In Defence of "Toxic Positivity":

Shedding Light On a "Misunderstood" Phenomenon

Julie Pluhařová

Vasco De Sousa

Serafina Strömsdörfer

Group Number S2326608953

Roskilde University

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Introduction

"Good vibes only" and "the pursuit of happiness", a phrase used a lot in the narrative of the "American dream", are only two examples of how we emphasise the significance of "staying positive" in everyday life through language. The term "toxic positivity" describes the phenomenon of expressing positive feelings, even if the individual does not experience pleasant or "positive" emotions. Sometimes, acting and reacting in a positive manner includes suppressing "negative" feelings. The phenomenon received the name "toxic positivity" in social media and emerged only in the last few years. We believe that the underlying appearance of expressing emotions that are not genuinely felt is deeply human and thus nothing tied solely to social media and the current coming of age generation. Also, we observe that the phenomenon referred to as "toxic positivity" has been interpreted and understood differently among us as researchers, which underlines how vague and undefined the appearance is, even though we all agreed on having encountered it in our everyday lives. What positivity itself actually is, remains rather dubious, too. We suggest, and will elaborate on that later in this paper, that positivity can be regarded as an emotion, but as a stance, which means a way of looking at things, too.

Positivity can be ambiguous due to its potential to cause adversity, when it is found unauthentically. In the latter case, it can be reversed to a damaging force, which stands in opposition to the rather constructive character mostly assigned to positivity.

Key assumptions

We approach a phenomenon that cannot be traced throughout history easily, as it is not referred to uniformly. Today, a lot of young people might understand the term "toxic positivity" whereas ideas of thinking positively and upholding a positive perspective on everyday life events have also been discussed in different historical movements such as the American "New Thought" movement and in "Positive Psychology". We perceive the underlying phenomenon to be rooted in everyday life, as we as researchers agreed on having encountered it multiple times within our own life histories, too. Moreover, we reckon that the phenomenon is strongly mediated by social norms and expectations of conduct in social interactions. We suggest that the appearance of "toxic positivity" has bidirectional implications that unfold both within the individual and between individuals when they connect and interact. Furthermore, due to our socialisation in Western societies, we can only investigate the phenomenon from a lens that is limited to the countries and cultural settings

we, the researchers, acted in. Relating our own social position and our individual histories and upbringing to the experience of "pushed positivity", we hope to find connections between the past and the prevailing traditions of thought that treat "positivity" and the normative contexts that encourage "toxic positivity" in our everyday lives.

Objectives of this project

The objective of this project is the exploration of the phenomenon often referred to as "toxic positivity" on social media. Why and how do individuals in the Western world push positivity onto themselves and others in everyday life situations? Are there other terms depicting the same phenomenon?

Primarily, we want to understand what possible consequences for the individual and the interlocutor can emerge from the phenomenon of "pushed positivity" and what makes it emerge. Also, we want to relate the occurrence of "forced positivity" to an individual's history and their social identities.

What is "toxic positivity"? How does it show and affect individuals?

In situations that demand heightened sensitivity from the individual to feel, which feelings actually are present, "forced positivity" can be displayed to try to maintain positive feelings or a positive stance towards the events happening. Trying to hold on to positivity even if the person does not genuinely experience it, can have problematic implications both intra- and inter-individually.

On the one hand, suppressing negative thoughts or feelings in order to stay positive can lead to later emotional outbursts, mental instability and depression. Also, denying the feelings that a person actually experiences, only promotes insistence on an illusional view of the current circumstances and other people and thus prevents them from confronting the maybe not-so-comfortable reality. Moreover, disapproving of the emotional experience of others in social interactions can lead to invalidating experiences which means that people we encounter will neither feel seen nor understood in their individual perception of the world. Sociologist Hartmut Rosa coined the concept of resonance, a state of connection between individuals and within the self. We believe that a sense of alienation, the opposite of resonance, can be elicited by "unauthentic positive" conduct (Rosa, 2018). Meetings of estrangement hinder people from experiencing resonance in social interactions and can lead to asymmetrical encounters. These prevent deep, genuine connections between humans and indirectly contribute to the continuation of social norms that encourage positivity at all times. In

addition, the invalidation of emotional experience can lead to the conclusion that it is inappropriate or not accepted to express non-positive emotions and thus, encountering others genuinely and allowing vulnerability does not seem like a code of conduct worthy to stick to. As we propose, that conduct, that results in suffering is only sustained by following and re-implementing social norms, we want to understand, how these norms make us prone to acting according to them instead of defying them, even though we might be aware, that succumbing to socially established actions of "toxic positivity" can have multiple negative implications. Outlining the consequences of "forced positivity" both, within and between individuals thus is another goal we strive for with this project.

Why do humans engage in pushing positivity?

In the course of this project, we want to explore, where doings of "forced positivity" originate from and why human beings maintain the latter doings even if they cause mental suffering for the individual and relational suffering in social interactions due to invalidating the experience of the other.

Context

We want to contextualise the phenomenon we are investigating by taking different historical movements that discuss positivity into account. We will shed light on ideas associated with the "American Dream", the American "New Thought" movement and "Positive Psychology" in order to understand how we, as individuals living and acting in Western contexts, are influenced by these traditions of thought.

Methodological stance and reflective journals

As the issue of non-authentic positivity is deeply rooted in our daily lives, we believe that observing ourselves in everyday-life situations is the most adequate method to receive diverse insights into the issue. As researchers, who are human beings at the same time, we are embedded into the surroundings we try to make sense of. In order to tackle the complexity of positioning research in everyday life, we want to follow concepts of situated knowledge formulated in feminist psychology theories drawing from suggestions formulated by Charlotte Højholt and Ernst Schraube in their book "Toward a psychology of everyday living" (Højholt & Schraube, 2016). As researchers, we want to make use of collaborative autoethnographic research techniques by keeping reflective journals and working from a stance of "situated empirical research [that produces] psychological knowledge in the

everyday reality in which psychological phenomena actually unfold" (Højholt & Schraube, 2016). We will observe ourselves in everyday life situations, for example, when trying to feel positive even if we actually are not feeling uplifted, and in interactions with others, e.g., when telling another person that we would be doing well even if that is not the case. In contact with each other, we want to exchange our observations and compare the situations in which "forced positive" doings occurred. Taking this standpoint requires acknowledging our subjectivity and defining our positionality in the frame of our observations in the double role as researcher and research subject.

One of the core problematics of psychology as a science is that we as human researchers can never be fully objective. Neither can we ever completely detach ourselves from the social environment we find ourselves in, nor can we liberate ourselves from the influence of the latter settings. Thus, we are constantly influenced by social norms and prevailing expectations and ideals that are present in the cultural context we find ourselves in. This is why we perceive raising our own awareness about our positionality as researchers to be crucial.

With the collaborative process of collectively reflecting upon our observations, we hope to be able not only to study why we force positivity upon ourselves and others, but also to investigate how exactly non-authentic positive doings are acted out and what its characteristics are. We perceive the exchange of experiences within the group as a strength of our chosen self-observation method, as it will enable us to get a diversified picture of a phenomenon that, at the beginning of this project, seemed to be rather vague and undefined. In addition, we believe that openly sharing our experiences in the group will promote transparency and vulnerability, which we find not to be present in a lot of moments, where "pushed positivity" unfolds. Therefore, we will also counteract the urge to only report positive events and defy the impulse to talk about unpleasant feelings in a positifying way by sharing our experiences of "forced positivity" within the group.

Problem formulation

Why and how do individuals in the Western world "push" positivity onto themselves and others in everyday life situations?

Research questions:

- *What are the possible consequences for the individual and the interlocutor that emerge from the phenomenon of "pushed positivity"?*

- *What makes this phenomenon emerge within the self?*

- *How does it relate to an individual's position?*

Terminology

The phenomenon we try to describe and analyse has not been defined in the history of psychology. Even though terms like "forced positivity" and "toxic positivity" delineate a phenomenon or at least contain associations, they do not portray the phenomenon we want to investigate in its entirety.

Therefore, we decided to use the terms "toxic positivity", "forced positivity", "pushed positivity" and "unauthentic positivity" synonymously, even if they denote different qualities of the same underlying process of positive emotional expression, even if a person genuinely does not experience positive feelings. As a synonym for positivity, we used "optimism" in contexts, where the latter vocabulary was a good fit to depict the phenomenon in a specific setting.

To underline that we do not intend to coin one of the named terms as the only or "best fitting" one for the phenomenon we investigate, we will use them framed by "quotation marks" in this report. We want to step away from the traditional way of naming appearances and establishing terminologies for topics of interest in the field of psychology. Leaving the phenomenon unnamed provides us with the flexibility to use different terms that cover certain nuances of the phenomenon in different situations, which makes our description more specific. In addition, it underlines our stance of researchers who perceive themselves as humans with limited knowledge who are not in the position to claim full understanding of a phenomenon as multifaceted as the one we study.

Toxic

We refuse to adopt the adjective "toxic" to describe the appearance we investigate, as we consider the word "toxic" to be overused and too static in order to describe a phenomenon that unfolds intra- and inter-individually, and thus, must be dynamic in its nature.

In social media and since then also in self-help books, the term "toxic" has become very popular to describe detrimental conduct or people.

The Cambridge dictionary defines "toxic" as an informal term for "causing you a lot of harm and unhappiness over a long period of time". The idea of toxicity is used a lot to categorise relationships (e.g., romantic relationships, friendships), individuals ("Kim is a toxic person!") and masculinity ("toxic masculinity").

With the notion of poisonousness comes the nuance of being static and unchangeable. This results in labelling people as "toxic", which neither provides an opportunity for the "toxic" person to disprove the assumption of being harmful, nor does it encourage people to attempt to look beyond forced demeanour of another and question why other people employ "unauthentic" conduct. In her article "Stop calling people toxic – This is why" published in "The Guardian", the clinical psychologist and author Hannah Baer states that "dynamics and situations are toxic, not people" (Baer, 2021). Moreover, she emphasises the problematic of condemning others instead of engaging in self-reflection when the word "toxic" is chosen to describe a person or a relationship. She also links this lack of willingness to dialectically look at interactions and people to fatalistic assumptions- The latter are characterised by non-existent expectations of future change and a resigned acceptance of the status quo. The motivation to enhance the sense of stability within the self by "attribut[ing] our pain to the other party's fixed and malignant pathology" (Baer, 2021) is another problematic arising with the use of the term "toxic".

In search of a term that might describe the phenomenon we are investigating adequately, we were considering the adjectives "forced", "pushed" and "unauthentic".

Forced

The word "forced" underlines the nature of the phenomenon not occurring naturally but being something that takes place using a certain strain. The latter force can be directed to the individual itself or to a person the individual interacts with. As an example of the first case (forcing positivity upon the self), imagine a situation in which an individual is feeling unwell but dislikes experiencing this emotional state. While trying to feel good again, the individual

might use a certain amount of effort to suppress arising negative feelings whilst forcefully trying to amplify positive sensations. In order to depict the case of forcing positivity upon the other, consider the following scenario. Person A tells person B that they were having a stressful workday today because of troubles with a colleague. Person B thus responds that person A should be grateful to have a job and that difficulties with the co-worker would be alright somehow. In the latter example, the effort of "positifying" a negative experience is directed toward the other and thus forced upon them.

Even though socially expected rituals like smiling or asking how somebody is doing are ingrained into everyday life interactions and thus automatised to a certain extent. We argue that the agent still can decide to follow the impulse of forcing positivity upon themselves or others or to resist the urge to act in a positive manner.

Pushed

In order to suggest an adjective that is less intense and absolute than "forced", we also use the word "pushed" to refer to positivity. Still, it contains the notion of generating pressure, both for the self and the other. It also encompasses the idea of ignoring or resisting "negative" feelings and it visualises the concept of an individual engaging in "pushed positivity" as a counteraction against non-positive experiences. "Pushing something" can also refer to "overdoing something" or taking something too far, which can result in disregarding boundaries of the self and the other. Therefore, we perceive this word to be capable of describing the phenomenon we investigate adequately.

Authenticity

Following the assumption, that a certain strain is involved in "forced positive" conduct, we argue, that the expression of positivity in a context, in which non-positive sensations are present, runs counter to the genuine experience of an individual, which makes the expression of positivity "unauthentic" in that context.

The Cambridge dictionary defines authenticity as "the quality of being real or true". Referring to the latter examples of "unauthentic positivity", the process of deciding against the genuine expression of the feelings that are experienced inherently in the favour of acting or reacting positively, can be regarded as untrue. The individual does not show themselves in a transparent and thus vulnerable manner. In later chapters of this paper, we will investigate which consequences might arise from "unauthentic" interactions between individuals and dishonesty within the individual concerning their emotional state.

How authentic are humans?

One could argue now that there are legitimate reasons why individuals should not always express their emotions freely without regulating them or adjusting them in concurrence with the current social situation. Consider for example the following scenario. A person asks their partner's opinion about something they are unsure about. The partner strongly despises the person's view. Even if the partner might verbally communicate their opinion about the person's concern honestly, it might be dysfunctional to reveal their disdain visibly through their facial expression. That might promote a feeling of invalidation within the person, which, in turn, could result in distant communication between the involved.

Therefore, we must see authenticity in relation to its function in a specific context.

Optimism

Optimism or "the quality of being full of hope and emphasising the good parts of a situation, or a belief that something good will happen" (Cambridge dictionary) can be regarded as a point of view that highlights positivity. Relating to an interactive context, applying an angle of expecting good and constructive outcomes in the future, optimism can be "forced" or "unauthentic". If an individual tries to maintain a positive mindset towards a negative or problematic issue, forcing optimism upon the self might result in distortion or denial of reality. Therefore, the individual might idealise the current situation or future perspectives and fail to see relevant facets of the present situation. Similarly, interactions in which optimism is forced upon the other could, again, lead to feelings of being misunderstood. As mentioned earlier, concrete consequences of intra- and interindividual "unauthentic optimism" will be discussed in detail in a later chapter.

Speaking of "forced optimism" therefore makes sense in situations that are future focused. Optimism can be expressed in dialogue, both within the individual (as inner monologue or "thoughts") and between individuals in conversation. Thinking about the unknown future from a stance of positivity could be formulated in sentences such as "I am looking forward to…", "It will be alright", "Expect only the best", "Tomorrow is a new day" and others.

What actually is "positivity"?

When trying to define the vague term of positivity we made use of earlier, there are different approaches that can be followed in order to characterise the concept of positivity. Positivity could be contrasted to negativity and thus be defined throughout the features it does *not* have. In terms of emotions and their expression, "positive" and "negative" emotions could be identified, which would result in a nonuniform collection of distinct theories about emotions. Numerous psychologists have established different concepts on emotion over time.

To name only two examples as representatives of psychological emotion theories. One of them is Ekman's theory of six universal emotions (fear, anger, disgust, surprise, sadness, enjoyment), the other is the Schachter-Singer theory of emotion or two factor theory of emotion, that suggests that emotions emerge as a cognitive labelling of physical sensations. As the subject of this paper is not emotional theory, but how emotional states can be suppressed or evoked forcefully in certain contexts, we suggest, that "positivity" can be regarded as a term subsuming sensations and emotional qualities that are broadly evaluated as pleasant, such as joy, happiness, hope, love, optimism, ease, effortlessness. Humour also makes part of positivity, as it portrays a way of reacting from a standpoint of easiness and a lack of graveness. Joking or not taking things seriously can both mask the experience of negative emotions and help coping with the latter. This two-facedness of humour complicates its definition as solely positive or negative.

In the paper "What Is Positive about Positive Psychology: The Curmudgeon and Pollyanna", psychologist Ed Diener elaborates on positive psychology as a new branch within the field and questions definitions of "positivity" from different psychological and philosophical angles.

Defining "positivity" in terms of affect or emotional experience, it must be said, that the dichotomy between "positive" and "negative" emotions can be justified in some cases, whereas it can be oversimplified in others. While some emotions, such as anger or fear, are very distinct and clearly discernible from each other and other feelings, studying positive emotions can be challenging, as humans mostly experience mixed affects. It is very likely that a person who feels proud might also experience feelings of contentment or enthusiasm. Therefore, investigating isolated instead of aggregated positive emotions seems to be almost impossible (Diener, 2003). Therefore we have to acknowledge that emotions that are broadly considered as "positive" and "negative" and thus subsumed under the latter categories can coexist even if that seems contradictory at first glance.

Shedding light on the counterpart of positivity, the dichotomy of pleasant vs unpleasant feelings can be used to determine, which doings are "authentic" and which ones are "forced". Relating to the phenomenon of "unauthentic positivity" in individual and social contexts, we will regard positive forms of emotional expression as "forced" or "unauthentic", because they disguise genuinely felt emotions, which might be *non-positive*.

Positivity as attitude

In this paper, we refer to "attitude" as a manner of looking at things. We understand "attitudes" as dynamic principles, that can be seen as angles from which we look at a situation, an event, an object or a person. Thus, being in a place of a positive attitude, an individual focuses on the positive aspects of the subject of interest. It will filter information and hints that align with the "positive gaze" the individual employs. By calling positivity not only an emotion, but an attitude, we propose that positivity should not solely be defined as an emotion, as it mostly is referred to in conventional psychological literature. Positivity can also be a pattern of reacting to everyday life events which is why it can shape interpersonal interaction.

As outlined earlier, we define attitudes as flexible and inconstant, as they can vary according to different situations, events and material or social surroundings. We prefer using the term "stance" instead of "attitude", as we perceive the latter to contain the potential to be understood in a conventional psychological way and thus as something fixed and unchangeable.

As "attitudes provide summary evaluations of target objects [which] are often assumed to be derived from specific beliefs, emotions, and past behaviors associated with those objects" (APA dictionary of psychology), a stance is closely tied to societal norms that generate frameworks for the conduct of everyday life. Which stances people employ, how and to what extent they change throughout life, is dependent on the settings an individual is embedded in. In general, the culture an individual acts in, has an impact on their perspectives. Specifically, social interactions in relationships and institutions shape a person's style of interpreting and viewing the external world. As the term "stance" rather refers to mental processes of meaning-making, we intend to contrast stances from emotions. Both, the individual experience of emotions within a person, and emotions in social interactions, which are mediated by prevailing social norms, will be examined in the following paper.

Positivity as doing

Following Brinkmann's (Brinkmann, 2011) claim of regarding "behaviours", as they are called in conventional psychology, as "doings", we want to emphasise that we see individuals as agents, who act upon and interact with their environments. To our minds, the term "behaviour" implies a mechanical understanding of cause-effect relationships as explanation to human actions, which we disagree with. This perspective suggests a separation between individual and surrounding. We suggest that the individual is not only influenced by the settings it finds itself in, but also has a share in the nature of these settings.

Brinkmann advocates for the term "doing" instead of "behaviour" for psychological phenomena, as he refuses the definition of behaviour as the effect or response to a "cause" or prompt from outside the individual (Brinkmann, 2016). Brinkmann argues that following the behaviourist school in the field of psychology results in "disregarding our capacities as human beings for being responsive to the reasons for acting, feeling, and thinking that are afforded by the situations and practices in which we find ourselves" (Brinkmann, 2016).

Drawing from the critical psychologist Thomas Teo, we take an exacting stance towards psychology as a science and its conventional frameworks that were used to explain why humans act in the ways they do. In his paper "History and Systems of Critical Psychology", Teo outlines key understandings of critical psychology, its history and its objectives. Furthermore he underlines our shared standpoint that "not only subjectivity, but also the discipline and profession of psychology need to be connected with contexts" (Teo, 2021). We believe that the agent can change or maintain its surroundings. This "ability of humans not only to adapt to an environment but to change their living conditions and transform the status quo" (Teo, 2021), seems to be especially crucial for the phenomenon of "toxic positivity", as this appearance emerges both, between and within individuals, which disables behaviourist explanatory models.

We suggest that the phenomenon of "toxic", "forced" or "pushed" positivity cannot be reduced to a mere response to external stimuli for the following reasons.

For one thing, the manifestation of the phenomenon of "unauthentic positivity" is variable and thus not uniform. A simple cause-effect relationship between an eliciting situation and "forced positive" doings would suggest a reaction pattern that is expressed in the same manner or in very similar ways across different contexts. Thus, we would have to define "forced positivity" and psychological phenomena in general as stable. As indicated earlier, we oppose claims of fixedness related to psychological terms like "attitude" and

psychologically relevant appearances. The rootedness of "unauthentic positivity" in everyday life makes it impossible to speak of it as something stable.

In addition, "forced positive" doings involve individual processes of evaluations of the situation in which "unauthentic positive" conduct occurs. These individual meaning-making processes and the spectrum of possible actions and reactions in specific situations are strongly mediated by a person's very own history and cultural shaping.

We perceive human beings as agents that can both act in awareness of their doings and in an absence of consciousness of their conduct. Brinkmann calls this a "continuum of doings, ranging from actions that are performed with full reflective self-consciousness (e.g., deciding whether to accept a job offer) to everyday habitual conduct" (Brinkmann, 2016).

Therefore, we prefer to use the term "doing" to depict actions and reactions related to the expression of "forced positivity" in everyday life.

The multifacetedness of positivity

The former paragraphs clarify the undefined nature of "positivity" and outline, how the term can be used differently depending on the context and the applied focus. As much as the adjective "positive" can be used in multiple meanings in everyday life, "positivity" describes emotional states, attitudes and doings emerging from both.

What are words?

Still, we have to state that redefining and questioning terminology about a phenomenon only scratches the surface of the underlying appearance. Thus, discussing the vocabulary to describe the phenomenon we are investigating can uncover different layers of it, but the theorising about the use of language related to the phenomenon remains superficial and does not necessarily promote a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. We understand language as a descriptive tool that can outline nuances of the appearance we try to portray.

Nevertheless we want to avoid remaining in discussions about terminology for too long, as that might impede us from sharpening our gaze to observe the phenomenon in the field and to study "forced positivity" in everyday life actions and interactions.

Context

As stated in the introduction of this paper, the phenomenon of "forced positivity" seems oxymoronic in its nature. Positivity, as a collection of subsumed emotional qualities that are experienced as pleasant, does not seem to contain the potential of being detrimental at first glance. If positivity is forced upon the self or the other and thus experienced as a contradiction to subjectively felt emotions, it becomes "unauthentic" or "toxic". The latter adjective is frequently used on social media. In the "Terminology" section, our choice of words to describe the phenomenon is outlined and explained in depth.

As implied, there is no uniform term for the phenomenon we are investigating, which makes it difficult to trace its history. We hypothesise that the phenomenon of interest is deeply human, as ideas of welfare and happiness were ever-present in human history. Therefore, we want to examine different psychological streams and traditions of thought and their concepts of emotional expression and positivity. In the course of investigating hints to "unauthentic positivity", we want to shed light on the "New Thought" movement, ideas of the "American Dream", the presence of the term "toxic positivity" in social media and the role humour can play as a device of "unauthentic positivity".

Referring today's ideas about "forced positivity" to what we draw from its different conceptualisations in the movements named above, we want to gain a more profound understanding of the underlying mechanisms of the phenomenon.

Regarding "forced positivity", suppressing unpleasant emotions is often viewed as a sign of strength, whereas expressing non-positive emotions is frequently viewed as a sign of weakness. The idea of positivity is that it helps people succeed, overcome obstacles, and preserve our own wellbeing (scielo.org - The History of Emotions).

The question arises why and how we still engage in positive conduct even if it contradicts our inherently experienced emotions. As the phenomenon of interest is defined variably throughout history and across cultures, it is hard to trace where it originated from. We will strive to give some context on different approaches that conceptualise optimism and positivity.

The cultural and political background of the post-World War II era can be linked to the emphasis on optimism and the repression of unpleasant feelings. After the omnipresent suffering caused by the war, individualism and personal accountability were once again

emphasised and optimism began to be connected with ideas of the American Dream, that formulates the premises of prosperity. With the development of feminist and civil rights movements as countercultures, this was a period of significant social and cultural transformation as well (Loc.gov, Post-War United States)

The "New Thought" movement

Cabanas, Spanish writer and research fellow at the Autonomous University of Madrid, explains that, in the late 19th century, the "New Thought" movement emerged in the United States as a spiritual and philosophical movement that highlighted the value of self-empowerment and self-improvement, the strength of optimistic thinking and the connection between mind and body (Cabanas et al, n.d). According to writer, historian and freethinker Larson, it can be understood as a revolt against the old and conventional dogmas of the historic religions of the Western World (Larson, n.d). The notion that the way we think about things have the ability to influence reality is one of the central principles of the "New Thought" movement. Another key assumption of the trend is that people attract great results and experiences by upholding positive attitudes and beliefs (Cabanas et al, n.d).

The Two Sides of the "New Thought" movement

On the one hand, the "New Thought" movement has been inspirational, motivating and impactful in the personal development and change of a lot of people. For some people, the realisation that they have the capacity to influence their thoughts and their reality has been liberating and transformational, boosting their self-assurance and resiliency in the face of hardship (Larson, n.d).

On the other hand, the movement has been strongly criticised for encouraging delusion and fake empowerment. Carroll, an American writer known for writings regarding scepticism, writes that "In addition to promoting delusions about the ability of people to cure others and themselves of horrible diseases by the power of thought, the New Thought movement encourages delusions in other areas of life. Outside of the healing arena, New Thought beliefs contribute to what might be called the empowerment delusion: The false belief that feeling empowered, or believing you are empowered, is the same as being empowered. The

empowerment delusion leads people to believe that they can create health or wealth or anything material by willing it or asking a god to will it" (Carroll, 1994).

The perspective advocated by the "New Thought" movement can be damaging to people who are dealing with mental health problems or challenging situations in their lives. For people who are suffering, the pressure to constantly be upbeat or to see every life event as a chance for development and learning can feel isolating and invalidating.

Despite the fact that the "New Thought" movement had a good influence on the lives of many individuals, it is crucial to be aware of the negative impact "forced optimism" can have. In order to foster a more nuanced, balanced approach to personal development and well-being that takes the nuances of the human experience into consideration, it is crucial to identify and validate unpleasant feelings and experiences.

The "American Dream"

The phenomenon of the "American Dream" is often traced back to James Truslow Adams, an American writer and historian. In 1931, as Americans went through the Great Depression, Adams wrote a book called "The Epic of America", where he critiqued the United States and suggested how it could be a richer and more just country (Gale, 2016).

In the 1920s, the idea of the American Dream was closely associated with "forced optimism" and the belief that wealth was the secret to happiness. The United States went through a period of great economic expansion and prosperity during this time, and many people thought that perseverance and hard work would enable them to realise their goals and lead happy, satisfying lives.

American teacher and historian Roland Marchand, describes success in this period of capitalism as the prevailing economic model was frequently determined by one's material wealth and goods. The notion was that whatever one desired, including happiness, could be purchased if you had enough money. This way of thinking gave rise to a culture of consumerism, where people were urged to continuously seek out the newest goods and fashions under the pretence that doing so would make them happier and more content (Marchand, n.d).

Instead of being accepted as an inherent aspect of life, unhappiness was viewed as a personal shortcoming. Negative feelings and experiences were pushed aside or disregarded as a result of the continual pressure to be regarded as successful and cheerful.

The notion of the "American Dream" fostered a false feeling of security among many who thought that if they found success and financial comfort, they would never again have to deal with misery or adversity.

Ultimately, the "American Dream's" "forced positivity" and consumerism of the 1920s led to a culture of superficiality and disconnection from true feelings and experiences. Manson, American writer and blogger, believes it is crucial to understand that genuine contentment and pleasure cannot be purchased or coerced, and that experiencing grief and adversity is a valid aspect of the human experience. (Manson, 2016).

"Forced positivity" in the face of the "American Dream" and consumerism had a number of unfavourable effects. People were involved in a society where they felt the pressure to maintain an outward appearance of happiness and prosperity, even while they were experiencing personal difficulties. People who feel they cannot share their true feelings and experiences with others may feel alone and disconnected from others as a result of the pressure to maintain their image (Manson, 2016).

The relentless quest of material possessions also caused people to lose sight of other crucial facets of life, like relationships, personal development, and community engagement.

It was also dangerous to think that the "American Dream" could shield people from misery and adversity since it created unrealistic expectations for what life should be like. No one is exempt from the difficulties of life, and it is a normal aspect of being human to, at times, experience suffering from sadness or hardship. People may feel as though they are failing if they go through difficult times due to the pressure to maintain an appearance of achievement, which may result in further anguish.

Despite the potential for success and happiness that the 1920's "American Dream" held out, its emphasis on "forced positivity" and materialism had a number of negative impacts. People felt the need to continuously preserve appearances and chase financial fortune at the expense of other significant elements of life, which resulted in a culture of superficiality and detachment (history.com - Roaring Twenties).

Humour

Historically speaking, humour has been a way of dealing with suffering and adversity caused by oppression, persecution, discrimination and other negative happenings. In their book "The Psychology of Humour: An Integrative Approach", the psychologists Rod A. Martin and Thomas Ford elaborate on different topics related to humour from a psychological and scientific standpoint. They investigate traditional humour theories and contextualise them in the face of contemporary models and studies conducted around the topic of humour and its functions. Amongst the multiple humour theories they portray, two rather conventional concepts seem to show parallelisms with possible reasons for "forced positive" conduct. The first one we want to shed light on is the "relief theory", which suggests that feelings of discomfort and tension are mitigated by humour and laughter (Martin & Ford, 2018). Developing possible explanations for pushing positivity, we can derive from the relief theory, that individuals shield themselves against unpleasant emotions by employing humour in situations that could potentially cause discomfort. Therefore, "toxic positivity" could be regarded as a mechanism of self-protection, as the individual strives for heightening their own wellbeing by shifting their focus towards the positive in a non-positive situation or during the experience of unpleasant emotions.

The second humour theory Martin and Ford point out is called the "superiority theory" and encompasses the intent of the individual to enhance its self-esteem which results in it rising above negative feelings of others or unpleasant emotions within themselves (Martin & Ford, 2018). The notion of maintaining or augmenting one's positive self-image and the wish to be seen (or to see oneself) in a good light in situations where "pushed positivity" is elicited, relates to this concept of humour. Positivity and humour thus serve as an anchor to stabilise the self-worth and integrity of individuals. Also, employing humour or positive conduct might give humans a sense of controllability of the situations they find themselves in, which again positively contributes to them perceiving themselves as sufficient.

Martin and Ford also refer to Freud's psychoanalytic theory of humour and his concept of defence mechanisms, which are qualities of the ego that protect it from facing reality and thus possibly experiencing pain or unpleasant emotions. According to the two psychologists, the ego is "employing defence mechanisms to protect itself from the otherwise overwhelming anxiety that arises from [...] conflicting forces" (Martin & Ford, 2018). As a defence mechanism, individuals can engage in suppression, denial, projection or humour, for instance.

According to Freud, humour is a "defence mechanism that allows us to face difficult situations without becoming overwhelmed by unpleasant emotion" (Martin & Ford, 2018). This idea of counteracting negative or potentially discomforting situations by emphasising positivity in a situation or embedding the latter by the use of humour, could be observed as an expression of "forced positivity" in our journals. This approach to "toxic positivity" suggests that we do not only employ this conduct in order to maintain a positive self-image, but also to enhance our own wellbeing. Due to the association of Freud's psychoanalytic theory with aggression and libido, we prefer regarding "toxic positivity" as a way of coping with potentially challenging emotions and situations rather than calling it a defence mechanism. To our mind, the term "coping" highlights the function and the use of "pushed positivity" in everyday life more, because it points out how forcing positivity can be employed as a self-protective reaction to enable an individual to deal with a situation. Calling "toxic positivity" a coping strategy does not imply that it is a functional or adequate way of dealing with unsettling or challenging situations at all times. Still, employing a positive stance or (re-)acting in a positive manner can help individuals to process their emotions as best as it is possible for them at a specific moment. Whether "pushed positivity" is a functional way of dealing with a situation depends on the extent to which it causes suffering or support for the individual and interlocutors. To sum up, we must confirm that "toxic positivity" is not thoroughly "toxic" or detrimental. In some situations, it can act as a mediator for intra- and inter-individual emotion regulation.

Social media presence

Because users of social media are frequently encouraged to present a carefully curated version of themselves and their lives online, social media has significantly contributed to the promotion of "toxic" or "forced positivity". This may put pressure on people to look successful, faultless and always joyful, which may cause them to repress or conceal unpleasant feelings and impedes them from sharing negative experiences. Additionally, motivational sayings, affirmations, and self-help advice are frequently posted on social media platforms, supporting the notion that success and happiness can be attained only by positive thinking. Because of this, we understand that Wang et al. believe people may have false expectations and feel excessive pressure to constantly be optimistic, regardless of their actual experiences or circumstances (Wang et al, 2017).

While being positive can be a useful coping strategy in many circumstances, the idea that people should always project a positive attitude can be harmful and counterproductive. It is essential to understand that true positivity is about building resilience and ways of coping to deal with challenging circumstances effectively rather than denying or suppressing negative emotions. Acknowledging both positive and negative feelings, as well as actively attempting to foster a sense of hope, optimism, and thankfulness even in the face of hardship, constitute a more balanced and genuine approach to positivity (Jangra, 2021).

Conclusion

Even if positivity on social media can be a powerful tool for personal growth and wellbeing, it is important to be aware of the pressure and the expectations that can accompany it and to put genuine self-expression and emotional wellbeing before outward appearances. Positive thinking that is "toxic" or "forced" can have a variety of detrimental effects on mental health. For instance, persistently repressing unpleasant emotions might result in loneliness, anxiety, and even despair. Furthermore, the pressure to portray an ideal or perpetually joyful persona on social media platforms can lead to feelings of inadequacy, comparison, and a sense of isolation from other people (bfi.com, 2022).

Telling people to "look on the bright side" can be especially detrimental to individuals who are already dealing with mental health issues like depression, anxiety, or trauma. It may give them the impression that their feelings are unimportant or that they are falling short of some arbitrary bar for satisfaction or wellbeing.
It is also true that some people turn to "forced optimism" as a coping method. Focusing on the positive or adopting an upbeat outlook might help people who are feeling helpless or overwhelmed to reclaim their sense of control and hope. This can be especially true in the short term since positive thinking can make people feel more resilient and upbeat when facing difficulties.
 Negative emotions can result in unprocessed trauma, burnout and other mental health problems if they are denied or ignored. Acknowledging both positive and negative emotions and creating functional coping mechanisms to handle challenging circumstances constitute a more balanced approach to coping (Thau, 2021).

Positive Psychology - science or self-help?

Development

"Positive Psychology" emerged as a new stream within the field of psychology in 1998, when the psychologist Martin Seligmann became president of the APA (American Psychological Association) and, with his position as a face of the APA, established this new branch of psychology together with the psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi.

It is crucial to keep in mind that this "unconventional movement" intentionally meant to contrast the predominant seriousness and disorder-focused perspective in psychology at the time of its emergence. Positive psychology, opposing the malfunction-focused conventional branches, wanted to emphasise human strengths and resources. It is a branch of psychology that mainly concentrates on positivity and the promotion of health instead of dysfunctional doings and mental disorders. It wants to mobilise humans to move toward their area of optimal functioning, which stands in contrast to clinical psychology, that focuses on difficulty functioning, as outlined by Jennifer S. Cheavens in "The Science and Application of Positive Psychology" (Cheavens, 2022). The book outlines the main theoretical models of positive psychology, its objectives and current developments in research within the field.

When it came to existence, positive psychology aimed to differ from pop-culture based "positive thinking" movements and self-help literature by providing scientific foundations for its key claims. As a new focus in psychology, positive psychology does not intend to replace, but to complement conventional branches in the field of psychology.

Key claims

Basic principles of positive psychology follow the long line of philosophical thought about "Eudaimonia" (Greek: happiness, welfare), which refers to

"leading a good life". It combines those with health-related psychological topics such as health benefits from positive thinking. It aims at anchoring research about human welfare in science and improving people's quality of life. It wants to investigate which conditions help people to flourish, to live up to their potentials, and to achieve their goals and how individuals can increase their capacities for joy, meaning, empathy, and hope (Cheavens,

2022). The pillars of positive psychology can be formulated as positive subjective experiences, positive individual traits, and positive institutions (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). As factors of happiness, connection in relationships, exercise, spirituality or religion and the membership in organisations are named by Seligman, the key figure of the movement.

Critique

The entanglement of life-coaching approaches and self-help literature including ideas about how to achieve happiness with positive psychology are problematic since the life-coaching and self-help scene could massively benefit from the scientific foundation of positive psychology, which conveys similar messages as advocates of the latter media do. Drawing from "scientific results", life coaches and self-help book authors can provide "objective" validation for their models of "the good life" and thus distribute literature, courses, seminars and other topic-related content more successfully.

In her book "Bright-Sided: How the Relentless Promotion of Positive Thinking has Undermined America ", the journalist Barbara Ehrenreich criticises, how even Martin Seligman, the "father of positive psychology" could profit from selling books with titles like "Authentic happiness – using the new positive psychology to realise your potential". The border between positive psychology as a branch within the science of psychology and the realm of self-help coaches and businesspeople "selling happiness" becomes untransparent.

Furthermore, Ehrenreich claims that positive psychology would be placing an optimistic bias in everyday life, which also implies that results gained through research in the field of positive psychology could underlie the confirmation bias and thus be rather generated instead of providing findings that can be successfully applied in everyday life (Ehrenreich, 2009).

In their paper "Positive Psychology and Cultural Sensitivity: A Review of the Literature" (Kubokawa & Ottaway, 2009), the psychologists Amanda Kubokawa and Amber Ottaway investigated psychology as a subdiscipline of psychology in terms of its cultural sensitivity and raise critical questions regarding the generalisability of key models positive psychology makes use of. They refer to different analyses of positive psychology that have been conducted by other researchers. Among those, Kubokawa and Ottaway quote the work of John Chambers Christopher and Sarah Hickinbottom many times. In their paper "Positive

psychology, ethnocentrism, and the disguised ideology of individualism" (Christopher & Hickinbottom, 2008), the latter researchers and psychologists critically examine the intent of positive psychology to develop universally valid concepts of happiness and its attainment. As we seek to gain a deeper understanding of the different movements that might have influenced our comprehension of positivity and to question to what extent positive psychology might have contributed to the phenomenon of "pushed positivity", we perceive the chosen papers to be suitable to bolster our critical review of positive psychology.

As the positive psychology branch was created and shaped by the APA, it naturally exhibits Western, especially American, perspectives on happiness and positivity in the style of "people achieve well-being when they feel good" (Cheavens, 2022). Transcultural concepts of welfare are not integrated into positive psychology, which sparks the question to what extent models of human prosperity that stem from positive psychological theories can be utilised and understood in non-Western contexts. As a theoretical approach rooted in an individualistic perspective, positive psychological key claims are focused on the self and its development. Conceptualisations of the self and the part it plays in ideas about welfare differ as much as positive and negative emotions are defined differently across cultures (Kubokawa & Ottaway, 2009). Moreover, some emotions that are interpreted to be negative in Western cultures are seen as a driving force for self-enhancement and advancement in East Asian cultures (Christopher & Hickinbottom, 2008). Self-efficacy, a respected abstraction prevailing in Western societies, is regarded as the key to happiness. This view is not to be generalised cross-culturally, as normative frameworks and ideas about traits worthy of being attained are not entirely universal. In search of universally valid virtues, Peterson and Seligman created a model of strengths that are to be pursued in order to live up to six universal virtues they formulated. This "Values in Action (VIA)" model claims universality while being grounded in a deeply Western perspective and exhibits the threat of oversimplification, as only similarities and common ground were taken into account when the six universal virtues were defined. Cultural differences were not considered (Kubokawa & Ottaway, 2009). The question, whether positive psychology is culture-free or culturally embedded, is vividly discussed within the field of positive psychology. Advocates of the embeddedness idea emphasise that "no form of psychology is free of either culture or values" (Christopher & Hickinbottom, 2008), whereas people affiliated with the standpoint of defining positive psychology as culture-free view "happiness" as the driving force of human action and conduct all over the globe and cross-culturally (Kubokawa & Ottaway, 2009).

Western or Euro-American views of happiness are rooted in philosophical ideas that were mainly formulated by European thinkers in the course of European history. One of the philosophical approaches that conceptualises contentment is hedonism, which advocates for pursuing happiness whilst avoiding unpleasurable emotions. This idea is also reflected in Freud's concept of the pleasure principle, which we will shed light on later in this paper. Like hedonist core ideas, negative emotions seem to be under emphasised in the positive psychology approach. Here, negative emotions are seen as contrasting positive feelings, which simplifies the complexity of emotions and maintains the conventional dichotomy of "positive" vs "negative" emotions. Positive psychology theories rather look at negative emotions in the light of evolutionary mechanisms. Therefore, negative emotions like fear are correlates of survival functions and thus, adaptive (positivepsychology.com, What are Positive and Negative Emotions and Do We Need Both?). Even though negative emotions are not completely rejected in positive psychology approaches, it is not assumed that negative emotions might bear hidden potentials (apart from being the counterpart to positive emotions), either.

Is positive psychology "toxic"? - Résumé

Positive psychology itself is not unauthentic, as its aim is the promotion of wellbeing without forcing it. Still, dealing with unsettling moments or events in life, acting out or reacting to negative emotions in general is not emphasised in the models provided by positive psychology. The movement rather tries to enable the individual to shift their focus towards the positive instead of giving space to negative emotions.

Yet, principles and results emerging from research within the branch of positive psychology can be abused and narrated in "toxic" manner which could happen due to overemphasising positivity while disregarding everything non-positive. Brinkmann refers to this one-sided expression of specific conduct as "overdoing" (Brinkmann, 2016). We could therefore speak of a misinterpretation of the core messages of positive psychology in everyday life practice and call the commercialisation of happiness-promoting practices advanced by life coaches, speakers and advocates for "the good life" a misappropriation of the original objectives of positive psychology.

Still, the question of what "positive" means, remains unanswered and is interpreted differently by psychologists and researchers in the field (Diener, 2003). Positive psychology is not "new" as such, but it helped to raise awareness for and to shift the focus within psychology towards more strength- and resource-oriented perspectives (Diener, 2003).

The previous exploration of the lack of cultural sensitivity within the positive psychology movement (Kubokawa & Ottaway, 2009) leads us to the conclusion that the phenomenon of "forced positivity" how *we* experience it strongly refers to the societal and normative conditions we were socialised in. This idea of cultural relativity of psychological concepts is formulated in cultural psychological approaches and referred to in later chapters of this paper. Predominant traditions of thought and knowledge brought to light by research within Western paradigms of psychology as a science shape our understanding of what "the good life" is and what it needs to achieve welfare more deeply than we might be aware of. Regarding positive psychology, it is striking how much it is representative of Western concepts of happiness and positivity and how it also shapes our experiences and definitions of "unauthentic positivity" in everyday life.

Therefore, we propose that the phenomenon is encountered and expressed differently in other cultures and societies. We as outstanders cannot make assumptions about how "forced positivity" might differ in cultural contexts that are not the ones we live and act in. The positive psychology movement can be understood as both a strong influence and testimony of Western/Euro-American ideals of welfare and norms advocating for the pursuit of positivity. It shaped us in our research, as we were all socialised in global North countries that are historically and currently influenced by and interconnected with the United States, especially regarding the discipline of psychology. Therefore, it is understandable that we all agreed on having experienced the phenomenon of "forced positivity" multiple times, even if our definitions of it slightly differ. Still, within normative frameworks of Western societies, we all can relate to each other's experiences of unauthentic positivity and have concurrent definitions of the phenomenon.

Overall, "forced positivity" has become a pervasive concept in modern-day society due to a combination of historical, cultural, and political factors. While positivity can certainly be a valuable tool for personal growth and development, it is important to recognize that negative emotions are a natural and necessary part of the human experience.

Consequences of "forced positivity"

"Resonance" and "forced positivity"

In the course of the effort to understand why humans continuously engage in "unauthentic positive" doings and interactions, even if they cause suffering, we will shed light on the sociological concept of "resonance". The latter term was coined by the sociologist Hartmut Rosa, who defines "resonance" as the counterpart of alienation (a sense of estrangement and separation). We suggest that alienation can be a consequence of "forced positive" encounters or the occurrence of "unauthentic positivity" within the self, as the intuitive, naturally arising experience opposes the expressed doing. This lack of calibration between experience and expression can lead to a sense of disconnection both within the self and, in the case of social interaction, between the self and the other.

Rosa points out that "resonance" shows, when the "subject[s] feel[…] touched, moved, or addressed by the people, places, objects, etc., [they] encounter (…)" (Rosa, 2018). This sense of connectedness that is achieved by the openness of the individual to be moved by something, can be observed, according to Rosa, in close relationships between romantic partners, friends, or people that feel mutual love for each other (Rosa, 2018) and "genuine dialogue". Taking the idea of resonance further, we suggest that resonance or alienation can be found in any kind of social interaction. Greeting a stranger on the street by nodding in their direction or discussing something with a beloved person thus can both be situations that can foster resonance between individuals or create distance between them.

Resonance between individuals

"When something really touches us, we can never know or predict in advance what we will become as a result of this" (Rosa, 2018).

Rosa highlights how resonance cannot be forcefully generated, which makes every new interaction unpredictable, uncontrollable and thus frightening to an extent. The willingness to submit to this uncertainty anyways might be rewarded with the experience of genuine encounter, which, according to Rosa, can only be guaranteed by embracing that resonance "requires difference and sometimes opposition and contradiction"(Rosa, 2018). Relating the idea of contrast as a driving force for true encounters to conduct of "forced positivity", we want to outline how the avoidance of conflict encourages "unauthentic positivity" and thus impedes resonant connections, as the dialogue is not genuine.

If people give the impression of feeling well even if that is not the case, they will try to disguise their authentically experienced emotions and engage in positive conduct. This can happen nonverbally on the one hand, for example through smiling or regulating the facial expression so that it doesn't show how the individual truly feels. On the other hand, "unauthentic positivity" can be expressed verbally and inform the other about the untrue well-being of people engaging in "forced positive" doings.

To enable more genuine and thus more resonant dialogue and interaction, we suggest that both, the individual and society as an abstract whole, must raise their awareness concerning this issue. They must effortfully try not to succumb to "forced positive" conduct in interactions, that has been dictated by social norms. Rosa refers to these codes of conduct as "axes of resonance" (Rosa, 2018). These axes constitute individual and social frameworks of resonance that are expected to arise in specific circumstances, for example in close relationships or in the engagement with activities and surroundings that are valued by an individual. His abstraction of "social axes", that "connect us with, and relate us to, other human beings" (Rosa, 2018), can be applied to our presumption, that unauthentic positivity is a phenomenon that is strongly shaped by social norms about how humans should interact with and react towards each other, when they are in contact with each other.

The quality needed to overcome untruthful interactions is vulnerability, the ability to show oneself as a being that can be hurt, influenced or attacked (Cambridge Dictionary, vulnerable). Sadly, vulnerability is mostly rather seen as a trait that makes the person who engages in transparency and vulnerability weak and easy to harm. Realising how vulnerability has the potential to enhance genuine dialogue and resonance is an important step to take towards a stronger sense of connectedness between humans.

Resonance within the individual

In the following, we want to make use of Rosa's concept of resonance in order to emphasise the importance of being moved by something within the individual, as well. In her study "The Psychological Health Benefits of Accepting Negative Emotions and Thoughts: Laboratory, Diary, and Longitudinal Evidence", Brett Q. Ford tried to show that accepting emotions is not only relevant in order to prevent the manifestation of clinically relevant symptoms (e.g., fear) or ill-being (e.g., depression, anxiety disorders), but it is also significant for "healthy"

individuals (Ford, 2017). Ford defines accepting emotions of whatever quality as a form of emotion regulation, that enhances healthy processing of emotions in the long-term. According to the studies Ford conducted, "people who habitually accept emotions and thoughts experience less negative emotion in the context of daily stressors" (Ford, 2017). Following this call, it appears paradoxical that humans try to increase their experience of pleasant emotions by forcing positivity, even if accepting their genuine feelings would enable a longer-lasting sense of wellbeing. We believe that concordance between the arising emotion that shows naturally (anger, for instance) and the expression of this feeling, will not only result in long-term mental health benefits, but also in a feeling of coherence or connection within the self.

Still, we presume that a high number of people will act positively in an "unauthentic" manner, even if the alternative of accepting internally experienced emotions seems plausible to them. In the following, we will shed light on some ideas that could serve as explanations for the question of why people maintain harmful conduct even if they are aware of alternative ways of acting and reacting in specific situations.

The Freudian pleasure principle

In his theories on the self, Freud formulates two principles that motivate human action, the reality principle, that balances individual needs with social norms and expectations towards the expression of the latter needs, and the pleasure principle. The pleasure principle or pleasure-pain principle motivates an individual to seek out positive experience and gratification of their needs that will result in enjoyment. It is moderated by the "id", a part of the self that is associated with drive and basic instincts in psychoanalytic theory (APA dictionary of Psychology, pleasure principle). While striving for the augmentation of pleasure, the id also aims for the reduction and the avoidance of disinclination and painful experiences. In his book "Beyond the pleasure principle", Freud emphasises the assumption, that the pleasure principle is the driving force underlying "mental events", how he names it. According to him the "course of those events is invariably set in motion by an unpleasurable tension, and that it takes a direction such that its final outcome coincides with a lowering of suspension of that tension, that is, with an avoidance of unpleasure or a production of pleasure" (Freud, 2015). The concept of the pleasure principle can serve as an approach to

explain actions of "forced positivity", as it theorises man's inherent need to heighten pleasure while minimising suspense or feelings of unwellness. In philosophy, a similar motive of the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain and unwellness has been coined as "hedonism", which is why we also refer to "hedonist" motivations that drive "pushed positive" conduct. The fact that concepts like the pleasure principle and philosophical streams like hedonism have been apparent throughout human history denotes that the pursuit of positivity is highly relevant to humans, which makes the phenomenon of "forced positivity" even more intriguing. This ever present motive of seeking wellbeing also provides an explanation for overdoing positivity, as trying to feel good has a long tradition in human development which makes "pushing positivity" an easily accessible step to take, when the emotions an individual experiences actually deviate from positivity.

Methodology

Introduction

This chapter aims to provide an overview of the research design, data collection, and analytic procedures used to investigate the phenomenon of "pushed positivity" in the Western world. Pushing positivity is the act of urging people to think positively, especially in situations where it may not be beneficial to do so. The purpose of this study is to explore the possible effects of this conduct on individuals and their interlocutors, as well as the reasons behind it. The study also intends to obtain an understanding of the underlying patterns of this conduct in everyday life situations and how an individual's position in society links to "forced positivity".

The research design and methodology

In this study, we will employ a collaborative autoethnography approach and a case study research design, in which the researchers will act as the research subjects. This method places a focus on the researchers' participation and co-creation of knowledge; it refers to a research approach in which researchers actively participate in the process of generating knowledge and understanding, enabling them to reflect on their own experiences within a particular social and cultural context. The researchers in this study are also the research subjects, which gives them a deep and intimate viewpoint on the events and environment that are the focus of the study.

According to Yin (2018), who is a prominent social scientist and methodologist who has contributed extensively to the field of qualitative research methodology, a case study research design is a qualitative research strategy that entails a thorough examination of one case or a limited number of cases. This method offers an in-depth insight into the case being investigated and is perfect for investigating complicated social phenomena such as "pushed positivity" in their natural surroundings. The case study method will enable us to investigate the subtleties and complexities of individual experiences within the particular social and cultural environment in which our study is embedded.

A qualitative research approach called "collaborative autoethnography" focuses on the individual's subjective experiences, in this instance, the researchers themselves. It entails taking account of one's own experiences and interpreting them in the context of the larger social and cultural setting in which they take place. This method promotes collaboration

among researchers as they share, analyse, and explore the meanings and values that underpin their experiences, as argued for by Dr. Chang in her book "Collaborative Autoethnography", which gives a thorough introduction to collaborative autoethnography and multiple examples of its use in research.

Drawing from the collaborative autoethnography technique and ideas from case study research designs offer us a thorough and nuanced approach to data collection and interpretation. This method allows us to explore the complexity of the social and cultural background "toxic positivity" is embedded in, while simultaneously developing a comprehensive grasp of the subjective experiences of how individuals within Western contexts experience it.

The need for a methodology that captures the complexity and diversity of individual experiences within specific social and cultural contexts

Baron, Byrne, and Suls (1989) define "social psychology" as "the scientific field that seeks to understand the nature and causes of individual behavior in social situations". One of the most pressing concerns in social psychology is the development of research methodologies that authentically represent the richness and diversity of individual experiences within specific social and cultural environments. The "Social Psychology" paper by Hogg and Vaughan (2018) is a helpful resource for recognising the limits of standard experimental research procedures and arguing for more qualitative and context-specific research methods due to its relevance, comprehensive coverage, and methodological guidance. As noted by Reis and Judd (2014), conventional laboratory research in social psychology has been criticised for failing to adequately reflect the complexity of social events and personal experiences in real-life situations due to the artificial conditions under which research is conventionally conducted.

Social psychologists have developed a variety of methods that emphasise the significance of context, diversity, and subjective experience in order to address this issue. For instance, qualitative research techniques like in-depth interviews, focus groups, and ethnographic observations enable researchers to learn more about people's subjective experiences in relation to their cultural and social environments. Similarly, Braun and Clarke (2013), who are researchers in the field of qualitative research methodology and analysis, stated that "qualitative research methods can provide rich and detailed accounts of phenomena, with the aim of understanding the complexity and diversity of human experiences, particularly in relation to their social and cultural contexts" (p. 79).

It is essential for developing the discipline of social psychology and advancing social justice and equity to develop methodologies that can adequately capture the complexity and diversity of individual experiences within particular social and cultural contexts.

Researchers as the research subject

The inclusion of researchers as research subjects has gained popularity in social psychology research, as it allows a deeper exploration of the complexities of human behaviour and social interaction from an inside perspective. In this approach, researchers use their own experiences and perspectives as a starting point for their research, which can provide valuable insights into the research topic.

The researcher Svend Brinkmann (2014) states that incorporating researchers as research subjects might result in a more in-depth and genuine examination of the subject matter since the researchers' experiences and views are essential to their comprehension of the study issue. However, it is important to take possible ethical problems with this approach into account. Lapadat (2017), who was concerned with the ethics of collaborative autoethnography, argues that by encouraging a more collaborative and reflective approach to research, collaborative autoethnography, a method that uses several researchers as study subjects, can assist in addressing these ethical issues. With this approach, researchers collaborate to examine their individual perspectives and experiences as well as the effects of their positionality on the research process.

According to Jaan Valsiner (2014), who is a prominent psychologist known for his significant contributions to the field of cultural psychology, particularly in the areas of human development, sociocultural theory, and the study of meaning-making processes, engaging researchers as research subjects can result in a more individualised and meaningful investigation of the research issue. Similarly, Onyx and Small (2001) suggest memory work as a technique for examining individual experiences and feelings during the research process. Memory work is a feminist method; it is the intentional examination and reinterpretation of personal and collective memories, with a focus on amplifying marginalised voices, contesting dominant narratives, and highlighting the gendered dimensions of individual and social experiences. These methods stress the significance of the researcher's own experiences and contextual knowledge in determining how they perceive the study issue.

The idea of situated knowledge, developed by Donna Haraway in 1988, emphasises the significance of accepting and valuing the variety of experiences and viewpoints in research. This method acknowledges how social settings and power structures influence knowledge

and how the perceptions of researchers are influenced by their positions within these contexts. The positions in question are those of researchers within social contexts and structures of power, which shape the manner in which they perceive the world as well as how they understand it.

In conclusion, engaging researchers as research subjects may provide insightful knowledge about the complex nature of social interaction and human behaviour. An in-depth and genuine investigation of the study topic can be achieved through the use of collaborative autoethnography, memory work, and other techniques that place an emphasis on the researchers' contextual knowledge and personal experiences. Still, the moral implications of this strategy must be thoroughly examined and handled.

Collaborative Autoethnography

"Collaborative autoethnography" refers to a group of individuals working together to investigate their personal experiences and cultural perspectives. This study method seeks to clarify the complex nature of social interaction and human behaviour (Lapadat, 2017). It involves the joint gathering, analysis, and interpretation of data. Researchers utilise their own experiences and cultural knowledge to develop a common understanding of the subject matter they are investigating.

According to Lapadat (2017), this approach enables researchers to draw on their personal insights and experiences while simultaneously participating in a collective sharing and reflection process. This collaborative technique has the potential to challenge prevalent cultural narratives and presumptions while simultaneously advancing the understanding of the complexity of human conduct and social interaction.

Collaborative autoethnography is dedicated to using ethical research methods, which is another important characteristic. The importance of ethical issues in collaborative autoethnography As underlined by Lapadat (2017), it rests in recognizing and resolving power dynamics, ensuring the representation of diverse perspectives, and getting informed permission from participants. Recognizing and minimising power inequalities between researchers and participants, amplifying minority viewpoints, and conducting research in a transparent and courteous manner that values participants' autonomy and well-being are all part of this. This method of doing research emphasises the need to provide a secure and

encouraging environment for each participant as well as the necessity of making sure that they are completely aware of the research process and their involvement in it.

Data Collection

This study's data-collection approach was reflective journaling, which is a standard qualitative research method (Lee, 2015). Lee is a communication studies academic and an expert in autoethnography, and she investigates the importance of reflective journal writing in autoethnographic research in her work. Researchers who use reflective journaling keep a personal journal in which they reflect on their study subject and write down their ideas, observations, and discoveries. In our case, researchers write about instances where they engaged in or were exposed to "pushed positivity". "Autoethnography: An Overview," by Ellis et al. (2011), gives a detailed introduction to the approach of autoethnography, which uses the researcher's personal experiences as a source of data. Reflective journaling provides researchers with a place to engage in self-reflection and record their unique experiences and viewpoints as they go through the research process. Thus, Lee (2015) argued that reflective journaling offers a valuable tool for researchers to document their research journey.

Procedure

Each researcher in this study kept their own reflective journal to document their distinctive experiences and thoughts on the phenomenon of "pushing positivity" in everyday life situations. In these reflective journals, the researchers documented their findings and epiphanies. Also, they reflected upon their interactions with others and their personal biases, assumptions, and how their positionality influenced their experience.

The journal provided data to be analysed and was utilised to guide the study's general direction and research questions (Ellis et al., 2011). By storing their journals in a safe place and using pseudonyms for both themselves and other people addressed in the journal entries, the researchers protected the confidentiality and anonymity of their writings as recommended by Lee 2015. To make analysis easier, the data was additionally organised based on identified themes, this will be elaborated on in the upcoming chapter. Reflective journaling was a useful tool for collaborative autoethnography in recording the individual experiences and viewpoints of the research participants.

Data Analysis

In this study, we investigated "toxic positivity" using an unconventional approach involving the researchers themselves, represented as researchers A, B, C, and D, as both coders and research subjects. By integrating our personal experiences and thoughts with rigorous analysis methods, we hoped to acquire a greater comprehension of the phenomenon.

The analysis approach began with data preparation, in which we collected a wide range of qualitative data using reflective journals. Each researcher went through a familiarisation process to guarantee a thorough investigation of the data. We engaged ourselves in the data, reading and re-reading the sources to have a thorough comprehension of the subject matter. This immersion allowed us to become acquainted with the dataset's nuances, thoughts, and narratives. The method also featured a collaborative component in which we read through our journals collectively and exchanged our ideas, viewpoints, and thoughts.

After that, we collaborated to create a comprehensive coding structure that would guide our analysis. Using our research questions and the existing literature on "toxic positivity," we found six major themes that were crucial to our study. They were based on underlying patterns and similarities that we observed. These themes also serve as chapters in our analysis.

We began an iterative coding process after establishing our coding structure. Each researcher coded the data by giving appropriate codes to segments that conveyed the essence of the selected themes. We had frequent group discussions throughout the process to analyse, revise, and align our code decisions. These conversations encouraged collaborative interactions, shared interpretations, and the resolution of any coding inconsistencies or ambiguities.

Patterns, linkages, and links within the data began to emerge as the coding process progressed. We hoped to discover overarching patterns, noteworthy insights, and relationships among the highlighted topics by synthesising the coded data.

We maintained a reflexive position throughout the analysis, noting our own biases and preconceptions as both researchers and research participants.

By combining our unique position as both researchers and study participants, we were able to undertake a comprehensive analysis that captured the depth and complexities of "toxic positivity." This method improved our understanding of the phenomenon and added vital insights to the area.

Reflexivity and positionality

Reflexivity and positionality are crucial to the research process in collaborative autoethnography. According to Lapadat (2017), reflexivity is the constant awareness of one's own values, views, prejudices, and assumptions and how these components affect the research process. According to Sved Brinkmann (2014), positionality refers to the researcher's social location, which includes their gender, race, class, and other social identities, as well as how these identities impact their experiences and viewpoints. Knowledge is always situated within a specific context and is shaped by the researcher's social, political, and historical position, as formulated by Haraway (1988) in her influential paper on situated knowledge. The subjects of collaborative autoethnography are the researchers themselves, and their experiences are crucial to the research. In order to guarantee that their experiences and opinions are appropriately portrayed and unaffected by their social status, it is crucial for the researchers to be self-aware and conscious of their positionality. The relevance of ethics in collaborative autoethnography was stressed by Lapadat (2017), who also noted that researchers need to be conscious of power dynamics that may occur throughout the collaborative process. It is crucial to recognize the likelihood of power disparities and take action to make sure that every researcher has an opportunity to speak up and is not excluded from the research process.

Svend Brinkmann (2014) emphasised the significance of comprehending positionality's role in the research process and advised researchers to actively consider how their own social position affects their work. Taking action to overcome biases and preconceptions that can have an impact on the research process is part of this.

Reflexivity and positionality in collaborative autoethnography are essential for ensuring that the study captures the experiences and viewpoints of the researchers themselves correctly. Researchers may make sure that the study is moral, truthful, and representative of all viewpoints by being conscious of their own biases and positionality and taking efforts to rectify them.

How the researchers' own experiences and perspectives influenced the research process and interpretation of the data

Personal experiences of the researchers had a significant impact on the research process, influencing the topic, research questions, and the study design. In their reflective journals, individuals identified important themes based on their lived experiences.

These personal experiences also had an impact on data interpretation, bringing new insights and enhancing the study. They added authenticity and depth to the results as both researchers and research subjects, owing to their intimate expertise and experience with the topic matter. However, it is crucial to recognize that personal experiences might bring biases. In order to overcome this, the researchers maintained their reflexivity, critically reflecting on their own viewpoints, assumptions, and prejudices. They engaged in self-reflection and open discussions to ensure data interpretation transparency and rigour.

Embracing their dual roles, the researchers developed a strong connection with the data, getting a thorough grasp of the phenomenon. This method thus incorporates personal experiences, scholarly analysis, and reflexive insights.

Discussion about conducting collaborative autoethnography

Collaborative autoethnography contains both challenges and opportunities for researchers. On the one hand, it may be an intimidating and lengthy procedure that calls for thorough preparation, transparent communication, and a readiness to maintain constant communication with the co-researchers (Lapadat, 2017; Onyx & Small, 2001). Working with diverse groups of individuals who might represent various viewpoints, experiences, and expectations can make this particularly difficult.

On the other hand, the collaborative method can benefit researchers in a variety of ways. In order to increase the validity and credibility of the findings, it can offer to establish a sense of shared ownership and responsibility for the research project (Lapadat, 2017). As co-researchers engage in reflective discussions about their own experiences and perspectives, it can also create opportunities for mutual learning and growth (Haraway, 1988; Valsiner, 2014). Additionally, since co-researchers participate in a process of collective storytelling and knowledge production, collaborative autoethnography can offer a platform for underrepresented voices to be heard (Lapadat, 2017).

Making sure all co-researchers are at ease and feel supported during the research process is one of the primary challenges of conducting collaborative autoethnography. This demands that researchers be aware of power relationships and establish an atmosphere of acceptance where all opinions may be heard (Onyx & Small, 2001). As co-researchers engage in discussions about delicate and private issues, the collaborative process can also be time-consuming and potentially emotionally draining (Lapadat, 2017).

Summing up, the advantages of collaborative autoethnography make it a useful approach for social psychology research, despite the drawbacks mentioned earlier. Co-researchers can deepen their awareness of their personal experiences and viewpoints while also advancing larger discussions about societal issues and identity by participating in a process of collaborative knowledge production (Valsiner, 2014). Collaborative autoethnography may offer a deep and nuanced understanding of complex social phenomena through careful preparation, clear communication, and a dedication to reflexivity and inclusion.

Self-reflection

Our personal definitions of the phenomenon

As the phenomenon we investigate is not defined uniformly, we decided to provide our own definitions of the phenomenon we call "toxic", "forced", "unauthentic" or "pushed" positivity or "forced optimism". Our personal definitions create a link to our collaborative autoethnographic method and underline how even in a group of four people, the same phenomenon is understood and experienced differently.

Serafina's definition of the phenomenon

To me, "toxic positivity" refers to a disproportionate persistence on expressing "happiness" and acting in a positive manner, even if that opposes what an individual feels inherently. What I associate with the term is people smiling for pictures while looking bored and indifferent behind the camera, ritualised meaningless conversations like "How are you doing?" - "Good, thanks. How about you?" - "Same" and a lot of effort in trying to cheer myself or someone else up by giving "powerful, inspirational" advice such as "It's all good, tomorrow is a new day, everything will be just fine, maybe you can learn and grow from this experience…".

When talking to others, I quite often experience how people I interact with are not willing or able to express how they genuinely feel (which I don't blame them for because I believe, that verbalising emotions is something most people, myself included, don't learn from their childhood on which can make it harder as a youth or an adult to feel and to voice how one is doing emotionally). Sometimes I feel fooled by the people I engage with when I get the feeling that they might feel unwell, insecure, overwhelmed, sad, afraid, stressed, angry, discontented or not positive in any other way even if they seem to feel alright. Verbally expressing that they are "doing fine", smiling or changing topics are ways of masking emotions that differ from the ones that genuinely are experienced. With people I am not too close to, I don't see myself in the position to openly question their emotional expression, with friends or family members I try to inquire more in-depth how they actually feel. But even in interactions with beloved people I know well, I am very cautious not to overstep their boundaries which can lead to situations in which all of the engaged people are aware of the fact that some thoughts or feelings are left unexpressed, but silently everyone agrees on accepting that without further questioning. As I don't actively use social media platforms in

my everyday life, I associate "forced positivity" primarily with interactions and the strain I sometimes put on myself in order to "be happy".

Julie's definition of the phenomenon

My first awareness of "toxic positivity," I believe, emerged as a result of experiencing mental health issues as a teenager. One of the reasons for my feelings of despair was that I couldn't comprehend or accept how we could live in such a bad environment and corrupt world and do nothing about it. When I expressed my thoughts and strong emotions, I was frequently met with an attitude that tried to guide me to look on the bright side of things, and as much as I believe that we need to appreciate the nice little things in life to get through the day, it was nowhere near what I needed at the time. "But it's so nice out, why don't you go for a walk?" and "Well, it's not all that bad, come on, don't worry too much." was the response to my anxiety and deeply sorrowful views.

I'd say this is a more particular example of my broader understanding of "forced positivity," where it can be reduced to acting as if a positive attitude were the perfect response to everything, namely every scenario and problem.

In my day-to-day life, I frequently observe myself and those around me engaging in the phenomenon of "pushed positivity." It is frequently as simple as responding to someone's complaint or concern with something positive or simply putting on a happy face, even when it is not necessary. I suppose the reason tends to be that I or the other person just lack the mental capacity to deal with our negative emotions, and it is easier to make them seem insignificant than to be emotionally vulnerable.

I may also see "forced optimism" at the institutional or systemic level, which adds another layer to my thinking. I find there to be a link between how capitalist society encourages us to remain optimistic in order to keep their workforce going. Discouraging unpleasant feelings is a method of controlling individuals. Especially in underprivileged communities, where convincing people that they should be grateful for the fundamental necessities of existence increases their likelihood of staying in line and not causing issues by wanting more.

Vasco's definition of the phenomenon

I became aware of what "toxic positivity" was, through social media. Since then, I have understood the phenomenon from a lot of different perspectives. I can see it as something that involves inducing happiness onto ourselves, when it is not beneficial for us, or others. I can

see it being something that people turn to, when one needs to cope with some certain sadness, in order to mirror happiness, when in reality, it is just a facade, and I can also see it as something that can be used by one, to bring others down, even unintentionally, by forcing happiness onto them, rejecting or ignoring their expressing of negative emotions.

I would also argue that, anyone can define "toxic positivity" differently, and everyone can decide when they think positivity becomes "toxic".

Positionality

We as researchers who study a phenomenon occurring in everyday life, chose to investigate ourselves in situations where we encounter "pushed positivity" and collaboratively reflect upon our experiences and observations. Inspired by their study on religion and spirituality by Muninder K. Ahluwalia and Jacqueline S. Mattis (2012), we want to integrate our personal history and positionality into our data analysis, as differences in these dimensions might account for our diverse understandings of the phenomenon of "forced positivity". Ahluwalia and Mattis point out two reasons why the clarification of the researcher's stance is crucial. On the one hand, probing into our own social identities heightens the validity of our research, as we root our observations in our everyday lives instead of claiming universal applicability of our results. Our study is deeply subjective. Conclusions we draw can only apply to our specific examples. What we deduce from our reflections is only valid for the sample we researched, which, in our study, is put together by us. On the other hand, formulating our stances as researchers highlights the "inherently subjective and relational nature of research" (Ahluwalia & Mattis, 2012).

The following paragraphs will outline all of our individual reflections on our cultural backgrounds and social identities and in what ways they might influence our perceptions of and experiences with "unauthentic positivity".

Each of us took the following aspect into account when formulating their stance as researcher and researched at the same time: Age, gender, ethnicity, education, social economic status (SES), our upbringing and the core values prevailing in the societal frameworks we were most exposed to. As none of us are native speakers of the English language, we want to point out, how language barriers and possibly limited vocabulary impact our choice of words and chosen formulations in our journals. We believe that language plays a pivotal role in creating narratives for our personal life stories, which is why expressing ourselves in English, which is

none of our mother tongues, might create a slightly different image of our self-observations and our reflections upon our standpoints.

Julie's stance

I am a white, 21-year-old, female passing individual who is however comfortable in androgynous presenting and still on the journey to figure out what gender and identity, if any, feel right. I belong to the LGBTQ+ community as well. My parents, a married couple who in many ways created the ideal traditional family, raised me in a little city in the Czech Republic. Contrary to many of my peers, I have never witnessed a divorce because my parents are still married and cohabitating. Though my family is atheist, which is very common in my home country, Christian values continue to serve as the guiding principles and the moral high ground. I grew up in the lower middle class, which has since transformed into the middle class or perhaps a slightly upper middle class as a result of my parents' long hours of work and numerous afternoons spent by myself. Where I come from, mental health awareness is far from ideal, so it was only natural that when, as a teenager, I started experiencing mental health problems, it was received with conflicting attitudes. Which led to my tendency to hide my negative emotions as well as my inability to handle those of others. My academic background is in the humanities, potentially with a particular focus on intersectionality and feminism.

My inclination to be too critical and dismissive of myself and my feelings might be a hindrance to our research since I could minimise some of my experiences and ideas related to the subject of our research.

Serafina's stance

I am a 22 year old female person who identifies as female and is questioning their sexual orientation. I was brought up in a German middle class family with two parents who worked full-time jobs and a younger sibling.

As a white, caucasian person of German origin with high-level primary and secondary education, I encountered positivity more in everyday life interactions with peers and family members. The only stereotype threat I experience is highly interlinked with my gender, as I perceive female read people to be expected to display a smile and positivity at all times. I, personally, find German society to be very work- and achievement focused. Attaining professional and personal goals should also go in hand with overall happiness, it seems like. This notion of positivity expands into different areas of life, the workplace and the family for

instance. I perceive that contentment is strongly interlinked with harmonious and well-functioning (whatever that may mean) family life and "success" (which equals job-safety and a decent salary in the minds of most Germans, at least that's what I believe). Both of my parents are very spiritual. They engaged in different non-Western spiritual practices like Chi-Gong and embedded alternative dietetics into our family life. The idea of influencing one's own mood or feelings and "deciding to feel happy" instead of being sad or angry was very present during my childhood. The interest in spirituality and personal development and growth was sparked in me from an early age on. During adolescence, I found a lot of support in self-help podcasts and literature, as I was struggling with a lack of self-esteem as an adolescent. This influence both helped me to start engaging in self-reflection and questioning my former beliefs, but it also highlighted the idea that "happiness is a person's natural state" and not feeling good was something to avoid or combat.

In the face of hardship, I viewed positivity as an anchoring point and a way of coping with wearying or challenging life-events. To my mind, it was impossible and simply no option to be "dragged down" or "overwhelmed" by difficult situations. As mentioned before, the idea of functioning perfectly regardless of external circumstances and potentially problematic situations, was (and still is) strongly ingrained into me. Therefore, I did not really consider expressing my feelings authentically for a long time, as that simply did not appear to be "useful" or "functional" to me. Only over the last three years I've started to dislike the strain so many people (me included) sometimes put on themselves in order to act and appear positive at all times. I also see myself as an advocate for honesty and emotional authenticity and try to implement these values into my actions and interactions more, sometimes with success, sometimes I still fall prey to the seemingly ever-present maelstrom of positivity. As a student of psychology, my academic foundation lies in the traditional teachings on general psychology. In my studies, I did not choose a specialisation yet and thus have a broad knowledge of psychological key concepts from different schools of thought to draw from.

Vasco's stance

At 20 years old, I am still in the early stages of my life, with much to learn and experience to gain. Being and identifying as a male gives me certain advantages in society, and although I am aware of these, I am also aware of possible societal demands that can come with my gender. In regards to ethnicity, I am white.

As a Portuguese national, I feel a strong sense of connection to my country's history and culture. I am fortunate to come from a country with a stable government and good political stability.

While my family holds Christian values, I do reject the ideal of a higher power, thus considering myself an atheist. Another important aspect of my positionality is my family background. My parents have been together for my entire life, and their successful careers have afforded me a very comfortable lifestyle.To this day, my parents show a lot of protection over me, especially for being the youngest. My household has always been focused on social freedom, but with a lot of attention to our own safety.

While aware of certain privileges that I had and still have, I have been through difficult times along with my family, which in a way shape who I am today.

I come from the area of Humanities, and global issues regarding politics and geographics interest me a lot. I also hold great interest in areas involving journalism and communication.

In difficult times, I have mainly looked at positivity as a facade. I was taught, and still believe, that the best way I can deal with sadness, is to distract myself with any specific activity, while not feeling forced to "push positivity" onto myself. In my eyes, one can be sad, choose to be sad, embrace the sadness, and distract it at the same time.

Analysis

Introduction

We will approach our analysis from the perspectives of narrative psychology and cultural psychology. These stances will aid us in our research in distinct, yet relevant ways.

In the paper "Narrating life", psychologist Brian Schiff outlines that narrative psychology focuses on the creation of a whole life story that includes past events, how they affected the present, and what they mean for the future. This story shapes our identities and helps us find purpose and a way to make sense of the world (Schiff, 2017). Schiff points out that narrative psychology as a tool in research can be "a way of seeing persons, understanding actions, thinking through the ways that words are enacted and their effects" (Schiff, 2017), which makes this approach particularly interesting for our research design using reflective journals. We want to comprehend how people construct their sense of self and how they view their interactions with their environment by exploring narrative psychology. This viewpoint admits that the idea of a "self" and the narrative we create around it are inextricably linked. We will investigate how our life experiences shape how we encounter "toxic positivity" in our everyday lives and how different variables affect our perceptions and experiences.

Cultural psychology focuses on comprehending the variations across civilisations and their distinctive ideas. It acknowledges that social and cultural settings have an impact on individuals and mould their perceptions and their actions (Yan, 2018). We seek to understand how cultural norms, values, and beliefs affect the topic under research by looking at "forced positivity" from a cultural psychology perspective. We accept that "toxic positivity" is not a term that is universally understood, and that cultural psychology can shed light on the many ways that this phenomenon is conceptualised, experienced, and understood in various cultures. With the use of this framework, we may investigate the various ways that the culture humans are socialised in affects their viewpoints, attitudes, and reactions to "toxic positivity".

We take a holistic approach to our study by merging narrative psychology and cultural psychology, which include both personal experiences and cultural influences in doings that are situated in everyday life. We may explore the complexity of the subject and get a thorough grasp of how "toxic positivity" arises in individual stories and specific situations involving cultural scenarios, thanks to this multifaceted viewpoint. We think that by making

use of these frameworks, we may get insightful knowledge and clarify the subtleties of "toxic positivity".

As mentioned in the method chapter, we found and divided this analysis into six themes that will allow us to connect our findings in the journals to the phenomenon of "pushed positivity".

As previously mentioned in the method chapter, our names* will be coded with "they" formulations in order to disguise the researcher's gender or other social identities. This enables us to protect our personal data.

*Researcher A is not involved in the group anymore, however, their data will remain in the project for empirical use, as agreed on and consented by all of us

"Pushing" positivity and engaging in humour as a way of adjusting to reality

In this chapter, we will investigate the phenomenon of "pushed positivity" as a defence strategy, investigating its underlying dynamics, motives, and potential consequences. Approaching this study with compassion and understanding is critical, since ways of coping, including "toxic positivity", frequently originate from a genuine attempt to negotiate life's problems.

From the perspective of using "pushed positivity" as a coping mechanism, in this instance Researcher C employs "forced optimism" to control their negative feelings and prevent potential negative effects, such as their mother's anxiety. The researcher is able to keep control of their emotions and their connection with their mother by projecting a favourable picture of them to their mother.
The researcher suggests at the end of the piece that their use of "forced positivity" had a beneficial impact by saying that "...we both feel safer, we know that we did not bother the other and that it was still great to talk." This underlines the possible advantages of utilising this coping method, such as preserving good connections and bringing about momentary relief from unpleasant feelings. But over time, focusing primarily on this coping technique can result in the suppression of real feelings, a sense of loneliness, and a lack of social support.
Similarly, Researcher C's mother engaged in the act of "pushed positivity," in the instance when the Researcher confessed to some negative emotions, although in a very subtle way:

"Yeah, everything is fine; I'm just tired; you know, school and work have been busy lately." To this, the mother answers with a hopeful attitude about a planned trip to Spain; "You're going to Madrid soon!", implying that the researcher should not be concerned about the current circumstances but rather focus on what is to come. The mother is projecting positivity onto the researcher rather than affirming their existing position. This suggests the widespread coping method of "looking on the bright side of things" when confronted with something unfavourable. The debate concerning the researcher's feelings was cut short by the affirming "Yes, I am going to Madrid soon," from the side of the researcher, which shows a type of surrender in the matter. This might imply that pushing positive thinking on someone else may result in alienation, feelings of loneliness and hopelessness, and a lack of enthusiasm to confide in them again.

Another instance of the use of "pushed positivity" as a defence mechanism in our empirical material is when Researcher B reflected on their parents divorce. The use of "forced optimism" as a coping technique is deeply rooted in emotional regulation. Researcher B is participating in emotion suppression by attempting to "smile through the pain" and conceal the emotional consequences of their parents' divorce. This regulation method entails downplaying or ignoring negative feelings, which can momentarily reduce pain but may have a negative long-term impact on emotional well-being. Positive thinking is used as a defensive method to protect oneself from the discomfort and vulnerability that come with admitting and expressing true grief. This claim is supported by Researcher B's statement that allowed them "to remain in the illusion of "just going on" with life", without having to address the issue.

The usage of "pushed positivity" as a coping technique in the context of the hospitality industry is demonstrated by a Researcher's C journal inquiry. The hospitality industry places specific demands on employees to embody positivity and friendliness toward customers, regardless of their personal emotional state, which poses a complex challenge because the pressure to perform a "happy" role, seen as part of professionalism, leads employees to suppress their genuine emotions and put on a facade, with potential rewards reinforcing this behaviour.

The coping strategy described by Researcher C entails separating their personal self from their hospitality self, effectively compartmentalising their emotions. This separation enables them to negotiate the job's responsibilities, but it also causes a dissociation from their genuine feelings. The urge to keep a cheerful attitude can impact how they see events, causing them to perceive things that aren't fine as fine. This cognitive dissonance and inauthenticity can contribute to personal dissatisfaction and internal conflict because the individual must deny

their own emotional truth in order to meet the expectations of their employer and customers, as demonstrated by Researche C's statement "...I walk into the kitchen with the smile still stuck to my face and think to myself, "What the fuck man?"..."

Humour

In our everyday life observations, humour as a distinct part of positivity, also seemed to play a role in pushing positivity. Researcher B reports an instance with their friend, who seemed to make use of humour to ease a serious situation. Researcher B states that they told their friend about current struggles in their life, which resulted in their friend to make a joke in order to make the researcher laugh. They reflect that "In the moment itself, that felt very good because it gave [them] a quick ease and shifted [their] focus away from the[ir] "problems" [...]. Still, some part of [Researcher B] wished to deepen the conversation about [their] issues and felt like it had been rejected by [their] friend's effort to distract [the researcher's] thoughts from the worries [they were experiencing]". This example outlines how humour can both be functional in alleviating a situation and elicit a feeling of being misunderstood in the other. In the example from Researcher B's journal, the easing effect of humour can be found in the researcher themself and in their friend. Still, the researcher also indicates how their friend "might have made use of humour in order to escape a topic that felt uncomfortable getting deeper into" (Researcher B), which also resulted in a feeling of repudiation in them.

How social norms, roles and expectations influence "toxic positivity" and how that is reflected in the use of language

What individuals perceive to be an adequate reaction in social interactions or what they believe to be a suitable way of expressing emotions is strongly shaped by social norms humans inevitably encounter in their everyday lives. These norms can encompass facial expressions, formulations, and phrases, as well as gender-, profession- and role related ideas about how individuals should act or react. The way we verbalise our emotional experience is also significantly influenced by social norms, which can differ cross-culturally. In their journal, Researcher B quotes their friend, who narrates that "it felt [to them] as if the culture [they] grew up in almost prescribes this reaction pattern of just making a joke about something sad or emotional, because we (the people the friend associates with their culture) all don't know how to deal with emotionality and feelings that are not necessarily positive". Social norms related to "forced positivity", that might elicit the "urge to say something that might cheer [someone else] up or make [them] "happy again" (Researcher B) influence the

individual invisibly. Raising awareness about the norms individuals might have internalised, can deepen our understanding of "default reactions" people seem to engage in, even unwillingly at times. Individuals might feel as if they were being expected to (re-)act in certain ways in specific situations. In the following section, we will explore different aspects of "toxic positivity" and its interconnections with social norms and expectations.

Language

Analysing the language we use to express our emotions, how we talk about them with others and how we perceive and evaluate them internally reveals how strongly the phenomenon of "forced positivity" is rooted in everyday life language. There are vivid discussions about the significance and the meaning language holds and to what extent it expresses or shapes our stance, our emotions, thoughts and ideas about the world around us. Different schools of thought advocate for different standpoints about the question to what extent we can deduce underlying value systems, for instance, from analysing human language. From the observations we carried out in our everyday lives, we can deduce that the way we speak (or not speak) about non-positive emotions and life events mirrors how social norms encourage happiness and a positive stance instead of promoting authenticity and allowing negativity. Formulations like "not feeling particularly well" (Researcher D) and
"I wasn't having the best day" (Researcher C) are euphemistic and thus mitigate the underlying negativity by talking around it instead of directly addressing it. Choosing mild formulations like "not so good" instead of "bad" can be seen as a strategy to avoid facing those feelings, but it might also be related to the desire to be perceived as a "positive person". The latter notion will further be investigated in the following section. Motivational quotes such as "live, laugh, love" or "always look on the bright side of life" that are disseminated via social media and popular songs contribute to the omnipresence of happiness in our everyday lives, as well. In their journal, Researcher A reports a situation with friends in which a negative event takes place. "One of my friends tried to "make the situation better" by singing "Don't worry, be happy" (researcher A), states Researcher A. Whether songs like "Don't worry, be happy" can be regarded as a result of pushing positivity, or whether they were meant to express the experience of positivity and joy in the first place remains unknown. Still, we can conclude that language does play a relevant role in "forced positive" conduct. In a memory Researcher B recalls in her journals, they describe the issues that may arise from the unavailability of language to talk about emotions adequately, which impacts both, how the individual within itself is able to name and categorise emotions and how it communicates

those to others. In their memory work, Researcher B narrates how in their early teenage years they were unable to tell their friends about their parents splitting up.

"In retrospect, it is interesting for me to see, how my engagement in "forced positivity" can be seen in the light of the inability to talk about negative emotions, which does not only refer to the choice of words or formulating sentences such as "I feel sad" or "I am not happy right now", but also includes how I could open a conversation about my authentic feelings and how to seek comfort in social support from peers or family members", Researcher B reflects.

Therefore, not falling prey to default answers like "good, thank you" when being asked how one is doing, requires awareness of this seemingly preset answer. In addition, reaction to non-positive emotions of others can prove difficult due to the lack of available alternative ways of communicating compassion and engagement with the other. In another everyday life observation in which Researcher B casually talked to their roommate, who was not feeling well that day, Researcher B found themself confronted with the challenge to react "in a neutral but validating way" (Researcher B). They report: "I felt the pressure to react "adequately" in that situation. I wanted to give [my roommate] the feeling of being heard and seen in [their] "weird day feeling" without telling [them] that "everything would be alright" and "tomorrow would be a better day".

The unavailability of alternative formulations and reactions towards the emotional expression of others can also be found in social taboo topics like sexuality or death.

Talking about their dog passing away, Researcher D notes in his journal that after the death of their dog, " Both of [their] sisters called [them] on the same day, and, with every intention of being supportive, which they obviously still were, they said things such as, "Well, he has lived a long and happy life", as well as "He is in a better place", to which [Researcher D] responded something along the lines of "Yeah, I know, you're right", because at the time, it was the normal thing to say and it felt very natural [..] to hear it, and to understand it as well" (researcher D). Again, phrases like a beloved one is "in a better place" seem to be the reaction most people expect from others in the case of death as it is very likely that traditional phrases like the latter will come to mind easily, as a lot of people have encountered and heard about them many times. Still, the question arises, whether these euphemistic reactions towards negative life events or taboo topics that cause discomfort in most people should be regarded as "normal", or whether we should consider striving for a rather neutral way of accepting the other and their emotional experience.

As alternative formulations to react to the emotional expression of others in a validating way, we thought of sentences like "I hear what you are telling me" and "take good care of yourself". Also, offering help or support if an interlocutor expresses non-positive feelings instead of trying to cheer the other up seems to be a fitting alternative to "forced positive" demeanour.

Translating embraces to "motivating" utterances

When a child cries or expresses feelings of anger, disappointment or sadness, most adults react in a caring way and seek physical contact with the child by embracing it, touching it lightly or caressing it in another way. Maybe formulating sentences like "you will be fine" or "everything is going to be okay" are ways of verbally comforting the other. Humans might adopt this conduct in contact with other grown-up persons to express their support and to embrace the other person and their emotional experience not in a physical but in a verbal way. Without claiming to know, what exactly it is that makes humans enact "pushed positive" doings, it still is interesting to consider, that "toxic positivity" might not always come from a place of denial of negativity and the hedonist wish to feel good at all times, but from a stance of empathy and the wish to comfort the other in social interactions. This might especially be relevant in close relationships between friends, family members and romantic partners, for instance.

Roles and expectations

Even if "unauthentic positive" doings can be carried out as the consequence of a more or less conscious decision-making process (which will be outlined in a later section of the analysis), conduct of "toxic positivity" is also closely interlinked with socially constructed ideas of the expression of emotions according to gender or profession.
Researcher A observes that male read persons can struggle in patriarchal societies, as they face expectations of working hard, being a leading figure and never displaying weaknesses. "Feelings are not wanted in that image and are thus repressed", Researcher A concludes. Researcher B states that they "encounter "pushed positivity" in [their] everyday life in one single ritualised action that [they] perceive to be expected by girls and women in the societies [they] lived in: Smiling" (Researcher B). These social roles of the kind, happy female and the stoic, always strong male put pressure on female and male read persons alike. As mentioned in the journal observations of the named Researchers, this conduct can be deeply

internalised and carried out in a ritualised manner without the awareness of the self, which leads to the retention of the social norms that elicited "forced positivity" in the first place. "Working in hospitality makes one's relationship with positivity [...] even more complicated. In most countries, you, as a hospitality worker, are required and expected to be nice and friendly to customers, even if you might not feel like it. The extent of this expectation varies from country to country and from establishment to establishment", Researcher C reports in their journal. The workplace also confronts people with ideas of roles according to which they feel expected to act. Being positioned differently in a hierarchically structured workplace can create an asymmetrical relationship, for instance between the boss and the employee, as both figures are expected to show specific conduct that is attributed to the role they are embodying. These expectations can range from clothing style to emotional expression, which leads us to the conclusion that humans also encounter "unauthentic positivity" in their everyday lives due to them acting as different "roles" in different contexts. Feeling obligated to "put on a happy face and completely disregard any emotion [that was] felt prior to coming to work" (Researcher C) can occur in the workplace. In a family context, parents and siblings can be confronted with traditional expectations of how a mother, a father or a sibling should and should not act and react in certain situations. Traditionally, mothers used to do a lot of unpaid caregiving work and household chores, which demands a lot of patience, endurance and emotional stability. With all the different responsibilities calling for their attention, mothers don't seem to have the right and the space to feel exhausted or unhappy. The notion of acting in a "forced positive" way out of the feeling of being responsible for others will be elaborated in a later section.

The attempt to meet the expectation of others and act according to them can be detrimental, if individuals do things that go against their original intentions and their actual feelings. Researcher C also narrates how at their workplace it is "expected to stay for a drink after your shift and socialise" (Researcher C). This unspoken assumption leaves little space for everybody to decide for themselves what they want to do. Researcher C, for instance, states that they were "pretty well known among [their] work friends now, as a so-called "party-pooper" because [they] do not always feel like going with the flow". The need to be acknowledged by peers or to fulfil the image one is seen in (may it refer to a gender, a profession or another social role) creates the breeding ground for "forced positive" doings to emerge, as they can enable individuals to blend in and to maintain relationships. The latter notion will be discussed in a later part of this analysis.

About the connection of identity, impression management and the self-image with "forced positivity"

Identity and impression management are key social ideas in today's society. Individuals struggle and worry frequently with the complexity of who they are and how they come across to others. These factors have become even more important in the digital era because of the abundance of social media platforms available. These factors influence how we see ourselves and how other people see us.

The presence of identity management and self-image can go unnoticed, and until we started the reflection process of our journals, all of our group members had no idea how much it was present in our everyday life.

Researcher B states that they "experienced a strong urge to cover up the perceived "imperfection" of coming from a conflicted "broken" home". At first, our group detected the social norms aspect of the citation, as we were all brought up thinking that it is quite the norm to pretend everything is fine after one's parents get divorced. However, the discussion really started, when Researcher B shared their thoughts on why they think they reacted the way they did.

After shedding some light on their perspective, we found ourselves immersed in a discussion regarding the constant worry in our realities related to impression management and the pressure to be likeable. In this case, Researcher B shares that they did not want to break the idea of not being their "shining, cheerful self". We understood the societal pressure that frequently forces people to fit into a constricted idea of what is acceptable, and anything less than positivity, could be met with judgement or disapproval. In this specific case, a perfect upbringing can be deemed as perfect by society, while anything less can be deemed as undesirable, or in this case, "imperfect".

We discussed how all of these complexities regarding impression management can be a double-edged sword. We related it to Researcher's B case, and we were able to understand that despite disregarding their true emotions in order to maintain their self-image, in a way it may have helped them to move forward. It allowed the Researcher to maintain a certain optimism, and use this "toxic positivity", as a way of coping with the situation. By putting up

this shield, the researcher was able to focus on more positive things, keeping their focus on something that can be changed. This "forced positivity", while unhealthy long term, actually seemed to be beneficial at the time.

We agreed that self-identity is a complex phenomenon created by each of our individual experiences, even those that result from "broken" households or other apparent "flaws". Our self-image fears come from a need for acceptance, that might not even be conscious, as we believe it to be programmed into our society of the Western World. We have come to understand how people in today's culture struggle with the complexity of who they are and the ongoing concern over how others view them. We believe these worries have significantly increased with this digital era we live in, as there are a lot of social media platforms and applications that affect the ways we view others, and consequently ourselves.

How responsibility and a feeling of burdensomeness can mediate "unauthentic positivity"

Feeling responsible not to negatively influence the mood of others or cause them to worry or feel burdened can also explain why people engage in "unauthentic positive" conduct. Both Researcher C and Researcher D reported the wish not to bother others, their parents in their instances, with their struggles or negative emotions. Researcher D states that they did "not want [their] parents to worry about something that they cannot help with" as they "tend to worry fast, and [Researcher D] see[s] that it is [their] responsibility to not make them worry" (Researcher D). Instead of assuming that others deal with their emotions independently and that their emotional state is not reliant on what people they interact with feel, individuals might feel responsible for not influencing the mood of others. Considering to what extent our own emotions can be expressed and in what way, is a filtering mechanism to impede us from transmitting our own emotions on others. This, we observed in our reflective journals.

This chapter looks into the application of "pushed positivity" in order to prevent burdening others or as a consequence of a felt obligation to others. Through the analysis of the Researcher's experiences and quotes, we gain a deeper understanding of the impact of inauthenticity, the pressure of expectations, and the weight of maintaining an outwardly positive facade. The narratives of Researcher C and Researcher D shed light on the complexities of their coping strategies and the underlying motivations that drive their actions.

We see a common thread in both Researcher C's and Researcher D's narratives of acknowledging the emotional impact their real feelings may have on their loved ones. They are both aware that revealing their struggles or dissatisfaction may cause anxiety and worry among their family members. As a result, they adopt a "pushed positivity" coping technique to protect their loved ones from undue distress and maintain harmonious relationships.

Researcher C's perspective highlights the conflict between their own emotional struggles and their concern for their mother's well-being. They explain, "I know she would worry about me, and she would feel sad that she's so far away and can't help. And I know she can't help me, and it's going to be difficult to make her understand what it is that I am feeling. So instead, I put on a happy voice every time, and I listen to her and tell her funny or interesting things from my life." In this quote, Researcher C recognizes that their mother's concern for their well-being may cause her distress, despite being unable to provide practical help. To protect their mother from this emotional burden and the difficulty of knowing their innermost feelings, Researcher C adopts a facade of happiness. They hope to preserve a feeling of normalcy and shelter their mother from the weight of their troubles by shifting the conversation to lighter concerns. This use of "forced positivity" helps Researcher C to retain a positive image while avoiding disclosing their genuine emotional condition to their mother.

Similarly, Researcher D struggles with the sense of responsibility they feel for their parents' well-being. "But my parents are used to this routine of ours, and I know that not calling them will make them worry," they admit. The comment from Researcher D illustrates their knowledge of the established pattern of contact with their parents and the potential repercussions of breaking it. Their use of "forced optimism" stems from a sense of obligation to save their parents from unnecessary concern. Researcher D hopes to offer their parents a feeling of stability and keep them from envisioning worst-case scenarios by maintaining regular contact and portraying a cheerful perspective. This coping method enables them to fulfil their imagined job of keeping their parents stress-free.

Furthermore, Researcher D recognizes their parents' limitations in helping or changing his condition. "I do not want my parents to worry about something that they cannot help with or change. I do not want my parents to think that I am unhappy in the situation I am in. My parents tend to worry fast, and I see that it is my responsibility to not make them worry." This

comment demonstrates Researcher D's knowledge that voicing their dissatisfaction may increase their parents' anxiety since they may feel powerless to help them. They absorb the weight of shielding their parents from unwarranted worries, relying on their cheerfulness to comfort them and keep them from ruminating on their problems. In doing so, they compromise their own emotional authenticity in order to protect their parents from distress.

Maintaining their parents' happiness and well-being becomes a goal for Researcher D. "I know my parents' happiness and well-being is at its peak when I tell them about how good I have it here." they say. Researcher D knows that hearing about the good aspects of their lives brings their parents satisfaction and reassurance. As a coping strategy, they use "pushed positivity" to prioritise their parents' emotional well-being. Researcher D hopes to provide their parents with a sense of security and satisfaction by stressing the positive parts and downplaying any issues. This coping method helps them maintain their happiness at the expense of their own emotional integrity.

While both Researcher C and Researcher D share the same objective of not burdening their loved ones, their situations differ. The primary worry of Researcher C is their mother's well-being and the challenge of making her understand their feelings. On the other hand, Researcher D feels obligated to keep their parents happy by relieving them of unneeded anxiety. Furthermore, their perspectives on "pushed positivity" diverge slightly. Researcher C's approach appears more spontaneous, as they adopt a cheerful tone and divert talks to lighter issues. In contrast, Researcher D intentionally controls the amount of optimism they communicate, carefully balancing genuineness with decreasing their parents' concerns. This regulation may also be apparent in Researcher C's statement, "I did complain about my roommate's situation for good measure." This demonstrates knowledge of the need to maintain a balance between the positive and negative.

The used statements demonstrate the use of "pushed positivity" as a coping method to avoid burdening others or fulfilling a felt commitment to loved ones. Researchers C and D maintain a careful balance between their genuine feelings and their wish to protect their loved ones from harm. They feel that projecting optimism and eliminating negative areas of their lives can relieve unneeded anxiety for their family members and preserve harmonious relationships. Relying only on "pushed positivity" might, however, lead to emotional inauthenticity, alienation, and a lack of true connection. These disadvantages emphasise the

necessity for alternate coping mechanisms that promote open communication and understanding while also addressing one's own emotional well-being. They know the risk of burdening their loved ones with their actual emotions and settle for "pushed positivity" as a coping method. They risk, however, abandoning their own emotional honesty and promoting a sense of isolation by doing so. These instances demonstrate the challenges and possible disadvantages of depending only on "pushing optimism" to sustain relationships and protect loved ones.

In addition, Researcher C's experience illustrates the Party Pooper Syndrome, which leads to their use of "pushed positivity." "You plant a seed of doubt, should they stay? Should they go? Why are you making them doubt their activity? Why do you want to leave? Why are you not having fun?" In social situations, Researcher C feels obligated to prolong her participation in order to avoid being viewed as the one who dampens the mood. Fear of interfering with others' happiness and planting seeds of doubt motivates the application of "pushed positivity." This exemplifies the psychological weight imposed on persons who believe they are responsible for the emotional well-being of others around them. The struggle of Researcher C demonstrates the complex interplay between personal demands and the need to meet societal standards, validating the use of "pushed positivity" as a coping technique.

Furthermore, Researcher C's participation in "pushed positivity" extends to their employment in the hospitality industry. To satisfy their employer's standards and ensure client happiness, Researcher C feels a responsibility to project positivity, even if they do not actually feel that way. "I am inauthentic to myself and to my feelings," they add, "and I am expected to be so by my employer." This comment emphasises Researcher C's knowledge of the inauthenticity they feel in their work, as well as the pressure placed on them to adhere to a certain image. The involvement of Researcher C with "pushed positivity" in the hospitality industry is motivated by a strong feeling of responsibility to their employer's expectations and the preservation of their professional identity. They recognize that their profession compels them to emphasise client satisfaction and comfort, even if it means concealing their own emotions. Researcher C attempts to match these expectations by adopting a "pushed positivity" perspective, as they claim, "This means that every time I start my shift, I put on a happy face and completely disregard any emotion I felt prior to coming to work."

While Researcher C may see "pushed positivity" as an essential part of their profession, the emotional toll it exacts highlights the complexity of employing it as a coping method. The

statements from Researcher C's own experience offer insight on the dilemma they face: reconciling their commitment to their employer's expectations with the toll it takes on their honesty and emotional well-being.

How "toxic positivity" can occur as a way of maintaining relationships and create a sense of belonging

The mechanics of sustaining connections have undergone a significant upheaval in our technologically advanced, globally interconnected environment. As we straddle the fine line between maintaining connections and upholding personal boundaries, the age-old debate between closeness and distance has acquired new dimensions. This chapter delves into the intricacies of keeping relationships in today's culture, including the use of phone conversations, staying in touch when geographically apart, and the compromises we make to keep relationships strong.

The drive to sustain connections might occasionally push us to partake in behaviours or encounters we may not actually want. We explore the intricate dynamics of this phenomena, looking at its fundamental causes, cultural norms, and effects on our sense of self and general wellbeing.

In their journal, Researcher C states that "This is mostly because you are expected to stay for a drink after your shift and socialise".

The importance of preserving relationships through proximity is highlighted in this quotation. After their shift, Researcher C feels compelled to stick around and socialise, demonstrating that there is a social expectation at work. This social expectation puts pressure on the shoulders of Researcher C, and the responsibility to "stick around, to not ruin everyone's hangout". As it is referred to in their journal, by wanting to leave, a seed of doubt is planted automatically, as others might start overthinking as to why they are leaving.

The "pushed positivity" imposed on Researcher C's circumstance might be considered as an illustration of how societal norms and expectations can persuade people to place a higher value on maintaining connections than their own genuine experiences. It makes one wonder whether "forced positivity" prevents people from forming real connections and meaningful relationships and to what degree people are able to convey their true emotions.

This relates to another passage of Researcher C's diary, "I often make myself stay and bite my tongue when asking how I feel in order to not break out of this social norm we have created at my workplace". The actions and experiences Researcher C has at work are influenced by these dynamics, which ultimately affects how likeable and connected they feel to their coworkers.

The idea that cheerful people make better company because they don't "drag you down" raises questions about a bias in favour of positivity and the value of those who struggle or express unpleasant emotions. The concept that expressing sadness, tension, or other unpleasant emotions is undesirable and may result in social rejection or criticism is reinforced by this prejudice.

Researcher B provides a different insight into their own experience and reticence to completely express their ideas and feelings, and the overall focus on the relationship maintaining. Researcher B's statement, "I didn't feel 'entitled' to be fully transparent and vulnerable in front of them, as I was unsure whether that would make them feel uncomfortable," suggests underlying worries about how being open may affect their relationship. Even if it means hiding their actual selves and avoiding future discomfort, they place a higher priority on maintaining the existing dynamics of the partnership.

Researcher B encountered a prime example of the difficult balancing act between connection preservation and vulnerability. They struggle to make decisions because they are concerned about upsetting other people, which makes them reluctant to communicate their true feelings. The overarching goal is to preserve the connection, even if it means hiding their true selves.

Open communication and sincere emotional expression are often overshadowed by politeness and the desire to be liked. As a result, people could decide to hide their genuine emotions in order to keep the relationship and sustain a favourable social dynamic.

Interestingly enough, our group debated how, in a lot of these cases, this form of "pushing positivity" onto one's self, was able to be beneficial at the time of action. Taking an example from Researcher C's journal, "And at the end of the phone call, we both feel safer, we know that we did not bother the other and that it was still great to talk because, for a moment, you can present the life that you wish was true, and see the good side, which makes the bad one a bit more bearable.".

This forced positivity, in its own way, becomes a source for comfort. By focusing on the positive and ignoring the negative, we manage to find solace and make the burden of the bad side a bit more bearable. It becomes a way of coping, enabling us to carry on. This act of putting on a facade of happiness becomes a shield, protecting us from the weight of our own emotions and struggles, even if only temporarily or at the time. Like Researcher C mentioned, It allows us to create a space where we can present a version of life that we wish were true, even if it's just for a brief moment.

In order to summarise this in the best way we can, we discovered that people may repress their true emotions under the pressure to appear joyful and pleasant, putting up an artificially upbeat front and feeling the need to "force" positivity onto themselves. Inauthentic emotional connection and understanding in relationships might be hampered by this internal fight to live up to cultural ideals, and societal norms.

Can "pushed positivity" be a conscious decision or is it habitual conduct?

The motive of deciding to act in a positive manner, even if a person experiences feelings of discomfort and negativity, showed frequently in our journal observations.
It seemed to be ritualised everyday life moments that occur often. As Researcher B stated in their observations, they
"Mostly [...] encountered "pushed positivity" on a small scale. It was moments like opening the door to the classroom or other places, where people gathered, in which I took a breath and tried to prepare myself "to shine". Those small moments were so integrated in my everyday life, that I didn't even count them as doings of "unauthentic positivity" anymore and thus did not include them in my diaries, as I feel like there was no external prompt worth mentioning. I was looking for "big, meaningful moments" of inauthenticity in my observations [...], but I didn't really encounter those moments".
The notion to "take a deep breath and pick up the phone" (Researcher C), "put[ting] on a brave face, inject[ing] [one]self with some fake happiness" (Researcher D) or taking a breath and "preparing [oneself] 'to shine'" (Researcher B) underlines the involvement of decision-making processes in "forced positive" conduct. It is hard to determine to what extent these decisions are made consciously, as they seem to be part of our everyday life doings, as stated by Researcher B**.**
In their journal, Researcher C reflects upon a recurring scenario at their workplace, in which they are known as "the party pooper", because they refuse to always follow the " tradition of

staying for drinks and [...] to socialise" (Researcher C) after their shifts. They explain, that they consciously decide to engage in "unauthentic positivity" in order not to be a killjoy, which results in Researcher C to "mak[ing] [them]self stay and bit[ing] [their] tongue when being asked how [they] feel in order to not break out of this social norm [that was] created at [Researcher C's] workplace". In this instance, social norms (namely the ones that were established at the workplace) and the wish to be part of a group an individual is affiliated with seemed to motivate the act to force positivity onto the self.

When analysing the reasons for why we still decided to act positively, even if it doesn't reflect what we authentically feel in some situations, we talked about the need to feel self-effective and in control of what is happening around and within us. Steering and influencing one's own emotions can contribute to a sense of self-efficacy and power, as we as agents feel that we have the capability to "generate" our own actions and to affect our surroundings according to our intentions. Of course, "being in control" is an illusion, as we as humans cannot be fully in control of what happens within and around us. Still, the wish to feel effective in our lives is a deeply human need that, to different extents, is present in most individuals. Also, we observed that "pushing" or encouraging positivity in oneself can serve as a preparation for potentially challenging situations or moments of discomfort. Deciding to "stay positive" might give individuals a base to act on, which could increase self-assurance, especially in situations of uncertainty or potential threat to an individual's self-image.

The habitual facet of "toxic positivity" also showed in the observations of Researcher C and Researcher D.

In their journal, Researcher C states that they avoid calling their mom when they don't feel well, saying "When I'm not doing great, I don't call" (Researcher C).

Researcher D describes how they call their parents even if "deep down, [they do] not feel like talking to anyone, but [their] parents are used to this routine" (Researcher D).

While Researcher C concludes that " it was still great to talk because, for a moment, you can present the life that you wish was true, and see the good side, which makes the bad one a bit more bearable" (Researcher C), Researcher D names his routine of sounding happy when calling his parents a "cycle of pretending" he has engaged in for a long time now. Interrupting this habit of "forced positive" conduct in contact with his parents could elicit worries in them as they are "not used to dealing with talks like these", which led to Researcher D making the decision to "keep it to [themselves]" and cope with their negative emotions on their own instead of expressing them.

Even if habituality seems to play a role in "pushed positive" conduct, we suggest that humans as agents still have the power to counteract ritualised doings and engage in new ways of acting and reacting. Researcher B, for instance, decided not to make use of a traditional answer when hearing about their roommate's discomfort. Researcher B describes that they were "well aware that feeling responsible for [their roommate's]well-being was a) arrogant of [themselves] and b) none of [Researcher B's] business" (Researcher B). Hence, we propose that "forced positivity" is a doing that can be altered, influenced and prevented.

Discussion

The goal of our study was to investigate the phenomenon of "toxic" or "forced positivity" and uncover the rationale for and methods used by us as Researchers, embedded in a Western context to exhibit this conduct in everyday life settings. We learned important things about the challenges and difficulties involved in maintaining a positive facade through the examination of reflective journals.

There are major difficulties and effects associated with this ongoing demand to be positive. "Forced positivity" frequently results in the repression the feelings truly experiences and a disregard for one's own wellbeing. It fosters a society in which people feel pressured to conceal their genuine emotions, compromising their authenticity in the process. Lack of emotional expression as a result might make it difficult to build deep relationships and communicate effectively with others.

It is important to acknowledge, however, the instances where we found positive aspects within this phenomenon. These aspects are important, as they allow us to understand the complexities surrounding "toxic positivity". We found that, in some circumstances, putting on a happy face helped people maintain their resilience and deal with their specific circumstances, and thus, "toxic" positivity occasionally acted as a temporary defence mechanism.

Choosing reflective journals left us depending on ourselves as the empirical data and on the encounter of "pushed positivity", which could happen in the last week before the hand-in, the first week, or not at all. Thankfully, it came naturally, as we started this process early.

Let us relate everything back to our problem formulation; So, *Why and how do individuals in the Western world "push" positivity onto themselves and others in everyday life situations?*

In Western society, toxic or forced positivity is a complicated and deeply rooted phenomena. Our research has shed light on the causes of this phenomenon and the difficulties that individuals face, identifying societal pressures, a fear of social rejection, and a desire for likeability as contributory reasons. Positive thinking is relentlessly pursued, which frequently results in the repression of real feelings and the sacrifice of authenticity. It fosters a society in which people feel pressured to conceal their actual emotions, which eventually prevents people from connecting with one another and communicating openly.

It is essential to understand the complexity of "toxic" or "forced optimism" in order to support better social dynamics and individual wellbeing. We may start to tackle the cultural norms that support this problem by building a culture that emphasises emotional openness

and acceptance. An approach to positivity that is more compassionate and genuine can be achieved by embracing a wider spectrum of emotions and encouraging real relationships based on honesty and understanding. Through these initiatives, we may work to create a culture that values emotional health and encourages deep relationships between people.

In conclusion, by emphasising the reasons and challenges connected to this conduct, our study advances our knowledge of the phenomena of "toxic" or "forced" optimism. By examining the why and how of "forced positivity", we discovered that the forces that are responsible for this phenomenon include societal pressures, a fear of social marginalisation, and a desire for likeability. Understanding the difficulties and negative effects of forced positivity opens the door to a more genuine and empathic attitude to one's own well-being and interpersonal relationships. We may build a culture that values sincere interactions and creates a better, longer-lasting attitude to positive by encouraging emotional candour and acceptance.

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