



# #bodypositivity: A content analysis of body positive accounts on Instagram

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## ABSTRACT

In the last decade, the body image literature has begun to extend beyond a primary focus on body image disturbances and examine the construct of positive body image. Similarly, “Body positivity” is a growing social media trend that seeks to challenge dominant societal appearance ideals and promote acceptance and appreciation of all bodies and appearances. The present study provides a content analysis of body positive posts on Instagram. A set of 640 Instagram posts sampled from popular body positive accounts were coded for physical appearance-related attributes and central themes featured. Results showed that body positive imagery typically depicted a broad range of body sizes and appearances. Additionally, while a proportion of posts were appearance-focused, the majority of posts conveyed messages aligned with theoretical definitions of positive body image. This study clarifies body positive content on Instagram, as well as highlights points of overlap and distinction from academic principles of positive body image and other appearance-focused social media content. Accordingly, the results offer theoretical and practical implications for future research and prevention efforts.

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## 1. Introduction

It is well established that exposure to culturally-based beauty ideals in the media is associated with body dissatisfaction, weight concern, thin-ideal internalisation, and disordered eating behaviours in women (Frederick, Daniels, Bates, & Tylka, 2017; Grabe, Ward, & Hyde, 2008; Groesz, Levine, & Murnen, 2002). More recently, people are increasingly turning to social media as a dominant source of information about social norms and appearance standards (Bair, Kelly, Serdar, & Mazzeo, 2012). Over 3 billion people use social media worldwide, with 89% of young adults checking their social media accounts at least once per day, and women checking even more frequently (Pew Research Center, 2018). Recent research suggests that, as with traditional media, appearance-focused social media use is positively associated with thin-ideal internalisation, self-objectification, body dissatisfaction, and disordered eating behaviours in women (Cohen, Newton-John, & Slater, 2018; Cohen, Newton-John, & Slater, 2017).

### 1.1. Appearance ideals on social media

Two predominant appearance ideals presented on social media are *thinspiration* (visual or textual images intended to inspire weight loss), and *fitspiration* (motivational images and text designed to inspire people to attain fitness goals). Content analyses of online media depicting *thinspiration* and *fitspiration* have found that these images typically portray scantily-clad women with ultra-thin or thin-athletic bodies in sexually objectifying poses (Carrotte, Prichard, & Lim, 2017; Ghaznavi & Taylor, 2015; Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2018). Most images contain messages that glorify the thin or thin and toned ideals, as well as promote dietary restraint and exercise for appearance-motivated reasons (Boepple, Ata, Rum, & Thompson, 2016; Simpson & Mazzeo, 2017; Wick & Harriger, 2018). Given that *fitspiration* is designed to motivate exercise and health, one may assume that it is healthier than *thinspiration*. However, Boepple and Thompson (2016) found that *thinspiration* and *fitspiration* online content did not differ on guilt-inducing messages regarding weight or the body, fat stigmatisation, the presence of objectifying phrases, and dieting messages, with 88% of *thinspiration* and 80% of *fitspiration* content containing one or more of these messages. It is not surprising then, that acute exposure to such content has been found to increase body dissatisfaction, negative

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mood, and decrease appearance self-esteem in women (Robinson et al., 2017; Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015).

## 1.2. Body positivity

In response to the dominant appearance-ideal messages in traditional and social media, there has been growing momentum to reject these narrowly-defined and inaccessible body ideals in favour of a more inclusive and positive conceptualisation of body image. In popular culture, this momentum has been termed the “body positive movement” or “body positivity.” This movement stems from the 1960s feminist-grounded fat acceptance movement that emerged in reaction to the rise in anti-fat discourse in Canada and the United States at the time (Afful & Ricciardelli, 2015). The fat acceptance movement aimed to encourage critical debate about societal assumptions of body image and protest discrimination against fat people (Afful & Ricciardelli, 2015). Similarly, body positivity aims to challenge the prevailing thin-ideal messages in the media and foster acceptance and appreciation of bodies of all shapes, sizes, and appearances (Cwynar-Horta, 2016).

In recent years, body positivity has become popularised through the photo-based social networking site, Instagram, which has seen a rise in body positive Instagram accounts. A search of the hashtag #bodypositive on Instagram elicits 7,069,114 posts and #bodypositivity shows 2,195,968 posts (Instagram, September 2018). These hashtags accompany a variety of imagery, including “fat” women practicing yoga with captions like “fat girls can be active, fit and fabulous too!”, and plus-size fashion bloggers wearing the latest trends previously reserved for thin-ideal runway models, with hashtags like #plussizefashion and #styleisizeless. Such posts intend to increase the visibility and normalisation of otherwise underrepresented bodies in traditional media (Saguy & Ward, 2011). Other popular body positive accounts share their journeys from body hatred and/or disordered eating to body acceptance and appreciation. For example, @bodyposipanda, one of the most prominent body positive “influencers”<sup>1</sup> on Instagram, describes herself as a “body positive babe [and] anorexia conqueror.” On her Instagram account, she shares her experiences recovering from anorexia nervosa with her 1 million followers and posts messages about accepting one’s body as it is, seeing “beauty in the rolls, folds, lumps and curves on your body.”

Unlike traditional media consumption, social media users are both passive consumers and active creators of content. Social networking sites, like Instagram, have become one of the most dominant and influential mediums to cultivate awareness, foster online communities and advocate for social change at a global level (Kasana, 2014). Accordingly, Instagram offers body positive advocates a global platform to reframe the prevailing discourse on body image, beauty, and health in the media to be more inclusive and affirmative. This has been accompanied by a barrage of media outlets urging readers to follow the top body positive Instagram accounts with headlines like “7 Body-Positive Instagram Accounts To Follow For A Confidence Boost” (Moss, 2017) and “13 Body-Positive Influencers You Should Follow on Instagram” (Williams & Williams, 2017).

## 1.3. Positive body image in research

This shift towards positive body image has also been reflected in the body image scholarship. In the last decade, the body image liter-

ature has begun to embrace a more holistic understanding of body image by moving beyond a singular focus on body image *disturbance* and investigating the concept of *positive* body image (2018, Tylka, 2012). Positive body image has been defined as an overarching love and respect for the body, consisting of six core components: (1) body appreciation (gratitude for the function, health, and unique features of the body), (2) body acceptance and love (accepting aspects of the body that are inconsistent with idealised media images), (3) conceptualising beauty broadly (perceiving beauty based on a variety of appearances and internal characteristics), (4) adaptive investment in body care<sup>2</sup> (tending to the body’s needs through exercise, sleep, hydration etc.), (5) inner positivity (feeling beautiful on the inside which may radiate to the external appearance and behaviour, e.g., kindness, mindfulness), and (6) protective filtering of information (rejecting negative body-related information while accepting positive information) (2018, Tylka, 2012; Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015b).

A growing body of research shows that positive body image is related to greater emotional, psychological, and social well-being, as well as physical health outcomes (Andrew, Tiggemann, & Clark, 2016; Andrew, Tiggemann, & Clark, 2016; Swami, Weis, Barron, & Furnham, 2018; Tylka, 2018). Moreover, research has found associations between positive body image and adaptive behavioural outcomes, including healthier eating patterns in adolescent and adult women (Andrew et al., 2016b; Andrew, Tiggemann, & Clark, 2014; Augustus-Horvath & Tylka, 2011), prosocial behaviour and self-care (Tylka, 2012), increased exercise frequency (Homan & Tylka, 2014), and improved sexual functioning (Satinsky, Reece, Dennis, Sanders, & Bardzell, 2012).

Research based on consumer preferences suggests that providing women with greater diversity of appearances in media images and developing social networks that focus on positive, non-appearance focused qualities, are worthwhile avenues to promote positive body image at a macro-level (Paraskeva, Lewis-Smith, & Diedrichs, 2017). Qualitative research has shown that individuals with a positive body image tend to interpret appearance-related information in a body-protective manner, internalising positive information and rejecting or reframing negative information (Holmqvist & Frisén, 2012; Wood-Barcalow, Tylka, & Augustus-Horvath, 2010). Accordingly, body positive Instagram accounts, which purport to offer online communities dedicated to sharing appearance-ideal resistance strategies and fostering appreciation for a wider variety of body appearances, may play an important role in the development and maintenance of positive body image in young women. Therefore, it is important to examine body positivity on social media in order to enrich our understanding of consumer experiences of positive body image, and potentially discover a novel avenue to promote positive body image at a macro-level.

## 1.4. Potential negatives of body positive social media content

Despite the ostensible benefits of body positive content on social media, some researchers have questioned whether the large number of images of women’s bodies and the emphasis on “loving your looks” continues to reinforce, rather than nullify, society’s preoccupation with appearance over other attributes (Webb, Vinoski, Bonar, Davies, & Etzel, 2017). Others are critical that, aside from portraying higher weight individuals, influential body positive accounts typically depict conventionally attractive White women and often exclude other marginalised bodies, such as diverse

<sup>1</sup> Influencer is a term used to describe a social media user who has garnered a significant number of followers and has thus established credibility in their specific domain. They therefore have the credibility and reach necessary to influence the behaviour and opinions of a large audience of followers (Halzack, 2016).

<sup>2</sup> This was previously called “adaptive investment in appearance” (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015b) but for the purpose of ease of interpretation and coding in this study, it will be referred to as “adaptive investment in body care” as recommended by T. L. Tylka (Personal communication, January 15, 2018).

ethnicities, individuals with a physical disability, and gender non-conforming bodies (Dalessandro, 2016). Moreover, some critics argue that, just like thin-ideal accounts, body positive accounts are becoming commodified as they grow in popularity, whereby influencers are paid to promote commercial products (Cwynar-Horta, 2016). Cwynar-Horta (2016) further argues that, during this commodification process, body positive advocates deviate from their initial body positive ideals and their Instagram content begins to resemble the more dominant appearance-focused content on Instagram.

Despite these concerns, no research to date has systematically examined body positive content on social media to determine whether it does in fact promote what it intends. For example, *fitspiration* is ostensibly intended to promote health and fitness, yet content analyses have found that it promotes thinness and disordered eating (Boepple et al., 2016; Simpson & Mazzeo, 2017; Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2018; Wick & Harriger, 2018). In addition, viewing such content has been found to be associated with greater body dissatisfaction and have no relationship with actual exercise behaviour (Robinson et al., 2017; Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015). Similarly, research examining body positive content is necessary to further develop our understanding of the emerging social and cultural influences that may be contributing to the shifting body image landscape.

One content analysis, however, examined the different types of fat acceptance messages on Instagram by comparing 200 images tagged with the hashtag “#fitspiration” and 200 images tagged with “#healthateverysize” (Webb, Vinoski, Bonar et al., 2017). Images across both groups were found to represent predominantly White women of high “normal weight” to low “overweight” body mass index (BMI). Despite these similarities, images associated with #fitspiration more frequently conveyed messages of fat acceptance through fashion and beauty-related activism (i.e., selfies, clothing item or fashion accessory prominently featured, additional fashion and beauty hashtags), whereas images tagged with #healthateverysize more often endorsed physical activity, health, and wellness. Surprisingly, posts tagged with #healthateverysize were associated with fat stigmatising content. Webb, Vinoski, Bonar et al. (2017) speculated that this weight stigmatising content may stem from the public’s scepticism that an individual can be both “fat and fit,” and the resulting belief that this type of content may negatively impact users’ motivation to seek support for engaging in healthy lifestyle behaviours. Whilst this content analysis demonstrated the multi-faceted nature of fat acceptance messages on Instagram, it did not examine broader body positive content (Webb, Vinoski, Bonar et al., 2017).

Accordingly, despite body positivity’s growing influence and popularity on Instagram, it remains unclear what messages are being disseminated across leading body positive accounts, and how closely these messages align with the theoretical understandings of positive body image. If predominant body positive accounts are aligned with positive body image constructs, this may present a unique avenue to foster positive body image in young women. Alternatively, if appearance-ideal attributes and messages are heavily featured instead, this type of imagery may contribute to negative body image similar to other appearance-focused social media content. Therefore, a systematic analysis of this body positive content may provide valuable information for future prevention research and initiatives.

### 1.5. The present study

The present study aimed to investigate the content depicted in prominent body positive Instagram accounts, and to examine how closely this content aligns with the theoretical core components of positive body image, as outlined by Tylka (2012, 2018)

and expanded by Tylka and Wood-Barcalow (2015b). Previous content analyses of *fitspiration* and *thinspiration* social media content have found that the women depicted in these images typically subscribe to ultra-thin or thin-athletic body ideals and are often posing in an objectified way. We therefore aimed to examine the visual depiction of individuals in body positive accounts, in terms of appearance and level of objectification. In response to the potential criticism of body positive accounts as still being heavily focused on appearance, a further aim was to examine appearance-focused themes. Based on a scoping review of current popular accounts (elaborated in the Method), we hypothesised that body positive Instagram accounts would depict a broad range of bodies and depict themes congruent with positive body image, but would also contain appearance-focused content.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Sample

To acquire the sample frame of popular body positive Instagram accounts, the search term “top body positive Instagram accounts” was entered into the three most used online search engines (Google, Bing, and Yahoo!). This purposive sampling approach is consistent with previous content analyses interested in the predominant appearance-related messages being communicated to consumers in magazines, books, and television (Aubrey, 2010; Boepple et al., 2016; Conlin & Bissell, 2014; Herbozo, Tantleff-Dunn, Gokee-Larose, & Thompson, 2004; Wasylkiw, Emms, Meuse, & Poirier, 2009). The search was conducted in January 2018 from a public library computer on a private browser to avoid targeted responses based on previous search histories and cookies. Consistent with Boepple et al. (2016), links were sampled from the first webpage returned by each search engine, because this presents the most widely accessed and influential websites (Hindman, Tsioutsoulis, & Johnson, 2003).

The search returned 16 unique links. Links were excluded if they did not list individual accounts ( $n = 1$ ) or if they were older than December 2016 ( $n = 4$ ), yielding a final sample frame of 11 website articles listing 67 unique Instagram accounts in total. Inclusion of each account was determined by four main criteria: (1) popularity (minimum 50,000 followers;  $n = 20$  removed), (2) activity level on Instagram (minimum 100 posts, including the most recent post being made within two weeks of sampling;  $n = 4$  removed), (3) body positive-related content (e.g., account biography references body positivity/positive body image;  $n = 10$  removed), and (4) English as primary language used in posts ( $n = 1$  removed). All body positive accounts that met criteria were retained for coding ( $n = 32$ ).

Twenty posts were then randomly sampled from each account, generating a final sample of 640 posts for coding. The target sample size was selected based on previous research (Boepple & Thompson, 2016; Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2018). Posts were randomly sampled using a random number generator across the 2017 calendar year to ensure the sample represented up-to-date body positive content without the potential biases that would arise from sampling consecutive posts during a particular week or month (e.g., only summer).

### 2.2. Coding procedures

Since there was no prior codebook of body positive content on social media, a codebook was created for the present study based on theoretical concepts, prior content analyses of social media content, and a scoping review of body positive content. Specifically, the body positive coding categories were developed based on Tylka (2012, 2018) and Tylka and Wood-Barcalow’s (2015b) core components of



positive body image. Appearance-focused coding categories were derived from previous content analyses of appearance-related content on social media (Boepple et al., 2016; Webb, Vinoski, Bonar et al., 2017). In addition, the first and second authors conducted an initial scoping review of the images to determine which variables were relevant for the analysis. Six additional attributes/themes emerged from this scoping review: two additional demographic and body-related attributes (i.e., visible physical disability and perceived “flaws”) and four other relevant themes (i.e., commercialism, mental health, eating disorders, and activism).

The first author and the main coder (second author, postgraduate psychology student) met for a series of training sessions involving an iterative process of consensus coding and making updates to the original codebook. Following this process, two rounds of pilot coding were conducted using posts captured in February 2018; 32 posts were analysed each time (not included in the final analysis). Each coder rated the posts independently and then met to discuss any discrepancies. This resulted in finalising the coding instrument. Following training and codebook refinement, the main coder went on to code all 640 official posts. To establish inter-rater agreement and reliability (Table 2), a second coder (third author, PhD-level clinical psychologist) was trained in the coding procedures and coded a random selection of 10% of the posts for all study variables according to the codebook. The total agreement across all coding was 94.23%, indicating a high level of inter-coder agreement. Inter-rater reliability was calculated for nominal variables using Cohen's Kappa (average  $\kappa = 0.85$ , indicating high reliability; Landis & Koch, 1977), and for continuous variables using two-way mixed intra-class correlation coefficients (average ICC = 0.95, indicating excellent reliability; Cicchetti, 1994). A third coder resolved any discrepancies.

### 2.3. Coding attributes and themes

The Instagram posts were coded on three levels: (1) Imagery (not including caption); (2) Human subjects (if present in Imagery); and (3) Post themes (including imagery, caption, and hashtags).

#### 2.3.1. Imagery

The visual component of posts was coded as: (a) visual image only (human figure/s, cartoon figure/s of humans, or non-human image of nature, food, animals); (b) text only (motivational quote, educational text, humorous text, opinion, other); (c) visual image and text combined (e.g., quote overlaid on an image); or (d) video.

#### 2.3.2. Human subjects

Imagery containing humans or cartoon figures of humans were coded further for demographics, body-related attributes, clothing, activity, and objectification. If the imagery contained more than one dominant human figure, each figure was coded individually for these features. Still images and videos were coded in the same way, with videos coded at the overall video level in line with prior content analyses of video content (see for example, Aubrey & Frisby, 2011).

**2.3.2.1. Demographics.** In line with Webb et al.'s (2017a; 2017b) rating schemes, human subjects were coded for perceived gender (female, male, other), age range (<15-years-old, 15-20-years-old, 20s, 30s, 40s, 50s, 60s or older), and race/ethnicity (African-American/Black, Asian, White, Indigenous, Middle Eastern, or other). Additionally, subjects were coded for the presence of a physical difference or disability (e.g., missing limb, wheelchair, obvious scarring on body, and colostomy bag).

**2.3.2.2. Body-related attributes.** Consistent with previous content analyses of multiethnic samples (Thompson-Brenner, Boisseau, &

Paul, 2011; Webb, Vinoski, Warren-Findlow et al., 2017), the subjects' body size was rated according to Pulvers et al.'s (2004) Figure Rating Scale. This scale consists of nine drawings depicting progressively larger body sizes (correlating with BMI scores), ranging from underweight (Figure 1) to obese III (Figure 9; Pulvers, Bachand, Nollen, Guo, & Ahluwalia, 2013). Ratings consisted of selecting the figure that most closely corresponded to the body size of the human figure in the image. Following Boepple et al. (2016), coders rated the extent to which the subject met other culturally-based beauty ideals (i.e., clear, blemish free skin; neat, shiny hair; symmetrical features; and straight, white teeth). These features were considered collectively to give an overall rating, ranging from 1 = not at all to 4 = to a great extent. Based on a scoping review of body positive content, subjects were also coded for the presence or absence of perceived “flaws” visible in the image (i.e., attributes incongruent with societal beauty ideals such as cellulite, stretch marks, acne, bodily hair, and rolls of fat on stomach).

**2.3.2.3. Clothing, activity, and objectification.** The subject's level of clothing/exposure was coded in line with previous research (Conlin & Bissell, 2014; Simpson & Mazzeo, 2017; Wasylkiw et al., 2009; Webb, Vinoski, Warren-Findlow et al., 2017). Clothing/exposure was classified as 1 = not at all revealing (e.g., long pants and long-sleeve shirt, long dress), 2 = slightly revealing (e.g., shorts and top, shorts and skirt, sleeveless dress), 3 = moderately revealing (e.g., tight workout attire, midriff top, short-shorts, mini skirt), 4 = very revealing (e.g., bathing suit, lingerie), 5 = extremely revealing (e.g., nude), or 0 = not shown (e.g., face only). In line with previous content analyses (Simpson & Mazzeo, 2017; Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2018; Wasylkiw et al., 2009; Webb, Vinoski, Warren-Findlow et al., 2017), the activity in which the subject was engaging in was categorised as: active (exercising or moving) or non-active (glamour posing or passive posture). Activities coded as “exercising” included exercises such as running, gym workouts, and active yoga poses, whereas “moving” referred to any general movement of the body not for exercise (e.g., “jumping for joy”, shaking the body, frolicking on the beach). Finally, subjects were coded for the presence or absence of three objectifying features: focus on a specific body part, a sexually suggestive pose, or absence of a clearly visible head and/or face (Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2018).

#### 2.3.3. Post themes

Each image and caption (including relevant hashtags) were coded together to determine the overall theme of the post. Thematic codes were not mutually exclusive, such that multiple thematic codes could be applied to one post. More detail for each theme can be found in Table 1.

**2.3.3.1. Positive body image themes.** Posts were coded for the presence of the six-core positive body image themes: (1) body appreciation, (2) body acceptance/love, (3) conceptualising beauty broadly, (4) adaptive investment in body care, (5) inner positivity, and (6) protective filtering information in a body-protective manner.

**2.3.3.2. Appearance-focused themes.** Appearance-focused themes were adapted from Boepple et al. (2016) and Webb et al.'s (2017a) analyses and included: (1) weight loss/exercise/diet-appearance, (2) clothing/beauty-appearance, (3) thin praise, (4) weight/fat stigmatising, (5) thin stigmatising, and (6) body/weight/food shame.

**2.3.3.3. Other relevant themes.** Finally, based on a scoping review of the body positive content, other common themes emerged that were included as coding variables: (1) commercialism; (2) mental health; (3) eating disorders; and (4) activism.

**Table 1**  
Post themes.

Variable	Definition	Examples
<b>Positive body image themes</b>		
Body Appreciation	Post encourages appreciating the features, functionality, and health of the body	Image of subject in yoga pose with caption “I’m feeling especially thankful for my thighs today. I am always in awe of what my thighs help me do, whether it’s when I’m walking down the street or powering through balance postures.”
Body Acceptance/love	Post depicts a wide range of appearances, body sizes/shapes, and inner characteristic as beautiful	Image of subject in bikini with stomach rolls with caption “It is possible to love your belly rolls”
Conceptualising Beauty Broadly	Post emphasises respecting and taking care of one’s body by engaging in positive, health-promoting self-care behaviours	Image of women of diverse body sizes and ethnicities with caption “everyBODY is beautiful”
Adaptive Investment in Body Care	Post encourages cultivating inner characteristics and positive feelings (e.g., body confidence, optimism, happiness) that may be expressed in outer behaviours (e.g., kindness, mindfulness, helping others etc.).	Image of subject exercising with caption “workout because you love your body, not because you hate it”
Inner Positivity	Post challenges the unrealistic nature of media images and appearance ideals, as well as interprets and internalises messages that are compassionate towards one’s body.	Image of subject smiling with head held high and caption “be strong by being kind to yourself and by sharing your light with the world”
Protective filtering Information in a Body-Protective Manner		Side by side images of posed and un-posed images with caption “the photo on the left is staged as hell. . . These are the types of images we compare ourselves to everyday. Our bodies are glorious from every angle. Posed or un-posed. Polished or not.”
<b>Appearance-focused Themes</b>		
Weight loss/exercise/diet-appearance	Post emphasises weight loss, diet and/or exercise to improve appearance	Before and after photo where the subject in the ‘after’ photo appears thinner and caption “Went back to work today and had a lot of people say I was looking way more toned woohoo!”
Clothing/beauty-appearance	Post emphasises clothing and beauty tips for appearance purposes	Close-up image of hair and make-up with caption “if there’s good lighting, take advantage of it for a selfie”
Thin praise	Post positively portrays thinness	Image of a thin and toned person with caption #bodygoals
Weight/fat stigmatising	Post negatively portrays being overweight/having fat	Image of larger woman in bikini with caption “not everyone should be in a swimsuit”
Thin stigmatising	Post ridicules or stigmatises thinness	Image of curvaceous woman with caption “real men prefer women with curves”
Body/weight/food shame	Post expresses guilt or shame about one’s body, weight, or food behaviours	Image of subject at gym with caption “Feeling guilty about how much I ate on the weekend – time to work off that weekend indulgence.”
<b>Other Relevant Themes</b>		
Commercialism	Post advertises or promotes a commercial product or brand	Image of subject in a clothing brand with caption “love this outfit. Shop this look at xxx.com”
Mental health	Post refers to mental health	Side by side images of subject smiling and not smiling, with text overlaid “doing the best she can to cope with anxiety” with captions “remind yourself that it’s okay to respect your own mental and emotional limits”
Eating disorders	Post refers to eating disorders and/or recovery	Before and after photo of subject (underweight to more body fat) with caption “Recovery is going to seem impossible at times – it isn’t. Your ED will scream at you, and tell you you’re nothing without it – it’s lying. You can do this.”
Activism	Post explicitly encourages others to support a social cause outside of body positivity	Image of subject holding re-usable water bottle with caption “Get on the plastic free wagon this July and challenge yourself to do something awesome for our planet and the future.”

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. Imagery

Overall, 71.88% of posts were visual images only, 12.34% were videos, 10.47% visual and text combined, and 5.31% text only. Of the imagery containing text (i.e., “visual and text combined,” and “text only”), 41.58% were rated as motivational, 24.75% educational, 21.78% opinion, 3.96% humorous, and 7.92% other. Majority of imagery (90.78%) contained at least one human figure.

#### 3.2. Human subjects

##### 3.2.1. Demographics

Of the imagery that contained at least one human figure, 95.87% contained a female, 5.85% contained a male, and zero contained a non-binary person. Of the imagery that contained at least one human figure, 51.12% featured a human coded as White, 35.11% as

African-American/Black, 12.22% as Asian, 6.2% as Other, 3.10% as Middle Eastern, and 2.58% ethnicity could not be determined. The majority (65.58%) of imagery containing humans depicted humans in their 20s, followed by 22.20% in their 30s, 4.30% perceived to be adolescent or younger, and only 2.75% perceived to be in their 40s or older. Only 2.24% of imagery featured human figures with a visible physical disability.

##### 3.2.2. Body-related attributes

Body sizes ranged from underweight (Figure 1) to obese III (Figure 9; Pulvers et al., 2013). Only 1.72% of imagery containing humans featured bodies perceived as underweight (Figures 1–2), 25.81% as normal weight (Figures 3–4), 33.22% as overweight (Figure 5) and 35.11% as obese (Figures 6–9). Just under half (39.59%) of imagery containing a human depicted at least one perceived “flaw,” with the most common “flaw” displayed being cellulite (29.19% of all occurrences), followed by stomach rolls/soft belly (24.05%), stretch marks (16.49%), acne/skin blemishes (5.41%), and bodily

**Table 2**  
Inter-coder agreement and reliability for coding variables.

Variable	Inter-rater Agreement (%)	Reliability (Kappa or ICC)
<b>Demographics</b>		
Gender	98.46	0.81
Ethnicity	95.96	0.86
Age	94.36	0.97
Visible physical disability	96.92	0.65
<b>Body-related attributes</b>		
Body size	89.69	0.91
Culturally-based beauty ideals	80.62	0.94
Visible “flaws”	96.41	0.80
Visible “flaws”: Cellulite	96.92	0.73
Visible “flaws”: Stomach rolls/soft belly	96.92	0.86
Visible “flaws”: Stretch marks	95.38	0.74
Visible “flaws”: Acne/skin blemishes	100.00	1
Visible “flaws”: Bodily hair	92.31	0.80
<b>Clothing, activity, and objectification</b>		
Clothing/exposure	92.97	0.98
Activity	89.23	0.77
Objectification	84.38	0.88
Objectification: Focus on specific body part	95.31	0.96
Objectification: Sexually suggestive pose	79.69	0.84
Objectification: Absence of clearly visible head/face	92.19	0.93
<b>Positive Body Image Themes</b>		
Body Appreciation	96.88	0.86
Body Acceptance/love	92.19	0.78
Conceptualising Beauty Broadly	87.50	0.75
Adaptive Investment in Body Care	96.88	0.87
Inner Positivity	89.06	0.73
Protective filtering Information in a Body-Protective Manner	96.88	0.87
<b>Appearance-focused Themes</b>		
Weight loss/exercise/diet-appearance	100.00	1
Clothing/beauty-appearance	89.06	0.76
Thin praise	100.00	1
Weight/fat stigmatising	100.00	1
Thin stigmatising	100.00	1
Body/weight/food shame	100.00	1
<b>Other Relevant Themes</b>		
Commercialism	92.31	0.83
Mental health	98.46	0.79
Eating disorders	98.46	0.85
Activism	98.44	0.79

hair (2.43%). Additionally, other “flaws” were depicted including facial hair, scars, wrinkles, and rolls of fat on the back (24.32%). Apart from body weight, 25.47% of imagery containing humans featured humans who met other culturally-based beauty ideals to a great extent, 17.97% somewhat, 20.16% very little, and 24.22% did not at all meet other culturally-based beauty ideals.

### 3.2.3. Clothing, activity, and objectification

Of the imagery containing humans, 83.82% were in a non-action pose and 15.15% in an action pose (i.e., exercise or movement). Almost one third (31.67%) of imagery containing humans depicted bodies in extremely revealing (5.85%) or very revealing (25.82%) clothing, 30.46% were in moderately revealing, 25.13% in slightly revealing, and 14.29% not at all revealing clothing. Just over a third (34.25%) of imagery of humans featured at least one of the specified aspects of objectification; the majority were posing in a suggestive manner (84.42% of instances of objectification), followed by the head/face being absent or not clearly visible (24.12%), and a specific body part being the focus of the image (22.61%).

## 3.3. Post themes

### 3.3.1. Positive body image themes

Overall, 80.15% (513/640) of all posts contained at least one explicit positive body image theme, with a total of 875 positive body

image themes across all posts. Of the posts containing at least one positive body image theme, the most frequent theme depicted was conceptualising beauty broadly (65.89%), followed by body acceptance/love (33.53%), inner positivity (31.38%), protective filtering of information in a body-protective manner (18.13%), adaptive investment in body care (11.11%), and body appreciation (10.53%).

### 3.3.2. Appearance-focused themes

Overall, 41.09% (263/640) of all posts contained at least one appearance-focused theme, with a total of 264 appearance-focused themes across all posts. Almost all of the posts that were coded for appearance-focused themes depicted clothing/beauty-appearance (98.86%), with only 1.52% of appearance-focused posts depicting weight loss/exercise/diet-appearance. There were no instances of thin praise, weight/fat stigmatisation, thin stigmatisation, or body/weight food shame (all 0%). Of note, only 2.50% of all posts featured food and 4.00% featured exercise.

### 3.3.3. Other relevant themes

Overall, 39.53% (253/640) of all posts were rated as promoting a commercial product (26.09% of these posts included self-promotion, e.g., personal blog, workshop, or book). Mental health was referred to in 1.88% of all posts and eating disorders were referenced in 3.75% of all posts. Activism/rhetoric was present in 16.09% of all posts, with 123 counts of activism across

103 posts. Of the posts containing an activist message, the majority were related to feminism (44.66%), followed by racial equality (34.95%), LGBTQI + rights (18.45%), environmentalism (7.77%), disability rights (7.77%), and other (5.83%).

## 4. Discussion

### 4.1. Body positive attributes and themes

The present study aimed to provide a detailed content analysis of posts found on popular body positive accounts on Instagram. In line with our hypothesis regarding body attributes, the analysis clearly showed that the body positive accounts depicted diverse body sizes, with just over two thirds of bodies perceived to meet overweight or obese BMI criteria. This diversity is in contrast to content analyses showing that *thinspiration* and *fitspiration* images represent a limited range of body sizes, with an overwhelming majority of the bodies featured being perceived as thin and toned (ranging from 75.2%–97.82%; Boepple et al., 2016; Carrotte et al., 2017; Talbot, Gavin, van Steen, & Morey, 2017; Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2018). Further, in contrast to Boepple et al. (2016), who found that majority of *fitspiration* images featured women who met culturally-based standards of beauty ideals, the body positive posts contained more diversity in the extent to which individuals pictured met culturally-based beauty ideals.

Almost half of the imagery of human bodies displayed attributes incongruent with societal beauty ideals such as cellulite, stomach rolls, stretch marks, and skin blemishes. This finding is unique, given that social media feeds are often referred to as “highlight reels” (Steers, Wickham, & Acitelli, 2014; Weinstein, 2017; Wiederhold, 2018). Social media users have been found to portray their best version of themselves, carefully posing, selecting, and even editing their photos before posting to hide or remove such societally deemed “flaws” (Cohen et al., 2018; Fox & Vendemia, 2016). Acne, cellulite, and stretch marks are only typically depicted in mainstream media in the context of a celebrity’s body being scrutinised for such “flaws,” or an advertisement for a beauty product to eliminate them.

These findings of diverse body attributes are somewhat contrary to criticism that popular body positive accounts typically depict conventionally attractive White women (Dalessandro, 2016). Compared to the largely White samples found in other online trends (e.g., *Fitspiration*, *Fatspiration*, and *Health at Every Size*; Simpson & Mazzeo, 2017; Webb, Vinoski, Bonar et al., 2017), only half of the current sample were rated as White. Nevertheless, the posts predominantly featured female subjects in their 20s, which is similar to other social media trends (e.g., Ghaznavi & Taylor, 2015; Simpson & Mazzeo, 2017; Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2018), and accordingly there may be scope for body positive accounts to include greater diversity of age and gender.

In addition to examining the body attributes displayed in body positive posts on Instagram, the current study was also interested in how body positive content aligns with the theoretical definition of positive body image. In support of the hypothesis, an overwhelming majority of posts contained messages in line with at least one of the six core features of positive body image (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015b; Tylka, 2012, 2018). This finding suggests that popular body positive accounts on Instagram currently exemplify core components of positive body image.

Of the posts containing positive body image themes, the most common theme was broad conceptualisation of beauty, which was depicted by two thirds of these posts. These posts ranged from cartoon images of a woman’s cellulite and stomach fat with a caption stating “...all those parts you see as flaws whenever you look in the mirror... they are natural, beautiful parts of the human

body...,” to an image of @Ashleygraham posing in a bikini for a photoshoot with untouched fat rolls and cellulite, and the caption “Summer is Here. And so am I. #swimsuitsforall.” The next most common theme was body acceptance/love, which included posts like a close-up photo of @harnaamkaur, a British-Indian woman in her 20s with a beard (due to a medical condition), and the caption “Self-love is a sense of self liberation that you feel for yourself for every ‘flaw’ that you have. You’re unique and beautifully special!” A third of body positive posts focused on cultivating inner characteristics and positive feelings (inner positivity), such as an image of a billboard stating, “We get so worried about being pretty. Let’s be pretty kind. Pretty funny. Pretty smart. Pretty strong.”

Though less common, a proportion of posts also depicted protective filtering of information in a body-protective manner (e.g., two images of @bodyposipanda side-by-side; the first posed and edited, and the second unposed and unedited with the caption, “the photo on the left is staged as hell. ...these are the types of images we compare ourselves to everyday!”), adaptive investment in body care (e.g., photo of @nolatrees in a yoga pose with the caption, “time for self-care continuously changes my relationship with my body, with my mind, and with the entire world around me”), and body appreciation (an image of @bostanley surfing in a bikini with the caption, “...when I see a belly or fold in surf shots I love it because I am moving my body in amazing ways because it’s strong, capable and healthy”).

Taken together, the current findings indicate that body positive accounts on Instagram may provide a unique perspective in an otherwise perfectly manicured environment for young women to view bodies much like their own with natural “lumps, bumps, and curves” that are displayed openly. Previous experimental research has found that viewers’ experienced greater acceptance of their own bodies following exposure to bodies that do not conform to the thin-ideal (Williamson & Karazsia, 2018), and self-compassion quotes on Instagram (Slater, Varsani, & Diedrichs, 2017). Notably, a recent experimental study has shown that exposure to body positive content on Instagram has an immediate positive effect on women’s mood, body satisfaction, and body appreciation (Cohen, Fardouly, Newton-John, & Slater, 2019). Further research is necessary to more fully understand the impact of viewing such imagery on viewers’ perceptions of their own bodies.

### 4.2. Appearance-focused attributes and themes

In line with prior content analyses of appearance-focused media content (Boepple et al., 2016; Conlin & Bissell, 2014; Simpson & Mazzeo, 2017; Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2018; Wasylkiw et al., 2009; Webb, Vinoski, Bonar et al., 2017) and objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997), posts were coded for objectifying attributes as well as appearance-focused themes. Interestingly, most subjects were in a non-active pose, and around a third of the women were in very or extremely revealing clothing and featured some degree of objectification, predominantly posing in a suggestive manner. Similarly, over a third of posts emphasised clothing and beauty for appearance. It has been suggested that a focus on appearance is intrinsic to the photo-based platform of Instagram, whereby users primarily post images of themselves explicitly for others to look at (Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2018). Of note, the overall frequency of body exposure, objectification, and appearance-focused themes was considerably lower than in other appearance-focused content analyses (e.g., Boepple et al., 2016; Ghaznavi & Taylor, 2015; Simpson & Mazzeo, 2017; Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2018). Nevertheless, these findings suggest that a proportion of body positive posts on Instagram may empha-



size appearance over other attributes, just like other forms of appearance-focused social media.

On the other hand, this appearance focus may be intentional given that a purported aim of body positive advocates on Instagram is to take up space in an arena where their bodies have previously been excluded (Cwynar-Horta, 2016). Indeed, Webb, Vinoski, Bonar et al. (2017) similarly pointed out the difficulty teasing apart positive body image and body objectification in fat acceptance communities. Women of larger bodies proudly posing in body-revealing attire could both be seen as an expression of positive body image, demonstrating acceptance of and pride in their body, or self-objectification, reflecting a focus on one's appearance over other attributes (Webb, Vinoski, Bonar et al., 2017). This idea is supported by one influential body positive advocate, Megan Crabbe (@bodyposipanda), who stated, “posting pictures that challenge the conventional unrealistic standard of beauty is a way to use the system to change the system” (Ciuca, 2018). Accordingly, when viewed in this context, the photo-based and user-generated features of Instagram may provide a unique platform for body positive advocates to represent a broad range of appearances and bodies as beautiful.

Indeed, the majority of posts that were coded for clothing/beauty-appearance were simultaneously coded for Tylka (2012, 2018) and Tylka and Wood-Barcalow's (2015b) positive body image concept of “conceptualising beauty broadly.” Furthermore, almost all of the posts coded as “appearance-focused” referred to clothing/beauty-appearance. There were minimal references to more “dysfunctional” appearance-focused themes (i.e., weight loss/exercise/diet-appearance, thin praise, weight/fat stigmatisation, or body/weight/food shame), which are commonly found in *thinspiration* and *fitspiration* content (Boepple & Thompson, 2016; Boepple et al., 2016; Simpson & Mazzeo, 2017). Together, these findings suggest that body positive posts with an appearance-focus are qualitatively different to *thinspiration* and *fitspiration* posts. Nevertheless, the overlap between appearance-focused and positive body image features requires further investigation to determine whether or not it has similar effects on body image as other appearance-focused content.

Two additional themes emerged as relatively common in the body positive content: commercialism and activism. Over a third of all posts were rated as promoting a commercial product or self-promotion. This finding is consistent with prior criticism of the commodification of body positivity on social media (Cwynar-Horta, 2016), and is not surprising given that the sample consisted of popular Instagram accounts with at least 50 thousand followers each. Typically, such “influencers” with large followings monetise their platforms to earn an income (Smith, Kendall, & Knighton, 2018). This may be through sponsored posts, whereby influencers are paid to feature a brand in their post, or by selling their own products such as a new book or upcoming yoga workshop. However, Cwynar-Horta (2016) also suggested that during the commodification process, the content of body positive accounts diverge from body positive ideals in favour of consumption practices. In contrast to this claim, the current study found that even with 39.5% of posts advertising products, the majority (80%) were still promoting messages consistent with positive body image. Lastly, a sixth of posts encouraged others to support a social cause outside of body positivity, such as feminism, racial equality, and LGBTQIA+ rights. This finding indicates that, though originally created to encourage acceptance of all body sizes, body positive Instagram advocates are expanding their focus to include and advocate for broader forms of equality.

Interestingly, there were minimal explicit references to food and exercise across body positive posts. Many body positive advocates and followers are recovering from an eating disorder (Cwynar-Horta, 2016), and therefore it is possible that the mini-

mal references to food and exercise are deliberate. For example, @FatGirlFlow, a body positive activist with an eating disorder history, explicitly aims to “keep dieting out of body positivity” (Petty, 2018). This finding of minimal references to food and exercise (with the exception of yoga) across the posts is also interesting in the context of recent claims that body positivity may promote obesity and adverse health outcomes (Muttarak, 2018). To date there has been no empirical evidence to support this assertion (Alleva & Tylka, 2018). Instead, such claims may reflect an inherent weight bias that equates fat with unhealthy behaviours and assumes accepting one's body means not taking care of it (Puhl & Heuer, 2009).

By contrast, research suggests that positive body image is related to health promoting behaviours, including intuitive eating, physical activity, and health-seeking behaviours, and is negatively associated with health compromising behaviours, such as dieting, alcohol, and cigarette use (2016b, Andrew et al., 2016a). In fact, although explicit references to food and exercise were minimal, the message of adaptive investment in body care (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015b) was featured in one tenth of all body positive posts. These posts focused on self-care behaviours like rest, hydration, and physical activity for health and enjoyment reasons. Moreover, any reference to appearance-related self-care (i.e., grooming, makeup, and clothing) were framed in terms of how they made the subject feel rather than how they looked (e.g., “sparkly eyeshadow makes me happy”). Body positive advocates have argued that increasing the visibility of a diverse range of body sizes empowers larger women to partake in health-promoting behaviours by breaking down weight stereotypes and perceived barriers to health-promoting behaviours (Haskins, 2015). Here, of note, two of the Instagram accounts analysed were yoga-focused accounts, @mynameisjessamyn and @nolatrees, who both promote practicing yoga regardless of body size. In contrast, considerable evidence demonstrates that weight stigmatisation and shame is linked with maladaptive eating behaviours and weight gain (Puhl & Suh, 2015). Moreover, *fitspiration* content, aimed to inspire healthy eating and exercise, has been found to have harmful psychological outcomes and have no impact on actual exercise engagement (Robinson et al., 2017). Accordingly, it would be worthwhile for future research to investigate the relationship between viewing body positive social media content and actual health behaviours.

#### 4.3. Implications and future directions

Positive body image has become increasingly recognised as an important component of body image and eating disorder prevention (Webb, Wood-Barcalow, & Tylka, 2015). Research links positive body image with numerous psychological and physical health benefits (e.g., Andrew et al., 2014, 2016a; Homan & Tylka, 2014; Satinsky et al., 2012; Swami et al., 2018; Tylka, 2012, 2018), as well as a potential protective role against media-induced body dissatisfaction (Andrew, Tiggemann, & Clark, 2015; Halliwell, 2013). Given this research, it is plausible that engaging with body positive content on Instagram, which espouses key tenets of positive body image, may be associated with similar benefits for women. Whilst causal effects cannot be inferred from this content analysis, these preliminary findings suggest that popular body positive accounts on Instagram both depict a diverse range of appearances and promote messages in line with important components of positive body image, and therefore may present a fruitful avenue for future prevention research.

Social media usage is at an all-time high amongst young women (Pew Research Center, 2018), and Instagram is one of the most dominant mediums for influencing user's attitudes and behaviours (Kasana, 2014). Accordingly, it is imperative for research to identify which types of content may be potentially beneficial or harmful in order to offer best practice guidelines for social media consumers



who may be at risk of body image issues. Susceptible young women may be encouraged to minimise exposure to appearance-focused social media content like *fitspiration* and *thinspiration* to reduce body image disturbances (Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015). Concurrently, this study, together with preliminary experimental evidence (Cohen et al., 2019; Slater et al., 2017; Williamson & Karazsia, 2018), suggests that young women may usefully be encouraged to follow body positive accounts as a possible avenue to enhance positive body image. Nevertheless, research shows that body dissatisfaction and disordered eating occur in both women and men of all ages (Mangweth-Matzek & Hoek, 2017). Accordingly, there may be scope for body positive accounts to include greater diversity of both age and gender.

Interestingly, the theme of body appreciation was rated less frequently across the Instagram posts compared to the other positive body image themes, yet body appreciation is the most commonly studied aspect of positive body image in the literature (Webb et al., 2015). Of note, our definition of body appreciation, taken from Tylka (2012, 2018) and Tylka and Wood-Barcalow (2015b), is more consistent with functionality appreciation (Alleva, Tylka, & Kroon Van Diest, 2017) than the body appreciation construct assessed by the Body Appreciation Scale (BAS and BAS-2; Avalos, Tylka, & Wood-Barcalow, 2005; Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015a). The BAS and BAS-2 conceptualise and assess body appreciation as an overarching construct of positive body image which contains many of the positive body image components within its items, such as appreciating the unique features of the body, body acceptance and love, broadly conceptualising beauty, inner positivity, adaptive investment in body care, and protective filtering. Nevertheless, it is important to examine each component of positive body image separately within research, and scales are now being developed to achieve this goal (Tylka, 2018).

Broad conceptualisation of beauty emerged as the most common theme across the body positive posts, but has been less extensively researched apart from the body appreciation construct assessed by the BAS-2. Our findings provide a better understanding of consumer experiences of positive body image and highlight that broad conceptualisation of beauty may be a particularly important component of positive body image for social media users. Accordingly, the study's findings identify broad conceptualisation of beauty as an important component to investigate for future research, which can be done using the Broad Conceptualization of Beauty Scale (Tylka & Iannantuono, 2016).

#### 4.4. Limitations

The present findings should be interpreted within the context of the following limitations. First, the findings are limited to the sampling frame used. It is possible that the accounts featured on the websites may have paid to be listed in those articles, or were purposefully selected by the articles' authors based on personal preferences. Despite these potential selection biases, online articles are a common way that the public may encounter such accounts, and therefore this search method is unlikely to impact the external validity of these findings. Furthermore, various inclusion criteria were used to ensure the accounts sampled were in fact relevant to body positivity, currently active, and popular. This sampling frame was the preferred approach given that our main aim was to analyse the current state of content depicted in prominent body positive Instagram accounts. Nevertheless, it would be informative for future research to conduct a corresponding analysis of body positive-related hashtags to understand how the broader community of Instagram users are interpreting and engaging with body positive content online.

Second, the exploration of body positive characteristics evident in body positive Instagram posts is limited by the themes selected

for coding. For the purpose of this content analysis, Tylka (2012, 2018) and Tylka and Wood-Barcalow's (2015b) six core components of positive body image were used to code the posts for body positive themes. Given the emerging field of positive body image research, several other constructs of positive body image have also been developed. These include body functionality (Alleva, Martijn, Van Breukelen, Jansen, & Karos, 2015), body image flexibility (Rogers, Webb, & Jafari, 2018; Sandoz, Wilson, Merwin, & Kellum, 2013), and body compassion (Altman, Linfield, Salmon, & Beacham, 2017). Accordingly, future research would benefit from exploring how some of these other contemporary positive body image constructs may be expressed in the social media environment.

#### 4.5. Conclusion

Despite these limitations, the present study uniquely contributes to the body image and social media literature by providing a systematic analysis of physical appearance-related characteristics and key themes from body positive content on Instagram. Importantly, the current findings indicate that, in contrast to the narrow portrayal of female bodies in traditional media (Conlin & Bissell, 2014; Wasylkiw et al., 2009) and social media content (Boepple et al., 2016; Carrotte et al., 2017; Talbot et al., 2017; Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2018), body positive imagery on Instagram does in fact represent previously under-represented body sizes. Moreover, the findings suggest that popular body positive accounts on Instagram currently exemplify core theoretical components of positive body image (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015b; Tylka, 2012, 2018). The findings extend previous research on appearance-focused social media use and provide an incremental contribution to the positive body image literature.

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