

# Study: Social media sways exercise motivation

January 17 2019, by Paul Mayne

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It's January – a time when students are looking for that extra bit of oomph. For some, time spent on social media might provide the necessary inspiration to get up and exercising – but that time can come

with consequences, according to a recent Western-led study.

Previous studies have shown that [physical activity levels](#) among [undergraduate students](#) have declined. As such, universities are looking for any number of ways to do so – including [social media](#). It has proven to be a powerful tool.

"We have a basic need to feel connected with others and this feeling of connection influences our wellbeing and motivation," Western Ph.D. Alison Divine explained. "As a society, we are connecting and communicating substantially through technology and [social media platforms](#), such as Facebook. University students tend to spend a significant time on Facebook."

Online [social networking sites](#), such as Facebook, provide their more than 1.28 billion daily users the ability to accumulate friends and create interactions. University-aged students make up 23 per cent of all Facebook users with 32 per cent of them spending more than four hours a day on the site.

Working with Physical Therapy professor Susan Hunter, Divine surveyed 24 undergraduate students at the same U.K. university on their Facebook use, [exercise](#) motivation and connectivity to one another. Further, 19 of those students took part in focus groups exploring experiences of exercise-related Facebook use and its perceived role in motivation.

The study's findings showed that providing supportive physical activity environments within Facebook may be a successful avenue to get students exercising. The study did, however, also identify a potential maladaptive side of Facebook resulting from social comparisons, bullying, and feeling left out.

The study, Facebook, relatedness and exercise motivation in [university students](#): A mixed methods investigation, was published in February 2019 edition of *Computers in Human Behavior*.

The findings revealed a double-edge sword all need to be mindful of when turning to social media for motivation, stressed the study's author.

"Facebook can influence why we exercise through developing connections with others and, in turn, enhancing our exercise motivation," said Divine, who collaborated on the study with colleague at John Moores University (Liverpool).

"This is particularly apparent with the interactions leading to feeling connected to others through supportive and positive environments on Facebook. When the feelings of connection with others are present, using Facebook is associated with increases in the types of motivation associated with prolonged exercise and physical activity engagement."

But while Facebook has the potential to get people physically moving in a positive direction, there still remains what Divine called the "dark side" to the social site.

"When interactions are not positive – actions such as [negative comments](#) about your own exercise behaviour or attempt, or even negative social comparison with others exercise endeavours – it can lead to feeling disconnected from others, which, in turn, negatively affects exercise motivation," Divine said.

Individuals who exercised for extrinsic motives – such as poor body image, the drive for thinness or even online bullying – were more likely to be driven by feelings of guilt and, as a result, experience poorer psychological wellbeing.

The message is far from mixed and instead points to the power of connecting to positive groups. Divine added more research is needed to investigate this maladaptive side of Facebook use on exercise [motivation](#).

Divine recently took a teaching role in Sport and Exercise Psychology in the Faculty of Biological Sciences at the University of Leeds.

**More information:** Alison Divine et al. Facebook, relatedness and exercise motivation in university students: A mixed methods investigation, *Computers in Human Behavior* (2018). [DOI: 10.1016/j.chb.2018.09.037](#)

Provided by University of Western Ontario

Citation: Study: Social media sways exercise motivation (2019, January 17) retrieved 10 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2019-01-social-media-sways.html>

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