

Toxic Positivity and Social Media: The Pressure to Always ‘Look on the Bright Side’

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ABSTRACT

In the age of social media, the pervasive culture of "toxic positivity" has emerged as a significant psychological and social phenomenon. Over the past few years, social media platforms have become an ever-present part of everyday life, shaping how individuals express emotions, share experiences, and interact with others. While these platforms often promote positivity and optimism, a growing body of research suggests that the pressure to maintain a perpetually positive outlook can lead to "toxic positivity." This phenomenon, characterized by the suppression of negative emotions and the overemphasis on positive thinking, can lead to adverse effects on mental health and emotional well-being. The impact of toxic positivity on mental health is explored notably within social media platforms where users are often pressured to present an idealized version of their lives. This paper explores the intersection of toxic positivity and social media, examining how the pressure to always "look on the bright side" influences users' emotional expression, self-perception, and interpersonal relationships. Drawing on insights from prominent psychologists, existing literature and case studies, this paper examines the consequences of suppressing negative emotions, the role of social media in perpetuating unrealistic expectations, and strategies for fostering a more balanced emotional landscape online.

Keywords: Toxic Positivity, Social Media, Mental Health, Emotional Suppression, Forced Positivity, Negative Emotions, Emotional Validation

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, social media has become a dominant platform for self-expression, community-building, and emotional sharing. However, alongside its benefits, a growing cultural phenomenon known as toxic positivity has emerged, promoting the idea that individuals should maintain a relentlessly optimistic outlook, regardless of their circumstances (Tomasulo, 2021). Toxic positivity discourages the acknowledgment of negative emotions, often framing them as personal failures rather than natural human experiences (David & Congleton, 2013). On social media, this pressure to "look on the bright side" is amplified, as users curate idealized versions of their lives, further perpetuating unrealistic emotional standards (Freeman et al., 2020). Research suggests that the suppression of genuine emotional expression in favor of forced positivity can lead to psychological distress,

including increased feelings of isolation, guilt, and emotional invalidation (Held, 2002; Wood et al., 2022). Social media platforms, with their emphasis on performative happiness, exacerbate this issue by rewarding optimistic posts with greater engagement while marginalizing authentic emotional struggles (Santarossa & Woodruff, 2017). This paper explores the impact of toxic positivity in digital spaces, examining how the pressure to maintain a facade of constant happiness affects mental health, interpersonal relationships, and self-perception. By analyzing existing literature, case studies and social media trends, this study aims to highlight the psychological consequences of toxic positivity, propose strategies for mitigating its effects and advocate for a more balanced, emotionally honest online culture.

LITERATURE

Definition and Conceptualization of Toxic Positivity:

Toxic positivity is characterized by the dismissal or invalidation of negative emotions in favor of an overly positive outlook. Psychologists have identified this as a form of emotional invalidation, which can lead to emotional suppression and increased psychological distress (Held, 2002).

According to Dr. Susan David, a psychologist at Harvard Medical School, "Toxic positivity is the excessive and ineffective overgeneralization of a happy, optimistic state across all situations. The process of toxic positivity results in the denial, minimization, and invalidation of the authentic human emotional experience" (David, 2016).

In her book *Emotional Agility*, Dr. David discusses the dangers of suppressing negative emotions and the societal pressure to maintain a facade of constant happiness. She argues that toxic positivity undermines emotional resilience and authenticity.

A clinical psychologist, Dr. Zuckerman highlights how toxic positivity manifests on social media, where users feel pressured to present only positive aspects of their lives. "Social media perpetuates toxic positivity by creating an environment where negative emotions are seen as undesirable or weak." (Zuckerman, 2019).

Psychological Impact of Toxic Positivity:

Research indicates that the suppression of negative emotions can result in increased depression, anxiety,

and stress (Gross & Levenson, 1997). Dr. Brené Brown, a research professor at the University of Houston, emphasizes that “when we deny our emotions, they don't go away; instead, they own us, they define us. Our job is not to deny the emotion but to find the healthy way to deal with it” (Brown, 2012).

In her research on vulnerability and shame, Dr. Brown emphasizes that toxic positivity can lead to emotional suppression, which is linked to increased depression, anxiety and feelings of inadequacy. In *The Art of Insubordination*, Dr. Kashdan explores how toxic positivity discourages critical thinking and emotional diversity, which are essential for psychological well-being. “A balanced emotional life includes both positive and negative emotions. Suppressing negativity can lead to emotional stagnation” (Kashdan, 2020).

SocialMedia as a catalyst for Toxic Positivity:

Social media platforms often reward positive content with likes, shares, and comments, creating a feedback loop that encourages users to post uplifting messages while discouraging the expression of negative emotions (Valkenburg et al., 2006). This can create a distorted reality where negative emotions are seen as unacceptable or abnormal.

In *Reclaiming conversation*, Dr. Sherry Turkle, a professor at MIT, discusses how social media fosters superficial interactions, where users feel compelled to present a positive facade rather than engage in meaningful, authentic conversations. He also argues that “social media encourages us to present a curated version of ourselves, one that is always happy, always successful, and always positive” (Turkle, 2015).

In a study published in the *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, Dr. Hunt and her team found that frequent overuse of social media is associated with higher levels of feelings of loneliness and depressive moods, partly due to the pressure to appear happy and successful. Dr. Hunt emphasizes that “Social media platforms often amplify toxic positivity by encouraging users to compare their real lives to others' curated highlights” (Hunt, 2018).

Cultural and Societal Influences:

In her book *Stop Smiling, Start Kvetching*, Dr. Barbara Held critiques the American cultural obsession with positivity and how it marginalizes those who express negative emotions. She emphasizes that “The pressure to be positive all the time is not just unrealistic but also harmful, as it invalidates legitimate struggles and emotions” (Held, 2004).

In *Chatter: The Voice in Our Head, Why It Matters, and How to Harness It*, Dr. Ethan Kross explores how social media exacerbates negative self-talk by promoting unrealistic standards of happiness. Dr. Kross asserts that “Toxic positivity on social media can amplify inner criticism, as users compare their unfiltered lives to others' polished personas” (Kross, 2021).

Coping Mechanisms and solutions:

In her work on self-compassion, Dr. Kristin Neff advocates for embracing all emotions, both positive and negative, as a healthier alternative to toxic positivity. Dr. Neff focuses on “Self-compassion involves treating oneself with kindness during difficult times, rather than forcing a false sense of positivity” (Neff, 2011).

In *Permission to Feel*, Dr. Marc Brackett emphasizes the importance of emotional intelligence in combating toxic positivity. He suggests that acknowledging and validating all emotions can lead to better mental health outcomes. He points out that “Emotional intelligence allows us to navigate the complexities of our feelings without resorting to toxic positivity” (Brackett, 2019).

CASE STUDIES

Facebook and Emotional Contagion (2014)

A controversial study conducted by Facebook in collaboration with Cornell University examined emotional contagion on social media. Researchers manipulated users' news feeds to show either predominantly positive or negative content. Psychologist Dr. Adam Kramer (Facebook) and Dr. Jeffrey Hancock (Cornell University) involved in this research. According to this Research(2014), People who saw positive posts tended to share uplifting updates themselves, whereas those who encountered negative content were more inclined to post pessimistic one. The study raised ethical concerns but also highlighted how social media platforms can enforce toxic positivity by promoting only positive expressions and suppressing negative ones.

Instagram and Mental Health (2017)

Researchers from the *Royal Society for Public Health (RSPH)* in the UK conducted a study titled #StatusOfMind, which studied the impact of social media on the psychological wellbeing of young people. Psychologist Shirley Cramer (CEO of RSPH) and Dr. Becky Inkster (Neuroscientist and co-author of the study) involved in this research. According to the findings of this research (2017), Instagram was ranked as the worst platform for mental health, with users reporting feelings of inadequacy, anxiety, and depression due to the constant exposure to idealized images and positive narratives. The study highlighted how the pressure to appear happy and successful online contributed to toxic positivity, discouraging users from expressing negative emotions.

Toxic Positivity and Grief on Social Media (2020)

Dr. Brene Brown, a research professor at the University of Houston, explored how toxic positivity manifests on social media, particularly in contexts of grief and loss. She analyzed posts and comments on platforms like Facebook and Twitter. In her study, Dr. Brown found that well-meaning comments like “Everything happens for a reason” or “Stay positive” often invalidated

individuals' grief and pain. This pressure to remain positive prevented people from processing their emotions authentically.

LinkedIn and Professional Toxic Positivity (2021)

A study published in the *Journal of Organizational Behavior* examined how LinkedIn, a professional networking platform, perpetuates toxic positivity by encouraging users to present an overly optimistic view of their careers. Psychologist Dr. Marla Baskerville Watkins (Northeastern University) and Dr. Timothy A. Judge (University of Notre Dame) given their contribution in this study. The study found that users felt pressured to share only success stories and avoid discussing failures or challenges. This created an unrealistic standard of professional achievement and contributed to anxiety and imposter syndrome among users.

TikTok and Toxic Positivity in Gen Z (2022)

Researchers at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) analyzed the impact of trending TikTok behaviors on Generation Z's emotional health. They focused on the prevalence of "good vibes only" content and its effects on emotional expression. Psychologist Dr. Yalda T. Uhls (UCLA) and Dr. Emily Weinstein (Harvard University) involved in this study. The study found that TikTok's algorithm often promoted content that encouraged toxic positivity, such as motivational quotes and life hacks that dismissed negative emotions. This led to feelings of guilt and shame among users who experienced sadness or anxiety.

Consequences of Suppressing Negative Emotions:

Toxic positivity insists on a perpetually cheerful attitude, regardless of how difficult or distressing the situation may be. While optimism and positivity can be beneficial, the pressure to suppress negative emotions and only focus on the "good" can have serious consequences for mental, emotional, and even physical health. Below are some of the key consequences of suppressing negative emotions in the context of toxic positivity:

Emotional Invalidiation

When individuals are told to "just stay positive" or "look on the bright side," their genuine feelings of sadness, anger, or frustration are invalidated. This can lead to feelings of shame or guilt for experiencing natural human emotions. Over time, this invalidation can erode self-esteem and make individuals feel as though their emotions are wrong or unimportant.

Increased Mental Health Issues

Suppressing negative emotions can lead to heightened anxiety, depression, and stress. Bottling up feelings without addressing them can create internal turmoil and exacerbate mental health challenges.

Chronic suppression of emotions has been linked to conditions like major depressive disorder, generalized anxiety disorder and even post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Emotional Burnout

Constantly forcing oneself to appear happy or positive, even when struggling, can lead to emotional exhaustion. This is especially common in environments where toxic positivity is encouraged, such as workplaces or social circles. Burnout can manifest as fatigue, irritability, and a sense of detachment from one's own emotions and relationships.

Strained Relationships

Toxic positivity can create barriers in relationships. When someone is told to "just be positive" instead of being listened to or supported, it can lead to feelings of isolation and resentment. Over time, this dynamic can damage trust and intimacy, making it harder for individuals to connect authentically with others.

Physical Health Problems

Suppressing emotions doesn't just affect mental health—it can also take a toll on the body. Research shows that chronic emotional suppression is linked to issues like increased blood pressure, weakened immune defenses, and higher risk of heart-related illnesses. The stress of holding in negative emotions can trigger inflammation and other physiological responses that harm overall health.

Loss of Authenticity

Toxic positivity encourages people to put on a "happy face" even when they're struggling. This can lead to a loss of authenticity, as individuals feel pressured to hide their true feelings. Over time, this can create a disconnect between one's internal experience and external expression, leading to feelings of emptiness or identity confusion.

Delayed Healing and Growth

Negative emotions often serve as important signals that something is wrong and needs attention. By suppressing these emotions, individuals miss opportunities to address underlying issues and work through challenges. This can delay personal growth, healing, and the development of healthy coping mechanisms.

Reinforcement of Unrealistic Expectations

Toxic positivity perpetuates the unrealistic expectation that life should always be happy and problem-free. This can create a cycle of disappointment and self-criticism when individuals inevitably face difficulties. The pressure to maintain constant positivity can lead to a distorted view of reality, making it harder to navigate life's ups and downs.

Increased Feelings of Loneliness

When people feel they can't express their true emotions, they may withdraw from others or feel misunderstood. This can lead to a sense of loneliness and isolation. Chronic loneliness correlates with

adverse health outcomes, impacting mental well-being (e.g., depression, anxiety) and even mortality rates.

Difficulty Building Resilience

Resilience is built by facing and overcoming challenges, not by avoiding or suppressing them. Toxic positivity discourages individuals from confronting their struggles head-on. Without the opportunity to process and learn from difficult experiences, individuals may struggle to develop the resilience needed to cope with future challenges.

The Role of Social Media in Perpetuating Unrealistic Expectations:

Social media has evolved into a fundamental aspect of contemporary living, influencing the way we interact, exchange moments, and view the world. Although it brings many advantages, like strengthening relationships and offering avenues for personal expression, it also plays a significant role in perpetuating unrealistic expectations, particularly through the lens of *toxic positivity*. Social media amplifies the phenomenon of toxic positivity, creating a cycle of pressure to appear perpetually happy and successful, which can have damaging effects on mental health and self-esteem.

Curated Perfection and Unrealistic Standards

Social media platforms thrive on curated content, where users often share only the highlights of their lives—perfect vacations, flawless selfies, career achievements, and happy relationships. This selective sharing creates an illusion that everyone else is living a perfect life, fostering unrealistic expectations for oneself. When individuals compare their own lives to these idealized versions, they may feel inadequate or pressured to conform to these unattainable standards. Toxic positivity exacerbates this by encouraging people to "just be positive" or "look on the bright side," even when they are struggling, further alienating them from their authentic emotions.

The Pressure to always Appear Happy

Social media often rewards positivity with likes, shares, and comments, creating a feedback loop that incentivizes users to post uplifting content. This can lead to the suppression of negative emotions, as individuals fear being judged or ignored if they express vulnerability. Toxic positivity thrives in this environment, as users feel compelled to mask their struggles with forced optimism. For example, captions like "Good vibes only" or "No bad days" reinforce the idea that negative emotions are unacceptable, leaving little room for genuine human experiences.

Influencers and the Commodification of Positivity

Influencers and content creators play a significant role in shaping social media culture. Many promote lifestyles centered around constant happiness, self-improvement, and success, often tied to products or services they endorse. This commodification of positivity can make it seem like happiness is something that can be bought or achieved through external means, rather than an internal process that includes both positive and negative emotions. The

relentless focus on "staying positive" can make individuals feel like failures if they are unable to maintain this facade.

The Impact of Mental Health

The pressure to conform to unrealistic expectations and toxic positivity can have severe consequences for mental health. Studies indicate that spending too much time on social media is associated with higher levels of anxiety, depression, and social isolation. When individuals are unable to live up to the idealized standards they see online, they may experience feelings of inadequacy, shame, or self-doubt. Toxic positivity compounds these issues by discouraging people from seeking help or expressing their true feelings, leading to emotional isolation.

Strategies for Fostering a More Balanced Emotional Landscape Online:

Toxic positivity—the pressure to maintain a relentlessly positive outlook, even in the face of genuine hardship can create an emotionally stifling online environment. It often leads to the suppression of authentic feelings, leaving individuals feeling invalidated or isolated. To counteract this, we need to cultivate spaces that embrace emotional diversity, authenticity, and empathy. Below are genuine, actionable strategies to foster a healthier emotional landscape online -

Encourage Emotional Authenticity

Normalize All Emotions: Creating spaces where people feel safe expressing a full range of emotions, including sadness, anger, fear, and frustration. Use language that validates these feelings as natural and human. *Avoid Overly Positive Language:* Refrain from using phrases like "Just stay positive!" or "Good vibes only!" that dismiss complex emotions. Instead, use empathetic responses like, "That sounds really hard. How can I support you?"

Share Vulnerable Stories: Encourage users to share personal stories that reflect real struggles, not just success or happiness. This helps break the illusion that everyone is perpetually happy.

Promote Emotional Literacy

Educate About Emotional Diversity: Share resources that explain the importance of experiencing and processing all emotions, not just positive ones. Highlight how negative emotions can provide valuable insights and growth opportunities.

Teach Healthy Coping Mechanisms: Provide tools and techniques for managing difficult emotions, such as mindfulness, journaling, or seeking professional help, rather than suppressing them.

Use Inclusive Language: Encourage discussions that acknowledge the complexity of emotions, such as "It's okay to feel multiple things at once" or "You don't have to be okay all the time."

Create Safe Spaces for Honest Conversations

Moderate with Empathy: Ensure online communities are moderated in a way that allows for honest expression while maintaining respect and kindness. Discourage toxic positivity by addressing dismissive comments.

Host Open Forums: Organize discussions or Q&A sessions where users can talk about their struggles without fear of judgment. Invite mental health professionals to provide guidance.

Celebrate Imperfection: Highlight stories of resilience that include setbacks and challenges, rather than just success narratives.

Challenge Toxic Positivity Directly

Call Out Dismissive Behavior: Gently address comments or posts that promote toxic positivity. For example, if someone says, “Just think positive!” in response to a struggle, suggest a more empathetic alternative.

Share Counter-Narratives: Post content that critiques toxic positivity and explains its harmful effects.

Use examples to show how invalidating emotions can damage mental health.

Amplify Diverse Voices: Share perspectives from individuals who challenge the idea that happiness is the only acceptable emotion, including those from marginalized communities who often face additional emotional burdens.

Model Balanced Emotional Expression

Lead by Example: Share your own experiences with a mix of emotions, including challenges and setbacks. This sets a tone of authenticity and encourages others to do the same.

Acknowledge Your Limits: Be honest about when you don’t have the answers or when you’re struggling. This helps normalize the idea that it’s okay not to be okay.

Practice Active Listening: When engaging with others online, listen without judgment and respond with empathy rather than quick fixes or overly optimistic advice.

Leverage Content Creators and Influencers

Collaborate with Authentic Voices: Partner with influencers and content creators who prioritize emotional honesty and mental health awareness.

Promote Realistic Narratives: Encourage creators to share content that reflects the ups and downs of life, rather than curated highlight reels.

Highlight Mental Health Advocacy: Amplify the work of advocates who promote emotional well-being and challenge toxic positivity.

Provide Access to Mental Health Resources

Share Professional Resources: Post links to mental health hotlines, therapy directories, and self-help tools that encourage healthy emotional processing.

Educate About Therapy and Counseling: Normalize seeking professional help as a proactive step toward emotional well-being, rather than a sign of failure.

Create Resource Guides: Develop guides that help users identify and manage toxic positivity in their own lives and communities.

Foster Community Support

Encourage Peer Support: Build networks where users can support each other through difficult times without resorting to toxic positivity. For example, create groups focused on mutual aid and empathy.

Celebrate Small Wins: Acknowledge progress and resilience in ways that don’t overshadow ongoing struggles. For example, “I’m proud of you for getting through today” can be more meaningful than “Everything will be fine!”

Promote Inclusivity: Ensure that all voices, especially those from marginalized or underrepresented groups, feel heard and valued in online spaces.

Use Media and Storytelling Responsibly

Share Diverse Stories: Highlight narratives that reflect a wide range of emotional experiences, including those that don’t have tidy, happy endings.

Avoid Glorifying Struggle: While it’s important to acknowledge challenges, avoid framing suffering as inherently noble or necessary for growth.

Balance Positivity with Realism: Celebrate joy and positivity without erasing the reality of hardship.

For example, “I’m grateful for today, even though it was tough” strikes a more balanced tone.

Reflect and Adapt

Solicit Feedback: Regularly ask your community how they feel about the emotional tone of the space and what improvements can be made.

Monitor Impact: Pay attention to how your strategies are affecting the community. Are people feeling more comfortable expressing themselves? Are toxic positivity patterns decreasing?

Iterate and Improve: Continuously refine your approach based on feedback and observations to create a healthier emotional landscape.

DISCUSSION

The study has found that shed light on the pervasive nature of toxic positivity on social media and its implications for emotional well-being and mental health. One of the major takeaways from this research is the way toxic positivity invalidates authentic emotional experiences. By prioritizing optimism and dismissing negative emotions, social media users may feel compelled to suppress their true feelings, leading to emotional dissonance. This dissonance can exacerbate stress, anxiety, and feelings of isolation, particularly for individuals already struggling with mental health challenges. Importantly, this research underscores the need for a more balanced approach to emotional discourse on social media. While positivity can be beneficial, it should not come at the expense of acknowledging and validating the full range of human emotions. Encouraging authenticity and fostering spaces where users feel safe to express their struggles without fear of judgment or dismissal is crucial. Mental health advocates, influencers, and platform developers have a unique opportunity to lead this shift by promoting content that normalizes emotional complexity and prioritizes well-being over performative happiness.

CONCLUSION

The exploration of toxic positivity and its prevalence on social media reveals a multifaceted issue with significant implications for emotional well-being, mental health, societal expectations and digital communication. While the intention behind promoting positivity is often well-meaning, the pressure to "always look on the bright side" can inadvertently invalidate genuine emotions, suppress authentic self-expression, and exacerbate feelings of inadequacy among users. This research highlights how the pervasive culture of toxic positivity on platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok can create unrealistic standards of happiness, leading to emotional dissonance and mental health challenges, particularly for vulnerable individuals.

One of the central conclusions of this research is that toxic positivity creates an environment where negative emotions are invalidated or dismissed. This invalidation can lead to emotional suppression, causing individuals to feel isolated, misunderstood, or inadequate when they experience struggles or hardships. The performative nature of social media exacerbates this issue, as users are often compelled to present idealized versions of their lives, perpetuating a cycle of comparison and unrealistic expectations. This study emphasizes the urgent need for a more balanced and inclusive approach to emotional discourse on social media. While positivity can be beneficial, it should not come at the expense of acknowledging and validating the full spectrum of human emotions. Encouraging authenticity, fostering empathy, and creating safe spaces for users to express their struggles without fear of judgment are essential steps toward mitigating the harmful effects of toxic positivity. Ultimately, acknowledging the complexities of human

emotions is essential for promoting mental health and well-being in the age of social media.

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