



one
LIKE 
fits all

Local youth are utilizing social media to develop and promote positive self image.

words by **MELISSA SCIANIMANICO** • design by **OLIVIA BROTZGE**

Belle Phothirath clutched her stomach as she walked steadily towards her school, Carroll High School in Fort Wayne, Indiana. The scene was innocent at first glance: giddy students buzzing with first-day-of-school excitement, but it was a nightmare to 14-year-old Phothirath.

There were teens sporting all different looks, from spiffy to sparkly to spunky, yet despite the diversity among Phothirath's peers, she felt especially singled out by bullies. In hindsight, Phothirath wished her classmates had just targeted her sense of style, but instead they were bothered by another aspect of her exterior: her weight.

Phothirath walked with her head down towards the floor, scared to make eye contact with any of the passing students as she blindly navigated the halls. As she made a beeline for homeroom, an unknown girl shoved Phothirath off her track and onto the floor. Phothirath's single folder was now out of her reach.

"Watch where you go, fattie," the girl said.

Phothirath's knees ached, her palms were bruised, and she was beyond frazzled as she peered through the crowd of traveling legs for the papers that were now strewn across the walkway.

"Do not cry," she thought, squeezing her eyes. "Breathe." Phothirath inhaled sharply, silently reminding herself, "You're fine, it's fine."

Phothirath struggled to get out her words, "I'm sorry, I was just—"

The girl's irked voice interrupted Phothirath's faint apology: "Maybe if you took up less space, I wouldn't have run into you, huh?"

Phothirath timidly made her way to class, trying to convince herself that she probably would not

encounter the girl again, but the uneasiness in the back of her mind became a reality when the girl's taunting continued daily. Days of bullying turned into weeks, and weeks into months.

"She made comments about what I wore to what I ate. She was relentless," Phothirath said.

Phothirath had hoped high school would be a fresh start. In her words, she envisioned "a monumental moment where I could finally venture into a new territory."

However, the torment she had faced throughout her elementary and middle school years soon became a common theme in high school as well. Even trusted adults could offer little refuge to the habitual bullying Phothirath faced.

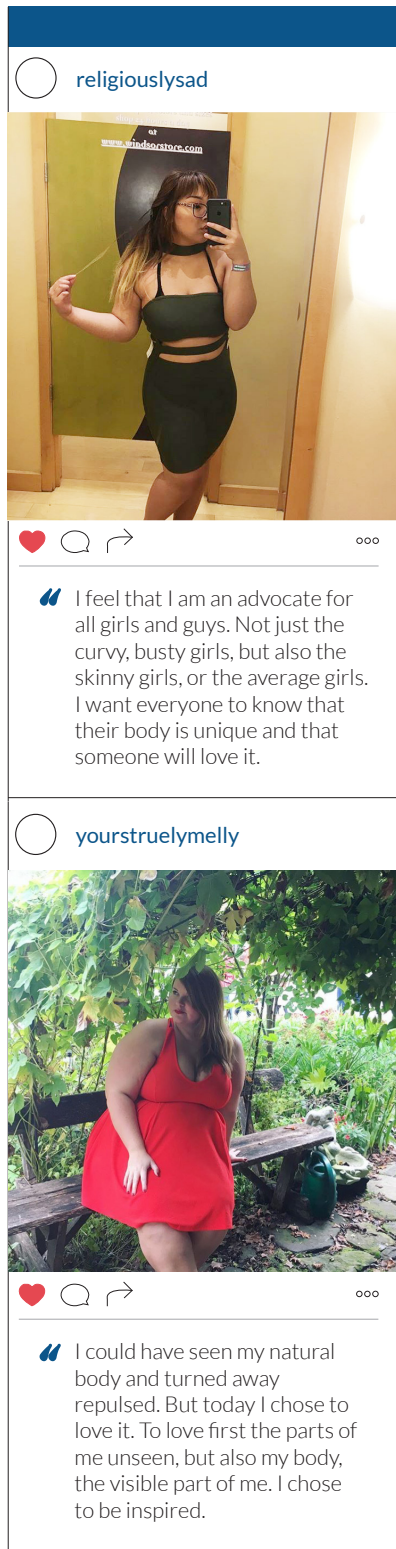
Even adults mocked her body. In fact, Phothirath remembers one adult telling her, "Lose weight. Boys like skinny girls; people can't take fat people seriously."

In the midst of Phothirath's sophomore year, the bullying reached its peak, and she decided that enough was enough. Enough of her peers' comments about how she was "too chubby." Enough of adults' constant judgment and disapproval of her body type. Enough.

It became apparent to Phothirath that these harsh criticisms were suppressing her self-worth and confidence. She didn't feel comfortable in her own skin, and for her, that wasn't okay.

Rather than continuing to endure this negativity, Phothirath created her Instagram, her safe place: @religiouslysad.

Like many teens, she started her Instagram as a place to express her interests. But as insults regarding her weight continued to plague her, the tone of her account began to shift.



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“I turned to Instagram and posted about my body. I tried to change the negativity into positivity for myself,” she said.

Fellow Instagram users began to relate to Phothirath, the vulnerable, open girl who was comfortable enough to share a part of her life from behind the screen. Ironically, as Phothirath’s followers increased, her posts became more and more personal. Most of her posts are of herself and her body, but she also shares the more casual parts of her life, like what makeup she wants or her work troubles.

“A lot of people think I post for sexual attention or compliments, but I don’t,” Phothirath said. “Yes, comments are amazing, but I post to show everyone that I love my body no matter what people say, because I’m a brave individual who loves herself.”

Phothirath’s account has skyrocketed from a mere 200 followers to an ever-growing 25,000 in the three years she has run the account. She now sees Instagram as a means to empower others while lifting her own confidence.

Because Phothirath shares a part of her life so publicly, she has to be wary of who follows her. She says has gotten in trouble over the content of her posts and now takes precautionary measures, like keeping her account private to prevent her from being exposed again.

But other social media users sometimes throw caution to the wind and go fully public, as social media use has shifted privacy expectations since its introduction in the early 2000s.

According to Dr. Keith Campbell, head of Industrial-Organizational, Brain and Behavioral Sciences at the University of Georgia, “Social networking websites – nonexistent just years ago – have drawn literally millions of users. Web sites such as MySpace and Facebook have been at the forefront of this migration.”

From 2003 to 2008, MySpace engaged the young adult demographic with music, music videos, and an edgy, individualistic environment that attracted users from all over the world.

As the MySpace frenzy declined, new and improved sites like Twitter and Facebook took over, followed by Instagram, which rapidly became part of pop culture in 2010. According to Tech Radar, a site that tracks technology news, these three apps have topped app charts and Google searches for years.

In contrast to social media’s new place in the modern world, body image struggles – or the subjective, often negative view people have of their own bodies – have been around for centuries.

According to Campbell, the mingling between social media and body image has influenced the way late millennials see themselves, creating an unprecedented social attitude.

Dr. Cheri Levinson, Assistant Psychology Professor at the University of Louisville, claims the media’s reinforcement of physical appearance is detrimental to how people see their bodies. But maybe it’s not the consistent focus on outward appearance that is detrimental, but society’s view of what that appearance should look like.

In fact, many young social media users, like Louisville’s Melissa Gibson, widely known as @yourstruelymelly, disagree with the idea that social media is a detriment.

As a 28-year-old graduate student at University of Louisville with over 148,000 Instagram followers, Gibson believes that social media has the amazing power to be used in a way that positively affects people’s body images.

“For the first time in forever we have a way to put ourselves out into the world,” Gibson said, “with our own message of who we are, who we want to be, and who we see ourselves as, and that is incredibly empowering.”

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Gibson views social media as a peek into her life, an extension of who she is. Instagram offers her a platform to have a voice and represent herself in a society that regularly looks down on women with her body type.

"I use Instagram as a tool to define my existence as a fat woman," Gibson said, "but I also want to fight back against the beauty standards and the lies that our society teaches us about who's worthy to feel good about themselves."

Despite the efforts of people like Gibson, who want to use social media to empower themselves and others, Dr. Levinson believes that societal standards still play a huge role in body image. Dr. Levinson says research exploring negative body image and eating disorder prevalence points to our culture's constant reinforcement of the concept of slim-is-superior, or "thin-ideal," with actions as simple as offering compliments over losing weight or looking thin.

According to The National Eating Disorders Association (NEDA), a non-profit that supports individuals and families affected by eating disorders, "cultural pressures that glorify 'thinness' or muscularity and place value on obtaining the 'perfect body,' contribute to the modern eating disorder epidemic."

Social media fosters an environment for individuals like Gibson to counter this phenomenon. Gibson feels as if her posts provide a genuine glimpse into her reality, a reality where many conclude that she does not have the body type to live confidently. Yet, Gibson expressed that the very existence of her account fights to prove that no matter what people look like, they deserve to be valued by society, deserve to be heard, and deserve to be treated just like anyone else.

The sentiment behind @yourstruelymelly has the potential to impact countless members of the Instagram community; in fact, Dr. Levinson said that accounts like @yourstruelymelly that focus on empowerment make people more aware of body positivity.

"If there is more education on the dangerousness of focusing on a thin ideal, we will see more of a push to accept bodies of all types," Dr. Levinson said.

Phothirath also encourages others to support the body positivity movement through her account.

"I feel that I am an advocate for all girls and guys. Not just the curvy, busty girls, but also the skinny girls, or the average girls," Phothirath said, "I want everyone to know that their body is unique and that someone will love it."

Although Phothirath and Gibson started their accounts as a means to express just themselves, they both agree one of the

most rewarding aspects of their accounts is the impact they have on their followers.

"It's kind of like this two-part game where it's challenging society to be better," Gibson said. "It's important to humanity that we can all encourage each other and celebrate one another."

In Gibson's opinion, before the presence of the internet and sites like Instagram, magazines were the primary medium that focused acutely on appearance and body, and thus held the power to define society's beauty standards. Now, through social media, individuals control what they want to post and can therefore define their message for themselves.

For example, the #Fatkini movement, a viral campaign started in 2012 by then 25-year-old fashion blogger, Gabi Gregg, features proud plus-size women taking selfies in their bathing suits, something that might have been unheard of a decade ago, when mainstream magazines were one of the only places to connect with fashion.

Although acceptance for all body types is still not entirely embraced by society, internet users have taken strides to make campaigns like the #Fatkini movement more well-received.

Dr. Levinson has noticed this trend, stating, "Bodies are amazing things and they are beautiful at every size. I am happy to see movement in our society towards this direction."

Although there has been a noticeable shift in society's overall view of body positivity, negativity still surrounds the issue.

"Being on the internet can be really hard at times. I mean, I am acutely aware every day of how my body is perceived because people tell me on the internet," Gibson said.

But, through the evolution of Gibson's account and the progression of her self-confidence, she has learned to ignore insults that try to disempower her.

"I have a hard time dealing with the amount of hate I get. I break down sometimes," Phothirath said of the negative comments on her page. "But I post about myself because I want to and because it's my body, and I'm allowed to freely post what I want."

Phothirath finds it shocking how much her account has impacted her. She doesn't like to say it changed her, because she believes she was always the beautiful Belle she sees now. She just no longer surrenders to societal standards that suppress her self worth.

"Some days I feel a lil' chubby, but I still go out and rock my crop top, because I have gone so long with the mindset that my body is beautiful, and," Phothirath said, "I've actually started to believe it." •