REVIEW ARTICLE

Conceptualizing Toxic Positivity: A Scoping Review Protocol

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Abstract

Toxic positivity, characterized by an overemphasis on maintaining a positive outlook while suppressing negative emotions, has been increasingly prevalent, particularly in the context of social media and the COVID-19 pandemic. This article presents the protocol for a scoping review that aims to synthesize existing literature on toxic positivity following Arksey and O'Malley's framework for conducting scoping reviews. The proposed scoping review will primarily address 4 key research questions: What is the definition of toxic positivity? What are its dimensions, antecedents, and consequences? Furthermore, the review aims to identify gaps in current research and offer insights into the mental health implications of toxic positivity, advocating for a balanced approach to emotional well-being.

Background

Positive thinking and the mandate for positive thoughts and actions have been overpowering social media feeds recently[1]. Books like *The Secret* and *The Law of Attraction* promote concepts like abundance, wealth, and success. They prescribe positive thinking as a panacea for all problems an individual might encounter, including but not limited to career, finances, health, and relationships[2][3]. Proponents of this concept encourage people to be vigilant about their thought processes to catch and fight against negative thoughts that are considered villains[4].

With the advent of the Pandemic in 2019 and the following lockdown, people turned to social media for a sense of community and belonging[5]. The discourse on social media platforms, with its highly edited, curated, and constructed online presence, is imbued with an exaggerated positive outlook toward life[6][7]. With unprecedented challenges and uncertainties, the pandemic has exacerbated the prevalence of toxic positivity as people seek solace and reassurance in the face of adversity[8].

Toxic Positivity, defined by Goodman[4], is the relentless pressure to be happy or pursue happiness, regardless of the circumstances. It involves overgeneralizing a positive mindset that encourages the suppression and displacement of negative emotions[9]. This mindset can be significantly harmful, preventing individuals from dealing with their authentic feelings and experiences and leading to a range of emotional and psychological issues. The prevalence of toxic positivity has increased since 2019, with searches for the term doubling since 2020[1].

The term Toxic Positivity, as we understand it today, is said to have first appeared in Halberstam's work on 'the queer art of failure' in 2011[6]. However, the idea that positive thoughts have curative powers has a much longer history. It can be traced back to the "New Thought" Movement, a philosophical and spiritual movement that gained popularity towards the end of the 19th Century[10]. The New Thought Movement, led by figures such as Phineas Parkhurst Quimby, emphasized the power of the mind in achieving health and success. It posited that the root of all illness is erroneous beliefs, which can be healed by realizing spiritual truths. Quimby believed in the power of the mind to heal and emphasized the importance of positive thinking and the influence of thoughts on physical and mental well-being[11]. This movement, focusing on the power of positive thinking, laid the foundation for the later development of positive psychology and the concept of toxic positivity[4].

The prominent philosopher and psychologist William James had a complex perspective on the New Thought movement. He understood that it emphasized the mind's ability to influence reality and bring about success, health, and personal growth. James addresses New Thought in the larger framework of religious and spiritual experiences, emphasizing mental healing and optimistic thinking. He valued New Thought's pragmatic approach to spirituality, emphasizing the advantages of optimistic thinking and conviction, but critiqued its potential for oversimplification and lack of intellectual rigor[11]. While he agreed that New Thought was helping to counteract the depressive nature of Calvinism and paving the way for a more positive way of thinking and living, he was aware that this new religion completely sidestepped the reality of tragedy. James pointed out that it was only suitable for "healthy-minded people" and offered a temporary solution[4].

The emergence of positive psychology as a discipline saw a significant shift in how researchers and practitioners address mental health[12], with research focusing on the physical and psychological benefits of positive emotions[13][14][15]. Martin Seligman, who is considered to be the father of Positive Psychology, posits that removing the client's negative emotions does not make them mentally healthy. According to him, positive mental health is the presence of positive emotions, engagement, good relationships, meaning, and accomplishment[16]. Positive emotions are important across the lifespan and help manage stress, healthier relationships, and decision-making[14]. Good mental health protects against the risk of coronary heart disease, diabetes, and stroke[17]. It enhances productivity and improves the sense of well-being[18].

The broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions proposed by Barbara L. Fredrickson posits that positive emotions broaden an individual's thought-action repertoire, which builds the individual's resources, ranging from physical and intellectual to social and psychological[19]. While the broaden-and-build theory has made valuable contributions to understanding positive emotions, it oversimplifies the role of emotions. It fails to fully incorporate the complexity of the human experience[20].

Proponents of these concepts encourage people to be vigilant about their thought processes to catch and fight against negative thoughts. Negative thought is seen as the villain or enemy here. Healthy positivity means making space for both reality and hope. Toxic positivity denies an emotion and forces its suppression. When individuals use toxic positivity, they tell themselves and others that this emotion should not exist; it is wrong, and if they try harder, they can eliminate it[4]. By labeling certain emotions as bad or unacceptable, toxic positivity denies authentic emotional expression and encourages people to suppress their emotions[21]. It leads to people judging themselves for experiencing negative emotions,

invalidating their emotions, and leading to shame and guilt[22]. The positivity mandate in workplaces that resulted from the positive psychology movement[23] and statements like "happiness is like a choice" puts the onus of emotional experience on the victim, which in turn triggers stigma[24].

The detrimental effects toxic positivity can have on mental health at different avenues, including, but not limited to, workplaces and schools, have been widely discussed[25][26]. However, scientific discourse and research on the topic is sparse. The limited published research on the topic focuses on the concept analysis of toxic positivity in the specific context of nursing[27] and discourse analysis, looking at the discourse of toxic positivity on Facebook[6]. Since toxic positivity can have a significant impact on the mental health outcomes of an individual[28], it is important to understand it from the perspective of psychology. The current paper proposes to synthesize the available literature on Toxic Positivity to that end through a scoping review. Scoping reviews are considered beneficial for bringing together literature in areas with emerging evidence, and they help in examining broader areas to identify gaps in the research knowledge base and clarify key concepts. Unlike a systematic review, scoping reviews are designed to provide an overview of the existing evidence base regardless of quality.[29]

A scoping review facilitates clarification of the concept and the exploratory nature of the review[30]. In order to gain a complete understanding of a concept, a broad and multidisciplinary review of the literature is the best[31]. The Arksey and O'Malley framework is considered the leading methodology for scoping reviews because of its rigorous, flexible, and comprehensive approach[32], and the current study proposes to adhere to this framework.

The research questions should be broad and comprehensive for a scoping review to broadly understand the concept of Toxic Positivity[31]. Arksey & O'Malley's framework also suggests a broad approach to cover the breadth[33]. Adhering to the framework, the following research questions have been formulated.

- What is the definition of Toxic Positivity?
- What are the dimensions of Toxic Positivity?
- What are the antecedents of Toxic Positivity?
- What are the consequences of Toxic Positivity?

Method

For the current scoping review, the researchers propose to follow the framework prescribed by Arksey and O'Malley since it is considered a valuable tool for researchers exploring broad research questions. The researchers will also refer to the PRISMA Sc-R Checklist for quality assurance. The study protocol has been registered in OSF for transparency and to facilitate peer review and replication of the research.

Eligibility Criteria

Considering that scientific literature on toxic positivity is limited, the review proposes to include all forms of literature,

including grey literature. Grey literature includes a wide range of materials produced outside of traditional publishing, and including it in studies can help reduce bias, increase comprehensiveness, and provide a more affluent evidence base[34]. The current study will include published literature, including but not limited to news articles, magazine articles, blogs, conference proceedings, posters, and essays, as well as research papers and articles.

Inclusion Criteria. Studies published between January 2011 and June 2024 will be included in the review, as the term was first used in 2011[6]. Studies published in the English language will be included in the review.

Exclusion Criteria. Studies where full text is unavailable or retracted, studies that are not published in English, and material that is not in print format will be excluded.

Information sources and literature search

Databases. The databases to be investigated will include Google Scholar, APA PsycNet, EBSCOHOST, JSTOR, National Digital Library of India, Sage Journals, Springer Link, Taylor and Francis, and Wiley Online Library.

Search strategy. The search strategy will employ a combination of the term "Toxic Positivity" and similar concepts like "positivity mandate" and "negative effects of positivity" with the Boolean operator OR.

Study selection

Studies meeting the inclusion and exclusion criteria will be selected, and duplicates will be removed. The studies will be scoped to understand their relevance to the research questions if the abstract needs to provide sufficient information to gauge their relevance. The studies that provide sufficient information regarding toxic positivity's definition, dimensions, antecedents, and consequences will be selected. Two researchers will conduct the complete process independently to ensure objectivity and minimize potential biases in selecting articles.

Data Extraction

The data charting form will include the following headings: Title, Author, Article Type, Link, Definition of Toxic Positivity, Dimensions of Toxic Positivity, Antecedents, Consequences, and Summary. The Title section will record the name of the article or paper. The Author section will list the name(s) of the author(s). The Article Type section will classify the article (e.g., research paper, review article, opinion piece, blog post). The Link section will provide the URL or DOI for easy access and reference. The Definition of Toxic Positivity section will capture the article's definition or description of toxic positivity, including any specific terms or phrases used. The Dimensions of Toxic Positivity section will outline the various aspects or facets of toxic positivity discussed in the article. The Antecedents section will detail the factors or conditions that lead to or contribute to toxic positivity, as discussed in the article. The Consequences section will describe the effects or outcomes of toxic positivity on individuals or groups. The Summary section will briefly summarize the article's main points, including significant findings, conclusions, or recommendations.

Results and Discussion

The unique purpose of a scoping review is to present an overview rather than narrowing the results down, as in a meta-analysis or systematic review. The data analysis will follow a narrative approach. This approach allows for a more flexible and comprehensive exploration of the subject matter, accommodating a variety of study designs and methodologies. The narrative synthesis will involve summarizing the findings thematically, identifying patterns, and discussing the implications of the results in relation to the research questions. Using this method, the review will provide a detailed and nuanced understanding of the topic, capturing the complexity and diversity of the evidence without imposing the stringent criteria required for a meta-analysis or systematic review.

Conclusion

The proposed scoping review aims to comprehensively synthesize the available literature on toxic positivity, offering insights into its definition, dimensions, antecedents, and consequences. By employing the Arksey and O'Malley framework[33] and including grey literature, this research seeks to throw light on the complexities surrounding toxic positivity, contributing to a deeper understanding of its implications on mental health and emotional well-being. Fostering a balanced approach acknowledging the full spectrum of human emotions can lead to healthier coping mechanisms and a more authentic expression of individual experiences.

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