Could Social Media Savvy Help Prevent Skin Cancer?

Circumspection about images of beautiful, tanned people on social media might discourage tanning.

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Young people who are savvier about interpreting social media images of tanned individuals are less likely to subscribe to the ideal of the golden tan.

This finding from an Australian study suggests that interventions to promote media literacy—in this case the ability to critically evaluate social media posts—could reduce rates of tanning, which can cause skin cancer.

Skin cancer is the most common type of cancer around the world. Each year, the global population is diagnosed with 2 million to 3 million non-melanoma skin cancers and 132,000 melanoma skin cancers.

John Mingoia, PhD, of the University of South Australia, conducted a study with 151 Australians 18 to 29 years old, including 61 men and 90 women. The participants were randomly assigned to look at social media photos of models who either had tanned or pale skin.

The investigators tested the participants' media literacy skills with the Media Attitudes Questionnaire, which asked people to rate statements including "Models in social media have perfect tans," "I could look like the models in social media" and "I could be as tanned as the models in social media."

The participants reported using social media for an average of nearly three hours per day. Ninety-seven percent of them used Facebook, 85% used YouTube, 70% used Instagram and 70% used Snapchat.

The participants were also surveyed for the internalization of the tanned ideal and their tendency to compare their own appearance with the those of the models after viewing the social media images.

Participants who were more media literate were less likely to internalize the tanned ideal after seeing the pictures of the models, while those who were less media literate were more likely to

internalize that ideal. Also, the participants' exposure to tanned models, compared with exposure to the pale models, was linked to a higher tendency to compare their own appearance to that of the models.

"The challenge is that people are exposed to images of the 'tanned ideal' on social media platforms—Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat and YouTube—where their perceptions of attractiveness are shaped and reinforced by images from advertisers, influencers, bloggers and friends, many of which have been artificially enhanced or manipulated," Mingoia said in a press release. "It's this kind of everyday organic content that we're trying to combat so that young adults can more easily identify the pervasive way that social media can influence their knowledge, attitudes and behaviors."

"Future interventions to reduce skin cancer risk should address the role of social networking sites in proclaiming tanned skin as ideal and increase skepticism about photos of tanned models online," the study authors concluded.

See related content, "Indoor Tanning Is Addictive, Especially If You're Depressed."

Click here to read a Cancer Health primer on skin cancer.

To read a press release about the study, click here.

To read the study, click here.

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