

Who Benefits from Body Positivity?

Background

"It is critical that men *and* women create a body-positive environment."

- Ashley Graham (model, body positivity advocate, and TEDX speaker)

The emergence of social media has changed traditional societal influences on body image development in unprecedented ways, creating a need for updated body image research. Of particular interest is the "body-positive" movement within social media. This movement challenges constrained Western beauty norms by highlighting broader definitions of beauty and showing appreciation for all body types.

Notably, it is building momentum at a critical time as **rates of depression, anxiety, and eating disorders among young adults are at an all-time high** (Arcelus, Witcomb and Mitchell 2013). Prior research disproportionately focuses on young, heterosexual women, while men and LGBTQ+ individuals often deal with differing influences in their social formation of body image. In fact, LGBTQ individuals face higher rates of eating disorders than cisgender and heterosexual populations (Parker and Harringer 2020). Because the only research conducted on body positivity only studied its effects on young women, its effect on men, transgender, and LGBTQ+ individuals are unknown.

Acknowledgments

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Research Question

Does **body positive imagery** on Instagram have variable effects on body image depending on **gender and sexual orientation**?

Hypotheses

- Body positive content will increase positive body image among all groups.
- Heterosexual women and LGBTQ+ individuals will be more susceptible to either positive or negative shifts in body image than other groups.
- Groups with significant appearance-focused Instagram use within their social circle will experience less positive effects of body positive imagery than those who use Instagram to connect with family and friends.

Methods

A survey was distributed over Instagram ads to over 2,500 respondents. The survey covered the following questions:

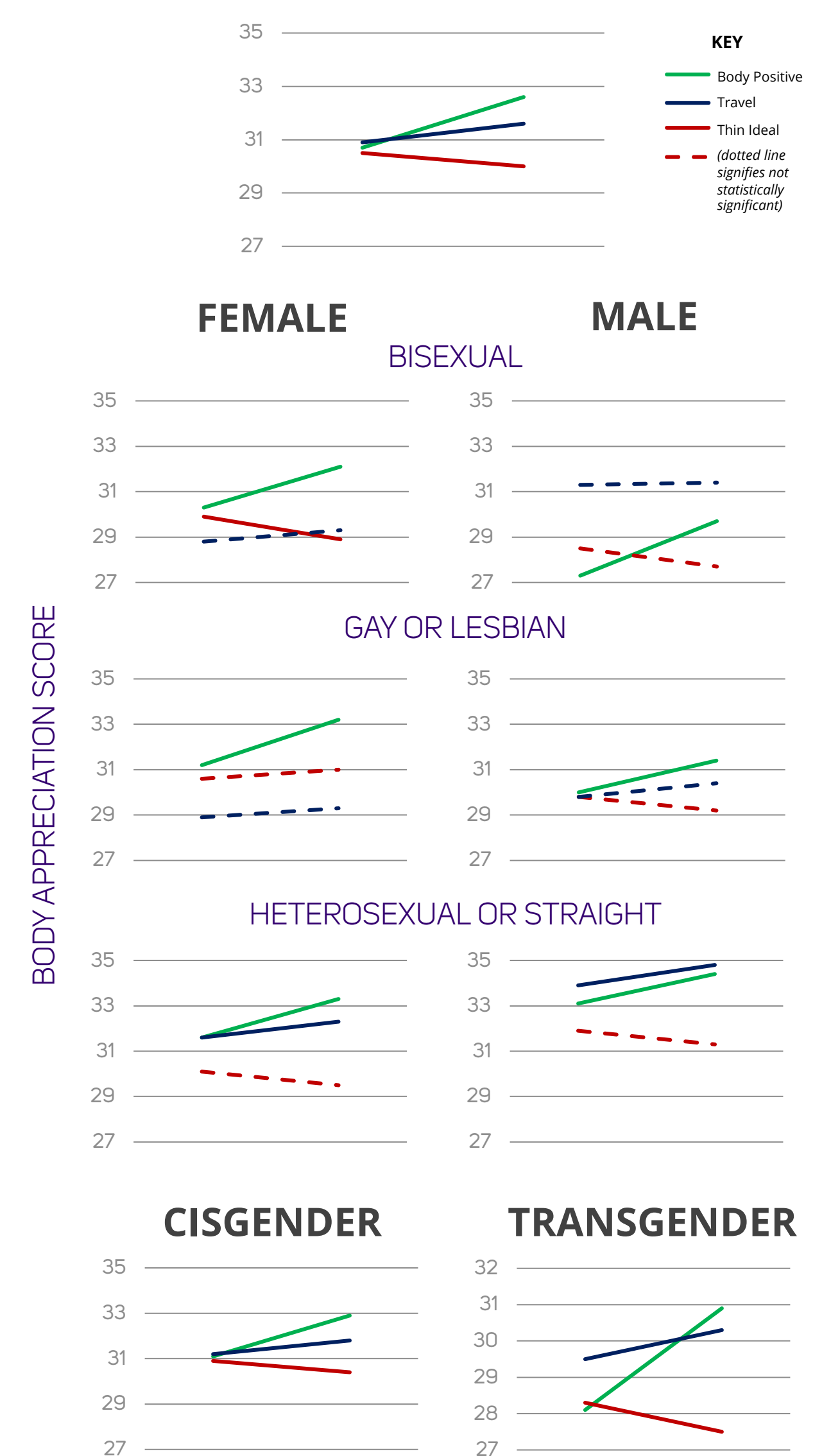
- **Demographics**
I asked respondents about their age, sex and gender, race and ethnicity, height and weight, disability, and class (education, income, and employment).
- **Instagram Usage**
Respondents answered their primary purpose of Instagram use ("to connect with family and/or friends", "to follow celebrities and/or models", or "other").
- **Pre-Test of State Body Appreciation**
A composite score of 10 questions that signify agreement with in-the-moment body appreciation.
- **Image Exposure**
Timed exposure to one of three categories of images: "body-positive", "thin ideal", or "travel" images (serving as the control).
- **Post-Test of State Body Appreciation**
Same as the pre-test.
- **Optional Random Drawing for Incentive**
If respondents indicated interest, they were directed to another survey link to enter their email and preserve anonymity.

Paired t-tests were used between pre and post test results to determine statistical significance. Linear regression is conducted to determine influence of individual factors.

Results

- Body positive content **did indeed** increase positive body image among all groups.
- Heterosexual women were the **only** cross-identification of gender/sexual orientation that had a statistically significant effect of thin ideal imagery, and people who are transgender experienced **more positive and negative shifts** than people who are cisgender. Additionally, LGBTQ individuals pre-tested with much lower body appreciation scores than non-LGBTQ.
- Instagram users whose primary purpose of using the app was to follow celebrities and models instead of staying up-to-date with family and friends had lower body appreciation pre-test scores and more dramatic positive effects of body-positive content. In addition, people who frequently followed fitness accounts when their peers did not, experienced much lower body appreciation than those who indicated strong fitness communities among their peers.

CHANGES IN STATE BODY APPRECIATION SCORES ACROSS TIME



Discussion

These results show that the positively affected audience for body-positive content reaches far beyond the narrow population of young women that has been previously studied. The positive and negative effects of tailored content to body appreciation is mirrored in almost every combination of gender and sexual orientation identities. The audiences targeted by content creators wishing to make meaningful change should reflect these findings.

Brands and influencers should be mindful of posting online content that promotes an unhealthy thin or unattainable beauty standard. Some digital regulators have also suggested labeling digitally altered photos (legally required in France starting in 2017), similar to how the FTC requires advertisements to be publicly disclosed on online content in the United States (Held, 2017; FTC, 2020).

SURVEY RESPONDENTS

