

Is Body Positivity Culture Here to Stay?

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## Intro

“Women of all shapes and sizes are beautiful.” That is what you probably hear from a friend of yours when you guys are scrolling through Instagram and looking through several online shops for evening outfits for a night out. However, you notice that your friend's expression starts to change when both of you see an ad for the upcoming runway from Victoria's Secret; a clear expression of disappointment and lack of confidence. “I heard they released a new perfume series, let's take a look.” your friend quickly clicks to a different post and you know exactly why. The clear depictions of the “perfect body” plastered on huge photos of supermodels all throughout the video. Selling you the idea of you having the perfect body, the body of these models if you purchase one of their dream bras.

Body positivity, the trend across social media platforms that started in 2010 that is still roaming across social media today. The push that bolstered this trend was in London in December 2018, when hundreds of women stripped down to their underwear to protest in front of Victoria's Secret store to demand body diversity and inclusion. “Our bodies matter too.” was written on one of the many signs in protest. The controversy started when women tracked down the concerning trend of Victoria Secret runway shows; they noticed that models who were modeling for Victoria Secret were often skinny, tall and no bigger than a size 2. Rarely will you see a plus-sized “angel” on the runway. Thus leading to the misrepresentation of different body types within Victoria's Secret conglomerate and the fashion industry at that time as a whole.

As social media began to grow in the early 2010s, it brought many pros and cons to society along with it, the representation of female inclusivity when it came to body image and the idea of body positivity was a primary topic of choice from the very beginning. More specifically, certain aspects of social media usage eventually left a negative impact on females.

An example of this could be that when women see actresses and models pop up on Facebook, Instagram, etc, this has the potential to lead that individual to compare their own body image in a negative light compared to what they are seeing on a daily basis as the “ideal body”.

“Correlational studies also indicate that specific aspects of social media use, such as comparing oneself to images of attractive peers [20,21 ], may be particularly important in the context of body image” (Fardouly and Vartanian, 2016). However, along with the negative comparison of oneself to the attractive images on social media, body positivity has grown a huge following and has actually made an impact in encouraging females to love their own bodies, in whatever shape, size, or condition they are in.

The objective of this research is to analyze the growing movement of body positivity on social media and compare findings as to whether this movement, which started a decade ago, is continuing on the move towards positive permanence to women within society or could its positive effects just be temporary? With ingrained traditional ideas of what makes a woman's body beautiful having such a dominant place in the minds of the everyday woman, our objective is to explore and study further into how social media ties in with women's idea of body image and how it shapes their perspective of themselves. Predominantly speaking, since we are living within the age of networking and being active on social media on a daily basis is such a common practice for so many women, there could be comparative effects on each individual. How do social media posts both body positive and in general, affect how women perceive the idea of their own bodies? This paper will explore the rise and history of body positivity within social media, social media body expectations and its positive effects, women's perspectives in connection to social media, and how influencers/celebrities present body positivity on social

media. As a final note, we would like to see whether our research could show if body positivity social media posts affect women positively or negatively going forward.

## **Literature Review**

### ***The Rise and History of the Body Positivity Movement***

The usage of exposing images of women for body diversity and promoting personal body images that go against what is called beautiful normally, is an important stance on how the movement for body positivity is created (Rodgers, Rachel F, 2021). The origins of the body positivity movement stem back from gay, overweight, and black activists during the civil rights movement, and have taken a new stage on social media. These activists, were expressing their right to be free from the cages that were holding their bodies and image to unrealistic standards. Now fast forward to 2010, the movement of body positivity on social media is the celebration and promotion of bodies that are not the thin ideal (Aniulis, Ellie, Sharp, Gemma, and Thomas, Nicole A, 2021). The positive feedback that is created on social media, helps users that are posting self-images, promote their perception that their body image is positive. This positive feedback that is cultivated, may help others appreciate their own body images that have similar attributes (Rodgers, Rachel F, 2021).

### ***Social Media's Body Image Expectations***

Social media has brought images, interactions, expectations, and exposure of the female body to the critique of the world. The construct of body image has many dimensions, such as, feelings, mentality, attitudes that can alter the appearance (Rodgers, Rachel F, 2021).

Instagram is a platform that is used to share pictures and videos, from which media followers are developed. Hashtags are mini search engines that allow keywords to be used to find images throughout the site. Using the hashtag, #bodypositivity a study that was conducted by, (Lazuka,

Rebecca F, Wick, Madeline R, Keel, Pamela K, and Harriger, Jennifer A,2020), they hypothesized that there would be a diverse variety of women with various body sizes, however, they would still be promoting content that focused on image and objectification (Lazuka, Rebecca F, Wick, Madeline R, Keel, Pamela K, and Harriger, Jennifer A,2020). Their research concluded that with the 246 posts they collected, 25.4% of humans were “obese,” 2.3% were “underweight,” 17.3% were “overweight,” and 54.9% were “normal” (Lazuka, Rebecca F, Wick, Madeline R, Keel, Pamela K, and Harriger, Jennifer A,2020). During this study, the images shown were being shot in an objectifying way, 36.2%, and 23.2% were posing in a sexual pose. Their hypothesis was correct, when using the hashtag, “body positivity,” there were various body shapes and sizes when posting to Instagram (Lazuka, Rebecca F, Wick, Madeline R, Keel, Pamela K, and Harriger, Jennifer A,2020).

The movement of body positivity is the promotion of all bodies and explores the fact that not one body type is ideal (Aniulis, Ellie, Sharp, Gemma, and Thomas, Nicole A, 2021). The “body positive” content on social media has helped give us an open platform to challenge what the eyes think of as beautiful (Rodgers, Rachel F, 2021). However, the use of social media has allowed users the ability to manipulate their pictures and content with the use of various filters. In an Australian study, the study showed that over 62% of young women had used filters, “sometimes,” or “very often,” (Rodgers, Rachel F, 2021). In another study, women were shown two different types of images, natural unedited images, and edited unrealistic images. Women who viewed images that showed women with unedited images and no makeup reported a more positive body image (Rodgers, Rachel F, 2021). With the normalcy of editing pictures, and changing the way media is viewed, the user must now be more subjective when validating images.

### ***Social Media's Influence on Positive Body Image***

Social media and online images are an important source of how women compare themselves to other women (Madison Politte-Corn, Jasmine Fardouly). In an online study 115 women, ages between 19-75 were shown different body types, the participants were to pick out what they thought the ideal body BMI was for the image that was displayed (Aniulis, Ellie, Sharp, Gemma, and Thomas, Nicole A, 2021). The participants in this study selected similar BMI's that would correlate with that body type, and they would not choose the thin idea. This study showed that women were not looking for the perfect and ideal weight, rather what was healthy and acceptable for that body type (Aniulis, Ellie, Sharp, Gemma, and Thomas, Nicole A, 2021).

### ***Social Media and Women's Perspective***

Various platforms such as Instagram have fostered a forum for users to post pictures and share pictures instantly without any hassle. With this quick and easy tool, social media usage on Instagram has been popular especially toward women when they need "advice" on what to wear today or what makeup is currently trending. Nonetheless, one of the most popular keywords that females usually search on Instagram is "model", or refer to as Instagram influencers. Being a model or being pretty is not something negative. However, the majority of women and young girls are vulnerable when they witness someone who has an "ideal" body type that they desire. According to Lewallen and Behm-Morawitz (2016), they reveal that social media usage influences women and young girls to what we call social comparison; this lowers their self-esteem and creates body dissatisfaction.

Furthermore, young women who gain exposure to social media usually perceive the negative impact and will lead to anxiety and eating disorders. Their anxiety is about how many "likes" they would get on their social media profile. Thus, the lower it gets, the more it provokes

anxiety and psychological distress, leading to eating disorders to fit in the norm at that moment. As Int J Environ Res Public Health points out “These ideals confirmed the way young people perceived themselves and, therefore, how they value themselves” (Martinez, Macias, Moreno, Jimenez, Pagliari, Abellan 2019). That is, social media plays a vital role in how young women depict themselves. It creates a standard or a role model of how women should be to fit in. Thus their body perception has been distorted and the rise of body positivity is necessary to help women realize their value and love their own body.

### ***Influencers/ Celebrities on Social Media and Body Positivity***

In early 2021, many stars like, Lily Reinhart, Demi Lovato, and Lizzo, started to speak out for body positivity. Their action was promoted across social media platforms with messages targeted especially to young women to be comfortable in their skin. They also promoted that being perfect is unachievable, and don't let anyone judge your value. These messages roamed across social media along with pictures of the stars in their “comfortable position” such as wrinkles, fat, etc. Nonetheless, this gave many women a chance to see that it is normal to have flaws and every woman is a perfect version of themselves (Beauty by Disaster, 2019; Messina, 2017).

### ***Body Positivity and Mental Health***

Over the last decade, scientists have proved that viewing body positivity messages on social media have a positive connection to mental health. Because the more body appreciation women have for themselves, the more this creates a shield to prevent women from body dissatisfaction (Andrew, Tiggermann, Clark 2015). Women who view positive messages and photos about body shapes on any social media platform have a higher rate of body appreciation than women who are not viewing. Not only Hollywood stars, but also influencers and fitness

models/trainers also follow the trend to upload photos on their social media and reveal their imperfect self. Not to mention, this trend started to grow stronger at a rapid rate in 2017, when Korean boyband BTS launched their album “Love Yourself”, carrying the message of self-appreciation and spreading it like wildfire throughout social media.

### **Research Questions**

1. What are the current expectations of women’s body image and how do body positive posts tie into those expectations?
2. What impact do body positivity posts have on women over time?
3. To what extent is social media affecting women’s perception of their bodies and do body positive posts alleviate any of their negative feelings?

### **Methodology**

For this study, our team would like to propose a quantitative study that consists of classic experimental components of analysis. Within our study, we will divide the women that have opted to participate and expose them to forms of body positivity within social media in the form of different posts in hopes that we will acquire their perceptions and be able to determine answers to our research questions. We would like to see if there is any correlation as to how body positivity posts on social media and posts that are not considered body positive affect their positive or negative perceptions of themselves when it pertains to their own body image and the idea of body positivity. We would also like to see if exposure to these posts remain relevant to them going forward, which will hopefully give us some insight as to the lasting power of the body positivity movement. Our reliability will be measured using Cronbach's coefficient alpha utilizing a body image scale.

### ***Sampling Selection***

The research groups within our experiment will consist of 150 women from various ethnicities and educational backgrounds, varying from ages 19 to 35. The 150 individual women will all pretest together, answering a questionnaire to get an idea of their perception of the concept of female body positivity. Those 150 women will then be placed, with a completely randomized design/ within-subjects design, into 3 groups. The first 50 will be randomly placed into a treatment group that exposes them to 10 body positivity posts on Instagram, ranging from body positive celebrities and influencers such as Lizzo and Nicole Byer to body inclusive lingerie brands such as Parade, who make a point to post their inclusivity of women of all shapes and sizes on social media of undergarments for bodies ranging from an XXS to a 3XL. They will then immediately posttest and be given a survey with questions regarding body positivity and how they perceive themselves after seeing these social media posts.

The questions will measure their answers using a Likert Scale method with (5) being Highly Likely and (1) being High Unlikely. The second group of 50 will be placed into a separate treatment group, exposing them to 10 social media posts and influencers on Instagram who are not promoting body positivity. Examples of this would be lingerie brand Victoria's Secret who is notorious for selling the idea of the "perfect supermodel body image" and clothing brand Brandy Melville who's garments mainly consist of the size "One Size Fits All". The second group will immediately also be given the same survey to take after viewing their social media posts. The remaining 50 women will be randomly placed into a control group and exposed to no treatment at all but still take the posttest survey. All groups will reconvene in one week to

repeat the same posttest and measure their attitudes on body positivity and distinguish if their perception has changed over time.

### ***Operational Definitions***

“Body Positivity” will be defined by any post, message, or influence being put forth on social media to promote and or celebrate the acceptance of one’s own body as beautiful and sufficient just the way it is.

“Body Image” will be defined as the way one looks at their own body or someone else’s and the positive/negative feelings that derive from their perceptions.

“Social Media Influence” will be defined as the power influencers, celebrities and basically most individuals have when they post content connected to a certain opinion they have on a certain subject that others will be affected by.

“Social Media” will be defined by the online platform used to feed the perceptions of individuals.

“Mental Health” will be defined as the psychological state an individual is left in after exposure to positive or negative influence.

“Negative Body Image Posts” will be defined as any post trying to mask itself as an influence of any kind while feeding into the non-inclusive negative body image on social media.

### ***Dependent and Independent Variables***

The 10 body positive and 10 non-body positive posts will function as the independent variable, while the perceptions of each participant in relation to their body image and the idea of body positivity after exposure to the independent variable will serve as the dependent variable.

### ***Limitations/Ethical Issues***

Possible ethical implications to the study when exposing individuals to negative body image perceptions such as non-body positive social media posts. These individuals being women who are in an early post-baby stage, could possibly have an ethical negative effect on the study. Furthermore, individual women within our study who have just had a baby could possibly be in a highly sensitive state in relation to their own body image which could cause them to answer posttest survey questions contrastingly differently than they would have not just given birth. This could cause inconsistencies therefore unreliable statistical findings when collecting and analyzing our data.

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