

Weight-inclusive fitness posts are more likely to motivate young women to exercise

June 30 2022, by Eva Pila and Madeline Wood



Positive representations of higher-weight women exercising can counter the idealization of thin bodies that is common on social media, while cultivating health-promoting exercise behaviour. Credit: Shutterstock

"[Fitspiration](#)" is a popular social media trend that depicts images of thin women posing in exercise clothing or engaged in fitness pursuits.

Research has found that this trend, which is intended to inspire viewers to engage in [health](#)-promoting [exercise](#), often [sexualizes and objectifies women's bodies](#). Fitspiration [may reinforce](#) narrow—often unrealistic or

unattainable—body ideals under a veil of health and fitness promotion.

Researchers have consistently found negative psychological effects of exposure to this type of content. The success of fitspiration to inspire people to exercise is less clear. In the few published studies on this topic, [there is no evidence](#) for the [claim that viewing fitspiration](#) increases exercise.

In fact, some evidence shows a [decrease in exercise](#) after viewing fitspiration. And even if fitspiration could inspire people to exercise, exercising for the main purpose of changing appearance can have [deleterious effects on mental health](#).

Weight-inclusive representations of exercisers

Social media content that positively represents body size, shape and weight diversity may help to address issues with fitspiration.

Posts of "fat"—a term that has been [reclaimed](#) as a neutral descriptor of [body size](#) in response to negative connotations and historical oppression against fatness—or higher-weight [women](#) engaging positively in fitness pursuits may promote [positive mental health and exercise outcomes](#). Featuring positive representations of higher-weight exercisers can [counteract the harms of anti-fat bias in exercise images](#).

In a [recent research study](#) conducted in the [Body Image and Health Lab](#) at Western University, we tested whether weight-inclusive social media content could elicit more "psychologically adaptive" motives to exercise compared to traditional fitspiration. Psychologically adaptive exercise motivation is rooted in the pursuit of [health and enjoyment](#), and promotes psychological well-being, whereas exercise motivation that is rooted in guilt, [social pressure](#) or desires to alter the body [can impair psychological well-being](#).

Weight-inclusive content

We enrolled over 1,000 [young women](#) to view either positive representations of higher-weight women exercising or typical fitspiration content on social media, and measured changes in a range of psychological outcomes, including exercise motivation.

We found that women who engaged with weight-inclusive social media content were more motivated to exercise and reported more psychologically adaptive and sustainable exercise motivation. In contrast, women who viewed typical fitspiration images did not report higher intentions to exercise. They also reported more dysfunctional motives for exercise, such as losing weight or improving their appearance.

While our study confirms that fitspiration may have harmful consequences for women's [body image](#) and health behavior, it also suggests that weight-inclusive content could be a psychologically adaptive alternative. Positive representations of higher-weight women exercising can counter the idealization of thin bodies that is common on social media, while cultivating health-promoting exercise.

Weight-inclusive [social media](#) content has the potential to combat anti-fat stigma and promote inclusivity in fitness spaces.

This article is republished from [The Conversation](#) under a Creative Commons license. Read the [original article](#).

Provided by The Conversation

Citation: Weight-inclusive fitness posts are more likely to motivate young women to exercise (2022, June 30) retrieved 11 January 2023 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2022-06-weight-inclusivefitness-young-women-toexercise.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.