

Body positivity: its relationship with fine art and the media

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Fine art

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Introduction

This paper will explore the definition of body positivity (bp), using evidence from the nineteen sixties to the present day; integrating body negativity and body neutrality within media. For the purpose of this essay all art is media and all media is art. Artists will be treated as influencers, undergoing the same scrutiny that Barbie and Victoria's Secret will face. Throughout this dissertation, I will give my opinion on these body matters, as well as some studies that have been conducted regarding these topics. Anecdotal evidence from books, as well as celebrity interviews will be used to explore these meanings and, how they are affecting people sixty plus years on from bp's creation. Additionally, (tw) body dysmorphia and eating disorders will be discussed.*

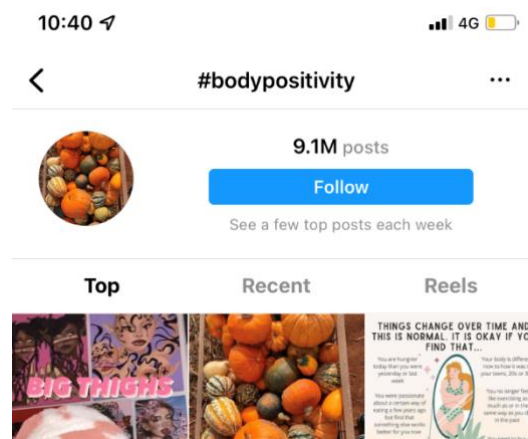


Figure 1

Origins

Body positivity (bp) is a phrase that is becoming more common within modern media. See figure 1 for the 9.1M results (at the time of writing) that *#bodypositivity* has on instagram alone. Defined by Collins as “the idea that people should feel happy with and proud of their body, whatever shape or size” (n.d.) modern *bp* encourages everyone to be confident in their skin. However, Frazier and Mehdi’s article discussed the original definition and explains how this appropriation of the moments undermines the founder’s goals.

“...pinpoint to the 1960s anti-fatness activism in the United States... to promote the radical acceptance of marginalised bodies”, helping fat people receive ‘tolerance from medical

establishments". (Alptbaum, 2017) "as well as working to undo fatphobia in schools, workplaces, and advertising" (Donne, 2017).

The 1960's movement worked to combat the lack of support from medical professions. Larger people's ailments were being diagnosed as weight related; fat people felt their health was not being taken seriously, therefore, *bp* was founded as a way of standing up to this oppression. Now *bp* is everywhere and it's meaning has, arguably, devolved. 2021's *bp* depicts a lot of thin, white, conventionally attractive, young women, with no history of weight conflicts. Whilst I am not suggesting that *bp* should be gate-kept, I do believe that because it originated as a resistance to societal norms, those who are deemed "socially normal" are appropriating the term. Additionally, this *all bodies* perspective means that there is still little to no representation for fat bodies in media. Fine art is no exception.

My experience

At age eleven, I was classed as 'clinically obese' in a letter that was addressed to my mother. This letter was a result of a company taking young people's measurements for a health census. As the letter was addressed to my parents it felt as though the world did not want me to be aware of my own body- as if I was not ready to know that body size and dieting existed. However, even before this letter the damage had been done. I had grown up in an environment that almost revolved around body image. I was aware that no one on magazine covers looked like me. At the time everyone's crushes were *Disney* actors or teen singers, all of whom had slim, 'perfect' bodies. In secondary school, there were countless times where someone would comment on my 'rolls' or my size. I went through periods of not eating and bingeing, trying to find this magical cure. I believe that having someone that represented people of an unconventional (by society's standards) size, that was not 'that fat singer', might not have led me to being so self conscious.

Throughout my time at university, the only life models I have had access to have thin, athletic body-types. This confuses me, especially when the purpose of life drawing is to

understand the body; how it looks, how to draw it, different angles, and perspective. Towards the end of my first year, I wanted to explore rolls of flesh on the body. I found this idea particularly difficult to carry out given the models available. This led to a frustrating drawing session with the life model, as neither of us could think of a way to contort her body to a shape that portrayed rolls or folds in her skin, and if we did find just the right angle the depictions were unnatural... forced. This project lead me to question if there is any fat representation within fine art?

Boterismo



Figure 2

The first image I saw that broke the 'beauty equates to small' theme that the majority of art portrays is, Venus by Fernando Botero. Weighing five tons and showcasing Venus, "the goddess of love, sex, beauty and fertility" (Garcia, 2013). The most impactful thing about this is Venus is shown as a curvy, visibly overweight woman. This image shocked me as it was my first encounter of a bigger person publicly representing beauty. Additionally, this Venus was my first experience seeing a large body have strong attachment to love and beauty.

Botero's style has created what is known as *Boterismo* (Hurtado, 2020); it consists of the mundane inspiration being intensified or embellished to explore its curves. Botero insists he does not create obese or fat people, instead he focuses on "bodies where the natural volume is highlighted" (Hurtado, 2020). This volume is created in his mind, therefore, he has applied this technique to landscapes in painting. Botero suggests that art is a celebration of life, while other artists look to create shock or scandal (Hurtado, 2020). However, given how uncommon it is to see a larger muse, I would argue that Botero unintentionally causes shock. While Botero might not have intended to be apart of the *b.p* movement he has joined the dialogue by adding to large representation. Seeing more works inspired by Boterismo could be life changing to people who do not see themselves in traditional media.



Figure 3

After researching all the Venus' in the Victoria and Albert Museum's Explore Pages (Collection, n.d.), Botero's is the biggest figure by far. Second are those drawn by Jan De Bisschop. Busschop's displays have an unrealistic hourglass figure that still maintains social

expectations of the female body (V&A Explore The Collections, 2009). I love that the V&A's collection has public access and given the pandemic the online collection has allowed me to continue my exploration. It is hard to deny that having a vast array of slim bodies connected to love and beauty, could have damaging effects on people, especially, in a media form known for its ability to be out-of-this-world. Fine art does not have to conform to society. Artists for years have *gone against the grain*, so why do we generally stick to this social norm?

Saville

Using the work of Jenny Saville (Gagosian, n.d.) as an advocate for larger bodies in art, it is clear to see that bigger figures generate negative reviews. Saville is well known for her paintings depicting fleshy, gelatinous bodies- sometimes herself- these images confront the viewer with, what Michelle Meagher describes as, "...feminist aesthetic of disgust" (2003). In her paper Meagher goes on to explain that this distaste is a cultural response to Saville; society has raised us to feel uncomfortable around the unknown and unsettled by the unfamiliar (Meagher, 2003). In this way, Meagher supports the notion that without fat representation, fat people will forever be outcasts.

Fat pride and liberation also come into play within this text, as it does with Saville's work. In 1997 Milner quoted Saville describing Western diet culture as "deeply disturbing," questioning "...why are we doing this to ourselves?" (Milner, 1997, cited in Meagher, 2003). This further suggests that Saville would see her work as a call-to-arms, for greater *large representation*. Although Meagher's paper does not mention body positivity outright- neither does Saville's interviews- however, they do heavily centre around the obsession the (western) world has with thin being ideal and beautiful.

The quote "...a fat phobic culture that considers fat bodies disgusting..." (Meagher, 2003), when coupled with Saville's fanmail reading "I am obese, but now I don't feel bad about it" (Henry, 1994, cited in Meagher, 2003) just goes to show how representation matters. If we continue to live in a toxic environment that only depicts the "redefined and evenly proportioned nudes of classical art" (Meagher, 2003), artists will be perpetuating society's fear of fat. In interviews, Saville gushes about the lines and contours of the larger body, she has always had this intrigue with flesh. "I was fascinated by the way her two breasts would become one, the way her fat moved, the way it hung..." (Cooke, 2012). It is clear Saville sees inspiration here. Wanting to explore the fat and express it within her art.

Saville describes the Renaissance gallery at the *Ashmolean Museum* as "full of nude women all painted by men... its just.. silly." (Cooke, 2012). Could it be that the slim, unrealistic figures all over galleries are there as a result of the *male gaze*? I would argue it is a contributing factor. We see this often within advertising. *Conventionally attractive* women are used to appeal to the market, despite only "5% of women naturally possessing the body type often portrayed by Americans in the media" (Baker, 2015). Elliott and Maurice (2002) explain the origins of the *male gaze*, which they describe as voyeuristic and rooted in fetish. I am not suggesting that the traditional male artists are sexualising the nudes that they are creating. However, using a model or muse that you are attracted to or find visually appealing is not a new concept for artists. Unfortunately, due to the disgust (Meagher, 2003) society has built against larger women, it is understandable that they are not really seen in galleries or focused on in academia.

Why is this representation important?

If we continue to fail representing the 95% of women that do not have these model bodies (Baker, 2015), we will be continuing to influence generations that discrimination is acceptable. Additionally, perpetuating these ideals within media can lead to mental and

physical disorders. Although this may seem extreme, using *Barbie* as an example, studies have found a correlation between eating disorders in later life and young influences.

Studies have shown a link between a child playing with a doll with an ultra-thin body type and later developing an eating disorder. "...girls who played with Barbies were more likely to restrict their eating afterwards than girls who played with the fuller-figured (now discontinued) Emme dolls." (Hains, 2014) Why are there no movements to change this? Modern media is not looking at how this perpetuation of thin equalling beautiful is a toxic concept. "If Child A hears Child B refuse food, stating if they deny food, they will get thinner and therefore they will be pretty. Child A may learn this behaviour and start refusing food" (Chambers, 2021). Particularly if these young minds are bombarded with media of people they idolise, who already have thin body types, advertising diet culture.

1963 saw Mattel release their *Barbie Babysits* doll. "Her subjects were; how to lose weight, how to get a raise and how to travel" (Vintage Barbie Baby-Sits, n.d.). She carried a book titled *How to Lose Weight* stating 'don't eat' on the back cover. "She came with a set of scales that read 110 lbs which would be around 35 lbs underweight for a woman of Barbies height" (MESSYNESSY, 2014). It is clear to see, that for over half a century, the media that children have available to them relates to health, weight and size. Even if young children are not consciously aware that, given the weight on the scales, *Barbie* is severely underweight, they will acknowledge the size of her hips, waist, large bust, skinny legs and that *Barbie's* thighs do not touch. Another study has shown, children found *Barbie* to be the more attractive of the two figures, when given with a toy that is more in proportion with the human body than *Barbie*. When an interviewer inquired what occupations *Barbie* would have, some replied "model" (Ramsey, 2014). Further studies have displayed children responding to *Curvy Barbie* compared to regular *Barbie*. These study's results found only 6% of girls chose to play with *Curvy Barbie*.

“...when asked why they would not want to play with her, at least 25 percent of the girls said it was because curvy Barbie was fat, chubby, or “big.”” (Engeln Ph.D., 2019)

Comments like these demonstrate unobtainable and unnatural figures are idealised from a young age. Larger dolls were judged to be less attractive because they were bigger, even if they were more realistic than original *Barbie*. If media perpetuates misrepresenting the body, we will be the cause of these eating disorders.

It is not just eating disorders the media could manifest. Being on the receiving end of media and art cantered around weight, growing up in this toxic state, is going to give young people complexes about themselves. Last year Billie Eilish opened up about her reasoning for always wearing baggy clothes.

The singer explained “the only reason I did it was ‘cos I hated my body.” She later went on to say, “There was a point last year where I was naked, and I didn’t recognize my body ‘cos I hadn’t seen it in a while...Whose body is that?” (Willen, 2020)

At just eighteen, during the interview, Eilish has established clear views regarding her feelings about her body. Given the way media in the 2000’s depicted body image, it would not be outrageous to assume that thousands of other people have insecurities relating to their weight and body. Unfortunately, we only seem able to identify these problematic behaviours within society, by discussing them with the victims once they are older and have the ability to associate the environment they grew up in with their feelings. What Eilish is describing is a form of *Body Dysmorphia*, which is defined by the NHS as, “a mental health condition where a person spends a lot of time worrying about flaws in their appearance. These flaws are often unnoticeable to others” (nhs, n.d).

In 2018, *Cosmopolitan UK* featured model Tess Holliday on its cover. This was accompanied by an article describing aspects of Tess' life, as well as how she navigates the modelling industry at over 300lbs (Norms, 2018). Kiana Docherty documents in her video that there were mixed reviews to this cover, even going as far as suggesting that models like Tess "glorify obesity" (Docherty, 2020). With the rise of the influencer it is easy to argue that by *Cosmopolitan* advertising Tess they are *endorsing* her way of life, glamorising being overweight. *Cosmopolitan* by no means states that the world should be full of Tess' with this article, they simply say, "Tess Holliday is everything the fashion industry needs. She doesn't conform to ... narrow standards of beauty that's been set by society..." (Cosmopolitan, 2018). This shows that existing companies that are so heavily entwined with media are *self-aware* of the toxic environment society has created for bodies like Tess. Within the article Tess expresses "what I wish is that I loved myself 120 pounds ago" (Cosmopolitan, 2018). Ultimately, this is a confession that Tess did not love her body. The whole piece has references to Tess not feeling like she had the ability to explore *self-love* or be *body positive* due to her size.

In other interviews Tess explains that she has had people make fun of her and tell her she could not be a model because of the way she looks (Ice and Coco, 2015). This furthers the idea that, automatically, we have presumptions about what a model looks like and what build they have. In 2019, Victoria's Secret added a '*plus sized*' Victoria's Secret model. "... [Victoria's Secret] sought to repair it's image with the hire of size 14 [US] plus sized model... 'size 14 is actually the average size'" (Moor, 2021). As stated this was all part of a rebrand, companies try to use this perception of diversity to appear more inclusive and forward thinking. In reality, even when companies try to extend their inclusivity, they either get attacked for *glorifying* an unhealthy lifestyle or completely miss the mark for fear of destroying the aesthetic. Leena Norms explains it best when she says "by Tess Holliday being a presence on this cover, she is not claiming to be perfect or claiming to be healthy,

she's just claiming to exist" (2018). Which I think really drives home the point of my essay. I do not want the media, especially fine art, to claim that fat bodies are the best, I just want it to accept that fat bodies exist. That rolls are real. That *the body* does not just have to be a size 8-12 woman with an hourglass figure and athletic build.

Earlier this year Holliday spoke out about recovering from anorexia. On Twitter she wrote "I'm the result of a culture that celebrates thinness and equates that to worth" (Holliday, 2021). In response to her announcement, an associate director at the National Eating Disorders Association said, "higher-weight individuals are often undiagnosed or misdiagnosed due to stigma..." (Elan, 2021). This proves that in the sixty years since the start of the *body positivity* movement, larger people still are not receiving the correct medical attention either. Priya Elan's article hones in on the idea that diet culture and society's misconceptions allow fat people to suffer from what could be a life-threatening disorder.

"I think it's a cultural shift. There's obviously way we can protect models. But it's a really complicated industry because it's just about using women's bodies to sell product" (CBS Mornings, 2021). Emily Ratajkowski discusses in interviews how she feels we need to change the way women are raised. She suggests that we move from these ideas that to be female is to be sweet and kind and at the end of the day objectified. It is a fine line to walk as being a model is part-and-parcel allowing people to view your body at their leisure- this is particularly relevant to fine art as creating art is a leisure activity.

As with all things there are positives. Society in some capacity is moving towards exploring *bp* in a non-judgmental manner. *Savage X Fenty* (van Elven, 2019) released a range of lingerie with it's main selling point being to cater towards bigger women. *Savage's* runway shows gained a lot of media attention, along with views; the brand was highlighted for it's inclusivity. As a result, more companies have responded with a push for inclusive modelling.

For example, *Victoria's Secret* has stopped its yearly runway show, specifically with their *Angels*, due to rethinking the company (Hanbury, 2021).

FIFI and TNOWTFG

Having had my first tutorial regarding my dissertation, it was recommended that I read *Fat Is a Feminist Issue (FIFI)*. This supposed “anti-diet book” (Orbach, 2016) details different meanings for women’s fat and anecdotal experiences that have led Orbach to creating a formula she suggests to the people who attend her clinic. While I respect that Orbach uses these real-life struggles to come to her conclusions, I cannot help but point out how much of a paradox I found this book. Orbach explains how these women have more attributes than their fat, and how with the right coaching they will begin to see this for themselves. Yet, Orbach states “when they lose weight...”, “to help in...the preparation for a new slim body” and “when you lose weight” (Orbach, 2016), which all suggest that losing weight is the *goal* of her teachings. This is not *accepting* language. This is not the language of an anti-diet book. Not only that but having whole chapters implying weight-loss is an ideal in a book that markets itself as *feminist* -suggesting equality and acceptance- could be really damaging.

However, in the more recent addition to *FIFI* written in 2016, Orbach proclaims, “images aren’t trivial. They work on our idea of who we can be...[including] how we need to display and present ourselves...” (Orbach, 2016, pgs. Vi-vii). This can be attributed to media in general. When we look at media we are influenced to become what we see, mimic this behaviour. Who’s to say that art is not the same? When we constantly see models that represent the same body type, this implies that only one body type is worth exploring. That only one body warrants internalising. “[Images] undermine the sense that bodies are varied” (Orbach, 2016, pgs. vi-viii). With greater representation comes more acceptance. If the “average American woman wears between a [US] size 16 and size 18”, why do they “represent less than 2% of media images”? (Dionne, 2017). It seems unfathomable that so

many people feel completely unrepresented. This lack of representation contributes to social stigma.

On pages 14-16 of *Things No One Will Tell Fat Girls (TNOWTFG)*, Baker lists statistics around not identifying with 'pretty'. "81% of ten-year-olds are afraid of being fat...[more] than they are of cancer, war, or losing both their parents" (Baker, 2015). These statistics show, that the media children are presented with, is having an effect on them it could be argued that these young minds do not have the life experience to know the consequences of these scenarios (war, cancer and death), but it is clear that they have a *fat equals bad* narrative in their heads.

Social Media

Recent news has called for reforms in the way *social media* regulates its content. This became apparent when Frances Haugen leaked files about the inner working of *Facebook* (Paul, Malmo, and Waterson, 2021). As a result of this, Haugen spoke to several media outlets and MPs in order to gain support for her argument that *Instagram* (owned by *Facebook*), needs further policing of its media. Haugen states, "Facebook's own research linked the app's young users to addicts... [*Instagram* focuses on] social comparison about bodies...and that's what ends up being worse for kids." (Paul, Malmo and Waterson, 2021). Additionally, "81% of Instagram users [age 18-24] visit the platform on a daily basis, with 55% reporting that they do so several times per day" (Pew Research Center, 2018). It is clear that young people are putting themselves in positions to be influenced by the media they consume.

However, a study by Cohen et al. (2019) found that women who viewed *body positive* posts expressed greater admiration for their appearance than those viewing thin-ideal images. It has even been suggested that *body positive* images be used in conjunction with treatments for eating disorders (Cook-Cottone, 2015). Therefore, the policing of negative body image on

social media, media in-general, and art, could lead to a population that experiences greater self-worth. As well as this, children would be influenced towards ideals of *body positivity* and may reflect on their bodies with less scrutiny.

Ultimately, the way social media is policed could have monumental effects on all media. Today the news is about *Facebook* - and by extension *Instagram* – in five years it could be about images and diversity in; student textbooks, on runways, in museums and even life models. The evidence suggests that what we view can dictate our opinions. Therefore, if we are taught that all bodies are worth representation, learning how to draw and showing to the public, there will be fewer people purely focusing on how their body looks. In my opinion, every cultural shift has an element of ‘why did we not see it sooner’ and we are in the midst of exploring this image effect. Now is the time to identify these biases so that we are not saying ‘in hindsight’ forty years down the line.

Bp was founded over fifty years ago and unfortunately has not had as much of an effect as it should have. We have not finished these conversations. The movement did not end. We are not over the hill. There are going to be people like me for generations. Midsized and plus sized bodies are not going to be eradicated. The media needs to have this realisation. If more people are represented, then there will be fewer people with *body dysmorphia*, eating disorders and potentially less suicides. Updating the narrative now would still be early intervention compared to waiting another fifty years. With the studies and information that is widely available, as well as the people speaking in interviews and parliament, ignoring this matter is an act of, accepting larger bodies are unworthy of protecting from harm.

Author’s note

I want to take this space to emphasise that by no means am I a reliable source. While I have used this essay to give evidence to support my ideas, that does not mean that they are blanket statement facts. Given that I have had my own experiences with body image, I felt it

important to speak out about my relationship with the body within my studies. As I am of a similar age to Billie and Tess, it is hard to ignore their opinions reflected in my own life.

Additionally, all my arguments are by no means perfect. I am white in a western society, I am *thin passing*, I can still buy clothes from high street stores and I have never been denied anything based on my weight. I experience body negatively. I have not experienced discrimination based on my body. I have never been told to lose weight in response to a medical enquiry. Yet, I have never seen my body type displayed as an equal to that of society's standards.

Emily Ratajkowski (CBS Mornings, 2021) comments on how an element of this *protection* that needs to extend to men too. I believe this is an important point that is normally left out of discussions in regards to bodies. Jess Baker's *Things No One Will Tell Fat Girls* (2015), despite being written by a woman, does cover briefly the male perspective on weight. It was unique to see a male point of view covered as body image is typically a feminine topic. As with all cultural shifts, all voices should be heard. Several of my arguments are based around the female perspective because that is the only experience I feel I am able to speak to. It is not my place to comment on behalf of others. With this paper I am not claiming to speak for other genders, other cultures or even other people. However, I do feel -as with most cases- more representation will affect not just those who speak out publicly.

Conclusion

Ultimately, we have not reached an end-point but we are definitely trying. I feel like my generation is causing a lot of change and we might be the turning point for this too. That said, I can imagine there were people with that mentality sixty years ago. My fine art course should consider evaluating the way it addresses the body, and how it implies that only studying one body-type is all that is necessary. This could be generalised to all art practices.

Additionally, we all need to look more at what media we are making available to new generations, as body negative mentalities have been proven to cause detrimental effects.

Glossary*

t.w, short hand for *trigger warning*. I felt it important to note that there are some parts of my essay that may be unsettling or cause a negative effect on the reader and I do not wish for that to be the case. If anything mentioned does trigger you in anyway people seek professional advice

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Figures

Figure 1 -Screenshot taken 08/11/2021, via *Instagram* search function for “#bodypositivity”

Figure 2 -Venus by Fernando Botero. *Flickr* user: dullhunk (2013) Available at: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/dullhunk/9199431324> (Accessed: 09/12/21)

Figure 3 -Victoria and Albert Museum: Explore the Collections. (2009). 'Standing Venus' *V&A Explore The Collections*. Available at:

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