



HEALTH AND WELLNESS

Fans turn on 'body positivity' influencers who lose weight



Jenna Ryu

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Story Highlights

TikTok star Mark Gaetano divided fans with his 100-pound weight loss.

Some showed support, while others accused the comedian for being "fat-phobic."

In a society that hails thinness, experts say some can feel betrayed by a role model's weight loss.

TikTok star Mark Gaetano (@Snarkymarky) never intended to be the face of body positivity. His 4 million followers flocked to his account for his snarky, hilarious impressions of school administrators. Late last year, when Gaetano shared a video about losing more than 100 pounds, many of his fans accused the comedian of being "fat-phobic."

A frustrated Gaetano ranted about the backlash in a viral video: "We live in a society where you can't even celebrate personal health advancements," he said.

In April, another TikTok star named Sienna Mae Gomez, who uses her platform to preach self-love, was criticized for not having the "right" figure for the body positivity movement.

Body positivity is everywhere: Is it for everyone?

"It's so upsetting to me because I've always kind of put the message out there that any body type is beautiful, and you guys used to preach that with me. But lately, I've seen a ton of comments bashing me for losing weight and for saying they don't relate to my content anymore, which is not in my control," Gomez said in a video response.

The body positivity movement offers hope and confidence to those who deviate from society's pervasive thin, mostly white "ideal." Diverse bodies are more visible than ever before.

But for people who finally see themselves reflected in the influencers they follow online, dramatic or even subtle weight loss can feel like a betrayal.

More on weight loss: Everything you miss when you think weight loss is about willpower

Why fans turn on them

We're too often stuck with damaging tropes: Skinny means happy, fat means sad and insecure. When we see influencers in larger bodies who are successful, confident and thriving, it's a refreshing change: "a beacon of hope," according to Jennifer Rollin, founder of the Eating Disorder Center.

"This topic is one with a lot of nuance because we have to look at multiple issues, including body autonomy and the history of fat-shaming," Rollin said. "We're talking about folks who are marginalized and not wanting to shame them, especially if they've been discriminated against. But it's also so important to have positive representation (of these bodies) in the media, or even in your life."

She said the disappointment and frustration that occurs when larger influencers lose weight is understandable – but that doesn't excuse the harsh criticism they receive.

"Especially for people in larger bodies, it's completely valid they may experience grief, disappointment, sadness or anger," she said, "because they're projecting their own feelings, experiences and struggles onto this role model."

Weight stigma is prevalent not only in workplaces, schools and health care settings but also in interpersonal relationships: Research has shown overweight people are often stereotyped as unattractive, lazy and lacking self-control.

"The desire to lose weight is unfortunately normal in a society filled with anti-fat bias," Rollin said. "However, I do have compassion for folks who have that desire, especially when they face so much discrimination in our society."

Fat people are not 'stupid or lazy': James Corden rebukes Bill Maher's fat-shaming

'Body positive' influencers can never win

Influencers face a double-edged sword: If they lose weight, they're accused of sending a harmful message. If they don't, they continue to fight in a world that conspires to hate fat people.

Look at Adele, who was shamed and ridiculed for much of her early career. Years later and 100 pounds down, she's still being criticized, this time for losing "too much weight."

'It's not my job to validate' body image: Adele stuns with devastating new songs, talks weight loss

It's a reflection of a cultural norm that judges people for their bodies.

"We need to acknowledge how hard it must be to be in a larger body in the public eye," Rollin said. "While it can be hard to see this representation gone, it is sad when folks in marginalized bodies get so much hatred from our society that some of

them succumb to the pressures of intentional weight loss." Weight loss can become dangerous, especially when it involves restrictive eating or excessive exercise.

Skinny shaming vs. fat shaming: Skinny shaming is real, but experts warn against comparing it to fat shaming.

Katie Rickel, a clinical psychologist and chief executive officer of Structure House, said that as long as weight loss is healthy, everyone has a right to body autonomy – without being subject to judgment or criticism.

"What people are misunderstanding is that these influencers may very much love themselves and their bodies and still want to lose weight if they think that will help them in other ways," Rickel said.

People should look up to role models that reflect "all different facets of who they are," not just their physical appearance, she said.

"When people are looking for role models simply because of body size without considering other aspects of their character, it marginalizes them just to their body shape," Rickel said. "It's important to look up to a role model or influencer for different qualities."

What is body neutrality? Lizzo criticized body positivity. Here's what you need to know about body neutrality.