

From New York streets to Instagram community: The chronicles of body positivism movement of curvy women and its transition to social media.

Abstract

This paper will analyze the shift of the curvy women community to Instagram. The social media platform has been promoting body positivity of curvy women by breaking down the beauty standards imposed by the West. For the conference purposes, this paper will provide a brief background history of Body positivism of curvy women, its transition to join Instagram, but focusing mainly on social media hashtags especially #effyourbeautystandards and #BOPO. These two respective hashtags will demonstrate how the body positivity movement upheld their initial goals despite globalization and transmit their message on the effective and collaborative platform of Instagram using influencers who positively affect the curvy women community as well as changing the online audience's attitudes towards the "fat" community. In parallel with hashtags activism, this paper will analyze the performance of body image by influencers on Instagram which promote body positive messages, breaking stereotypes and documenting their life experiences with storytelling creating a homogenous and bonding community despite their culture heterogeneity. The present study portrays Instagram as encouraging body positivity communities of curvy women to forge their online identity by normalizing the "unconventional" body shape.

Keyword: #hashtags #bodypositivism #curvy #effyourbeautystandards #BOPO #influencers

The conceptualization of feminine beauty is a socially constructed conviction which depicted the physical attractiveness as the most important attribute to women, who should strive to maintain and achieve in the society. This beauty standard was first illustrated by Charles Dana Gibson who portrayed the “Gibson Girl” as the ideal American woman which spread its popularity and forged the main standard of body image since 1890 in America (Simon & Mamp, 2020). This ideology of beauty led to discrimination, stereotyping and unfairness towards marginalized groups such as fat, black, gender oppressed and other underrepresented communities of women. The origins of the body positivity movement came from the first fat acceptance movement in America, now known as National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance (NAAFA), founded by Bill Fabrey in 1969 whose wife was criticized and ill-treated by the society for being fat (Cooper, 2016). Through the fat right movement, which continually grow between 1970 to 1990, there has been a liberalization spreading slowly on national radios and newspapers by protesting in the streets of New York (Stürmer et al., 2003). Body positivism established its own identity in the 2000s as a community which unify all body types, to celebrate the physical traits, no skin color discrimination, normalizing scars and body hair according to Chamberlain (2017, as cited in Ford, 2021) which differs from the NAAFA movement now, who advocate only for overweight and obese people.

With the emergence of new media, the body positivity movement seized the opportunity to project their national public sphere community into globalization by joining social media platform like Instagram which gives a more democratic approach compared to other social media competitors. Instagram provided new types of user generated contents like sharing videos, stories, or photos compared to the traditional medias; article, magazine or radio, allowing diverse representations of beauty (Webb et al., 2017). But to what extent can Instagram promote curvy body image to its cosmopolitan audience. Despite the controversies related to the curvy body image, this paper will contend that Instagram is an influential tool that impact positively on women’s identity by keeping the society’s pressure at gatekeeping to fit in the western beauty ideal: the Gibson Girl. Hence, Instagram encourages body positivity communities of curvy women to forge their online identity by normalizing “unconventional” body shapes. This is done through the work and influence of sponsoring influencers and the use of personalized hashtags on the social media platform.

#Hashtag a new form of activism

The practice of hashtags activism is influencing the way global movements evolve in gaining mediatic attention to shine a spotlight on social, political and economic issues. Previously, the internet became the main place where body shaming and body love are spread. The '90s boards display and private chatroom shifted to social media, the fat activism continued building its community digitally. The hashtag phenomenon uses keywords with # symbol preceded to mark an occasion, event or feeling, but also strategically retrieve a specific information quickly on any unfolding affairs (Tiggemann & Zinoviev, 2019). The use of hashtags proved to be effective and viral as it allows content creators to attract and target a specific audience who have a common interest on a subject, allowing quick access, collection and distribution of information, and use to signpost a topic, to filter and facilitate the communication in the search process. The two most used hashtags supporting curvy women movement are #effyourbeautystandards with 4.8 million post and #BOPO with 1.2 million post, refer to Figure 1 (See Appendix). The picture of a woman posing confidently and smiling in her bikini-clad with a short description and using the #BOPO and #effyourbeautystandards hashtags which gives purpose, meaning and value to the photo. What differs from many other pictures of women, is the body size of the model as she is considerably larger than the mainstream standard. Hashtags are the small but powerful tool, which is found across Instagram, that makes a picture stand out among thousands other with a specific signpost which will regroup curvy women into normalizing the exhibition of curves in a bikini during summer like everyone else and compelling other viewers to be exposed to diverse body images.

This recent overflowing of body positivity contents on Instagram has led to a proliferation of body positive discourse, showing a visible social change in the 'Gibson Girl' ideal. By breaking down the body image standards, the curvy women movement has attracted and build their Instagram community with the public sphere as well as partnered with brand like Dove, who empowers curvy women to self-brand their neoliberal identity, accept their "real beauty" and advocate for liberation of normalizing and accepting 'fat' bodies (Murray, 2013). The significant shift of curvy community to Instagram acts as a system advocacy platform for body positivity, can speed up mobilization and help the discriminated and stereotype fat women to have a voice

and seek for an online justice by storytelling as stated Chamberlain (2017, as cited in Ford, 2021). Hashtags and storytelling blended perfectly to showcase, portray and determine a call for action on Instagram. Storytelling compelled the curvy women to take actions of sharing their discriminated experiences and call for actions by doing petitions to seek justice and apologies. It is the 'live' connection that enables participatory culture where the body positivism movement strengthen community relationship and create social change with their online audience (Canella, 2017). Through storytelling, it was easier for the movement to engage in participatory culture. As a result, this demonstrates that there is a strategical process of influencing and normalizing body shape by the online communities on Instagram. Pictures and videos tagged with a specific hashtag are compiled with similar element, the online sphere finds it easy to partake actively or passively in the body positivity propaganda. Since other's opinion matters as a fact of validation or approval in constructing their body image (Webb et al., 2017), this generated body confidence leading to more self-appreciation among curvy and insecure women. Instagram's fluidity platform attracts like-minded people to support and communicate globally by showing interest and purpose on curvy body issues by using hashtags and sharing contents. The increase in authenticity of curvy contents and journey to accept their body proved to encourage women to talk and seek advice or support on their personal struggles such as body shaming, stereotyping and have a sense of belonging with the online community (Paraskeva at al., 2017).

#Influencer the new role model

The online curvy Influencers created a third space through interaction and inspiring their community to respect and forge their acceptance of being beautifully different to the mainstream ideal. Previously, the fat body shape in Western societies was synonym of uncultivated, uncared which failed to meet the aesthetics features (Murray, 2004). But today, Instagram influencers are empowering curvy women in the body performance such as exposing their generous curves, wearing the latest fashion trend in plus size and promoting body positivity through sharing photos and videos with new meaningful hashtags. The American Model Tess Holiday as shown in Figure 2 (See Appendix), founder of #effyourbeautystandards since 2013 is the first curvy woman to sign a contract in the fashion industry in 2015. Her posts are followed by 2.1 million

people and her pictures are highly liked as she exposed her generous body shape which do not fit the western beauty standards. Holiday described herself as a body positive activist, who embraces her 'fat' figure and advocate for plus size women to love their curves. Having a strong and organic online community, Holiday's Instagram page is a perfect example of social media hybridity. She has used traditional media such a Tv coverage and radio interview as well as new form of communication like direct messages and filming her daily life journey. She shares her real-life struggles using stories which every curvy woman can relate to. This clearly shows how the body positivism movement has placed a body positive activist to show the dilemma of being 'fat' and still pursuing your dream life to emphasize on the credibility of the body positive messages across Instagram. Instagram allowed Holiday to empower the curvy women who suffers from social ostracism and the 'fat' should fight to change beauty norms by imposing their own labels and get things done in the fast-growing industry (Holiday, 2020). By sharing the curvy women's testimonials and stigmas, Holiday exchanged direct messages, provide guidance and support to women facing discrimination and stereotyping around the world. Instagram made it possible for reachability between influencers and the online public sphere in supporting the curvy movement and reinforced female ties to form network individualism. Holiday broke the public and celebrity barrier by doing live videos or IGTV with an open debate on topics related to body positivism, fat rights and educate the audience to treat the 'fat' people equally as they have same rights as everyone and to accept this 'fat' body as beautiful and normalize seeing the fat figure without criticizing or discriminate them.

Influencers are powerful pillars that create body positive contents on Instagram which improve positive mood, body appreciation and normalizing being different online as well as offline (Langer & Perez-Moreno, 2020). Not only curvy women but everyone is exposed to diversity of purpose related to body positivism and interpret the message according to their struggles or mindset, establishing an identity to the online community. Accordingly, curvy movement makes it normal to engage in communal criticism when talking about 'fat'. It reinforces the female ties and create a common responsiveness of tackling body discontent (Britton et al., 2006). Bonding with their audience is vital for Influencers to construct the power of a community and attract lifelong members. Instagram acts as a facilitator to gather all these positive and negative engagement, but Influencers who are self-objectify makes it look normal and still pursue body

love and spread empowering message on body curve attributes. The body performance is a very powerful tool which knows no borders, this online influence of body positivity can be seen in real life. Curvy women associate their identity to the influencer community and are more confident to live a normal life, developed purpose to wear what they want and eat whenever they want, compared to the 80s (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013). This shows that the curvy body community has reached billion of women sharing their homogeneous entity which celebrate their body shape and fighting against the westernized standards and stereotyping. By investing through Influencers, the curvy body movement communicates methodically to bring awareness, empowerment, but mainly input a role model on the social platform for women to take example from, to smooth the process of body acceptance and liberation of curvy movement (Martinez-Lopez et al., 2020). Instagram helps building the curvy body resistance to break down the beauty ideals and stereotyping, as well as uplifting the female identity to grow uniquely and remain positive with their beauty appearances.

Conclusion

To sum up, Instagram became a popular platform providing exposure that has increased curvy body positivism messages globally. Through sponsorship of Influencers and hashtags activism, curvy community could empower and normalize having different body shape. Referring to the above discussion, emergence of new media and globalization, brought change from the ideal ‘Gibson girl’ to break down the western ideologies and liberate this oppressed community. Instagram allowed the movement to build and nurture their culture online as well as offline assuming that every curvy woman can influence the discriminated and unrepresented communities with body related issues to effectively guide them to body positivity and build a sense of belonging. Judy Freespirit and Aldebaran (1973, cited in Rothblum & Solovay, 2009) who wrote the Fat Manifesto, “We commit ourselves to pursue these goals together. And if together exclude the fat people, black people as well as other marginalized bodies who made Body Positivity possible – it’s not Body Positivity at all”. However, even if there are a lot of articles written on body positivism movement, further research needs to be done on specific topics like hashtags activism and influencers’ power. Most of the studies conducted are

correlational and this limits the approach of this paper to delve deeper with the evolution of Instagram and persistent change of community behavior resulting to assumptions and user experiences to convey a clear statement in this conference paper. Hence, more research with experimental methods should be carried out and examine the direct relation of body positivism movement on social media.

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Appendix:

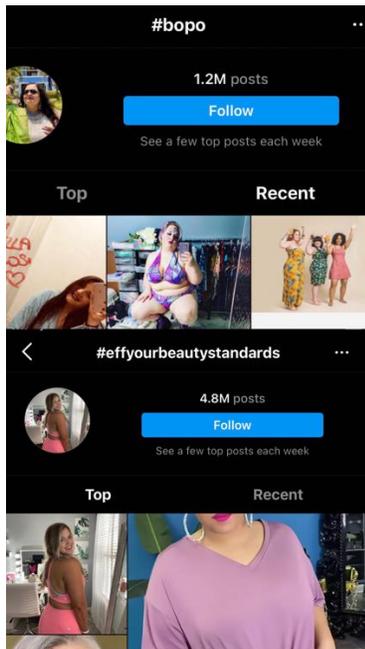


Figure 1. #effyourbeautystandard & #bopo strong presence on Instagram

Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/>



Figure 2. Tess Holiday sharing her journey to body positivity through an Instagram post

Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/tessholliday/>