

EMERGENCE OF ACCEPTANCE WAVE AND BODY POSITIVITY ON INSTAGRAM: CONTENT ANALYSIS

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Abstract

Social media has been long blamed for circulating and encouraging negative stereotypes. In the recent times, the role of social media in endorsing positive ideas and trends has been recognised. Body Positivity and Self-Acceptance have recently emerged as popular constructs. Body Positivity stands for the practice of challenging culturally constructed and idealised appearance stereotypes. The present study aims to review content related to body positivity on Instagram and the various practices on Instagram, that are being utilised to inculcate body positivity. This includes the usage of various hashtags, reels, influencers and trends promoting Body Positivity. Three prominent hashtags were chosen to review their usage frequency and the kind of Content associated with these hashtags. The study also attempts to understand body positivity movements' influence on different gender types. Conclusively, the aim of the study is to review the Emergence of acceptance wave on Instagram and its influence on the audience.

Keywords: Acceptance, Positivity, Instagram, Appearance, Hashtags

Evolution of Socially Constructed beauty Standards

Beauty standards are socially constructed norms, which are the characteristics based on which society differentiates aesthetically pleasant people from those not so pleasant looking. The consensus of what is good looking has been perpetuated through circulation of unrealistic, photo-shopped and edited images on social media. Individuals are increasingly relying on social media to source information about accepted appearance norms and communal standards. (Bair, Kelly, Serdar, & Mazzeo, 2012). These unrealistic beauty standards create an unsaid sense of pressure amongst the youth to look their best, thus at times, going to lengths to edit their images, using too much makeup, indulging in unhealthy eating habits and overall detriment on their self esteem.

Unlike conventional media forms such as television and magazines, where primarily, images of celebrities and models are featured, Social media platforms, such as Instagram features images of common people as well. Such Images of the Common people, then become targets of comparison for users. According to a study, Women reported comparing their appearance more often with their own past appearance, acquaintances and friends than to that of celebrities on Facebook. (Fardouly et al., 2015). Another established fact is that beauty standards are culturally defined. Most individuals assess their appearance in terms of how their peers or counterparts feel about their appearance. Especially in young individuals, Peer influence largely determines how much one is satisfied with their physical self. According to research, higher number of conversations with friends related to appearance was associated

with more intense body dissatisfaction and poorer body esteem was observed across five studies. (Clark & Tiggemann 2006, 2007; Jones et al., 2004; Shroff & Thompson, 2006; Sinton & Birch, 2006)

Though the physical beauty of the human body has been given great value, from ancient and medieval times, it has gained momentum as a topic of research relatively recently. Ancient instances of body image consciousness can be traced back to Ancient Egypt where a woman having slender body, narrow shoulders and tall waist was considered to be perfect. Similarly, a woman's appearance was thought to be an important indicator of her husband's wealth status in Ancient Italy, where a woman with full hips and ample bosom was thought to be good looking. The Chinese also preferred women with narrow waists and slender bodies.

More serious research began in this area, in 1930's with the publishing of the book "The image and appearance of the Human body" By Austrian neurologist Paul Schilder, who defined body Image as "The picture of our own body which we form in our mind , that is to say, the way in which the body appears to ourselves." Even then, body image as a topic of study remained more confined to females till the late 1900s. This was because of the collective unconsciousness of the society, with the expectation of women being pleasant looking and sexually attractive. The ideals of beauty standards have also changed from time to time. What was considered beautiful five decades back, does not match upto present standards of beauty. A close comparison of Indian cinema clearly shows how perceptions of beauty have changed within the last 50 years. Movies from the 1950's portrayed women with curvy bodies and chubby features to be beautiful, whereas now, women with slender waists and toned bodies are appreciated.

The new millennium brought with itself new trends and standards of physical beauty, with models flaunting prominent thigh gaps, fuller breasts and slender bodies. This period also saw more rise in cosmetic surgeries, concepts of crash diets, and vigorous workout regimes. With the Emergence of newer forms of media brought about more exposure to socially constructed beauty Ideals. The Internet has been typically outreaching and influential in creating public opinion of appearance , and to top this, it is accessible to everyone in the present time. The internet seems to be taking over the other traditional forms of media in the past few decades. It's reach and growth has been monumental. According to Gilder(1992), Television will be overtaken by the computer in the near future and most people will also look for news on the internet, instead of glueing to the Television.(Conley & Lambie, 2006). Not only did the Internet take over other forms of Media, it has been successful in Influencing society across domains.

Various Social Media platforms influence human lives and their influence on one's life has been in question since the inception of such platforms. Currently, more than 42% of the world's population is an active social media user (Kemp 2018). Everyday, millions of images and visual media content is added to Social networking sites such as Instagram and facebook. These forums serve as platforms for Internalisation and comparison. People usually post images, and videos which they can edit and add filters to, before posting. To understand how media exposure influences the perceptions of women, A study by Hendriks and Burgoon (2003) concluded that women who had substantial exposure to thin ideal media images were likely to accept thin as a desirable norm. The problem with this being, that these images exhibited by

media, are in most situations, perfected through editing and photoshopping and normally correspond to unattainable levels of body perfection. In another study, by Sara Santarossa & Sarah J. Woodruff(2017), It was found that Females engaged for 4.1 ± 3.9 hours, while males engaged for about 2.9 ± 2.8 hours on Social Networking sites, stalking other people's profiles, without actually communicating with them. A study in the Indian context suggests a high body dissatisfaction amongst Indian women. In this study by Chandra et. al, 2012, It was found that Indian girls aged 14-19 years were highly dissatisfied with their bodies, where girls with a Normal Body Mass Index were as dissatisfied with their bodies as girls with a higher Body Mass Index. Furthermore, problematic Social Networking site use showed positive correlation with influence on Body Index, Low Self Esteem and increase in Eating Disorders. According to Stice & Bearman (2000), it was observed that college women who were exposed to physically ideal and attractive images from magazines, were less confident, more ashamed and more depressed with their bodies than others who were not exposed.

However, in the very recent past, an emerging shift in paradigm was observed with regard to appearance ideals and acceptance of self on Social Media. Beginning 2012, one could find an increased number of visual images and hashtags on Instagram that advocated Self Acceptance and body positivity. Body Positivity emerged as phenomena that aimed to challenge stereotypical, culturally circulated dominant ideals of appearance.

Body Positivity and Acceptance wave on Instagram

The Body positivity Movement emerged in 2012, as a revolution to challenge societal stereotypes of appearance. The movement was aimed at countering the unrealistic beauty expectations and unrepresentative portrayals of women in popular media and advertising (Sastre, 2014). Multiple hashtags emerged to be used by users to share raw and unedited pictures of themselves, and yet be confident in their own skin, rather than being judged. There has been a growing propulsion to do away with narrowly defined body ideals, to give way to more inclusive and diverse ideas of Appearance. Instagram, as compared to other platforms, saw more prominent content related to body positivity.

However, research suggests that Instagram is also responsible for causing more body image issues than Facebook. The results of a study by Zola et. al (2020) suggests that when it comes to young women's body image and mood, Instagram may be a more problematic platform than Facebook. According to the study, though use of Facebook did increase appearance comparisons relative to a control condition, Instagram did it to a greater extent. Post Pandemic, while the world is walking towards a new normal, it has also become more inclusive and accepting of diverse environments. Recently, some segments of social media have become more focused on fostering inclusion and acceptance in the community.

This shift in paradigm has been popularly termed as "Body Positivity Movement" or what layman calls as "Acceptance wave". This Acceptance wave has become more famous on Instagram, with many celebrities and influencers coming out as advocates of Acceptance and Inclusion by normalising varied body shapes and types. Recently, Instagram saw a surge in hashtags such as #plussizefashion, #curvyconfidence, #selflove etc. According to Sastre (2014), the body positivity movement gathered attention in 2012, to counter the unrealistic beauty expectations and unrepresentative

portrayals of women that were showcased in popular media and advertising. Spearheading these changes on Instagram, is a bunch of Microcelebrities who are using their network and profile to endorse acceptance of various body shapes and features. These Microcelebrities, also known as Social media Influencers are helping their followers become more aware of the virtuality of the images shown on social media, and move away from body shaming. There has been a growing propulsion to do away with narrowly defined body ideals, to give way to more inclusive and diverse ideas of Appearance. Microcelebrities such as Kusha Kapila are known to not only advocate but self endorse body positivity.

Kusha, who has more than 2.9 Million Instagram followers, has at multiple incidences, dejected the ideas of body hate and beauty standards. An article in the famous magazine Vogue cited her saying *"I can't stand standards. The idea is to challenge that. How can you set standards for billions of people who come from such different histories and ancestral lines? I feel it is a great disservice and is in fact, against the very idea of beauty"* .

Another noted Microcelebrity Dolly Singh, with over 1.5 Million followers advocates body acceptance , for those who have body image issues for being too skinny. She opened up about how she was bullied and name called in School for being too skinny and dark. She was also trolled in school for having crooked teeth. She has been vocal about how she openly resists beauty standards, and also recently featured in a toothpaste ad, which represents her self acceptance and body positivity.

Multiple Hashtags related to body positivity have emerged on Instagram. A very popular hashtag used on Instagram is #nofilters, wherein individuals post their raw pictures, without the use of filters, in their natural skin to endorse that one's real appearance is accepted and appreciated .When one searches for a Hashtag called #bodypositivity, it brings about 10.9 Million posts on Instagram, while #effyourbeautystandards elicits about 5 Million posts. However, the observation is that most of the posts that are elicited out of these hashtags are more centred around body size than any other appearance attributes.

Many Celebrities and Brands have also come forward in support of the Body Positivity Movement on Instagram. For Instance, popular Indian celebrity designer Sabhyasachi Mukherjee, who is renowned for his outfit and jewellery designing, has often utilised models of various body shapes and body types to normalise the fact that women have different body types, and to appreciate the beauty of each body type. In his recent Photoshoot to endorse his bridal couture, which he posted on Instagram, he has utilised Dark complexioned , curvy women with natural, un-treated hair to show that one does not have to be a typical body type to look good. Similarly, another known fashion designer Masaba Gupta who has recently launched her cosmetic brand Lovechild by Masaba has endorsed women of various body types, facial features and complexion to endorse her brand.

With the onset of COVID-19 Pandemic and the restrictions of lockdown worldwide, people were confined to their homes across the globe. This also bought in the culture of work from home. Social media became the primary mode to interact with others and to recreate . Many posts regarding self care and that of others began to be circulated , and more content was natural, unedited and authentic. According to an Article by TNN titled "Pandemic's 'plus' point: Trends on body positivity are a welcome change" , a celebrated stylist was quoted saying *"I'm glad that the awareness of being body*

positive is finally setting in — all thanks to the pandemic. Social media consumption has been on a high since COVID-19 and people are being exposed to content that is different from the conventional cover-page model stereotype. Content creators are churning out material related to body positivity and this has helped build awareness that all body types are beautiful.” As a part of a research study aiming to understand the effect of Instagram on Appearance Internalisations, Young female participants revealed that during the pandemic, is when they began getting less conscious about what others thought of their appearance, and became more confident in their own skin. As one of the participants reported *“It was during the pandemic that I realised, that at the end of the day what matters is that one is healthy...getting influenced by how other people look and what others think of me does not matter. I have come to accept myself as I am.. I am more confident in my own skin.”* Additionally, Many other respondents reported that they like Microcelebrities who endorse authentic content and content that represents real individuals.

One of the respondents who was a Kardashian fan, later ended up unfollowing them *“That doesn’t feel natural to me. That’s not a celebrity or influence I’d like to look up to... I was also following the Kardashians because I grew up watching their shows. But eventually I ended up unfollowing all of them because they also keep on doing a lot of procedures and they tend to change their body or their skin colour or a lot of other things. Didn’t seem relatable that way.”* However, When life came back to normal, the discussion around quarantine weight gain came into the picture, wherein new terms such as “covibesity” (Khan & Smith, 2020), began to emerge. Also, the success of Body Positivity Movement still stays questionable with respect to its implementation and success over general population.

The Present Study

The Present study is a qualitative study which aims to analyse prominent hashtags related to Body Positivity on Instagram. An analysis of these hashtags helped to understand what body positivity meant to Instagram users across the globe. The hashtags were selected with a criteria that each of them elicit at least more than 1 Million posts on Instagram and were amongst the relevant hashtags related to the body positivity movement. To analyse the hashtags better, the captions and other hashtags that were used alongside were also observed. Each of the posts observed under the hashtags were posted on public accounts. However, the Instagram user ids of the posters were kept confidential. The posts that emerge on these hashtags were then analysed to look for recurring properties and themes. During the pre-study of the body positivity movement posts, The hashtags that were selected to be observed were:

- 1. #bodypositivity**
- 2. #effyourbeautystandards**
- 3. #loveyourbody**

- each eliciting more than 1 Million posts.

Findings and Themes

Hashtags	Usage Frequency	Observations
#bodypositivity	11 Million posts	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. More focused on acceptance of larger Body shapes 2. Body positivity emphasis largely on females 3. Endorsing body hair 4. Acceptance of cellulite on body 5. Comfort with posting facial pictures endorsing freckles , acne and various skin complexions
#effyourbeautystandards	5 Million posts	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Focus on raw and unedited pictures 2. Motivational quotes of embracing oneself as one is 3. Normalising acceptance of Injury Scars and stitches on body
#loveyourbody	6.4 Million posts	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Acceptance of postpartum body changes 2. Elicits bodies on either side of thickness spectrum, but largely on fat acceptance 3. Posts encouraging Fitness

On analysis of each of these hashtags , few themes that emerged were:

1.The gender Inclined “BO-PO Movement on Instagram -”

Though the Body Positivity movement originally emerged sometime in the 1960s, Body-Positivity Movements or the “BO-PO” Movements have gained prominence since 2012. Since 2012, Body Positive Movements , or in short “BO-PO Movements” have emerged as a platform for individuals, with non-stereotypical body types to challenge society's dominant views of appearance. On the analysis of the hashtags, a fact that clearly stood out that though there have been posts challenging masculine stereotypical appearance, However, the movement has in all terms, emerged in heavy relevance to females than males, with almost about 1 in 20 posts centred on males. The trend was not unexpected, as appearance stereotypes are more common towards females than male.

Majority of posts elicited from #bodypositivity were about women who were endorsing themselves in scanty clothing , and being at comfort with belly fat, chubby arms and cellulite and fat on limbs. The pictures of males that were elicited with the same hashtag showed men endorsing abs and well chiseled body, hefty biceps, body piercings and tattoos. Major posts about males also had supplementary hashtags such as #gymlover, #fitnessmotivation, while on the other hand, supplementary hashtags on females' posts included likes of tags such as #curvy, #plussize, #selflove on their posts. Some posts also had their personal stories of how the person in the picture came to terms with their body, by accepting , loving and nurturing it. Posts elicited on #effyourbeautystandards were heavily focused on females , with only 2 posts featuring males amongst the first 200 posts that emerged on the hashtags. It was observed that one of the most used supplemental hashtag with #effyourbeautystandards was #bodypositivity.

2. Endorsement of Plus size bodies, neglecting the other side

The analysis of the hashtags revealed that though the posts elicited a spectrum of body types , However, the majority of posts were about acceptance and endorsement of plus size bodies , and only about close to 10% of observed posts were related to

thinness. The hashtags also elicited posts about acceptance of postpartum body fat, cellulite, stretch and surgery marks and saggy breasts. While on the other hand, there were posts that were against the normative stereotypical appearance ideals such as thin waists and fuller bosoms.

The trend of posts failed to focus on the other end, i.e. thinness. Rarely any posts related to thin body types that did not match the stereotypical appearance ideals were posted as body positive. What the trend does not identify is that there is a section of people who are not dissatisfied with their body type, not because they are heavier, but because they are slimmer than the accepted and appreciated body type. Another noted type of elicited posts were by women bodybuilders, who endorsed bulky and strong body types for women, which were supplemented by other hashtags such as #fitspo, #girlswholift etc. Most of these posts regarding acceptance of various body types were centred on females, with almost 1 in 20 posts observed to be centred on males. The hashtag #loveyourbody elicited posts which endorsed body hair, freckled skin and acne prone and oily facial skin. Since societal stereotypes focus on a very narrow range of ideal appearance, those on the other end of body spectrum, i.e. images of people with slim and bony body type were not well represented under #bodypositivity and #loveyourbody hashtags.

3. The Psychological Downsides of Body Positivity movement

Though body positivity has been widely popular and accepted, it has simultaneously faced an equal amount of criticism for encouraging injudicious approval towards obese bodies. The major theme of the criticism lies in the fact that acceptance of one's body as is, is desirable in terms of fighting societal stereotypes. However, the movement has become too generalised and has encouraged unhealthy lifestyle amongst viewers and followers in the name of self acceptance.

Which implies that excessive visuals of overweight and obese individuals has normalised obesity, in lieu of self acceptance. Such obese individuals are prone to lifestyle and metabolic diseases. An article titled "Is the body positivity movement going too far" in Greatist, which is an online community aimed at spreading fitness and health, has clearly defined and demarcated between Body positivity vs. neutrality vs. fat acceptance. According to the article, The body positivity movement is sometimes referred to as "denial of science". Additionally, the body positivity movement has also played a role in the marketing and popularity of various products aimed at spreading body positivity.

An example of this is a famous ad-campaign "The Real Beauty" launched by the brand "Dove", which aimed at popularising Dove as a product brand meant for individuals (women) of different skin types and tones, whilst also showing its support for body positivity. Research suggests that Body positivity movement has played a pivotal role in the success and popularity of many products and celebrities. However, Intense research about the two-way influence of various aspects of Social media and Body Image is underway, and a different research domain altogether.

CONCLUSION

The body-positivity movement is still being held controversial vis-a-vis its pros and cons. On one hand, it is considered to bring about Positive societal change, with it considered to be challenging the stereotypical societal norms, on the other hand, it is being criticised for being gender-specific, making people indulge in unhealthy choices

and over-utilisation of certain products. Therefore, It is safe to say that it is too early to undermine the larger influence of body image in the general population.

Conflict Of Interest Declaration

The authors declare that they have no competing Interests. We warrant that this paper is the author's original Work .

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