The risks of adopting 'body positivity' to make a sale

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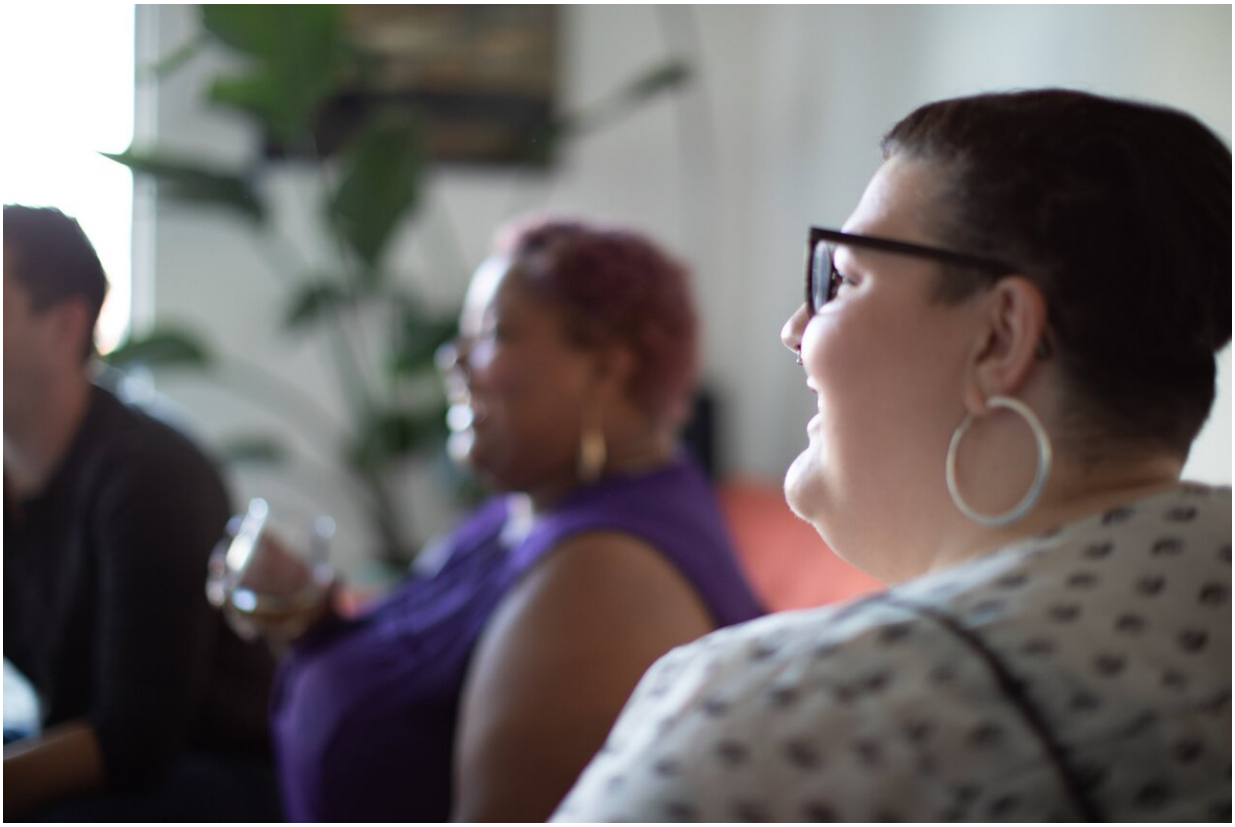

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Instagram users who detect self-promotion or corporate marketing in a post embracing the body positivity movement may be turned off by that dual messaging, new research suggests.

In the study, women viewed experimental Instagram posts that borrowed body positive messages from actual users and contained body positive hashtags, such as #bopo. The posts all featured the same initial body positive sentiment, but some posts also asked viewers to either like and follow their profiles and others advertised products or services.

Researchers found that participants who spotted self-promotion or advertising considered the posts less morally appropriate and not altogether sincere in their support of the body positivity movement in comparison to non-promotional posts.

Self-promotion was consistently perceived by study participants to be less negative than corporate advertising, but the viewers did not go so far as to consider any marketing messages offensive or inappropriate, the findings showed.

"If companies are going to use body positive imagery, it's a balancing act between trying to seem authentic—and hopefully be authentic—with what they're trying to push," said Kyla Brathwaite, lead author of the study and a doctoral student in communication at The Ohio State University.

"But seeing so much body positivity content coupled with advertising might make viewers wary about the movement—or see the movement as something that's appearance-centered."

Brathwaite conducted the study with co-author David DeAndrea, associate professor of communication at Ohio State. The open-access article is published in the journal *Communication Monographs.*

Before the "body positive" phrase was coined and body positivity-related hashtags emerged on Instagram, the fat acceptance movement advocated for the rights and dignity of fat people. Now, as then, the body positivity

movement decries society's fixation on young, thin, white bodies and calls for acceptance and appreciation of bodies of all shapes, sizes, colors, appearances and abilities.

After encountering the "fitspiration" and "thinspiration" messages pushing exercise and dieting on social media and more recently observing the growth of the body positivity movement, Brathwaite "started hearing a voice in my head saying people are co-opting the movement and trying to sell me things."

With millions of hashtagged posts combined with widespread sponsored content on Instagram, the platform became an attractive candidate for study.

"Our hope was to try to speak more broadly to prosocial movements online in general," DeAndrea said. "They're most effective when they seem genuinely grassroots. Then you have companies that recognize this and are trying to piggyback off the goodwill of the movement to help themselves."

The researchers recruited 851 women from TurkPrime (now CloudResearch) ranging in age from 18 to 89.

Each participant viewed a total of 10 experimental Instagram posts, all of which included two body positive messages that functioned as the basis of posts in the study that represented movement-supporting user content: "We won't be distracted by comparison if we are captivated by purpose" and "Be done shrinking your mind, body and soul. Take up space." The messages also featured hashtags such as #allbodiesaregoodbodies and #bopo.

Messages representing user-generated self-promotion added encouragement to like, comment or visit a YouTube channel. Corporate-

sponsored messages either focused on appearance-centered items by adding language promoting a fitness plan and "flaw-blurring" facial products or, in a control condition, marketed a clothing line using language that made no mention of appearance.

An analysis of viewer reactions showed that the higher the participants' recognition of promotional cues in the experimental messages, the more likely they were to attribute posters' motivation to something other than an embrace of body positivity.

The researchers also wanted to gauge how images associated with messages influenced viewers' perceptions, and tested this by featuring photos of either average- or plus-sized women in the messages. The more that participants perceived women's bodies on posts to be plus-sized, the more they rated the messages as morally appropriate and believed the messages were exclusively shared to promote body positivity.

"One could assume that consumers viewing a campaign that's talking about body positivity but not featuring women the movement is supposed to support may be questioning the motives of these companies," Brathwaite said.

The researchers noted that the results suggest meshing the movement with marketing has potential pitfalls for both body positivity itself and for companies that give a nod to the movement in their ads.

"The question is whether you can walk that tightrope of promoting the movement while selling the product," DeAndrea said. "It does seem that people didn't find these messages or images inappropriate, but it can still be done in a way that might minimize any degree to which the movement is undermined, and from a company perspective, minimize any chances for blowback based on exploitation of the movement."

More information: Kyla N. Brathwaite et al, BoPopriation: How self-promotion and corporate commodification can undermine the body positivity (BoPo) movement on Instagram, *Communication Monographs* (2021). DOI: 10.1080/03637751.2021.1925939