

Women can build positive body image by controlling what they view on social media

18 March 2019, by Rachel Cohen



Celeste Barbour runs an account on Instagram where she parodies the images celebrities post on their own social media. Celeste Barbour (screen shot taken March 13 2019)

Social media use is often described as being problematic for mental health and body image. But is all social media use bad?

[Our new research](#) shows that viewing [body positive](#) Instagram [content](#) may actually *improve* women's body image, at least in the short term.

With more awareness, social [media](#) users might be able to curate a social media environment that promotes positive body image by unfollowing or blocking idealised accounts, and following more body positive accounts – possibly including more [Celeste Barbour](#) – on Instagram.

Chasing 'the ideal'

Body image concerns are common among young women and can have serious negative consequences. Most young women use social media [daily](#), and [research](#) suggests that viewing idealised appearance-focused content is associated with poorer body image.

That is, following accounts like the Kardashians/Jenners, fitspiration, or influencers and friends posting glamorous bikini shots, is associated with women being more preoccupied with their appearance and less satisfied with their own bodies. As a result, women may engage in unhealthy dieting or exercise strategies to try and achieve "the ideal" they see in their social media feeds.

The rise of BoPo

Recently, a new trend has emerged on social media called "body positivity" (or "BoPo").

Body positivity aims to challenge narrow beauty ideals and encourage acceptance and appreciation of bodies of all shapes, sizes, and appearances. BoPo accounts such as [@bodyposipanda](#) (with over 1 million followers), have become particularly popular on Instagram.

A search for the hashtag #bodypositive returns almost 9 million posts, and #effyourbeautystandards (popularised by body positive activist [Tess Holiday](#)) generates almost 4 million posts.

A recent [content analysis](#) of body positive content on Instagram shows that these posts do indeed depict a broad range of body sizes and appearances. Content includes:

- selfies of women proudly displaying their belly rolls and cellulite
- before and after photos of "real" vs "edited" bodies, encouraging awareness of the common use of Photoshop on Instagram
- self-compassion quotes
- images focusing on body functionality (what the body can *do* rather than what it looks like).

But do women feel better?

Although body positive content is intended to make women feel better about their appearance, there had been no research confirming whether this was actually the case.

In our [new study](#), 195 young women (18-30 years old) viewed either body positive content, idealised content with thin women, or appearance-neutral content taken from Instagram.

Before and after viewing this content we asked women to rate their mood, body satisfaction, and the extent to which they focused on their appearance (known as self-objectification).

We found that brief exposure to body positive Instagram posts resulted in improved body image and mood in young women, compared to idealised and appearance-neutral posts.

Women who viewed body positive posts felt more satisfied with their bodies, were more appreciative of the unique functions and health of their bodies, and had more positive mood. In contrast, those who viewed idealised Instagram posts had poorer body image and mood.

Although this study found positive results for body image, it also showed that body positive content can make women more focused on their physical appearance over other aspects of themselves.

This has been a [criticism](#) of body positive accounts in the past, with some suggesting that it may be better to focus on aspects of the self that are unrelated to physical appearance in order to improve well-being.

We need more research to determine the effects of body positive content over time and to explore what types of posts are more helpful than others.

Curate your own environment

Given the popularity of social media among [young women](#), we need to understand the type of use that may be helpful or harmful for body image. Unlike traditional media formats (like magazines and television), social media users are active content creators and have agency in what they post and

Interestingly, another [recent study](#) found that showing [women](#) humorous, parody Instagram content ([@celestebarker](#)) resulted in improved [body image](#) and positive mood, compared to viewing traditional thin celebrity posts.

So, maybe social media is not necessarily all bad? Rather, we need to be more mindful of the content we are consuming. Considered choices about who we follow, and the messages they promote, might actually help us feel better.

More information: Rachel Cohen et al. #BoPo on Instagram: An experimental investigation of the effects of viewing body positive content on young women's mood and body image, *New Media & Society* (2019). [DOI: 10.1177/1461444819826530](https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444819826530)

Rachel Cohen et al. #bodypositivity: A content analysis of body positive accounts on Instagram, *Body Image* (2019). [DOI: 10.1016/j.bodyim.2019.02.007](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bodyim.2019.02.007)

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