



## Review article

## Revisiting positive body image to demonstrate how body neutrality is not new

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## ABSTRACT

In this position paper, we review nonacademic and academic discourse on body neutrality, a recent concept that has spread from social media platforms into scientific publications. This discourse has (inaccurately) promulgated that body neutrality is distinct from and more realistic than positive body image and body positivity. We identify and challenge 10 myths found within this discourse: (1) positive body image and body positivity are the same and therefore interchangeable, (2) positive body image isn't realistic or attainable, (3) we should forget about body positivity and positive body image, (4) body neutrality is a new way of thinking about body image, (5) body neutrality is unique from positive body image and positivity, (6) body neutrality is a more realistic and inclusive alternative to positive body image and body positivity, (7) body neutrality is different from positive body image but we can still use the research on positive body image to support body neutrality, (8) body neutrality is a midpoint between negative body image and positive body image, (9) striving for body neutrality is sufficient, and (10) appearance can be disregarded. We offer recommendations applicable to researchers, clinicians, media, and the general public interested in body neutrality.

## 1. Introduction

In the body image field, it is common for new concepts to emerge. It is human nature to find appealing that which is presented as a new, different, better, and a more realistic alternative to what we already know (Persaud & Heneghan, 2024) and plays into our innate drive for self-actualization and self-improvement (e.g., Maslow, 1943; Sedikides & Hepper, 2009). Body neutrality is an example of a recent movement across different spheres (non-academic and academic) corresponding with enthusiasm, which requires further consideration as to whether it offers incremental value to our field.

## 1.1. Position

The goal of this position paper is to share observations about body neutrality, a recently introduced concept that spread from social media into scientific publications. We examine parallels with positive body image, and conclude that body neutrality is not unique. Rather, current descriptions and definitions of body neutrality borrow heavily from the positive body image literature while mischaracterizing it (see Table 1).

We identify myths found within body neutrality writings, which we dispute with documented research. We revisit the origins of body image scholarship including the differences among proposed constructs (positive body image, body positivity, body neutrality) to acknowledge overlaps and distinctions. We examine and discuss opposing ideas, known as dialectics, in contrast to the black-and-white thinking that pervades many writings and commentaries on these topics. We conclude this position paper with a list of recommendations applicable to a wide audience of researchers, clinicians, media, and the general public interested in body neutrality.

This discourse is important. While positive body image and body neutrality both aim to lessen body-related angst, positive body image has advantages over body neutrality in that it promotes body-related flourishing and has a rich theoretical and empirical research base supporting its tenets and validating its interventions.

## 1.2. Reflexive statement

As positive body image researchers, we engaged in a reflexive process to consolidate ideas, consider intentions, challenge assumptions,

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**Table 1**

Key Elements of Positive Body Image and Their Overlap with Current Conceptualizations of Body Neutrality and Proposed Body Neutrality Strategy Elements Based on Recent Academic Publications.

Key Elements of Positive Body Image: Most Commonly Described in Body Neutrality Spheres		Body Neutrality Definition and Strategy Elements by Pellizer and Wade (2023)		Body Neutrality Definition and Single Session Intervention (SSI) Elements by Smith et al. (2023)
	Early support	Examples of subsequent support		
Body appreciation	Scale title of Avalos et al.'s (2005) BAS and further elaborated by Frisé and Holmqvist (2010) and by Wood-Barcalow et al. (2010)	5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10	Same as	Body gratitude and functionality appreciation. Writing a letter of gratitude to the body.
			Same as	Flexible (body image changes across the lifespan, varies with chronic illness/disability/injury). "Accepting that you don't have to love how you look to appreciate what it does for you and not feel like you need to change it." "Just like we don't always feel happy, it's normal to not always love your body." Countering negative thoughts with statements affirming flexibility and fluidity (e.g., "I'm not happy with the way I look today, and that's okay, everyone feels like that sometimes").
Fluidity	Frisé & Holmqvist (2010); Wood-Barcalow et al. (2010)	5, 6, 7, 9,10	May include	Some days we feel good about our body, some days we feel bad about our body, but on all days, we can respect our body. Choosing coping statements that affirm body image flexibility and fluidity (e.g., "This is uncomfortable, but this stress won't last forever and I'll feel like myself again soon"). "Valuing your body based on what it does for you." Writing "a list of things your body lets you do, that you appreciate." Countering negative thoughts with functionality-based statements (e.g., "I can appreciate my body for things besides its appearance, like what it helps me do").
			Same as	Body gratitude and functionality appreciation. Focusing on the body's functions and what it does for us. Choosing coping statements that affirm one's body functionality and taking care of the body (e.g., "My body helps me in many ways, and I will help it by taking care of its needs"). "Our bodies do not need to be seen as attractive or beautiful for us to exist and be respected." "Recognizing that our body is just one part of us and does not define our actual selves. Our bodies do so much more and allow us to do so much more than be seen by others."
Functionality appreciation	Frisé & Holmqvist (2010); Wood-Barcalow et al. (2010)	5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10		Writing a list of appreciated body functions. Choosing coping statements that affirm one's body functionality and taking care of the body (e.g., "My body helps me in many ways, and I will help it by taking care of its needs"). "Our bodies do not need to be seen as attractive or beautiful for us to exist and be respected."
Priority of inner characteristics; self-worth is not tied to appearance.	Item 8 in Avalos et al.'s (2005) BAS and further elaborated by Frisé and Holmqvist (2010) and by Wood-Barcalow et al. (2010)	4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10		Self-worth is not defined by appearance. De-emphasize the contribution of appearance and celebrate intrinsic strengths that have nothing to do with appearance, including our unique personalities, qualities, and traits. "Recognizing that our body is just one part of us and does not define our actual selves. Our bodies do so much more and allow us to do so much more than be seen by others."
			Same as	Acknowledge and grow our external contributors to self-esteem such as hobbies, friendships. Countering negative thoughts with statements affirming one's inherent worth (e.g., "How I feel about my appearance does not determine my worth as a human being"). Choosing coping statements that affirm one's inherent worth (e.g., "My worth and lovability do not depend on my looks").
Body image flexibility	Frisé & Holmqvist (2010); Wood-Barcalow et al., (2010)	5, 6, 7, 9, 10	Same as	Flexible (body image changes across the lifespan, varies with chronic illness/disability/injury). Some days we feel good about our body, some days we feel bad about our body, but on all days, we can respect our body. Nonjudgmental stance.
			May include	Mindfulness and mindfulness activities. Opposite action (choosing to do something helpful to push against unhelpful thoughts) Countering negative thoughts with statements affirming flexibility and fluidity (e.g., "I'm not happy with the way I look today, and that's okay, everyone feels like that sometimes"). Choosing coping statements that affirm body image flexibility and fluidity (e.g., "This is uncomfortable, but this stress won't last forever and I'll feel like myself again soon").
Additional Key Elements of Positive Body Image			Body Neutrality Definition and Strategy Elements by Pellizer and Wade (2023)	Body Neutrality Definition and SSI by Smith et al. (2023)

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Table 1 (continued)

Key Elements of Positive Body Image: Most Commonly Described in Body Neutrality Spheres		Body Neutrality Definition and Strategy Elements by Pellizzer and Wade (2023)		Body Neutrality Definition and Single Session Intervention (SSI) Elements by Smith et al. (2023)
	Early support	Examples of subsequent support		
Body acceptance and love	Items 2, 4, 5, 6, 10, 13 in Avalos et al.'s (2005) BAS and further elaborated by Frisén and Holmqvist (2010) and by Wood-Barcalow et al., (2010)	5, 6, 8, 9, 10	Same as May include	Radical acceptance of the body as it is right now. Scale use (reducing weight checking or getting rid of scales altogether).
Body respect	Item 1 within Avalos et al.'s (2005) BAS and further elaborated by Wood-Barcalow et al., (2010)	5, 6, 9	Same as	Nurturing and respecting the body.
Taking care of the body via adaptive self-care behaviors (e.g., intuitive eating, joyful physical activity)	Items 7 and 11 in Avalos et al.'s (2005) BAS and further elaborated by Frisén and Holmqvist (2010) and by Wood-Barcalow et al. (2010)	5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10	Same as	Nourishing the body with nutrition and joyful physical activity. Not engaging in dieting or other disordered behaviors. Eating mindfully and intuitively. Setting eating and exercise goals based on health not weight or shape. Self-care activities that show love and respect to self and body.
Adaptive appearance investment	Wood-Barcalow et al. (2010)	5, 8, 9, 10	May include	Wearing clothing that is comfortable and enjoyable. Discarding clothing that no longer fits.
Protective filtering	Item 12 in Avalos et al.'s (2005) BAS further elaborated by Frisén and Holmqvist (2010) and by Wood-Barcalow et al. (2010)	4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10	May include	Social media (being critically reflective, unfollowing unhelpful content... and instead following body neutral content) Opposite action (choosing to do something helpful to push against unhelpful thoughts) Being mindful of our own body talk by reflecting on and challenging unhelpful body thoughts.
Reciprocity	Wood-Barcalow et al. (2010)	5, 6, 8, 9, 10	May include	Finding a community of like-minded individuals. Redirecting body conversations with others or about others. Activism (e.g., challenging unrealistic beauty standards, pushing for workplace reform, civil rights legislation)
Refusing to engage in disparaging body talk	Wood-Barcalow et al. (2010)	5, 9	May include	Self-compassion to self and body. Consider what to say to someone else. Being kind, gentle, and patient with self. Use of body-neutral statements.
Broadly conceptualizing beauty	Item 8 in Avalos et al.'s (2005) BAS and further elaborated by Frisén and Holmqvist (2010) and by Wood-Barcalow et al., (2010)	4, 5, 6, 9, 10	Same as	Inclusive of all bodies.

Note. 1 = Avalos et al. (2005); 2 = Wood-Barcalow et al. (2010); 3 = Frisén and Holmqvist (2010); 4 = Holmqvist and Frisén (2012); 5 = Tylka & Wood-Barcalow (2015c); 6 = Bailey et al. (2015); 7 = Alleva and Tylka (2021); 8 = Holmqvist Gattario and Frisén (2019); 9 = Alleva et al. (2023); 10 = Ogle et al. (2023).

The format of this table was inspired by Mander et al. (2014).

Table 1 includes only content derived from academic peer-reviewed journal articles, and thus does not incorporate non-academic commentary on body neutrality. Further, the articles from the positive body image field are mainly qualitative and narrative articles that have identified and described the conceptualization of (elements of) positive body image. We acknowledge that there are numerous studies that could be included here, with alternative research designs (e.g., studies supporting the relationship between functionality appreciation and well-being; Linardon et al., 2023). The list of example studies is not intended to be exhaustive but rather to exemplify the conceptualization of positive body image as based on peer-reviewed research in this field.

acknowledge potential blind spots, and ensure the appropriate representation of scholarly work. While doing so, we noticed (and accounted for) how our respective personal investments in the field of positive body image shape our interpretations and presentation of information, as well as set the tone of this paper. At times, we questioned how the

overall scholarly work of positive body image has been mischaracterized, with its core tenets then marketed by another name, body neutrality. This oversight may be an inadvertent omission, perhaps a byproduct of getting caught up in the zeitgeist of the body neutrality movement. We simultaneously acknowledge that the construct of

positive body image largely resides within the “ivory tower,” with nominal social media and community presence. To assure accountability, we invited nine premiere body image researchers and two clinicians to offer their feedback, which was considered and integrated in this position paper.

## 2. Myths within body neutrality writings

Proponents of body neutrality position it as a novel construct that is more realistic to pursue than positive body image, resulting in the promotion of many myths. These myths first reduce positive body image to a unidimensional construct and equate it with one faction of the on-line body positivity movement, which focuses on appearance. This reductionistic portrayal opens the door for dismissing both positive body image and body positivity as unattainable and unrealistic, and introducing body neutrality as an alternative, unique construct consisting of (discarded) elements of positive body image. Body neutrality then (falsely) shines as an attainable and sufficient end-goal that is worthy to pursue. Below, we break this process down into 10 myths circulated within body neutrality spheres and provide evidence that counters each myth, reclaiming the multidimensional and adaptive nature of positive body image (see Table 2).

### 2.1. Myth 1: positive body image and body positivity are the same and therefore interchangeable

**Evidence:** Although there are similarities between positive body image (one’s perspective of the body) and body positivity (a movement), they have unique origins with critical differences.

Positive body image and body positivity are often confused and conflated. Articles written by professionals and non-professionals contain explanations of their differences but then use them interchangeably. We describe the origins of both positive body image and the body positivity movement to highlight critical differences.

#### 2.1.1. Positive body image origins

Before 2005, research on body image was focused predominantly on negative body image and more narrowly limited to its appearance-related aspects (e.g., weight, body shape) (Cash & Smolak, 2011; Thompson et al., 1999). Inspired by the advancements within the emerging field of positive psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) and budding theory of positive body image (Williams et al., 2004), the construct of *body appreciation* emerged (Avalos et al., 2005). Body appreciation tapped into four interrelated themes: (a) holding favorable opinions of the body regardless of its appearance; (b) accepting the body despite its imperfections; (c) respecting the body by attending to its needs and engaging in healthy behaviors; and (d) protecting the body by rejecting unrealistic images of beauty presented in the media. Avalos et al. (2005) developed items that reflected these four themes to construct the Body Appreciation Scale (BAS). Importantly, the BAS was uniquely associated with well-being even after accounting for the contributions made by multiple measures of negative body image, highlighting the incremental value of body appreciation to the body image field.

After 2010, the field of positive body image gained strong momentum due to the publication of three qualitative articles. Wood-Barcalow et al. (2010) interviewed 15 U.S. women, who self-identified as having a positive body image, and five body image clinicians and researchers, and identified these characteristics: (a) appreciating the function, health, and features of the body; (b) accepting and loving the body as is; (c) holding spiritual beliefs that bodies were designed to be special; (d) taking care of the body via healthy behaviors; (e) filtering

information in a body-protective manner; (f) broadly conceptualizing beauty; and (g) having an inner positivity that influences behavior. Importantly, Wood-Barcalow et al. also identified three *processes* of positive body image: (a) *reciprocity* (changing, shaping, and altering environments in positive ways, such as mentoring others to have a positive body image); (b) *protective filtering* (processing positive information and rejecting most negative information such as appearance-related pressures); and (c) *fluidity* (e.g., acknowledging “bad body image days” at times due to being immersed in a culture that idealizes a narrow beauty ideal).

Around the same time, Frisén and Holmqvist conducted two qualitative studies of 30 early adolescents from Sweden with high body esteem (Frisén & Holmqvist, 2010; Holmqvist & Frisén, 2012) and noted similar positive body image characteristics as Wood-Barcalow et al. (2010). Overall, these adolescents indicated that a functional view of their body and acceptance of their perceived bodily imperfections coincides with positive body image (Frisén & Holmqvist, 2010). They found physical activity to be joyful, engaged in protective filtering, defined beauty widely and flexibly, stressed the importance of looking like “oneself” rather than media ideals, described their appearance as average-looking, and indicated that personality was more important than looks (Frisén & Holmqvist, 2010; Holmqvist & Frisén, 2012).

Tylka and Wood-Barcalow (2015a) synthesized findings from the aforementioned qualitative studies on positive body image to revise the BAS, resulting in the Body Appreciation Scale-2 (BAS-2) and edited (2015b) a special issue within *Body Image: An International Journal of Research*. One article within this issue (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015b) described “what is, and what is not” positive body image, based on the extant research evidence:

Our current understanding of positive body image demonstrates that it is: a distinct construct from negative body image, *multifaceted* (with the facets including body appreciation, body acceptance and love, adaptive appearance investment, broadly conceptualizing beauty, inner positivity that radiates outward and manifests as adaptive behavior, and filtering information in a body-protective manner), *holistic* (in which internal experiences such as inner positivity and protective filtering are interwoven with external behaviors, interpersonal relationships, community, media, and culture to create attunement), *stable but adjustable* via intervention, likely *protective*, linked to unconditional body acceptance by others, and *molded by individuals’ multiple social identities*. We also elucidate that positive body image is *not*: being highly satisfied with all aspects of appearance, limited to appearance at the exclusion of other body dimensions (e.g., body functionality), expressed as narcissism or vanity, foolproof in its ability to protect against all body image-related threats, linked to disengagement from self-care, or aided by frequent appearance-related compliments from others. (p. 127).

From 2015 on, the study of positive body image gained additional momentum with the development of new scales to assess *functionality appreciation* (Alleva et al., 2017) and *broad conceptualization of beauty* (Tylka & Iannantuono, 2016); further qualitative work that explored positive body image in diverse groups (e.g., Alleva et al., 2023; Bailey et al., 2015; Maes et al., 2021; McHugh et al., 2014; Ogle et al., 2023; Poulter & Treharne, 2021; Thornton & Lewis-Smith, 2023); applications of positive body image to interventions (e.g., Guest et al., 2019, 2022; Halliwell et al., 2019; Sundgot-Borgen et al., 2020; Wood-Barcalow et al., 2021); and longitudinal studies of positive body image (e.g., Linardon, 2021, 2022, 2023; Messer et al., 2022). Constructs such as *body image flexibility* (i.e., experiencing body-related thoughts, feelings, and sensations without acting on them or trying to change them; Sandoz et al., 2013; Sandoz et al., 2019) and *body compassion* (Altman et al.,

**Table 2**  
Body Neutrality Myths with Corresponding Examples, and Evidence Refuting Myths.

Myth	Example	Evidence
1 Positive body image and body positivity are the same and therefore interchangeable (e.g., often referring to “the positive body image movement” and being “body positive”).	“Body positivity refers to having a positive view of your physical body, regardless of its shape, size, or other appearance-related attributes.” (Cleveland Clinic, 2022)	Although there are similarities between positive body image (one’s perspective of the body) and body positivity (a movement), they have unique origins with critical differences.
2 Positive body image isn’t realistic or attainable.	“Having a positive body image and feeling good about how you look all the time simply isn’t realistic for many people, who sometimes feel as if they’ve failed when they don’t like the reflection staring back at them in the mirror.” (Poirier, as quoted in Haupt, 2022)	Moving toward positive body image is feasible and worth the effort based on established research.
3 We should forget about body positivity and positive body image.	“We need to let go of the idea of body positivity. There’s nothing wrong with loving ourselves or our bodies, if we’re being realistic about what ‘love’ means. But I do take issue with the notion that we should be able to feel a constant flow of celebratory happiness and affectionate gratitude toward our bodies, or that we have to joyfully embrace every dimple, every jiggle, every inch. That’s neither realistic nor necessary.” (Kneeland, 2023)	Addressing critiques of <i>accurate portrayals</i> of positive body image and body positivity is important, and we can achieve this goal without abandoning these constructs.
4 Body neutrality is a new way of thinking about body image.	“Many are turning toward a new philosophy called ‘body neutrality’ that places much less importance on positive body-talk and appearance, focusing instead on accepting your body for what it is.” (DiBenedetto, 2022)	Current definitions of body neutrality are inconsistent and tap into existing conceptualizations of positive body image.
5 Body neutrality is unique from positive body image and body positivity.	“Body neutrality has since arisen as an alternative to [body positivity], often incorporated into conversations about inclusive, intersectional health—ones that emphasize fitness programs that don’t use appearance or diet-related goals, and instead promote fun, positive movement and emotional health.... It doesn’t assign moral worth to appearance (no “good” or “bad” body parts), or strive for beauty as an end goal, and it urges people to reject the thought that not loving yourself makes you a failure.” (DiBenedetto, 2022)	Body neutrality includes many components of positive body image (e.g., body appreciation [including body respect and body acceptance], fluidity, functionality appreciation, body image flexibility) while promoting a neutral conceptualization.
6 Body neutrality is a more realistic and inclusive alternative to positive body image and body positivity.	“Body neutrality [as opposed to body positivity] takes the pressure way off, and tends to feel like a much more approachable and achievable goal....it offers a safe place to rest as you exit body hatred, without putting pressure on you to somehow magically love every iota of your body and self.” (Kneeland, 2023)	The body neutrality movement emerged as a critical response to the online body positivity backlash and is not grounded in research.
7 Body neutrality is different from positive body image, but we can still use the research on positive body image to support body neutrality.	“Body neutrality is a paradigm shift that encourages individuals to focus less on the appearance of their bodies and more on what their bodies can do for them. It transcends the conventional notions of positive and negative body image and advocates for a neutral stance.” (Poirier, 2024b)	Body neutrality is not only misdefined but is now being promoted in the body image field despite the adequacy of data.
8 Body neutrality is a midpoint between negative body image and positive body image.	“Body neutrality is a ‘kind of détente, a white flag, a way station between hating oneself and loving oneself.’” (Meltzer, 2017)	Positive body image and negative body image do not fall on the same continuum.
9 Striving for body neutrality is sufficient.	“Body neutrality... takes the pressure way off, and tends to feel like a much more approachable and achievable goal.” (Kneeland, 2023)	Aiming for a neutral body image corresponds with biases and falls short of flourishing.
10 Appearance can be disregarded.	“Body neutrality places no emphasis on physical appearances, beauty, or desire.” (DiBenedetto, 2022)	It is unrealistic to disregard appearance completely.

2020; Beadle et al., 2021) are also studied under the umbrella of positive body image. The *Handbook of Positive Body Image and Embodiment: Constructs, Protective Factors, and Interventions* highlighted the historical evolution of positive body image research (Tylka & Piran, 2019).

Recent research in positive body image has also included the study of developmental trajectories to investigate *fluidity* and cross-national investigations. For example, drawing from a larger longitudinal cohort study conducted in Sweden, Holmqvist Gattario and Frisén (2019) identified participants who as adolescents reported low levels of body esteem, but by early adulthood had reported high levels of body esteem. Semi-structured interviews with these participants identified turning points that characterized their transition toward a more positive body image. Demonstrating the fluidity of (positive) body image, these participants described that maintaining a positive body image requires

“constant work” (p. 59), as they were unceasingly exposed to various body image threats such as appearance-ideal media imagery. This process also involves body image flexibility and body compassion, which normalize fluctuations in body image and promote observing these fluctuations without judgment, with kindness toward the self, and recognizing that one’s experience is part of the common human experience. This study extends qualitative findings that aspects of negative body image can co-occur with aspects of positive body image (e.g., individuals with a predominantly positive body image can experience dissatisfaction with some aspects of their body; Frisén & Holmqvist, 2010; Wood-Barcalow et al., 2010). Furthermore, an international collaborative of over 200 researchers investigated body appreciation (via the BAS-2) across 65 nations (Swami et al., 2023), supporting the generalizability of body appreciation in that it holds a similar meaning

and is connected to higher psychological well-being across nations.

### 2.1.2. Body positivity movement origins and evolution into social media

While positive body image is a *person's experience* of accepting, appreciating, respecting, caring, and loving their body (see above section), body positivity is a *movement* that aims to *encourage* body acceptance (Rodgers et al., 2022), or the idea that “all bodies are good bodies” (Griffin et al., 2022). Body positivity can be traced back to critical feminist movements in the 1960s that countered societal body ideals and fought against anti-fat discrimination (Afful & Ricciardelli, 2015) and fat, Black, and queer activism in response to the lack of visibility of, and value placed on, certain bodies within visual media (see also Griffin et al., 2022).

At its inception, body positivity reflected a value system of enjoying a positive relationship with the body (Goodman, 2023). Although many activists advocated for challenging, restructuring, or dismantling existing capitalist, racist, ableist, ageist, sizeist, and patriarchal structures, body positivity focused more on individuals' responsibilities to embrace their bodies as a political act than dismantling structural limitations (e.g., fat stigma, white supremacy). As a result of conceptualizing a societal issue as an individual issue, popular culture (e.g., fitness, health and wellness industries) appropriated, commodified, and gentrified the body positivity movement, often excluding fat, non-white, differently abled, and/or nonheteronormative bodies (Griffin et al., 2022). Likewise, body positivity's online social media presence (e.g., #BoPo) attempts to promote body acceptance through celebrating body diversity and encouraging individual-level respect and care for all bodies. Yet, because of its divergence from fat, Black, and queer activism, it has a blind spot: It often features, centers, and promotes bodies that are young, white, lean, able-bodied, and/or cisgendered.

### 2.1.3. Conflation between positive body image and body positivity

Body neutrality spaces often equate positive body image with body positivity by using these terms interchangeably, creating a problem whereby body positivity is reduced to simply “loving your appearance.” Therefore, positive body image also becomes “loving your appearance” resulting in a simplistic, reductionistic, and inaccurate portrayal. Below we offer critical differences between the two concepts.

One critical difference involves the *promoters* of each and their *intentions* (e.g., to enhance quality of life vs. to sell products vs. to gain notoriety). While body image scholars study and advance positive body image following the scientific method in peer-reviewed publications, body positivity can be promoted by anyone via any platform, resulting in varying definitions. As an example, while content analyses of body positivity social media posts revealed that many images depict a diversity of body sizes and include messages consistent with the characteristics of positive body image, other images center on appearance and feature women who are thin, fit, able-bodied, and toned (Cohen et al., 2019a,b; Lazuka et al., 2020; Sastre, 2014). Any social media user can post content and label it as body positive; however, this content may or may not represent body positivity and may reflect the user's blind spots.

Another critical difference is the *scope* and *messages* of the content offered. The messages and images contained within body positivity highlight appearance more so than other characteristics, whereas positive body image focuses on the body in a holistic manner (see Section 2.1.1.). Further, body positivity content typically does not normalize the experience of negative body-related thoughts and emotions. This narrowed scope aligns with toxic body positivity, or the belief that people should always think positively about their body (Bisbing, cited in Goodman, 2023), which is the body-specific form of the larger concept of toxic positivity that rejects uncomfortable emotions in favor of an ever-cheerful and falsely positive facade (Cherry, 2023). This narrative

does not allow for authentic reactions to body image-related threats and negative body-related experiences, both of which are acceptable and common while holding an overall positive body image (Alleva et al., 2023; Wood-Barcalow et al., 2010). In contrast, the scope of positive body image promotes individual body acceptance while also acknowledging the existence of negative body thoughts and emotions that may emerge (Sandoz et al., 2019; Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015c). Furthermore, positive body image promotes the honoring of body sovereignty and extends appreciation beyond the body to the Self (Alleva et al., 2023; Avalos et al., 2005; Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015c; Wood-Barcalow et al., 2010, 2021), whereas body positivity content often focuses narrowly on body size, shape, and weight.

## 2.2. Myth 2: positive body image isn't realistic or attainable

**Evidence:** Moving toward positive body image is feasible and worth the effort based on established research.

The sentiment that positive body image is not realistic or attainable for many individuals, such as those with eating disorders, is often found within body neutrality spheres. Yet, moving toward a positive body image *is indeed feasible* through targeted interventions, even for those with eating disorders or substantial body dissatisfaction (Alleva et al., 2015; Cook-Cottone, 2015, 2023; Koller et al., 2020; Linardon et al., 2022b; Wood-Barcalow et al., 2021). A wealth of evidence points toward the benefits of holding a positive body image (see evidence within Myth 8) and applies to other psychological disorders as well. For instance, integrating positive psychological interventions into treatment for those with clinical depression has been found to decrease symptomatology and increase remission and clinically significant change rates compared to treatment-as-usual (Geschwind et al., 2019, 2020; Seligman et al., 2006).

To proclaim that positive body image is not attainable for many people delegitimizes the experiences of those individuals who have transformed from espousing a predominantly negative body image toward a predominantly positive body image (Alleva et al., 2023; Frisén & Holmqvist, 2010; Holmqvist & Frisén, 2012; Holmqvist Gattario & Frisén, 2019; Wood-Barcalow et al., 2010), even for those self-described as not meeting societal body norms (Alleva et al., 2023; see Myth 9). This myth is further discounted by the fact that, across studies, many participants endorse high levels of body appreciation, functionality appreciation, and body image flexibility.

## 2.3. Myth 3: we should forget about body positivity and positive body image

**Evidence:** Addressing critiques of *accurate portrayals* of positive body image and body positivity is important, and we can achieve this goal without abandoning these constructs.

Here, we acknowledge and respond to overarching critiques of both positive body image and body positivity.

### 2.3.1. Responses to common critiques of positive body image

One common argument is that positive body image fails to consider the complexities (e.g., gender dysphoria, body discomfort) that exist between social identities and body image, which may result in a range of negative impacts for individuals with marginalized identities (Duffy et al., 2016; Smith et al., 2023). On the one hand, this critique may result from a misunderstanding of what positive body image is, reducing it to an emphasis on appearance and a directive to love your body all of the time. Based on this (mis)characterization of positive body image, intervention approaches could indeed risk harming individuals by dismissing or minimizing their experiences if the focus is to love and accept

their appearance.

We argue that positive body image applies to all bodies, from the understanding that it (a) is holistic (including body functions), (b) involves a rejection of sociocultural appearance ideals (including internalized beliefs) for how a body “should” look and function, and (c) includes an ability to respect and take care of the body regardless of whether one is satisfied with their appearance and functionality. For example, an individual can respect and appreciate their body as it currently is, while working toward bringing their appearance in line with their gender identity; these adaptive appearance investments can be important in fostering and maintaining positive body image (Alleva et al., 2023). Further, while minority identities (e.g., concerning sexual orientation, gender, physical ability, ethnicity) can increase one’s vulnerability to experiencing negative body image, these same aspects can serve as valuable resources in fostering and maintaining positive body image (e.g., via pride in one’s identity as expressed through appearance, via positive social connections among one’s community; Alleva et al., 2023; Bennett et al., 2024; Johnson-Munguia et al., 2024; McHugh et al., 2014).

On the other hand, we acknowledge that even though a wealth of research on positive body image across cultures and geographical regions has been conducted in the past 15 years (e.g., Linardon et al., 2022a, 2023; McHugh et al., 2014; Swami et al., 2023), there is still work to be done across social identities and their intersections. Instead of dismissing the construct of positive body image for this reason, we encourage researchers to conduct more studies in this area. Some of this work is already emerging (e.g., Bennett et al., 2024; Johnson-Munguia et al., 2024; Ogle et al., 2023), illustrating the continued interest in positive body image scholarship and recognition of its multifaceted nature.

Another common argument against positive body image is that it focuses exclusively on appearance. As described in Section 2.1.1., even the earliest publications of positive body image *never* conceptualized it as emphasizing appearance alone. Positive body image is holding favorable opinions towards the body *despite its appearance* (Avalos et al., 2005) and focusing on body functionality (Frisén & Holmqvist, 2010; Wood-Barcalow et al. (2010) while also appreciating one’s unique features and looking like “oneself” (e.g., tattoos, make-up, clothing) (Holmqvist Gattario & Lunde, 2018; Wood-Barcalow et al., 2010). Positive body image does not focus fully on appearance, nor does it fully disregard appearance. Rather, appearance may play a functional role in positive body image and identity, as it becomes one way to express authenticity and/or pride in identity (McHugh et al., 2014; Ogle et al., 2023).

### 2.3.2. Responses to common critiques of body positivity

While body positivity may portray qualities of positive body image (e.g., body acceptance, broad conceptualization of beauty), it may also lack representation of body shapes, sizes, and ethnicities that accurately reflect the general population (e.g., Lazuka et al., 2020). Further, while the overall evidence supports that exposure to body positivity on social media contributes to improvements in body image (e.g., de Valle et al., 2021; Vandenbosch et al., 2022), some articles reported that it can enhance self-objectification (i.e., an emphasis on appearance as a source of self-worth) and that a proportion of content promotes selling a product or service (e.g., Cohen et al., 2019a; Lazuka et al., 2020). Skepticism toward aspects of the body positivity movement is justified and needs to be accounted for, and simultaneously should not correspond with a rejection of the movement.

Another criticism of body positivity is its corporate connections. Other social justice movements have been impacted by “big business” (e.g., corporate social responsibility efforts) and commercialization, such as Black Lives Matter, Me Too, and Pride (Berkeley Economic Review, 2019; Kelly, 2020), and this can be problematic and harmful. For

example, subversive social justice movements that enter the mainstream may risk becoming a fleeting fad, and purchasing products that signal these movements can result in *moral licensing* by consumers, ultimately reducing effective action (Berkeley Economic Review, 2019; Blanken et al., 2015; Kelly, 2020). Further, involvement of business entities in social justice movements may reinforce the idea that it is the *individual’s* fault for feeling negatively about their body and for their lived experiences, absolving the responsibility from businesses and wider structural systems.

The two aforementioned arguments are valid and provide important areas for consideration. With that said, we propose that rather than dismiss movements like body positivity, we redirect efforts towards producing and supporting content and actions that *are* concordant with the movement’s original intentions (and call these efforts body positivity rather than rename them body neutrality), and direct skepticism toward the broader systems (capitalism, materialism) that reward individuals and businesses for co-opting these movements. Furthermore, scholars can conduct research on the intersections between positive body image, body positivity, and big business, as exemplified by recent work by Craddock et al. (2019).

An unsubstantiated criticism of the body positivity movement is that depicting diverse people who are comfortable and happy in their bodies could encourage others to discontinue self-care activities. However, as described above, the consensus based on the extant empirical research is that *exposure to body positivity images on social media contributes to actual improvements in body image* (Stevens & Griffiths, 2020; Vandenbosch et al., 2022), and improvements in body image then prospectively contribute to well-being, such as intuitive eating, exercise, and decreased substance use (Andrew et al., 2016; Linardon, 2021, 2022, 2023).

### 2.4. Myth 4: Body neutrality is a new way of thinking about body image

**Evidence:** Current definitions of body neutrality are inconsistent and tap into existing conceptualizations of positive body image.

The term “neutral body image” appeared in the academic literature in 2011 and was described as simply *tolerating the body*, which could limit self-care and result in disconnection from how the body is feeling and functioning (Tylka, 2011, 2018; Wood-Barcalow et al., 2021). In a qualitative analysis of body image in middle-aged and older adult women, participant responses representing “unsure” attitudes toward their bodies were categorized as neutral body image (Bailey et al., 2016). The authors conceptualized these neutral experiences as “merely low levels of negative body image and satisfaction (p. 92)” that are also “distinct from positive body image” (p. 94). According to these researchers, neutral body image is more similar to negative body image conceptually as well as empirically than it is to positive body image (Bailey et al., 2016).

Those in non-academic spheres have blurred neutral body image and body neutrality in some discourses. That is, instead of being recognized as solely a social media movement, body neutrality is also framed as a body image variable. As an example, an online post states, “For some, achieving a neutral body image is more realistic than pure body positivity. ‘The term body neutrality reminds us that we do not have to love our body to respect it, to nourish it, listen to its cues, or to have gratitude for what it can do’” (DeCaro, cited in Vann, 2024).

#### 2.4.1. Non-academic commentary on body neutrality

In 2015, Anne Poirier promoted body neutrality as a new philosophy which is described in her follow-up book, *The Body Joyful* (2021). Poirier (2021), who trademarked the term, describes body neutrality as “a paradigm shift that encourages individuals to focus less on the appearance of their bodies and more on what their bodies can do for them. It

transcends the conventional notions of positive and negative body image and advocates for a neutral stance.” Poirier’s definition of body neutrality borrows from positive body image: “It inspires you to redefine the relationship you have with your body by encouraging a shift from self and body criticism to body acceptance and appreciation.” In Myth 6, we further illustrate how Poirier’s conceptualization of body neutrality is fundamentally based on body appreciation and therefore does not represent a paradigm shift.

#### 2.4.2. Research on body neutrality

In a 2023 academic article, body neutrality is described in relation to what it is not: It is not the body positivity movement (Pellizzer & Wade, 2023). Three features of body neutrality were identified via a synthesis of website content (107 websites). First, body neutrality is a neutral attitude toward the body that is more realistic, mindful, and flexible than body positivity [note Myths 1 and 2 perpetuated here] and involves being mindful of and accepting bad body image days, permission to not love the body, a middle-ground perspective of not self-loathing or loving the body, and realizing that body image is not stable. Second, body neutrality involves appreciating, respecting, and caring for the functionality of the body and treating the body with respect. Third, body neutrality de-emphasizes appearance and celebrates tying self-worth to internal qualities and external contributors such as hobbies and social connections.

Scholars of another recently published article stated that “there is no published empirical research attempting to validate a definition of body neutrality, and there is some variation in the definitions proliferating in the media” (p. 1556; Smith et al., 2023). The authors proposed two commonalities across these definitions: body neutrality (a) incorporates functionality appreciation as a “central component” and (b) is contrasted with body positivity. Interestingly, concerning (a), the authors defined functionality appreciation from Alleva et al. (2017) and provided additional citations wherein functionality appreciation is explicitly positioned as a core element of positive body image (Alleva & Tylka, 2021; Swami et al., 2020; Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015c). Furthermore, they elaborate:

Unlike body positivity, which encourages individuals to love the way their body looks, the functionality appreciation aspect of body neutrality involves encouraging individuals to value their body based on the functions it performs, even if they are not always satisfied with its physical appearance. As such, body neutrality is an approach that diverges from many traditional positive body image constructs that have been researched and implemented in ED [eating disorder] prevention and treatment since Cash and Pruzinsky (2002) initiated this direction (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015). (p. 1557).

Concerning (b), their Single Session Intervention (SSI) contained exercises and vignettes that prompted adolescents to view body positivity as harmful and unrealistic, and to view body neutrality as a “well-rounded alternative to body positivity” (p. 1558).

#### 2.5. Myth 5: Body neutrality is unique from positive body image and body positivity

**Evidence:** Body neutrality includes many components of positive body image (e.g., body appreciation [including body respect and body acceptance], fluidity, functionality appreciation, body image flexibility) while promoting a neutral conceptualization.

Table 1 presents the key characteristics of positive body image (see Section 2.1.1.) mapped alongside the proposed characteristics and strategy/intervention elements of body neutrality identified in recent articles (Pellizzer & Wade, 2023; Smith et al., 2023). We contend that none of the proposed features of body neutrality or the strategy

elements, as currently conceptualized, are unique to body neutrality, but rather are features of positive body image. Below, we elaborate on some of the points of overlap with positive body image constructs.

##### 2.5.1. Body appreciation

As noted earlier, body appreciation is rooted in positive body image research since 2005 (see Evidence in Myth 1). In the *Shaping Perspectives* post, *How to Embrace Body Neutrality in 2024*, Poirier (2024c) indicates that body neutrality “inspires you to redefine the relationship you have with your body by encouraging a shift from self and body criticism to body acceptance and appreciation” and further states that “appreciating and respecting our body becomes an open door to a different way of living your life and showing up.” Within another *Shaping Perspectives* post, *The Gift of Body Neutrality*, Poirier (2024b) discusses her own experience:

Body neutrality gently quieted my critical inner voice (my Mini-Me) and started to strengthen a voice of body appreciation (my Maxi-Me) .... Though I couldn’t seem to switch over to really liking my body all the time, I was able to be at least grateful for my body. I was able to step back from the old thoughts with the help of Maxi-Me. I gave her one job. Every day find three things about your body to be grateful for. That’s it.

Poirier elaborates that “if we can choose to start appreciating and liking our bodies, might we begin to take better care of them? Might I even nurture it?” In *Accepting Your Aging Body*, Poirier (2024a) indicates that seeing people “accepting and appreciating their unique one-kind bodies” is her favorite part of her *Shaping Perspectives* company. Of note, Poirier (2024c) also offers other components of positive body image within her tips on how to practice body neutrality that stem from body appreciation: (a) “gratitude for your body’s abilities,” (b) “surround yourself with positivity” that includes “engage with communities that promote body positivity and neutrality,” (c) focus on health and well-being that includes “treat your body with respect,” and (d) intuitive eating.

##### 2.5.2. Fluidity

Once a more positive body image is cultivated, individuals can experience days or longer stretches of time when they feel more or less positively about their body (Wood-Barcalow et al., 2010, see also Section 2.1.1. and 2.9. for additional research). Overall, as demonstrated by the literature, the important part is that individuals are able to accept these changes and navigate (back) toward a more positive body image over time. This fluidity process may also involve body image flexibility and body compassion, which normalize fluctuations in body image and promote observing these fluctuations without judgment, with kindness toward the self, and recognizing that one’s experience is part of the common human experience (Beadle et al., 2021; Sandoz et al., 2013).

The first component of Pellizzer and Wade’s (2023) definition of body neutrality (“our feelings about our body change constantly so are best mindfully observed without judgement”) alludes to body image fluidity. Additionally, some of the statements included in the Body Neutrality SSI also reflected fluidity: “This is uncomfortable, but this stress won’t last forever and I’ll feel like myself again soon” and “it’s normal to not always love your body” (Smith et al., 2023).

##### 2.5.3. Functionality appreciation

As a central component to positive body image (Frisén & Holmqvist, 2010; Swami et al., 2020; Wood-Barcalow et al., 2010), functionality appreciation involves “appreciating, respecting, and honoring the body for what it is capable of doing, extending beyond mere awareness of body functionality (e.g., knowing that the body can digest food vs. being grateful that the body can digest food)” (Alleva et al., 2017; p. 20).



Yet, as illustrated in Section 2.4.2., published body neutrality articles claim functionality appreciation as their own. As an example, the second component of Pellizzer and Wade's (2023) definition of body neutrality is "a central focus on what our body allows us to do and appreciating this will lead us to respect and care for our body." Additionally, Smith et al. (2023) emphasized functionality appreciation both as a "core element" of body neutrality and as one strategy for embracing a body neutrality mindset. Within their SSI, body neutrality was defined as, "valuing your body based on what it does for you, even if you are not always happy with how it looks." The exercises involved identifying body functions that one appreciates, offering advice to fictional peers using body neutrality (functionality appreciation) principles, and countering negative body thoughts with body neutrality (functionality appreciation) statements.

#### 2.5.4. Priority of internal characteristics over appearance

Scholars and individuals with a predominantly positive body image have emphasized that having a positive body image does not equate to vanity or overvaluing appearance as a source of self-worth. This notion had already been captured in items of the original BAS (Avalos et al., 2005), including "My self worth is independent of my body shape or weight" and, "I do not focus a lot of energy being concerned with my body shape or weight" and qualitative research. For example, one participant described that body image should encompass "20–30 % of one's identity," which allows a "diverse identity based on skills, intelligence, and ability to function and interact with others, with body image being a functional sub-part" (Wood-Barcalow et al., 2010; p. 111). Similarly, another participant stated, "It's what's inside that counts; how you are, and not how you look, how you dress or whether you're thin, it is how you are that counts. I think that's the first most important thing" (Holmqvist & Frisén, 2012; p. 392). We thus contend that the third component of Pellizzer and Wade's (2023) body neutrality definition, which includes intrinsic qualities and extrinsic passions while deemphasizing appearance, is already an established component of positive body image.

#### 2.6. Myth 6: Body neutrality is a more realistic and inclusive alternative to positive body image and body positivity

**Evidence:** The body neutrality movement emerged as a critical response to the online body positivity backlash and is not grounded in research.

Part of the appeal of the body neutrality movement is the claim that "loving your body" is not always a realistic goal. Indeed, proponents of body neutrality suggest that it "may present as a more attainable and accessible pursuit for a greater number of people" (Pellizzer & Wade, 2023, p. 440) and could inform approaches to enhance body image, especially related to gender diversity (Perry et al., 2019). As stated by Poirier, "it's kind of a long jump to move to body positivity from dissatisfaction" (Meltzer, 2017). Alas, many of those promoting body neutrality have narrowly conceptualized, misaligned, and promoted positive body image and body positivity as simply "loving your appearance." This mischaracterization opens the door for body neutrality as currently conceptualized to be viewed incorrectly as a more sensible, realistic, and novel concept (encouraging people to "live with, rather than love, their appearance"; DiBenedetto, 2022) while simultaneously conflating the reductionistic description of toxic body positivity as synonymous with positive body image.

As emphasized prior, body positivity (a movement) and positive body image (personal attitudes and behaviors related to appreciating, accepting, respecting, and caring for the body) are distinct. Nevertheless, body neutrality often blurs these lines and is marketed as both a movement and a distinct set of attitudes toward the body. Of note, no

current empirical evidence exists for body neutrality as a body image construct, as there is no measure of body neutrality (Pellizzer & Wade, 2023). Instead, body neutrality proponents have borrowed constructs from positive body image, such as functionality appreciation and body image flexibility, as well as body compassion, labeling them as "body neutrality" and concluding that body neutrality is associated with well-being (Pellizzer & Wade, 2023). Research studies substantiate the validity of positive body image rather than body neutrality. The next myth elaborates on this point.

#### 2.7. Myth 7: Body neutrality is different from positive body image, but we can still use the research on positive body image to support body neutrality

**Evidence:** Body neutrality is not only misdefined but is now being promoted in the body image field despite the inadequacy of data.

As highlighted in Myth 5, prevailing definitions of body neutrality have been informed by website content written largely by non-academics, coaches, wellness experts (personal trainers, fitness experts), social media influencers, and online users. Pellizzer and Wade (2023) obtained their definition of body neutrality using a "realist synthesis of websites and a common elements approach to extract the key definition elements of body neutrality" and "strategies to improve body neutrality." Smith et al. (2023) used the definitions of body neutrality available in the media to conceptualize functionality appreciation as a central component of body neutrality. Collectively, this work did not include already established academic literature on positive body image.

We question calls to (a) conduct research to better understand how body neutrality relates to other body image constructs and (b) create a measure of body neutrality when positive body image work has been available for decades. Recently, it has been proposed to develop a body neutrality scale by "pooling relevant items from the existing (positive body image) measures" and adding in items reflective of other positive body image characteristics such as adaptive self-care and respect for the body (Pellizzer & Wade, 2023). Alas, the ethics of pooling items from existing scales and calling it by another name is not the only concern here. Scale construction of this type does not make sense: purportedly measuring a construct (i.e., body neutrality) by what it is proposed to not be (i.e., positive body image) by including items from positive body image scales.

We are concerned with the masking of research on positive body image as research on body neutrality. For example, an opinion piece in the *Conversation* indicates that "body neutrality de-emphasizes the focus on appearance, it allows us to better appreciate all the things our bodies are able to do" and then includes a hyperlink to an article on functionality appreciation (Swami, 2022b). An illusion is created that this article represents research on body neutrality. The piece further indicates, "Being grateful for being able to do the hobbies you love or appreciating your body for what it's capable of doing are both examples of body neutrality" and "there's evidence to suggest that body neutrality can be beneficial to us. Across cultures and demographic groups, body neutrality is associated with more positive body image and mental wellbeing. And the good news is there are many ways you can develop body neutrality, including writing-based therapies, yoga, and spending time in nature." Hyperlinks to positive body image research and interventions are offered. Importantly, another *Conversation* article (Swami, 2022a) recognizes the overlap between body neutrality and positive body image, "body neutrality shares many similar tenets with what researchers have called positive body image." We are concerned, though, that this message alone is insufficient to counter the myth that body neutrality is unique from positive body image. [Of note, we recognize that editors of opinion pieces might override a researcher's more informed, responsible writing in favor of what makes a "good story."].

To the casual reader of these articles, it is natural to assume that: (a) body neutrality has garnered empirical support and (b) intervention techniques for body neutrality have already been developed—when in fact, this is not the evidence. Reflecting this tendency, while many facets of Smith et al.'s (2023) SSI could have been framed as positive body image-based techniques, they described that “framing the SSI using the culturally-relevant concept of body neutrality may optimize reach, uptake, engagement, and accessibility” (p. 1557). While these practices are partly understandable, they are also ethically questionable.

We are concerned about additional ethically questionable practices within the design of research, with methodology decisions that bias the data in favor of body neutrality and against body positivity and/or positive body image. For example, within Smith and colleagues' (2023) SSI, one of the first slides describes that body positivity “encourages us to love the way our bodies look, but this just doesn't work for everyone.” Then, fictional peers who struggle with their body and describe why they feel they cannot love their body are presented (e.g., “My body hurts a lot. I can't love that about my body”), thus priming participants to view body positivity from a negative lens. Immediately thereafter, participants are asked, “Is body positivity something that works for you?” In addition, at the end of the SSI, participants are asked to rate how much they like the ideas of body positivity and body neutrality. The data from these questions are presented as evidence of the adolescents' negative attitudes toward body positivity (e.g., “oftentimes the body positivity mindset is impractical, if not toxic”) and of their higher support for body neutrality (e.g., “It feels like I can reach it. It's not on such a high shelf. It's more scientific and it acknowledges the functions it allows me to do”).

## 2.8. Myth 8: Body neutrality is a midpoint between negative body image and positive body image

**Evidence:** Positive body image and negative body image do not fall on the same continuum.

Within body neutrality writings, body image is viewed as a continuum that ranges from negative body image at one end, to positive body image at the other end. According to this perspective, having a high positive body image automatically means having a low negative body image. Body neutrality is then imagined as a middle point between negative and positive body image. While intuitive, this perspective is inconsistent with research findings.

Much research supports that positive and negative body image are each separate constructs measured on their own continuum rather than on a single continuum (Avalos et al., 2005; Linardon et al., 2022a; Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015a,c). Therefore, it is possible to exhibit variations of negative and positive body image simultaneously (e.g., Bailey et al., 2016). To illustrate, an individual might experience moderate levels of negative body image (e.g., a preoccupation with viewing certain body parts from a judgmental lens) and high levels of positive body image (e.g., appreciating the resilient functioning of the body following a health event). Positive body image is uniquely associated with various measures of well-being after controlling for negative body image, suggesting that the benefits of high positive body image cannot be explained by low negative body image (Avalos et al., 2005; Linardon et al., 2022; Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015a,c). [If positive and negative body image were on the same continuum, this unique association would not emerge]. Ultimately, if we know that positive and negative body image exist on alternate continua, then we are left with the question of whether body neutrality (as currently defined) actually exists, and if so, how it can align with that which is already established in scholarly work.

## 2.9. Myth 9: Striving for body neutrality is sufficient

**Evidence:** Aiming for a neutral body image corresponds with biases and falls short of flourishing.

Many body neutrality promoters suggest that reaching body neutrality (or a “neutral midpoint” see Myth 8) is sufficient. If the message promoted and accepted is that body neutrality is superior to positive body image which is mistakenly deemed *unrealistic and unattainable* (see Myth 2), then individuals (researchers, clinicians, media influencers, and the general public alike) may inadvertently endorse cognitive biases: (a) *learned helplessness* (Maier & Seligman, 1976) by perceiving positive body image as impossible and therefore not attempting to move toward it, (b) *negativity bias* (Jaworski, 2020; Rozin & Royzman, 2001) by not considering positive ways of interacting with the body, and (c) *experiential avoidance* (Chawla & Ostafin, 2007; Hayes et al., 1996) by avoiding uncomfortable internal body-related experiences (e.g., feelings of where the body is simply tolerated) in lieu of addressing and working through them.

Perhaps one of many pathways toward a predominantly positive body image is through the direct experience of negative body image. Multiple studies on positive body image to date acknowledged the transition from a predominantly negative body image to that of a predominantly positive body image via various sudden and/or gradual routes (Alleva et al., 2023; Holmqvist Gattario & Frisen, 2019; Wood-Barcalow et al., 2010). As mentioned earlier, men and women described “turning points” from adolescence to emerging adulthood by surrounding themselves with a positive support system, developing a sense of agency and empowerment, and the use of cognitive strategies (Holmqvist Gattario & Frisen, 2019). As further evidence, Alleva et al. (2023) interviewed 25 Canadian women who self-identified as (a) having a condition or characteristic that caused their body to differ from societal norms for how a body “should” look and/or function; and as (b) having had a predominantly negative body image in the past but having developed a predominantly positive body image over time. All women described their journey toward positive body image as not linear but rather had multiple “pivots and turns along the way,” with an “ebb and flow” to it (p. 160). Overall, the women described themselves as a “work-in-progress” (p. 160) and acknowledged that fostering and maintaining positive body image is a dialectic, both difficult *and* ultimately worth it. A seminal comment from Alleva et al. (2023) is “negative body image is not inevitable and, moreover, that positive body image is attainable, even for those who experience negative body image.” It is noteworthy that most participants even described their negative body image as a *blessing* because it motivated and maintained their journey toward positive body image and well-being, and because working through their negative body image experiences and continuing further toward positive body image had fostered their strengths (e.g., empathy for people who are “othered”), offered clarity on what is important in life (e.g., family rather than appearance), and shaped their valued life paths (e.g., entering a career in social work).

Aiming solely for body neutrality as an end goal is settling for mediocrity with an underlying assumption that tolerating the body is sufficient. It is reimagining Maya Angelou's (1978) inspirational poem about appreciating and celebrating the body, *Phenomenal Woman*, as *Meh Woman*: tolerating the body and being neutrally detached from it. While this neutral approach might be adequate and/or necessary for a select few, we contend that *it is more consistent with languishing and not sufficient for flourishing*. In line with broaden and build theory (Fredrickson, 2001), the capacity to experience positive emotions such as gratitude and joy can broaden our thought-action repertoires, ultimately building adaptive resources, skills, and well-being (e.g., Fredrickson & Joiner, 2018; Garland et al., 2010). Therefore, experiencing positive emotions toward the body could likewise broaden and build our body-related well-being.

Body-related flourishing is indeed feasible. Three meta-analyses that summarized the extensive research on body appreciation (240 studies), functionality appreciation (56 studies), and body image flexibility (62 studies) (Linardon et al., 2021, 2022a, 2023) supported correlations of these positive body image variables with comprehensive well-being,

with moderate-to-strong effect sizes. Linardon and colleagues (2022, 2023) provided evidence that body appreciation and functionality appreciation promoted well-being over time, and that body appreciation was still related to markers of well-being even after controlling for the influence of negative body image.

### 2.10. Myth 10: Appearance can be disregarded

**Evidence:** It is unrealistic to disregard appearance completely.

Proponents of body neutrality pigeonhole positive body image as focused on appearance, and then downplay the importance of appearance itself. Here, we turn the tables and argue that just as it is unreasonable for a person to love their body “all day every day,” it is utopian to disregard appearance given its (often unfortunate) importance in culture and interpersonal relations.

As the biennial conference hosted by the Centre for Appearance Research (CAR) indicates in its title, “Appearance Matters,” we are exposed to and internalize messages that appearance matters early in life, as evidenced in children as young as three years old (Harriger et al., 2010). We agree that appearance is *overemphasized*, which is linked to detrimental outcomes such as self-objectification and body comparison (Calogero et al., 2017; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Thompson et al., 1999). Within an ideal world, the scope of appearance would be minimized and the pressures to use and modify appearance to gain societal status and power would be non-existent. Yet, the reality is that we do not (and likely never will) live in this type of world. Furthermore, recommending that individuals divest of or ignore appearance does not rectify the underlying systemic and sociocultural influences that overemphasize the importance of appearance.

Importantly, declaring that appearance is irrelevant can be detrimental in and of itself. From an individual perspective, this emphasis may prompt rebound guilt if/when engaged in daily grooming and self-care behaviors that alter appearance. As further illustration, suggesting to a person whose gender identity does not match their appearance that they should not be concerned with their appearance is characteristic of a privileged viewpoint.

Embedded in the positive body image literature is the distinction of appearance-related practices into adaptive and maladaptive appearance investment (Holmqvist Gattario & Lunde, 2018; Wood-Barcalow et al., 2010). *Adaptive appearance investment* entails engaging in appearance-related practices to reflect unique style, personality, and/or identity, whereas *maladaptive appearance investment* involves choosing and engaging in potentially harmful practices due to preoccupation with appearance. Holmqvist Gattario and Lunde (2018) emphasized the need to experience *body comfort*, a construct deeply rooted in the positive body image and positive embodiment literatures (Piran, 2016, 2017; Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015c), which can guide adaptive appearance investment. For instance, if we feel comfortable with and positive about our bodies, then our appearance-related behaviors will likely be more flexible and focused on health, self-care, authenticity, and expressing our unique style and would less likely take significant time and energy away from other important aspects of our lives. Furthermore, adaptive appearance investment also provides opportunities to develop a more positive body image. For example, a person may choose to get a tattoo or piercings to express their identity. When an absolute lens is adopted to not invest in or care about appearance, then we may miss potentially meaningful and valuable aspects of experiencing the body and self-expression.

Often the motives underpinning appearance-related practices can help differentiate adaptive from maladaptive appearance investment (Russell, 2012). *Signification* represents engaging in appearance-related practices for a personal meaning or to mark the culture, class,

religion, gender identity, or other social group to which we belong, and may be more aligned with adaptive appearance investment. On the other hand, *beautification* represents engaging in these practices to become more attractive to others and may be more aligned with maladaptive appearance investment. It is important to note this may not always be the pattern, as beautification is likely a motive for some of our appearance-related practices—and this is acceptable as well (Wood-Barcalow et al., 2021). Regardless, embedded in the positive body image literature is the need to preserve *body sovereignty*, or an individual’s right to determine what is best for their body.

## 3. Discussion

New knowledge develops in stages, and as it develops, it behooves us to examine and honor the way in which new constructs overlap with or add to the existing literature. The body neutrality movement suggests a wish to not be subjected to “positive” expectations, which may be experienced as unrealistic or oppressive, but also recognizes the importance of experiencing joy and other positive emotions through the body. As researchers in the body image field, it is important for us to clarify the flexible and varied ways in which living in the body is addressed. At the same time, it is important for us to highlight the overlap of body neutrality with existing constructs in the body image field in a way that has not yet been recognized.

In this position paper, we identified important myths associated with positive body image concepts and the body positivity movement while simultaneously promoting the body neutrality movement as an alternative. One of the methods by which this process unfolds is through the use of dichotomous thinking, to which we offer balanced counterarguments based on evidence to demonstrate the inherent nuances within. Once we parsed out the differing definitions and understand what is (and is not) positive body image, body positivity, body neutrality, and neutral body image what we are left with is that: (a) positive body image has a solid line of research identifying its unique components; (b) body positivity as understood *solely* through a unidimensional social media movement (“love your body”) is *not* the same as research findings of positive body image; and (c) recent proposed definitions of body neutrality both in public spheres and academic articles overlap with existing positive body image components.

While we disagree with the notion that body neutrality is in fact “new” and offer evidence that current definitions actually corroborate what is already known about positive body image, we can acknowledge simultaneously the contributions of these recent publications. We are curious as to the description of “*being mindful of* and accepting bad body image days” as part of the body neutrality definition provided by Pelizzer and Wade (2023) in how that might relate to existing research constructs found in the positive body image literature, such as body compassion, body image flexibility, and/or equanimity. Additionally, creating Single Session Interventions (SSI) to promote positive change for body image, as designed by Smith and colleagues (2023), is innovative. While we applaud the implementation of an accessible approach to reach large audiences at pivotal stages of body image development using an SSI, we respectfully request that future interventions alter the language about what is being described (from body neutrality) to accurately reflect positive body image, and its core components including functionality appreciation, as well as body positivity.

We conclude by suggesting that, at the core, the motives underlying the promotion of body neutrality and positive body image are complementary: improving people’s body image to lead full lives that are not encumbered by how they think and feel about their body. In the spirit of moving closer to this shared aim, and based on the preceding 10 myths and their respective evidence, we offer the following recommendations

to a general audience and specific considerations for researchers, clinicians, and the media (these can also be downloaded separately via the [Supplementary Materials](#)).

- Identify and challenge these 10 myths and refer to the evidence offered in this position paper.
- Review the rich history of positive body image research including the distinctions between the origins and conceptualizations of positive body image and body positivity.
- Promote that positive body image is feasible and worth the effort as it corresponds with flourishing.
- Acknowledge (valid) criticisms of positive body image and body positivity.
- Acknowledge that appearance *does* play a role in body image and consider the nuances between adaptive and maladaptive appearance investment.
- Consider how values and viewpoints shape the decision to interact with big business as it relates to body image marketing.
- Direct skepticism toward systems (capitalism, materialism) that reward individuals and businesses for co-opting movements (e.g., body positivity).
- Redirect efforts towards producing and supporting content and actions that *are* concordant with the original intentions of the body positivity movement.
- Ensure that information offered by professionals and scientists to the media aligns with the evidence surrounding positive body image and request to review the final product before its dissemination to the public.
- *For researchers/scientists/academics:*
  - Consider the lack of current research and evidence to support body neutrality as an independent construct.
  - Highlight how current interpretations of body neutrality are actually key components of positive body image theory/research (e.g., body appreciation, functionality appreciation).
  - Be prudent in methodological design decisions to reduce and limit the potential for bias (e.g., favoring body neutrality over body positivity and/or positive body image, what “body positive” stimuli we select and the measures we include).
    - With respect to “body positive” stimuli, be explicit about whether these stimuli are designed/selected to reflect body positive media as depicted in mainstream media (“flaws” and all) or to reflect body positive media as depicting the characteristics of positive body image. For example, there is an important nuance between investigating the effects of body positive media (a) as it is often misrepresented (i.e., with an emphasis on few body types and on appearance) vs. (b) as it was originally intended (i.e., with an emphasis on body diversity, body functionality, and the Self).
  - Be intentional to identify how #bodyneutrality is presented actually reflects positive body image characteristics. For example, we may find that #bodyneutrality imagery often emphasizes functionality appreciation, but it is important to highlight the nuance between the public understanding of body neutrality vs. the positive body image literature base.
  - There is a difference between conducting research and promoting body neutrality as a novel construct, compared to exploring how #bodyneutrality is understood and represented on social media.
- As a Reviewer, be mindful of the 10 Myths and how they may be perpetuated within body neutrality writings and research methodology. Encourage authors to constructively engage with the feedback pertaining to these Myths (e.g., do not frame body neutrality as a novel construct, do not describe positive body image as unrealistic and unattainable).
- Conduct research on positive body image across different social identities and their intersections (as an example, see [Ogle et al., 2023](#)).
- Conduct research on appearance investment and how it may support positive body image, for example among individuals across gender identities and sexual orientation and their intersections ([Bennet et al., 2024](#)).
- Ensure that the conceptualization and creation of new body image measures include unique items that are not extracted from existing assessments on positive body image and include items representative of the unique elements of the construct.
- *For clinicians:*
  - Inspire optimism that positive body image is attainable.
  - Educate about what positive body image is (and is not) including appreciation of/for the body and what it can do along with flexibility when clients express an interest in body neutrality.
  - Review the 10 myths and evidence using [Table 2](#) from this article. Counter the myths that clients may have internalized about positive body image being unrealistic and unattainable.
  - Inform how negative and positive body image exist on different continuums and explore how this manifests unique to each client.
  - Shift the goal from merely tolerating the body to appreciating it holistically, including all that it can do.
  - Help clients to identify and remedy barriers and biases (e.g., learned helplessness, experiential avoidance) in moving toward positive body image.
  - Remind that body image is fluid and can change both in the short-term (e.g., good versus bad body image moments/days) and the long-term (e.g., “turning points” and life experience can shift from predominantly negative body image to predominantly positive body image), with this fluidity even being viewed as a “blessing.”
  - Share how working through negative body image and continuing further toward a more positive body image can foster strengths and illuminate both values and what is important in life.
  - Identify how positive body image is related to self-compassion, self-esteem, life satisfaction, and intuitive eating *and* protects from depressive symptoms, anxiety symptoms, and eating problems (e.g., binge eating, disordered eating behaviors).
  - Offer support with the reality that maintaining a positive body image requires continual effort.
  - Incorporate interventions that support moving toward positive body image such as focusing on what one appreciates about the body.
  - Encourage adaptive self-care behaviors including intuitive eating and joyful physical activity.
  - Explore with clients what adaptive appearance investment could look like for them and how it could play a modest beneficial role in their body image.
  - Be aware of your own potential biases as a provider (e.g., negativity, learned helplessness) and how that might shape clinical dialogues and interventions.
- *For the media:*
  - Acknowledge and accurately portray the similarities and distinctions among positive body image, body positivity, and body neutrality.
  - Educate on how body neutrality is currently described as the repackaging of positive body image concepts grounded in years of research.
  - Consider whether #BoPo is really an (online) movement that should be “done away with,” and how media could help to reorient the (public perception of the) movement toward its roots in body acceptance and skepticism toward harmful systemic influences (e.g., capitalism, materialism).
  - Utilize the myths and evidence from this article to create pieces that balance both the public interest and are informed by science.

## CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Nichole L. Wood-Barcalow:** Conceptualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Jessica M. Alleva:** Conceptualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Tracy L. Tylka:** Conceptualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

## Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors do not have any financial or commercial conflicts of interest.

## Data Availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

## Appendix A. Supporting information

Supplementary data associated with this article can be found in the online version at doi:10.1016/j.bodyim.2024.101741.

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