No, looking at the 'perfect body' on Facebook isn't making you depressed

Start looking at your friends as friends instead of judging them. And stop reading too much into all these social media studies!

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Mark Zuckerberg is making you feel fat – at least, that's what recent headlines about a new study would have you believe. The research itself is fairly straightforward: women who said they wanted to lose weight – a full 86% of the participants – and spent the most time on Facebook were likelier to report negative feelings about their body, and to become more conscious of their own physical appearance, than women who browsed Facebook less.

The findings, to be presented at next month's conference of the International Communication Association, are [widely](http://www.bbc.com/news/health-26952394) [being](http://www.theatlanticcities.com/arts-and-lifestyle/2014/04/facebook-making-women-feel-bad-about-their-bodies/8844/) [reported](http://www.usnews.com/news/articles/2014/04/10/study-more-time-on-facebook-could-mean-worse-body-image-for-women) as showing a direct, causal relationship – that Facebook makes you feel bad about yourself. But its lead author, Petya Eckler of the University of Strathclyde in Glasgow, tells me that's not the case: "There probably is a relationship between Facebook and body image, but it's not straightforward." Indeed, women in her study who said they were satisfied with their current weight showed no connection between Facebook browsing time and negative feelings about their bodies. Alas, it may be that women who are more self-conscious about their figure are more drawn to the social network in the first place.

So, no, Facebook isn't making you hate your thighs.

The implications, though – that your body image might be better off if you log off, or vice versa – may say more about our approach to social media than it says about any misplaced urges to buy a skirted swimsuit this month. [According to research published in The Journal of Research in Personality](http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S009265669992281X), there are two primary ways we respond to images of other people: comparison and identification. If you're a comparison type, you might look at a picture of a stunning woman on a billboard and think, *I'll never look like her.* Similarly, you might look at a photo of an unfortunate-looking soul and think, *Whew! At least I don't look like her*. But if you're an identification sort, your response may be to combine the image you're looking at with your own self-image. Look at the billboard, and you picture yourself there in the model's place; look at a photo of a homely woman, and your self-image plummets.

Most of this criticism of idealized images focuses solely on comparison: we're surrounded by perfected photos of perfected people, making us covet Scarlett Johansson's hair and Megan Fox's face, according to another recent study that's been [widely reported](http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2014/04/10/perfect-body-myth-women-men-celebrity_n_5125411.html) but imperfectly understood. The result, the thinking goes, is that the non-perfect women absorbing these images can't help but feel subpar.

Enter Facebook. Here we have a stream of images of people we've personally selected – people we know *aren't* perfect, *aren't* impeccably polished, *aren't* so removed from our own sphere. (Friends! They're just like us!) And yet, according to Eckler's research, we treat them as points of comparison, not identification. These are the people whose images should logically be inducing a mind-set of identification, not comparison. Instead, we're doing the opposite. "You're immediately forced into comparison mode on Facebook," Eckler says. "It's almost automatic – first you look at pictures, and second, you're thinking how you'd score those pictures."

We've mentally turned the Facebook News Feed into Hot Or Not.

In a country as individualistic as the US, it makes sense that we'd intuitively treat Facebook as a miniature rat race, one in which we're constantly checking our ranking. Who hasn't done a quiet audit of high school classmates? But doing so flies in the face of the possibilities social media offers: we *choose* these people as our community, after all. Our friends should be those with whom we're most likely to identify, not those who drive us to comparison. Trouble is, the tendency is to regard Facebook as a collection not of friends but of "Friends" – the fellow you met at a party in 2009, your sister's ex, a friend who was dear years ago but no longer – people who, in their proximity to our actual lives, resemble small-scale celebrities more than they do the folks with whom we can actually identify.

When it comes to something as fundamental as body image, this tendency veers from problematic to unhealthy. Perhaps the key lies in adopting a different perspective on imagery: fantasy. [In research from University of Lancashire](http://clok.uclan.ac.uk/1860/), women who were prompted to see idealized photographs as fantasy – rather than examples of how to live – came away from the study with a higher regard for their own appearance. Meanwhile, women prompted to take in the same images as social comparison reported the opposite.

The share-all nature of Facebook and its ilk makes it easy to forget one of its core truths: social media is about as "real" as reality television. Whether we're talking about retouched profile photos or discreet de-tagging of unflattering snapshots, Facebook is a form of fantasy, and we'd do well to remember that. "There is research showing that women try to represent their best self on Facebook, not necessarily their true self," Eckler says. "You need to take it with a pinch of salt."

Questions

1. How does the writer’s use of language make clear her attitude to the research in paragraph 1? (5)
2. There is a difference in the writer’s attitude to the research from the University of Strathclyde. How does her use of language convey this? (5)
3. What is the tone of paragraph 3? (1) (Try to list the techniques that exist in the para)
4. In your own words, explain the ‘two primary ways we respond to images of other people’. Paragraph 4. (4)
5. In your own words what is ‘The result, the thinking goes’ at the end of paragraph 5? (2)
6. In paragraph 6 starting ‘Enter Facebook’, how do the writer’s techniques make clear her surprise about people having comparison mindsets on Facebook? (4)
7. What is the tone of paragraph 7? (1) (Again, note the techniques)
8. In your own words, why does the writer believe our friends on Facebook drive us to comparison and not identification? Paragraph 8 (2)
9. In your own words what did the University of Lancashire discover (paragraph 9)? (4)
10. What reasons does the writer give for suggesting social media like Facebook is a ‘form of fantasy’ in the final paragraph? Use your own words. (3)
11. Sum up the main points the writer makes about social media and body/self image in the article. (6)