How exposure to body neutrality content on TikTok affects young women’s body image and mood

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ARTICLE INFO
Keywords:
Body neutrality
TikTok
Functionality appreciation
Positive body image
Body satisfaction
Upward appearance comparisons

ABSTRACT
Body neutrality aims to encourage a non-judgmental attitude towards the body and prioritize functionality over appearance. This study examined the impact of exposure to TikTok body neutrality content on young women’s body image and mood. The sample comprised 189 undergraduate women (Mean age = 19.25, SD = 1.98) who were randomly assigned to view one of three compilation TikTok videos on body neutrality, thin ideal, or art. Controlling for pre-test measures, results showed that women in the body neutrality group reported higher functionality appreciation and body satisfaction than women in the thin ideal and art control groups. Higher levels of positive mood and fewer upward appearance comparisons were reported by women in the body neutrality group relative to the thin ideal group. Although women in the body neutrality and thin ideal groups thought about their appearance and what they were wearing whilst viewing the videos, women in the body neutrality group reported that those thoughts were more positive than those in the thin ideal group. Findings demonstrate that brief exposure to body neutrality content on TikTok may induce immediate positive body image and mood in young women whilst providing a useful alternative to the unrealistic beauty standards popularized on such platforms.

1. Introduction

Image-centric social media applications (apps) such as TikTok and Instagram play a fundamental role in shaping appearance trends that contribute to unrelenting beauty standards for women (i.e., flawless skin, facial symmetry, lean and toned body; Tylka et al., 2023). It is also well established that high consumption of idealized beauty imagery on such platforms promotes harmful comparisons that can not only lead to negative mood in young women but also contribute to the development and maintenance of body dissatisfaction and disordered eating (Pioravanti et al., 2021; Mink & Szymanski, 2022). These findings are particularly concerning given that, globally, young women are also the most prolific users of these types of apps with those aged 18–24 years comprising the largest demographic of TikTok users (21%) and 14% of Instagram users (Statista, 2023a, 2023b). Although idealized imagery of women continues to appear on social media apps, societal perceptions of body image have begun to shift, with a recent global marketing report showing that 24% of all social media users and 32% of influencer followers are calling for more content that helps to curb unrealistic beauty standards (GWI, 2023). One growing social media trend that aims to challenge unattainable beauty ideals is the body neutrality movement. This movement removes the expectation of specific feelings toward the body, such as positivity or negativity, and prioritizes what the body can do over how it looks. The current study aimed to investigate the effect of body neutrality TikTok content on young women’s body image and mood.

1.1. Body neutrality on TikTok

Since 2017, most research on social media and body image has focused on the use of Instagram (Vandenbosch et al., 2022). However, young women are seemingly spending more time on TikTok (Statista, 2023a). TikTok is a mobile app that hosts short-form vertical videos from 15 s to 10 min. Its interactive features move beyond likes, comments, and shares, to include challenges, a large selection of music, a ‘stitch’ option (which allows users to combine another video on TikTok with one they are creating), and duets (posting videos side-by-side with a video from another TikTok creator; Bostic, 2022). Compared to
For how they function, rather than focus on how they look (Rees, 2019). Society by encouraging individuals to respect and nurture their bodies neutrality aims to de-emphasize the importance placed on beauty in state, hard and deserves kindness. It is therefore unsurprising that TikTok influencer campaigns and trends, targeting young women, are likely to go viral.

The #bodyneutrality trend on TikTok, yields 1.1 billion views (as of May 2023) demonstrating its reach and appeal to viewers who are seeking content that advocates for a respectful and non-judgmental way of thinking about their bodies. The term body neutrality was popularized in the mid-2010s by Anne Poirier, a body image coach. Poirier (2021) describes the practice of body neutrality as a holistic attitude toward the body and framed it as a focus on what the body can do rather than what it cannot, while emphasizing that one’s appearance does not define one’s worth. A recent working definition has been proposed by Pellizzer and Wade (2023) whereby, unlike body positivity, body neutrality recognizes that our feelings towards our bodies are constantly in flux and thus does not suggest the need for positive (or negative) judgment toward our body. Instead, body neutrality shifts its focus towards appreciating the functionality of our bodies, fostering a sense of respect and care for our physical selves. It also encourages us to recognize that our innate qualities and external interests play a significant role in shaping our self-worth, ultimately helping to diminish the excessive emphasis placed on our appearance (Pellizzer & Wade, 2023).

The creators of body neutrality content on TikTok are typically young women who demonstrate diversity of body shape, size, and ability, and whose presentation is natural looking (i.e., unedited or unfiltered) and conversational (Hallward et al., 2023). Creators define body neutrality (in line with Pellizzer & Wade’s working definition) and discuss what it means to them, how it has helped them overcome negative body image, and useful ways that others can incorporate body neutrality into their lives. Body neutrality topics on TikTok also include exercising for health and enjoyment (not weight loss), understanding that clothes were made to fit the body (rather than the other way around), and a focus on respect for and nourishment of the body regardless of how one feels about their body weight, shape, or ability (Hallward et al., 2023).

1.2. Body neutrality and positive body image

Although body neutrality shares commonalities with body positivity in that both movements aim to challenge societal messaging and norms about human bodies (Cohen et al., 2020), it is important to recognize that the two movements are distinct from one another. Whereas body positivity aims to redefine societal standards of beauty by promoting love, acceptance, and appreciation of all body shapes and sizes, body neutrality aims to de-emphasize the importance placed on beauty in society by encouraging individuals to respect and nurture their bodies for how they function, rather than focus on how they look (Rees, 2019). For example, a body neutrality affirmation may state, “My body works hard and deserves kindness” whereas a body positivity affirmation may state, “While my tummy isn’t flat, it is still beautiful.” Indeed, body neutrality was popularized by Poirier based on her own lived experience for individuals who are uncomfortable with the idea of loving their bodies unconditionally (as espoused by the body positivity movement), experience chronic pain and feel betrayed by their bodies, or are in eating disorder recovery, by encouraging them to view their bodies as their home which still requires respect and support.

The working definition of body neutrality is an emerging concept within the body image literature, precluding prior research that evaluates all its components (Pellizzer & Wade, 2023). However, researchers have begun to examine body functionality and appreciation of that functionality which is a fundamental aspect of body neutrality (see Linard et al., 2023). According to Alleva and Tylka (2021) body functionality is not an able-bodied construct (i.e., individuals’ bodies with physical limitations are still capable of functioning), but rather comprises the body’s capacity to heal, move, sense, express, rejuvenate, and communicate. Theoretical frameworks from which body functionality has been derived include (a) body conceptualization theory (Franzi, 1995) which proposes a two-perceptual concept, the body-as-process (physical capacity and internal processes) and the body-as-object (physical appearance), and (b) the developmental theory of embodiment (Pirin, 2015) which identifies and explains bodily experiences and the body’s engagement with the world (e.g., engagement in joyful activities, expression of agency, and understanding the body’s needs and desires).

Despite this key difference between the aims of body neutrality and body positivity, both movements align with the broader theoretical framework of positive body image conceptualized as an overarching love, respect, and appreciation of one’s body and its functions (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015a, 2015b). Key constructs of positive body image include, but are not limited to, (a) body appreciation (acceptance, love, and respect for one’s body and appearance, and the ability to protect oneself from societal ideals promoted by the media; Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015a, 2015b), (b) a broad conceptualization of beauty (Tylka & Iannantuono, 2016), and (c) functionality appreciation (encompassing bodily functions related to internal processes, physical capacities, senses, creativity, self-care, and communication; Alleva et al., 2017). These positive body image constructs are associated with higher positive mood, body satisfaction, and self-compassion, and lower appearance anxiety, sociocultural pressures, and appearance comparisons (Linard et al., 2022, 2023).

To date research has largely focused on the effects of body positivity on women’s body image and mood. Encouragingly, experimental studies have shown that engagement with body positivity images on Instagram, Facebook, or TikTok may be useful in increasing body satisfaction, body appreciation, and mood relative to viewing thin- or fit-ideal content with medium effect sizes (Cohen et al., 2019; Cowles et al., 2023; Dhadly et al., 2023; Fardouly et al., 2023; Fioravanti et al., 2021; Nelson et al., 2022). However, whereas Fardouly et al. (2023) found decreases in appearance comparisons among women who viewed body positive content over time, Fioravanti et al. (2021) found increases, suggesting that a focus on appearance within body positivity content may continue to provide a point of comparison for viewers. Although creators of body neutrality content intentionally downplay the significance of appearance by focusing on non-judgmental attitudes towards the body and offer practical ways to appreciate its functionality, it is worth noting that appearance still plays a role in their presentations through their faces and bodies. Consequently, it raises questions about whether viewers are prone to making comparisons between themselves and body neutrality creators. Moreover, a recent study by Seekis and Kennedy (2023) revealed that young women tend to contemplate their own appearance irrespective of whether they encountered female TikTok creators conforming to societal beauty standards. However, it is also important to understand the valence of thoughts concerning appearance, particularly when considering the potential benefits of content like body neutrality on social media platforms.

Notwithstanding the benefits of body positive content on women’s body image, some concerns have been raised about the degree of objectification within social media body positivity posts (Webb et al., 2017). In line with objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) which posits that women are perceived as objects to be admired rather than acknowledged for their capabilities, Cohen et al. (2020) found that almost a third of the women in positive body image posts were in very or extremely revealing clothing and posing in a suggestive manner. Furthermore, over a third of posts analyzed highlighted clothing and beauty for appearance. Interestingly, studies have shown that women
exposed to both body positive and thin ideal content on Instagram reported more self-objectification (prioritizing one’s appearance over function) than the control group (Cohen et al., 2019; Nelson et al., 2022). It is therefore important that research investigates potentially helpful online content, such as body neutrality, that may cater to individuals with different needs.

Given the nascent research on body neutrality, only one recent intervention study (Smith et al., 2023) has investigated its impact on body image in adolescents. Smith et al. (2023) found that among youth with elevated body concerns, engaging in a single-session body neutrality-focused digital intervention led to increased functionality appreciation and body satisfaction from pre- to post-test. A notable mention from that study was the diverse sample with 32% identifying as non-binary, almost 15% identifying as transgender, and 37% reporting a disability which underscores body neutrality content as promoting a respectful and non-judgmental way of thinking about one’s body.

Regarding exposure to functionality-related social media content, Mulgrew and Courtney (2022) exposed female participants to Instagram images of women engaged in various activities (e.g., running, yoga, gardening, playing music) that included captions such as “My hands give me the ability to draw and create” and “My body is a home for my beautiful soul”, as well as fitnesspiration images of women (with and without captions). Findings from that study showed that women exposed to captioned functionality images reported higher functionality and appearance satisfaction than women exposed to uncaptioned inspiration images, but not relative to captioned fitnesspso images. Perhaps then, functionality imagery requires some type of commentary to be effective in boosting functionality and appearance satisfaction, suggesting that content presented in video format would be useful.

1.3. The current study

The current study experimentally tested the effects of exposure to TikTok body neutrality content on young women’s functionality appreciation, body satisfaction, mood, and appearance comparisons, relative to thin ideal and appearance-neutral content (art-control). Based on prior research (Mulgrew & Courtney, 2022) we predicted that viewing body neutrality content on TikTok would result in greater functionality appreciation and body satisfaction than viewing thin ideal or art content. Given that body neutrality broadly aligns with theoretical constructs of positive body image and based on prior body positivity research (e.g., Cohen et al., 2020), we predicted that relative to thin ideal content, exposure to body neutrality content would reveal higher levels of positive mood at post-test. Since research showing that viewing appearance-related content on social media leads to upward appearance comparisons (Mink & Szymanski, 2022; Seekis et al., 2020a) and that body neutrality was designed to focus on one’s functionality over appearance, we also predicted that more upward appearance comparisons would be reported in the thin ideal than the body neutrality and art conditions at post-test. In response to a recent call on the investigation of the valence (i.e., positive or negative) of appearance thoughts following exposure to idealized imagery (Seekis & Kennedy, 2023), we also investigated whether (a) more thoughts about appearance and clothing occurred after exposure to thin ideal relative to body neutrality content and (b) whether those thoughts were less positive in the thin ideal condition compared to the body neutrality condition. Finally, to determine the engagement value of content beyond the experiment, participants’ intention to view or follow the content was also assessed.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The sample comprised 189 undergraduate women aged 17–28 years who were recruited via introductory psychology courses at a large public university in Australia ($M_{age} = 19.25, SD = 1.98$). Participation was voluntary in exchange for course credit and a prize draw entry for one of three $50 gift cards. The majority of the sample identified as white (80.4%, n = 152), followed by 10% as Asian (n = 19), 2.6% as Australian Aboriginal (n = 5), 2.6% as Middle Eastern (n = 5), 2.1% as African (n = 4), and 2.1% as Other (n = 4). Participants’ daily use of social media averaged 3.47 h ($SD = 1.31$). The most used social media platform reported was Instagram (n = 183) followed by TikTok (n = 171), then Snapchat (n = 158), Facebook (n = 136), YouTube (n = 126), and other apps (Twitter, Pinterest, Discord etc., n = 41). The most viewed or followed content on social media daily was comedy (n = 89), followed by fashion (n = 84), food/cooking (n = 73), beauty (n = 72), fitness (n = 71), influencers (n = 69), celebrity news and entertainment (n = 47), current events (n = 37), and gaming/sports (n = 34). Although we do not consider Body Mass Index (BMI) indicative of one’s health (e.g., Austin & Richmond, 2022), it is reported given convention. BMI ranged from 16.42 to 41.63 ($M = 23.32, SD = 4.39$).

2.2. Stimulus materials

Three sets of videos based on body neutrality, thin ideal, and art content were initially searched for and selected by the researchers. The videos were then piloted for refinement with independent participants from the target age range, and a final set compiled for this study. Final conditions contained 12-minute compilations of TikTok videos, sourced from publicly available TikTok accounts and uploaded to YouTube (unlisted) for the experiment. Based on prior recommendations by Seekis and Kennedy (2023) who suggested that video length of content promoting self-care strategies may need to exceed 7 min to maximize the content’s effectiveness, the current study added 5 min of content for a total of 12 min per condition.

Given the absence of content analyses on body neutrality, an initial search on TikTok was conducted by the authors to view the popular body neutrality hashtags. Video content was then searched and selected using those hashtags (e.g., #bodyneutrality, #bodyneutralityoutfits, #bodyneutralitygym) from the search function on the app. The body neutrality and thin ideal conditions were then matched on content regarding choice or purpose of clothes and purpose of physical exercise. For example, content for the thin ideal condition was searched using the hashtags #getdressedwithme, #gymgirlmotivation, #workoutiktok. Content for the art control group was searched using popular hashtags such as #artinspiration and #artpainting. Art was chosen as a compatible control given that creators were engaged in functional activities.

The selected body neutrality content (condition 1) included young women discussing and/or demonstrating: (a) what body neutrality meant to them and how it helped them with their body image issues, (b) recycling clothes that no longer fit as clothes are meant to fit our bodies not the other way around, or wearing clothes for comfort, (c) affirmations or guides to help cultivate body neutrality and (d) exercising for enjoyment and mental and physical wellbeing, not weight loss. The thin ideal content (condition 2) included young women discussing and/or demonstrating: (a) what they chose to wear whilst getting ready to go to university or an event, (b) types of exercises on how to achieve leanness, for example, a flat tummy, lean thighs, a thigh gap, and toned arms. The art content (condition 3) included videos with female vocal instructions about how to paint on canvases using various techniques (e.g., oils, textures, acrylics, fingers, brushes, sponges), and all were presented by creators whose hands or backs could be seen whilst demonstrating the painting techniques.

Female creators for conditions 1 and 2 were matched on approximate age (young adults) and ethnicity (about 60% white). Creators in condition 1 were diverse in terms of body shape and size, and in keeping with the concept of body neutrality, three creators had medical or physical conditions (e.g., alopecia, amputation below the knee, burn scars). Creators in condition 2 were all lean and/or toned. TikTok borders, usernames, music, and any captions were retained to provide a naturalistic experience. In total, approximately 17 mins of content for
each condition was piloted by seven independent women from the target age group.

The seven pilot participants were issued brief content overviews (i.e., “You’ll be viewing TikTok videos that include female creators of varying body shapes, sizes, and ethnicities who are discussing or showing the purpose of choosing clothing, the purpose behind physical exercise, body neutrality affirmations, how to paint using various techniques.”). Participants were also issued a brief definition of body neutrality, (i.e., “Body neutrality places value on what the body can do, feel, and experience over how the body looks, and emphasizes accepting and caring for your body regardless of how you feel about it”). They were then asked to indicate how representative each video was of (a) the above topics (b) body neutrality and (c) female creators’ compliance with the thin ideal from 1 (not at all representative) to 7 (extremely representative).

Videos were also rated on overall visual and audio quality from 1 (poor quality) to 7 (very good quality). Selection of TikTok videos was based on high scores in representativeness of content and body type, as well as visual and audio quality.

The final set of 12-minute compilation TikTok videos in each condition did not differ on video quality ($M = 6.43, SD = 0.53, p = .46$), or representativeness of content ($M = 6.54, SD = 0.46, p = .94$). However, as expected, body neutrality content was rated higher in the body neutrality group ($M = 6.50, SD = 0.49$) than the thin ideal ($M = 1.76, SD = 0.63$) or art group ($M = 1.66, SD = 0.48, p < .001$) and the creators of the thin ideal videos were rated higher in leanness and/or tone ($M = 6.60, SD = 0.57$) than the body neutrality ($M = 1.65, SD = 0.50$) and art control groups ($M = 1.60, SD = 0.57, p < .001$). Each 12-minute compilation video comprised approximately 18 videos and each video ran for between 15 s and 1.16 min.

A second pilot study with nine women from the target age group (independent from the main study) was conducted to test the study procedure. All participants rated the timing of the video as “about right” relative to “too long/short”. The manipulation check was also pilot to whereby participants were asked three recall questions about specific aspects of the video content. All participants recalled 100% of the information about the videos when responding to the recall questions indicating that participants were attending to the content.

### 2.3. Measures

#### 2.3.1. Demographics

Participants were asked to record demographic information including age, height and weight, ethnicity, and social media use. Social media use was assessed via one item on overall engagement time on social media with a 7-point scale ranging from 30 min or less to 6+hrs or more. Participants were also asked which social media apps they used, frequency of social media app use from 1 (never) to 5 (daily) and frequency of the type of content they viewed or followed (i.e., beauty, celebrity news and entertainment, comedy, cooking, current events, fashion, fitness, gaming/sports, influencers/vloggers) from 1 (never) to 5 (daily).

#### 2.3.2. Pre- and post-test state measures

##### 2.3.2.1. Functionality appreciation

State functionality appreciation was assessed using the 7-item Functionality Appreciation Scale (FAS; Alleva et al., 2017). To capture state levels of functionality appreciation and in line with the State Body Appreciation Scale-2 (Homan, 2016), we added “right now” or “at this moment” before each item. An exemplar item read, “Right now, I appreciate my body for what it is capable of doing”. Visual analogue scale (VAS) items were used to capture state levels of functionality appreciation given they are particularly sensitive to small changes across time (Heinberg & Thompson, 1995). Scales comprised 101-point digital sliders ranging from 0 (not at all) to 100 (extremely so). Scores were averaged such that higher scores indicated higher levels of functionality appreciation. Alleva et al. (2017) reported high internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.87$) and test-retest reliability in a diverse sample of women at 3 weeks (ICC = 0.81). Internal consistency was also high at pre-test ($\alpha = 0.92$) and at post-test ($\alpha = 0.96$) in the current study.

##### 2.3.2.2. State body satisfaction and mood

Four visual analogue scale items were used to measure state body satisfaction and mood. Scales consisted of 101-point digital sliders ranging from 0 (not at all) to 100 (very much). Based on items by Pryde and Prichard (2022), body satisfaction was assessed by asking participants to rate a series of four dimensions ‘right now’: “I feel physically attractive, fat, satisfied with my body shape, satisfied with my body size”. As per Cohen et al. (2019), to further disprove the true purpose of the study, participants were also asked about their satisfaction with university coursework, social life, and housing situation. After reverse scoring the item “I feel fat,” scores were averaged such that higher scores indicated higher levels of state body satisfaction. Internal consistency was high at pre-test ($\alpha = 0.89$) and at post-test ($\alpha = 0.92$) in the current study, which aligns with prior studies (e.g., Pryde & Prichard, 2022).

To assess mood, participants were asked to rate a series of dimensions ‘right now’, “I feel happy, sad, anxious, and confident”. After reverse scoring negative mood items, scores were averaged, such that higher scores indicated a higher state of positive mood. Internal consistency was adequate at pre-test ($\alpha = 0.79$) and at post-test ($\alpha = 0.86$).

##### 2.3.3. Post-test measures

#### 2.3.3.1. State upward appearance comparisons

To assess state upward appearance comparisons after exposure to the videos, the 3-item State Appearance Comparison Scale (SACS; Tiggemann & McGill, 2004) was used. Two items assess state appearance comparisons; the third assesses state appearance thoughts. As per Seekis and Kennedy (2023), the items were modified to reflect comparisons to people participants perceived to be more attractive than themselves. To capture a more reliable measure of state upward appearance comparisons, one item was reworded, and two more items were added. Thus, in addition to the item about overall appearance, the item assessing comparison of specific body parts was changed to body size, and two more items assessed comparison of body shape and facial features. Participants rated their level of overall appearance comparisons (“While watching the TikTok videos, how much did you compare your overall appearance to people you thought were more attractive than you?”), body size (“…how much did you compare your body size to people you thought were more attractive than you?”) and body shape (“…how much did you compare your body shape to people you thought were more attractive than you?”), as well as facial features (“…how much did you compare your facial features to people you thought were more attractive than you?”) using a 7-item scale with responses ranging from 1 (no comparison) to 7 (a lot of comparison). Exploratory factor analysis, using principal axis factoring and oblique rotation, was conducted to establish structural validity for the state upward appearance comparison measure on the data obtained from the current sample. Results suggested that the state upward appearance comparison items loaded on one factor (eigenvalue = 3.57) and accounted for 89.15% of the variance. Factor loadings were $> 0.88$. Items were averaged with higher scores indicating higher levels of state upward comparisons. Internal consistency was high for the current study ($\alpha = .97$).

#### 2.3.3.2. State appearance thoughts

Given that thinking about one’s appearance does not necessarily assume that the individual is comparing oneself to another person, appearance thoughts were derived from the single item in the SACS (Tiggemann & McGill, 2004) to form a two-part item. The two-part item is intended to capture thoughts about appearance and clothing as well as valence (positive or negative) of those thoughts. Thus, participants were asked if they thought about, (a) their...
2.4. Procedure

Responding with due diligence. To distract participants from the main aim of the study, two apps in the future on a scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 7 (very positive). For the yes responses, the items were averaged with higher scores reflecting higher levels of positive thoughts.

2.3.5. Intention to act and distractor and attention check items

Participants were asked to (a) Describe three main points about the content of the videos you just watched (b) “Which video stood out to you and why – describe three things about why this video stood out to you”, and (c) If you were asked to create a video like these, what would you include in that video? Describe what you would talk about and do”.

2.5. Design and data analysis

All data analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS (version 28). The experiment employed a between-subjects design with three levels of the independent variable, TikTok condition (body neutrality, thin ideal, art). The three dependent variables assessed at pre- and post-test were state levels of functionality appreciation, body satisfaction, and positive mood. Based on recommendations by Van Breukelen (2013), to increase power and reduce risk of Type I errors that may arise from multiple testing, a series of analyses of covariance (ANCOVAs) were conducted whereby pre-exposure scores were entered as a covariate to control for individual differences and test the differences between groups at post-exposure. For the post-test only measures, univariate analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were conducted to test between group differences on state upward appearance comparisons and intention to view or follow content. Valence of appearance thoughts were tested via independent groups t-tests. Partial eta-squared effect sizes were calculated for each outcome variable where 0.01, 0.06, and 0.14 constitute small, medium, and large effect sizes, respectively (Cohen, 1988). Cohen’s d effect sizes, where 0.20, 0.50, 0.80 constitute small, medium, and large respectively (Cohen, 1988), were calculated for between-group mean differences. Power analysis (G*power 3.1) showed that a sample size of 158 participants was sufficient for a between groups design, when the power is 1-p = 0.80, the confidence level is 95%, and effect size is moderate (0.25). Thus, our final sample size of 189 was adequate to detect moderate effect sizes. To reduce the risk of Type I error, a Bonferroni adjustment was also made for five comparisons (α = 0.01).

3. Results

The initial sample comprised 190 participants. However, one participant in the body neutrality condition had incorrectly answered two out of three attention check items and was thus removed from all further analyses (Final N = 189, 63 per condition). All other participants correctly selected at least two out of three attention check items. All participants recalled responses to manipulation items in the intended manner. Although there were no missing data, the mean for functionality appreciation was not normally distributed (Kolmogorov-Smirnov p < .05), at pre- and post-test at the group level. The ANCOVA is considered robust to non-normal data (Olejnik & Algina, 1984) when group sizes are equal and substantial (relative to power analysis) and was thus appropriate to test the hypotheses. A series of one-way ANOVAs showed that the three experimental conditions did not differ on pre-test measures of functionality appreciation, F(2, 186) = .40, p = .673, body satisfaction, F(2, 186) = 0.02, p = .979, or positive mood, F(2, 186) = 0.11, p = .900. Means and standard deviations for pre- and post-test variables per condition can be seen in Table 1. There were also no significant group differences in time spent on social media, F(2, 186) = 0.41, p = .665 or in the top fiveviewed content: comedy, F(2, 186) = 0.09, p = .918, fashion, F(2, 186) = 0.60, p = .549, cooking, F(2, 186) = 1.53, p = .219, beauty, F(2, 186) = 0.26, p = .773, and fitness, F(2, 186) = 0.72, p = .488.

3.1. Functionality appreciation

There was a significant effect of Group on functionality appreciation, F(2, 185) = 59.09, p < .001, η² = .39. At post-test, pairwise comparisons showed that the body neutrality group had significantly higher levels of functionality appreciation than the thin ideal, t(124) = 10.83, p < .001, d = 1.02 and art control groups, t(124) = 4.60, p < .001, d = 0.39.

3.2. Body satisfaction

A significant effect of Group on body satisfaction was also found, F(2, 185) = 37.18, p < .001, η² = .29. Pairwise comparisons showed that the body neutrality group had significantly higher levels of body satisfaction than the thin ideal, t(124) = 8.61, p < .001, d = 0.76 and art control groups, t(124) = 3.97, p < .001, d = 0.38.

3 Given the non-normality of the functionality appreciation scale, a square root transformation was applied to the data and analyses were re-run. There was no difference to the outcomes and so the untransformed data were retained.
3.3. Positive mood

There was a significant effect of Group on positive mood, $F(2, 185) = 24.22, p < .001, \eta^2 = .21$. Pairwise comparisons showed that although positive mood was higher in the body neutrality group than the thin ideal group, $t(124) = 6.79, p < .001, d = 0.71$, after correcting for multiple comparisons, there was no significant difference between the body neutrality and the art control groups, $t(124) = 2.07, p = .04, d = 0.29$.

3.4. Post-test analyses

A univariate analysis of variance (ANOVA) showed significant differences between groups for state upward appearance comparisons, $F(2, 186) = 85.95, p < .001, \eta^2 = .48$. Pairwise comparisons revealed that women in the thin ideal condition reported significantly more upward appearance comparisons than women in body neutrality, $t(124) = 7.85, p < .001, d = 1.23$, and art control conditions, $t(124) = 13.02, p < .001, d = 2.49$. However, women reported more upward appearance comparisons in the body neutrality condition than in the art control, $t(124) = 5.18, p < .001, d = 1.01$.

In total, 92% ($n = 58$) of women in the body neutrality group and 95% ($n = 60$) of women in the thin ideal group reported thinking about their appearance whilst watching the videos. Critically, an independent samples t-test showed that women in the body neutrality group reported more positive thoughts about their appearance than those in the thin ideal group, $t(116) = 6.38, p < .001, d = 1.17$. Similarly, 58% ($n = 37$) of women in the body neutrality group and 62% ($n = 39$) in the thin ideal group reported thinking about what they were wearing whilst watching the videos. Again, women in the body neutrality group reported more positive thoughts about their clothes than women in the thin ideal group $t(74) = 3.52, p < .001, d = 0.81$. Eight women in the art group thought about their appearance and only one thought about her clothing whilst viewing art TikTok content.

3.5. Intention to act

Finally, a univariate ANOVA showed that there was a significant effect of Group on the likelihood to view or follow the content participants were exposed to, $F(2, 186) = 9.60, p < .001, \eta^2 = .09$. Pairwise comparisons showed that women exposed to body neutrality content were more likely to view or follow that content than women in the thin ideal group who were to follow thin ideal content, $t(124) = 4.25, p < .001, d = 0.75$, but no group difference was found between the likelihood of viewing or following body neutrality and art content, $t(124) = 1.19, p = .24, d = 0.22$.

4. Discussion

This study investigated the effect of brief exposure to TikTok body neutrality content on young women’s functionality appreciation, body satisfaction, positive mood, and upward appearance comparisons relative to thin ideal and art content. Findings showed that functionality appreciation and body satisfaction were higher in the body neutrality group than the thin ideal and art-control groups at post-test. Furthermore, women reported higher levels of positive mood and fewer upward appearance comparisons after exposure to body neutrality content than women who viewed thin ideal content. Notably, although women who viewed body neutrality and thin ideal content thought about their appearance and their clothes during exposure, those in the body neutrality group reported more positive thoughts about their appearance and what they were wearing than women in the thin ideal group. The present study shows that body neutrality content may provide women with a beneficial alternative to the unrealistic beauty standards heavily promoted on image-centric platforms such as TikTok.

Current findings contribute to existing positive body image research in various ways. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study to show that brief exposure to body neutrality content on TikTok demonstrated higher levels of functionality appreciation and body satisfaction in women, relative to the thin ideal and art content, with moderate to large effect sizes. Our findings are also consistent with the theoretical framework of positive body image (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015a, 2015b) by demonstrating that the topic areas covered in TikTok body neutrality content (i.e., exercising for wellbeing rather than weight loss, understanding that clothes are made to fit women’s bodies rather than the other way around, and practicing functionality appreciation strategies), may provide an avenue for women to feel a sense of respect and appreciation for what their bodies can do and feel, regardless of how they perceive their body’s appearance.

The present study also adds further support to the limited research on the effects of viewing body functionality content on social media (e.g., Mulgrew & Courtney, 2022). Although not directly comparable, our results are consistent with prior research (Mulgrew & Courtney, 2022) which showed that women who viewed captioned functionality images on Instagram, relative to women who viewed uncaptioned fitness images, reported higher functionality and appearance satisfaction. Perhaps then, in light of current findings, use of video format within social media apps, which typically involves creators speaking about or using voiceovers for their content, helps provide an explanatory value for new phrases or hashtags such as ‘body neutrality’. Our findings also reflect those of Smith et al. (2023) who showed that a single-session digital body neutrality-based intervention improved functionality appreciation and body dissatisfaction in a diverse sample of young people.

Another novel finding was that positive mood was higher in the body neutrality group relative to the thin ideal group with a moderate effect size. Additionally, there was no difference between the body neutrality group and the art group on positive mood which suggests that viewing body neutrality content may feel as non-threatening to one’s mood as viewing appearance neutral content such as how to paint on canvas. Furthermore, present findings contribute to prior body positivity studies (Cohen et al., 2019; Dhadly et al., 2023) by showing that body neutrality

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Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale range</th>
<th>Pre-test</th>
<th>Post-test</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Functionality Appreciation</td>
<td>1-100</td>
<td>75.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body satisfaction</td>
<td>1-100</td>
<td>49.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive mood</td>
<td>1-100</td>
<td>55.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upward comparisons</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>2.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intention to view or follow</td>
<td>1-5</td>
<td>3.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive appearance thoughts</td>
<td>1-7</td>
<td>4.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive clothing thoughts</td>
<td>1-7</td>
<td>4.86</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. *(Body Neutrality, N = 58; Thin ideal, N = 60; Art, N = 8), *(Body Neutrality, N = 37; Thin ideal, N = 39; Art, N = 1)
content may be just as useful in promoting positive mood. In line with the developmental theory of embodiment (Piran, 2015), perhaps the focus (in body neutrality content) on women’s capacity to understand and appreciate their body’s needs and desires without judgment, as well as their engagement in exercise for joy and health, instills a sense of relief and contentment in viewers.

As predicted, women reported more upward appearance comparisons after exposure to thin ideal content relative to those who viewed body neutrality or art content. Our findings are consistent with similar studies which showed that more upward appearance comparisons were reported by women exposed to idealized beauty content than those exposed to appearance-neutral (travel) content on TikTok (Seeks & Kennedy, 2023). Moreover, this is the first known study to show that upward appearance comparisons are less likely to occur when viewing women discussing clothing and exercise from a body neutrality perspective than viewing thin women discussing clothing choices and fitness routines to lose weight and improve body tone. Although this finding may not be surprising (given the diverse body types of body neutrality creators compared to the homogenous body type of the thin ideal creators), it is an important one given that appearance comparisons to others on social media, particularly in the upward direction, are known risk factors for negative body image (Seeks et al., 2020a; Mink & Szymanski, 2022). However, it should also be noted that upward appearance comparisons were higher in the body neutrality group relative to the art group, suggesting that exposure to women discussing body image is still likely to trigger upward appearance comparisons for some women.

A novel aim of this study was to better understand the valence of women’s thoughts about their appearance and what they were wearing during exposure to either body neutrality or thin ideal content on TikTok. Interestingly, over 90% of women reported that they thought about their appearance while viewing body neutrality or thin ideal content. Notably however, those in the body neutrality group reported, on average, more positive thoughts about their appearance than those in the thin ideal group. Although less women thought about their clothing whilst watching the video content (~60%), on average, women in the body neutrality group reported more positive thoughts about what they were wearing than those in the thin ideal group. These findings highlight the importance of understanding the valence of appearance thoughts; that is, thinking about one’s appearance or what one is wearing does not automatically imply that those thoughts are associated with negative emotions (Alleva et al., 2019). Indeed, according to body conceptualization theory (Franzoi, 1995), women exposed to body neutrality content may have thought about their appearance in terms of body-as-process rather than body-as-object and thus felt more positive about their appearance. Future research could seek to better understand what drives those positive thoughts (e.g., functionality appreciation, non-judgment, or both). Nonetheless, despite body neutrality’s aim to change the value placed on societal beauty standards by encouraging individuals to appreciate the functionality of their bodies rather than focus on their body’s appearance, current findings highlight the challenges faced by women to neutralize the incessant preoccupation with appearance.

4.1. Implications

The current study provides practical implications in addition to the theoretical implications discussed above. Based on a recent global report showing that about 32% of influencer followers are calling for more content that helps to curb unrealistic beauty standards (GWI, 2020), our findings show that body neutrality may help young women feel more appreciative of how their body functions and more body satisfied than content related to meeting societal appearance standards. Furthermore, given that 62% of participants from the body neutrality group indicated that they would be ‘likely to very likely’ to view or follow body neutrality on social media, encouraging young women to do so seems feasible and beneficial. Moreover, following body neutrality accounts on social media is also likely to help refresh and shape the algorithm on platforms such as TikTok and Instagram so that less idealized and more supportive content regarding body image is directed to the viewer’s feed. Finally, body neutrality is an inclusive movement that offers individuals a non-judgmental perspective about how to respect and nurture their bodies, despite how they might feel about their physical appearance or their body’s abilities. Thus, college counselors and psychologists may suggest viewing or following body neutrality accounts to young women who are struggling to embrace their body image.

4.2. Limitations and future research

Current findings should be interpreted within the context of several limitations. First, this study was primarily tested within the framework of body functionality which, although is fundamental to body neutrality, is not the only aspect of the construct. Future research should aim to investigate the components of body neutrality, as defined by Pellizier and Wade (2023), to gain a deeper understanding of how individual elements such as non-judgmental attitudes, appreciation of functionality, intrinsic qualities, and extrinsic experiences impact or interact with people’s body image and self-worth. Relatedly, the development and validation of a body neutrality measure is imperative to progress research in the field. Second, based on the concept of body neutrality, three videos within the body neutrality group included young women creators with various medical conditions and physical ailments (e.g., alopecia, amputation below the knee, eating disorder recovery, and burn scars); however, it is unclear whether the effects of exposure to these videos would vary according to individual participants’ mental and or physical conditions as these details were not obtained. Future research could screen for health ailments to better understand body neutrality’s impact on functionality appreciation in people with physical and or mental health conditions. Additionally, given the promotion of inclusivity within body neutrality, future research could also seek to investigate its effects in more diverse samples in terms of gender identity, age, and sexual orientation. Indeed, the sample of majority white undergraduate women aged 17–28 years in our study limits generalizability.

Third, viewing 12-minutes of video content on platforms such as TikTok is not unusual for young people, but the effects of doing so in the current study are short-term and thus longer-term effects remain unknown. Relatedly, although written responses to recall questions suggested that most participants in the body neutrality group favored either the clothing or exercise videos over the affirmations, the combination of topics makes it difficult to know which type of content is driving the effects. Furthermore, although a cover story and recall activity as well as appearance neutral measures were used in this study, demand characteristics may have been at play. Follow-up measures or the use of ecological momentary assessment may provide more nuanced understanding regarding the impact of viewing or following body neutrality content over time. Finally, although a recent content analysis has provided initial differences between body positivity and neutrality content on TikTok (Hallward et al., 2023), content analyses linking theoretical sociocultural and positive body image frameworks would provide a useful foundation from which future research can draw upon.

5. Conclusion

The present study contributes to emerging research on the benefits of engaging with positive body image on social media by demonstrating that brief exposure to body neutrality content on TikTok can have an immediate positive impact on women’s functionality appreciation, body satisfaction, and mood. These promising and novel findings indicate that viewing social media content about clothing and exercise in a way that inspires women to feel appreciative of their body’s functionality may help curb the pressure to meet unrealistic beauty standards. Indeed, based on our findings, young women who feel uncomfortable when
idealized content is promoted in their feeds may be encouraged to view, like, or follow body neutrality content to help promote positive body image and mood.

Funding
This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

CRediT authorship contribution statement
Veya Seekis: Conceptualization, Methodology, Data curation, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft. Rebecca K. Lawrence: Methodology, Data curation, Formal analysis, Writing – review & editing.

Declaration of Competing Interest
The authors of the submitted manuscript, “How Exposure to Body Neutrality Content on TikTok Affects Young Women’s Body Image and Mood”, declare no dual commitments, financial or competing interests, or competing loyalties.

Data availability
https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/PNX6M

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