

Researcher warns about 'lookism' and toxic resolutions in a social media–fueled body-critical era

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Last year the [top three New Year's resolutions](#) people intended to make in 2023, were about getting a better body, namely doing more exercise,

losing weight and improving diet, according to a You Gov Poll. This was the fourth year in a row that resolutions to improve body image were in the top three.

But why do we think having a better body is the key to a better life?

Research done by Professor Heather Widdows, a leading beauty philosopher at the University of Warwick, found that the increasingly visual and digital culture we live in has led us to believe that how we look is intrinsic to our self-worth.

She said, "Doing more exercising, losing weight and dieting are common New Year's resolutions which might be undertaken under the guise of improving one's health, but it's often for beauty.

"We used to think we had to change what's on the inside to be better, we now increasingly judge ourselves and others on looks or how we present ourselves to the world. What we value and what matters to people has dramatically shifted in recent years with the advent of [social media](#).

"Looks matter to us—this shift is radically changing our identity and our sense of self-worth, and we are barely recognizing it."

Professor Widdows believes this shift in our self-worth has given rise to an epidemic of [body image](#) anxiety.

The damaging 'self' shift

"We are starting to see body image anxiety affect people at a younger age and continue as they get older," she continued. "Because this is something that is affecting so many of us, it is becoming normalized but it doesn't make it any less harmful."

In the case of New Year's resolutions, Professor Widdows is clear that they don't deliver what they promise.

"We think if only we could lose weight, get the right body, then other things in our life would change—maybe we would be able to get a better job, a better relationship or being happy—but body change is illusionary and having a 'better' body doesn't deliver these things, and so the well-meaning resolutions, end up being completely counterproductive."

Reducing pressure in a visual world

Professor Widdows coined the phrase "lookism" and set up an #everydaylookism campaign, in a bid to stamp out appearance discrimination—the most prevalent form of bullying.

She said, "It's not just about bullying. Lookism matters more in a visual and [virtual world](#). With smartphones and social media, self-expression and identity are entwined and we modify our bodies and alter our images in the hope that we will be good enough.

"It is vital to reduce this pressure to be perfect if we are going to look after our physical and mental health as a society.

"We should be calling out lookism, and helping people to feel less ashamed when their bodies don't measure up. There's lots of work to be done to recognize and address appearance bullying because despite being the most prevalent, it is the one we do least about."

Professor Widdows says more education around lookism is needed to get people to recognize lookism as a prevalent and harmful form of discrimination.

"Perhaps we don't think looks should matter, so pretend they don't. But

the evidence they do is overwhelming. We have to address this now. As our culture becomes more visual and virtual, lookism will get worse, because in the digital age the image always speaks louder than the word."

Provided by University of Warwick

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