What's the Skinny? A Critical Discourse Analysis on "*Nicola Coughlan is Right: 'Body Positivity' Traps Us in the Same Old Conversations"* by Rhiannon Lucy Cosslett

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In the 1990s, everyone knew *someone* who was trying to become thinner. A Gallup survey from 1996 reported that "63% of women and 45% of men wanted to lose weight" (Gallup, 1996, as cited in Newport & Carroll, 2002). Another report from 1990 found that "30% of Americans had seriously tried to lose weight at least once in their lives" (Gallup, 1990, as cited in Carroll, 2005). The era birthed food brands such as Nabisco's *Snackwell's*, which catered to consumers looking for low and fat-free options. Programs like *Weight Watches* and *Jenny Craig* reeled in weight-loss hopefuls by advertising before and after photos of participants, and drug cocktails like Fen Phen were prescribed by doctors (Cohen, 2003). Fashion models like Kate Moss, who were described as waifish, were popular at the time. But then the body positivity movement became "popularized during fourth-wave feminism" and "celebrated women's bodies in all their diverse beauty" (Cosslett, 2026, para. 5). In 2004, Dove launched the Real Beauty campaign to bring awareness to "the harmful impact unrealistic depictions have on women and girls" (Unilever, 2024, para. 2). The rise of the body positivity movement was meant to empower women, but journalist Rhiannon Lucy Cosslett doesn't believe that the movement has resolved the issues surrounding body image. In the opinion piece *"Nicola Coughlan is Right: 'Body Positivity' Traps Us in the Same Old Conversations,"* Cosslett uses several linguistic choices to explain how body positivity still reduces women down to their looks as opposed to their talents and merits.

Rhiannon Lucy Cosslett's identity and background inform her perspective on the body image conversation. She is a white woman who grew up in the '90s and remembers how Kate Winslet "was viciously body-shamed" at the height of her Titanic fame (Cosslett, 2026, para. 3). She "contributes to The Guardian, is the co-founder of the feminist blog *The Vagenda*, and has appeared in radio broadcasts like BBC Radio 4's Women's Hour" (Cosslett, n.d.). Much of her work is feminist and woman centric. This opinion piece offers support to women who shoulder the societal pressures surrounding body image.

Throughout the article, Cosslett adopts a conversational style as opposed to an academic or journalistic one. Academic and journalistic styles detach the audience from the author and are often used to relay information neutrally. Cosslett (2026), on the other hand, gets on our level by using phrases we hear in our everyday speech like "hear me out" to create connection between herself and her target audience (para. 1). The conversational style makes her relatable. Cosslett isn't just a writer; she could be your sister or friend. She's a woman too.

This article switches between active and passive voice. The author uses active voice when she talks about the experiences of Nicola Coughlan. For instance, Cosslett (2026) writes "Nicola Coughlan is sick of the subject of 'body positivity'" and "Coughlan recounted an encounter with a fan" (para. 1). The subject (Nicola Coughlan) is the one doing the action as opposed to the action happening to her. On the other hand, passive voice distances the reader from the action. In passive voice, Cosslett (2026) writes "Winslet was subjected to the merciless misogyny and body fascism of 1990s media" and "Coughlan is held up as a 'body positivity role model'" (para. 3). The use of passive voice shifts blame from any single person and places responsibility more broadly on society.

Cosslett uses emotionally charged language throughout the article. She compares the beauty standards of the time to authoritarianism by using the phrase “body fascism of the 1990s” (Cosslett, 2026, para. 3). Fascism is a particular loaded word in 2026 due to the current political climate in the United States. Words like “viciously,” “body-shamed,” “merciless,” “misogyny,” “ruthless,” “toxic,” and “heartbreaking” all make an appearance to create a sense of sympathy towards women. In the article, Cosslett quotes Nicola Coughlan who explains how she could “work on something for months and months… and then it comes down to what you look like.” (Cosslett, 2026, para. 2). The word “traps” in the title implies that we may never escape the conversations surrounding women’s bodies.

Gendered language is used throughout the article. Words like “girls,” “female,” “women,” and “women’s bodies” are repeated in the text. The article centers cis-gender women in this conversation about body image. Cosslett does not touch on how body image affects other sexes and gender identities. It could be argued that omitting these identities from the conversation could show bias against them because body image impacts people across the gender spectrum.

Cosslett’s identity makes her a passionate and reliable voice on the topic of body image because she has experienced life as a woman in society. She creates a connection with readers through a conversational style, and uses emotionally loaded language to illicit compassion toward women. Cosslett uses a variety of linguistic choices to persuade us that conversations about women’s bodies, whether positive or negative, undermine women’s value.

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