Is It Really #bodypositive? Examining the Effectiveness of the Body Positivity Movement on TikTok

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Opening TikTok, I only scroll through three videos before encountering my first advertisement. It's for Beyond Body, a "personalized wellness book" with a corresponding app that operates on a subscription service. The ad itself starts with a young, skinny, white woman looking forlorn, in a sweatshirt, and eating croissants with the caption "I can't fit into my old jeans anymore." It then transitions to the same woman dancing in a crop top and jeans with the caption, "A month later, wearing my old jeans again. Get Beyond Body now!" (Beyond Body).

In her 2021 paper "Moralizing Hunger: Cultural Fatphobia and the Moral Language of Contemporary Diet Culture," Emma Atherton, an MIT PhD candidate studying social philosophy, feminist and queer theory, and science and technology, defines fatphobia "as a form of bodily normativity that identifies thinness with dignity, normalcy, desirability, and worthiness, and casts fat bodies as undignified, disgusting, socially threatening, and abject" (Atherton 1). Using this definition, the Beyond Body advertisement is fatphobic as it sends the message that gaining weight, and thus approaching fatness, is an upsetting experience. This type of common negative perception of what it means to gain weight has led to the emergence of the body positivity movement across various social media platforms, including TikTok.

This movement started in the 1960s, with the appearance of the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance (NAAFA), which started in 1969 in New York. Just a few years later, the organization partnered with other "fat feminist collectives" to create the Fat Underground, a nationwide campaign focused on improving the treatment of fat people. This eventually led to the Fat Liberation Movement which has evolved into the broader body positivity movement seen today (NAAFA). While the body positivity movement did stem from fat activism, it is important to note that there does exist a difference. Fat activism focuses more specifically on changing the

perceptions of fat people, while the body positivity movement, as defined by researchers from Pepperdine University and Florida State University studying body positive content on Instagram, "...involves the rejection of unattainable, narrowly-defined beauty ideals and encourages individuals to challenge current societal messages regarding beauty and to accept more diverse body sizes and appearances as attractive" (Lazuka 86).

In 2021, a study done by professors at the Chapman University and Ohio State University Schools of Communication looked at the effects of sexualized body positivity content on Instagram. Though the body positivity movement did not start on social media, they believe it has blown up online because the "...content is user-generated, involves fewer gatekeepers to entry, and allows users to promote their content to a broad online network" (Vendemia et al. 138). This lack of regulation surrounding content on social media has the potential to harm the movement. The Pepperdine and Florida State study, published in 2020, found that "The majority of human individuals displayed in body positivity posts on Instagram at least somewhat embodied culturally based beauty ideals (78.8%), with 26.4% of them embodying culturally based beauty ideals to a great extent" (Lazuka 87). Unlike Instagram, on TikTok, any individual with an account can make a video with the potential to reach millions of viewers. What does this mean for the body positivity movement?

The rest of this paper will be devoted to the analysis of certain TikTok content that promotes diet culture and two of the most popular self-described body positivity influencers on the app. Through this analysis, I will attempt to show that the body positivity movement on the platform is insincere and thus ineffective because, in addition to the movement being dominated by conventionally attractive individuals, there exists a conflict of interest in which, given their popularity on the app, these body positive activist influencers are profiting off of the movement.

The rise of "wellness" content on TikTok promotes a form of diet culture that still perpetuates fatphobia, yet masks itself as a more holistic and forgiving way of life than thinspiration and fitspiration (Atherton 3). Take the Beyond Body advertisement, for example. Though the name of the product suggests a move away from both diet culture and the tendency to focus exclusively on the body itself, quotes from some of their TikTok ads include, "For the first time in my life, I can see the outline of my abs," "When I reached my body goals sooner than I was expected because of the Beyond Body book," and "How can I lose belly fat before Christmas?" (Beyond Body). Clearly, there is still very much a focus on the body and changing the body.

What makes this even worse is the advertisement pops up on my For You Page with no warning. Although I always click the "not interested" button when diet culture content emerges on my page, this apparently does not apply to advertisements. With TikTok, "the choice is not to start a video, but rather to leave or stop the video" (Pierce 13), an issue noted in "Alimentary Politics and Algorithms: The Spread of Information about 'Healthy' Eating and Diet on TikTok," published in spring of 2022 and written by Sara Pierce, who received a Bachelors of Arts in Anthropology: Global Health and the Environment from Washington University. Even if there were a diverse group of individuals leading the movement that truly did provide content to better people's body images, the nature of the For You Page means it could also easily show videos and advertisements that undo any progress.

Unfortunately, "thinness is often cast as a prerequisite for being attractive" and "the recognition and acceptance of women as valid social subjects hinges significantly on their desirability and attractiveness (according to dominant standards) in a way and to a degree that it does not for (some) men in mainstream society" (Atherton 20). What makes this collective desire

so dangerous is its contagiousness on TikTok. TikTok is a unique social media platform in that it creates "virtual communities" that produce "identity, personhood, belonging, and cultural expectations of behavior" (Pierce 12). Communities on TikTok are often stronger than on other forms of social media as "...watching someone was a way of being 'with' someone, as it involved witnessing their lives, seeing what their days were like, or understanding how they lived/behaved/acted/talked. In this way, even watching TikToks could be a method of building community and relationships…" (Pierce 5).

There are countless communities on TikTok, known better as "sides" to users of the app. And there is much overlap of various types of content onto different sides (Pierce 21). This can create issues as body positivity bleeds into diet culture. Consider a TikTok in which a skinny, white woman starts the video off with a short clip of her torso, with her head and lower legs cut off, with the caption "what i eat in a day working on building a healthier relationship with food." The rest of the video is a montage of short videos showing what she ate throughout the day. This included a slice of toast topped with guava and cream cheese, a small serving of berries, lemon water, celery and almond butter, a green juice, a small tuna salad with a handful of crackers and four pieces of asparagus, a protein shake, takeout sushi, and a gluten-free, vegan donut (Pope). By showing her body before showing what she eats, there exists an underlying message telling viewers that if they want a body like hers, they should eat the foods she is eating. And while what is shown is not an abnormally small amount of food, it is certainly not a large amount, and much of what she eats is considered "healthy" and reflects trends in wellness culture. Wellness influencers have claimed lemon water boosts metabolism and reduces bloating, wellness talk for weight loss (Brown), and green juice is considered a "status symbol" used to "convey the

impression of superior health and discipline" (Rosman). Even the donut she consumes is not your regular sugary, buttery Krispy Kreme dessert, but rather a gluten-free and vegan version.

The caption of the video reads "Having a bad day so treated myself with takeout & treats" with several hashtags, including, #fitspo #wellness and #bodypositivity (Pope). The problem with this use of hashtags is that fitspo and wellness are inherently contradictory to body positivity. While fitspo focuses on "dominating the risk of fatness" and wellness culture uses a strategy of "negotiation with food and with one's body" to "manage the danger of fatness," (Atherton 26, 27) body positivity is supposed to reject these notions that being fat is reprehensible.

Wellness culture emphasizes the importance of "balance" between foods considered healthy and foods considered unhealthy. While this seems like, and arguably is, a better and more manageable perspective on food than that of thinspo, which encourages eating as little as possible, it still serves to place food on a hierarchical scale. This idea of "balance" suggests that there are "good" and "bad" foods in the first place (Atherton 28). Though this video creator has no problem with eating takeout and "treats" (desserts), unlike pro-anorexia or thinspo content, she still places a moral value on these foods, as she considers them something to be earned, only because she had "a bad day." Despite this video being clearly *not* body positive, the body positive hashtag means it will most likely appear on the For You Pages of those genuinely interested in body positivity content.

To some extent, body positivity has gone from being a movement to being a trend on TikTok. Because of this, it is more common for people and influencers to purposefully stick their stomachs out, slouch to create rolls, and otherwise morph their bodies into having more "flaws" to appeal to an audience in need of body positive content. The way that mid-sized women are

praised for being confident about their bodies when the average American woman is larger than that "...is a hugely depressing referendum on the state of body diversity in media," as said by senior correspondent at Vox, Rebecca Jennings, in her article about online body positivity. And while it is not my intention to disregard the insecurities of those in thinner bodies, by not acknowledging their privilege in being a conventionally attractive individual taking up space in the body positive movement, they leave less space for creators with more diverse body types that may be more affected by fatphobia and body type stigmas, otherwise known as those that do not possess "the proper American body" (Atherton 15).

Atherton defines the proper American body as one "that is not only slim but also white, nondisabled, cisgender, and marked as heterosexual and wealthy" (Atherton 15). The desire to achieve this body is what leads to diet culture's popularity, yet it is also what leads to the rise of influencers who are able to gain traction on TikTok because the algorithm favors their proper American bodies. In 2020, TikTok was exposed for its "ugly content policy" in which creators who did not fit the proper American body type were suppressed by the algorithm. Supposedly, they have gotten rid of this, but many are still suspicious as thin, white women continue to dominate the body positivity movement on the platform (Harwell).

Take Sienna Mae Gomez, for example, a famous, half-white half-Mexican TikTok influencer with 13.1 million followers. In spring of 2021, she made a video featuring her in a bikini. It starts out with her turning to the side, to check her side profile, presumably with a focus on her stomach, which is flat and almost concave. There is a caption above her head that reads "before eating." She then shows a plate of tacos, with one missing, and then all five. The video ends with her smiling and turning to the side once again, showing an ever-so-slightly expanded stomach (artful.marwah).

Looking through the comments on the video, some believe she should not have posted it because it made those who experience more noticeable bloating and have larger stomachs in general feel worse about themselves; comments on the TikTok include "I see literally no difference this video make me feel worse about myself my stomach expands atleast 10 inches bigger after eating" and "Nah that made me feel bad about my self."

Due to this controversy, Gomez removed the TikTok from her profile and posted a response video to defend her actions. In it, she insists she "never claimed to be the face of body positivity" and that she's "always put the message out there that every body is beautiful" (Gomez). Going back to Lazuka's definition of the body positive movement, it is contradictory of her to say she is not the face of body positivity while also saying she tries to spread the exact message of the body positive movement.

This being said, there are other comments written by those who believe it is hypocritical to tell her she does not have the right body to be creating body positivity content, because the whole point of the movement is to accept all bodies. Others have written "you're actually rly helping me. and many other people" and "You literally inspire me so much." It would be wrong to say Gomez's videos are entirely adverse and to assume immoral intentions. Spreading body confidence and self-love should not be exclusive to certain body types, and she has no control over who views this video and how they interpret it, but the problem arises when she does not acknowledge that her body type is not the one most affected by fatphobia.

Furthermore, in the Chapman University and Ohio State University study, it was found that "...both those exposed to body-positive and thin-ideal Instagram images experienced heightened state self-objectification relative to appearance-neutral images" (Vendemia et. al 138). The research also identified that when women view content on social media that is

sexualized, which includes women in bikinis as Gomez was, they are more likely to self-objectify themselves. This, in turn, puts them at a greater risk of succumbing to diet culture and upholding traditional beauty standards (Vendemia et al. 143). Thus, it does not matter what Gomez's intentions were because the fact is the video did place an emphasis on appearance, which is proven to cause viewers to self-objectify.

Gomez has also been able to profit off her brand of "inspiring confidence," which further complicates her incentives and thus the effectiveness of her platform. In June 2022, she launched a swimwear line, called "Sienna Swim." On the website, Sienna writes about her journey on social media and connecting with "millions of people over funny dances, body positivity, and my swimwear obsession" and that "The purpose behind Sienna Swim" is to "honor femininity in every form." This "about" section ends with her talking directly to the reader, saying "When you wear my swimwear, I want you to feel celebrated, seen, and special, because – you are!" (Sienna Swim). Unlike her apology video, she is now overtly stating that part of her social media platform includes body positivity. When it comes to making profits off her swimwear line, she attempts to sell herself as more of a prominent figure in the body positivity movement, yet when faced with backlash, she claims not to be a willing participant.

Honoring "femininity in every form" seems to imply a goal of body inclusivity, but the images on the website do little to reflect this. The majority of models are skinny and white. Only when clicking on a specific product and scrolling through more images does one see some racial and body size diversity. Historically, modeling has lacked diversity of any kind, so it is significant that there is some in the swimwear models, but the fact that it is hidden and takes more steps to get to shows that body inclusivity is maybe not as much of a priority as Gomez claims. The photographs also fall into the Chapman and Ohio State study's definition of what it

means for an image to be sexualized, which includes "sexually suggestive poses, specific body part focus, and revealing clothing" (Vendemia et al. 138). And as mentioned previously, viewing sexualized images such as the ones on the Sienna Swim website, can lead to self-objectification and a desire to look like the thin, conventionally attractive women on the screen.

Spencer Barbosa is another TikToker, with 8.3 million followers, following in the footsteps of Gomez. Barbosa is a relatively thin 20-year-old white woman who meets the beauty standard and, like Gomez, encourages her followers to be confident in their bodies by being confident in her own. On her profile, she has three "pinned" videos, meaning they will always appear at the top of her page. One of these videos starts by zooming in on specific body parts of hers that she is insecure about, including her stomach, armpit, eyes and eyebrows, and knees, which is followed by quick flashes of magazine covers advertising weight loss.

The music in the background is Billie Eilish's song "idontwannabeyouanymore." The lyrics "Tell the mirror what you know she's heard before" play in this first part of the video. It ends with her showing her head and torso, presumably inspecting herself in the mirror, mouthing along to the next line of the song, "I don't wanna be you anymore," before walking off camera. In an interview with Genius, Eilish talks about how she wrote the song about her struggles with depression and not wanting to be herself (Fu). The video itself is not uplifting, but based on the rest of her content in which she preaches body positivity and self love, it is clear it is meant to be a relatable video as many of her followers are those who have felt that way before. Some of the comments on the TikTok include "i really appreciate you posting these," "you make me feel safe," and "this makes me happy" (Barbosa). As with Gomez, there are evidently positive outcomes to her platform.

However, this TikTok poses some problems. By no fault of Barbosa's but due to the structure of TikTok, this video has the potential to appear on anyone's For You Page at any point. And "merely seeing female targets on social media that have a strong visual orientation may prime thoughts about one's appearance" (Vendemia et al. 143). Barbosa's videos, and others like it, then have the potential to reverse the effects of the body positive movement by drawing viewers' attention to very specific body parts, such as knees and armpits, that they may not have thought about prior, which then encourages them to self-compare.

Barbosa makes her own comment on this pinned video, writing that "companies literally THRIVE off your insecurities. you are beautiful" (Barbosa). While this is undoubtedly true, to what extent is the body positive movement any different? Barbosa's bio states, "treat yourself like something you love" with the next line being "SHOP MY CLOTHING BRAND" enclosed by two pink heart emojis. Clearly, Barbosa is also profiting off of people's insecurities, as her whole platform is dedicated to "helping" people through them.

Compared to Gomez's swimwear website, Barbosa's "You Are Something Bigger" website more immediately and overtly presents its diversity in models. The home screen features a large, candid-looking image of four, racially diverse young women smiling at each other. However, it is worth noting that they are all relatively thin. Looking further down the page, there's an image of a happy-looking Barbosa followed by two of the brand's products.

The first product is a sweatshirt and the first four images accompanying it are of the sweatshirt itself, the fifth is of Barbosa posing in the sweatshirt, and the last two are videos of a man and a plus-sized woman trying on the sweatshirt in different sizes. The second product, a tee shirt, follows a similar pattern of a few images of just the product, and then an image of four women, all of different body types. Similar to Gomez, the images of these two products that

arguably do the most for the body positivity movement, the ones that appear last, take more effort to reach.

It feels easy to put the weight of the body positivity movement's problems entirely on those who have made themselves the faces of the movement, such as Gomez and Barbosa. And while they could be doing more to better advance the body positivity movement, the same could be said for any activist in any field. The movement's problems on TikTok ultimately stem from the structure of the app itself. It is not the fault of body positive influencers that TikTok will almost inevitably cause people to compare themselves and self-objectify. Throughout this essay, it has been made clear that content that focuses on the body has its risks. But this then begs the question, what other content are body positive influencers supposed to be making? Is it worth the risk to help those that do appreciate this type of content? Or is it time to rethink how we spread messages of body positivity in the digital age?

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