

The case for body positivity on social media: Perspectives on current advances and
future directions

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Abstract

In recent years, the body positive movement has emerged on social media and has generated both support and criticism in pop-cultural discourse. We review the potential benefits and disadvantages of ‘body positivity’ on social media in light of theory and the available research. Based on early evidence showing potential benefits of engaging with body positive content on social media for positive body image, a case is made in support of this emerging content. Nevertheless, recommendations are made for future research with an emphasis on experimental and longitudinal investigations of actual health outcomes of engaging with body positivity on social media, and clarification of the potential relationship between body positivity and objectification.

1. Introduction

Obesity and overweight are amongst the leading global risks for mortality in the world (World Health Organisation, 2018), whilst eating disorders have the highest mortality rate of any mental health disorder (Smink, Van Hoeken, & Hoek, 2012). Although eating disorders and obesity have previously been considered separate issues, more recent research has shown that obesity and eating disorders are linked with shared risk and protective factors (Haines & Neumark-Sztainer, 2006; Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2007). Specifically, body dissatisfaction, dieting, media use, and weight-related teasing have been implicated in the development of both types of weight-related disorder (Goldschmidt, Wall, Choo, Becker, & Neumark-Sztainer, 2016; Haines & Neumark-Sztainer, 2006), while positive body image has been identified as a shared protective factor (Neumark-Sztainer, 2009). It is well established that the media promotes unrealistic standards of beauty and plays a key role in the development and maintenance of body dissatisfaction and disordered eating (Frederick, Daniels, Bates, & Tylka, 2017; Grabe, Ward, & Hyde, 2008; Levine & Murnen, 2009).

Social media use has increasingly become a dominant form of media consumption, with 89% of young adults using at least one form of social media daily (Pew Research Center, 2018). In recent years, a growing body of research has shown that social media use is related to adverse body image and eating concerns (Holland & Tiggemann, 2016). Photo-based platforms like Instagram are particularly salient given their widespread use, the idealised nature of the images presented like *thinspiration* (content intended to inspire weight loss), and *fitspiration* (content designed to inspire fitness goals), and the infinite opportunities for appearance-comparisons they foster (Cohen, Newton-John, & Slater, 2017; Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016). Content analyses of *thinspiration* and *fitspiration* content on social media have found that this content typically portrays thin and toned bodies in sexually objectifying poses with guilt inducing messages about diet, weight, and exercise (Boepple & Thompson,

2016; Carrotte, Prichard, & Lim, 2017; Ghaznavi & Taylor, 2015; Simpson & Mazzeo, 2017; Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2018; Wick & Harriger, 2018). Research has shown that viewing such appearance-focused content on social media increases negative mood and body dissatisfaction in women (Robinson et al., 2017; Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015).

While Instagram accounts displaying idealised images continue to grow in popularity, a movement known as ‘body positivity’ has emerged on social media. Body positivity aims to challenge dominant appearance ideals, foster acceptance and respect of all bodies regardless of shape, size, and features, and focus on appreciating the functionality and health of the body rather than solely focus on its appearance (Sastre, 2014). Whilst the existing literature overwhelmingly shows that viewing idealised images of women on social media is negatively related to body image outcomes in young women (for reviews, see Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016; Holland & Tiggemann, 2016; Rodgers & Melioli, 2016), less is known about the relationship between body positive social media content and aspects of body image. In fact, whilst many consumers celebrate this rise in body positivity, others have expressed concern over its potential drawbacks, including reinforcing a focus on appearance (Webb, Vinoski, Bonar, Davies, & Etzel, 2017), and contributing to the prevalence of overweight and obesity (e.g., Muttarak, 2018; Nomi, 2018). This paper will explore the arguments both for and against body positive social media content in light of theoretical constructs of positive body image and the current state of empirical research.

2. Body positivity and positive body image

Over the last decade, the body positive movement (or body positivity) has developed in reaction to the constant barrage of media images promoting unrealistic and unattainable appearance ideals. More recently, body positivity has been popularised through the social media platform of Instagram (Cwynar-Horta, 2016), with over 11 million posts tagged with #bodypositive, 4 million for #bodypositivity, and over 1 million for #bopo (Instagram,

January 2020). In a recent content analysis of 640 Instagram posts sampled from popular body positive accounts, the authors found that such posts typically include images of diverse body sizes and appearances that are otherwise underrepresented in mainstream accounts (Cohen, Irwin, Newton-John, & Slater, 2019b). For example, the majority (94%) of bodies depicted in popular body positive posts ranged from normal weight to obese, and just under half (40%) featured attributes that diverged from societal beauty ideals such as cellulite, stomach rolls, and stretch marks. Such images are accompanied by captions promoting body acceptance and seeing beauty in diverse appearances and internal attributes (Cohen et al., 2019b). Other hashtags associated with body positivity and the fat acceptance movements include #healthateverysize, #haes, #effyourbeautystandards and #fatspiration. A content analysis that examined different types of fat acceptance messages among 400 Instagram images found that those tagged with #fatspiration typically conveyed messages of fat acceptance through fashion and beauty-related activism, whereas images associated with the hashtag #healthateverysize endorsed physical activity, health, and wellness (Webb et al., 2017). This is consistent with Health At Every Size® (HAES) principles, which advocate for a weight-neutral approach to health by prioritising wellness over weight loss (Association for Size Diversity and Health, 2013). Through such posts, body positive advocates aim to show that all bodies deserve respect and promote a more positive relationship to one's body and self.

The potential beneficial effects of viewing body positive content online may be better understood in light of the more recently explored theoretical construct of positive body image. Over the last decade, body image scholarship has shifted away from a sole focus on body image disturbances towards a more holistic understanding of body image. Positive body image has been conceptualised theoretically as an overarching love and respect for the body (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015). Relatedly, Piran's construct of positive embodiment has

been described as ‘positive body connection and comfort, embodied agency and passion, and attuned self-care’ (2016, p. 47). Research shows that positive body image is associated with greater psychological, social, and emotional well-being (Swami, Weis, Barron, & Furnham, 2018), health promoting behaviours like intuitive eating and physical activity (Andrew, Tiggemann, & Clark, 2016a, 2016b), and is protective against thin-ideal media exposure (Andrew, Tiggemann, & Clark, 2015; Halliwell, 2013). Core features of positive body image include appreciating the unique features of one’s body, accepting aspects of the body that are inconsistent with idealised media images, broadly defining beauty, inner positivity, tending to the body’s needs, and filtering information in a body-protective manner (see Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015). Importantly, Cohen et al. (2019b) found that the content espoused on leading body positive Instagram accounts is largely consistent with key theoretical tenets of positive body image (Tylka and Wood-Barcalow, 2015), and therefore the authors concluded that engaging with body positive content on Instagram may be associated with similar psychological and protective benefits for women.

3. Maintaining an appearance focus

Whilst body positivity on social media continues to grow in popularity and reach, there has been limited research examining its content and impact (Camarneiro, 2017). Moreover, various mass circulation newspapers and online blogs have criticised it with headlines like ‘The body positive movement is admirable, but it isn’t liberating women’ (The Sydney Morning Herald; Reilly, 2017), ‘Body positivity is everywhere, but is it for everyone?’ (USA Today; Dastagir, 2017), and ‘Please stop telling me to love my body; embracing body neutrality’ (Man Repeller Blog; Oltuski, 2017). One argument found in such articles is that body positivity creates a new pressure on women to ‘love’ their bodies, and therefore may make women feel worse about themselves if they do not (Oltuski, 2017). Another criticism is that despite the positive messaging around bodies, such content still

focuses on appearance and thus may merely perpetuate the underlying issue in the first place – by keeping the focus on the body. Indeed, the Cohen et al. (2019b) content analysis of body positive posts on Instagram found that almost one third (32%) of the imagery containing humans depicted bodies in extremely or very revealing clothing, and just over a third (34%) featured objectification (i.e., focus on a specific body part, a sexually suggestive pose, or absence of a clearly visible head and/or face). However, these frequencies are considerably less compared to *fitspiration* and *thinspiration*, where the overwhelming majority of the images have been found to feature sexual objectification (between 56-85%; Boepple, Ata, Rum, & Thompson, 2016; Ghaznavi & Taylor, 2015; Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2018). Nevertheless, prominent body image researchers have questioned whether any emphasis on bodies in these types of fat acceptance communities may continue to reinforce a preoccupation with appearance over other attributes (Webb et al., 2017).

In order to address this question, Cohen, Fardouly, Newton-John, and Slater (2019a) conducted an experimental study to investigate the effect of viewing body-positive Instagram posts on young women's mood and body image. Participants were randomly allocated to view either body positive, thin-ideal, or appearance-neutral Instagram posts. Results showed that brief exposure to body positive posts was associated with improvements in young women's positive mood, body satisfaction and body appreciation, relative to thin-ideal and appearance-neutral posts. However, both thin-ideal and body-positive posts were associated with increased self-objectification relative to appearance-neutral posts. Accordingly, this preliminary research suggests that, on the one hand, viewing body positive imagery is associated with improved mood and positive body image, which runs counter to criticism that it makes women feel worse about themselves (Oltuski, 2017). However, on the other hand, it is still associated with a focus on appearance over other attributes consistent with Webb et al.,'s (2017) concerns.

According to objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997), living in a society that sexually objectifies the female body encourages women and girls to ‘self-objectify’. Self-objectification refers to viewing oneself as an object to be evaluated by others based on one’s appearance. Importantly, objectification theory outlines a number of negative psychological consequences of self-objectification, that are disproportionately experienced by women (e.g., body shame, appearance anxiety, disordered eating, and sexual dysfunction; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). In the Cohen et al. (2019a) experiment, state self-objectification was measured using a version of the Twenty Statements Test (Fredrickson, Roberts, Noll, Quinn, & Twenge, 1998), whereby participants are asked to complete sentences beginning with ‘I am’. A greater number of responses referring to body shape and size and other physical appearances indicate higher levels of self-objectification. Interestingly, women made more statements about their appearance after viewing both thin-ideal *and* body positive posts compared to the appearance-neutral posts (Cohen et al., 2019a). Notably, those who viewed body positive posts made more positive statements about their appearance (e.g., ‘I am beautiful’) compared to those who viewed thin-ideal posts (e.g., ‘I am ugly’). Nevertheless, this still constitutes a focus on appearance over other attributes.

This finding reiterates that because body positive content still exists on the photo-based platform of Instagram and contains appearance-focused images of women’s bodies in revealing clothing (Cohen et al., 2019b), viewing it may be associated with negative consequences in line with objectification theory. Nevertheless, given this preliminary experimental study found that acute exposure to body positive posts on Instagram was associated with both increased body appreciation and increased self-objectification, two seemingly opposing constructs, future research is necessary to further understand this complex effect. For example, qualitative interviews may provide greater insight into how women may experience both body appreciation and self-objectification following exposure to

body positive posts. It is also possible that time is a factor, such that while immediate responses to body positive imagery may be positive, the long-term effects could be negative. Longitudinal research would shed more light on the long-term effects of cumulative exposure to body positivity on both body appreciation and self-objectification.

4. What about body neutrality?

In light of this appearance focus, critics of body positivity instead advocate for ‘body neutrality’, which is supposedly the ‘middle ground’ between otherwise polarising messages of loving or hating one’s body (Weingus, 2018). Whereas body positivity aims to change the definition of beauty in society by promoting acceptance and appreciation of all body shapes and sizes, body neutrality aims to change the value placed on beauty in society by encouraging individuals to place less emphasis on their physical appearance altogether (Rees, 2019). Examples of body neutrality messages include ‘You are more than a body’ and ‘Your body does not exist to be pleasing to the eyes of others’. While body neutrality may be a worthwhile perspective to adopt, this is likely to be a major challenge in a society where women are constantly being bombarded with messages to scrutinize their ‘flaws’ and ‘fix’ their bodies (Betz & Ramsey, 2017). In an environment that places high value on physical appearance, particularly online, it is important that content like body positivity continues portraying images of alternative body types as beautiful and worthy and presents messages that challenge the prevailing appearance ideal messages. Indeed, previous research has found that young women experienced greater acceptance of their own bodies following exposure to bodies that do not conform to the thin-ideal (Williamson & Karazsia, 2018).

Tylka and Wood-Barcalow (2015, p. 118) have argued that by body image and eating disorder treatments focusing on reducing negative body image without promoting aspects of positive body image, ‘they may promote a neutral body image at best (e.g., “I don’t hate my body anymore. I merely tolerate it”)’. Instead, these authors assert that, ‘helping clients adopt

a positive body image may help them appreciate, respect, celebrate, and honour their bodies, which may make treatment gains more effective and lasting' (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015, p. 118). Similarly, researchers of eating disorder prevention efforts have advocated for the incorporation of positive body image into the treatment of eating disorders in moving patients toward flourishing and well-being (Cook-Cottone, 2015). Accordingly, body positive content on social media may be one scalable and feasible avenue through which to not only reduce body image dissatisfaction for vulnerable social media users, but indeed promote positive body image as well. There is evidence that young women perceive body positive accounts favourably and are willing to follow in the future (Cohen et al., 2019a).

5. Encouraging obesity and unhealthy lifestyles

There have also been concerns in the popular press that body positivity encourages obesity by 'glorifying' unhealthy habits (Nomi, 2018). In a similar vein, a recent paper published in the scientific journal '*Obesity*' asserted that the normalisation of larger bodies is contributing to the prevalence of overweight and obesity (Muttarak, 2018). Importantly, such claims remain unsubstantiated and likely reflect an inherent weight bias that associates body acceptance with unhealthy behaviours and self-neglect (Puhl & Heuer, 2009). Indeed, Mutarak's (2018) paper has been criticised by other academics as inaccurate and misleading research (Alleva & Tylka, 2018; Stewart, 2018). To date there is no empirical evidence to support the supposition that viewing body positivity leads to unhealthy behaviours or obesity. In fact, idealised social media content like *thinspiration* and *fitspiration* have been found to disseminate messages that conflate notions of health with thin ideals, exclude individuals of larger body sizes, and promote fat stigmatisation and disordered eating (Boepple & Thompson, 2016). Moreover, experimental research has found that exposure to such content has no impact on actual exercise behaviour and instead increases body dissatisfaction (Robinson et al., 2017). This is consistent with a large body of research showing that public

health campaigns using weight stigmatisation in an attempt to ‘motivate’ individuals to adopt healthy practices in fact alienate people of larger bodies from engaging in health behaviours and leads to further weight gain (Puhl & Suh, 2015; Puhl & Heuer, 2010).

By contrast, body positive posts on Instagram have been found to encourage concepts like body appreciation and body care, and present women of larger bodies engaging in physical activities like yoga (e.g., @nolatrees and @mynameisjessamyn) and surfing (e.g., @bostanley; Cohen et al., 2019b). Similarly, a content analysis of Instagram images with the hashtag #curvyoga found that these images featured messages conveying a holistic approach to health, active portrayals of health and fitness at any size, and taking pride in the functionality of one’s body, consistent with the Health at Every Size® health promotion philosophy (Webb et al., 2019). Body positive advocates argue that such social media content likely creates a more inclusive and empowering environment for all people to partake in similar activities regardless of their body shape or size (Haskins, 2015). Furthermore, there is evidence that focusing on health behaviours for the functional benefits (e.g., strength, endurance, and improved mood) as found in body positive posts, promotes greater adherence than an appearance-based focus such as that found in *fitspiration*, which is associated with disordered eating and lack of adherence (Tylka & Homan, 2015). Taken together, it is more plausible that exposure to body positive content, rather than weight stigmatising content, is associated with *adaptive* health behaviours than unhealthy behaviours and obesity.

6. Future directions for research

Whilst body positivity on social media offers a promising approach to cultivate positive body image on a large scale, research is in the early stages and further investigation is necessary to draw more definitive conclusions about its usefulness. First, given the finding that a third of body positive posts featured some degree of objectification (Cohen et al., 2019b), together with experimental findings that state self-objectification increased after

viewing body positive posts (Cohen et al., 2019a), further research is necessary to understand this relationship. If indeed body positive posts maintain a preoccupation with appearance, perhaps there is scope to promote positive body image messages through quotes and illustrations without portraying objectified images of the body. Experimental research would help tease these elements apart and clarify if the same positive effects on mood and body image can be achieved without the objectifying elements. Second, in light of claims made in the popular press that body positivity may contribute to obesity, it would be beneficial for future studies to empirically examine health attitudes of body positive social media consumers as well as actual behavioural outcomes following exposure to such content. Third, research shows that older women and men are also susceptible to body image issues (Mangweth-Matzek & Hoek, 2017), and future research may examine if engaging with body positive content on social media may have benefits for these demographics too (Cohen et al., 2019b). Finally, longitudinal research would help to clarify if the short-term benefits of viewing body positive content on social media persist in the long-term, or whether the heightened focus on appearance following acute exposure ultimately contributes to long-term self-objectification.

The current literature also presents future directions for body positive content on social media. A systematic content analysis of popular body positive accounts found less frequent representation of themes of filtering information in a body-protective manner, adaptive investment in body care, and body appreciation (Cohen et al., 2019b). Research indicates that these themes are important for both the development of positive body image and the prevention of body image disturbances (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015). Therefore, body positive posts may benefit from further emphasis on these components of positive body image in addition to broad conceptualisation of beauty, body acceptance, and inner positivity.

7. Conclusion

Both eating disorders and obesity are serious public health concerns due to their high prevalence and critical psychosocial and physical health implications. However, to date the media portrayal of one body type as ‘healthy’ and ‘beautiful’ and the public health focus on weight control and obesity prevention has shown limited effectiveness, and in fact likely serve to promote and perpetuate these very issues (Puhl & Suh, 2015). By contrast, positive body image messages may offer a fruitful adjunct to prevention and intervention efforts (Bray, Slater, Lewis-Smith, Bird, & Sabey, 2018). Preliminary evidence suggests that body positivity on social media may be one avenue to enhance positive body image at a population level.

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