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#BodyPositivity or #BodyPolitics?: A Rhetorical Analysis of the Body Positivity Myth Formed by Narratives of Political Myth

Sydney Berenyi Lasike
Utah State University

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#BODYPOSITIVITY OR #BODYPOLITICS: A RHETORICAL ANALYSIS OF THE BODY

POSITIVITY MYTH FORMED BY NARRATIVES

OF POLITICAL MYTH

By

Sydney Berenyi Lasike

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of

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in

Communication Studies

Approved:

_____
Nicole Allen, Ph.D.
Major Professor

_____
Mollie Murphy, Ph.D.
Committee Member

_____
Sydney O'Shay, Ph.D.
Committee Member

_____
D. Richard Cutler, Ph.D.
Vice Provost of Graduate Studies

UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY
Logan, Utah

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ABSTRACT

#BodyPositivity or #BodyPolitics: A Rhetorical Analysis of the Body Positivity Myth Formed by

Narratives of Political Myth

by

Sydney Berenyi Lasike, Master of Science

Utah State University, 2023

Major Professor: Dr. Nicole Allen
Program: Communication Studies

The #BodyPositivity movement is an online social movement that warrants the celebration of all body types—promoting the difference of size, shape, color, and ability. Despite the movement's original mission to promote bodily acceptance and irradicate fat-phobic ideology, it has been co-optated by dominantly white, female influencers. These influencers have the normative, ideal body and through becoming the protagonists of #BodyPositivity, they create narratives of beauty myth and political myth. I combine the beauty myth and political myth to create the Body Positivity myth. I argue that the Body Positivity myth is a political myth that invokes objectification, disempowerment, and villainization upon women who lack the ideal body. I used representative anecdotes to lead my analysis of three popular Instagram influencer's #BodyPositivity content and their common narratives within these posts. As I identified the overarching narratives found within these influencer's content, I conducted a narrative analysis to carefully examine how these narratives construct the Body Positivity myth and how they are used as a weapon to disempower large-bodied women and women of color in society.

(90 pages)

PUBLIC ABSTRACT

#BodyPositivity or #BodyPolitics: A Rhetorical Analysis of the Body Positivity Myth Formed by

Narratives of Political Myth

Sydney Berenyi Lasike

The Body Positivity movement is well-known for advocating for the acceptance of all body types—including size, shape, color, and ability. Images online in support of the movement often showcase stretch marks, cellulite, and other "unattractive" bodily features to protest against the thin-ideal and strict standards of beauty placed upon women. Despite the goal to inspire self-love and celebration of all bodies, the hashtag #BodyPositivity has been taken-over by white, female influencers who have the idolized, female body. They contradict the original message of the movement through their posts on Instagram that centralize white feminine features and thin, Eurocentric bodies. This is the Body Positivity myth, a combination of the beauty myth and political myth, that holds women back from being able to progress through society successfully.

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Introduction

As a young, impressionable girl I was taught by my mother that "beauty comes in all shapes and sizes." While I believed that notion to be true when I observed others online, I rarely found it applicable when examining myself in the mirror. I certainly did not look like the slim, blonde social media influencers saturating my Instagram timeline, yet I yearned to become like them; to finally feel beautiful, acceptable, and "normal." Considering that I come from an ethnically mixed background of Polynesian and European heritage, I felt the intense friction between my contrasting physical features. My features of brown, curly hair, "thunder thighs," and a large body frame quickly became shameful flaws instead of my own unique body traits. I learned to praise my euro-centric features (e.g. light skin, light eye color) and to hide, modify, or "fix" everything else about my body that appeared different than the image of "perfect beauty" we are accustomed to in the media. When the uproar of the hashtag #BodyPositivity was introduced to me on Instagram, I finally hoped I found a place of solace to encourage and recognize all body types. Instead of seeing the push for body acceptance and appreciation, I was met with images and captions villainizing fatness—perpetuating only one ideal feminine body-type. The vilification of bodies that are not considered ideal by society, especially large bodies, continues to persist on various social media platforms, ironically including the hashtag #BodyPositivity.

For generations, traditional visual media outlets have been the dominant medium for reinforcing beauty standards and the ideal body type in Western society. In a culture that disparages individuals with medium to dark skin tones and vilifies women with larger body-types, women of color tend to suffer from the mass media's surge of racialized beauty norms

(e.g. Hurtado & Cantu, 2020; Deliovsky, 2008; Bruns & Carter, 2015). Rather than normalizing the unique differences of size, shape, and color in all women's bodies, the media continues to perpetuate the idea that white beauty norms—most commonly thinness—are ideal, easily achievable, and the end goal for all (Deliovsky, 2008; Maddox, 2021; Bruns & Carter, 2015; Schooler & Daniels, 2014). In the past, women of color were constantly barraged with the toxic ideology that their bodies did not compare to Cindy Crawford posing on the cover of Vogue or Miss America's dainty figure and light complexion as she swayed across the stage in her bikini attire. Now, the issue no longer only exists in magazines or on television, but it is present at the tip of our fingers as we scroll through highly-visual social media platforms like Instagram, Facebook, TikTok and Pinterest (e.g. Perloff, 2014; Tiggemann, Brown, & Anderberg, 2019; Maddox, 2021). Social media platforms are flooded with countless images of tall, thin women, more commonly known as influencers—each showcasing their "perfect" physiques, tiny waists, airbrushed skin, plump lips, button noses, and other highly envied, euro-centric features (e.g. Chiat, 2020; Maddox, 2021; Parameswaran & Cardoza, 2009; Perloff, 2014).

Indeed, it is no surprise that most successful, female influencers on Instagram are white women, proving that contemporary Western culture has invoked a standard of beauty that excludes women of size; ignoring that women of color, black and brown women, typically have more voluptuous body types (Hurtado & Cantu, 2020; Legault & Sago, 2022). Idolized whiteness pervades modern beauty standards through a narrative that highlights two key points: (a) Eurocentric beauty standards (e.g. thin body, straight, blonde hair, small nose) are presented within society as normative beauty traits excluding the inclusion of women of color (Deliovsky, 2008; Parameswaran & Cardoza, 2009; Legault & Sago, 2022); and (b) If an individual lacks the normative beauty traits, this narrative suggests that Eurocentric beauty traits are easily attainable

and can be achieved by all (Deliovsky, 2008; Lazuka, Wick, Keel & Harriger, 2020). Moreover, one cannot simply change their racial background, skin color, or hair texture, exemplifying that society's conceptualization of beauty is racially charged and privileges whiteness (Deliovsky, 2008; Cohen, Irwin, Newton-John, & Slater, 2019). Thus, this issue drives my exploration of how narratives of racialized beauty norms have led to the idolization of the white, female body on social media—ostracizing women of color. We see this issue linger within a particular social media movement, commonly found hash tagged as #BodyPositivity.

#BodyPositivity represents an online social movement that ostensibly encourages individuals to dedicate themselves to nurturing bodily acceptance through providing a safe space online that allows any individual to showcase bodies of all shapes, sizes, colors, and abilities (Sastre, 2014; Frazier & Mehdi, 2021). For example, some Instagram influencers have embraced the movement, posting unedited photos showcasing their stretch marks, cellulite, acne, and other natural body traits that are usually considered flaws by Western society (Vandenbosch, Fardouly, & Tiggemann, 2022; Tiggemann et al., 2020). Rather than being ashamed of your body or any marks upon it, the goal of #BodyPositivity was originally to normalize (every)body and battle anti-fat rhetoric (Frazier & Mehdi, 2021; Cohen et al., 2019). Despite this explicit intention, to invite more inclusivity of size and shape online, it has been heavily criticized for reinforcing that the ideal female body type is still, in fact a skinny, white woman's body (Frazier & Mehdi, 2021; Taylor, 2016; Afful & Ricciardelli, 2015). When scrolling through a small cluster of the 10 million posts that are found under the hashtag #BodyPositivity, it has become clear that the use of the hashtag no longer serves as a tool for individuals who are typically ostracized by society to post about their real, unedited bodies. The pictures often depict women who are fitness influencers, with the normative female physique claiming that their transformation to a healthier

lifestyle is considered body positivity (i.e. "fitspiration" content). The movement no longer serves its original purpose of combatting fat-phobia but has silently (re)elevated whiteness as the ideal in contemporary beauty standards.

Upon reviewing the original mission and the co-optation of the body positivity movement—along with the variety of implications that follow, I seek to understand how these new narratives function as a beauty myth within our modern-day society. Wolf (2002) defines the beauty myth as "an obsession with physical perfection that traps the modern woman in an endless spiral of hope, self-consciousness, and self-hatred as she tries to fulfill society's impossible definition of 'the flawless beauty,'" (p.4). The beauty myth is often constructed rhetorically through the use of narratives to communicate unattainable body ideals or beauty qualifications (e.g. extreme thinness, unblemished skin, Euro-centric physical features) to an audience of women (Wolf, 2002). Thus, a variety of narratives used within #BodyPositivity content create a new, specific beauty myth called the Body Positivity myth. I will combine the beauty myth with the political myth to further my understanding of how narratives construct messages that vilify and undermine women who do not fit the normative view of feminine beauty. Bottici and Challand (2006) define political myth as "the work on a common narrative, which provides significance to the political conditions and experiences of a social group" (p.320). Mythical narratives about beauty have long been used against women as a political weapon to hinder them from cultural, political, and professional progression (Wolf, 2002). Moreover, I approach the beauty and political myths together to understand how the body positivity myth—and associated narratives—racially constrains the ideal definition of beauty while perpetuating the very ideologies it claims to resist.

Based on my analysis, the Body Positivity myth is constructed of three features: (a) the ideal body is the thin body accompanied by Euro-centric physical features; (b) the ideal body is easily attainable for anybody and everybody; and (c) all women should work (e.g. intense exercise, cosmetic surgery, using beauty or diet products) to reach this body-type. I developed this definition of the Body Positivity myth through conducting an analysis of body positive Instagram influencers and their narratives of body positivity. The common narratives that comprise the Body Positivity myth include, first, posts idolizing bodies that regularly participate in fitness culture and gym-going. Second, common #BodyPositivity narratives solely celebrate "the healthy body" (almost always portrayed as the white, thin body). Third, narratives within this beauty myth communicate the necessity to engage in bodily transformation (e.g., the fat-to-skinny transformation) via extreme exercise or purchasing beauty and wellness products in order to feel more acceptable and fulfilled. Finally, through the lack of diverse influencers and racial representation of all women, women of color are often actively erased and diminished within popular narratives perpetuated through the hashtag. As a result of these intense mythical and narrative features, the implications of the #BodyPositivity beauty myth result in a myriad of consequences for women with the non-normative body or women of color who regularly view body positivity discourse.

The co-optation of #BodyPositivity is driven by the combination of the beauty myth and the political myth. Together, the beauty myth and political myth construct toxic narratives about women's bodies that create the Body Positivity myth. Within these destructive narratives, Instagram influencers portray themselves as the protagonists of beauty myth narratives. By becoming the protagonists and main characters of #BodyPositivity, their narratives then vilify fat-bodied individuals and portray them as antagonists within the Body Positivity myth.

Essentially, viewers examining this content are encouraged to become like the influencer—who is often embodying all the qualifications of the ideal woman—rather than the "other" (i.e. fat-bodied people, women of color, curvy body shape) (Legault & Sago, 2022). Again, these narratives communicate fat-phobic ideology and reshape fat-bodied people as villains, rather than humans who deserve to be seen, heard, and celebrated just as thin-bodied individuals are. #BodyPositivity beauty myth narratives also lack a variety of diverse, ethnic representation further ignoring black and brown women who often possess different body compositions than that of white women (Petermon, 2020; Parameswaran & Cardoza, 2009; Legault & Sago, 2022). Moreover, because white influencers act as the protagonists within this beauty myth, black and brown women are among the individuals who are vilified and eliminated from the conversation completely (Legault & Sago, 2022; Lazuka et al., 2020).

I offer a brief preview of how I will argue that the Body Positivity myth is a political myth that invokes objectification, disempowerment, and villainization upon women who lack the ideal body. To strengthen this claim, I will begin by identifying and discussing the current literature and scholarship surrounding #BodyPositivity, Wolf's (2002) conceptualization of the beauty myth, the role of benchmark women as influencers online, and the intersection of political myth. Using Bottici and Challand's rework of the definition and criteria of political myth, I will demonstrate how the Body Positivity myth is a political myth due to its use of narratives to create conditions regarding the female body that limit and marginalize certain social groups. I will draw upon Burke's (1969) conceptualization of representative anecdotes to lead my analysis of three popular Instagram influencer's #BodyPositivity content and their common narratives within these posts. As I identify the overarching narratives found within these influencer's content, I will conduct a narrative analysis to carefully examine how these narratives construct

the Body Positivity myth and how they are used as a weapon to disempower large-bodied

women and women of color in society. Moreover, the Body Positivity myth on Instagram can do

more harm among marginalized individuals viewing this content, rather than staying true to the

original intentions of the body positivity movement and creating a safe space for all bodies to be

celebrated and advocated for.

Chapter I: Beauty Myths and #BodyPostivity

In this chapter, I will begin by discussing the historical context regarding the Body Positivity movement and its most recent co-optation. Through this literature review, I invite individuals to view the Body Positivity myth as a political myth. The body positivity myth disempowers, objectifies, and marginalizes women by using narratives that prioritize fitness culture, racialized beauty standards, and bodily transformation via extreme exercise and consumerism. To help define and support my argument that the Body Positivity myth is a political myth that focuses on bodily transformation through fitness culture and consumerism, I will discuss the Body Positivity myth's intersection with political myth, and the co-optation by influencers, or benchmark women, of the movement leading to narratives constructing the Body Positivity myth.

The Origins and Influence of #BodyPositivity on Instagram

In response to the dominant appearance-ideal messages on social media, there has been a growing social movement to reject these impossible body standards, inviting more inclusivity and diversity of body image online. This phenomenon is called the "body positivity movement" or "body positivity." The movement is further defined as "a movement that enforces and creates a message of self-love and acceptance by rejecting the current images of beauty and embracing and reconciling with parts of oneself that was deemed unattractive under those standards," (Chiat, 2020, p.4).

Body Positivity stems from the 1960s fat acceptance movement (grounded in feminist theory) that emerged due to the rise of fat-phobic and anti-fat discourse in the United States

(Afful & Ricciardelli, 2015). The fat acceptance movement advocated for diverse body shape and size acceptance and specifically protested against the discrimination of fat or larger bodies (Afful & Ricciardelli, 2015). Further, the movement challenged the popularized societal assumptions that only thin bodies are valuable and worth celebrating (Afful & Ricciardelli, 2015). For years, anti-fat rhetoric claimed the size and shape of an individuals' body equated to how healthy that person was, when in reality this link only promoted the necessity of the thin-ideal narrative in order to be considered acceptable to Western society. Frazier and Mehdi (2021) note: "Proponents [of the fat-acceptance movement] tried to shatter the perception that weight and health were conclusively linked and sought to remove the temptation to say that people needed to be healthy—and beautiful—to be worthy of dignity, respect, and fair treatment" (p.1). Body Positivity parallels the goals of the fat acceptance movement, aiming to challenge the myriad of thin-ideal messages in the media and initiate acceptance and appreciation of all bodies, no matter shape, size, ability, and/or appearance (Cwynar-Horta, 2016).

More recently, the body positivity movement has been popularized through highly-visual social media platforms—most prominently Instagram—where users share photos of their body and encourage self-love through the hashtag #BodyPositivity. The hashtag originally invited individuals to participate in this "safe space" where misconceptions regarding health, beauty, and fatness could be challenged through social media content and individual narratives (Afful & Ricciardelli, 2015). #BodyPositivity combatted more than the unrealistic beauty standards presented by society, but the movement challenged the stigma surrounding fatness in the medical and professional fields (Frazier & Mehdi, 2021). Moreover, the original movement fought against systematic discrimination, allowing all bodies and identities to feel liberated from the harsh expectations society set upon them (Frazier & Mehdi, 2021; Afful & Ricciardelli, 2015). A

simple search of the hashtag #BodyPositivity on Instagram elicits 11.4 million posts (Instagram, April, 2023). "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," (Cohen et al., 2019, p.48).

A variety of images using the hashtag to promote body acceptance showcases plus-sized women advocating for the celebration of all bodies by posing in bikinis, lingerie, or the latest fashion trends reserved for the ideal, thin female runway model (Cohen et al., 2019; Rodgers, et al., 2022). Others show plus-sized women engaging in health and fitness activities, such as yoga or Pilates (Lazuka et al., 2020). These posts are meant to encourage others that anyone, no matter the size or shape of their body, can regularly engage in fitness activities and be considered healthy (Lazuka et al., 2020; Cwynar-Horta, 2016). Several images include women posing with their natural bodies unedited, showcasing their stretch marks, cellulite, and other "imperfections" to normalize these bodily traits that have been heavily critiqued by contemporary society (Cohen et al., 2019; Paraskeva, Lewis-Smith, & Diedrichs, 2015).

A growing pattern of content posted under the hashtag #BodyPositivity includes images of conventionally attractive women showcasing their normative bodies, which strays from the initial fat acceptance narrative of the movement (Frazier & Mehdi, 2021; Tiggemann, 2022). This new narrative emerging from these posts has received backlash since it has recentered normatively attractive women of the movement, once again pushing marginalized bodies to the fringes of the movement (Frazier & Mehdi, 2021). While the hashtag expresses a positive message about all bodies, the posts and images used in this group lack inclusivity to all identities and body-types (Chiat, 2020). More recently Lazuka et al. (2020) analyzed the movement finding that while the purpose of the movement is to encourage body acceptance, only 43-

percent of posts depicted larger bodies which is not representative of the general population. In their essay, Chiat (2020) describes that most posts using the hashtag #BodyPositivity focus on the aspect of weight—mostly insinuating that the loss of weight is ideal, degrading fatness. Specifically, several posts with the hashtag #BodyPositivity include weight-loss transformations where the individual explains that they were not happy with their overweight body before, and they feel more beautiful now that they are the ideal size (Legault & Sago, 2022).

Along with the continued narrative of the thin-ideal, content using this hashtag often ignores and/or under-represents women of color and their bodies compared to their white counterparts. The narrative of the posts using the hashtag heavily reinforce that the ideal female body type is a skinny, white woman's body (Frazier & Mehdi, 2021; Chiat, 2020). Frazier and Mehdi (2021) specifically comment on this co-optation found in recent #BodyPositivity content stating "this co-optation is ethically problematic since it makes it more difficult to accomplish the goals of the original 'body positivity' movement and further marginalizes the bodies for which the movement was created" (p.1). Further, although the primary goal of a social movement will change over time, the co-optation of #BodyPositivity invites dangerous consequences for marginalized bodies who will continue to be subjects of oppression due to fat-phobic narratives (Frazier & Mehdi, 2021; Cwynar-Horta, 2016; Tiggemann & Zinoviev, 2019). The body positivity movement on social media has been taken from the hands of a disadvantaged, marginalized group creating further implications that result from power being stripped from marginalized bodies (Legault & Sago, 2022; Frazier & Mehdi, 2021; Chiat, 2021). Moreover, the importance of diverse representation and finding beauty in bodies of color has yet to be acknowledged by the mainstream movement (Lazuka et al., 2020; Legault & Sago, 2022). This issue is a direct effect of most successful "body positivity" influencers being conventionally

attractive in regards to their hourglass figure, flat stomach, ethnicity, and euro-centric facial features (Yeboah, 2017; Legault & Sago, 2022).

Body Positivity myth as a Political Myth in the Body Positivity Movement

Despite the initial efforts of the Body Positivity movement to eradicate fat-phobia and foster inclusivity, the movement continues to spread the narrative of idolizing thinness and beauty traits commonly seen in white women. I argue that the narratives that comprise the body positivity myth are both political and beauty myths. I will add to current literature discussing the co-optation of the body positivity movement, by combining beauty myth and political myth, then studying how this combination creates narratives that reinforce unrealistic beauty ideals. Narratives surrounding #BodyPositivity online are an example of a beauty myth that not only idolize racialized beauty norms but messages that continue to push the aspiration of thinness upon everyday women. The narratives subconsciously present an "easily achievable" standard online that is actually always out of reach, while continuing the vilification of fatness, (Petermon, 2020).

I argue that the Body Positivity myth is a type of political myth. In their essay, Bottici and Challand (2006) claim that myths provide significance to social groups through the use of narratives. These stories help individuals make sense of political situations (Bottici & Challand, 2006). Moreover, the authors write: "Myths tell stories, they state the origins of things, and thus, at the same time, where they are going" (Bottici & Challand, 2006, p. 319). To be considered a political myth, Bottici and Challand (2006) argue that a narrative must do these three things: (a) it must inform and reproduce significance; (b) the narrative must be shared by a given group; and (c) it must address the specific political conditions in which a given group coincides. Together,

the political myth and beauty myth provide women with an understanding as to how narratives of unattainable beauty ideals are prohibiting their advancement through society (Urbatsch, 2018, Wolf, 2002). Through merging both the political myth and beauty myth together, women become aware as to how they are reduced to their physical appearance to appease the male gaze. This section will explore how these two concepts can work together to illuminate the Body Positivity myth.

Women, specifically women of color, who view #BodyPositivity are met with a beauty myth. "The beauty myth tells a story. The quality called 'beauty' objectively and universally exists. Women must want to embody it, and men must want to possess women who embody it, but the beauty myth is always actually about prescribing behavior and not appearance" (Wolf, 2002, p. 12—14). Moreover, according to the concept of beauty myth, achieving the culturally acceptable construct of "beauty" is the most important goal for a woman. This is especially problematic as most narratives of beauty in Western society exclude non-white bodies and features, making it ultimately impossible for women of color to conform (Petermon, 2020).

Beauty myths can function as sites of control and influence. Wolf (2002) argues the beauty myth is less about the surface-level issue of achieving physical beauty, but more about the social control of women—which proves to be just as restrictive for modern-day women as previous traditional images: homemaker, intense mother, and domestic wife. As a beauty myth, instead of liberating women, #BodyPositivity content can function as a type of control for women to control them to act or behave a certain way, as well as spend money on cosmetics, cosmetic procedures, or weight-loss strategies, all of which hold special significance for women of color. Furthermore, the body positivity myth focuses on dehumanizing women to reinforce hegemonic ideology concerning womanhood and how women should behave in their traditional

social roles. These narratives create political significance by reinforcing that only normative

bodies with racialized beauty traits are considered valuable, while bodies belonging to

individuals with the non-normative body or women of color are ignored and considered denied

certain privileges.

Beauty ideals in the #BodyPositivity movement are specifically seen through online

content and narratives that suggest an individual should look a certain way. For example, many

posts that use the hashtag #BodyPositivity show before and after pictures, once again

perpetuating the message that "fat is bad" and "skinny is good" (Hass, 2016; Zimdars, 2017;

Levan, 2014). Moreover, bodies that are naturally built larger than the normative feminine body,

such as ethnic bodies, naturally become outcasts (Williams, 2017; Stoll, 2019; Zimdars, 2017).

As influencers, celebrities, or other prominent social media users teach onlookers that their

identity "must be premised upon their 'beauty…'" (Wolf, 2002, pg.4). As influencers dominate

this political myth, narratives are constructed by their group for a specific following or audience.

The audience will include their followers who value the Influencers and their posts, along with

individuals with non-normative bodies viewing content using #BodyPositivity. As marginalized

women view the co-optation of the body positivity movement, they will learn that their body-

type is often not represented, ignored, and unacceptable. Further, this concept of making women

feel as if their bodies are unacceptable leads to a larger implication: the patriarchy's narrative of

the ideal woman is crucial to spread in order to direct and impose their form of normative

femininity (Vendemia, Braithwaite, & DeAndrea, 2022; Stoll, 2019; Wolf, 2002).

I argue that beauty myths in general and the Body Positivity myth specifically is best

understood as a type of political myth. According to Wolf (2002), individuals and the media use

images of female beauty as a "political weapon" against the advancement of women. Bottici and

Challand's (2006) definition of political myth begins to demonstrate how we might consider beauty myth as a type of political myth. The authors note (2006) political myth: "A political myth can be defined as the work on a common narrative, which provides significance to the political conditions and experiences of a social group" (p. 320). Political myths were thought of as rhetorical devices that explain how the use of narratives help individuals understand how the world works regarding in political matters (e.g. self-fulfilling prophecy, "Manifest Destiny," the American Dream). Bottici and Challand (2006) argue political myths do not only exist in regards to traditional political situations, but can offer explanation to modern-day phenomena, "such as large social movements, that the role played by narratives appealing to people's imagination becomes evident" (p. 317). Further, the topic of a myth does not necessarily make it a "political myth," rather it is how a narrative gives meaning and addresses political situations for various social groups (Bottici & Challand, 2006).

This suggests that political myth can be applicable to situations surrounding the way individuals decide what is beautiful and how these beauty standards are communicated. Bottici and Challand (2006) argue that political myths are specific to social groups and to the groups that use and work on them. Thus, such political myths that suggest benefits for one social group can severely ignore and degrade other social groups; hence the co-optation of the body positivity movement. Frazier and Mehdi (2021) mention this concept in their essay describing the dangerous consequences of co-optation in the body positivity movement, stating: "Although there is nothing inherently wrong with the aims of a social movement changing over time, the current ideology behind the 'body positivity' movement violently undermines the aims of the original movement" (p. 3). In the hashtag #BodyPositivity, we can observe this principle with content posted under this hashtag showing that those with normative bodies remain acceptable to

society (serving these individuals), while degrading those with bodies that are considered unattractive or different. This example demonstrates that the Body Positivity movement on social media can be considered a political situation and is worthy of being evaluated as a political myth. Furthermore, body positivity narratives can also be considered fit for political myth because they address the specific political conditions surrounding what bodies are considered beautiful and what bodies are ignored.

This definition of political myth provided by Bottici and Challand (2006) heavily relies on the use of narratives to carry myths that provide meaning to political situations and specific social groups. Traditionally, political myths in the United States of America used political narratives such as flags, national heroes, and political rituals, to insinuate that "all" Americans have specific political destinies (e.g.they perpetuate unrealistic expectations among minorities and marginalized groups). This is actively seen not only in political myth (e.g. the American Dream vs. Minorities in America), but also in Beauty myth, where white women are praised and idolized for their normative bodies while racialized and other marginalized bodies continue to be shunned.

Through my analysis, I demonstrated how the Body Positivity myth meets the criteria by Bottici and Challand (2006), further proving that this beauty myth is a political myth as well. Within the Body Positivity myth, we see an overarching narrative of the necessity of bodily transformation. The narratives presented through the hashtag on Instagram often depict bodily transformation through extreme fitness regimens and through consumerism as well. This narrative is seen often by the marginalized viewers who regularly follow and look at the content using this hashtag. It is politically harmful for women with non-normative bodies and women of color because the narratives of self-transformation attempt to control and shape women's bodies.

The Role of Benchmark Women as Influencers on Instagram

To truly understand the potential influence of the Body Positivity myth has made upon women in general, we must identify and examine "benchmark women," or the main characters often encountered in the body positivity myth. I argue that we can identify "benchmark woman" in beauty myths as "a hegemonic ideology and social location that define dominant and subordinated femininities," (Deliovsky, 2008, p. 49). Moreover, previous rhetorical scholarship studying beauty myth has found that benchmark women are considered the ideal women who set the bar for others to achieve in regards to physical appearance (Wolf, 2002; Maddox, 2019). Within the #BodyPositivity movement, benchmark women are recognizable as the Instagram influencer who already has the ideal, female body exhibiting the highly sought-for white, female traits. These are the women who present the standard for what "attractive" bodies should look like online. Deliovsky (2008) claims young girls and women are "susceptible to impersonating 'heroines' of adult female culture whose highest embodiment are the models in women's health and fashion magazines" (p. 51).

The Instagram influencers that act as benchmark women online create content that provides insight about the ideology of beauty and femininity. Collins (2004) refers to benchmark women as "normative yardsticks," that regulate (whether unknowingly or on purpose) all "requirements" of femininity. Typically, black or other women of color fall victim to these beauty standards and are "relegated to the bottom of the gender hierarchy" (Collins, 2004, p. 193). Parameswaran and Cardoza (2009) argue women of color are constantly undermined by cultural beauty politics that use persuasive narratives to idolize light-skinned beauty when it comes to facial features and body types—leading to white women being the goal for all, even

medium to dark-skinned women. According to the beauty myth, benchmark women not only appear physically attractive according to the heteronormative ideals of women, but these women also behave by the rules of normative white femininity. For example, normative white femininity relies solely on women taking care of themselves, prioritizing personal self-care, seeking glamour, and maintaining their physical appearance (Deliovsky, 2008). Those who fail to prioritize or maintain their physical appearance, lack femininity, therefore also lacking what it takes to be an "ideal," "beautiful" woman in Western society.

White women are considered the main characters or benchmark women of the Body Positivity myth. Historically, white women's bodies were viewed as "more valuable" and "more beautiful" within the hierarchy of femininity—especially within the media (Thorton, 1995). The role of benchmark women is vital to the beauty myth, as benchmark women are the ideal examples of beauty (Deliovsky, 2008). In regards to the #BodyPositivity movement, the population that represents benchmark women in this movement are white, body positivity influencers that actively possess the ideal body and constantly post about it. These influencers typically use the hashtag to express self-love and acceptance about their own body, disregarding that the movement was created to advocate for all body-types, but more specifically to create a safe-place online for marginalized bodies. Their ignorance of the original mission of the body positivity movement discredits and shuns others with marginalized bodies, leaving non-normative-bodied people and women of color to become "the villains" in regards to beauty (Petemon, 2020).

Beauty standards and the ideology behind femininity are racialized, often erasing women of color and their chances of being able to attain "physical perfection." Further, images of white, thin influencers typically receive the most user-engagement and interactions on social media

platforms compared to their ethnic counterparts (Cohen et al., 2019). Brown and black women who do receive positive engagement about their bodies or beauty traits on Instagram typically are thin or have noticeable euro-centric features (Cohen et al., 2019; Maddox, 2019; Petermon, 2020). Petermon (2020) explains that women of color who have the non-normative body-type are villainized not only because of the way they are shaped but also because of the color of their skin and ethnic traits. Moreover, despite socially accepted women of color, such as Jennifer Lopez and Beyonce, coming to the forefront to represent ethnic beauty and diversity, Peterson (2020) says marginalized bodies are still ignored, and the embrace of the non-normative body type has not been extended to women of color who are considered "fat." By identifying how benchmark women construct narratives in #BodyPositivity, this study can demonstrate how the body positivity myth functions and how this co-optation is formed through political myth.

Another element that is essential for a narrative to be considered a political myth is the use of heroes as main characters who help shift or influence the audience's ideology (Flood, 2013; Bottici & Challand, 2006). Johansson (2021) argues that most benchmark women are white, slender, able-bodied cis-women, ignoring and "othering" women of color who fall short of acquiring idolized beauty due to racialized beauty norms. The idolization of benchmark women in #bodypositivity "often ignores social differences and how economic, cultural and political conditions and forces shape the possibilities of the body" (Johansson, 2021, p. 120). Whiteness is used as power for the benchmark women heroines—their perpetuation of modern-day beauty norms sustains the beauty hierarchy as it not only devalues non-normative bodies, but race as well (Johansson, 2021; Deliovsky, 2008; Wolf, 2002). The body positivity movement originally argued that "all bodies are good bodies," but due to the power imbalances created by benchmark

women and the villainization of marginalized identities, diversity and inclusion are increasingly

absent from the movement online (Contreras Jr, et al., 2020).

Chapter II: Methodology of #BodyPositivity and Mythical Criticism

To further evince my argument that the body positivity myth is constructed by narratives of the beauty myth and political myth, I used mythic criticism to theoretically guide my study. Mythic criticism is the interpretation of rhetorical works "in the light of patterned resemblances to figures, actions, plots, meanings, or significances associated with myths" or the cultural tales revolving around a social group's heroes (Princeton University Press [PUP],1993, p. 809). I specifically focused on identifying major narratives that rhetorically construct political/beauty myth within #BodyPositivity content. Moreover, this examination required the use of Burke's conceptualization of the representative anecdote as it is impossible to collect and analyze all Instagram posts using the hashtag #BodyPositivity. Therefore, I chose three prominent body positivity influencers to study content from that led me to a firmer understanding of the co-optation of the body positivity movement and its link to beauty myth.

Choosing Political Myth

Mythic criticism is an apt way to uncover the racialized beauty norms and "all-inclusive" contradictions presented in #BodyPositivity content, as well as assess the beauty myth narratives in their rhetorical nature. In order to justify that the #BodyPositivity movement online is a political myth, I first demonstrated that this hashtag can be considered a political topic—worthy of discussion and draw a parallel to other well-known political myths (e.g. the American Dream, Manifest Destiny). According to Flood (2013) the term *political* in regards to political myth can refer to 1) "the spheres of social organization and action covered by the principal fields of political science as an academic discipline—namely government, public administration, political

behavior, political theory, and interpersonal relations;" or 2) "other spheres of social organization and action, such as the economic, the juridicial, the religious, the educational, the ethnic, matters of gender, and the artistic" (p. 5). #Bodypositivity creates political implications in regards to gender—women suffer from narratives that normalize fat-phobia and the lack of body diversity (Contreras Jr, et al., 2020). Further, feminist scholars believe most beauty myth narratives reinforce a system of male dominance where women must learn to ultimately appease the male-gaze (Wolf, 2002; Deliovsky, 2008; Maddox, 2021). The beauty mythical narratives found within #BodyPositivity directly impact the health and well-being of women and their ability to succeed and be accepted by society (Wolf, 2002; Maddox, 2021). Ultimately, the ideal female body serves as a function of the male gaze as it is currently represented as "the healthy body." This body is often portrayed as a slim, toned, and lean physique—alluding to the idea that only skinny bodies qualify as "healthy bodies" (Andreasson & Johansson, 2013). Women are, again, reduced to the quality of their appearance and expected to meet the standards of "the healthy body," potentially changing the way they eat, exercise, dress, and live their everyday lives. As Wolf (2002) notes, "women have always suffered for beauty;" arguing beauty politics serve as a way to bear down upon women, distract their energy, and undermine their progress in other aspects of life (p. 3).

Political myth is flexible in its object of analysis. Contemporary myth scholars also identify that political myth can be found in any object or gesture such as in a painting, a film, an image, a song, and an advertisement—visual representations of myth exist in a majority of political situations (e.g. Bottici & Challand, 2006; DeSantis, 1998; Flood, 2013). The visual representation of political myth found within #BodyPositivity is essential to note, as my examination of this material involved analyzing photos on Instagram that add to the overall

narrative of this movement. Myth scholars describe that if a rhetorical situation is to be considered a political myth, it must be framed by the following concepts: (a) narrative form; (b) includes political subject-matter; (c) gives meaning and the story acts as an important truth for a social group; and (d) the myth must function to change or form a specific ideology (Flood, 2013, p. 7; Bottici & Challand, 2006; DeSantis, 1998). Moreover, #BodyPositivity can be considered political, even in the most casual sense, since the movement involves social organization and a reaction that directly obstructs females and ethnic individuals from being able to successfully progress within society (Wolf, 2002).

Political Myth and Narrative

Narratives work as a rhetorical tool within #BodyPositivity content to construct the beauty/political myth. Political myth is guided by the use of narratives to create meaning for a social group (Flood, 2013; DeSantis, 1998). In order for a narrative to qualify as a myth, it must consist of the following functions: (a) the narrative must define or point-out a good society; (b) the main characters of the myth are heroic; and (c) the narrative must help individuals solve problems or make sense of large questions (Rowland, 1990; Flood, 2013). In my analysis, I discussed how the #BodyPositvity beauty myth is constructed through the rhetorical device of narratives, or the personal stories of Instagram Influencers that fulfill their idea of body positivity. I then identified the major narratives that co-opt the hashtag #Bodypositivity, and I used these narratives to argue that the Body Positivity myth is also a political myth—making the two terms synonymous in this instance. Further, myths act as "socially circulated narratives" that supply social norms and other beliefs—becoming important in regards to #BodyPositivity because the narratives used to describe "beauty" led to normative body expectations (Bottici &

Challand, 2006; DeSantis, 1998; Maddox, 2021). Myths function to provide meaning through the use of narratives, "identify a comprehensive understandable image of the world, and support the social order" (Fisher, 1973, pp. 160—167; Flood, 2013). Essentially, the use of narratives, or representative anecdotes, in political myth function as an initial building block and/or the starting point of a journey to understand human behavior (Jasinski, 2001; Burke, 1969).

To further establish whether a narrative is a political myth or not, rhetors must specifically examine the reception of the narrative, rather than singularly focusing on the production of the narrative (Bottici & Challand, 2006). These narratives do not remain stagnant, but are a process of continual work that will change according to the circumstances of a social group and as time progresses (Bottici & Challand, 2006; Flood, 2013). We see the narratives of #BodyPositivity shift over time (from its original message to its current message) depending on which social group—whether it is those with marginalized bodies or individuals with normative bodies—dominates the hashtag more (Johansson, 2021). This leads me to my first research question, what are the popular narratives of the #BodyPositivity movement on Instagram and how do they redefine the original purpose of the social movement? In my analysis of #BodyPositivity, I demonstrated that the beauty myths or narratives used in #bodypositivity online content not only fulfill all the requirements necessary to be considered a political myth, but the implications resulting from these narratives only led to more marginalization of "unideal" bodies. In addition, I question how the #BodyPositivity political myth continues the elevation of white standards of beauty to the exclusion of women of color.

Instagram and Political Myth

I explored content from the hashtag #bodypositivity on Instagram to form my argument that the Body Positivity myth is a political myth. Instagram is a photo sharing social media platform that not only prioritizes visual social media content (e.g. photos and video), but also written textual content in the form of captions (Serafinelli, 2018). According to Perrin and Anderson (2019), women are more likely to use image-based social media sites—particularly Instagram and Facebook—compared to their male counterparts. This social media platform is apt for studying the body positivity movement because the audience is not only reading a message about bodies in the caption but is viewing a photo that either invites initial feeling of self-love or incites feelings of shame (Chiat, 2020).

The highly visual emphasis on Instagram allows for an audience to physically see what bodies are "acceptable" in the body positivity movement, and which bodies "are not." While the caption of a photo might send a message of self-love for all shapes and sizes, a photo of an influencer showing and referencing exclusively their conventionally attractive, slender figure does not communicate the same message (Chiat, 2020; Frazier & Mehdi, 2021). Because of the juxtaposition often seen between caption and photo, I chose this platform to further my argument that #bodypositivity is a political myth that uses beauty myth narratives to reshape the mission of the original social movement.

Specifically, I examined Instagram images and captions by three influencers, or benchmark women, who have prominence on the social media platform, use the hashtag often, and post regularly about the body positivity social movement. Social media influencers, are "vocational content creators, capable of amassing and maintaining engaged audiences and monetizing their activity over time" (Femenia-Serra, et al., 2022, p. 1). I chose to analyze body positivity content from @milliemclay (69.1K followers), @izzyhillfit (24.5K followers), and

@carolineconneen (99.6K followers). I chose these three specific influencers because they identify as "health/beauty" influencers who regularly post about beauty, fitness, diet, health, wellness, and are body positivity advocates. Choosing three influencers with extreme prominence on the app accurately portrays that the Body Positivity mythical narratives are repetitive, and the normative message delivered through the hashtag. The influencers also have a large following on the app (>20K followers), meaning their posts tend to receive a higher amount of user-engagement (e.g. likes, comments, views, saves, shares) and the Instagram algorithm will spread their content to a larger, broader audience compared to an individual who has <10K followers (Pilgrim & Bohnet-Joschko, 2019; Femenia-Serra, et al., 2022). These influencers are worth studying because they are "powerful agents able to reshape information flows" and "their persuasion capacity can be leveraged by governments and brands to spread messages to online audiences according to strategic goals" (Femenia-Serra, et al., 2022, p. 2). Moreover, because of their power and influence over their followers and other social media users that engage with their content, they are more likely to be seen as credible, reliable, and trustworthy (Abidin, 2018).

As it is impossible to study every post using #BodyPositivity on Instagram, I drew upon Burke's conceptualization of representative anecdotes to collect and analyze prominent posts and popular influencers within the hashtag that can represent large narratives emerging from #BodyPositivity literature as a whole. With a simple search of #BodyPositivity on Instagram, pictures from the influencers I have chosen to study will populate towards the top of the page, meaning their posts receive the most amount of attention and regular user-interaction out of 11.1 million posts. According to Jasinski (2001) "a representative anecdote for studying human behavior must have a strongly linguistic bias and must be supple and complex enough to be representative of the subject matter it is designed to calculate" (p. 492). Burke's (1969)

conceptualization of a representative anecdote has been used as a critical method for approaching large pieces of texts that represent a central narrative for a whole social group (e.g. the United State Constitution) (Jasinski, 2001). Further, the posts of #Bodypositivity content from the three influencers I chose to analyze will be considered a textual representative anecdote that alone may be a singular text, but represents a larger group of texts (Jasinski, 2001). With these influencers having a large amount of following, likes, comments, and other engagement, three is a justifiable number to prove that the narratives perpetuate the same messages across the hashtag. Madsen (1993) argues "the identification of an anecdote sums up the essence of a text" (p. 208). In relation to my analysis, the body positivity content posted by the three influencers in my study will represent the major narratives and themes from the collective, 11.1 million #Bodypositivity Instagram posts. By using Burke's representative anecdote to guide my analysis, I used the content from @milliemclay, @izzyhillfit, and @carolineconneen to represent #BodyPositivty as a whole and study the main narratives they perpetuate through their visual images and captions that use the hashtag.

To collect the information I needed, I screenshotted and filed #BodyPositivity posts from each of these influencers after scanning their pages and identifying the posts that specifically use the hashtag. Each post must be from one of the three body positivity influencers I chose to analyze, acquire at least 200 likes and/or views, and include an image or video of the influencer's body. After collecting the posts, I first visually analyzed the photo and what it is adding to the overall narrative of the post. I then read the captions and pulled the main themes from them as well. The goal of collecting these Instagram posts were to (a) determine the major narratives being perpetuated by the Instagram content; (b) gain an understanding of the role these specific influencers play as potential benchmark women and main characters of beauty myth, and (c)

gather information that will determine whether or not the Body Positivity myth is a political myth depending on the requirements necessary. Upon the conclusion of collecting and analyzing the body positivity content, I have a clearer understanding of how these narratives of beauty myth in these posts constitute as political myth. While approaching this work as a feminist scholar using a critical method to analyze this social movement, it was essential that through the analysis, this essay would challenge the underlying assumptions of "acceptable" bodies in Western culture to advance more diversity, equity, and inclusion (Contreras Jr, et al., 2020).

Chapter III: Analysis

I conducted an analysis of three Instagram influencers' #BodyPositivity content which led to my claim that the body positivity myth is also a political myth. Within this content I searched for overarching narratives that persisted within their posts. I begin this analysis by examining the role of *Fitspiration* content within #BodyPositivity. Next, I discuss the frequent use of before-and-after photos in #BodyPositivity and the implications of vilifying fatness, while idolizing Euro-centric thinness. Finally, I address the role of consumerism as a mode for bodily transformation as these influencers heavily advertise products to encourage body transformation as a form of self-love. Through this analysis, I found that these narratives constantly communicate messages about bodily transformation for women with non-normative bodies and women of color—eventually becoming a defining factor of the Body Positivity myth.

The reification of #BodyPositivity as fitspiration

Upon conducting the search for popular #BodyPositivity Instagram content, a significant number of images populated revolving around exercise, workouts, fitness culture, body transformation, and the idolization of the "healthy body," (portrayed as the thin body). This content is called *Fitspiration*, and it emphasizes fitness culture, health, beauty and wellness. According to Vandenbosch et al.(2022) fitspiration refers to "images and text[s] that avowedly aim to promote a healthy lifestyle through exercise and healthy eating" (p. 2). I argue through fusing fitspiration and body positivity content into one category, the "healthy body," portrayed as skinny bodies accompanied by Euro-centric features, become the only body-types

worthy of being celebrated. Moreover, because these narratives invite women to idolize the thin body, participate in egregious fitness regimens, and seek bodily transformation, women will feel potentially inclined to change the way they move their body, what they eat, and how they view their physical appearance. Essentially, the narratives encourage women to attempt to reach for an unattainable standard that becomes controlling and hinders their ability to be socially mobile througout society since they lack the ideal body.

Historically, there has been toxic associations of beauty and physical appearance within the health and fitness industry. The term 'fitness' itself initially alluded to biological adaptiveness of human beings within new environments or situations, but it has more recently been equated to "muscle size, body contour, and/or the ability to sustain a 30-minute exercise bout" because of the need to associate fitness to physical appearance (Park, 1994, pp. 61—62). Upon redefining fitness to focus on intense exercise or the "improvement" of one's physical appearance, we are reiterating the idea that those who actively participate in fitness culture are more attractive than those who do not (Boepple et al., 2016; Williams, 2017). This not only leads to the vilification of those who do not regularly participate in fitness culture, but perpetuates the ideal, thin body as "the healthy body" (Boepple et al., 2016). Thinness is often equated to healthiness and active participation in fitness, therefore leading to the stigmatization of fat bodies as unhealthy bodies or lazy bodies (Stoll, 2019; Alberga, et al., 2018; Boepple, et al., 2016). Furthermore, the narrative of idolizing the "healthy" body as a result of fitspiration or body transformation feeds into the #Bodypositivity beauty myth, which is: (a) the ideal body is the thin-body; (b) the ideal body is easily attainable for anybody and everybody; and (c) all women should work to reach this body-type.

The following sections will give examples of how fitspiration narratives help construct and shape the Body Positivity myth. This myth includes three actors: Millie Mclay, Caroline Conneen, Izzy Hill—all of whom identify as Body Positivists. Their #BodyPositvity posts regularly include images and videos of gym content—including fitness routines, workout programs, gym selfies, ads for gym clothing, sponsorships from well-known athletic brands, and images of individuals' bodily transformation as a result of exercise. I analyzed the role of these Instagram influencers, or benchmark women, as the main characters or heroines in beauty/political narratives. The Body Positivity myth also includes a series of events the characters must go through in order to achieve bodily perfection; these can be considered the plot(s) within these narratives. Some of these plots include working out, buying supplements, or changing diet habits for bodily transformation. Our main characters (influencers) must engage or journey through these plots within the Body Positivity myth in order to work towards self-improvement, bodily change, and success. Moreover, through perpetuating the message that all women who want the ideal body must journey through these plots within the fitspiration narrative, influencers are teaching their viewers to first, associate exercise and health to the "improvement" of physical appearance; second, intertwine the idea of the "healthy body" to the "thin body;" and third, vilify fat bodies because they are "unhealthy," "unattractive."

The contradictory messages in fitspiration and #Bodypositivity posts

Historically, fitspiration content has created more harm for social media viewers than benefits (Andreasson & Johansson, 2013; Vandenbosch et al., 2022). By associating the hashtag #BodyPositivity with fitspiration content, the audience viewing these posts are invited to associate the mission of body positivity and self-love to common narratives of weight loss,

extreme fitness regimens, thin and toned bodies, and diet culture. Examples of fitspiration and

their effect on #Bodypositivity are seen through the following posts:

Figure 1

McLay posing at the gym

Figure 2

McLay caption

Millie McLay (@milliemclay) is a health and wellness influencer with 57.7K followers who writes in her profile bio that she is "Ur self-love BFF" (via Instagram, 2023). She also writes that she is interested in fitness, body positivity, and girl talk. She dedicates most of her content to videos of workouts, bikini, and lingerie pictures depicting self-love, and body positivity content. In a video reel by Mclay, the influencer posts about overcoming "gym anxiety" while participating in fitness culture. According to McLay, gym anxiety refers to the anxious feelings a person gets when they lack a sense of belonging within the gym or develop extreme insecurity while working out. In this reel, she combines several short videos together— each about one second—of her doing various workouts throughout the gym while wearing leggings and a sports bra that showcase her thin, toned physique clearly. Although the text within her video and in the caption explain that she is constantly suffering from "bad gym anxiety," she appears to be confidently moving through her typical gym routine as she smiles while examining herself in the mirror and goes through several different upper-body exercises. Further, there seems to be a large disconnect between her expressed feelings of anxiety compared to her confidence portrayed in the video. McLay appears comfortable in the gym setting, she confidently uses good form and technique throughout her exercises, and she is wearing gym clothes that are complimentary to the idolized female physique she possesses.

McLay acts as the main character and protagonist in this fitspiration post by portraying herself as a heroine as she "motivates" others (I.e. villains or fat-bodied people) to workout despite their gym anxiety. The post first emphasizes the necessity to engage in gym-going and regular exercise despite any reservations holding an individual back. This narrative ultimately promotes the need for women who are fat-bodied to acquire bodily transformation through working out. Essentially, as fat-bodied people attend the gym despite their anxiousness or fear,

they will eventually see their bodies transform into one like McLay's. In this post, McLay acts as a benchmark woman of beauty, through wearing trendy, sexy clothes to the gym, embodying confidence as she works out, and showcases the "ideal" female body that others with marginalized bodies should strive for by regularly participating in extreme exercise. McLay's post highlights the necessity and potential beauty benefits of participating in physical activity to achieve the "dream body"—leading women to believe that they will finally acquire a body worth celebrating and loving. Wolf (2002) clearly states that a beauty myth is an unreachable standard of beauty that others claim is easily attainable for their own benefit. McLay enacts this exact qualification of the beauty myth within her reel by showing others that they "too" can, and implicitly should, get over their gym anxiety to one day achieve the same bodily results as her. She demonstrates that "getting over" gym anxiety is easy and makes attaining the normative bodily ideal realistic for all individuals—a key part of the beauty myth.

By using the hashtag #Bodypositivity in a video explaining how to "get over gym anxiety," McLay pushes others to participate in fitness culture despite their feelings of anxiety or fear in the gym. As stigma is constantly placed upon large and (assumed) unhealthy bodies, individuals who have marginalized bodies are less likely to feel comfortable in the gym or other fitness centers (Greenleaf, et al., 2018). Communicating the narrative that all bodies should prioritize fitness in order to achieve the ideal, "healthy" body—no matter the anxious feelings marginalized individuals experience—is a product of the thin-privilege benchmark women hold. As benchmark women, influencers do not experience the same stigmatization, shame, or judgement that is regularly shown to fat-bodied individuals—especially observed within a gym setting (Andreasson & Johansson, 2013). This narrative also leads to the incorrect assumption

that "healthy" bodies only look thin, when in reality bodies of all shapes, sizes and abilities can

be considered healthy (Park, 1994).

Figure 3

McLay working out at the gym

McLay attempts to include textually positive messages in her reel. For example, the

influencer posts "it doesn't matter if you don't look like everyone else," further "proving" why

individuals with the non-normative body should still desire to go to the gym despite feelings of

crippling anxiety. These "positive" messages are a direct result of the privilege and ignorance

benchmark women hold as they speak to an audience of marginalized individuals without taking

into consideration the extreme shame and stigma fat-bodied individuals face in public—more

specifically in fitness culture. Frazier and Mehdi (2021) note that fat-bodied people are

constantly teased, bullied, shamed, or stigmatized for being "lazy" and "unhealthy" when

participating in gym or fitness settings. Moreover, a part of the original purpose of the body positivity movement was to challenge misconceptions regarding fatness and health (Frazier & Mehdi, 2021). It has become apparent through McLay's narrative that fatness is not acceptable nor desirable, making the beauty myth stronger.

Through the fusion of #Bodypositivity and fitspiration content, the beauty myth becomes more apparent. The beauty myth sells the idea that the ideal body is available and attainable for anyone, yet this is untrue. The myth invites women to obsess over the need to attain this unrealistic goal, allowing the myth to control many aspects of their lives including what they eat, what they wear, how they move their bodies. Within the narrative we see examples of the beauty myth being dangled in front of women as something easy to attain through simply working out and transforming their bodies. However, the principle remains the same that the beauty myth is ultimately a distraction from allowing women to reach their full potential as human beings. Although benchmark women use toxic narratives to construct the beauty myth found in #Bodypositivity, they are still regarded as main characters and protagonists within this content. As these women portray themselves as the main characters and heroines in their own content, their audiences are invited to receive and validate their beauty myths.

The "easy-to-achieve" thin ideal

Figure 4

Hill posing at the gym

Figure 5

Hill leg workout caption

This image from Izzy Hill is yet another example of how fitspiration narratives have been used by benchmark women as a method of participating in the Body Positivity myth. Hill is a fitness and body positivity influencer with 24.3K followers. While most of her content revolves around fitness posts such as work out tutorials, ads for athletic-wear, and gym selfies, a large portion of her images include the hashtag #Bodypositivity. Because she is so popular, her posts regularly surface at the top of #Bodypositivity content when simply searching the hashtag. In this particular image we see Hill posing in the mirror of a gym with bright, neon leggings and a sports bra while flexing her perfectly toned leg and abdominal muscles. To the right of the influencer's selfie is text stating: "staple lower body workout" with a leg workout written out for her followers in a box below the text. This image reiterates the necessity of engaging in fitness to easily reach the ideal body that she showcases. Further, Hill gives her followers a "simple" workout to follow in order to achieve the body she has—becoming the perfect example of "advertising" the ideal body as something that is easily attainable for everyone, no matter who they are or what they currently look like.

In this post, the influencer is the main character and agent of the photo. She portrays herself as a heroine, by becoming the "fitness trainer" fat-bodied antagonists need in order to transform their bodies and become beautiful and healthy just like her. Although Hill and McLay construct a similar narrative to reiterate the importance of bodily transformation via fitness culture, Hill includes an easy workout for women to follow within her post which allows for her narrative to seem more credible and helpful. Unlike McLay, she not only advertises the ideal, healthy body, she gives her viewers step-by-step routines to "become" like her one day. Moreover, Hill promotes her leg workout as an easy way to transform into the "ideal," when in reality, women will not attain the body they desire by just using this routine.

The photo and caption both revolve around body transformation and self-enhancement, both narratives versions of the #Bodypositivity beauty myth. Hill contributes to #bodypositivtiy as a beauty myth by reinforcing the narrative that those who are fat or have the unideal body should seek total transformation for the fit body. In fact, the hashtag she includes before the #bodypositivity hashtag is #gymtransformation. Her post intends to "motivate" others by including a workout program, but in actuality Cohen, Irwin, Newton-John and Slater (2019) state fitspiration gym routines are actually associated with greater body dissatisfaction due to social comparison and has no link to actual exercise behavior within the viewers.

Finally, in this image we can examine yet another example of how benchmark women have mythically co-opted the body positivity movement. Hill shares the narrative of prioritizing fitness with her audience without acknowledging any message or narrative to do with self-love and acceptance. The influencer seems more concerned with promoting her leg-workout to attract attention to her account rather than including it because she is trying to "help" her followers. Hill uses this post to "encourage" others to do her recommended workout routine in order to achieve a body like hers. This narrative is seen on a larger scale as the audience of #bodypositivity is fed by monotonous images of what the ideal body should look like and is given an ostensibly easy way to "achieve" this perfect body through fitspiration content.

"Healthy bodies" as thin bodies

Figure 6

Conneen beginning the "Healthy Girl" routine

Figure 7

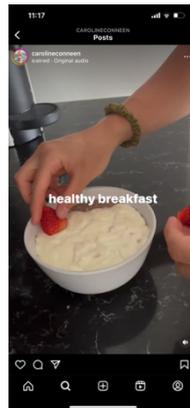*Conneen's healthy girl breakfast*

Figure 8

Conneen working out

The final example of fitspiration among body positivity influencers is demonstrated through this post by Caroline Conneen. Conneen is a body positivity advocate and fitness influencer who shares workouts, recipes, and confidence-boosting content for her 100K followers. In this post, we observe Conneen's video reel entitled: "Healthy Girl Morning Routine." This video is an eight second reel where this influencer shows her everyday morning routine as a self-avowed healthy girl. The first part of the video shows Conneen waking up and getting out of bed. The text on this portion states: "Make your bed," while she makes her bed. Next, Conneen shows herself looking at her reflection in the mirror while she is smiling, posing, and cheering with the accompanying text stating: "hype yourself up." Then, she washes her face and shows the skincare products she uses as the text displays: "simple skincare." The video then transitions into Conneen making herself a cup of coffee while the text states: "no phone for 30 minutes." Conneen then inserts videos of herself working out and labels this part of the routine as "movement." After the gym, she is then seen making a bowl of oatmeal with strawberries and coconut for breakfast, labeling this "healthy breakfast." Lastly, she films her laptop and shows that she is doing work for the rest of the day. The text accompanying this last video states: "Productive work." In most of the video we see images of her enacting her "healthy girl" morning routine, where she shows her ideal, female body to her audience—especially during the longest portion of the video which was the gym/movement snippet.

This reel steps away from the traditional fitspiration content we analyzed through Hill and McLay's posts. In this video we see Conneen incorporating more of her everyday lifestyle and wellness routine into her fitness content. Although posts like these are especially viewed for their aesthetic appeal, as a regular face amongst the #Bodypositivity community, Conneen's "healthy girl" routine reiterates beauty myths about what the healthy body looks like and how it

functions on a daily basis. The title of the video is especially problematic when it comes to perpetuating a narrative of what characters are considered healthy or unhealthy in this context. Conneen insinuates that only healthy girls look like her, have a morning routine like her, and are willing to behave like her. Here, health is equated to how thin an individual is, how productive their morning routine is, what kind of breakfast they eat in the morning, and if they engage in physical exercise or not. By labeling this reel a "healthy girl" morning routine, Conneen eliminates any audience members who do not look, or act like her.

Conneen simultaneously establishes the grounds for how unhealthy girl routines could potentially appear. Implied within the un-equivocated enunciation of a healthy girl routine is the unhealthy girl routine. Presumably, this routine begins with women who do not look like Connen, who do not make their bed, who do not go to the gym or exercise, or who forgoes healthy breakfasts. Once again, fat-bodied people who view this video are considered antagonists because only healthy girls perform this morning routine and fit the thin-ideal body and narrative. Moreover, this example perfectly fits the requirements necessary for this narrative to be considered a beauty/political myth. First, Conneen openly shows that the ideal, healthy body is a thin, implicitly white, body that she displays in the video. Second, she demonstrates that it is "easily attainable" to try to achieve this body through going through this "healthy girl" morning routine every day. Third, there is a pressure to conform to this unreachable ideal, and those who are fat-bodied should want to become healthy as portrayed within the reel.

With a simple search of the hashtag #Bodypositivity, one will be met with a myriad of fitspiration content. These three influencers represent how difficult it is to separate body positivity from fitness culture in our modern day. This co-optation is dangerous, especially as influencers, who identify themselves as advocates for body positivity, regularly post about

extreme workouts, body transformation through fitness, and fitness advice paired with images of their ideal white body. With such a large number of followers, their perception of the ideal body and what it physically takes to reach this ideal only creates more implication for fat women and other marginalized bodies. I have only analyzed one post from each of these three accounts, but most of their Instagram content revolves around fitness content. Individuals who look at content under the hashtag #Bodypositivity will be met with an overwhelming amount of fitness content that once again perpetuates that the ideal body for females is thin, strong, defined, and sexy. It is common for many individuals who regularly participate in the fitness industry to actively praise good-looking, slim bodies and villainize fat ones (Greenleaf et al., 2018). Through the beauty myth adapted and circulated by these influencers, body positivity offers little benefit to fat women and women of color who continue to face stigmatization, harsh judgement, and societal oppression.

Among searching for popular content surfacing at the top of all #BodyPositivity content, I found that predominantly white women received the most attention and engagement through this hashtag. The influencers I chose to analyze are all white women, and act as representative anecdotes of the dominant white ecology that exists within #BodyPositivity. This is a common pattern seen across the hashtag as most women who post using the intersection of #BodyPositiity and fitspiration are white (Johansson, 2021; Darwin & Miller, 2021). The lack of ethnic and racial representation within this supposed "all-inclusive" hashtag is a direct result of the hegemonic ideology surrounding the idolization of whiteness—namely white beauty and white bodies (Williams, 2017; Lazuka et al., 2020; Johansson, 2021). Considering that most fitspiration posts within the Body Positivity myth focus on promoting the "healthy," thin, Euro-centric body, women of color become invisible (Petermon, 2020; Darwin & Miller, 2021). Thus,

the narratives produced by influencers within the Body Positivity myth often overlook and alienate women of color and their body compositions. This implication is dangerous as women of color are a part of the marginalized members of society that actively search for safe spaces (i.e. the body positivity movement) to advocate and share about their bodies.

#BodyPositivity as Before and After Photos

#BodyPositivity is a political beauty myth that emphasizes narratives of self-transformation, specifically, through the use of before-and-after photos and the comparison of the thin body versus the fat body. This section will examine common posts among body positivity Instagram influencers that introduce the *reverse before-and-after post*. In these posts, the influencer creates a before and after comparison through the use of a photo collage. In the before photo, influencers typically pose in a way that showcases their body as perfect, attractive and ideal. In the second image, the influencer stands unposed, revealing that their body is not necessarily "perfect" because they appear larger or less attractive. The goal of this reversal is to invite others online to see the truth behind "the ideal body." Influencers claim they are being real and genuine by posting their body in its natural, unperfect state, yet their body, even presented in its most "unattractive state" is still culturally attractive (Brathwaite & DeAndrea, 2021). This idea is meant to "free" people from the idea that every woman online has the perfect body and seems liberatory, yet it continues to participate in the Body Positivity myth. These posts add to the #BodyPositivity beauty myth because of the use of the before-and-after narrative. Despite using the format as a reversal, the before and after image is problematic and linked to the idea of the thin body will always prevail compared to the fat body (Hass, 2016).

Through the use of 'before and after photos' to express #BodyPositivity, several narratives showcase the intense dichotomy between the idolization of thinness and the vilification of fatness. As we examined in the fitspiration section, fat-bodied people are clearly made to be antagonists within these narratives constructing the beauty myth, while thin-bodied individuals are commonly the protagonists. This beauty mythical narrative of thinness versus fatness is not a new concept in digital media. Television shows such as *The Biggest Loser* and *Extreme Makeover: Weight-loss Edition* glamorize weight loss transformations, once again reinforcing the message that an individual should strive for thinness and that larger body types are an "ugly" problem in need of correction (Hass, 2016). Traditionally, we as an audience are accustomed to viewing before-and-after photos as a narrative that involves a fat-bodied person depicted in the "before," then the fat-bodied person engages in an extreme makeover becoming slim or thin in the "after" photo. This transformation does not just include the physical appearance aspects of transformation, but also shows a before-and-after in personality as well (i.e. transforming from the lazy fat-person stereotype into the hard worker who lost a significant amount of weight). In order for a fat-bodied antagonist to journey through this narrative, they must be stripped of their identity and become a "docile body."

Upon examining narratives within the Body Positivity myth, I have noticed the repetitive nature of portraying thin-bodied people as protagonists while fat-bodied people are antagonists. I argue that an additional requirement is added to the role of the fat-bodied antagonist in order for them to become protagonists themselves. Fat-bodied antagonists must submit themselves to become docile bodies, becoming individuals in complete control of the beauty myth guiding them. Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer introduce the concept of the docile body to further explain disciplinary practices of femininity, such as weight-loss or wearing

make-up, which can lead to extreme makeovers or the total transformation of an individual. The docile body is "a body willing to be disciplined as a process of normalization" (Banet-Weiser & Portwood-Stacer, 2006, p. 261).

In popular reality television shows, such as The Biggest Loser or Extreme Makeover: Weight-Loss Edition, we can see individuals willingly and emotionally surrendering their bodies to transform from the old, problem body into the new, improved body. Further, Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer note: "These shows are premised on the notion that in order to lead a rewarding, fulfilling psychological and personal life, the cost is nothing less than a perfect, enhanced body" (p. 261). The same notion can be identified within the many before-and-after posts seen in the #BodyPositivity hashtag once an individual submits themselves to the narratives created by influencers. One photo alludes to the body that "no one" wants, while the other photo communicates an ideal body that everyone should crave and attempt to attain. One can only "attain" the ideal body in these images through becoming a "docile body," fully allowing yourself to believe the beauty narratives communicated by these photos in order to begin and seek total transformation. Given the implications of this problematic narrative for marginalized bodies, a majority of before-and-after images using #BodyPositivity appear to attempt "celebrating" body acceptance and self-love, when in actuality the posts exemplify the admiration of thin bodies with the rejection of larger body types.
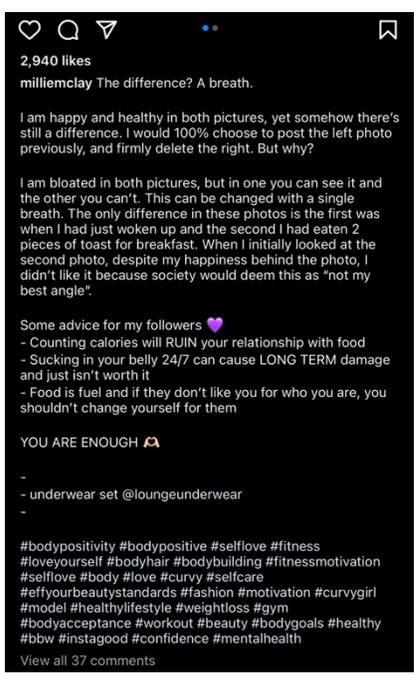
The reversal of before-and-after photos

Figure 9

McLay's before-and-after

Figure 10

McLay's before-and-after caption

In this post by McLay, the protagonist aims to normalize the fluctuation in appearance of all bodies throughout the day. However, she does not promote this intended message through her post. Instead, she reiterates the idea that benchmark women remain attractive and ideal, even when they post their most "unflattering" pictures online. This narrative adds to the #BodyPositivity beauty myth because it shows the rewards and privileges a thin-bodied woman receives once she becomes beautiful and considered ideal within society. McLay offers two photos, stitched together in a side-by-side comparison. The photos are separated by the words 'before breakfast' and 'after breakfast.' In the before photo, we see McLay is wearing a blue and white high-waisted matching underwear set. Her core is toned, and her waist appears tiny. In the after photo, McLay is still wearing the blue and white underwear set, yet the high waist is pulled down to reveal the subject's stomach below the navel. Her pose appears to be more relaxed, especially considering the drop of her shoulders. The subject's shoulders in the first photo appear to be raised, a typical gesture made when someone is inhaling and holding their breath in. The second photo, where the individual's shoulders are more relaxed, could possibly mean that she is exhaling or purposefully making her stomach appear larger while taking the photo rather than keeping her core tight. While this photo suggests that the 'before breakfast' photo is the more ideal body compared to the 'after breakfast' photo, both images appear almost identical with very slight noticeable differences. Though this influencer attempts to normalize the bloating of bodies after a meal, her "bloated" body is still considered conventionally attractive and thin to Western society. Moreover, even though the influencer sees this image as unflattering, it shuns those with marginalized bodies in the hashtag once-more.

McLay proves through this before-and-after narrative that a thin woman can post the "most unattractive" photo of herself, and she will still not feel the shame, prejudice, or criticism

that follows women with marginalized bodies after they post just as vulnerable of a photo. This is another way of reeling women in to the #BodyPositivity myth. When a woman sees the benefits and privilege a thin woman possesses, she is invited to go to great lengths to attempt to achieve the idolized body-type falling into the endless spiral of the beauty myth (Wolf, 2002). Brewster & Sklar (2022) determine that the goal of many Instagram influencers is to be real and "authentic," especially within the body positivity movement by posting unfiltered, unposed, and natural images of themselves. Furthermore, this issue of authenticity by body positivity influencers leads them to post "unflattering" images of themselves. As most people online would be met with less likes, engagement, or comments on their post for posting an unflattering picture, these influencers are rewarded for being so open and vulnerable (Brewster & Sklar, 2022; Braithewaite & DeAndrea, 2021). Braithewaite and DeAndrea (2021) claim influencers have ulterior motives when it comes to adding to #BodyPositivity. Non-normative bodied women do not receive as much Instagram engagement and embrace when they post unflattering photos of themselves. This inequality once again reinforces that the thin body is preferred, those with a thin body will be celebrated, and non-normative bodied women should consider self-transformation to reap the same rewards that thin women receive.

Paired with the before-and-after image is a caption by McLay describing the challenges of posting such an unflattering photo online. She begins by highlighting that the difference in each photo is "a breath." For many antagonists with marginalized bodies, a breath does not determine whether or not their body will be seen as attractive or unattractive within their photos; a breath does not become the determining factor between their large body appearing ideal or unideal to society. These antagonists do not have the choice to inhale a single breath and automatically achieve the ideal body. Moreover, the first line of this caption instantly

exemplifies the privilege benchmark women have when it comes to showcasing "unflattering" images of their body online for the "advocation" of body positivity. She continues the caption by explaining that in both photos she is bloated. Specifically, in the 'before' image, she is standing in an optimal angle while sucking-in her stomach. The second photo was taken after eating two pieces of toast, and she lowers her flattering high waisted underwear, then chooses not to suck-in her stomach as she stands in a more comfortable position. Moreover, McLay notes that while she liked the 'after' image of herself, society would not like the image because it is not "her best angle."

McLay demonstrates that benchmark women, or thin-bodied protagonists in these beauty narratives, blur the lines between unacceptable and acceptable portrayals of themselves in these before-and-after photos because they possess the ideal body. If a fat-bodied person posted themselves in this schema, they more than likely would not gain any positive reactions. Moreover, we, as viewers are expected to celebrate all that thin women do because of their body shape, while anyone with a non-normative body becomes an ignored "other." Furthermore, through the narrative that all women should want the thin body, body positivity influencers encourage for a woman to become a docile body (Banet-Weiser & Portwood-Stacer, 2006). While McLay intends for this before-and-after post to normalize all bodies throughout various stages of the day, the beauty narratives that emerge from this before-and-after sequence is two-fold: (a) thin bodies are ideal and worth being celebrated; and (b) those who lack the ideal body should strive for total transformation (through the docile body) in order to reap the same rewards thin-bodied women. These narratives reinforce the requirements necessary to be considered a political beauty myth including the idolization of the thin body, the thin body as an easily attainable body, and the necessity of bodily transformation to attempt to achieve the ideal body.

The permutation of the before-and-after narrative

Figure 11

Hill before image
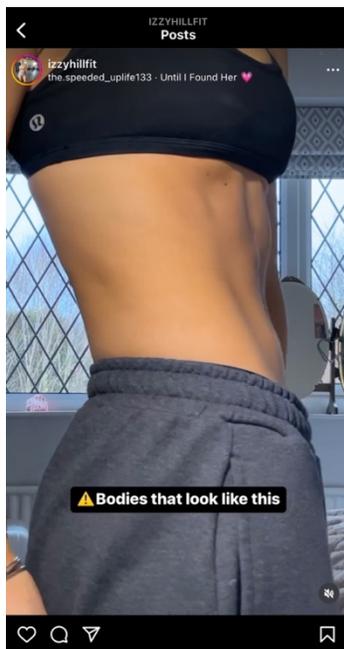

Figure 12

Hill after image

Figure 13

Hill's before-and-after caption

More beauty narratives surrounding bodily transformation emerge from before-and-after content seen in #BodyPostivity posts from the influencers, Hill and Conneen, as well. Hill uses a reel, or short video on Instagram (much like a TikTok video), to showcase her own before-and-after content. The clip begins with Hill showcasing her toned, flat stomach before breathing out and revealing her stomach as more rounded and bloated-looking. She is wearing black sports bra and grey, low-rise sweatpants that allow her mid-section to be totally visible. Text appears on the screen while Hill films her toned physique stating: "Bodies that look like this…" Then, as she exhales, extenuating the roundness in her stomach, text appears on the screen stating: "Also look like this." The two texts describing what is happening on the screen frame the reel as a before-and-after sequence. The video is filmed close-up to Hill's midsection, so we are not able to see the influencer's entire body as her stomach takes up the whole frame. Again, there are very

subtle differences between the first image and the second image in this example. Although in the 'after' section where Hill exhales and shows her bloating stomach as a normal bodily function, the size of her stomach still appears small and conventionally thin. Overall, the message remains the same; bloating is acceptable for all, yet not all bodies are acceptable. Hill presumes that all bodies acquire the normative ideal yet lacks thinking about her audience who might have big bodies and less of a dramatic transformation between their regular body and bloated body.

This post acts as a message meant to uplift and encourage others, when in actuality the narrative is destructive to individuals with marginalized bodies that are not represented in the beauty myth. Hill's body in the second picture is still considered thin and acceptable to contemporary society, despite her broad avowing of body positivity. Through this reverse transformation where the goal is to show a thin-bodied person normalizing fat-bodies, we actually end with a permutation of the original narrative that continues to highlight stereotypes of thin-bodied people without addressing the same instances for fat-bodied people.

Fat-bodied people are ignored and remain the lonely antagonists in the #Bodypositivity beauty myth. Hill's caption begins by reassuring women that it is okay to bloat, attempting to normalize bloating for all bodies, but ends with yet another contradicting conclusion: "Let me know if you'd like to see what foods I eat to look after my gut/reduce bloating." Her original message of advocating for all bodies while normalizing bloating turns into a self-advertisement to reduce bloating. If this post was truly created to invite body positivity, the caption would solely stress the importance of normalizing bloating rather than reinforcing the narrative that a large stomach or bloated body is unwanted and should be avoided. Moreover, this example clearly shows why Instagram influencers or benchmark women should not be the main characters of the body positivity movement because they do not represent those with non-

normative bodies and women of color well, ignore that their bodies are considered ideal (even when trying to reproduce a "bad photo"), and are more worried about selling products or creating user-engagement rather than tackling issues of hegemonic beauty ideals.

While Hill and McLay both demonstrate how narratives of before-and-after within the Body Positivity movement can harm individuals with the non-normative body, the lack of diversity within these posts allows viewers to see only white women as potential protagonists of body transformation. As white women predominantly make-up most of the space in #BodyPositivity, it is important to note the implications of only white viewers being invited to see themselves as protagonists who are successful within the beauty myth. When white influencers share their narratives on social media, they disregard that their physical appearance and personal narratives are only representations of thin, white women (Darwin & Miller, 2021; Petermon, 2020). Therefore, when these influencers post narratives of the Body Positivity myth and portray themselves as protagonists, they are actively insinuating that individuals who do not look like them or behave like them are the antagonists of their story (i.e. women of color, women with the non-normative body). This enables for Euro-centric features and the idolization of white bodies to be encouraged rather than the promotion of inclusivity of all bodies no matter shape, color, or ability. Further, because of this lack of diversity, women of color are never represented in these narratives as potential protagonists, even if they do have the thin, idolized body type (Johansson, 2021; Williams, 2017; Senyonga & Luna, 2021).

Self-Sabotage VS. Self Love

Figure 14

Conneen's before-and-after image

Figure 15

Conneen before-and-after caption

The final image of before-and-after content by Conneen offers a different approach to sharing these types of images online, yet still perpetuates a harmful narrative concerning the hashtag #bodypositivity online. In this image, we see two pictures of the same influencer posing in front of a mirror at the gym. In the image on the left, Conneen is very thin, has defined abdominal muscles, appears to be fatigued and sweaty following a workout, and she is wearing leggings and a sports bra that display her ideal figure more. Placed on top of the image on the left are the words: "self-sabotage." In the image on the right there are slight noticeable differences between the influencer's physical appearance. She is smiling and seems more energetic. She is wearing her hair down and is wearing a sports bra and leggings that show more of her mid-section compared to the image on the left. Her physique, although she describes it differently, still fits the idolized standards of the Western, white feminine body. Above this image, the influencer includes the words: "self-love." Through editing these two photos together in a collage, the influencer invites her audience to compare the two images; one of which she describes that she put herself through self-sabotage and the other is an image where she practices self-love. This image is another example of body transformation within the gym. Further, in the caption, she writes about her fitness journey and how her body has gone through significant changes to get where she is today.

The narrative elements communicated from this photo demonstrate the beauty myth surrounding #bodypositivity on social media. First, Conneen exemplifies that only one body in this photo is worth celebrating and showing self-love to, while the other one does not. Body positivity is defined as the opposite of self-hatred and emphasizes self-love for everybody, no matter what it looks like (Johansson, 2021). Conneen defies the original goal of the body positivity movement by using the comparison between the two photos to vilify one portrayal of

her body, then perpetuates the use of fitness (e.g., explaining her fitness journey) to achieve the ideal body. Moreover, this reemphasizes the necessity of implementing fitness into an individual's life in order to achieve the ideal, female body—reshaping the purpose of body positivity. The beauty myth of participating in fitness culture or physical activity to become physically attractive, rather than solely for the purposes of health reinforces the objectification of bodies—specifically, the female body (Greenleaf et al., 2018). Conneen focuses her message of "body positivity" to centralize her fitness journey. This narrative adds to the common beauty myth perpetuated by other fitness content using the hashtag #bodypositivity—prioritizing fitness culture for "bettering" an individual's physical appearance.

Advertisements as Mythic Modern Consumerism

The large, overarching beauty myth arising from content using #BodyPositivity is the promotion and demonstration of bodily transformation. Main characters in this myth— influencers—seek to transform their bodies into the perfect picture of health. They focus their content on "fitness inspiration" and the use of before-and-after photos that only highlight stereotypes of thin-bodied people without addressing the same of fat-bodied people. Wolf (2002) identifies that a beauty myth is a censored, commodified, and unattainable physical ideal to which women must adhere; in order to "reach" this level of beauty, exercise products, diet supplements, and other goods are offered as "tools" or "stepping-stones" to reach the ideal physical-appearance. It is no surprise that health and wellness influencers are constantly trending on various social media platforms as there has been an increase in paid partnerships, advertisements, and sponsorships among these individuals with the promotion of health, beauty,

and diet products (Wolf, 2002; Andreasson & Johansson, 2013). I have discussed the larger

implications of these past narratives (i.e. fitspiration and before-and-after transformations) within

the realm of beauty myth, yet my final argument notions that protagonists (e.g. benchmark

women, thin-bodied people) have led their online followers to believe they, too, can "achieve"

the ideal body through using health and beauty products in online advertisements.

      To be a successful influencer, an individual must work on personal branding and

representing their own brand well on social media (Abidin & Ots, 2016). These influencers

carefully curate their online personas and aim to build awareness to their profiles as well as

audience engagement and growth (Abidin & Ots, 2016). Moreover, an influencer must establish

trust and credibility between themselves and their viewers in order to gain a large number of

followers, sponsorships, partnerships, and brand deals (Abidin & Ots, 2016). Among the growth

of trust and credibility between protagonist (influencer) and antagonist (big bodied people), it is

much easier for benchmark women to sell their products that they post since they seem so

friendly, amicable, and personable. Through these ties, influencers are paid for making

partnership deals which includes posting regular advertisements for the company as well as

fusing their personal brand together with the company brand in order to become one entity

(Abidin & Ots, 2016).

      Through advertisements, promotions, and deals being highlighted with the use of the

hashtag #BodyPositivity, the connection between beauty and toxic consumerism through the use

of media becomes evident once again. As women are constantly faced with the beauty myth and

feeling as if they will never attain the perfect body or face, they become more susceptible to

buying-into the cosmetic, health, and beauty industries to attempt to do so (Wolf, 2002). Further,

as influencers first post images that make their followers feel as if they will never measure up,

they quickly post an image selling products to boost weight-loss and body transformation; there is a constant cycle revealed in the beauty myth where consumerism breaks down women, then "builds them up" while selling products to them. The following examples directly show how the #BodyPositivity beauty myth is further narrativized through advertisements and other financially-driven motives.

Anti-bloating products to perform body transformation

Instagram influencers commonly use sponsorships and partnerships with brands to make money for themselves (Abidin & Ots, 2016). Through this partnership, influencers post advertisements for the company on their social media platforms. As costumers buy these products, the influencer gets paid depending on their sales or simply through their advertisement services (Abidin & Ots, 2016). In this section we will examine how influencers act as main characters within their narratives of consumerism. To implore their viewers to buy products from the brands they represent, they invoke the beauty myth. The beauty myth reiterates that women must attain a set physical standard, but the ideal standard is often unreachable and not available for all (Wolf, 2002). A common narrative seen within all of the following examples is the necessity of self-transformation. In order to physically look like the Instagram influencer, one must buy the product in the photo that is being advertised. Most influencers credit the products they sell as the reason for their "good looks" and "healthy body." This misguides the average onlooker, and makes them believe that through purchasing these goods or services that they will look just like the influencer and finally achieve the ideal body. I will first examine a post from Hill selling digest supplements for women to reduce bloating. Then, I will examine McLay's post using her ideal body as a symbol of sexiness to advertise lingerie. Finally, I will analyze

Conneen's post, which advertises her workout program, further influencing others to fall prey to the beauty myth and its toxic narratives.

Figure 16

Hill sells supplements

Figure 17

Hill uses her bloated stomach as persuasion

Figure 18

Hill displays digestive capsules

Hill (@izzyhillfit) demonstrates the direct tie between #BodyPositivity and modern consumerism through advertising Anti-Bloating products called Innermost: The Digest Capsules. She sells this product through creating a video reel which begins as a simple video giving simples tips for how to reduce bloating. Though her intentions seem helpful and encouraging to aid and support others who feel the drawbacks of bloating, she 1) does not normalize bloating as a natural human reaction and 2) sneaks in an advertisement into her video to persuade others to buy a product that will make their body look "better. The reel begins with a picture of Hill's large, bloated belly with text overlaying the picture stating "How to reduce bloating tips. How I went from this…" The image then changes to a video of Hill in green sweatpants and a light brown sports bra appearing very thin with defined abdominal muscles; the text states: "to this,"

showing the intense juxtaposition and transformation between the beginning bloated picture to the ideal flat-tummy and toned physique. She then includes a series of tips for how to reduce bloating including: (a) hydration is key; (b) taking Daily Innermost Digest Capsules; and (c) regular exercise. Hill makes sure to enact all of the tips in her reel by showing that she is well-hydrated, taking the Innermost Digest Capsules every day, and rigorously working out.

In this advertisement for health supplements, Hill acts as the main character and protagonist. She is the "hero" helping antagonists (e.g. fat people) fight the battle against bloating and big bellies. Hill has initially conditioned her audience to believe that bloating is bad, abnormal, and in need of a quick-fix by instantly mentioning bloating must be reduced instead of normalized. She also includes a horrendous example of "body positivity" by once again perpetuating that bodily transformation should be the ultimate goal of all larger-bodied individuals through using a photo of a fat, bloated belly then transforming into a female with the ideal thin, strong body type (as seen in Image 8.1). This sets the audience up with more reasons to believe they should purchase the digest capsules in order to not only feel better but look better. Those who regularly seek #Bodypositivity content through following this hashtag will not only be met with normative discourse of beauty but the shaming of larger bodies in order to sell more products to these antagonists and other targeted groups. Dimulescu (2015) notes contemporary representations of female beauty within the health, wellness, and cosmetic industries has been an instrument in the cultural representations of women as objects and the shaming of fat women. Essentially, Instagram influencers, like Hill, create content that follows this pattern of making an audience member feel like they should change their unattractive physical appearance, then provides them with the products to do so.

The narrative that adds to the beauty myth of #BodyPositivity in this post suggests that having a big body, stomach, or physical appearance is undesirable. Although Hill masks this idea as having the "bloated" belly, she inherently perpetuates the message that big is bad and thin is better. Roberts and Roberts (2015) examine the internalization of the thin ideal by audiences of social media advertisements. The authors note that through this internalization and idolization of the thin ideal, advertisements in the cosmetic, beauty, or health industries are indeed effective and drive women to purchase items in order to one day reach the slim standard of beauty (J. Roberts & C. Roberts, 2015). Hill highlights the necessity of fulfilling the thin ideal and does so solely to sell the Digest capsules. This is common amongst other fitness influencers as well by showcasing their thin physiques as a persuasive technique to sell beauty enhancement products and other dietary supplements. The objective of these kinds of advertisements is to invite the viewer to compare themselves to the image of perfect beauty, then feel the need to buy the products. Further, a more detrimental idea rises as a result of these types of advertisements: fat bodies will never be acceptable in comparison to thin, toned bodies held by benchmark women and other health and wellness influencers.
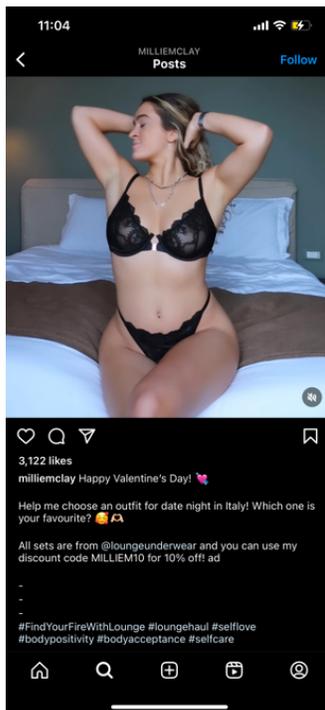
Thin ideal in Sexy Advertisements

Figure 19

McLay posing and selling lingerie

Figure 20

McLay posing in lingerie

McLay (@milliemclay) demonstrates another example of using normative beauty narratives as a way to sell more products to an audience online. McLay sells lingerie in an Instagram advertisement for Lounge Underwear. She does so by posting an Instagram video reel that showcases her modeling three different types of lingerie sets which perfectly show her thin physique, in which she confidently poses. She asks her audience to help her "choose" a lingerie set to wear for date night, then promotes the deal of 10% off if her followers use the discount code MILLIEM10 when purchasing items from Lounge Underwear. The first image on this post states: "You can only pick one. Valentines' edition." with McLay wearing a matching red lingerie set, posing in front of the camera. Through using her caption to invite her followers to comment, like, and engage in a friendly conversation with her about which underwear to choose, we can examine how comfortable she is on this platform as well as the intimate relationship she attempts to build with her followers. This is, once again, a tactic influencers use to build rapport with their followers to earn their trust, later leading to being "influenced" or conditioned to buy products from them.

In this video, McLay demonstrates that bodily transformation is expected from women to "achieve" the ideal body in the #BodyPositivity beauty myth. This transformation not only occurs through fitness, but consumerism as well. McLay acts as the protagonist within this narrative—depicting herself as the sexy, main character that every woman wants to become. To sell the lingerie she is wearing, she becomes the embodiment of normative femininity and invites her followers to become beautiful like her through buying the product. This advertisement implies a new definition of female beauty, one that also includes sexuality and sexual expression, but only for those who possess the ideal body type. Gill and Scharff (2011) highlight that many new advertisements in the beauty industry include more sexy depictions of women (i.e. sexy

lingerie advertisements for Victoria's Secret), yet these advertisements still exclude representation of all body types—focusing on only women with the thin body. Because of this lack of body diversity and representation in advertisements featuring "sexy women," individuals with fat bodies are left out of the conversation and declared "un-sexy."

McLay communicates within her narrative that women must buy the product she is selling in order to transform themselves into the sexy, thin, and confident woman she is depicting. The antagonists within this narrative are those who resist the advertisement, becoming individuals who are void of sexiness, confidence, and the ideal body. McLay shows she is the rightful protagonist of this narrative because she is comfortable and confident modeling lingerie in a social media post that can be seen by myriads of people. In the end, her body will not be scrutinized, but rather celebrated for its sensual, idolized appearance which will elicit more buyers of the lingerie she is selling.

This advertisement limits the antagonists within McLay's narrative from ever achieving the ideal image of beauty and femininity furthering the work of Wolf's (2002) conceptualization of beauty myth. Wolf (2002) articulates the beauty and cosmetic industries often use the sexualization of women to objectify them, yet they also promote body shaming as it is common to advertise normative beauty standards rather than the promotion of diversity and inclusivity of all body types. Essentially, consumerism is used as a strategy to hurt women's self-esteem in order to persuade them to buy goods or products that will boost their self-esteem (Gill and Scharff, 2011). McLay's reel offers insight as to how consumerism leads women to believe that they must buy products in order to transform themselves into the ideal woman through self-comparison. This idea circulates the media as a common narrative used to construct the beauty myth, sending women in an endless spiral of trying to attain the perfect body and physical

appearance with a hope of finding a way out through purchasing as many beauty products as they

can.

Bodily Transformation via Consumerism

Figure 21

Conneen advertising her workout plan

Figure 22

Conneen posing at the beach

In the last example of consumerism among #Bodypositivity content, Conneen shares a post advertising her fitness program called "Change with Caroline." She shares an image of herself in a bikini, posing by the beach. The bikini is a light blue, grey color with a strapless top and low waist bottom. This bikini shows Conneen's figure and mid-section completely, allowing the audience to observe her toned abdominal muscles, long legs, tiny waist, and defined shoulder muscles. She stands with her left foot slightly forward, adding more shape to her hips and waist. Lastly, her blonde hair is down and flowing in the breeze. In her caption, Conneen writes: "Working on YOU is the best thing you can do." She then offers a free month of her "Change with Caroline" workout program to all students—high school, college, and grad school. She says it is a stressful time for students and wants to help them settle one their healthy routine. Conneen then invites her student viewers to sign up by clicking the link in her Instagram bio for more information.

Like most Instagram influencers, Conneen can easily recognize her audience and that many of them are students or young adults. She targets them in this advertisement for her own services. First, she draws them in with the image of her perfect body, rather than an image of her working out to show them the body they could "potentially" have if they sign up for her workout program. She then promotes the idea of "working on yourself" as a form of self-love and body positivity. This narrative that body transformation is necessary to achieve the ideal standard promotes consumerism as a mode of bodily transformation rather than just fitness that we observed in the fitspiration section. Even the name of Conneen's program (i.e. Change with Caroline) focuses on "change" and "transformation" rather than self-love and body acceptance no matter what your body looks like in its current state. Through this narrative of "changing to

look and become better," Conneen presents two potential characters. First, she marks

protagonists as individuals who choose to live a "healthy" lifestyle by buying her workout

program. These individuals look like her, act like her, participate in fitness like her, and are

regularly portrayed as thin-bodied people. The antagonists in this narrative are any individuals

who do not want to undergo the suggested transformation by buying Conneen's program. Those

who choose not to buy the workout program become the opposite of healthy, implying that these

antagonists are lazy and are living without an active lifestyle. The stigma of being lazy and

regularly participating in a sedentary lifestyle is often attributed to fat-bodied people (Park,

1994). Therefore, our antagonists in this narrative once again target fat-bodied people, who

should feel the need to transform their fat bodies into a body that is "better." Ironically, if an

individual were truly advocating body positivity, they would not fall prey to the beauty myth,

rather there would be no intrinsic need to transform their bodies into a more desirable state.

The common narrative arising from this analysis of consumerism among #Bodypositivity content

is the necessity to change or transform your body into the ideal one with the help of goods and

services. This has become a common factor seen in all #Bodypositivity content online, requiring

"bodily change and transformation" to be a part of each of these posts in order to be considered a

political beauty myth. As we have determined, to be a political beauty myth, narratives are

formed highlighting that first, the ideal body is a thin body; second, the ideal body is portrayed

as easily attainable although it is often an unreachable beauty standard; and third, body

transformation is necessary for marginalized bodies to reach the ideal body through participating

in fitness or consumerism. Moreover, through identifying how these narratives feed into the

overarching themes of political beauty myth, we can identify that #Bodypositivity is indeed a

political myth because each of the posts we have analyzed fit the determining factors of what a political beauty myth is.

Finally, the Body Positivity myth is also a political myth because it allows for white benchmark women to regularly portray and recognize themselves as protagonists within these narratives. By and large these women are, by default, establishing that the most visible protagonist of the Body Positivity myth is thin, white women. Through dominating the hashtag and co-optation of the body positivity movement, white women have continuously named themselves the main characters of Body Positivity narratives. Within these narratives, white physical features and body types are glamorized, while any other body type or physical appearance is presented as less than. Ignoring women of color and their bodily representations is a political weapon to disempower them and eliminate their voice socially and culturally (Petermon, 2020). Women of color are continuously reduced or absent in the Body Positivity myth as an act to keep this social group quiet and marginalized (Petermon, 2020; Johansson, 2021; Legault & Sago, 2022).

Chapter IV: Conclusion

In this conclusion, I discuss specific and general implications of my argument that the Body Positivity myth is also a political myth. The Body Positivity myth is a political myth because it uses narratives of unachievable feminine beauty to influence women's actions, behaviors, and ideology regarding their physical appearance and self-worth. I provide further implications of beauty myths as political myths including the continued stigmatization of fat-bodied people. Following this discussion, I explain the specific implications surrounding #BodyPositivity online content as a political weapon used against women of color. I then discuss the general implications of the Body Positivity myth as a political myth and what these findings can do to promote change or future direction concerning the hegemonic beauty ideals within our society.

The Body Positivity myth as a political myth

The potential negative impacts of acceptance and participation in the Body Positivity political myth are numerous. As both a political and beauty myth, the narrative marginalizes, oppresses, and disempowers women—especially women of color and women with non-normative bodies—by inviting them to participate in a destructive narrative. By influencing women and sending them into "an endless spiral of hope" to someday achieve the ideal body. The Body Positivity myth hinders women from being able to successfully advance through society professionally, politically, and culturally (Urbatsch, 2018). Wolf (2002) notes that as women are continually reduced to their physical appearance, their success or ability to thrive within society depends on how attractive they are according to the "male gaze." Women who are

considered beautiful tend to have more social mobility and privilege within society, allowing them the opportunity to get over major roadblocks. In turn, women who have large bodies or women of color have a harder time accessing basic human endeavors (e.g. making friends, getting a job, higher socioeconomic status) (Urbatsch, 2018). It is dangerous to participate in the Body Positivity myth that includes these components: (a) the ideal body is the thin-body; (b) the ideal body is easily attainable for anybody and everybody; and (c) all women should work to reach this body-type. These qualifications are communicated through #BodyPositivity narratives/posts authored by Instagram influencers.

Throughout the essay, I have argued that the Body Positivity myth takes common narrative forms on Instagram. The most common narratives within the Body Positivity myth are first, the idolization of the "healthy" body. The "healthy body" was always portrayed as the white female, thin physique. fitspiration content was found to be the most dominant types of posts within #BodyPositivity. The fitspiration narrative commonly identified ideal bodies as bodies that regularly participated in fitness culture or intense workout regimens. Moreover, each of the three influencers I chose to analyze identified themselves as fitness influencers and consistently posted images or videos of themselves at the gym or working out. As I used Burke's (1969) conceptualization of the representative anecdote, I chose three prominent influencers who received the most engagement within #BodyPositivity to represent the hashtagged content as a whole. Each of these influencers were white, showing that white women dominate across the posts used in this hashtag. By using representative anecdotes, I had to largely exclude women of color and non-normative bodied women. Due to a lack of diversity, women of color were often overlooked and ignored in these narratives of 'fitspiration,' concluding that white, thin bodies are valued above others and that every woman should seek to somehow transform their bodies into

that of a white woman. If women of color are continually ignored within the body positivity movement, they will have nowhere to turn online to communicate about their body or the pressure they feel to conform to strict beauty standards. Finally, if women of color do share about their bodies online, they will most likely receive harsh criticism, especially if they have a non-normative body.

The next common narrative existent within the Body Positivity myth was the before-and-after narrative that vilified fat bodies and idolized thin bodies. The traditional use of before-and-after images in the media highlight how fat individuals eventually transformed themselves into thin individuals through hard work, a strict diet, and intense workouts (Hass, 2016). While these narratives of the 'before and after process' celebrate an individual's hard work on their journey to "health," they reiterate stigmatized ideology about fat bodies (Hass, 2016). Each of the three influencers I chose to examine used a reverse before-and-after image to teach others that it is okay to post their unedited, unposed, genuine bodies on the internet. While this message initially sounds like a positive narrative, the reverse before-and-after is still instilling destructive ideology about bodies within the viewers. First, white women who have the ideal body display that they can post images of their bodies in the most unflattering ways, yet still get away with posting these photos without facing hateful comments or stigmatization like a non-normative bodied individual would. Second, these influencers portrayed the vilification of fatness and the idolization of thinness as they posted images together comparing their "unattractive, fat-body" compared to their regular, thin body. The influencers actively reinforce body transformation while missing the message of body positivity—which is to be positive about all bodies no matter how they are shaped. Finally, as these women are all white, they invite only white viewers to potentially see themselves as protagonists and main characters within the before-and-after

narrative. White women are the only individuals who continually see their body type being praised online no matter how their body is posed or pictured (Cwynar-Horta, 2016). Through this narrative, women of color and women with the non-normative body are expected to transform their body into that of the ideal (Lazuka et al., 2020).

The last narrative seen within the Body Positivity myth is the role of bodily transformation within narratives of consumerism. Influencers on social media typically earn money through advertising products for brands that they partner with or collaborate with. Each of the three influencers examined in this essay use advertisements in the Body Positivity myth to reiterate the importance of bodily transformation to their viewers. Further, their advertisements were used to objectify and sexualize women, or to criticize the appearance of a woman in order to sell a product such as anti-bloating supplements or a workout program. The common factor among all the advertisements included the necessity for women to transform themselves into a better-looking individual. However, this transformation could only occur by buying the product(s) being sold in their advertisement.

Not only are these advertisements harmful for viewers to see regarding their body-image, but it can politically harm women as well. The influencers used advertisements to influence women to buy goods or services in order to prioritize capitalism over the feelings and mental wellbeing of women (Cwynar-Horta, 2016). By participating in these narratives' women of color and women with the non-normative body will believe that they can achieve the ideal body or physical appearance by purchasing the products. Though these marginalized groups will use the products they were sold, they will still be ignored and othered upon completion. Once again, these advertisements lacked diversity and portrayed the white, thin influencer as the main character and protagonist of the narrative. Those who do not look like the influencer are invited

to buy the product they were selling in order to somehow become like the influencer or look like her. These advertisements target women of color and women with the non-normative body by promising them the ideal look, but once again only reinforces toxic body ideals and communicates false promises.

These examples of the Body Positivity myth are alarming for everyone. They are doubly alarming for women who lack the ideal body type and women of color. This beauty myth presents itself as a way to control women and take away their power within society since they will be too distracted by trying to achieve unattainable, unrealistic beauty standards. For women with the non-normative body, the myth does little to address women stigmatized as "the fat, lazy woman." And it does even less to provide spaces of resistance for woman who are seen as unattractive problems. Women of color are also forgotten individuals within this myth who are initially thought of as powerless and benchmark women continue to ignore these women to maintain their powerless positions. Through the Body Positivity myth, we observe that the narratives functioning within it lack any association to the original mission of the body positivity movement. The Body Positivity myth does not provide spaces of acceptance, protest the idolization of thinness, reject the commercial desire for bodily transformation, or provide a space for women of color.

As I have demonstrated, the co-optation of Body Positivity through its absorption into a beauty myth removes a space of resistance. It is important to discuss the implications of understanding beauty myths as political myths. Previously political myth researchers have only considered an issue a political myth if it concerned "complex societies endowed with formal political institutions and written cultures" (Flood, 2002, p. 4). By only constituting an issue political by this very narrow idea, political myth researchers are missing opportunities of study

that impact people outside of governing bodies and institutions, such as marginalized people. Therefore, there is a lack of scholarship concerning women and people of color within current political myth discourse. By studying beauty myths as political myths, scholars can reify what constitutes an issue as political. The beauty myth changes the way we view traditional understandings of the political myth by inviting scholars to critically think about broader issues that hinder an individual's social mobility and opportunities within society. For women, their success is often dependent on how physically attractive they appear (Urbatsch, 2018).

The Body Positivity myth expounds upon this issue, showing that beauty is political for the advancement of women. The co-optation of the Body Positivity movement is a direct example of powerful, influential people stripping others of their opportunities to be heard and validated. Understanding the power-dynamics within this myth deems it as a political situation, making this understanding valuable as political myth scholars broaden their conceptualization of what is a political myth. Upon the completion of this essay, it is my hope that the body positivity movement and hashtag will one day return to its original mission to uplift, advocate, and celebrate all bodies no matter their shape, size, color, or ability.

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