Social media play an important role in users' perception of the ideal body, study shows

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How can social media contribute to a more diverse concept of body shapes and physical attractiveness? The answer is body-positive content.

On [social media platforms](#), slim and fit bodies are often over-represented and thus brought to the fore. However, the reality is different and often neglected when scrolling through [social media posts](#) and profiles. For this reason, Instagram, TikTok and the like are blamed, at least in part, for promoting unhealthy slimming ideals—especially among women.

One movement that opposes these unhealthy beauty ideals is body positivity (BoPo)—that is, a positive basic attitude toward the body. BoPo advocates the beauty of all body shapes and types.

In a study conducted at the Julius-Maximilians-Universität Würzburg (JMU), the authors, Professor Jan-Philipp Stein, Sophie Scheufen and Professor Markus Appel, hypothesized that BoPo has the power to change the concept of ideal bodies.

Most importantly, viewing body-positive content should not only change what is perceived as ideal body [weight](#), but also expand the range of weight-related norms. The study was published in the *Journal of Experimental Psychology*.

Shifting the focus—from one to diverse body ideals

Two experiments were conducted to examine the effects of body-positive content on body perception. "Previous research focused exclusively on capturing a single body ideal. Therefore, in both experiments, participants were asked to choose not just one body shape, but all the body shapes they consider ideal," explains Markus Appel, Chair of Communication Psychology and New Media.

In both experiments, two groups of women were randomized. In the first experiment, participants were shown either five Instagram posts categorized as body positivity content, or five Instagram posts

categorized as fitspiration content. Fitspiration is content that is meant to encourage an active and health-conscious lifestyle, but often includes an emphasis on low weight.

After viewing the posts, participants were asked to select all the weight types they thought were ideal on a visual rating scale. This measurement method was also used in the second experiment; however, instead of fitspiration content, neutral Instagram posts were presented. In addition, the researchers used a pre-post design that allowed for an examination of numerical differences before and after the test.

Body-positive content broadens women's concept of ideal body weight

As expected, the average body shape chosen as ideal in the BoPo condition turned out to be slightly more voluminous compared to the fitspiration condition. In addition, individuals confronted with BoPo content selected an average of nearly three body shapes to describe an ideal body, while participants who viewed Fitspiration content selected only slightly more than two body types.

An additional task involved estimating the weight of 36 people depicted in full-body photos. On average, subjects who had viewed BoPo content estimated the weight of the pictured strangers to be significantly less than those who had consumed Fitspiration content. This suggests that weight perception was indeed influenced by prior exposure to different types of social media content.

Body-positive content and body self-esteem

The data also showed that body-positive content led to an increased sense of well-being in one's body. Based on this, the results suggest that

the increased number of body shapes considered ideal is an effect variable that positively influences body self-esteem.

Digital body positivity may be uniquely positioned to promote societal change. "By changing internalized beauty standards toward diversity, it could address unjust appearance-based biases that still exist in many areas of social life," concludes Jan-Philipp Stein.

   More information: Jan-Philipp Stein et al, Recognizing the beauty in diversity: Exposure to body-positive content on social media broadens women's concept of ideal body weight., *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* (2023). DOI: 10.1037/xge0001397

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