



Appearance-Related Messages in YouTube Workout Videos: A Content Analysis



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Introduction

- The pandemic led to shutdowns which limited the availability of gyms. Therefore, many individuals turned to online workout programs to sustain activity levels throughout quarantine.
- According to the wellness technology platform Mindbody, since March 2020, 73% of consumers began using pre-recorded videos versus 17% in 2019 and 85% attended livestream classes weekly, versus 7% in 2019 (Cording, 2020).
- A previous study examined yoga videos on Instagram, which portrayed instructors as having very unrealistic physical characteristics, such as being thin, young, and having visibly toned muscles (Hinz et al., 2021).
- A study examining ‘fitspiration’ content on YouTube videos found various messages regarding the fitness as beauty ideal, where overlapping themes found the primary motivator for exercise to be appearance-related reasons (Ratwatte & Mattacola, 2021).
 - Many videos depicted instructors’ comments on how to achieve the ideal thin-yet-toned physique by sharing exercises to tone certain areas of the body, taking progress photos, counting calories, or targeting fat loss eventually leading to the ideal body (Ratwatte & Mattacola, 2021).
- No studies, to our knowledge, have examined the content of YouTube videos although an increase in popularity has been observed. By examining whether these messages are present, it would be necessary to develop interventions to help viewers further combat the internalization of these messages to reduce the negative impact that appearance-focused messages have on one’s body image.
- The purpose of this study is to conduct a content analysis of appearance-related messages on popular workout videos on YouTube, which has not been previously examined. Findings obtained from previous research examining appearance-related messages and instructors’ comments provide a strong foundation to suggest the importance of examining whether similar messages are also prevalent in YouTube workout videos.

Selection of YouTube Workout Videos

- The 350 most popular workout videos on YouTube were collected
 - The videos were collected between December 14-27, 2021
 - The term “workout videos” was used to search for content on YouTube
 - “Popularity” was determined based on the number of views the video amassed.
 - The final dataset included 298 workout videos (52 videos were excluded)
 - Videos were excluded if they were not in English, less than 30 seconds long, the main instructor was not clear, or if it was not a follow-along workout video

Development of the Codebook

- The themes and variables in the codebook were gathered from previous content analyses examining similar types of media content (Boepple et al., 2016; Cohen et al., 2019; Hines et al., 2021; Lazuka et al., 2020)
- All variables and their definitions are included in Table 1

Training of Coders

- Coders were undergraduate psychology students
- Coders participated in several training sessions and practiced coding workout content
 - Once the coders reached an agreement of 90% or higher for each variable, the coding for the current study began
- Each coder viewed and coded the YouTube workout videos independently
 - Discrepancies in coding were resolved through discussion between the two coders
 - Kappa values ranged from .715 to .993, demonstrating high inter-rater reliability

Table 1. Definitions of Variables Coded

Variable	Definition
Body appreciation	Video encourages appreciation of features, functionality, and health of the body (ex: you’re getting stronger)
Body care	Video emphasizes taking care of one’s body by promoting positive, self-care behaviors (ex: reminding viewers to hydrate, stretch, rest)
Body type build	Instructor’s body type ranged from very thin (1), thin (2), athletic (3), average (4), high level of visible fat (5), or unable to determine/loose clothes (6)
Clothing tightness	Instructor is wearing clothing that is tight fitting (both top and bottom is tight fitting), normal/comfortable fit (top or bottom is more of a comfortable fit, or both top and bottom are not form fitting but not loose/baggy), loose/baggy fit, or swimsuit/underwear.
Diverse body	At least one instructor has a different body type than other instructors present
Diverse race/ethnicity	At least one instructor is not perceived as White
Inner positivity	Video encourages cultivation of inner characteristics and positive feelings that may be expressed in outer behaviors (ex: having fun, enjoying the workout)
Lose fat/weight	Emphasis on working out to lose body fat or lose weight
Modifications	Instructor is demonstrating easier/harder versions of the exercise or discussing ways to modify intensity level
Not aligned with ideals	Physical characteristics usually not associated with dominant Western beauty ideals were present or absent on the instructor (ex: stretch marks, acne, wrinkles, less taut skin, cellulite, and scars)
Tone/muscles	Instructor’s body tone/muscular definition ranged from little to no visible definition (1), visible definition (2), high-level definition (3), or unable to determine (4)
Unrealistic goals	Goals of the workout are to obtain unrealistic physical characteristics (ex: get abs in two weeks)

Results

Variable	Kappa	Percentage Present (%)
Body appreciation	.72	40.1%
Body care	.72	36.0%
Diverse body	.83	22.2%
Diverse race/ethnicity	.99	33.3%
Inner positivity	.74	30.3%
Lose fat/weight	.76	46.5%
Modifications	.74	54.9%
Unrealistic goals	.76	8.8%

- 100% of instructors had features consistent with Western cultural beauty ideals, such as clear skin, white teeth, styled hair, no wrinkles, or lighter skin (for Black instructors)
- 55.9% of instructors had a visibly toned body with clear definition of multiple muscle groups
- 68.4% of instructors had an athletic body type where they had a lean or medium build with little to no visible fat but visible muscularity
- 54.5% of instructors wore form-fitting tops and bottoms

Discussion

- Many of the videos included positive messages such as body appreciation, body care, and inner positivity
- Moreover, 54.9% of videos provided modifications for the exercises to accommodate each viewer
- Almost half (46.5%) of the videos encouraged viewers to work out to lose weight and only 1/3 (33.3%) of the videos included instructors of diverse races/ethnicities
- Many of the instructors had unrealistic body types. Past research indicates that exposure to idealized bodies is linked to body dissatisfaction (Hinz et al., 2021)
- Limitations include having collected the videos over a few weeks, thus the results are not generalizable to all YouTube videos
- The study also used a deductive method where coders followed a coding manual developed ahead of time, therefore the themes that were not included in the manual were not taken into consideration
- Future research should utilize experimental methods to examine the effects of exposure to YouTube workout videos

References

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