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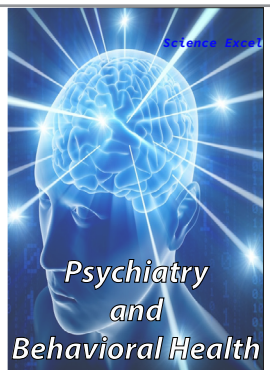

The Dark Side of #PositiveVibes: Understanding Toxic Positivity in Modern Culture

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Abstract

Toxic positivity, a phenomenon where positive thinking is prioritized to the exclusion of genuine emotional experiences, has gained prominence in modern society, especially with the advent of social media. This article examines the rise of toxic positivity, tracing its roots through psychological theories and cultural shifts. The discussion includes an analysis of how social media platforms amplify this trend, possibly leading to significant mental health consequences such as anxiety, depression, and emotional suppression. Drawing on key studies and theoretical frameworks, the article highlights the adverse effects of unchecked positivity while offering practical strategies for individuals. These strategies include recognizing toxic positivity, maintaining a balanced emotional outlook, exploring your feelings, and practicing social media literacy. By understanding and addressing toxic positivity, individuals can develop a more genuine emotional awareness and support others by recognizing the full spectrum of human emotions.

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Introduction

Toxic positivity is a concept that has garnered significant attention in recent years, particularly with the rise of social media [1]. It refers to the excessive and ineffective overgeneralization of a happy, optimistic state across all situations, which can result in the denial, minimization, and invalidation of genuine human emotional experiences [2]. Unlike healthy positivity, which acknowledges and embraces a full range of emotions, toxic positivity often suppresses negative emotions, leading to adverse psychological outcomes [2]. This perspective is echoed by researchers who argue that promoting an unrealistic positive outlook can prevent individuals from processing and dealing with genuine emotional experiences, ultimately impeding emotional resilience and growth [3,4].

The field of positive psychology, which emerged in the late 1990s, aims to study and promote factors that contribute to human flourishing and well-being [5]. It focuses on positive aspects such as happiness, strengths, and virtues, advocating for a balanced approach to understanding human experiences [5]. However, when the principles of positive psychology are misapplied or taken to an extreme, they can contribute to the phenomenon of toxic positivity [6]. This misapplication can lead to unrealistic expectations and pressures that ultimately harm rather than help mental health [7].

The pervasive influence of social media has played a significant role in the spread of toxic positivity [1]. Social media platforms often showcase an idealized version of life, emphasizing positive experiences while downplaying or ignoring negative ones [8]. This can create unrealistic expectations and pressure individuals to maintain a facade of constant happiness [2]. Influencers and viral content further exacerbate this issue by promoting messages that suggest positivity as a cure-all solution, neglecting the importance of acknowledging and processing negative emotions [9]. Exemplified by the popular hashtag being used on various social media platforms: #PositiveVibesOnly.

This article explores the rise of toxic positivity in the modern world, particularly through the lens of social media's influence. Understanding the rise and impact of toxic positivity can contribute to for promoting genuine well-being [2]. This article aims to investigate some of the cultural and social factors contributing to toxic positivity, its psychological impacts, and practical strategies for individuals to foster a more authentic and emotionally balanced approach to life. By critically examining these aspects, we can better understand how to mitigate the adverse effects of toxic positivity on mental health.

A Brief History of Positivity in Psychology

The emphasis on positivity in psychology can be traced back to the early 20th century

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with the advent of the self-help movement [10]. This movement was heavily influenced by the New Thought philosophy, which promoted the power of positive thinking and the idea that individuals could manifest their desires through mental discipline and optimism [11]. Key figures such as Norman Vincent Peale, author of "The Power of Positive Thinking", popularized the notion that maintaining a positive attitude could lead to success and personal fulfillment [12]. In the mid-20th century, humanistic psychology, led by figures such as Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers, further emphasized the importance of positive human potential and self-actualization [13,14]. This approach focused on personal growth, self-discovery, and the inherent goodness of individuals [13,14].

The emergence of positive psychology in the late 1990s marked a significant shift in the field of psychology, with an increased focus on empirical research to study and promote factors that contribute to human well-being [10]. Founded by Martin Seligman and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, positive psychology emphasizes the study of positive aspects of human experience, such as happiness, strengths, and virtues [5]. The primary goal is to enhance human flourishing and well-being by fostering positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment [5]. Numerous studies have documented the benefits of positive psychology, including improved mental health, increased life satisfaction, and better physical health outcomes [5,15,16].

However, the focus on positivity can sometimes lead to unintended consequences. Cognitive dissonance theory, proposed by Leon Festinger in 1957, posits that individuals experience psychological discomfort when they hold two or more contradictory beliefs, values, or attitudes simultaneously. In the context of toxic positivity, cognitive dissonance occurs when individuals feel compelled to project positivity despite experiencing negative emotions. This dissonance can lead to emotional suppression, where negative emotions are ignored or invalidated to align with the externally imposed expectation of positivity [17,18]. Emotional suppression, a defense mechanism where individuals consciously inhibit the expression of their emotions, has been linked to numerous negative psychological outcomes [19,20]. Research indicates that suppressing emotions can increase stress, reduce emotional resilience, and negatively impact interpersonal relationships [19,20]. In the long term, chronic emotional suppression can contribute to mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, and psychosomatic disorders [21].

The Rise of Toxic Positivity

Cultural Factors

Cultural expectations around happiness and success play a significant role in the rise of toxic positivity [22]. Across various cultures, there is a pervasive belief that maintaining a positive outlook is essential for achieving success and happiness [23]. In Japan, the concept of "ganbatte," which translates to "do your best" or "persevere," underscores the cultural expectation to maintain a positive and determined attitude, even in the face of adversity [24]. Similarly, in India, the philosophy of "santosha" in yoga and Hindu traditions emphasizes contentment and maintaining a positive mindset regardless of external circumstances [25]. In South Korea, the "hwaiting" culture encourages individuals to cheer each other on with expressions like "fighting" to promote positivity and resilience [26]. In Brazil, the "jeitinho brasileiro" or "the Brazilian way" refers to the ability to navigate complex situations with optimism and ingenuity, often masking underlying stress and dissatisfaction [27].

These cultural philosophies can be both beneficial and detrimental. On the positive side, they can foster resilience, community support, and mental well-being. However, these cultural expectations can also lead to the suppression of negative emotions, as the pressure to always display a positive demeanor, can result in individuals hiding their true feelings to conform to societal norms [26]. For example, a study on Chinese culture, which traditionally emphasizes emotional restraint and harmony, found that emotional suppression is linked to increased symptoms of depression and anxiety [28]. Another example is the research conducted in the Middle East, where cultural norms often discourage the expression of negative emotions to maintain social cohesion and family honor [29]. This suppression has been associated with elevated levels of psychological distress and lower overall well-being [26].

Additionally, certain personality traits, such as high levels of neuroticism or a tendency towards perfectionism, can make individuals more susceptible to toxic positivity [30]. People with these traits might feel compelled to hide their negative emotions to meet their own or others' expectations of constant positivity. Early research by Watson and Pennebaker [31] indicates that individuals who frequently suppress emotions may experience greater psychological distress over time.

These studies underscore the complex relationship between cultural norms, personality traits, emotional expression, and psychological health [28,29,31]. While cultural practices promoting positivity can foster resilience and social harmony, they can also lead to adverse mental health outcomes when they discourage the healthy expression of negative emotions.

Social Media

Social media has long been a platform where users primarily showcase the most positive and curated aspects of their lives, a trend often encapsulated by the hashtag #PositiveVibesOnly. This phenomenon, which promotes an almost relentless focus on happiness and success, has contributed significantly to the rise of toxic positivity online [32]. Influencers and everyday users alike have cultivated feeds filled with idealized moments, leading to the creation of unrealistic standards of living that many feel pressured to conform to [33]. This constant stream of positivity can create unrealistic expectations and pressure individuals to conform to these ideals, leading to the neglect of negative emotions and authentic experiences [1]. Influencers, in particular, play a significant role in this phenomenon, as their curated content and viral positivity messages often set unattainable standards for their followers [34].

A longitudinal study by Kross et al. [35] revealed that increased Facebook use predicts declines in subjective well-being among young adults. The study tracked participants over two weeks and found that those who used Facebook more frequently reported lower levels of happiness and life satisfaction [35]. The constant exposure to others' highlight reels of happiness and positivity can create a skewed perception of reality, making individuals feel that their own lives are less fulfilling by comparison [35]. Research highlights that these portrayals can lead to significant psychological impacts, such as feelings of envy, loneliness, inadequacy, depression, and anxiety, particularly when individuals compare their real lives to the highly curated lives they see online by Lowe-Calverley [32] & Tandoc, et al [36].

The pressure to constantly display a positive demeanor online can result in individuals hiding their true feelings and experiences. This phenomenon is further supported by a study conducted by Vogel EA, et al. [37], which found that social comparison on social media is linked to depressive symptoms and lower self-esteem. The study highlighted that individuals who engage in frequent social comparisons tend to have lower self-worth and higher levels of depression, as they are constantly measuring their lives against the often exaggerated portrayals of others' success and happiness [37,38].

However, there is an emerging shift in the way social media is being used, with a growing trend toward embracing vulnerability and authenticity [39]. More users are beginning to share not just their highs but also their lows, creating a space where negative emotions and difficult experiences are openly discussed [39]. For example, videos of individuals crying or expressing their struggles after a significant life event, have gained traction and often receive significant positive reinforcement in the form of likes, comments, and shares [40]. Furthermore, a recent phenomenon that contrasts with toxic positivity is known as "sadfishing," where individuals share exaggerated emotional experiences to garner sympathy or attention online [38,41]. This trend has gained traction alongside the shift towards more authentic content on social media [41]. However, while sadfishing can create space for emotional expression, it also raises concerns about the potential for manipulation and the blurring of genuine emotional sharing with attention-seeking behavior [38]. Nonetheless, this shift still suggests that there is increasing value placed on authenticity and the expression of a full range of emotions, rather than just the positive ones.

Professional and Self-Help Influences

Toxic positivity extends beyond cultural norms and social media and can permeate professional environments and the self-help industry. In some workplaces, there can be a pervasive culture of relentless positivity where employees are expected to maintain an optimistic outlook despite challenges [42]. This expectation can lead to the suppression of genuine emotions, increasing stress, and contributing to burnout [43]. Furthermore, research by Grant and Schwartz [44] indicates that excessive positivity in the workplace can ultimately reduce job satisfaction and employee well-being. Ehrenreich [45] further highlights the potential harm of this unbalanced emphasis on positivity, noting that it can prevent individuals from confronting and resolving their genuine emotional struggles.

Similarly, the self-help and motivational industry often promotes an overly simplistic view of positivity [46]. Popular books, seminars, and motivational speakers encourage individuals to "think positive" without addressing underlying issues, inadvertently fostering toxic positivity [45]. This approach implies that negative emotions are a sign of failure or weakness [2], which can discourage individuals from seeking help or expressing their true feelings. Furthermore, the combination of self-help materials with an overly positive workplace may contribute to employees feeling pressured to conform to an optimistic outlook, fearing negative repercussions if they express genuine concerns or challenges [42]. This phenomenon is not limited to employees; leaders and managers are also susceptible to the pressure of maintaining a facade of positivity [47].

In contrast, Brené Brown's work emphasizes the importance of vulnerability in the workplace as a means of fostering genuine connections and creating a healthy organizational culture [48]. In her book Dare to Lead, Brown argues that showing vulnerability is not a weakness but a strength that can lead to greater trust, creativity, and resilience within teams [48]. She suggests that leaders who embrace vulnerability are better equipped to create environments where employees feel safe to express their true emotions, including negative feelings [48]. Brown's extensive research demonstates that when leaders model vulnerability, it encourages employees to do the same, thereby reducing the pressure to maintain a facade of constant positivity [48]. By understanding these influences, encouraging emotional authenticity and promoting psychological safety are essential steps toward cultivating a healthier and more resilient workforce.

Implementing Research-Founded Strategies to Counter Toxic Positivity

Addressing toxic positivity requires not only recognizing its presence but also adopting practical strategies to foster emotional well-being [49]. The following strategies are grounded in psychological research, highlighting the importance of emotional authenticity, balanced emotional processing, and critical engagement with social media.

Recognizing and Validating Emotions

The first step in countering toxic positivity is recognizing its presence in various aspects of life [50]. Toxic positivity often manifests in the form of platitudes that dismiss or invalidate negative emotions, such as "just stay positive" or "look on the bright side" [51]. These phrases, while seemingly well-intentioned, may contribute to feelings of isolation and inadequacy [50]. By becoming aware of these tendencies, individuals can begin to challenge and reframe them [2]. One of the most effective ways to do this is by consciously recognizing and validating a full range of emotions [2]. Research by the American Psychological Association [52] shows that when individuals acknowledge their emotions rather than suppress them, they experience better psychological health and reduced levels of stress. For instance, allowing oneself to feel sadness or frustration without judgment can lead to more effective emotional regulation and resilience [53]. This practice can be reinforced in both personal and professional environments through mindfulness and emotional intelligence training, which have been shown to improve emotional awareness and interpersonal communication [53].

Mindfulness training typically involves exercises designed to increase awareness and presence in the moment. One common approach is Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), a program developed by Jon Kabat-Zinn in 1979 [54]. MBSR teaches participants to focus on their breath, bodily sensations, and present thoughts without judgment [54]. Over time, this practice can help individuals become more attuned to their emotional states and reduce automatic responses to stress [54]. For example, in a corporate setting, an MBSR program might involve weekly group sessions where employees are guided through mindfulness exercises such as body scans or mindful breathing [55]. These practices help participants cultivate a non-reactive awareness of their thoughts and emotions, which can reduce stress and improve emotional regulation [56].

Emotional intelligence training focuses on developing the skills needed to recognize, understand, and manage one's emotions, as well as the emotions of others [57]. A well-known model for EI is the Mayer-Salovey-Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test (MSCEIT), which assesses four branches of

emotional intelligence: perceiving emotions, using emotions to facilitate thinking, understanding emotions, and managing emotions [58]. In a practical setting, EI training might involve workshops where employees engage in role-playing exercises to practice empathy, active listening, and emotion management [59]. For instance, participants might be asked to reflect on past experiences where they successfully managed a difficult emotional situation and then discuss these scenarios with their peers [59]. This training helps individuals to better understand their emotional triggers, which can be particularly useful in reducing the pressure to conform to toxic positivity in the workplace [60].

Encouraging a Realistic Emotional Outlook

A balanced emotional outlook is essential for genuine well-being [61] . Rather than striving for constant positivity, individuals should aim for emotional realism -accepting that negative emotions are a natural and necessary part of life. Research in cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) supports the idea that realistic thinking, which acknowledges both positive and negative aspects of situations, is more effective for long-term mental health than forced positivity [62]. To aid in this process, individuals can utilize a “feelings wheel,” a tool that helps in identifying and articulating emotions with greater precision.

The feelings wheel categorizes emotions into core feelings, such as happiness, sadness, anger, and fear, and further breaks these down into more nuanced emotions. For example, someone feeling "sad" might use the wheel to identify that they are specifically feeling "disappointed" or "lonely." This level of specificity allows individuals to understand their emotions more deeply, which is a key aspect of emotional realism [63].

Consider a situation where someone has applied for a job they are very excited about but then receives a rejection. Instead of forcing themselves to "stay positive" and suppress their disappointment by saying things like "It's fine; it wasn't meant to be," they could use the feelings wheel to accurately identify their emotions. They might realize that they feel "disappointed" and "frustrated," and by acknowledging these specific emotions, they can better process them. This approach not only validates their feelings but also enables them to reflect on the situation in a balanced manner - recognizing both the setbacks and the opportunities for growth [63].

Figure 1. *The Feelings Wheel*

Furthermore, organizations can encourage this approach by fostering a culture that values honest reflection and constructive problem-solving, rather than only celebrating successes [64]. This can be supported by creating structured opportunities for employees to share their challenges and receive support [42]. For instance, "psychological safety" in the workplace - where team members feel safe to take risks and be vulnerable - has been shown to enhance team effectiveness and innovation [64]. Regular debriefing sessions, where both challenges and achievements are discussed, can help normalize the experience of a full range of emotions [42].

Enhancing Media Literacy to Combat Unrealistic Expectations

In an age where social media heavily influences perceptions of happiness and success, enhancing media literacy is crucial [65]. Research has shown that individuals who engage in critical media literacy are better equipped to navigate the pressures of social comparison and the unrealistic standards often perpetuated on social media [66]. Rather than passively consuming content, individuals should be equipped with the tools to critically analyze the messages they receive [67]. This involves questioning the authenticity of social media portrayals and recognizing the potential psychological impacts of constant exposure to idealized images [67]. Encouraging individuals to ask questions like "Who created this content?" "What is the purpose of this message?" and "How does this content make me feel?" can help them approach social media with a more analytical mindset [68]. This shift from passive consumption to active engagement can diminish the influence of harmful media messages and promote a healthier relationship with social media [68]. By developing the skills to critically assess media messages, individuals can reduce the negative impacts of social comparison, which is a significant contributor to depression and anxiety, particularly among younger audiences [69].

Encouraging mindful engagement with social media is another effective strategy [67]. This involves setting intentional boundaries around social media use, such as limiting screen time, curating a feed that reflects diverse and realistic content, and practicing digital detoxes [70]. Research suggests that mindful media consumption can significantly reduce stress and improve overall well-being [68,70]. Therefore, educational programs that focus on media literacy, particularly in schools and workplaces, can help individuals develop a more critical and realistic approach to online content, reducing the pressure to conform to unrealistic standards [71]. This is especially important for younger audiences who are most vulnerable to the impacts of social comparison [71].

Conclusion

Toxic positivity, while rooted in well-meaning intentions, can lead to significant psychological harm when it dismisses or invalidates genuine emotional experiences. This article has

explored the origins and impacts of toxic positivity, emphasizing the importance of a balanced emotional outlook that acknowledges both positive and negative emotions. The rise of social media has amplified the pressures to maintain a facade of constant happiness, contributing to unrealistic expectations and emotional suppression. Additionally, cultural and professional environments often reinforce these pressures, further complicating the discourse around emotional well-being. By integrating research-founded strategies such as recognizing and validating emotions, fostering realistic emotional perspectives, building resilience through adaptive coping mechanisms, and enhancing media literacy, individuals and organizations can counter the detrimental effects of toxic positivity. These approaches promote a more authentic, compassionate, and supportive environment, where emotional diversity is embraced and mental health is prioritized. Moving forward, it is crucial to cultivate spaces—both online and offline—where all emotions are acknowledged and valued, thus fostering true emotional resilience and well-being. .

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