

“I Love My Body, but Hers is Better!” Body Positivity and Social Media Among College Women

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Abstract

This qualitative study explores how college women interpret and negotiate body positivity messages that appear alongside unattainable body image ideals on social media. The sample consisted of 44 undergraduate college women between the ages of 18 and 23. Methods included semi-structured interviews and focus groups. Using content analysis, the following key themes were identified: a persistent culture of comparison online that reinforced a narrow body ideal alongside an imperative to love your body at any size; skepticism about whether the body positivity movement could create meaningful or enduring cultural change; and the use of fat talk and other self-disparaging online strategies to mitigate critique from others and elicit compliments. Results suggest that women endeavored to internalize the values of body positivity even as they struggled to enact them online. Social media, an ever-changing environment, emerged as a key social and developmental context within which emerging adults negotiate body image ideologies.

Keywords

body positivity, body image, social media, emerging adulthood, fat talk, qualitative methods

Introduction

Social media, a rapidly growing global phenomenon, has become a key social and developmental context for emerging adults (Vannucci et al., 2019). Ninety-seven percent of emerging adults own a smartphone (Pew Research Center, 2021), and nearly half (48%) report that they go online “almost constantly” (Perrin & Atske, 2021). Daily time spent on phones continues to rise significantly. In 2019, young adults in the US, aged 18 – 24, checked their phones approximately 200 times per day (Asurion, 2019); by 2021, that number increased to 352 times a day, which translates to once every 3 minutes (Cibean, 2022).

Emerging adulthood is defined by several key features, including instability, identity exploration, an intense focus on the self, and the increasingly prominent role of social media in everyday life (Arnett, 2024). Social media provides a visual stage upon which emerging adults negotiate identity, relationships, ideologies, and social norms. With 24/7 availability, social media provides instant gratification for those in this life stage, characterized by exploring new freedoms and “living your best life.” It also provides continual exposure to body image norms through explicit and implicit messaging and images.

Social Media and Body Image

Research suggests higher body dissatisfaction directly correlates with time spent on social media, particularly among women (Engeln et al., 2020; Fardouly & Vartanian, 2015). Emerging adults are interactive consumers and producers of highly curated, rapidly changing online content; they continually view posts from friends, social media influencers, and advertisers, all of whom serve as sources of comparison and reminders of how they should look. Feedback mechanisms, such as likes and comments, make it all too obvious which body ideals and body “assets” people consider attractive.

Studies have linked frequent Instagram use to greater self-objectification (i.e., thinking of your body as an object for others to gaze upon) (Fardouly et al., 2018; Garcia et al., 2022). Perhaps unsurprisingly, the more images we are

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exposed to, the greater the possibility for concern over our own body. Social media promotes thinness through idealized images of “perfect” women (Markova & Azocar, 2021; Mingoia et al., 2017). Posting photos of oneself and viewing and commenting on others’ photos is harmful to young women’s body satisfaction (Baker et al., 2019; Butkowski et al., 2019).

Recent research suggests that white and Asian college women are more likely to internalize the thin ideal and have greater body dissatisfaction after spending time on social media than their Black and Middle Eastern/Arab counterparts (Markova & Azocar, 2021). Several qualitative studies have found that Black and Latina women have more flexible beauty ideals; they tend to reject the thin ideal and value a curvaceous body, including having a larger butt as an important cultural aesthetic (Capodilupo, 2015; McClure, 2017).

Recent survey results found that over 60% of Gen Z respondents believed how you present yourself online is more important than in person self-presentation (Squarespace, 2022). Previous research has unpacked and detailed the “many works” of creating a single post among young women, which involves taking multiple photos while attending to angles, lighting, posture, and background followed by a process of painstaking editing to eliminate perceived flaws of one’s body. Each photo is carefully curated and strategically posted during peak times to attract maximum attention (Taylor & Nichter, 2022).

This social media production process is further complicated by the need to develop tailored content for specific social media sites, all designed to get as many likes and positive comments as possible. Our previous research, which explored college students’ presentation of self online, found that the average time required to create a single Instagram post, including taking photos, editing, creating a perfect caption, and posting was two to 3 hours (Taylor & Nichter, 2022). In addition, most women interviewed reported that they vigilantly monitored feedback, another labor-intensive process, both in terms of time spent and emotional investment in the outcome.

Increasingly, managing appearance though intensive beauty work has become a moral duty of the individual, particularly for young women (Cairns & Johnston, 2015). The idea that women have agency and power to determine their own self-presentation is pervasive; in addition, women are expected to self-surveil and carefully manage their behavior (Gill & Scharff, 2013). This is especially true on social media where self-expression has become a mechanism by which the female body is both produced and regulated. Tropes of confidence, body positivity, and self-esteem are evident in popular culture, particularly on social media (Banet-Weiser, 2015, 2018; Gill & Orgad, 2017; Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018).

Sarah Banet-Weiser has discussed a key element of popular feminism—the imperative for girls and women to be self-confident, particularly at the site of the body. Highlighting a critical paradox in this imperative, she notes, “Even as the average U.S. teenage girl is flooded with images of the

‘perfect’ female body, she is also inundated with what seems like the opposite of that perfection: exhortations that she should love herself for who she is” (Banet-Weiser, 2018, p. 72). It is within this social and developmental context that we examine the body positivity movement.

The Body Positivity Movement

Social media has amplified and popularized the body positivity movement. An Instagram search (2024) reveals that the hashtag #bodypositive has 19.3 million posts and the hashtag #bodypositivity has 12.2 million posts. The body positivity movement has its roots in the fat liberation movement, particularly the Black is beautiful movement, which promoted positive body image for people of color (Craig, 2002; Darwin & Miller, 2021; Griffin et al., 2022). Body positivity serves as a counterweight to posts of thin women flaunting their flat stomachs and thigh gaps (Salam, 2017). The movement suggests that women accept their bodies (including fat rolls, cellulite, acne, scars, stretch marks, disabled bodies, etc.) and reject narrowly defined and largely unobtainable body ideals. In principle, the body positivity movement challenges assumptions that fat bodies are not active and fit and recognizes that women can be healthy and beautiful at any size.

Experimental studies on body positivity and social media conclude that viewing body positive posts is associated with improvements in positive mood, body satisfaction and appreciation among young women, in contrast to what they experience after viewing posts of thin-ideal shaped women (Cohen et al., 2019). Similarly, a study using ecological momentary assessment found that college students experienced higher body satisfaction and improved emotional well-being after viewing body positivity content on social media (Stevens & Griffiths, 2020).

Some researchers have questioned whether the emphasis placed on “loving one’s body” reinforces the cultural preoccupation with appearance, albeit in a repackaged format that still begins and ends with image (Webb et al., 2017). From this perspective, the body positivity movement continues to privilege how one looks over other attributes (e.g., personality, intelligence, sense of humor). One study concluded that most Instagram posts linked to body positivity represented “a very narrow visual field that was overwhelmingly white, visibly physically able, and demonstrating strength by appearance and function” (Griffin et al., 2022, p. 9). These authors assert that the body positivity movement has been coopted and used to reify the status quo and idealizations of white bodies to the exclusion of Black bodies.

Still other critics argue that Instagram influencers have commodified body positivity posts in their efforts to create and post an identity coherent with the brand they are representing. These influencers, paid by companies to promote and endorse specific products, receive training on how to post images and captions that appear authentic despite their artificiality and co-constructed, branded identity (Cwynar-Horta, 2016).

Present Study

To date, relatively few studies have examined the topic of body positivity and social media through qualitative research (Ando et al., 2021; Burnette et al., 2017; Rodgers et al., 2023). Drawing on interview and focus group data, this paper explores the following research questions: How do emerging adult women interpret and negotiate body positivity messages on social media? How does body positivity content on social media affect the way college women feel about their own bodies? How does the body positivity movement impact online posting behaviors?

Methods

Sample

Participants included 44 female undergraduate college students between the ages of 18 and 23 who were social media users. Thirty women participated in semi-structured individual interviews; six of these women were also part of focus group interviews. An additional fourteen women who had not been interviewed previously participated in focus groups. All participants used multiple social media platforms, with Instagram and Snapchat emerging as the two favorites, followed by Twitter and Facebook.

The research setting was a large, ethnically diverse state university located in the southern United States. Fifty-seven percent of students enrolled in that university at the time of the study identified as racial or ethnic minorities, which included 39% Hispanic and 11% Black. Our sample closely reflected the university demographic. Fifty percent of our participants identified as white; 32% identified as Hispanic, Latino, or Mexican; 13% identified as Black; and five percent identified as other (Asian and Filipino).

Data Collection Procedures

Research for data presented in this paper took place over two years (2017-2019). We obtained IRB approval prior to participant recruitment and data collection. All names included in this article are pseudonyms to protect confidentiality. Two graduate students were hired to help with recruitment, data collection, and development of the coding scheme. Recruitment efforts for individual interviews included class presentations and flyers posted across campus. We gave recruitment presentations across campus in nine departments to obtain a diverse academic sample.

Graduate student researchers were trained to facilitate interviews using several methods: (1) lead researchers provided direct instruction during a half day training workshop on conducting interviews; (2) graduate student researchers observed lead researchers conduct several interviews; and (3) graduate student researchers were observed by the lead researchers while independently conducting interviews. Each

phase of training was followed by debriefing meetings with the entire research team that provided an opportunity for graduate research assistants to ask questions, receive feedback, and verbally troubleshoot challenges encountered during interviews.

After the training period, graduate student researchers and lead researchers conducted individual interviews independently. All focus groups were co-facilitated by a lead researcher and graduate student researcher. Weekly research team meetings throughout the data collection process provided regular opportunities for interviewers to discuss successes, challenges, missed opportunities, and strategies for improving interview techniques. We also used weekly team meetings to discuss emergent themes, allowing us to develop and continually refine a draft coding scheme.

Development of the individual interview protocol was partially guided by a thorough review of extant literature where we identified topics in need of further exploration using qualitative methods. We also conducted a series of four key informant interviews and two exploratory focus group interviews with college students prior to beginning formal data collection to guide the development of our interview protocols. Participants for these interviews were not included in the sample, and data from these interviews did not contribute to research findings. Participants in these preliminary exploratory interviews were drawn from a convenience sample of undergraduate students between the ages of 18–23 who were taking or had recently taken classes with the first author.

The purpose of the initial key informant and exploratory focus group interviews was to gain a preliminary understanding of how emerging adults were engaging with each other in social media and which aspects of their online experience they considered most salient at that point in time. These interviews were unstructured and conversational in nature with the goal of encouraging participants to reflect and process their ideas and experiences freely. We found this strategy for developing interview questions to be especially valuable for researching rapidly changing online environments where social norms are under continual negotiation.

Once the individual interview protocol was finalized, we conducted thirty semi-structured interviews with college women exploring their experiences and perceptions about body image and body positivity in social media (See [Appendix A](#) for interview questions). All interviews were audio recorded and interviewers took detailed notes as well. Interviews were later transcribed verbatim for formal data analysis; however, interview notes provided important guidance for identifying emergent themes and refining our coding scheme throughout the data collection process.

We relied on the draft coding scheme derived from interview notes and weekly research team meetings to guide the development of the focus group interview protocol (See [Appendix A](#) for Focus Group Questions). We used focus group interviews to help understand complex themes that emerged from individual interviews. For example, key

contradictions emerged repeatedly through individual interviews, including (1) the need to filter and edit photos while also appearing authentic and (2) how content on social media was promoting both body positivity and narrow body ideals. We relied on focus group interviews to delve more deeply into these topics and better understand the nuances of seemingly contradictory social norms. As such, focus groups extended our understanding of participants' perceptions and experiences by providing deeper insights and a broader frame of context for themes identified through individual interviews (Agar & MacDonald, 1995).

We used snowball sampling to recruit for focus group interviews, which involved asking six female participants who were particularly insightful and forthcoming during individual interviews to recruit a few close friends. We facilitated six focus group interviews with twenty women. Focus groups varied in size from three to five participants.

Focus groups "produce data and insights that would be less accessible without the interaction of a group" (Morgan, 1988). We were able to observe firsthand how friends negotiated online communication and posting norms in an offline (aka IRL) setting. In our previous research on body image, we found that focus group participants who know and trust each other are more likely to talk openly and share personal experiences (Taylor & Nichter, 2017). The use of existing friendship groups provides insight into their shared understandings and contested meanings. It is also a useful strategy for observing differences in what participants say they do and how they behave because friends who are comfortable with each other and have a history together will often challenge each other's statements (Kitzinger, 1994).

We used guidelines for code saturation and meaning saturation to determine sample sizes for individual and focus groups respectively (Hennink et al., 2017). Code saturation describes a point in the research when no new information or issues emerge, or once researchers have "heard it all" (Hennink et al., 2017; Morse, 2015). Weekly team meetings where we discussed interview notes and emergent themes and continually refined our coding scheme helped us to determine when we had reached code saturation. Though we had identified the range of issues relevant to our topic through individual interviews, we had yet to reach a point where we "understood it all" (Hennink et al., 2017; Morse, 2015). Focus group interviews added dimensionality and meaning to themes that emerged from individual interviews, helping us achieve meaning saturation.

Data Analysis

We relied on content analysis, as our goal was to describe a phenomenon, in this case, how college women understand and experience body positivity online. This approach allowed us to "explore explicit and covert meanings" in the narratives of college students (Bernard, 2018, p. 474). Content analysis supports an inductive approach, as it allows themes and codes

to emerge through the researcher's immersion in the data (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). At the conclusion of data collection, we had a draft coding scheme that the team developed and continually refined through weekly discussions of interview notes. As such, our immersion in the data occurred throughout the interview process, laying the groundwork for coding and analysis.

After we concluded data collection, all audio files from interviews and focus groups were transcribed verbatim and uploaded into Atlas.ti Qualitative Analysis Software along with interview notes. We immersed ourselves again in the data, reading transcripts word for word to check our draft coding scheme and revise it as needed. Once we finalized our draft coding scheme, we entered codes and their definitions into Atlas.ti. The first author coded a sample of data in Atlas.ti that the second author reviewed, noting areas of disagreement that we discussed until we came to consensus. The first author then coded all data in Atlas.ti with the second author reviewing coded outputs along the way to check for conceptual consistency. We met regularly throughout the coding and review processes to refine, discuss, and come to consensus about coding.

Broader Research Study

Research presented in this paper is part of a broader ethnographic study exploring how emerging adults adapt to ever changing online social norms and communicative expectations, their lived experiences in and perceptions of social media, and the complexities of self-presentation across multiple social media platforms (Taylor & Nichter, 2022). Methods for the broader study included an additional 32 individual interviews with male college students between the ages of 18 and 23 as well as long-term participant observation in social media, a method that involved creating project social media accounts in Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter, and Facebook, friending participants to observe and engage with them online, and capturing screenshots of their posts and comment threads for triangulated data analysis. As a follow-up to our study, we gathered narrative accounts from an additional forty (30 women and 10 men) students during 2020 to explore the increasing popularity of TikTok.

Though our sample for the broader study included women and men, we found that women had much more to say about body positivity and body image in online contexts than men. This finding is supported by previous research on gender and body image in social media that has shown that many women engage with social media specifically to compare themselves to others (Haferkamp et al., 2012) and are more likely to use social media for social comparison than are men (Alhabash & Ma, 2017). This may result in women being more vulnerable to the negative effects of social media (Vannucci et al., 2019). As such, this paper focuses on college women's perceptions of and experiences with body positivity online.

Thematic Findings

We identified four themes that reveal the dichotomous nature of body positivity messages that exist alongside enduring heteronormative body image ideals. In the following sections, we unpack the components of body positivity within a social media context to explore how emerging adult college women interpret and negotiate competing ideas about body image online.

A Persistent Culture of Comparison

College students we interviewed spent a great deal of time on social media. Over one quarter (27%) reported spending more than 5 hours a day; most of these respondents were women (Taylor & Nichter, 2022). Several studies confirm that young women spend more time on social media than men do (Leyrer-Jackson & Wilson, 2018; Scott et al., 2017; Twenge & Martin, 2020). Spending so much time on social media meant that women were inundated with filtered and edited photos of friends, celebrities, and influencers. This high level of online engagement provided multiple sources for constant comparison, including social media posts and comment threads that evaluate others' appearance, in addition to a multitude of offline contexts.

Body comparison within social media emerged as a strong theme that undermined body positivity for the women we interviewed. Images of the ideal or perfect body, as seen in celebrity and influencer posts and fashion ads were pervasive, especially on Instagram. This section, which provides a contextual backdrop to subsequent sections focusing on body positivity, explores how narrow body ideals cultivated an online culture of comparison, encouraging women to view their bodies as projects in need of constant improvement.

We asked women how spending time on social media was affecting how they and their friends felt about their own body image. Kayla, a journalism major who hid her figure under a baggy t-shirt and jeans, said that looking at posts online and drawing comparisons is

definitely a big factor in how you see yourself...you see all the posts about the Victoria's Secret fashion show and all these models and they're beautiful, and you're like, I don't look at all like that. I don't know, it kind of makes you be like, "That sucks for me." I wish I could have won that lottery.

There is frustration and resignation in Kayla's voice as she compares herself to models with whom she cannot match up. She indicts pervasive images on social media as a causal agent in her dissatisfaction with self.

Brianna, a focus group participant who wore yoga pants and a tank top to the discussion, said she likes to wear workout clothes because they are comfortable and show off her curves. She explained how her comparisons to other women on various sites made her feel about herself:

When it comes to social media and body image, there's always going to be someone prettier and skinnier than you are. I feel like social media makes you compare yourself. If you're okay with how you look, you're like "Oh, okay, that's fine." Then there's other people that compare themselves and then they'll work out, or people that are like, "Oh, I need to look different" and they'll drastically change. I feel like it puts a certain image in our head, and we have to follow it.

Brianna's description of body comparison underscores how the immersive experience of constant exposure to images of other women can result in negative perceptions of oneself.

These micro-comparisons and evaluations of oneself go beyond outward appearance of face, body, and hair to an imaginary of how the "other woman's" life is experienced. The woman with the seemingly "perfect" body has—by extension—a perfect life (Jackson & Vares, 2015; Nichter, 2000; Taylor, 2016; Widdows, 2018). Few are immune to the impact of these comparisons; while some can accept themselves for who they are, others feel they must take action to change themselves.

The narratives of these women illustrate the persistent nature of narrow body image ideals that dominate normative culture online. Below, we explore body positivity as a competing narrative that young women wanted to embrace but struggled to do so. The following sections explore how women we interviewed interpreted and negotiated these competing messages.

"Your Body is Perfect! Love Your Body!"

For many women, a consequence of frequently comparing oneself to others' bodies was a hesitancy to post pictures of themselves. Shelby, a Spanish major who spent a lot of time scrolling through her sites but rarely posted, told us that showing your whole body required a lot of confidence, and depending how you felt about yourself, you limited what you would be willing to show. When asked how body image affects posting habits, she explained that it was not about *how much* you post, but instead *how you post*.

If you're comfortable with your body, you'll post full body. If you're not, you'll crop it. If you don't like it, you just won't post it. 'Cause that's something that people are gonna come look at you and you're automatically getting judged. So if you don't like it, you don't want others to see your flaws.... But you also have the people who are very confident and go almost naked. So, like, it's just how proud of yourself you are.

Having self-confidence to post full body shots requires a sense of pride in one's body. Indeed, body positivity requires that you love your body and have enough confidence to post full body photos without concern about how others will judge or comment. Expressions of pride and confidence in one's body are not only components of body positivity, but

according to many women we interviewed, they felt like imperatives.

A key theme that emerged from our research was that larger women felt that since the body positivity movement had begun, it was no longer acceptable to express negative feelings on social media about how they looked. Olivia, a woman who considered herself plus sized, explained:

So, we have the body positive movement, right? So now every girl is supposed to abide by the idea of love your body, love yourself, every body is perfect, like that's what you're supposed to believe. Because that's the common ideology now, it feels like you're not allowed to talk about what you don't like. . . . If I post, "God, I really hate my stomach," then someone will immediately say, "Your body is perfect, love your body!" You're not allowed to voice your feelings about not liking your body because it's all about body positivity and love your body and so it's like an imperative.

Thus, even when body image expectations appear to be expanding, an element of control remains in place, particularly in relation to a woman's expression of how she feels about her body.

Many interviewees discussed the continued emphasis on appearance and pressure to exude confidence at any size as an unintended consequence of body positivity messaging that exists alongside persistent thin body ideals. Sarah explained how the body positivity movement "still puts a lot of pressure on the way that you look... it makes it so you're supposed to value your larger body." Another woman in the focus group agreed, "Yeah, if you're not hot, you have to at least be proud that you're not hot. So, it still puts a lot of pressure on the way that you look, no matter what." Jennifer added, "Yeah, you've got to own your sexy, larger body. I feel like it hypersexualizes women to a degree even though it's body positivity because it's like love your rolls, show them off." Everyone in the group agreed that the body positivity movement was not as effective as it could be. Rather than empowering women of all sizes to feel good about themselves, the movement instead added a new pressure for women to worry about—appearing confident regardless of how they truly felt about their bodies.

These friends went on to say that, given the pressure to be perceived positively by peers, you had to have something going for you— "Like, if you're ugly, you've got to be funny," or "You could be either pretty or you can be cool." Emma explained:

Like, I was fat growing up, so I had to develop a personality that I was fine with. And now I'm not really at the age where I can just totally neglect my appearance. I have to find some sort of balance, and I don't want to. I don't know. It's easier for people that have looks as kind of, like, their thing. . . . to navigate social media, because that's a large part of what it is.

According to Emma and her friends, people who were good looking in a way that aligned with dominant cultural ideals

could more easily leverage this asset to get followers on social media. However, those who were not conventionally attractive, including those with larger bodies like Emma, needed to cultivate other aspects of themselves for which they could receive positive feedback.

To be clear, this shift in self-presentation was more difficult in a largely visual medium like Instagram where, "If you're not attractive, no one will even bother to look at your captions." Emma believed that it was much harder on social media to play up other strengths that you might have, like your sense of humor, intelligence, personality traits, or anything about you that was not appearance related. Whereas offline interactions allow for multiple aspects of the self to be seen, appreciated, and explored, social media, particularly Instagram, privileged one's outer appearance above all else.

Women may experience body positivity offline but expressing that sentiment online is more complex. For some women, expressions of body positivity offline felt safer because in that context the audience is smaller and people in face-to-face contexts cannot be edited or filtered. In contrast, expressing body positivity online involves posting full body photos against a backdrop of unreal images that have been heavily edited and filtered to a large audience of strangers. For many women, the fear of judgement and cruel comments posed an insurmountable risk to appearing body positive online.

The Difficult Path to Acceptance

When asked if the body positivity movement was helping them feel better about themselves, several women initially responded that it was. However, listening closely to their narratives often revealed conflicting ideas and emotions. Alexis, a nursing major, described herself as slightly overweight. Her narrative of how she felt about her body fluctuated throughout our discussion. She explained:

I don't care what people think...if you want to call me fat, oh well. And I feel that's good because you shouldn't care what people think about you. If you have this much body fat on you, it's not going to kill you to post a picture. But that's like super hypocritical of me because I don't want to post something if I feel I'm too fat, like for a bikini picture...but then I see other people who don't care and I'm just like, wow, I wish I could be like that.

Initially bold, Alexis quickly shifted her voice to express concern about her body. While she talks about body acceptance and not caring what others think, she ultimately felt too self-conscious to post pictures of herself. She and her friends were attempting to internalize body positivity, but the thin body ideal received so much praise on social media that it was difficult to embrace this movement, particularly for those with average weight or larger bodies.

In interviews, several women puzzled through and reflected upon these competing narratives. Callie, for example,

recognized that “the right way to look was constantly changing,” which offered women more latitude on acceptable body size and shape. But she went on to say, “Whether we realize it or not...it’s in the back of our minds that people prefer thin bodies.” This made it difficult for larger women like herself to accept how they looked. While she saw a trend towards acceptance of more “average-looking people” in terms of body shape and size, she and her friends believed they needed to continually fight for their own space on social media sites that privileged the thin ideal.

For many young women, their experience on social media in relation to body positivity was mediated by posts and comments of other women. Deysha explained that her level of body positivity fluctuated throughout the day:

If I look at somebody who’s flaunting and showing they’ve been working out or they can fit in a skimpy outfit, I’m like, “Oh I can’t do that,” but other times when I see women saying, “Oh, you’re beautiful just the way you are,” or a girl saying, “I’m confident and you should be confident too” then, for me at least, I feel more confident like I should be able to post a picture and not care what anybody thinks.

Emma felt that body positivity as a movement was mainly targeted at women and that despite a greater acceptance of fat bodies, she was still seeing a lot of messages to “lose weight, be fit, be skinny.”

While women acknowledged an expansion of beauty ideals, and that, for the most part, “People are more accepting of plus-size models,” they were also cognizant of a counter current, visible on social media through hateful speech and negative feedback that reinforced long-standing narrow beauty ideals, particularly about thinness. Several women we interviewed referenced cruel online commentary in response to plus-sized women posting pictures meant to show off their bodies. Some also described commentary challenging negativity, resulting in a battle of body norms playing out on sites like Twitter and Instagram.

Women in our study internalized these stories of fat phobic comments on social media as cautionary tales, resulting in fear about expressing body positivity online even if one embraced body positivity offline. For example, Tatiana explained:

I know this one girl who is really big but she’s positive about it...she loves who she is. And she posts pictures of her face, but she doesn’t post pictures of her body even though she says she’s body positive. I think that has a whole lot to do with like, if she did post her whole body, what would people say?

Women may feel more comfortable expressing body positivity in person where it is less likely that they will be confronted by hateful comments from strangers hiding behind a screen. On this difficult path to acceptance, women experienced a specter of fear that their posts would unleash hurtful comments from others.

Fat Talk on Social Media

Some women described ways in which their friends navigated the slippery slope of body positivity online. For example, women put themselves down on social media to elicit compliments on how they looked, a strategy also found in face-to-face conversations. Earlier research identified that many young women complain about their body weight to friends (exclaiming, “I’m so fat!”), which typically prompted the response, “Oh no you’re not!” (Nichter, 2000). This ritual, “fat talk,” occurred frequently among friends throughout the day.

Engaging in fat talk indexed personal and cultural concerns about weight and was a call for support from peers, an affirmation that the speaker was, in fact, not fat (Nichter, 2000). A plethora of studies confirm that fat talk remains a powerful and frequent conversational speech form among women and increasingly among men (Greenhalgh, 2015; Mills & Fuller-Tyszkiewicz, 2018; Shannon & Mills, 2015; Sladek et al., 2018; Sturtz Sreetharan et al., 2019; Taylor, 2016).

We asked our participants how fat talk operated on social media. Amber explained that there were subtle ways in which women solicited positive comments on how they looked online.

I don’t think a girl’s gonna post a picture and say, “Oh, I look so fat in this photo.” But I have seen lately that girls will post a selfie and say something like, “Thought it was cute, but I might delete it later,” and then people will be, “No, don’t delete it, you look so good.” I’ve seen that a lot. I’ve also seen a lot of posts making fun of that.

Other respondents similarly commented on the phrase, “Thought I looked cute, might delete later” and slight variations. Aliyah described an exchange with a friend whom she questioned about using this phrase as a caption for her photos. Her friend responded, “It’s for people to comment and say ‘No, don’t take it down. It looks great,’ or ‘You look really nice in this picture.’” Putting yourself down in this way opened the door for positive responses that refuted your negative self-image. In effect, it allows women to circumvent expressing body positivity by shifting the focus to the viewer. And, by criticizing yourself first, you preempt others from doing it.

Another attempt at getting a compliment on social media was to post a picture of oneself with a specific complaint like, “I hate my lips” or “I really hate my eyes but posted this anyway.” In such cases, it was clear to readers that the desired response was positive feedback, that in fact, your lips, eyes, or whatever body part you were complaining about, looked good.

In offline interactions, a comment like “I’m so fat” or specific complaints about one’s body parts can be a way to bond with other women, to show that you have bodily concerns in the same way they do. Negative body talk can serve as a leveling device that makes it clear you do not feel more

attractive than your friends. In contrast, in the impersonal realm of social media, body talk that indicates dissatisfaction with self (“I’ll delete this later”) are oft times seen as annoying and an obvious tactic for getting likes.

Some women recognized that these types of comments reflected women’s need for validation. In the era of body positivity and constant comparisons on social media, validation has become increasingly important, and paradoxically difficult to obtain. As one woman explained:

I mean, maybe it’s just because I am insufferably a bleeding heart, but even if I know it’s just someone looking for a compliment, I’m still going to say, “You look wonderful, I love your bod”. . . because I do the same thing. I need it, too. I’m not gonna deny it to someone. . . I do what I can to put positivity out there. I know that they’re just fishing for it, but it’s not my place to deny it. That doesn’t mean I comment on every single one, but you know.

This young woman’s empathy and compassion for other women her age was noteworthy and rooted in her awareness of her own need for validation from friends about her appearance. She went on to say that attractive women “get a lot more attention and so much love” and that larger women “get so much hate.” Even in the age of body positivity, larger women needed to carefully navigate this dilemma.

Discussion

In this paper, we have explored emerging adult women’s perceptions of and experiences with body positivity online. Research questions guiding our study include: How do emerging adult women interpret and negotiate body positivity messages on social media? How does body positivity content on social media affect the way college women feel about their own bodies? How does the body positivity movement impact online posting behaviors? The following sections discuss implications for our findings, directions for future research, and limitations of our study.

Implications for Social Comparison

Frequent online comparisons to other women made it difficult for most of our respondents to fully embrace body positivity. Overwhelmingly, these comparisons resulted in negative feelings about their own bodies. Social media, particularly Instagram, privileges one’s outer appearance above all else. While women understood that beauty ideals from celebrities and others observable on social media were largely unrealistic, they could not help but compare themselves to images representing unobtainable ideals.

Our findings concur with previous studies on social comparison and body image that found women are more likely to make upward appearance comparisons (that is, comparisons to those who are more attractive) than lateral comparisons

(comparing oneself to someone of equal appearance) or downward comparisons (comparing oneself to someone less attractive) (Leahey & Crowther, 2008; Leahey et al., 2011). Upward appearance comparisons are amplified on social media and have the most negative impacts on women’s body image.

Our findings support research cited earlier suggesting that frequent Instagram use leads to greater body dissatisfaction and self-objectification in women (e.g., Baker et al., 2019; Butkowski et al., 2019; Garcia et al., 2022). Qualitative data presented in this paper provides further insight and explanation to previous quantitative work on this topic by giving voice to women’s experiences navigating body image ideals online. While ostensibly “just posting fun moments,” women described the arduous work of creating and posting their best selves (i.e., one that hid their perceived flaws) for fear of an imagined audience who might scrutinize and critique their bodies. The gendered beauty work women performed required continuous self-surveillance and monitoring. For most, this was a fraught experience.

Implications for Changing Body Image Norms & Body Positivity

Body positivity messaging existed alongside persistent dominant images of the thin body ideal, undermining its effectiveness. Most of the women we interviewed expressed skepticism about the ability of the body positivity movement to create a meaningful or enduring cultural change around body image norms, a finding that supports previous research (Darwin & Miller, 2021). Griffin and colleagues have argued that “the body positivity movement preserves rather than disrupts the status quo of white, straight, cis, and thin embodiments” (Griffin et al., 2022, p. 11).

Feminist scholars point out the “feminist” content that garners attention on social media is that which poses the least challenge to existing heteronormative and gendered ideologies (Banet-Weiser, 2018). This emerged in our research through persistent images of the thin ideal that continued to attract a high volume of positive attention online as well as critical and hateful commentary to larger bodies. Not only did these online practices undermine the effectiveness of the body positivity movement, but they also generated a new set of imperatives that constricted women’s expression about their bodies. Paradoxically, these constrictions co-existed with feminist ideology emphasizing women’s empowerment and freedom of expression, adding a new pressure for women to worry about—the need to appear confident regardless of how they truly felt about their bodies.

Our findings challenge research cited earlier suggesting that viewing body positive posts on social media results in higher body satisfaction and improved emotional well-being among young women (e.g., Cohen et al., 2019; Stevens & Griffiths, 2020). Though some of our participants felt this way initially upon viewing body positive posts, the critical

commentary attached to such content and the dominant social media culture highlighting unrealistic thin body ideals undermined positive effects in the long term.

Though many of the women we talked with wanted to show their authentic, unfiltered body online, they understood this to be a risky practice that could result in an onslaught of venomous messages. Given this, many larger women chose not to post. Most said they were more comfortable expressing body positivity offline among friends, suggesting an important distinction between offline and online behavior.

Implications for Navigating Competing Narratives

Many women conveyed a desire to love and accept their bodies as they were. However, almost all respondents expressed a contradictory message; that is, a strong need to work on improving how they looked through exercise or losing weight. Some also expressed guilt when they lacked motivation for bodywork and dieting. This represented a double think among college women who were immersed in comparisons to other women both online and offline.

Despite the difficulties in fully embracing body positivity, most women we interviewed maintained a hope that body size standards would become increasingly inclusive in the future, even if they were not presently so. Students suggested that because the thin beauty ideal has been prevalent for so many decades, it may well require additional time for diverse body shapes and sizes to be more fully accepted and embraced.

Our research identified several “creative work arounds” that women adopted to allow them to express themselves authentically while maintaining their sense of dignity and avoid crossing into potentially harmful spaces. This included posting and putting themselves down through fat talk, or suggesting they would delete the photo they were posting. These strategies allowed women to question/comment on their own bodies before others did, which often resulted in obtaining compliments. Other women had perfected taking selfies that maximized their preferred body parts.

Implications for Emerging Adulthood Research

The intense engagement of emerging adults with social media has expanded contexts for study of this age group. Multiple social media apps offer a variety of social contexts with different audiences, social norms and site-specific affordances. As such, these online worlds offer emerging adults an opportunity to “try on” multiple identities and explore different sides of themselves.

Because social media offers spaces for emerging adults to develop and present *digital multiples* across apps, it allows for a much more dynamic identity exploration than offline contexts alone (Taylor & Nichter, 2022). As such, the study of emerging adults online is complicated by the opportunity (and need) to understand how different aspects of the self, including

body image, are cultivated across apps, an ever-changing proposition as emerging adults can reimagine and recreate their presentation of self easily with a click and a swipe.

Findings presented in this paper contribute to the literature addressing emotional expression on social media. Earlier studies have demonstrated a positivity bias in social media (Reinecke & Trepte, 2014). More recently, research has suggested that norms for online emotional expression differ by social media app, providing distinct online spaces for users to express a range of positive and negative emotions (Taylor & Nichter, 2022; Waterloo et al., 2018). Our findings reveal that emerging adult women struggled to express body positivity online due to a persistent thin ideal coupled with their fear of critical commentary. Women we interviewed instead developed adaptive strategies, including posting photos that drew attention away from their bodies and engaging in an online version of fat talk to elicit positive affirmations about their appearance.

Social media provides opportunities for negotiating competing social norms and ideologies in a visual medium that lends itself to studying aesthetic aspects of the self, such as body image and body positivity. Expanding emerging adulthood research to examine online contexts allows for a more holistic understanding of this life stage, especially when approached from both qualitative and quantitative perspectives. Our qualitative study explored how emerging adult college women negotiated body positivity within an online context that values the thin ideal to examine the effects on their body image and posting behaviors, underscoring the need to take cultural context into account.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Given the ethnically diverse nature of our research sample as well as findings from previous research identifying ethnic differences in the extent to which women internalize normative body image ideals (Capodilupo, 2015; Markova & Azocar, 2021; McClure, 2017), we expected to find ethnic differences. Instead, women in our study articulated similar experiences and social norms regardless of ethnicity. This may have been because our broader exploratory study was designed to elicit student narratives across a wide range of social media related topics beyond body image and body positivity. Research specifically designed to explore ethnic differences related to body positivity on social media would likely uncover more nuanced data on the topic.

Additionally, individuals cultivate their online worlds through who they choose to connect with on social media. The accepted social norms and ideologies of those they follow on social media become codified through suggested content and ads generated by the app’s algorithms based on the user’s preferences. Without explicitly examining the individualized content students are viewing, it is difficult to understand the differential effects of how they are being influenced. In other words, if emerging adult women in the US tend to follow the

same highly popular influencers, then it may have an equalizing effect on their body image ideals regardless of race and ethnicity.

Another limitation is our small sample size, which is not representative of college women in the US. Rather, our study offers an in-depth view into how a group of college women experienced, interpreted, and negotiated body positivity in social media. A larger quantitative or mixed methods study on this topic would complement our research by uncovering potential demographic and geographic distinctions. Additionally, our inclusion criteria for recruitment required that students be social media users, which excluded those who opted out. Their experiences and perspectives are important to understand as well.

A challenge of social media research is the rapid rate at which these technologies change. Online social norms have likely continued to shift in the five years since we gathered the data presented in this paper, which is a limitation of our study. Even immediately following our two-year data collection period, TikTok, a site no one was talking about initially, emerged as one of the most popular social media platforms for emerging adults. Thus, amid writing our book in 2020, we returned to the field to gather follow up data on the topic (Taylor & Nichter, 2022). As such, emerging adults' use of social media requires ongoing study to explore the ever-changing nature of these new technologies and emerging adults' engagement with them.

Additionally, body image and body positivity in the age of social media continues to shift even as we write this paper. For example, a recent rise in the popularity of Ozempic and other weight loss drugs offers yet another counter narrative to body positivity that emerging adults must navigate. Even though emerging adults may not be using these weight loss drugs due to the high cost and other access barriers, they are heavily promoted on social media by influencers and ads suggesting the need for constant body work to achieve a certain look. We captured a moment in time during the body positivity movement; future research on the development of this movement and its impact on the body image ideals of emerging adults is needed.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to explore how college women perceive and experience body positivity online to understand the potential effects of this movement on body image among emerging adults. Frequent social media use converges with a focus on the self, identity exploration, and body image during emerging adulthood. As such, this is a critical life stage for examining how youth engage with the competing messages that simultaneously promote both a thin ideal and body positivity. We found that women endeavored to internalize the values of body positivity even as they struggled to enact them online. The enduring culture of comparison on social media, fueled by images promoting a thin ideal, undermined both the

body positivity movement and women's ability to fully embrace it. Despite the frustration that women expressed on the topic of social media and body image, they remained optimistic about the possibility of body image norms expanding. Social media emerged as a key social and developmental context within which emerging adults negotiate body image ideology.

Appendix

Appendix A: Interview Protocol

Findings about body positivity and body image presented in this paper emerged out of a much broader study exploring a range of other topics, including online presentation of self, emotional expression, beauty work, and social norms of online interaction among US college students (Taylor & Nichter, 2022). As such, our full interview protocol for in-depth individual interviews included 46 questions and the focus group interview protocol included 21 questions. In the interest of space, we have compiled interview questions from both protocols that directly relate to the topic addressed in this paper—we have excluded introductory and concluding questions as well as questions on topics unrelated to this paper.

We began each interview by reviewing key components of the IRB approved consent form, including purpose and background of the study, procedures, risks, benefits, confidentiality, compensation, and the voluntary nature of their participation. Participants received a \$20 gift card to a local grocery store as an incentive to participate. As part of the consent process, we asked students if they had any questions before they signed the consent form.

Individual Interview Protocol (Relevant Questions)

1. What kinds of things do you and your friends do to look the way you want on these sites (e.g., photo angles, filters, editing)? What do you think about that?
2. Take me through the steps of creating a post on sites you most commonly use, from getting an idea to posting it.
 - a. Can you show me a photo you recently posted and some you chose not to post and help me understand why?
3. How do you project yourself differently on social media than in face-to-face contexts?
 - a. What are the differences between your online self and your offline self?
 - b. What are the differences by social media app?
4. How important is it for you to look similar online to how you look in person?
5. Are there aspects of yourself that you highlight on social media? Tell me about that.
6. Are there aspects of yourself you hide from social media? Tell me about that.

7. Do you feel obligated to live up to your online self? Why or why not?
8. Do you think there are rules for how/what you post? What are they?
9. Do you think people sometimes post things to get feedback on how they look? Tell me about that?
 - a. Do people put themselves down or hype themselves up to get compliments? What does that look or sound like?
10. Is there “body talk” on the sites you’re on? What does it look like?
11. Do you and your friends share tips for how to post the most attractive images? Tell me about that.
 - a. Do people talk about strategies for cultivating “looks” online? What kinds of things do they say?
12. Do you think spending a lot of time on social media affects how you or your friends feel about your body image? Tell me about that.
13. How do body image and body positivity affect posting habits?
14. Is the body positivity movement helping you feel better about yourself? Tell me more about that.

Focus Group Interview Protocol (Relevant Questions)

1. How is social media affecting body image and body positivity?
 - a. Do you think that posting pictures of ourselves all the time is affecting how we feel about our bodies?
2. How is social media affecting ideas about attractiveness?
 - a. Is it reinforcing a narrow ideal or expanding our ideas about beauty and attractiveness?
 - b. Do you think women are feeling better about themselves and their bodies nowadays, or is there even more pressure to look a certain way or have a certain kind of body? How has the body positivity movement affected this?
3. What kind of body is preferred for women? How is the body positivity movement influencing that?
4. How do people get feedback on how they look on social media?
 - a. Do you think women hype themselves up or put themselves down for likes? What does that look like?
 - b. What kinds of comments do those posts get? Can you give us some examples?
5. A lot of people we interviewed talked about how women seem to seek approval for how they look. Do you think the body positivity movement is affecting that? If so, how?

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The list of questions and coding schema used in this study are not openly available but can be obtained upon request from the corresponding author. The data used in this manuscript are not openly available due to privacy restrictions set forth by the institutional review board and cannot be obtained from the corresponding author. No aspects of the study were pre-registered.

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Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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