# Prevention c+lumn

## Social networking sites and their impact on body image

**68%** of Canadians are **active in different ways on one or more social networking sites**[1]

**73% of women would like to be thinner**, regardless of their weight[2]

**25% of men would like to change their weight** to improve their appearance[3]

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### EXPERIENCE LA CAPITALE'S PREVENTIVE APPROACH

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**W**e all know that society places a lot of emphasis (too much) on a person's appearance. Over the years, we've seen pictures of gorgeous celebrities with impossibly perfect bodies on TV, in magazines and on billboards. The women have a perfect hourglass shape, and the men are muscular and manly. Although the way that social networking sites portray body image ideals is different, it can definitely have a negative impact on a person's self-esteem.

## The era of perfectionism

How much time do you spend choosing a selfie to post on Facebook or Instagram? Do you enhance it? Apply a filter? Are you disappointed if you don't get a lot of Likes or comments on your photos? Do you compare yourself against "perfect" profile pics and then not feel so good about yourself?

Studies have shown that the use of appearance-based social networking sites is associated with greater preoccupation with body image and even with disordered eating[4]. Exposure to perfect body images causes us to internalize the unrealistic ideal, compare ourselves to models of unattainable beauty and be dissatisfied with our own appearance[5].

## What is body image?

Body image refers to the perception you have of your own body and what you feel that others may be thinking about your appearance. That perception includes thoughts, judgments, emotions and sensations about your body. Your body image reflects the perceptions about body type, weight, functional capacities and attractiveness[6].

Having a healthy body image means having a realistic and overall positive perception of your body. A healthy body image refers to your ability to see your body as it is right now and to appreciate its abilities and unique features. If you have a healthy body image, you will be able to value your body for what it is able to do and not only for the image it reflects. You will also be more inclined to treat your body kindly by adopting healthy lifestyle habits from a health and wellness perspective rather than from a weight-control or aesthetics perspective[7].

## When your appearance is more important than how you are

The images published on social networking sites often portray an aesthetic aspect of a person's body rather than a functional one. In fact, photos that only show a person's face or body tend to focus on appearance. That is also what will be commented on... and perhaps criticized! Rigid ideas of body perfection cause people to objectify their body rather than value it for what it is able to do. When you spend a lot of time looking at and commenting on pictures posted on Facebook, following Instagram accounts that focus on only one body shape, selecting and meticulously enhancing every photo you post, that contributes to reinforcing the standard of "beauty" and may promote the development of a negative body image.

## A positive movement: #bodypositivity

Over the past few years, a movement has developed on social networking sites, and on Instagram in particular, to reverse the trend and to value body uniqueness and diversity[8]. Published content is varied and includes extensive body diversity, photos that have not been Photoshopped, inspiring self-acceptance quotes, images that highlight what the body is able to do, etc. The movement has become very popular. And hashtags such as #bodypositive, #bodypositivity and #bopo have been used respectively 9.1 million, 2.9 million and 887,000 times on Instagram[9]. Exposure to such content could promote the development of a positive body image and even protect a person from the negative effects of more "traditional" and unrealistic images[10]. Why then would you not take advantage of your use of social networking sites to diversify the accounts you follow and learn to be a little kinder with regard to your body? ■

# 4 THINGS
## you can do to change the situation

By becoming aware of the possible negative impact that social networking sites can have on body image and by being more careful about what you look at or post, you can contribute to bringing about change and to moving social networking sites to platforms where the body is valued for something other than its appearance. Here are four things that you can do the next time you visit your favourite platform.

### 1. TRY NOT TO ENHANCE YOUR PHOTOS

By posting photos of yourself as you are, you contribute to diversifying the single model presented on social networking sites. You also become a model and a source of inspiration for your friends and subscribed followers.

### 2. POST PHOTOS THAT DO NOT FOCUS SOLELY ON APPEARANCE

Try to select photos of yourself being active, to show value for what your body allows you to do rather than solely on its appearance. Share a good time with friends, memories from a recent vacation, a bike ride, an afternoon at the park with one of your kids. Let your imagination go free!

### 3. COMMENT ON SOMETHING OTHER THAN APPEARANCE

We often tend to comment on the appearance of others. Even if what we have to say is positive, comments about a person's weight or appearance can have negative consequences, because they maintain focus on appearance and rigid ideas of body perfection. Why not meet the challenge of commenting on something other than appearance on social networking sites? Talk about an activity that has been carried out or someone's personal qualities, positive emotions, achievements, strengths, etc.

### 4. FOLLOW INSPIRATIONAL PEOPLE

Try to diversify the pictures in which you are portrayed on social networking sites. Follow art, leisure and inspirational groups that promote cultural diversity and authenticity. It will give you an opportunity to look into #bodypositivity and its derivatives. ∎

# TEENS
## and social networking sites

If a teenager is among your loved ones, you may be interested to know that 95% of teenagers apparently have access to a smart phone and that 45% apparently have it on continuously, in order to be able to use such platforms as YouTube, Instagram, Snapchat and Facebook[11].

Many young people enhance their photos by using filters to present an image of themselves that does not represent reality. Studies have shown that adolescent women who spend more than two hours/day on social networking sites are at higher risk of being dissatisfied with their body and wanting to be thinner[12].

Adolescence is a period during which the body goes through numerous changes quickly, at a time when the opinions of others and a feeling of belonging are very important. This can cause them to be more vulnerable to the influence of social networking sites and to the development of a negative body image.

As an adult, you can play a role in helping young people develop their critical thinking, so that they can realize that the model to which they are exposed does not represent reality. Don't hesitate to talk about it with them. You can also get them involved in making a change by diversifying the photos they post, commenting on something other than appearance, etc. And, most importantly, don't forget to value them for what they ARE!

## In short

There is no need to ban or be afraid of social networking sites. They are a part of our lives and offer undeniable benefits in terms of access to information, networking, sharing of interests and passions, etc. We simply need to be aware of the focus on appearance and try to promote healthier and more diversified representation of the body. #bodypositivity ∎

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