

Perception of Toxic Body Positivity as a Coping Mechanism Among Young Adults

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ABSTRACT

This study delves into the perceptions of toxic body positivity among young adults, focusing on their understanding of body positivity, beauty ideals, social media trends, societal beauty standards. The internet serves as a platform where diverse opinions on various topics, including body positivity, are readily available. The objective of the present study is to understand and interpret how the young adults perceive the concept of body positivity and the use of the particular concept as a coping mechanism. However, misinterpretations and misrepresentations of the concept of body positivity can occur, leading to misconceptions and making use of unhealthy or negative coping mechanism to deal with the set ideals among individuals. For the present qualitative study thematic analysis used to identify five major themes elucidating participants' ideas and opinions regarding toxic body positivity. The themes are: 1) Body positivity providing a safe space 2) Body positivity and its alignment with mental and physical health 3) The role of social media 4) Body positivity as a coping mechanism 5) Recommendations for spreading the right knowledge.

Keywords: *Toxic Body Positivity, Young Adults, social media Trends, Health concerns, Qualitative Study*

Body positivity is the belief that all people, regardless of how society and popular culture perceive ideal shape, size, and appearance, deserve to have a positive body image. Body positivity has its origins in the late 1960s fat acceptance movement. Fat acceptance aims to eliminate fat-shaming and prejudice against people based on their size or body weight. The body positivity (or body acceptance) movement promotes self-acceptance and self-celebration of one's physical attributes while criticizing beauty ideals as harmful social constructs. With several hashtags and the presence of plus-size models on social media sites, the movement has recently become more active there. The larger movement for fat activism and fat rights includes body positivity.

The emergence of the first wave of body positivity occurred in the 1960s. The fat acceptance movement of the 1960s brought to light the mental health problems associated with beauty and weight loss, such as the dangers of diet culture, the prevalence of negative body images, and eating disorders, especially in young women and adolescents. The second wave of the

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body positivity movement developed in the 1990s, concentrating on exercise inclusion. The movement's supporters emphasized the importance of exercising for people of all body types and attempted to create safe, welcoming environments free from body or fat-shaming. The body positivity movement saw yet another evolution in the 2010s as a result of social media and photo manipulation. The movement currently emphasizes self-esteem, bodily functionality, and appreciating your body despite any perceived imperfections.

Body positivity, or the notion that all bodies are good bodies, is a contentious social movement. For different people who live in and have different bodies, it has varied meanings. Additionally, it has a contradictory acceptance within the movement, fitness, and wellness industries, where there is an inherent dichotomy between the body-positive message to accept the body regardless of look or function and the predominate focus on body performance, improvement, and transformation. Fat, Black, and queer activism gave rise to the body positive movement as a reaction to how rarely particular bodies were seen or valued in discourses and visual media (such as fashion or physical cultures). Scholars, however, are divided on whether the #BodyPositive movement maintains the current quo of white, straight, cis, and thin characteristics.

Coping is described as the ideas and actions used to control stressful conditions both internally and externally. It is a phrase used specifically to describe the mobilisation of voluntary and conscious acts, as opposed to "defence mechanisms," which are adaptive subconscious or unconscious responses that both work to lessen or tolerate stress. Coping styles, which are a collection of largely consistent features that influence an individual's behaviour in reaction to stress, are the various ways in which people choose to respond to stressors. This hold true over time and in various contexts.[3] The two main types of coping are reactive coping (a response to the stressor) and proactive coping (an effort to reduce future stresses). People that are proactive thrive in predictable circumstances because they are more regimented, rigid, and are less sensitive to shocks and perform better in environments with more variation than sensitive people. Accordingly, In order to deal with the dissatisfaction arising out of body image people use various coping strategies or measures.

There is strong evidence that stigma related to weight is stressful, but little is known about how individuals deal with these stigmatising events. Numerous suggestions for coping mechanisms have been made, however there is little scientific data on their use and efficacy. Following a study of the theoretical and empirical literature, Puhl and Brownell identified a number of possible coping mechanisms for dealing with weight stigma. People who experience weight stigma may respond by adhering to weight-based stereotypes, using self-defense techniques like attributing negative feedback to the prejudiced views of others, making up for weight-related negativity by becoming skilled in other areas (like improving their social skills to become more likeable), publicly attributing their obesity and weight-related behaviours to outside forces (like medication), or a combination of these using avoidance or disengagement strategies (such as avoiding places where stigma is more likely to occur), participating in communal coping, trying to lose weight, or negotiating their identity (such as denying their weight-based identity or decreasing its importance in threatening situations). These reactions can take many different forms, and how much they are employed will probably depend on a variety of personal and environmental circumstances. There is a dearth of empirical data supporting these and other responses.

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The present study aims at looking towards the perceptions of young adults to the concept of body positivity and how people are using it as a coping strategies to deal with the toxic side of it. In today's image-conscious society, body positivity has evolved as a potent coping strategy for many young adults. Embracing body positivity enables them to fight and reject societal norms that encourage self-doubt and insecurity in a world where unattainable beauty standards are ubiquitous. Young adults find comfort, self-acceptance, and enhanced mental health by loving their bodies in all of its varied forms. This movement allows individuals to focus on their unique qualities and self-worth, developing a more positive relationship with their bodies and ultimately contributing in their psychological resiliency and overall happiness. Although body positivity has many advantages, it also has some disadvantages. The movement has occasionally come under fire for allegedly normalising unhealthy habits and encouraging obesity, which can have detrimental effects on one's health. The focus on outward appearances also runs the risk of perpetuating an overemphasis on physical characteristics over other significant aspects of self-worth, even if it is beneficial. Furthermore, as people feel forced to maintain a particular image to fit into this new cultural norm, the urge to conform to body positivity ideals can occasionally lead to a different kind of strain and stress. Within the body positive movement, finding a balance between advocating healthy lifestyles and self-acceptance continues to be difficult. The study aims to delve into the reasons for finding out the balance between what is actually body positivity and what is known to be toxic body positivity. Choosing the extremities of any such concept that surfaces over the internet has its own mere consequences and leading to a more rigid and non-flexible thinking pattern which might proportionally lead to unhealthy and toxic coping mechanisms.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In an experimental study conducted by Kristie Rupp and Stephanie M. McCoy (2023) on the topic Understanding Health Behaviours, Weight perceptions, and Body Appreciation of young Adult Women engaged in the body positivity Movement explored the relationship between social media participation in the body positivity movement and weight status, body appreciation, body dissatisfaction, and health behaviours such as intuitive eating and physical exercise in young adult women (18-35 years). Participants for this cross-sectional survey (N = 521; 64% engaged in body positivity content on social media) were recruited using Qualtrics online panels in February 2021. The results shows that Engagement with body positivity content was associated with higher levels of body dissatisfaction), body appreciation), and a higher likelihood of reporting high levels of physical activity compared to nonengaged peers; these associations remained significant after further adjustment for weight status. Engagement in body positivity was not related to weight status, weight perception, or intuitive eating. The study clearly states that Engagement in the body positivity movement is associated with higher body dissatisfaction and body appreciation in young adult women, which suggests they may be drawn to and engage in the body positivity movement as a protective or coping mechanism for body dissatisfaction.

Gemma sharp et.al (2023) conducted a qualitative study on the topic Examining health professional perspectives on social media body image movements: A qualitative exploration. This study looked at health professionals' thoughts on body image social media movements and if they thought they were relevant to their professional practise. This study enlisted the help of 30 medical and allied health experts for semi-structured interviews. To generate common themes across the data, thematic analysis was performed. Participants identified benefits linked with body positivity online content, but reported concerns about the health of influencers with larger bodies and that the pro-anorexia trend was harmful overall. Despite

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the importance of body image in patient health across several areas, these findings indicate a lack of body image-based talks. This suggests that health practitioners could benefit from social media literacy training to help them assess and treat their patients more thoroughly.

In a study conducted by Fatima Cody Stanford et.al (2018) on the topic of Media and its influence on obesity has its purpose to review how the media frames obesity and the effect it has upon on public perceptions. And the findings of the study show the importance of the scientific and public health understanding of obesity increasingly points away from individual behavior and towards medical community factors, but diffusion of this knowledge is slow. The findings also suggest the growing awareness of the importance of body positivity is driving attention to the harm of weight bias and fat shaming.

In another study conducted by M. Dhurup and V.T. Nolan in the year 2017 on the topic of Body Image Coping Strategies among University Students and Variations in Terms of Gender in a Developing Country. The study tries to find out the various coping mechanisms used the students to overcome the body image issues. Data were gathered from a sample of 639 undergraduate and graduate students from a university using a quantitative research approach. Coping techniques were evaluated using the Body Image Coping techniques Inventory (BICSI). According to the findings, appearance maintenance and positive rational acceptance are two coping mechanisms that are used by university students of both sexes, however female students rely on them more than male students do. Students should be aware of how daily events and situations can activate thoughts, interpretations, and conclusions that frequently trigger positive or negative cognitive and behavioural reactions to their body image experiences and ensuing coping mechanisms and behaviours. Body image perception can influence students' perceptions of their bodies.

METHODOLOGY

Problem statement

The body positivity movement has gained popularity in recent years, embracing varied body shapes and questioning conventional beauty standards. However, there have been concerns raised about the growth of toxic aspects within this movement, which may unintentionally lead to bad coping strategies and increase body image concerns among young adults. The purpose of this research project is to look into how young adults perceive and use toxic body positivity as a coping method. It aims to comprehend their perceptions of various coping techniques and investigate their impact on mental health and self-image.

Defining Variables

- **Body positivity:** Body positivity is a social movement that encourages for the acceptance of all body types and sizes as a means of achieving mental well-being.
- **Coping strategies:** Coping strategies are behavioural and cognitive approaches used to manage difficult, Uncomfortable and challenging events, situations, and demands.

Significance of the study

The significance of the study is that it sheds light on the evolving dynamics of body positivity among young adults. By gaining a deeper understanding of how the young adults navigate and interpret toxic or the negative aspects of this movement, the study will provide valuable insights for mental health professionals, educators, and policymakers in understanding the steps to be taken in order to spread the right information and knowledge amongst the upcoming generations. Furthermore, this study may contribute to fostering healthier and more supportive environments for young adults as they confront societal

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pressures related to body image. And the study will also shed light on the positive and negative aspects related to the concept of body positivity which adds on a balance towards the approach and will help the young adults to differentiate between both the extremities.

Objectives of the study

- To understand how young adults perceive and interpret the concept of body positivity.
- To understand the use of body positivity as a coping mechanism and its consequences.
- To assess the impact of these coping mechanisms on the mental well-being and self-perception of young adults.

Research Design

Qualitative Research Design

Sampling

Purposive sampling will be utilized to select participants who meet the specified age range (20-25) including male and female. This method allows for the targeted selection of individuals with relevant experiences.

Sample

The participants age range for the study will be 20-25. This study's qualitative nature emphasises in-depth exploration. As a result, a sample size of 16 participants was considered to be adequate for achieving the study's objectives. This sample size enables the collection of rich, detailed data and various views on the interaction between toxic body positivity and its usage as a coping mechanism.

Data collection Technique

Semi- structured interviews will be used in order to gather the data and all the relevant information from the participant.

Data analysis

Qualitative Thematic Analysis (Braun and Clarke,2006) will be used to explore the participant's responses.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

In this study, to obtain the objectives 16 participants were interviewed. The participants belonged from various backgrounds, culture, ethnicity. Among the 16 participants 7 were males and 9 were females. The age range of the participants were from 20-24 years. The details of the participants are mentioned below:

Table 1 Showing the sociodemographics of the participants

SI.NO	AGE	OCCUPATION
1	24	Social media executive
2	24	Business
3	23	Postgraduate student
4	25	Business
5	23	Lab Assistant
6	25	Investment analyst

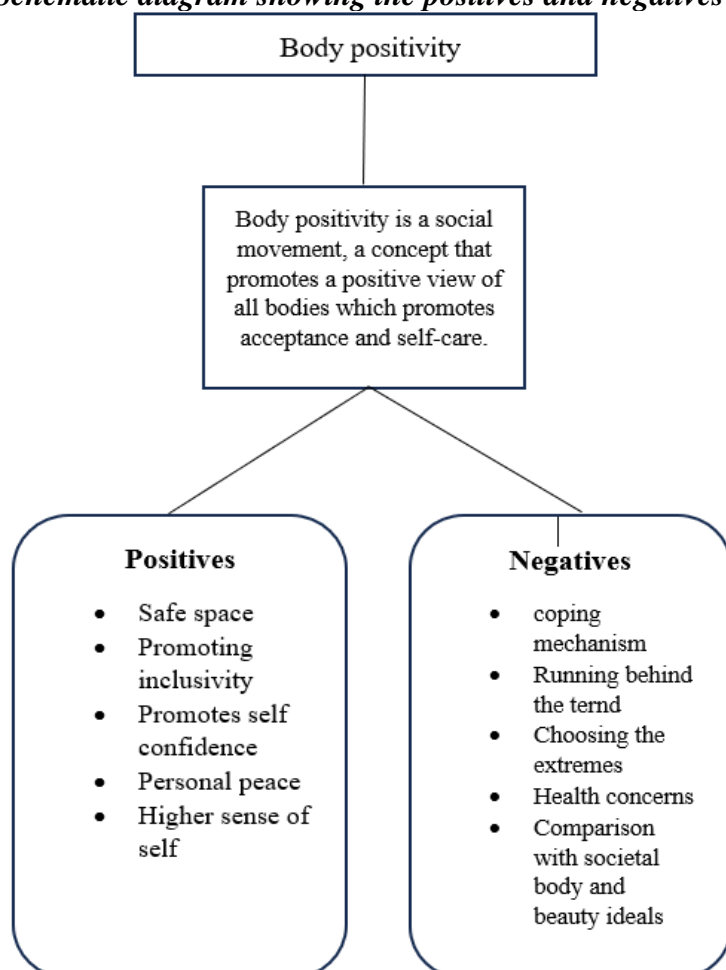
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SL.NO	AGE	OCCUPATION
7	23	Postgraduate student
8	24	HR intern
9	23	Postgraduate student
10	23	Postgraduate student
11	22	Undergraduate student
12	22	Undergraduate student
13	23	Post graduate student
14	21	Undergraduate student
15	24	Business
16	23	Postgraduate student

After interviewing all the 16 participants, the audios were recorder as per the informed consent sent to the participants beforehand. The recorded audio was then transcribed through Adobe Premier Pro into written form for further coding and theme analysis.

Among the 16 participants, 7 participants were male and rest of the 9 participants were female. The coding of the audios was done listening to the audios thoroughly. After analysing the codes there significant emerging out of the concept. And the significant positive and negative aspect of the concept of body positivity as per the findings is shown below in the diagram.

Schematic diagram showing the positives and negatives

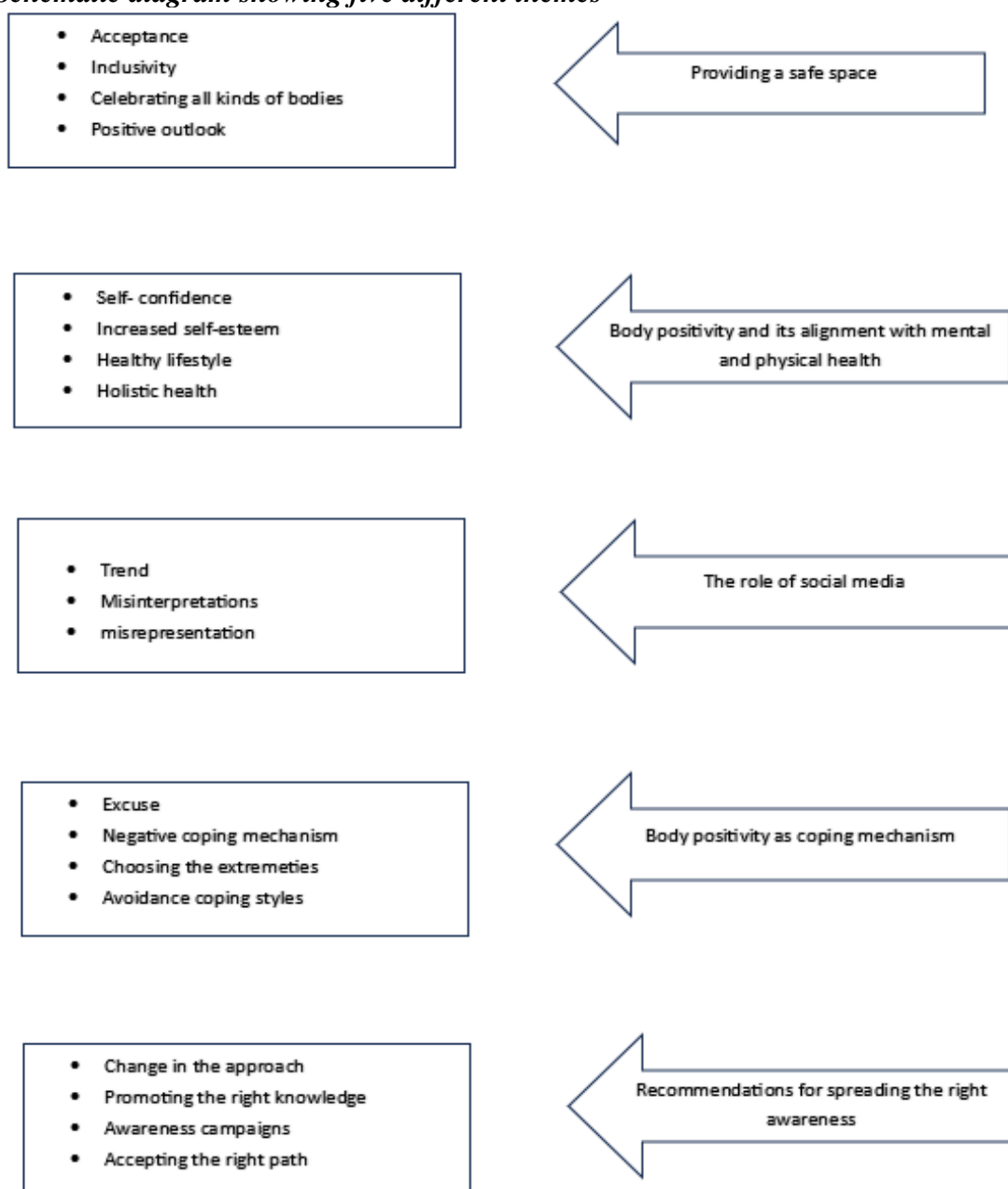


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Thus, every other concept or any movement that emerges has both the positives and negatives. The study focuses on how the younger generation today tends to follow the concept or we can call it “trend” according to the convenience of their own comfort. The concept emerged as a weapon towards fat shaming, to make people feel comfortable in their own bodies and accept and look forward towards wellness and betterment but, it can be observed that amidst all the better side there also lies some unseen consequences to it if the concept is misunderstood or misinterpreted. From the interviews conducted there are numerous responses some supporting the concept and some which are not in the support for which we will see various factors underlying.

Thus, the from the coding of the transcripts of the interview responses the findings include the following themes and subthemes. They are as follows:

Schematic diagram showing five different themes



Theme 1

Safe space: When asked the question on what is body positivity, then the most frequent response received was that it is a concept that has proved to provide a safer space to many people all around the globe. It spreads inclusivity and generates empathy and a sense of humanity in the people towards each other. It provides a space for acceptance of oneself and integration of higher self-esteem among people. Being comfortable within ones own bodies, moving forward towards betterment, wellness and positivity. It promotes a positive outlook or approach according to which all the body types are celebrated. Body positivity provides the opportunity to accept oneself in any form. Body positivity is not only a concept now actually it is lifestyle, and if understood without any,

Participant no.1: “Body positivity is having a good outlook on your personal shape and size of your body and also making peace with it no matter in what size you are and not comparing with other people or trying to become like other people. So, it's making peace with who you are and how you look, and that is body positivity”.

Participant no.5: “Body positivity is having a good outlook on your personal shape and size of your body and also making peace with it no matter in what size you are and not comparing with other people or trying to become like other people”.

Theme 2

Body positivity and its alignment with physical and mental health: The approach directly aligns with one’s mental and physical health. The way we look, the way we feel, the way the society around us perceive us has a prominent role to play as how our own perception towards our own self is developed. Once we accept our bodies irrespective of all the previously set societal norms and ideals it has a positive effect on our “self” which includes our self-confidence, self-efficacy, self-worth which also directly correlates with our overall mental health. But it has been observed that mostly, body positivity concept is used as a shield to hide our inability to cope with the socially acceptable body and beauty ideals set in the mainstream world. Which is not wrong because the younger generation in this fast-paced technological society has to somewhere fit in in order to sustain and survive. But in this process, the concept of body positivity is misunderstood now and has started becoming more of a threat because of the unseen effect it has on the mental health and the strong and rigid cognitive distortion that it is creating in today’s society among the younger generation. On the other hand, physical health also gets affected at a larger extent. In most of the previous literatures it can be observed that health conditions like obesity, hypertension, unhealthy eating patterns, anorexia, heart diseases, are associated to the misinterpretation of the concept of body positivity. Also, we cannot deny the fact that not all the weight issues or other medical conditions are the sole result of body positivity, there are various other underlying issues. Body positivity as an approach gives people an opportunity to outlook the underlying causes and maintain the same lifestyle choices which might life threatening in the longer run.

Participant 3: “So, to me, body positivity is not just the concept related to the physical appearance of a person, but it's also about how that a person's mental health is aligning with this body. So according to me, it's not that you have to accept everything, like if you're overweight or if your weight falls into the category of obesity/underweight or of maybe because of some very unhealthy lifestyle, then according to me, that shouldn't fall under a body of positivity”.

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Participant 09: “I stopped at some point, I actually stopped looking at pictures of myself. I stopped looking myself in the mirror because that used to make me feel very insecure about the feeling of what I actually look back then. So yeah, those are some of the things which I did back then. And in terms of social media, I was always active on social media platforms, but at some point, in time I stopped uploading pictures of my and myself because I actually never liked them”.

Participant no. 8: “Now this clearly you are not okay because if you are obese and you have to, I am not saying that if you are a certain way, you will have diseases. A very thin person can also have a lot of diseases. But this a serious problem. Say some serious diseases come with the body weight. You cannot escape physical issues that come along our choices”.

Theme 3

The role social media: In today’s society social media plays a huge role in every aspect of our daily life routines. Our days starts and ends looking at our notification panel of our phones. We are indulged in the contents provided by the internet all according to our interests, likes and dislikes. The concept of body positivity also got popularised through the various intricacies of social media. In the recent years, body positivity turned out to be a trending topic over the globe because the people were liking and accepting and were being able to relate to the concept. It was something that many people were feeling the same thing and having the same ideologies in regards of the body image issues, societal standards of beauty and many more. But along with the widespread acceptance of the concept it also has consequences which comes along with it. And the concept was not understood in the same manner by all the categories of the consumers present over the internet. Some took it in the real essence of the concept but on the other hand, some people misunderstood and turned and twisted the concept according to their own convenience, which gradually led many people to accept the other side of the approach. Now a days, internet tries to normalise everything which increases inclusivity but at the same time it also increases the negative consequences that come along with it.

Participant no. 16: “I would say because of Instagram, Facebook and all posts about these cleansers. Now what happens is body positivity means it is okay to be unhealthy, I would say, because there look, there are always extremes of it. Now people are accepting how they are. That is a very good thing. But you cannot accept the diseases that come with it”.

Participant no. 11: “social media is like, you know, it really should refer to more and more, you know, the kind of content which you search, if you like. So, like somebody is using social media on something related to positive body positivity. The only thing that is attributed to all the content is that tried and thought as normal. Anything that is unhealthy is also at times is also considered to be normal”.

Participant no.7: “There is singer who promotes a lot of body positivity, but she's very obese, based in America. And I've seen a lot of talk shows and a lot of debates arising from that particular thing. Her biggest agenda is that she promotes body positivity. You see her and you know that, okay, she's not okay. She has to sleep with a freaking oxygen mask because of her body and respiratory issues which misleading to the people who follow her over the internet”.

Theme 4

Body positivity as a coping mechanism: Coping refers to conscious strategies used to reduce unpleasant emotions. The particular concept of body positivity can be used as both positive and negative coping strategies towards one's health and lifestyle. In order to use it as a positive coping strategy the approach must be adopted in its real sense and not according to one's own convenience. But, in today's generation mostly amongst the young adults it is seen to be used as an excuse to choose a healthier lifestyle and health choices which benefit the overall physical and mental health. Avoidance coping styles and appearance fixing strategies such as indulgence in the concepts such as body positivity are seen to be used in order to make oneself feel "okay" with ongoing health issues and its further life-threatening consequences. On the other hand, there is the other side which includes accepting and knowing one's own body and working on the process to change and choose a better, healthier and a positive outlook towards life.

Participant no.12: "I have used body positivity many times because I whenever someone used to, you know, the relatives or someone we know, they used to come and tell me, no, you should not wear, you know, skin tight jeans because you have bigger thighs, you have a bigger hip, you know. So, at that time I used to use this as my coping mechanism because I used to the I don't want to stop wearing my the clothes that I like because of my body. So, I used to use that. Later, my mom, she explained me. I mean, she made me understand the line between what his toxic body positivity and what is actually body positivity".

Participant no. 16: "Body positivity is not only fat positivity because there are two different things, but people who are very thin, they also are like body positivity and stuff like that. So, people nowadays people are taking body positivity as an excuse to not eat healthy or just be what they are".

Theme 5

Recommendations for spreading the right knowledge: In accordance to the above findings, it was evident that there were place for recommendations and suggestions from the participants to put forward the right awareness that might be lacking somewhere in the understanding of the concept in the right manner. The promotion of the concept must be done in the correct manner in order make people realise the difference between what is positivity and choosing the extremities of any approach. Some of the recommendations provided by the participants are as follows:

Participant no. 8: "So, I would see like, like I'm not saying it's bad to alter yourself to fit what you want. Like, that's fine, but don't do it to conform to. And as it depends on the type, like if you want to be muscular, you do that. If you want to be like thinner, you do that. But like, don't do it because you feel pressured into it. So be like, and keeping them on like, you know, finding them something that makes them happy instead of just conform to what they think is expected of what they think the current trend is. And apart from that, things that can help them would be sensible. I think just promoting like a good life in terms of like being happy and exercising, feeling like you should be careful of your mental health as well and eat healthy".

Participant no 3: "I would say wellbeing is necessary. You can come from sports, which in curriculum, when we were in school, we would be like, you have to only study, study and study. There is no wellbeing or exercising part of it. And body positivity is not only being a certain way, you have to be healthy, healthy lifestyle comes from walking, being, running

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around school curriculum, you have to have classes of sports. That is very important. Everyone needs to participate in healthy interventions. As I said, people have to know about all the physical characteristics of them, says and also give them psychoeducation of if they are and what it is so at large needed”.

Participant 16: “I feel that early, early intervention is very important and especially inculcating psychological aspect of it because as we were kids I didn't know, I do those things like belonging to the school and getting body image issues are very clear and evident. So, introducing the concept of body positivity in the right manner and not following the things on the internet blindly at the early and schooling age would be beneficial for the upcoming generations”.

The above recommendations and suggestions if included in the school curriculums or other social media platforms which will provide the young generations with the right idea and knowledge about what to follow and what not to. Without the right kind of knowledge anything on the internet that holds value and people start acknowledging the concept such as body positivity where people relate their own selves might be harmful and hazardous in the longer run. Thus, understanding the concept of body positivity in its real essence is of utmost importance so that it does not take a turn a toxic turn in the name of defence mechanism.

CONCLUSION

The present qualitative study shows perceptions of toxic body positivity as a coping mechanism among young adults. The study concentrates on how the younger generation today understand the concepts such as body image, beauty ideals, social media trends, body positivity, societal ideals of beauty and standard body norms and many more. Internet is a space where we can find various opinions and perceptions on every other topic that emerges or is in trend. But in this process sometimes some concepts such as body positivity which is the focus of the present study, is misunderstood and is wrongly circulated amongst the people. Thus, the findings present study consists of five major themes which elaborates the ideas and opinions of the participants. The results clearly depict both the extremes of the body positivity approach. Thus, it is of utmost importance to understand and choose between what is right for our body, our mental and physical health, our overall wellbeing.

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Conflict of Interest

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