

# Positive messages can mitigate harm from objectified fitness posts, suggests study

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A few words of body appreciation can help counter the negative impact of viewing objectified images of female fitness influencers, according to a Washington State University study.

While fitness influencers say they want to inspire good physical health, research has found that their [social media posts](#) often inspire negative mental health, especially among [younger women](#). The WSU experimental study, published in the [journal \*Health Communication\*](#), revealed that the negative impact of idealized Instagram images may be offset with something as simple as a caption with a body appreciation message, like "Love your body. See what it can do."

This type of message appeared to boost viewers' self-compassion and appreciation of their own bodies—at least in the short term.

"These captions could serve as a protective factor," said Jessica Willoughby, the study's senior author and associate professor in WSU's Murrow College of Communication. "This is something that's really small, just a couple of comments, that influencers could be putting on their posts."

The findings also point to other possible interventions, Willoughby said. For instance, health communicators could make sure that [young women](#) who regularly view this type of content also see other posts reminding them to think about their bodies in positive ways.

For this study, Willoughby and first author WSU Ph.D. candidate Leticia Couto had 200 college-age women view different sets of manipulated Instagram posts from real fitness influencers who have millions of followers. Each group of participants was shown a set of posts with objectified and regular images with or without body appreciation messages.

Objectified images include scantily clad influencers posing with a focus on specific body parts and sometimes even with the face cut out of the frame. An earlier study led by Willoughby found that the majority of top fitness influencers' posts contained these types of sexually objectified

images.

The "unobjectified" images in the current study could still include influencers posing in tight sportswear, but the frame contained the whole person and had a focus other than just viewing the body, such as the influencer demonstrating an exercise.

After viewing the posts, the participants ranked their agreement to a series of statements related to [self-esteem](#), self-compassion and views toward their own bodies at the moment and their more steady, long-term perception of their bodies, known as "trait body appreciation."

The results showed that the body appreciation messaging, even when paired with objectified images, had a positive impact on participants' self-compassion and their views toward their own bodies at the moment. No connection was found to better self-esteem or the longer-term perception of their bodies.

The researchers did not expect that seeing just a few positive statements would have a long-term impact, but Willoughby still found the results encouraging, especially because self-compassion can be more protective than self-esteem.

"If you are in a difficult situation, self-esteem sometimes goes away, but self-compassion typically stays because it's a way of talking to yourself when you need it," she said. "Knowing these messages have an impact on self-compassion is really powerful because it's something that can impact you even when you're not having a good day."

The experiment captured short-term effects, but more research is needed on the cumulative effects, since many young women are likely scrolling through dozens of these images on a weekly or even daily basis.

The researchers would like fitness influencers to consider adding body appreciation messages to their posts—or even better, posting fewer over-idealized, sexually objectified images. Willoughby knows the latter is probably unlikely, even though her [past research found influencers' sexually objectified poses resulted in fewer "likes."](#)

Instead, it may be on the Instagram users to change how they interact with these accounts.

"Pay attention to how these posts make you feel," Willoughby said. "Is it actually inspiring you? Or is this something maybe you need to take a break from?"

**More information:** Leticia Couto et al, #LoveYourBody: An Experimental Test of the Effects of Objectification and Body Appreciation Content on Instagram Fitness and Health Posts Among Young Women, *Health Communication* (2023). [DOI: 10.1080/10410236.2023.2265647](#)

Provided by Washington State University

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