

Body Image and Social Media Sharing: A Content Analysis of Public Reactions to a Body Positive Post on TikTok

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Abstract

This study explored the public reactions of society to a post on TikTok created by Nessa May. In this video, Nessa May confidently shows her body, which does not fit the stereotypical beauty standards of society. She explains to viewers that it is okay not to fit beauty standards and to have a body type similar to her own. A content analysis of the 100 most recent comments reacting to Nessa May's video identified five main themes including: love, thankfulness, emotions (happiness), beauty, and insecurities. The predominant theme seen was that of love towards Nessa May herself, as well as self-love and increased confidence in the commenters themselves (this made up 35% of all comments). Overall findings showed both support for the body-positive post, as well as an emphasis on the effect normative beauty standards have on women.

Introduction

For decades, women have been told what their bodies should look like. Stereotypes regarding women, and specifically women's shape, are still prevalent in society today. What society tells us the "ideal" female form should look like is an extremely thin physique, but this body type is achievable by almost no one (Fredrickson, Noll, Roberts, Quinn, Twenge, 1998, p. 271).

Through socialization, women are taught from a young age that their looks and the way that others perceive their looks, matter. They are taught to chase after this often unattainable ideal so they may be accepted by society and be attractive. In this way, women are taught to look at themselves "through a veil of sexism" (Fredrickson, Noll, Roberts, Quinn, Twenge, 1998, p. 269). An outcome of this can be self-objectification,

where people measure their worth through their appearance and how they believe they "measure up" compared to beauty standards, as well as what they believe others think about them (Fredrickson, Noll, Roberts, Quinn, Twenge, 1998, p. 270). This can lead to a plethora of negative consequences, specifically mental disorders (such as eating disorders and depression), as well as anxiety and body shame (Fredrickson, Noll, Roberts, Quinn, Twenge, 1998, p. 271). Body shame often has added consequences of feelings of powerlessness and worthlessness (Fredrickson, Noll, Roberts, Quinn, Twenge, 1998, p. 271).

All of this is a cause for many individuals to take part in body monitoring, stemming from feelings of self-consciousness. Since women are told that they should have this extremely thin body type and that is what they should strive for to have an attractive appearance, it

also produces feelings of failure in those who cannot achieve the standard. In this way, the shame that women often feel toward their bodies strengthens social norms and standards (Fredrickson, Noll, Roberts, Quinn, Twenge, 1998, p. 272).

It is not surprising that women feel pressure to conform to the standards of society when it is a very real possibility that they could be the victim of weight stigma if they do not. Obese individuals are commonly stereotyped as “lazy, unmotivated, unintelligent, sloppy, and lacking willpower,” due to the belief that obese individuals can control their weight but simply choose not to (Pearl, 2018, p. 147). In reality, many obese individuals cannot control their weight due to a plethora of factors, such as genetic predispositions, hormonal changes, and the use of medications. Since society upholds this belief, overweight individuals are often personally blamed for not conforming. (Pearl, 2018, p.152). Proponents of the stereotype believe that when a person looks good, or in other words, if they conform to societal beauty standards, they must engage in good behavioural practices as well. They believe the opposite is true of those they do not deem as physically attractive (Pearl, 2018, p. 154). Due to this stigmatization, obese people are devalued as members of society and can even be ostracised. Living with this constant shame can be extremely hard on obese individuals, especially if they internalize these negative stereotypes. This can lead to self-devaluation and self-directed stigma, which can cause a person to develop depression, anxiety, poor self-esteem, body dissatisfaction, and eating disorders (Pearl, 2018, p. 160).

The media supports and even spreads misconceptions about weight stigma. News coverage regarding obesity depicts overweight individuals in unflattering and dehumanizing ways, like showing them engaging in unhealthy stereotypical behaviours (like eating fast food, for example) (Pearl, 2018, p. 151). The news also spreads misinformation supporting the idea that obese individuals are in complete control of their weight, and that they are to blame for being larger than what is perceived to be ideal (Pearl, 2018, p. 151). Similarly, the entertainment industry also depicts people of larger size in a negative light. In books, movies, and television shows, obese characters are routinely portrayed as unattractive, unhealthy, unhappy, and/or

unpopular (Pearl, 2018, p. 151). They are also rarely the main character of these programs and are frequently used for comedic relief, often at their own expense. Television shows with a focus on weight loss, like “The Biggest Loser” for example, also support the idea that weight is in the control of every individual (Pearl, 2018, p. 153). Social media sites can also allow the spread of negativity toward obese individuals. Due to the prevalence of weight stigma in society, many people feel comfortable commenting on others’ bodies, and social media sites are an easy place to do this. This is because social media platforms allow people to comment on anything they like, and the comments are made public unless someone takes active measures to have them removed, such as the original poster. This is an easily accessible gateway for cyberbullying and verbal forms of aggression.

As a result of socialization practices, females come to believe they should fit society’s beauty standards regarding thinness. The media, including social media sites, promote unrealistic body standards and spreads images of women with the “ideal” body type, often through hashtags like “#thinspiration” (Cohen, Newton-John, Slater, 2021, p. 2366). Research indicates that social media posts like these spread the message that the thin-ideal body type is what is healthy, leading to the exclusion and stigma of larger individuals and the fostering of disordered eating habits (Cohen, Newton-John, Slater, 2021, p. 2369). Repeated exposure to such standards on social media also leads to body dissatisfaction, body image concerns, and disordered eating among viewers (Cohen, Fardouly, Newton-John, Slater, 2019, p. 1548).

The body-positivity movement developed as a reaction to the prevalence of unrealistic beauty standards on social media (Cohen, Newton-John, Slater, 2021, p. 2366). The main purpose of body-positive posts is to attempt to show a more diverse range of bodies and inform people that having these body types is normal, natural, and perfectly okay. They usually depict subjects of many different sizes that are often underrepresented otherwise and contain captions that promote body acceptance and seeing beauty in appearances other than what is “ideal” (Cohen, Newton-John, Slater, 2021, p. 2366). There are concerns though, that body-positive posts are not truly helpful because they are still appearance-based content

(Cohen, Fardouly, Newton-John, Slater, 2019, p. 1559). In an experiment, 195 women viewed 20 posts for at least 10 seconds each. The women each either viewed 20 posts of thin-ideal content, body-positive content, or appearance-neutral content. Findings showed that exposure to body-positive photos led to an increase in body satisfaction and the body-positive posts also resulted in the highest score for body appreciation (Cohen, Fardouly, Newton-John, Slater, 2019, p. 1554). In contrast, there was a decrease in body satisfaction in women who viewed thin ideal posts, and their body appreciation scores were the lowest (Cohen, Fardouly, Newton-John, Slater, 2019, p. 1554). Moreover, women who viewed more body-positive posts made more positive statements about their own appearances than those who viewed thin-ideal posts (Cohen, Fardouly, Newton-John, Slater, 2019, p. 1559). Finally, exposure to body-positive content was associated with positive mood and body satisfaction, suggesting social media can also be used to promote more realistic body standards to the benefit of consumers (Cohen, Fardouly, Newton-John, Slater, 2019, p. 1560-1561).

The present study is a content analysis of responses to a body-positive social media post on TikTok showing a woman with a body type that is larger than the ideal beauty standard. This study contributes to the existing literature on normative body by gauging acceptance to a body positive post on a popular social media platform.

Methods

Sample

The sample consisted of 100 comments under a TikTok post created by Nessa May (@nessa.may.8). Keywords used to obtain the data source include: “body image,” “body positivity,” and “normalize normal bodies.” The video source entails Nessa May showing her body, which is larger than what society tells women is “ideal.” She explains through the video why her stomach is not flat like beauty standards tell women it should be. She goes on to express that it is more than okay for her to not have a flat stomach and that it is ok for the viewers of her video to have a similar body. The video source can be found here:

https://www.tiktok.com/@nessa.may.8/video/7076201199518780718?is_copy_url=1&is_from_webapp=v1

Sample Selection

The data source was acquired from TikTok because it is an extremely popular sharing platform with millions, if not billions, of monthly users worldwide, and it is only gaining popularity as time goes on. It is also a rather new social media platform, with an initial release date of September 2016, whereas other sharing platforms have been around longer and most likely have previously been studied more. TikTok is also easily accessible to the general public, as it is a free app available worldwide, and all an individual would have to do to access its content is create an account. The account owner of the video this study is analyzing also seems to be quite popular on the app, with 66.6 thousand followers. The video this study focuses on has a large amount of attention as well, with 838,000 likes, 10,500 comments, and 7999 shares on the site.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The purpose of this content analysis is to study and analyze the reactions of society to a body-positive media post depicting a woman of a larger than stereotypically “ideal” size. The most recent 100 comments that included reactions to the woman in the source, her body, and her message were included in the analysis. All other unrelated comments were not included for examination. Comments that were not in English were also not included in the analysis. Replies to comments were not involved in the analysis as well as there are too many replies to single comments so it would not allow for the examination of multiple perspectives and reactions to the video source.

Unit of Analysis

The unit of analysis for this study is the themes observed in the 100 most recent comments related to the reactions to a body-positive TikTok post. These themes were found by looking at the keywords within the comments as well as the general meanings of the comments.

Setting and Materials

This study took place in the principal researcher’s home. The possession of a technological device, internet access, and a TikTok account were all materials necessary to obtain the data. These materials

were necessary because the video analyzed was posted online on TikTok.

Coding Procedures

All 100 comments were analyzed individually with the intent of finding any keywords as well as the general meaning behind each comment. Once the initial codes were created, the comments were re-examined to identify the main common themes found within them.

Design

This study used a content analysis to analyze recurring themes seen in the comments of a body-positive TikTok video depicting a woman of a larger than “ideal” size according to stereotypical beauty standards.

Results

Results revealed 5 main themes present in the most recent 100 comments on the source. These themes were, in order of prevalence: love, thankfulness, emotions, beauty, and insecurities.

Love

The most common theme found was love. Comments included in this theme were comments that expressed love towards the woman in the video herself as well as comments expressing love towards the content that she created and shared. This theme gauged 35% out of the total sample of 100 comments. Examples of comments showing this theme would be “I love you. Like really. You’re amazing and sweet and have helped me a lot. THANK YOU”, or “I love you sm [so much]”. Comments that included components of self-love and confidence resulting from viewing the source were also included. An example of this type of comment would be “This made me feel even better about myself, thank you.”

Thankfulness

The second most prevalent theme found was thankfulness. Thankfulness refers to comments that included a component expressing gratitude towards Nessa May for creating the content of the video and sharing it with the world. This theme accounted for a total of 30% of the comments. All these comments expressed that they were grateful to be exposed to the video and to hear the message of it. An example of a

comment demonstrating thankfulness is “I sent this to all my girl best friends, and they are all thanking me! You made all of our days! Thank you!”.

Emotions (Happiness)

The third most prevalent theme found was emotions, with a total of 28% of comments including a spoken element of emotion. The emotions that were expressed in all comments were that of happiness. Many examples simply expressed that they were feeling happy, but many also insinuated feelings of happiness by saying that the post made them cry because the message meant a lot to them. Examples of comments relating to the theme of emotions are comments such as: “This made my day I’m so happy!” and “You made me cry...not because of sadness...thank you.”

Beauty

Beauty was the fourth most common theme that was found, with a percentage of 19% of the comments out of the entire sample (n=100) including it. Comments included under the theme of beauty were comments that expressed the belief that the woman in the video was beautiful. Examples of beauty comments included: “You’re beautiful” and “You look amazing <3 stunning.”

Insecurities

Finally, the least prevalent theme was insecurities. Comments categorized as insecurities all had a component speaking about the commenter’s feelings of insecurities regarding their own bodies. Examples of comments categorized as insecurities included: “Insecure because of how big I am,” and “We literally have the same body type. Like exact same. I’ve always been so insecure about my stomach. I’m not anymore because of you. Ily [I love you].”

Other less prevalent themes identified were representation, normalization and beauty standards, and health. Comments depicting representation expressed a similarity between the body in the post and their own body, like saying they share the same body type as Nessa May. These accounted for 7% of the comments. Normalization and beauty standards were comments about society’s beauty standards and how they enjoyed the way the video content worked to normalize bodies that do not fit the standards. Normalization and beauty

standards comments accounted for 3% of the total sample (n=100). Finally, comments included in the health category were comments mentioning the health of Nessa May. These accounted for 3% of the comments.

Table 1. Examples of Comments for Each Main Theme Category

Love	<p>"Honestly, I've been having such a bad time lately and now because of you I will start to love my body."</p> <p>"I love you. Thank you for making me comfortable in my own body!!!"</p>
Thankfulness	<p>"I love this, thank you beautiful."</p> <p>"Girl thank you."</p>
Emotions (Happiness)	<p>"I'm gonna cry this really meant a lot to me"</p> <p>"Thank you this rly [really] makes me happy I'm very insecure! God bless you I'm tearing up LITERALLY you're so beautiful and kind! Enjoy your day/night love you x"</p>
Beauty	<p>"Girl you are gorgeous!!!"</p> <p>"You're so pretty hi"</p>
Insecurities	<p>"I cried when I saw this... I have been feeling so terrible about my rolls this means so much"</p> <p>"Omg [oh my god] I've hated my body for so long that this video just made me cry!!! Thank you this helps a lot"</p>

Discussion

This study explored reactions that were publicly posted in the comment section of a body-positive Instagram post promoting a body size and shape that does not fit the typical social norm. The most common theme found in this study was that of love, whether it be directed towards Nessa May and her message, or towards the commenter themselves and how the content of the source made them feel about their bodies. These findings coincide with the findings found by Cohen, Newton-John, and Slater (2021, p. 2368), stating that when women look at body-positive posts, they have an overall more positive mood as well as greater body satisfaction. This seems to be the case for most people when viewing a body-positive post, not just women (though the comments seemed to be mainly all written by females). This positivity is shown by the love and support that is shown towards Nessa May, and increased body satisfaction is demonstrated in the reactions displaying feelings of self-love and increased confidence. This positivity is also shown through the emotions expressed in the reactions to Nessa May's body and her message. The emotion that was observed was happiness. Comments like "You just made my

day" or "I'm gonna cry this really meant a lot to me" show that people enjoy viewing this content, and it seems to make most individuals that were part of the sample happy to see the video. The results found in this study also support previous findings of women feeling pressure to conform to societal standards, and that women feel that they are not enough if they do not fit these impossible standards society tells them that they should (Fredrickson, Noll, Roberts, Quinn, Twenge, 1998, p. 272). This is demonstrated by the insecurities individuals shared in their comments about their bodies and feelings of wanting to look different and more conventional. This strengthens the belief that women are socialized to believe that they should strive to fit stereotypical body standards. The result of this is self-objectification and body shame, which causes women to measure their bodies in comparison to beauty standards and feel that if they do not "measure up" they should change (Fredrickson, Noll, Roberts, Quinn, Twenge, 1998, p. 270). When looking at body-positive content though, it seems as though the women compare themselves to the woman's body that they are seeing online still, but more positively.

There were several comments analyzed that explained the commenters' insecurities and expressed that the video content helped them to feel better about their own body due to seeing Nessa May's body and hearing her message about it. There were also a few comments expressing feelings of similarities to Nessa May's body. They felt that seeing her representing that body type and shape on the internet made them feel more comfortable in their own skin. These were comments like, "We have the same body type this made me tear up". This, along with the increased confidence seen in many comments, also supports previous research findings that state the viewing of body-positive posts causes increased body satisfaction in the viewer (Cohen, Newton-John, Slater, 2021, p. 2368). There were multiple comments insinuating raised body satisfaction because of viewing the body-positive video, such as "I'm crying oh my god this raised my confidence so much" as well as "You made me feel pretty again."

There were also limitations to this study. First, the study sample only accounts for 100 of the most recent comments on Nessa May's TikTok post. There is a total of 10.5 thousand comments, so there is the

possibility that comments that were not included in the sample could change the results of this study. It is also unknown how many comments, specifically negative comments, were removed from the post before this study began by Nessa May herself or by representatives of TikTok. This could limit the observation of possible topics, like weight stigma. This study also only analyzed one body-positive post on TikTok. It is possible that analyzing other body-positivity posts would lead to different findings. Future research should analyze additional body-positive posts with larger sample sizes to better gauge the reactions of society to this type of content and its effect on body image and weight stigma.

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