

Instagram makes it easier to exercise

March 5 2020, by Steinar Brandslet



Credit: RDNE Stock project from Pexels

Exercising can be a chore. We know it's good for us, and we may do it, but it's not always fun.

When [training](#) gets tough, finding something or someone that helps us get over that motivational hump can be just what we need. Researchers

at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU) have now tested how [social media](#) can help.

"We wanted to encourage and support people in feeling good about their training," says Professor Frode Stenseng at NTNU's Department of Education and Lifelong Learning.

The results of a recent experiment published in *Frontiers in Psychology* show a clear effect of targeted motivation on Instagram.

Over 500 study participants were recruited through Facebook and other online channels. Participants were at different training levels and had varying degrees of fire in their belly, but all of them exercised.

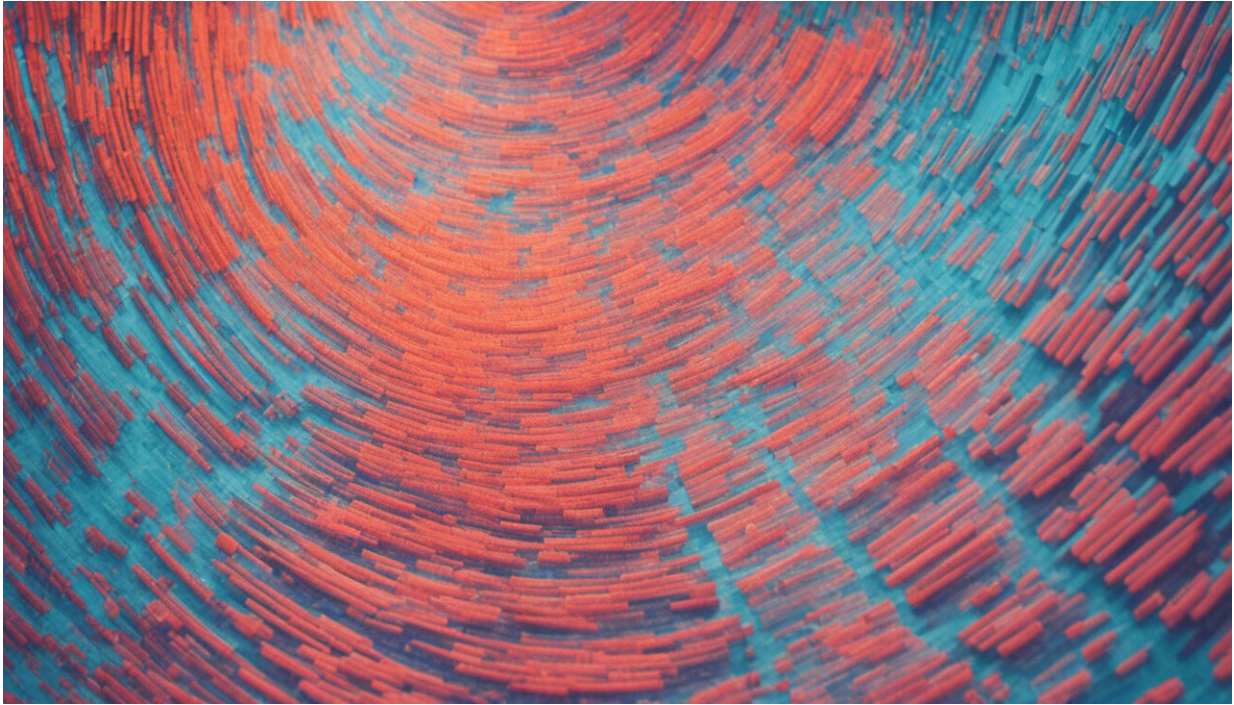
"A lot of emotions can come up when you [exercise](#), no matter what level you're at," says Stenseng.

Participants were asked how motivated they were to exercise and how much they enjoyed their training. They were randomly split into two groups.

One group was able to follow an Instagram account called #dinmotivation. The researchers posted motivational posts on this account every three days over four weeks.

"We tried to make participants aware of their own motivation to exercise, and to increase their awareness of why they were training," says Stenseng.

Participants were then asked again about their exercise motivation and enjoyment.



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Greater exercise enjoyment

People in both groups were equally prepared to exercise after the initial four weeks. They continued to train equally. But how much they enjoyed their training was different.

"Participants who followed the account postings developed more [positive feelings](#) related to their training. The other participants didn't," says Stenseng.

The results were clear. The people who had followed the Instagram postings reported enjoying their exercise much more than the ones who hadn't.

Following the postings involved spending no more than a few minutes per month on Instagram.

Influencers not nearly as effective

There's no lack of influencers with perfect bodies who are happy tell you about the joys of exercise on various social media. But whether they can help you to the same degree is uncertain at best.

"Today's influencers are undoubtedly having a great impact, and this was part of the reason for conducting our study," says first author and clinical psychologist Silje Berg.

Social media offer a multitude of tips and advice without necessarily having any scientific basis for them. A lot of the research to date has shown how this can adversely affect the message receivers.

"Our study is in many ways a counterpart to this. We wanted to show a method using social media that yields a significant positive effect by relying on scientific psychological theories," says Berg.



Credit: RDNE Stock project from Pexels

The posts on Instagram were based on self-determination and passion theory. That is, they were designed to give people a sense of belonging, mastery and autonomy. Autonomy should give a person the feeling that what they're doing is in line with their own needs and desires.

"We want to show how the influence of social media can be positive and used to promote public health—rather than the opposite. It can also inform how we should be critical of the source regarding content that appears in our feed. Awareness is key for achieving the positive effect we want," she says.

Influencers more like a TV show

"Watching influencers is probably more like watching TV," says Stenseng.

After all, it's fun to watch talented athletes on TV, without thinking that you will ever be as good as them, or that the show will help you get up off the couch.

Likewise, influencers who write about exercise are often top-level athletes, partly because it's their job, so it's doubtful that you will ever reach their level. But it can be exciting to follow them anyway—even if it doesn't necessarily increase your own exercising enjoyment.

Good, cheap support

The researchers conclude that social media can be a good and inexpensive approach to reaching people with different messages about exercise and health—if it's done right.

"We meet people where they are," says Stenseng.

Using social [media](#) in a thoughtful way can improve the training pleasure of the individual, and at the same time contribute to public health.

"Several platforms are having a big impact. It's interesting how some exercise apps promise exercise enjoyment and motivation without having any clear theories for how they want to achieve that. Now our study has shown that theoretical content can have a positive effect, so we should encourage more people in this market to become knowledge-based," says Berg.

More information: Silje Berg et al. When Passion Does Not Change, but Emotions Do: Testing a Social Media Intervention Related to Exercise Activity Engagement, *Frontiers in Psychology* (2020). [DOI: 10.3389/fpsyg.2020.00071](https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.00071)

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