

# **Representing Brand Identity through Body Positivity on Instagram**

A Thematic Analysis of the Aerie Brand

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#### **ABSTRACT**

*Body positivity that challenges the common portrayals of the unrealistic body has been familiarized and disseminated through Instagram. Body positivity entails the appreciation toward own body and the celebration of body diversity, as well as inclusivity. This notion is an increasingly important discussion topic among businesses, especially in the fashion and beauty industries due to their influential power in portraying the ideal physical appearances. As a consequence, several woman's fashion brands have been adopting body positivity to promote their products and convey their brand identities by focusing on the embracement of diverse woman's bodily looks. Given the importance of body positivity for fashion brands, this research attempts to identify how a woman's fashion brand, namely Aerie, communicates its brand identity on Instagram through body positivity. The theories pertaining to body positivity elements, brand identity strategy, and authentic brand activism facilitate the identification of Aerie's strategic brand identity on Instagram. A qualitative design was employed, making use of thematic analysis. The analysis was guided by the sensitizing concepts about authenticity in brand activism, diverse portrayals of woman's bodies, body positivity movement, and brand identity elements. A thorough analysis of 153 Instagram posts from Aerie's account has generated five main themes, namely 'beauty on the inside', 'the power of Instagram', 'women's body empowerment', 'fashion inclusivity for every woman', and 'caring toward own body'. The findings revealed that Aerie represents its brand identity on Instagram by embracing woman's unique bodily features, cultivating appreciation toward own body, enhancing a positive mindset, and celebrating the diversity and inclusivity of woman's bodies. All of these aspects are presented in the alignment of Aerie's values, purposes, and practices, besides, shown on Aerie's Instagram pictures and captions. Aerie also uses mainstream body positivity and radical body positivity approaches to frame its body positivity movement, in which the former is about the liberation of every woman to achieve beauty and an attractive body, while the latter highlights the support toward the underrepresented bodies. The results indicated that through Aerie's identity, the brand tries to reshape the meaning of beautiful bodies by embracing woman's unique distinct physical appearances and pointing out the importance of inner beauty. Given this research is limited to the interpretation of Aerie's perspectives, future research could explore the effect of Aerie's body positivity activism on customers.*

**KEYWORDS:** *body positivity, brand identity, brand activism, Instagram, thematic analysis*

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PREFACE

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## 1. Introduction

In today's contemporary media environment, social media have become the primary source to gain information about a woman's ideal beauty which is predominantly depicted as thin and unrealistic (Betz & Ramsey, 2017; Simpson & Mazzeo, 2017). There is a lack of representations of marginalized bodies, notably fat women, women with physical flaws, women of color, aging women, and disabled women in the media (Caldeira & De Ridder, 2017; Cwynar-Horta, 2016). Moreover, the depictions of woman's body on the new media platform, especially Instagram are considered problematic as women tend to compare themselves with the thin idealized body on the platform, thus, feel insecure, and dissatisfied with own's body (Morris, 2019; Tiggemann et al., 2020). As a consequence, the criticism of the narrowed view of beauty and perfect body has become a significant concern in acknowledging the conception of woman's beauty (Cohen et al., 2019).

The challenges toward a more inclusive representation of female bodies on social media thus raise the notion of body positivity. This concept has received substantial attention from businesses, especially fashion brands, due to their influence on shaping women's ideal bodily appearances (Craddock et al., 2019). The concept of body positivity entails the celebration of diverse physical appearances through the acceptance and love of the body despite the shapes, skin color, and abilities (Leboeuf, 2019). Drawing on this, fashion and beauty brands can either foster or resist societal beauty standards in promoting their products and communicating brand identity to customers.

The endorsement of body positive movement by a brand is a form of brand activism in the realm of social activism. Given that fashion is the major theme for body positivity activism (Hynnä & Kyrölä, 2019), several fashion brands have been slowly valuing the diverse portrayals of woman's appearances. Georgallis (2017) affirms that social movement or activism reflected through a company's value and practice is fundamental in defining brand identity. This is paramount because brand identity constitutes specific brand associations that the brand wishes to establish (Kapferer, 20120, Srivastava, 2011). In this respect, integrating and incorporating body positivity into brand values should be done in effective and reliable manners, because as suggested by Nandan (2005), brand identity is essential in assisting brands to remain competitive in the market.

Fashion business is the focused in this study as fashion is a source of empowerment for women as it enables them to unveil the bodily constraints concerning how women should ideally look in order to be attractive and beautiful (Hynnä & Kyrölä, 2019; Tyner & Ogle, 2009). Besides, in the context of body positivity, fashion is vital in forming the identity of stigmatized groups (Harju & Huovinen, 2015).

Previous studies have investigated body positivity on social media (Caldeira & De Ridder, 2017; Cohen et al., 2019, Cwynar-Horta, 2016; Tiggemann et al., 2020; Simpson & Mazzeo, 2017)

and blog (Darwin & Miller, 2020; Harju & Huovinen, 2015; Hynnä & Kyrölä, 2019). Also, a few studies have solely focused on the discussion of fat women or flaunting fat in the media (Gurrieri & Cherrier, 2013; Otis, 2020; Saguy & Ward, 2011; Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013) instead of the portrayals of other underrepresented groups. In addition, most of these studies were conducted in a quantitative way. This indicates that there has been a paucity of qualitative research about body positivity on social media.

Although some research has been carried out on body positivity on Instagram, there has been little discussion about how body positivity is incorporated into a brand identity strategy. Therefore, this study bridges the knowledge gap between the concept of body positivity and brand identity strategy on social media. Instagram is specifically chosen for this research because this platform has developed exponentially over the years and has been leveraged by many businesses to maximize their content marketing strategies (Teo et al., 2019). Additionally, a qualitative approach adopted in this research provides a deeper insight into the meaning of body positivity embedded in the brand identity elements of a fashion brand.

One of the fashion brands that involved in body positivity activism is Aerie. Aerie is a brand that provides women's apparel, swimwear, lingerie, and activewear (AEO Inc, 2021). This brand is chosen to be studied in this research because Aerie's brand value, which is centered on inclusivity and body positivity, implies a brand mission to encourage women to love their bodies and proud of their physical appearances (Kohan, 2020). Aerie suits the topic of this research because the brand has employed a few body positivity Instagram marketing strategies (e.g., #AerieREAL and #MyAerie), besides, Aerie REAL Role Models or influencers are inspiring women with diverse body conditions and types (Aerie, 2019; Rasool, 2018). On this ground, it is interesting to examine the way Aerie delivers the meaning of body positivity to represent its brand identity on Instagram.

By taking up the research problem and based on Aerie's brand mission to empower women through body positivity, this research attempts to answer the following research question:

**How does Aerie represent its brand identity through body positivity on Instagram?**

The additional sub-questions were formulated to answer the main research question and obtain in-depth insights into the topic being studied. The sub-questions are as follow:

1. How does Aerie portray the authenticity of body positive movement?
2. How does Aerie frame body positivity movement?

The first sub-question connects to the features that enhance the authenticity of brand activism in order to understand whether the body positivity movement conducted by Aerie is genuinely value-driven and not exclusively conducted for the commercialization purpose. The second sub-question addresses the angle used by Aerie in forming the messages about body positivity through Instagram pictures and captions. To answer the main research question and sub-questions, the theories of body positivity elements by Cohen et al. (2019), four frames of body

positivity movement by Darwin and Miller (2020), the features of authentic brand activism by Vredenburg et al. (2020), and six facets of brand identity by Kapferer (2012) were guiding this study.

### *1.1. Academic relevance and social relevance*

In terms of academic relevance, the combination of body positivity and brand identity studies of fashion brands on Instagram adds an important contribution to the literature of brand identity strategy, fashion management, and body positivity activism in social media. Previous studies emphasize body positivity in the fashion context (Harju & Huovinen, 2015; Gurrieri & Cherrier; 2013), brand activism on social media and the implications of brand activism (Baer, 2016), and the components as well as strategies of brand identity (Sikic, 2021; Hutchinson, 2021, Shetty et al., 2019; Lee & Yoon, 2020). However, there is limited research about brand identity of a fashion brand (Ross & Harradine, 2011). It can be pointed out that very little attention has been paid to further understand the brand identity strategy of fashion brands through the concept of body positivity on social media. Therefore, it is relevant to identify the way a fashion brand incorporates body positivity to its strategic brand identity on Instagram.

This research is also socially relevant especially in the context of fashion and beauty because the definition of beauty and the ideal body has been shifting. Recently, women have been facing a broader variety of beauty portrayals beyond the narrowed thin body (Betz & Ramsey, 2017), hence, it is prominent for fashion and beauty industries to be more inclusive by normalizing and embracing woman's body in promoting their brand identities in social media. This paper also assists brands in the fashion and beauty industries to view beauty from different perspectives by not setting a limit or standard for every woman to pursue beauty. Overall, the social relevance of this study lies in the way it contributes to the exploration of how fashion and beauty brands can redefine the meaning of conventional ideal body and beauty to customers.

### *1.2. Thesis outline*

In the next chapter, the theories of body positivity, brand activism, and brand identity will be elaborated on extensively. Specific theories that will be discussed include authentic brand activism features, six elements of body positivity, four frames of body positivity movement, and six facets of brand identity. This chapter will be followed by the methodology chapter that describes the qualitative research design. This third chapter encompasses detailed explanations of sampling, data collection, data analysis, and coding strategies. Moreover, the application of the following concepts: authenticity in brand activism, diverse portrayals of woman's body, body positivity

movement, and brand identity elements will be thoroughly described.

The fourth chapter presents the main themes observed from the data. The major patterns found are related to inner beauty, body positivity campaign initiatives, women's body empowerment, and body care. In this chapter, the discussions of the findings along with the theories that support the data will be elaborated. The fifth chapter provides answers to the research question and sub-questions. This final chapter also includes the description of the theoretical as well as managerial implications, research limitations, and future research.



## 2. Theoretical Framework

This section elaborates the important theories for this research on body positivity and brand identity. Since the umbrella concept of this study is brand activism, the literature about brand activism in social media and the discussion about authentic brand activism are discussed in the first part of this chapter. This is followed by the descriptions of body positivity on Instagram which include the six main elements of body positivity and four frames of body positivity movement through the lens of feminism. Finally, the theories about brand identity strategies are explained. This chapter elaborates on the discussions of body positivity and brand identity on Instagram among various scholars.

### 2.1. Brand activism and authentic brand activism on social media

In recent business practices, many brands have become more concerned with social and political issues. Brands attempting to stand out to particular sensitive social and political issues are involved in brand activism (Vredenburg et al., 2020). Brand activism is derived from the evolution of corporate social responsibility (CSR), in which CSR is classified as corporate-driven and marketing-driven, while brand activism is identified as values-driven which emphasizes the impartiality of social, political, environmental, or economic aspects (Sarkar & Kotler, 2018). As an evolution of CSR, brand activism is slightly distinct from CSR, because CSR puts a higher salience on the actions and the consequences of the actions rather than the brand values (Vredenburg et al., 2020). Brand activism is therefore defined as brands that support social, environmental, cultural, or economic issues and align their activism efforts with brand missions (Shetty et al., 2019). The aforementioned issues are required to be addressed and incorporated into brands' core business values and practices to establish shared value for society and business (Hatch & Mirvis, 2010).

Due to the advancement of new media, companies promote certain social issues and CSR-related initiatives through social media as it allows them to rapidly address their viewpoints to the masses (Nalick et al., 2016). Furthermore, with the increased utilization of social media, customers expect brands to provide activism practices that are accessible through online platforms (e.g., hashtag campaign) as it allows them to be actively involved in brand activism (Lee & Yoon, 2020). In this light, delivering an effective body positivity activism through Instagram requires an engaging social media content strategy that strongly delivers the brand's social stance about body diversity and inclusivity. Based on this view, Instagram is considered as one of the most powerful tools for brand activism and to reach wider audiences.

Brand activism is characterized by the endorsement of progressive stances about social or political issues to solve societal problems, which is termed *progressive activism* (Vredenburg et al., 2020). However, Sarkar and Kotler (2018) contend that brand activism can also be regressive, called

*regressive activism*, because many companies still adopt policies that only contribute to company profits and negatively impact society. Hence, it is important to note that brand activism does not always contribute to positive outcomes.

There are six categories of brand activism, namely social activism, legal activism, business activism, economic activism, political activism, and environmental activism (Sarkar & Kotler, 2018). Since Aerie takes a stance on social issues regarding the portrayal of woman's ideal bodies, it can be argued that Aerie is involved in social activism, specifically body positivity activism. Body positivity activism refers to the movement that discourages the standard beauty appearances to promote self-love and acceptance despite various types of body shapes, features, and sizes (Otis, 2020; Morris, 2019), being a form of progressive activism. Thus, Aerie implements body positivity activism as a part of brand activism strategy to address the unrealistic woman's thin ideal body depicted in the media.

The primary feature of brand activism is authenticity, which refers to the alignment of brand values, messages, purposes, and actions or practices (Lee & Yoon, 2020; Vredenburg et al., 2020). Research has shown that the misalignment of brand values, actions, and vision in brand activism leads to backlash from customers as the brand's activism effort is rather seen as a marketing gimmick (Shetty et al., 2019). The previous scholar argued that a brand's efforts or attempts to obtain authentic brand activism through aggressive, pervasive, and riskier approaches are considered threatening the efficacy of authenticity since customers would perceive it as a commercialization tactic (Holt, 2002). Likewise, in the context of body activism, brands sometimes use body positivity as a marketing strategy, thus, capitalizing on the movement and disregarding the main purpose of the activism for the society (Cwynar-Horta, 2016; Gill & Elias, 2014). This means that without careful consideration of activism strategies, brand activism can be considered both inauthentic and regressive.

Prior study concerning CSR and activism also demonstrated that even the authenticity of big companies, such as General Electric, remains questionable due to the inconsistency of corporate vision, practices, and culture (Hatch & Mirvis, 2010). Therefore, the attribution of brand practices with values that focused on goodness and rightness to society is crucial, especially to establish the authenticity of brand activism (Koch, 2020). Taking this perspective into account, brand activism is not merely about promoting a certain issue through Instagram, as this platform gives the basis for this study, but also ensuring that the brand's values, visions, and activities about the issue are genuinely reflected in the brand's Instagram content. It is thus imperative that the endorsement to brand activism aim to benefit the society, not merely to promote the products or services.

To obtain authentic brand activism, the following features should be adopted: high activist marketing messages that include the claims to drive social change concerning certain social issues, active prosocial corporate practice to support the marketing message, clear prosocial values and

purposes, and showing solutions to problems to society (Vredenburg et al., 2020). These features should therefore be consistently adopted by brands to avoid inauthentic brand activism which can be perceived as deceptive. Past research revealed that to mitigate the perceived inauthenticity of brand activism, brands can use brand ambassadors or other key opinion leaders to convey the brand activism messages through the storytelling of their personal experiences and thoughts about certain issues (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020). It can be argued that delivering activism marketing messages through brand ambassadors on Instagram requires careful attention to ensure that the messages being communicated on the Instagram posts are aligned with the brand values and practices, otherwise, brands can be perceived to be inauthentic. In addition to the congruence of brand activities, messages, and values, brands need to consider how those three elements can engage customers emotionally to evoke a positive experience (Hatch & Mirvis, 2010). Given that social issues in activism evoke public debate and emotional feelings among various groups in society (Nalick et al., 2016), brands should therefore be cautious in conducting brand activism on social media by ensuring that the messages being delivered are in congruence with the corporate practices.

Vredenburg et al. (2020) suggested the following aspects to further ensure the authenticity of brand activism: the divergence of brand messages from common norms, a non-extreme divergence of brand messages, and a non-threatening divergence of brand messages. While Vredenburg et al. (2020) focused on the alignment of brand values, practices, and messages as well as the degree of the divergence of activism messages, Moorman (2020) emphasized the importance to generate activism messages that enhance resonance with customers to obtain authentic brand activism, hence, customers can identify themselves with the brand. When it comes to communicating activism messages, it is crucial to note that the contested societal norms can be viewed as threatening by some people or groups but can also be seen as harmless by other people (McGraw & Warren, 2010). In this respect, the three aspects about the divergence of messages by Vredenburg et al. (2020) can be relevant to establish authentic brand activism as well as enhance positive responses from customers. These three aspects of Aerie's activism messages through Instagram pictures and captions were therefore analyzed to understand the way Aerie portrays authenticity about body positivity activism.

Drawing on the previous literature, it can be emphasized that activism message is fundamental as it contributes to the authenticity and quality of content produced by the brand. Previous research about brand environmental activism (green marketing) demonstrated that Instagram could sufficiently communicate activism messages in textual and visual ways, thus, increase the reliability of messages (Sikic, 2021). More importantly, Kusumasondjaja (2018) mentions, in a research about the social media brand communication strategies, that brands should consider generating social media message appeals, which can be obtained through the employment

of informational appeal (i.e., emphasize brand performance, brand value, functionality, and convenience) and emotional appeal (i.e., emphasize social, psychological, and emotional aspects). Taking up this perspective, it can be argued that the informational and emotional appeals in the forms of visual and text facilitate a brand to have authentic brand activism on Instagram. Hence, it was relevant to examine which type of appeal(s) implemented by Aerie to enhance the authenticity of brand activism.

Building on the studies above, it is imperative for brands to remain authentic in driving social changes through social media because brand deception is inevitable, especially when there is a misalignment between brand messages, values, and actions. Therefore, in pursuing a greater understanding of Aerie's strategy to portray the authenticity of body positivity activism on Instagram, the characteristics of activism messages and the congruence between brand value, action, and mission were identified through Aerie's Instagram posts.

## *2.2. Body positivity on Instagram*

Instagram is defined as a visual-centric social networking platform that allows people to share pictures and videos (Roncha & Radclyffe-Thomas, 2016; Teo et al., 2019). This platform is a powerful instrument that ignites social movement (Treem et al., 2016), besides, Instagram is an interactive platform to promote media, entertainment, and fashion companies and brands (Roncha & Radclyffe-Thomas, 2016). From this view, Instagram can be considered as one of the major vehicles for Aerie to not only promoting the brand itself, but also to challenge the common norms about women's beauty standards through the discourse of body positivity.

In response to the mainstream thin-ideal body that is considered unrealistic and unattainable, the discourse of body positivity in social media has been emerging to promote body inclusivity and self-acceptance toward one's body (Cohen et al., 2019; Lazuka et al., 2020). Despite the dominant social media content about weight loss and thin body, Instagram facilitates a democratic content creation compared to conventional media, thus, enabling activists, individuals, and businesses to challenge the common depictions of woman's body (Lazuka et al., 2020). Moreover, Instagram allows brands to rapidly disseminate information about specific issues to the public (Ciszek, 2016; Hutchinson, 2021). Due to this democratic manner, the portrayals of underrepresented bodily appearances have been gradually appearing in social media (Webb et al., 2017). For this reason, Instagram has popularized the notion of body positivity (Cohen et al., 2020; Morris, 2019). This means that businesses, groups, and individuals exploit the opportunities on Instagram to improve the visibility of marginalized bodies.

In terms of brand communication strategy in social media, brands can utilize social media, notably Instagram, to communicate brand values, build a relationship with customers, improve

customers' purchase behavior, promote products or services, and establish interactivity through the combination of verbal, visual, and textual content (Alalwan et al., 2017). This mixture of content features could produce rich formats of messages (Kusumasondjaja, 2018). Hence, brands need to ensure that the shared messages contain legitimate information and favorable intention (Treem et al. 2016), because customers are not merely receiving the messages about the brand itself but they can also build a shared meaning about the brand (Teo et al., 2019). This means that Aerie needs to consider the quality of body positivity messages being conveyed through the pictures and captions to establish a positive shared meaning of the brand and, thus, successfully represent its identity on Instagram.

Body positivity refers to the appreciation and acceptance of unique body features that do not meet standardized beauty (Tiggemann et al., 2020). To be more specific, body positivity is conceptualized as the messages (written and visual) that criticize the social construction of beauty by normalizing and embracing various body appearances which include fat body, hair body, belly rolls, acne, and disabled body (Cwynar-Horta, 2016). Prior research demonstrated that body positivity goes beyond aesthetic bodily features and physical appearances, the functions of the body and personal characteristics are also considered important (Williamson & Karazsia, 2018). In this way, body positivity does not merely enhance the embracement of diverse appearances but also strives to foster the importance of outer and inner beauty, respectively. Based on these views, the concepts of ideal beauty and bodily appearance are redefined and challenged.

A recent study about positive body image on Instagram reported that the platform's content about body positivity consists mostly of unretouched images of plus-size and thin bodies which show body flaws (e.g., stretch marks and blemished skin), along with the captions (e.g., "every type of body is beautiful") and hashtags (e.g., #loveyourcurve) that cultivate body acceptance (Tiggemann et al., 2020). In this regard, to understand how body positivity is specifically presented by Aerie as a part of the brand identity, the Instagram content of Aerie that displays the pictures of women's bodies and captions about body positivity is investigated.

There are six primary elements of body positivity that consist of *body appreciation*, *acceptance of body and self-love*, *a broad conceptualization of beauty*, *body care*, *positive inner characteristics*, and *information filtering* (Cohen et al., 2019). The first element refers to the respect and admiration for the unique distinct types of body, features, functional capability of the body, health, and body strength (Williamson & Karazsia, 2018). Hence, this first body positivity element includes gratitude for the diversity of physical appearances and the ability of the body to function despite the flaws. The previous study has established that body appreciation allows people to value the substance, shape, features of their body, thus, further allowing them to endorse a positive body image (Wood-Barcalow et al., 2010). Drawing on this, the messages about the appreciation of body functionality and health that are reflected in Aerie's Instagram pictures and captions are identified.

The *acceptance of body and self-love* as the second element of body positivity points out the importance to love and accept body features that do not correspond to the narrowed beauty standard (Tiggemann et al., 2020; Cohen et al., 2019). This suggests that body positivity enhances people to acknowledge their body imperfections but at the same time being comfortable and proud with those flaws. In this regard, specific phrases, words, and pictures displayed by Aerie about body acceptance and self-love are examined.

Concerning the *broad conceptualization of beauty*, this element is about creating a wide perception of beauty based on diverse physical looks and characteristics that include body sizes and shapes (Cohen et al., 2019; Diedrichs & Lee, 2011). The prior study revealed that broad beauty conceptualization contributes to the positive perceptions toward the body as it embraces body inclusivity (Wood-Barcalow et al., 2010). When it comes to inclusivity, the broad conceptualization of beauty also comprises disabled individuals, people of color, and aging people (Caldeira & De Ridder, 2017). On this account, the third element of body positivity cultivates tolerance and respect for the depictions of various body conditions and appearances in the media. The women models displayed in Aerie's Instagram posts are analyzed to understand whether the brand portrays different types of body sizes, conditions, shapes, and ethnicities.

In terms of *body care*, this element highlights the prominence to engage in health behaviors to take care of one's body, which particularly includes self-care activities that improve both physical and mental health (Lazuka et al., 2020). For instance, regular health exercises (e.g., yoga), and hydration (Cohen et al., 2019; Wood-Barcalow et al., 2010). The *body care* element thus puts the salience of self-care behaviors that promote a healthy mind and body instead of emphasizing weight loss and a strict diet.

*Positive inner characteristics* as the fifth element of body positivity build happiness, confidence, optimism, and empowerment, moreover, these inner traits are reflected in positive attitudes and behaviors, such as compassion, kindness, considerate, and caring (Lazuka et al., 2020; Cohen et al., 2019). This element attempts to radiate positive traits, hence, resulting in a favorable outward manner. To effectively represent brand identity through the discourse of body positivity, Aerie should therefore include the important value of individual positive traits on the Instagram content through visuals and texts.

Finally, *information filtering* is defined as the rejection of mainstream ideal beauty depicted in the media and acceptance of information about the body that enhances positive feelings and confidence (Cohen et al., 2019). Research has shown that women could filter the information regarding the body and beauty (including the criticism towards imperfect body and flaws) based on the positive and negative effects, rational and irrational beliefs, and accurate and inaccurate perceptions (Wood-Barcalow et al., 2010). Drawing upon this perspective, Aerie's Instagram followers have the choice to absorb both positive and negative information to form their opinions

and evaluation of their bodies.

Upon reflecting on the above literature and previous research, the six core elements of body positivity can be considered as a relevant basis of Aerie's communication strategy to represent its brand identity through the notion of body positivity on Instagram. Overall, these main body positivity elements and prior studies about social media brand communication strategy are relevant to answer the research question and sub-questions of this research.

### *2.2.1. Body positivity movement through the feminist lens*

Social movements have increased the presence and implementation of social initiatives by organizations to promote a vision and idea of what a society should be (Georgallis, 2017). Thus, social movements have become fundamental in shaping corporate reputation and identity. One of the popular social movements is the fat acceptance movement; dating back to the 1960s, this movement stems from second-wave feminism (Cwynar-Horta, 2016; Morris, 2019). Body positivity movement lies under the umbrella of the fat acceptance movement, in which the approach of this movement enhances individuals to construct the normalization of diverse body types by actively confronting the ideology of beauty and breaking the claims about the association of fat bodies with unhealthy lifestyle (Afful & Ricciardelli, 2015; Gurrieri & Cherrier, 2013; Otis, 2020; Saguy & Ward, 2011). From these perspectives, fat acceptance and body positivity movements encompass the efforts and practices to celebrate the beauty of fat bodies and other body types that deserve admiration from society.

The fat acceptance movement is deeply rooted in feminism as this movement seeks to achieve women's liberation from the oppressive system that praises the thin-ideal bodies (Morris, 2019; Johnston & Taylor, 2008). In accordance with the literature, Gill (2007) discussed the body as fundamental to femininity, wherein women's physical appearances are constantly being scrutinized by men and women. Consequently, women are inclined to be valued and evaluated by their bodily appearances (Caldeira & De Ridder, 2017). To redefine the idealized 'rules' of feminine beauty, it is relevant for Aerie to ensure that the distinct portrayals of women's physical appearances are worth being adored and respected.

While the fat acceptance movement stems from second-wave of feminism (Morris, 2019), the contemporary body positive movement is highly influenced by postfeminism which is reflected in the third and fourth waves of feminism. The postfeminist perspective emphasizes empowerment and individual agency to enhance women in pursuing beauty (Caldeira & De Ridder, 2017). Similarly, Tyner and Ogle (2009) stated that the beauty and fashion industries have long been known as the avenue to women's empowerment through the concept of body. On this ground, body positivity movement puts the onus of the individual to attain beauty (body and mind) and feel beautiful

regardless of the body imperfections. Along with these views, it is relevant to identify how the postfeminist viewpoint is represented by Aerie in addressing body positivity on Instagram.

Darwin and Miller (2020) proposed the following significant frames to convey body positivity movement: *mainstream body positivity*, *fat positivity=body positivity*, *radical body positivity*, and *body neutrality*. The first frame is depicted from the postfeminism approach which underlines empowerment through self-love to encourage women to feel attractive, sexy, and beautiful despite their body flaws because beauty is democratically obtainable by every woman and not limited to a thin-ideal body (Darwin & Miller, 2020). The act of self-love in this frame comprises body-positive messages about being confident, feeling sexy, and embracing body curves and flaws (Gill & Elias, 2014). Through this frame, body positivity is constructed through the concept of self-love and body confidence that reflect individual empowerment in achieving beauty.

*Fat positivity=body positivity* frame addresses the destigmatization of fat women, thus, strives to increase the inclusion of fat bodies in the media (Darwin & Miller, 2020). In fighting the fat stigma, activists must increase the active involvement of fat women in the beauty and fashion domains (Hynnä & Kyrölä, 2019; Gurrieri & Cherrier, 2013). This means that by adopting this frame, the companies or brands are particularly focused on improving the privilege of fat women. Concerning this perspective, it can be argued that various body types and conditions, which include thin and disabled bodies become further marginalized, especially in social media.

In the *radical body positivity* frame, the focus lies on fighting systemic oppression by supporting the groups excluded in the *mainstream body positivity* and *fat positivity=body positivity*, such as women with hijabs and women of color (Darwin & Miller, 2020). This frame is in line with prior research by Cwynar-Horta (2016) who suggested the inclusion of a thin body, fat body, normal body, and disabled body in body positivity movement. Sastre (2014) also mentioned that representing disabled people in the body positivity movement can shape a positive new conception of disabled bodies. Based on the literature, it can be argued that questions and concerns have been raised regarding the representation of marginalized groups, such as non-white ethnicities and disabled women. On this account, *radical body positivity* prioritizes a broad perspective of inclusivity regarding women's physical appearances.

The last frame is *body neutrality*, which advocates the notion of body acceptance, thus, shares similar characteristics with the *mainstream body positivity* frame due to the influence of postfeminism (Darwin & Miller, 2020). Instead of emphasizing the feeling of being sexy toward one's body as in the *mainstream body positivity* frame, *body neutrality* stresses the acceptance of the body to maintain physical and mental well-being (Darwin & Miller, 2020). Positive psychological well-being, such as optimism and self-esteem, enables women to have a positive relationship with their body, in other words, self-love, and acceptance (Webb et al., 2017). This means that activists or brands that endorse this frame address the importance of women's positive mental and



behavioral aspects toward their bodies.

In general, prior research about fat acceptance movement through the postfeminist perspective and theory of four frames of body positivity movement is relevant in examining Aerie's strategy to frame body positivity on Instagram. In reference to the literature about the fat acceptance movement and the *fat positivity=body positivity* frame, it can be noted that there is a debate of whether fatness or fat body should be celebrated, against, or accepted (Donaghue & Clemitshaw, 2012). Therefore, Aerie should ensure the diverse portrayals of woman's bodies by displaying thin bodies, fat bodies, women of color, and disabled bodies to minimize the tension regarding fat acceptance on Instagram.

### *2.3. Brand identity communication strategy on Instagram*

Brand identity has been instrumental in creating and maintaining brand success in the recent competitive business market (Nandan, 2005; Roy & Banerjee, 2014). Due to the rapid development of media technology, social media platforms have become one of the relevant branding tools of many companies (Yan, 2011). Social media, particularly Instagram is thus an important tool to communicate Aerie's brand identity concerning body positivity.

Brand identity is defined as the positive and special brand associations that the company strives to establish, communicate, and maintain (Nandan, 2005; Srivastava, 2011). Differentiation is thus prominent in creating a strong brand identity because it brings competitive value to the brand (Ghodeswar, 2008; Knox & Bickerton, 2003). Brand differentiation which relates to body positivity should therefore be taken into account in representing Aerie's brand identity on Instagram. This is important because differentiation constitutes aspects that make the brand stand out among the competitors (Ghodeswar, 2008). Aside from differentiating the brand from competitors, it is also prominent for brands to ensure that their brand identities resonate with consumers and potential customers (Ghodeswar, 2008; Srivastava, 2011).

Prior research found that the employment of social media assists to build strong brand identity by building a meaningful connection with customers and cultivating customers' sense of belonging to the brand through the messages being communicated (Yan, 2011). Additionally, in the study investigating the brand identity performance, Muhonen et al. (2017) reported that brands need to differentiate themselves based on both functional and intangible benefits. This means that it is imperative to examine the functionality of Aerie's products represented in the Instagram posts and the way Aerie establishes an emotional bond with customers through body positivity on Instagram. Building on this, showing a clear and unique identity through Instagram content can provide a useful account to foster positive customers' associations with the brand.

Given that identity is focused on the unique associations that the brands seek to establish,

brand identity lies on the sender's perspective because it involves the brand's responsibility to create valuable products and services (Kapferer, 2012; Nandan, 2005; Roy & Banerjee, 2014). Brand identity, therefore, includes the way brands portray themselves to be favorably perceived by customers and the way the companies represent their values to customers (Srivastava, 2011; da Silveira et al., 2013). It is also important for brands to be genuine in delivering their identities as people can identify brands' personalities through the social media content posted by the brands (Yan, 2011).

Concerning brand identity features, a study about corporate branding demonstrated the six components of brand identity that include brand vision, culture, positioning, personality, relationship, and presentation (Harris & de Chernatony, 2001). Moreover, this concept focused more on how brand vision, culture, relationship, and personality reflect the self-images of stakeholders (Harris & de Chernatony, 2001). Another perspective has been adapted by David Aaker (1996) to understand brand identity features, in which he argued that brand essence (main idea and value), core (value proposition and other unique benefits offered by the brand), and extended identities are fundamental in brand identity model (Mohan & Sequeira, 2009). However, more detailed brand identity features were developed by Kapferer to understand how brands create unique brand associations, thus, he suggested a brand identity prism (Kapferer, 2012).

The brand identity prism (see figure 2.1.) consists of six major facets or elements of brand identity, namely *physique*, *personality*, *culture*, *relationship*, *reflection*, and *self-image* (Kapferer, 2012). Regarding the first facet, *physique* means what the brand does and what the brand is about, in other words, the physical or tangible aspect of the brand (Ross & Harradine, 2011). Previous research demonstrated that a strong *physique* element of brand identity allows people to quickly recall and identify a certain brand name while thinking about a specific product (Ghodeswar, 2008). It can be noted that the brand value should be conveyed and featured in the physical aspect of the brand. Hence, the *physique* facet of Aerie is analyzed through the brand products, promoted in the Instagram posts.

In terms of the *personality* facet, it is about the appealing brand character that reflects the main value of the brand (Ross & Harradine, 2011). In previous studies by Kapferer (2012) and Ghodeswar (2008), this component serves as a psychological function to customers (e.g., to cope with frustrating circumstances and to solve a problem). This means that Aerie should be effectively projecting the favorable traits of brands. *Culture* facet is considered the most prominent in brand identity prism because it contains the ideology of the brand which drives the brand vision, therefore, brands should communicate what they stand for (Kapferer, 2012; Roy & Banerjee, 2014). To better inform the vision, brands can use social media as the tools to express their ideas and brand values to customers and increase better awareness of the brand values to customers (Yan, 2011). Aerie should therefore maximize the use of Instagram to communicate their stance on body

positivity issues.

Concerning the *relationship* facet, it is defined as the way brands deliver the meanings of products or services to customers to build a long-lasting relationship with them, besides, customer trust remains fundamental in this facet (Kapferer, 2012; Ross & Harradine, 2011). The *relationship* facet can be intensified through social media as it allows customers to actively engage with the brand through brand fan pages and social media content (Yan, 2011). It can thus be argued that Aerie can use several Instagram features, such as *Stories*, *Instagram Live*, *Instagram TV*, and *repost* to engage with customers. Since this research only focused on the analysis of Instagram picture posts, the picture *repost* feature is examined in Aerie's Instagram.

In the *reflection* element, the brand should ensure that its values positively reflect the customers because customers tend to build their identities through certain brands (Kapferer, 2012; Roy & Banerjee, 2014). In this way, this facet offers customers a self-expressive advantage (Srivastava, 2011). This means that Aerie should ensure that the messages they communicate on Instagram can facilitate customers to express their identities through body positivity values. Finally, the *self-image* facet encompasses the inner reflection of customers towards the brand, hence, customers tend to picture themselves in the brand products or services (Kapferer, 2012; Ross & Harradine, 2011). While the *reflection* facet focused on the outward self-mirror (Kapferer, 2012), the *self-image* element concentrated on the inward self-mirror (Roy & Banerjee, 2014).

On the whole, based on the brand identity literature discussed above, the concept of brand identity prism by Kapferer (2012) is more relevant compared to the brand identity models by Harris and de Chernatony (2001) and Aaker (1996), because Kapferer's concept constitutes a detailed brand identity elements that can be investigated through Aerie's Instagram posts. In this manner, the Instagram content of Aerie is analyzed to understand what kind of customers' outward and inward mirrors that the brand wants to achieve concerning body positivity. Overall, the brand identity prism and the discussion about social media as branding tools are relevant to understanding the way Aerie conveys its values and unique character on Instagram through the context of body positivity.

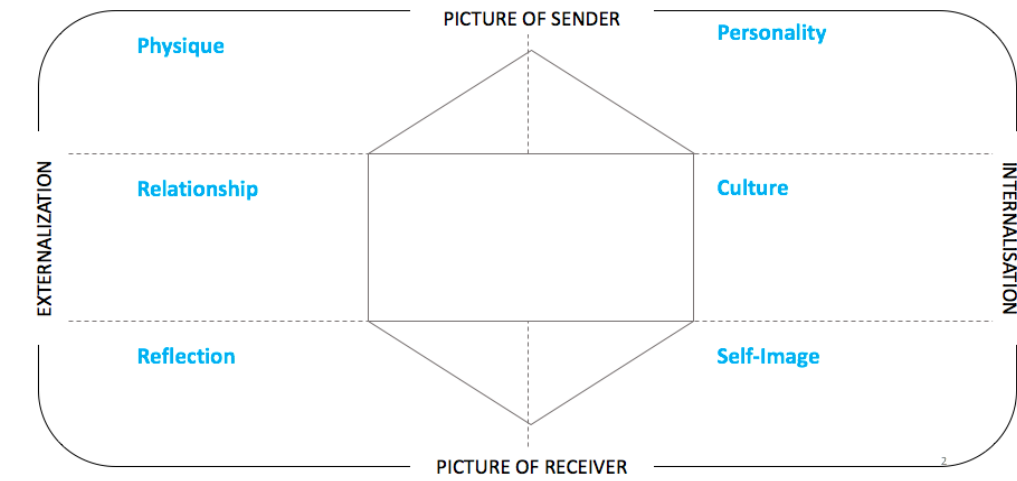


Figure 2.1. Brand identity prism by Kapferer. From *jocelyneleannec*.  
<https://jocelyneleannec.com/lumo-plays-brand-guidelines>. Copyright (n.d.) by  
 Jocelyne Le Leannec.

#### 2.4. Summary

To summarize, the entire concepts about brand activism, body positivity, and brand identity strategy on social media are relevant for this research. The concept of brand activism serves as the umbrella theory that guides this research regarding body activism. The theory about authentic brand activism features adds to the understanding of Aerie’s strategy to portray the authenticity of the body positivity movement.

The six core elements of body positivity provide insights on the specific features shown in Aerie’s Instagram that communicate the ideas about body positivity, while the four frames of body positivity movement are useful to define how the messages about body positivity framed by Aerie because each frame constitute the different meaning of body positivity. The frames of body positivity movement can thus examine whether Aerie emphasizes more on the fat body, individual empowerment, the inclusivity of marginalized groups, or even the combination of the respective frames. Regarding brand identity, the concept of brand identity prism is prominent to identify the way Aerie brand conveys its vision, value, and unique value proposition on Instagram as associated with body positivity. In addition, the literature about postfeminism also provides information on body positive movement through the lens of feminism.

On the whole, these entire concepts offer greater insights into the effective communication strategy of Aerie to represent brand identity through body positivity on Instagram. Despite the existing studies about body positivity activism, the fat acceptance movement, and brand identity strategy on social media, there is a lack of extensive research regarding the analysis of the use of body positivity messages and values to communicate the brand identity of fashion brands,

specifically through Instagram. Due to this literature and knowledge gap, this research provides information on the combination of brand identity communication strategy on Instagram and the elements of body positivity which concentrated on the fashion businesses.

### **3. Methodology**

The following chapter elaborates on the qualitative research design approach to answering the main research questions and sub-questions. Purposive sampling was employed to collect 153 posts from Aerie's Instagram and the data was further analyzed using thematic analysis. The analysis has resulted in 294 open codes with five main themes. The details of research design, data collection, sensitizing concepts, sampling, data gathering, and data analysis process are described and justified. Additionally, a detailed explanation of a reflection on the credibility and validity of this research is described in this chapter.

#### *3.1. Research design*

This research adopted a qualitative method as this approach helps to uncover deeper meanings and gain rich information of events, phenomena, and other contexts of the social practices (Babbie, 2017; Brennen, 2017; Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). In the context of media studies, qualitative research seeks to understand values implied in media, such as in new media, advertising, and entertainment (Brennen, 2017). Since this research focused on the Instagram posts, qualitative design facilitated the researcher to reveal in-depth meanings of Aerie's posts regarding the representation of their brand identity through body positivity on Instagram.

To obtain a proper understanding of Aerie's strategy to communicate its brand identity through body positivity, thematic analysis was used in this research. Thematic analysis was chosen to find patterns and meanings in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006), besides, applicable to analyze visual and written texts (Walters, 2016). Moreover, thematic analysis enables the development of critical analysis that assists to identify specific concepts shown in the content of data (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Therefore, patterns, important concepts or ideas, and implicit meanings within the pictures and captions of Aerie were revealed through the use of thematic analysis.

The data in this research was observed inductively as this technique allows more explorations of the themes that are emerged from the data itself, hence, the analysis is data-driven (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). Through inductive reasoning, the patterns of specific phenomena emerge from the observations of data, thus, capturing the significant information in the data (Azungah, 2018; Babbie, 2017). In this way, the themes and codes about body positivity, brand identity, and authentic brand activism were generated from the identification of Aerie's Instagram posts. Although an inductive approach was employed, the data analysis remained guided by the sensitizing concepts about diverse women's portrayals, brand identity elements, and authentic brand activism. The pre-existing coding frame about body positivity by

Cohen et al. (2019) was also adopted. Given the coding frame by Cohen et al. (2019) was done quantitatively, this research has attempted to analyze the coding frame qualitatively to obtain a greater meaning of the body positivity elements in Aerie's Instagram posts.

### *3.2. Sampling and data collection*

Instagram posts were particularly identified in this study because, in the context of body positivity, this platform allows people to generate picture-based content that entails messages about self-appreciation and the embracement of different kinds of body types and sizes (Tiggemann et al., 2020). In this light, the sampling unit of this study was the official Instagram posts of Aerie because these revealed specific messages about Aerie's brand identity, authentic body positivity activism feature, and body positivity facets as well as frame(s). Aerie's Instagram posts that contained pictures of women and captions about body positivity were therefore parts of the dataset.

This study used a purposive sampling technique, in which the sample was selected based on the objective of the study, thus, specific criteria of the sample were determined to obtain the data that could answer the research question (Babbie, 2017). The sample of this study was based on relevant criteria to identify Aerie's brand identity strategy, body positivity elements and frame(s), and authentic brand activism strategy. This sampling strategy was, therefore, suitable and relevant since this study attempted to identify body positivity-related messages in Instagram posts.

The criteria of the sample were: (1) picture-based posts (excluding the graphics, animations, and product pictures only), (2) displayed pictures of women, (3) captions that contained body positivity related messages, (4) posted by Aerie (including the reposted pictures by Aerie and excluding tagged posts), (5) posts that represent the primary concepts or one of the concepts of this research (body positivity elements and frame(s), brand identity prism, and authentic brand activism features), and (6) posted in 2020. For posts that included multiple pictures, the entire set of images were analyzed, on the condition that such pictures displayed women's portrayals.

The sampling time frame was one year, notably from January to December 2020. In total, there were 153 Instagram posts collected. Smaller samples are inclined to be used in qualitative research for in-depth analysis through the identification of latent and manifest aspects (Braun & Clarke, 2006). A total of 153 sample sizes in the data set was therefore adequate to conduct detailed examinations of the data.

The data was collected from Aerie's official Instagram account @aerie. The data gathering process was carried out from February 24<sup>th</sup>, 2021 to March 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2021. To begin the data collection process, the researcher was logged in to her personal Instagram account and searched for @aerie official account. Following this stage, the researcher was scrolled down the posts to January 2020.

Afterward, both textual (captions) and visual (images) posts from January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2020 were thoroughly selected by taking into account the sampling criteria mentioned in the previous sub-section. When selecting the posts, the screenshots were taken and saved. The entire screenshot images were then imported to ATLAS.ti.

Only the posts from January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2020 to December 31<sup>st</sup>, 2020 were collected for this research because the one-year time frame could capture the recent strategy of Aerie. This time frame was also relevant to understand the recent values and aspects that Aerie would like to be associated with for its brand identity. Besides, this time frame consisted of various portrayals of women and seasonal collections. This was important to provide the rich descriptive thematic data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In this respect, this process enabled the researcher to analyze the dynamic content displayed by Aerie on their Instagram posts regarding body positivity.

### *3.3. Sensitizing concepts*

To perform sufficient data analysis, it is better to engage with the theories from literature, in other words, sensitizing the data with the relevant concepts (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Moreover, sensitizing concepts offered background ideas of the research problem and phenomenon being studied, in this way, sensitizing concepts were helpful to improve sensitivity in the data analysis process (Bowen, 2019). From this perspective, sensitizing concepts assisted to analyze meanings in the data to the concepts of body positivity, brand identity, and brand activism in the context of the Instagram account of a woman's fashion brand. The sensitizing concepts of this research included authenticity in brand activism, diverse portrayals of woman's bodies, body positivity movement, and brand identity elements.

The first concept identified in this study was about the authenticity of brand activism in Aerie's Instagram content. As mentioned in the theoretical framework, brand activism serves as an umbrella concept because the body positivity movement is part of social activism. The main theory that guides the analysis of this concept is the feature of authentic brand activism by Vredenburg et al. (2020). This concept was observed through the activism messages communicated by Aerie through pictures and captions, particularly whether such messages were diverging from the common beauty norms in the fashion industry and whether the messages were encouraging or rather inviting controversy.

The authenticity of brand activism was also observed through the claims made by Aerie to foster social change regarding women's beauty in their captions. Since authenticity is about the alignment of claims, brand values, and practices (Vredenburg et al., 2020), it was also imperative to identify Aerie's actions and efforts that support their body positivity activism messages and improve the diversity and inclusivity of woman's body. These were observed through the social events about body positivity organized by the brand and other activism-related practices shown on



Aerie's Instagram. The actions and efforts were also investigated by examining the pictures reposted by Aerie from customers to understand whether the content enhances women to appreciate their bodies and grow a positive mindset.

The concepts about diverse portrayals of woman's bodies and body positive movement were guided by core elements of body positivity by Cohen et al. (2019). The six main body positivity elements *body appreciation, acceptance of body and self-love, broad conceptualization of beauty, body care, positive inner characteristics, and information filtering* (Cohen et al., 2019) were observed through the woman's body depicted in Aerie's posts (i.e., women of color, women with hijab, disabled women, women in every size, and women with flaws), clothing style, body exposure, messages about the gratitude toward the body, and motivational messages that enhance body appreciation. Furthermore, the way Aerie emphasizes individual positive traits, such as being happy, conquering the negativity, being confident, and feeling good were analyzed. All of the elements were also observed through the poses, body gestures, and facial expressions of the models to gain underlying meanings of body positivity messages conveyed by Aerie.

The analysis of the body positivity movement was also guided by the following four frames by Darwin and Miller (2020): *mainstream body positivity, fat positivity=body positivity, radical body positivity, and body neutrality*. The wordings and images in Aerie's posts were analyzed to understand whether the brand focused more on individual empowerment through self-love, fat destigmatization, the inclusion of marginalized bodies, maintenance of physical and mental well-being, or even the combinations of these aspects. In addition, a variety of woman's bodies was also observed to understand whether Aerie mainly displays plus-size bodies or body inclusivity that includes, for instance, a disabled body.

For the last concept, the brand identity prism by Kapferer (2012) was employed to understand the way Aerie wants to stand out among its competitors through its unique brand identity. As mentioned in the theoretical framework, brand identity prism include *physique, personality, culture, relationship, reflection, and self-image* (Kapferer, 2012). The *physique* facet was identified through the various sizes of lingerie, activewear, swimsuits, and other Aerie's products (e.g., plus size swimsuits and lingerie). Messages emphasizing the importance of feeling good with one's body and that every woman is beautiful (e.g., showing that every woman can look good in bikini and swimsuits) were observed to understand Aerie's *personality* facet.

*Culture* facet was analyzed through the way Aerie addressing body positivity in the context of fashion (e.g., disabled and plus size women wearing activewear), while the reposted pictures from Aerie's community members and customers (e.g., selfie pictures wearing Aerie's products) were examined to gain insights on how Aerie represent *relationship* facet. Finally, *reflection* and *self-image* facets were identified through the messages that highlight the importance to turn body insecurity into positivity. Overall, the observations of these aspects provided knowledge on Aerie's

unique brand associations.

### *3.4. Data analysis*

This sub-chapter focused on the process of data analysis, including the phases of thematic analysis and coding procedures which include the initial coding to the final coding processes that resulted in the final thematic map. The analysis of 153 posts was conducted using an inductive approach to identify themes based on the Instagram content of Aerie. Furthermore, the six stages of thematic analysis by Braun and Clarke (2013) are elaborated. Since the crucial thing about themes is to capture relevant information and meanings that answer the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Castleberry & Nolen, 2018), the detailed descriptions of the coding process that help to capture important meanings within the data set are provided.

#### *3.4.1. Data and coding processes*

To begin the data analysis process, the data was thoroughly viewed to gain an understanding of the main context of the collected Instagram posts. This process was useful for the familiarization with the data, thus, initial ideas about the coding framework were generated in this phase (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The initial ideas that consisted of relevant information captured in Aerie's Instagram posts were manually put in the handwritten notes as a first guide of the coding process.

After familiarizing myself with the data and generating initial ideas, the entire data was imported to ATLAS.ti. The entire posts were coded with as many as possible patterns by taking the sensitizing concepts in mind. In this phase, it is prominent to examine the interesting features of each data as the initial codes form the basic segments of repeated themes within the data set data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Therefore, in this phase, each Instagram post was inclusively and meticulously coded by selecting a specific area in pictures as well as the screenshots of captions (e.g., stretch marks, smiling face, attributes, hashtags, and terms) and naming each of the selected areas with separated code. In this initial phase of analysis, a total of 294 open codes were generated.

The open codes, such as 'belly fat', 'eat healthy', and 'being a changemaker' were formulated. The codes that emerged from the data were interpreted using sensitizing concepts to answer the research question and sub-questions. Moreover, to ensure the quality of the data interpretation, both manifest and latent meanings were observed. For instance, a picture of a disabled woman wearing Aerie's yoga clothes and doing a standing yoga pose (manifest meaning) implies that despite the limitation of her body condition, disabled women can be active and stay healthy as a form of self-love and appreciation (latent meaning).

Once the data was entirely coded, all the different codes identified from the data were

sorted into the initial themes. Identifying the relationship between various codes as well as themes and combining the codes to form a general theme are crucial in this phase (Braun & Clarke, 2006). All the codes thus were carefully analyzed and grouped into the relevant sub-themes. For example, the codes 'feeling good' and 'feeling beautiful' were put under the sub-theme 'positive affirmation'. This was done by critically examining the similarities and differences among each code. To give an instance, sub-themes 'every woman is beautiful', 'various body sizes' and 'multiple ethnicities' belong to theme 'celebrating women's body diversity in fashion'. Additionally, a miscellaneous category was created for the codes that do not belong to the sub-themes and themes. The initial coding framework generated in this stage can be seen in Appendix A.

Following this process, the themes were refined and evaluated. The quality of themes should be judged based on the *internal homogeneity* (the coherence of data that belong to each theme) and *external heterogeneity* (clear differentiation between themes) (Braun & Clarke, 2006). For instance, the sub-theme 'encouraging mindfulness' was not initially fit to the theme 'women's body empowerment', hence, this sub-theme was categorized into the theme 'inner beauty and characteristics' because mindfulness is closely associated with positive inner individual traits. Moreover, the following sub-themes: 'disability' and 'illness', 'facial skin flaws and bodily flaws', and 'revealing and modest clothes' were merged as it contains a similar idea. The sub-theme 'disabled women being active' was also moved into the 'body care encouragement' theme and merged under the 'promoting wellness/healthy lifestyle' sub-theme since being active (e.g., doing sports) is part of body care behavior.

It is also important in this stage to think about the boundaries of each theme by identifying what does each theme entails and does not entails (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). The initial seven themes were thus evaluated by understanding whether each theme provide a clear distinction from other themes. For example, 'women's body empowerment' entails that despite the body flaws and physical conditions, all women can obtain beauty in their ways, while 'body care encouragement' contains messages that motivate women to take care of their bodies as a form of respect and love toward the body.

Moreover, this stage includes two levels, in which the first one is to review the coherence of potential theme and the second one is to evaluate the validity of each theme as well as whether the potential thematic map reflects the entire data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Concerning the first level, after a careful evaluation, the theme 'loving and embracing the body' was merged into the theme 'women's body empowerment' as the respective themes have similar essence. The theme 'representation of marginalized bodies' was also merged into the theme 'celebrating women's body diversity in fashion' because both themes entail the embracement of a woman's physical appearance. In the second level, the entire themes were reviewed to ensure that the themes reflect the whole data set. This refinement process had resulted in the formation of five main themes,

namely 'inner beauty and characteristics', 'women's body empowerment', 'celebrating women's body diversity in fashion', 'invitation to participate in Aerie's campaigns' and 'body care encouragement'. An overview of the refined coding framework can be found in Appendix B.

On completion of themes refinement and evaluation, the themes were further redefined to be presented and discussed in the results section. This phase involves analyzing the particular aspects and meanings contained in each theme to gain an understanding of the substance of each theme (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Creating a concise name for each theme is also important in this stage to guide readers in understanding the meanings of the themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In this stage, the theme names were reviewed and a few themes were altered to provide a clearer overview. The 'inner beauty and characteristics' changed into 'beauty on the inside', 'celebrating women's body diversity in fashion' into 'fashion inclusivity for every woman', 'invitation to participate in Aerie's campaigns' into 'the power of Instagram', and 'body care encouragement' to 'caring toward own body'. Following the finalization process, the themes were reported in the result section and critically discussed to answer the research question and sub-questions. The final coding tree for the thematic analysis can be viewed in Appendix C.

### *3.5. Credibility, reflexivity, and ethical concern*

Two central aspects of credibility in qualitative research are reliability and validity. Credibility is paramount to evaluate the quality of qualitative research (Babbie, 2017) as it entails the connection between claims and evidence, solid argument, and rigorous knowledge (Silverman, 2011). On this ground, the results presented in this research were supported by proof that contained strong arguments and valid knowledge of body positivity and brand identity strategy through critical thinking and analysis processes.

The descriptions of the research process and theoretical transparencies enhance the reliability of research (Silverman, 2011). The transparency of the research process of this study lies in the detailed explanations of data collection, step-by-step thematic analysis process, and coding procedures. The sampling strategy and unit were also explained clearly and transparently to ensure the reliability of this qualitative study. All of these aspects (data collection, choice of method, sampling strategy and unit, step-by-step thematic analysis procedures, and coding process) were not merely thoroughly described but also justified to enhance the reliability.

Regarding theoretical transparency, the theories used in the research paper were explicitly discussed given that a theoretical stance influences the interpretation of data (Silverman, 2011). In this view, the theories derived from existing academic research papers about six elements of body positivity, four frames of body positivity movement, brand identity prism, and elements of authentic brand activism in social media were discussed. Moreover, this research openly adopted a

feminist theoretical stance. This feminist theoretical stance constitutes the contestation of the system of oppression to improve the lives of marginalized groups (Intemann, 2018). In this respect, this research discussed the flexible portrayals of women's ideal bodies, specifically about the depictions of inclusive and diverse woman's body inclusivity and diversity on Instagram.

Concerning the validity, the data is treated exhaustively so that the results accurately reflect the phenomenon being researched (Silverman D., 2011). The pictures and captions were analyzed and comprehensively treated in a critical manner using thematic analysis and further imported into ATLAS.ti. The theoretical structure for data is also prominent for the validity of qualitative research (Boeije, 2010), hence, the themes generated from Aerie's Instagram post were also guided by the theories about body positivity, brand identity, and authentic brand activism to increase validity.

Regarding the generalizability in a qualitative study, due to the qualitative approach, this study cannot be generalized. This research also consisted of small samples. Despite the small samples, the in-depth data analysis is considered adequate for qualitative research (Boeije, 2010). Hence, the data of this study remains sufficient for qualitative investigations. For reflexivity, the role of the researcher was critically taken into account in the entire process of this research. A qualitative researcher must understand his or her position in this research to avoid subjectivity in the data interpretations (Brennen, 2017). In this case, the cultural and educational background, as well as gender of the researcher, could affect the process of data analysis and the results of this study. Therefore, the theories, data gathering strategy, sampling, thematic analysis phases, and coding procedures were explicitly described to increase transparency and guide the researcher in gaining objectivity during the data interpretation process. Through legitimate theories, a clear method strategy, and a clear feminist theoretical standpoint, the researcher was able to provide valid arguments in this study.

Finally, the ethical sensibilities of the researcher should be highly considered by ensuring that the analyzed data and findings are solely aiming to discover the knowledge of the study, not attempting to fulfill personal goals (Babbie, 2017). The entire data set was analyzed and the results were discussed to obtain the aim of this study, which was to understand how Aerie represents its brand identity through body positivity on Instagram. Given that the data derived from the official Instagram account of Aerie, the data was analyzed objectively because the posts were accessible to the public and carefully curated by Aerie. Since the reposted pictures from customers were included in the analysis, the anonymity of the data was ensured, thus, only the data produced by Aerie was visible in this research. Overall, there was not a major ethical issue in this study.

### *3.6. Summary*

To sum up, this research adopted a qualitative approach in which the data was analyzed

using thematic analysis to understand the patterns of meanings regarding Aerie's strategy to represent its brand identity through body positivity through Instagram. A purposeful sampling with specific criteria to collect the data from Aerie's Instagram posts was performed. The entire data was thoroughly and critically observed by taking the sensitizing concepts into a consideration. The list of sensitizing concepts about body positivity elements, brand identity strategy, and authentic brand activism was employed to guide the inductive data analysis. A total of five themes were generated through the coding procedures and the coding tree can be found in Appendix C.

#### 4. Results and discussion

Based on a comprehensive analysis of 153 Aerie’s Instagram posts, a total number of five themes were generated. The following main themes are ‘beauty on the inside’, ‘the power of Instagram’, ‘women’s body empowerment’, ‘fashion inclusivity for every woman’, and ‘caring toward own body’. This chapter discusses the findings which demonstrated that Aerie represents its brand identity through body positivity by emphasizing the inner beauty of women, utilizing the power of Instagram to inspire women, cultivating women’s body empowerment, enhancing inclusivity of women in fashion, and caring toward own body on the Instagram posts. Brand identity concept is included and merged in the body positivity elements reflected in each theme. The results demonstrated that the entire brand identity facets of Aerie are aligned. Besides, regarding the authenticity of brand activism, there is an alignment of Aerie’s values, messages, and practices on body positivity.

By highlighting ‘beauty on the inside’, Aerie wants to communicate that physical appearances are not the only aspects to define the beauty of women, but inner characteristics also play a key role in it. Moreover, ‘the power of Instagram’ shows how the authenticity of body positivity activism is portrayed by Aerie through its Instagram marketing content strategy. Furthermore, ‘women’s body empowerment’ body positivity entails collective and individual approaches to empower women. ‘Fashion inclusivity for every woman’ widely appeared on Aerie’s Instagram posts and this theme puts the salience of Aerie’s brand identity regarding the embracement of various woman’s body types, body sizes, physical conditions, ethnicities, and fashion styles. Finally, Aerie stressed the importance of taking care of own body. This gives an insight to women to not merely accepting their body flaws and be confident about it but also taking good care of the body through a well-balanced life. Each theme is extensively discussed in the following sub-sections to answer the research question and sub-questions. The themes and sub-themes are illustrated in table 4.1 below.

Beauty on the inside	The power of Instagram	Women’s body empowerment	Fashion inclusivity for every woman	Caring toward own body
Encouraging mindfulness	Body positivity campaign	Collective empowerment	Every woman is beautiful	Treating ourselves
Expression of happiness	Instagram hashtags	Individual empowerment	Thin/fit portrayals	Promoting wellness/healthy lifestyle
Being courageous	Bringing positive impact	Achievement in life	Multiple ethnicity	Self-care
Good personality		Body skin exposure	Different clothing style	Active pose
		Positive affirmation toward oneself	Various body sizes	
		Physical flaws	Women with disability and illness	
		Body acceptance		

Table 4.1. Overview of themes and sub-themes

#### 4.1. Beauty on the inside

From the analysis, the dataset revealed that inner beauty or beauty on the inside was the most prominent in Aerie's Instagram posts. This pattern implied that becoming beautiful as a woman is not only a matter of bodily appearances but also about what they have inside, notably their characters or traits and mindset. Based on the entire data, Aerie addressed inner positive characters through the captions and posts. As shown in figure 4.1. below, Aerie mentioned "inner greatness", "disrupt the status quo", "stop holding yourself back from living for fear and anxiety of the way you look", and "you are so much more than a body" (Aerie, n.d.).

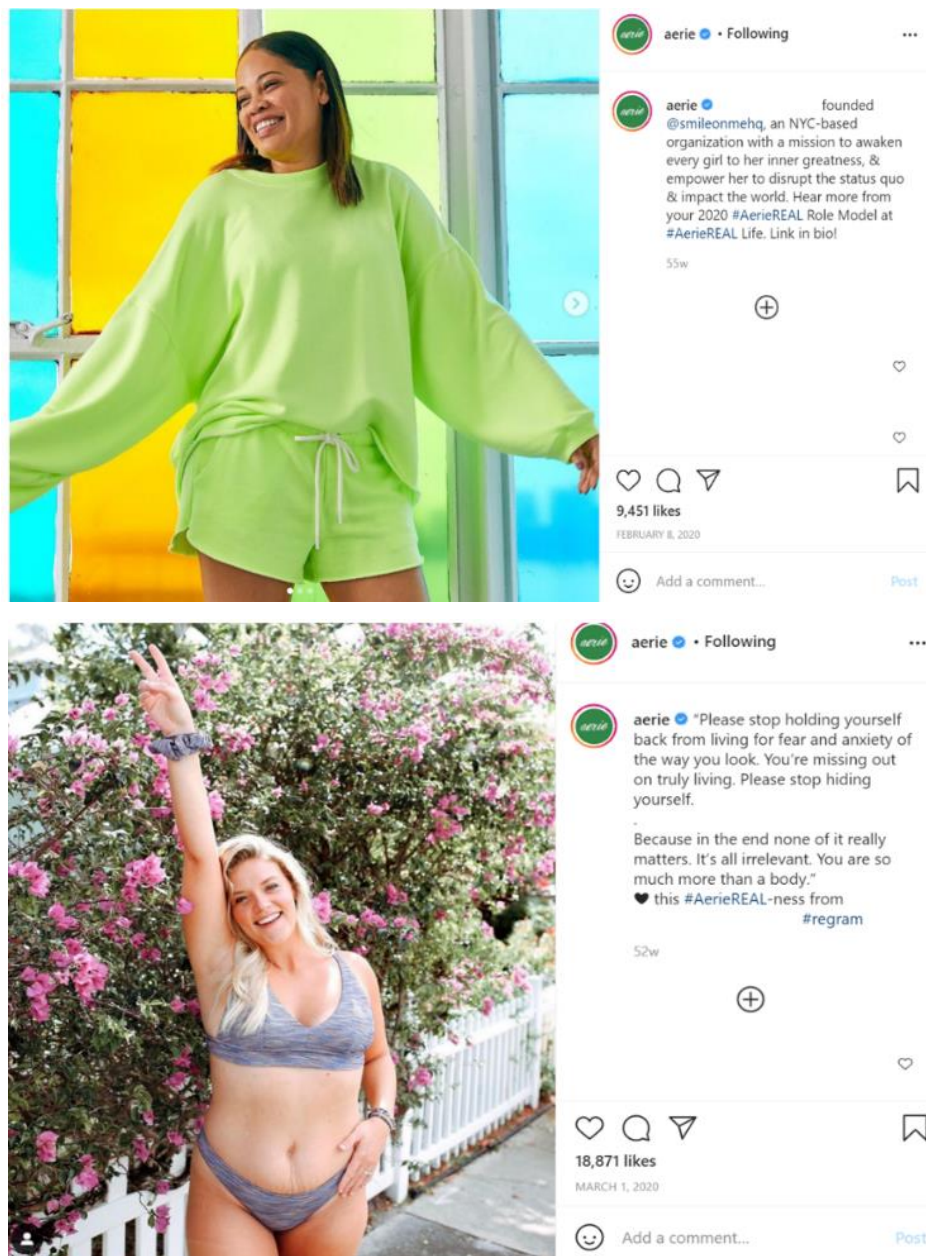


Figure 4.1. Being courageous

These particular phrases and sentences communicate bravery to express oneself regardless of the physical looks, positive mindset, and message to not being judgmental towards own and others'



bodies since the concept of beauty is beyond the physical looks. These results are in line with the *positive inner characteristics* element of body positivity by Cohen et al. (2019) which demonstrated that favorable personal characteristics that evoke happiness and positive feelings can reflect outer attitudes, such as being kind, brave, and compassionate. Additionally, Williamson and Karazsia (2018) affirmed that body positivity is about diverse bodily features, personal characteristics, and bodily functions.

In figure 4.1., the women were smiling with their teeth and the backgrounds of the pictures were bright and colorful. These smiling faces and colorful backgrounds indicated contentment, cheerfulness, and freedom. Moreover, the following sentence: “you are so much more than a body” (Aerie, n.d.) highly signified a reminder for women that physical appearances do not necessarily define them. This is also supported by a prior study about the discourse of Love your body (LYB) which pointed out that women’s personal characters and positive way of thinking become the new vehicle to achieve beauty and sexiness as those aspects are more prominent than bodily looks (Gill & Elias, 2014).

Having good personal traits can also be characterized by being an optimist (Lazuka et al., 2020) as it represents a positive mind. For instance, the optimism trait appeared in the data through the following caption: “Now, is the time for optimism” (Aerie, n.d.). By looking at the post in figure 4.2. below, it can be argued that Aerie wants to urge women to think positively despite their circumstances. This kind of positive inner character is influential for women to look upon themselves and their bodies because beauty is also projected from the inside, not only from the outside (Wood-Barcalow et al., 2010).



Figure 4.2. Good personality: being an optimist

It is interesting to note that the 'beauty on the inside' pattern is also related to the *information filtering* element of body positivity because, as stated by Cohen et al. (2019), information about the body that enhances positive feelings allow people to reject negative thoughts and beliefs concerning their physical appearances. By emphasizing the inner beauty values, namely happiness, bravery, kindness, mindfulness, and optimism, Aerie wants to create Instagram content that facilitates women to filter out positive information regarding body positivity. Thus, present inaccurate perceptions of beauty which mainly focused on women's flawless bodies.

Aside from the 'good personality', 'being courageous, and 'expression of happiness' sub-themes, another sub-theme that belongs to this pattern is 'encouraging mindfulness'. This sub-theme is about having a peaceful mind to be able to think positively and be more content with life. For instance, the analysis found that Aerie has arranged several events to encourage mindfulness, particularly online meditation through Instagram Live streaming. This means that Aerie does not solely depend on communicating its values about inner beauty but also providing the facilities for its customers to have beautiful and favorable characters.

The 'beauty on the inside' pattern speaks for the unique character that Aerie aims to communicate for its brand identity, specifically in the *personality, reflection, and self-image* facets. In accordance with Kapferer (2012) who stated that the *personality* of a brand performs as a psychological function to customers, the data showed that inner positivity values communicated by Aerie could enable customers to see and evaluate their bodies more positively. On this account, a brand character that evokes a positive emotional aspect of customers allows the brand to be stand out among the competitors, besides, establish a rich brand identity (Ghodeswar, 2008).



Figure 4.3. Expression of happiness

The embracement of 'beauty on the inside' character represented through the expressions of happiness, courage, and mindfulness as depicted in previous figures indicated the brand value

that Aerie wants to project to customers on Instagram. In figure 4.3., it is clear that the facial expressions and hand poses of the women portray happiness. By taking a closer look at the picture, it can be noted that they can freely and joyfully express themselves in their bralette, undies, and bikini despite their body sizes, shapes, and skin colors. Given the thin body and flawless appearance still dominate the social media content in the areas of fashion and beauty (Caldeira & De Ridder, 2017), Aerie attempts to generate Instagram content that praises the inner beauty of women without emphasizing the prominence of having a perfect standard body. These findings confirm the theory about the *personality* facet of brand identity which demonstrated that the character of a brand reflects the core value of the brand (Ross & Harradine, 2011). It can therefore be noted that Aerie tries to represent its brand identity by projecting the inner beauty value of body positivity on Instagram.

The pattern of 'beauty on the inside' is also included in the *reflection* facet. The data revealed that the notion of inner beauty constitutes Aerie's values that reflect customers in a favorable way, that is to encourage women to feel beautiful on the inside, not only from the outside. This result corroborates the *reflection* facet of brand identity which suggested that the brand's value reflects customers' identity in a way that they desire to be seen by using certain brands (Kapferer, 2012; Roy & Banerjee, 2014). For instance, as illustrated in figure 4.3 above, the women looked happy and confident in Aerie's bralette and bikini products. This reflects what women wish to be viewed by others, especially for women who have flaws, in which their physical looks do not meet the common ideal body as portrayed by thin and low-fat bodies. In this respect, regardless of customers' skin colors, body sizes, types, conditions, and bodily imperfections, Aerie's products could enable them to radiate their inner beauty since such value is already instilled into Aerie's brand identity.

Finally, this pattern is a part of Aerie's *self-image* facet, in which this facet could enhance customers' positive inner relationship with themselves through inward self-mirror (Ross & Harradine, 2011; Roy & Banerjee, 2014). The 'beauty on the inside' depicted in Aerie's Instagram posts reflects customers' inner self. The findings implied that by believing in the power of a good personality and positive mindset, Aerie wants to encourage every woman to reflect themselves as worthy because what matters the most lies beyond bodily appearances.

#### 4.2. The power of Instagram

The second pattern generated from the dataset was related to Aerie's Instagram marketing affordances to promote brand activism. The sub-themes discovered from this pattern were 'body positivity campaign', 'Instagram hashtags', and 'bringing positive impact'. Through the analysis of the entire data, Aerie's stance to body positivity for woman's bodies is communicated through the use of hashtags, unretouched photos, and the reposted Instagram posts from Aerie's customers.

The Instagram hashtags, namely #AerieREAL, #MyAerie, #AerieREALSummit as illustrated in figure 4.4. conveyed the body positivity messages that encourage women to reconstruct the meaning of beauty and ideal body as every woman deserved to be seen as beautiful by becoming their real self and having attractive personalities.

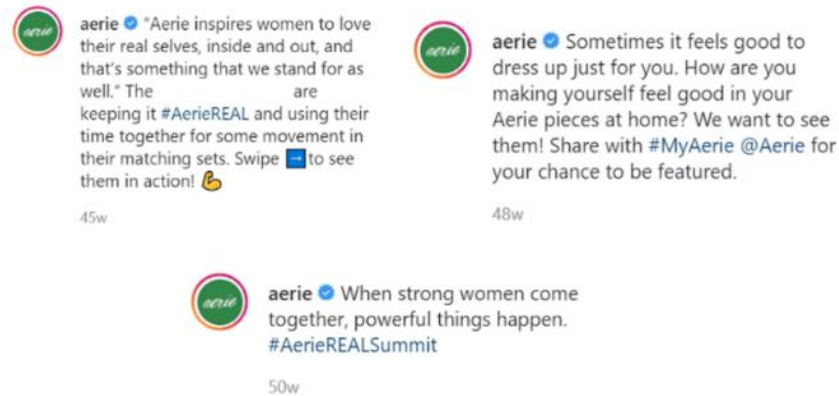


Figure 4.4. Aerie's Instagram hashtags

The hashtags as seen in figure 4.4. above indicated the body positivity activism initiated by Aerie on Instagram. The hashtag in social media is considered an effective strategy in digital activism to communicate the messages of value-driven brand activism (Lee & Yoon, 2020). Based on the dataset, Aerie focused on challenging the common body norms to improve body inclusivity and unconditionally accept the bodies. For instance, the #AerieREAL focused on the depiction of the real body to enhance women to be proud of themselves, while #MyAerie is about the way Aerie products make women feel beautiful with their unique and distinct bodily features. Another hashtag that appeared in the entire data was #AerieREALSummit, in which Aerie showed, promoted, shared a body positivity summit event that empowers women through engaging series of activities.

Moreover, it was shown from the data that the hashtags emphasized beauty without limit through the portrayals of disabled women and diverse body sizes as well as ethnicities. In this regard, the narrowed views concerning women's body and beauty in social media is contested by Aerie on Instagram. The criticism toward societal influences on the women's body standard assists the establishment of a broad perception of the attractive body (Cwynar-Horta, 2016). Hence, through the contestation of the normative woman's body, Aerie wishes to bring wider positive views and conceptions of what woman's beauty and perfect body are. This is in accord with the concept of social brand activism which is driven by impartial values to benefit society as a whole (Sarkar & Kotler, 2018).

Apart from the hashtags strategy, the data found that the unretouched pictures and Instagram reposted pictures from the customers were parts of Aerie's body positivity activism. In the left picture of figure 4.5. below, Aerie posted the quote in the caption from one of Aerie's role

models about the unedited photos for the Instagram content.



Figure 4.5. Unretouched and reposted pictures

The caption also included a motivational message that aims to increase women's confidence regarding their appearances, engage customers to be part of the body positivity activism, and inspire customers to donate to bring a positive impact to society. Building on these, Aerie's stance on the women's social issue that respects every type and condition of the body confirms the concept of *progressive activism* which aims to solve societal problems (Sarkar & Kotler, 2018). Furthermore, the reposted posts as illustrated in the right picture of figure 4.5. can be considered as one of Aerie's Instagram content strategies to show its brand mission, value, and actions about body positivity because Aerie does not only share inspirational messages about body positivity, but also show it through the real actions by reposting the pictures and quotes from Aerie's role models and customers who represent diverse body types and sizes.



Figure 4.6. Aerie's activism event

Moreover, Aerie does not merely expose customers with its value and message regarding body positivity through its Instagram content, but also show the posts about a series of event, such as Aerie Real Summit in 2020 (see figure 4.6). As presented in the figure above, the event involved diverse speakers who have a different ethnic background including the disabled woman. This constitutes Aerie's efforts attempts to generate Instagram content that display how the brand initiates the body positivity-related activism practices. Therefore, these findings corroborate the features of authentic brand activism that ensuring the combination of prosocial marketing messages, brand practices, and purposes (Vredenburg et al., 2020). Additionally, the Instagram marketing message of Aerie is focused on offering fashion products that praise every bodily feature and providing the best avenue for every woman to confidently express their true selves through fashion. This is consistent with the literature that demonstrated the importance to serve the interest of every group in society in pursuing authentic social brand activism (Koch, 2020).

The data also revealed that Aerie uses storytelling for its Instagram content strategy to deliver prosocial brand messages and show brand practices to customers. The storytelling key messages were conveyed by Aerie's official Role Models who consisted of inspirational influencers and key opinion leaders who have diverse expertise and backgrounds in the fields of fashion, wellness, food, and literariness. Besides, Aerie's influencers included women of color with diverse body conditions. These results are consistent with the study by Mukherjee & Althuizen (2020) who stated that the storytelling of activism messages by brand representatives through their personal stories and opinions contributes to minimizing inauthentic brand activism.

Figure 4.7. below shows an example of the use of storytelling to convey Aerie's activism message. It can be noted that Aerie chose Iskra Lawrence as one of Aerie's influencers to talk about body positivity due to her popularity as a plus-size lingerie model. In figure 4.7. below, Aerie mentioned "changemaker", "inspires", and "empowers". It can be highlighted that these particular words implied the core activism messages and brand values that Aerie aims to communicate on Instagram. Besides, these words added emotional nuance to the messages. In addition, the model was smiling and wearing a bra set which exposed her unique and real body parts. This aims to communicate the confidence that every woman should have despite their bodily looks. Drawing on this, Aerie's Instagram content encompasses messages about body positivity and Aerie's brand purposes as well as values, respectively.



Figure 4.7. Storytelling of #AerieREAL

The data found that although Aerie strives to challenge the ideal woman's body and beauty in fashion through the involvement of disabled women, plus-size models, and women of color, the divergence of the activism messages was neither considered as extreme nor threatening to specific groups. These can be seen from the choices of the words, sentences, and phrases as shown in the former figures, such as "changemaker", "beautiful no matter what", and "you are so much more than a body" (Aerie, n.d.) employed by Aerie to convey the divergence of messages regarding woman's ideal body. These findings are in agreement with the concept of message divergence which suggested that the non-extreme and non-harmful messages should be established in ensuring the authenticity of brand activism (Vredenburg et al., 2020). The degree of message divergence is important because the contested social norms are considered sensitive and can be threatening to some groups in society (McGraw & Warren, 2010).

Moreover, the data indicated that Aerie employed both informational and emotional social media message appeals as conceptualized by Kusumasondjaja (2018). The informational appeal, such as Aerie's body positivity values and efforts to provide inspiring knowledge to customers through the workshops, talk shows, and online Instagram Live talks appeared in the data. The emotional appeal, such as personal stories or journeys of customers and Aerie's Role Models and motivational words and sentences were also emerged throughout the data.

Finally, concerning brand identity, this pattern constitutes the *relationship* facet of brand identity. The data found that the reposted pictures from Aerie's customers and the hashtags that

enhance customers to participate in Aerie's body positivity social media activities were the strategies to engage customers in a meaningful relationship with the brand through Instagram. This is in accord with the *relationship* facet that enables brands to establish an enduring relationship with customers (Kapferer, 2012; Ross & Harradine, 2011). The phrases, namely "share your unretouched photos with #AeriREAL" and "share with #MyAerie for the chance to be featured" (Aerie, n.d.) as illustrated in the previous figures above were parts of Aerie's way to have two-way communications with customers. This two-way communication between the brands and customers is prominent in social media to enhance the attachment of customers to the brand (Alalwan et al., 2017). Building on these analyses and discussions, Aerie portrays the authenticity of body positivity movement on Instagram through the pictures, captions, events, and online activities that contained messages and Aerie's values about the embracement of a unique and diverse woman's body.

#### 4.3. Women's body empowerment

The third pattern discovered throughout the data was 'women's body empowerment', this pattern entails the way Aerie empowers women by addressing the prominence of accepting the body, building positive affirmation toward the body, and exposing the body parts. The empowerment message shown in the data indicated that women should be proud with own body despite the various unique physical features. The sub-themes included in this pattern were collective empowerment, individual empowerment, body skin exposure, positive affirmation toward oneself, physical flaws, body acceptance, and achievement in life.

The data showed that the exposures of bare skin and body parts were mainly visible in Aerie's Instagram posts. These exposures emphasized the appreciation of unique bodily features that include imperfections. Figure 4.8. below presents an example of body appreciation that encourages women to always trust their bodies despite the alteration of body shapes or forms. The sentence "You have changed, and your body has done exactly what it is supposed to do." (Aerie, n.d.) implied that the function of the body plays a significant role in one's life. Moreover, the following phrases: "Changed with you. Changed for you." and "What a gift. Let's be grateful for that, too." (Aerie, n.d.) entailed messages about being grateful and respectful to own body in terms of its capability to function properly. This means that Aerie attempts to enhance an appreciative view of the body to customers. These findings corroborate the *body appreciation* element of body positivity by Cohen et al. (2019) who demonstrated the importance to show gratitude for body functionality and features. This form of body admiration allows people, including disabled people to value the body in a positive way (Williamson & Karazsia, 2018; Wood-Barcalow et al., 2010).





Figure 4.8. Body functionality appreciation

As illustrated in figure 4.8., the skin exposures were visible, especially the bare midriff, lower belly areas, and a slight skin exposure of the upper thighs. In the picture, her hands were put on each side of her waist to emphasize the loose and saggy skin on her belly. It can be noted that this closed-up picture of her changed body part represents a sense of pride and respect for her body regardless of how it looks. This is in accord with the concept of self-appreciation of the body which indicated that the woman's ability to confidently displaying herself, including her body flaws to the public is one of the forms of loving her own body unconditionally (Gill & Elias, 2014). Drawing on these findings, it can be highlighted that body appreciation is a form of women's body empowerment because, despite the shapes or looks of bodily features, the function of the body plays a fundamental role, thus, women should be proud of it and feel empowered.

This pattern implied that women's body empowerment can be achieved through accepting and loving the body, especially the body flaws. The data found that facial flaws (e.g., acne, blemished skin, and textured skin) and bodily flaws (e.g., stomach rolls, stretch marks, and scars) frequently appeared on Aerie's Instagram posts. These results implied that Aerie wants to normalize women's realistic physical appearances through self-love and acceptance. In line with Cohen et al. (2019), Tiggeman et al. (2020), and Lazuka et al. (2020), the concept of *acceptance of body and self-love* is about encouraging people to love, embrace, and acknowledge body imperfections. Furthermore, it can also be noted from the data that by displaying body flaws to promote women's clothing products, Aerie wants to cultivate women to feel good about their

unique and real physical looks, hence, instead of hiding their body imperfections, they are embracing it.

Figure 4.9. below provides examples of the physical flaws displayed by Aerie on Instagram. The first picture depicts textured facial skin, the second one shows stomach rolls, and the third photo presents belly stretch marks. These results indicated that even the imperfect features of body parts are worthy and appealing. It can thus be argued that the exposure of body flaws through visual representations is one of Aerie's strategies to utilize Instagram as a tool to empower women through the concept of body and fashion. In this case, the resistance toward the ideal women's body is represented by Aerie through the celebration of a woman's distinct unique appearances, including the flaws.



Figure 4.9. Accepting body and facial flaws

Based on the analysis of the entire dataset, to empower women through the notion of body, the captions and pictures comprised positive self-affirmation. The data showed that the positive affirmation that encourages women to feel good, feel beautiful, feel confident, feel loved were mainly incorporated by Aerie. The following phrases and sentences from the data: "Find something beautiful in you every single day", "...beautiful no matter what.", "...wear what feels good." (Aerie, n.d.) were the examples of positive affirmations employed by Aerie in the captions. The affirmation itself was also visually supported by the pictures of women with diverse physical looks wearing bikini, swimsuits, and bralette, showing their body flaws, and smiling.

Aside from positive self-affirmation, the messages to accept one's body unconditionally were captured in the captions of Aerie's Instagram through the examples of the following wordings: "Stop comparing yourself to others!" and "Thank you body." (Aerie, n.d.). These implied the expressions to focused on valuing and loving own's body. The captions also reinforced women's awareness on realizing that every type, size, and condition of the body is special in its own way. The unconditional acceptance and love toward own's body is paramount in maintaining body positivity (Wood-Barcalow et al., 2010). The messages about body appreciation as well as body acceptance as

illustrated in figures 4.8. and 4.9. above are also in agreement with a research conducted by Sastre (2014) who suggested that body positivity is gained through a self-journey that required a positive relationship between a self and the body. In this view, the appreciation of body functionality and the acceptance of physical flaws are parts of Aerie's way to empower women through a positive self-love journey.

The data indicated that Aerie employed the combination of individual and collective empowerments to represent its brand identity on Instagram. The former includes self-love as described in the prior paragraph. Furthermore, individual empowerment was presented in Aerie's Instagram through the examples of these captions "Do I have the perfect body? Nope. Do I love my body? Yep. Am I going to wear a bikini loud and proud? Duh." and "Wear what feels good." (Aerie, n.d.). These captions posited the idea of pursuing the liberation to feel beautiful and good by wearing whatever we want and confidently expressing it to the public. This idea attempts to make women to be self-empowered by loving themselves no matter the looks of their bodies.

In figure 4.10. below, the women were showcasing their realistic bodies which comprised of belly fat, cellulite, and blemished facial skin. In addition, the pictures were accompanied with the following captions: "F that mentality. Here's to loving my body because it IS good. Not just for how it looks." and "Create your own sunshine" (Aerie, n.d.). The captions and photos in figure 4.10. signify that each woman is allowed and deserved to feel beauty, obtain a good-looking body, and find her own ways to be attractive regardless of the shapes, sizes, and conditions of the body. These visual and textual forms of personal empowerment messages are in accord with the postfeminist view in the *mainstream body positivity* frame which emphasizes self-love and the idea that beauty and a perfect body are attainable for every single individual (Darwin & Miller, 2020; Johnston & Taylor, 2008). Aerie's brand identity which reflected on the Instagram posts is therefore associated with postfeminism view, in which according to Caldeira and De Ridder (2017), this viewpoint entails the agency of every woman to feel empowered in pursuing beauty. On this ground, Aerie frames body positivity movement through *mainstream body positivity* that constitutes individual empowerment to achieve beauty and an appealing body.

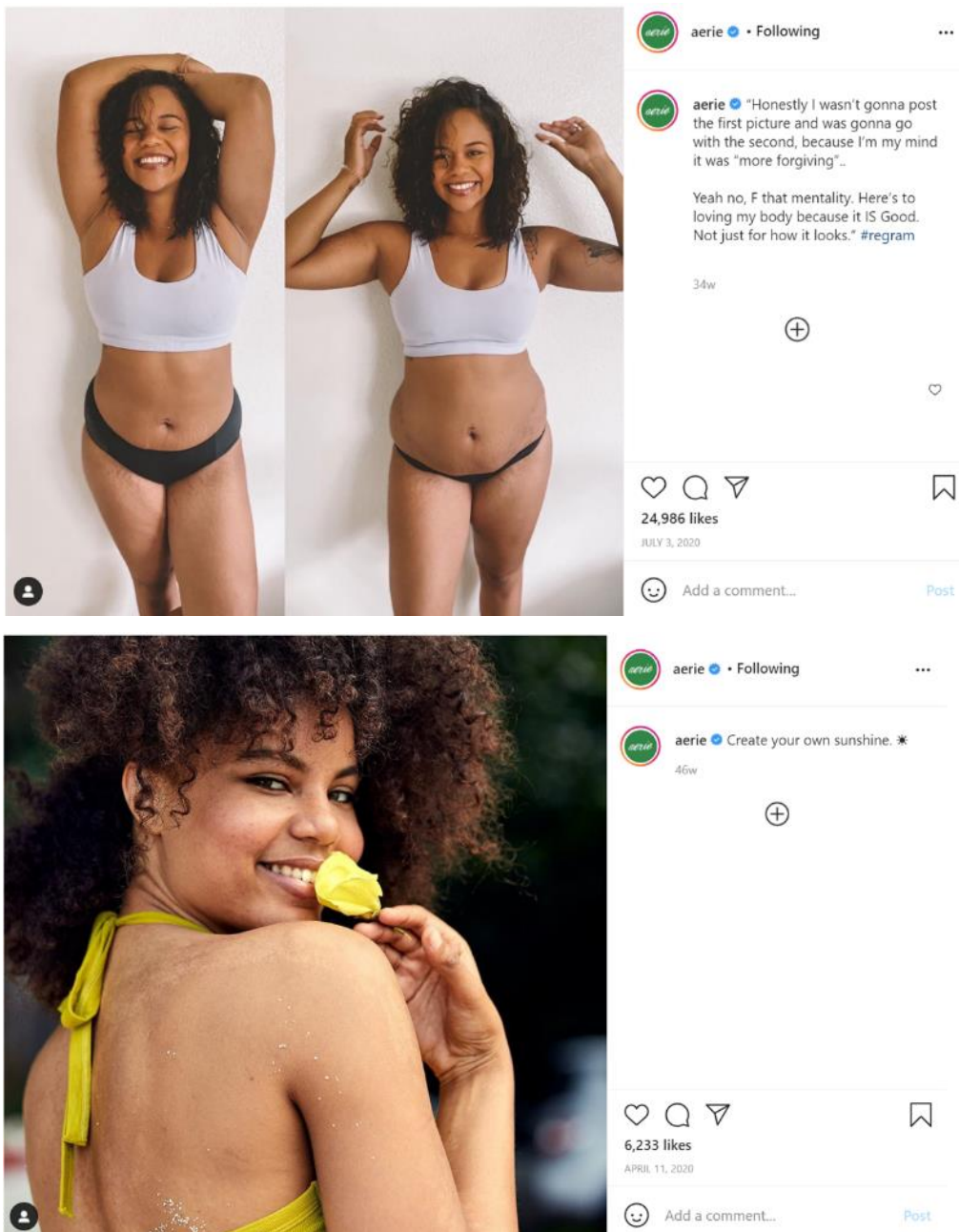


Figure 4.10. Individual empowerment

Concerning collective empowerment, the data revealed that Aerie expressed its brand value that attempts to encourage women to support each other in fighting the stigmatization of the body that does not belong to the standard constructed by society. Based on the data, the captions, such as “...and used it to empower others to speak up, too.”, “We are here for you”, and “Aerie’s fam REALness” (Aerie, n.d.) indicated a sense of group support. The term “Aerie’s fam” was frequently mentioned to build a sense of togetherness. As illustrated in figure 4.11. below, the women were gathered to celebrate one of Aerie’s events. It is apparent from this post that the group consisted of diverse ethnicity, skin colors, body sizes, types, and conditions as there was a disabled woman in the wheelchair. The accompanied caption “ When strong women come

together, powerful things happen.” (Aerie, n.d.) also added a sense of group support, connection, and empowerment. This collective approach to convey the idea of body positivity assists to build women’s body empowerment and increase a sense of social connection with each other (Afful & Ricciardelli, 2015).



Figure 4.11. Women empower each other

Building on the analysis, it can be noted that Aerie is not merely very supportive of women with diverse body types and cultural backgrounds, but also the underrepresented groups, especially disabled women. This confirms the *radical body positivity* frame of the body positivity movement which entails the support toward marginalized groups, such as disabled women and non-white ethnicities to fight the systemic oppression concerning a woman’s body (Darwin & Miller, 2020). It can thus be pointed out that aside from the *mainstream body positivity* approach, the *radical body positivity* view was applied by Aerie to frame body positivity movement on Instagram.

Finally, this pattern serves as Aerie’s *culture* and *personality* brand identity facets. The data found that Aerie holds the value that empowers women through the notion of body positivity. For instance, Aerie communicates the messages that attempt to encourage women to respect and love their bodies despite the conditions through the following examples of captions: “We all have different bodies and that’s okay!” and “All the softness, rolls, stretch marks, and cellulite are a part of your beautiful self!” (Aerie, n.d.). The messages in the captions implied that Aerie embraces the realness of woman’s body and view it as a beautiful thing that women should be proud of.

In this view, the messages also captured Aerie’s ideology that stands for women’s body empowerment through the embracement of women’s various physical appearances and conditions. This ideology constitutes the importance to confidently express oneself through fashion, hence,

women with various physical conditions can proudly wear Aerie's products (e.g., swimwear, bikini, bralette, and sportswear) and feel beautiful as well as empowered. In accordance with Kapferer (2012), *culture* facet of brand identity contains the values and main ideology that drives the brand mission and character. In this view, the ideology of women's body empowerment drives Aerie's mission and purpose. In addition, *personality* defines the main character reflected from brand values (Ross & Harradine, 2011). On this account, woman's body empowerment represents the *personality* facet of Aerie, because the embracement of diverse women's bodies is what Aerie valued in driving its brand.

#### 4.4. Fashion inclusivity for every woman

This pattern entails various representations of women shown in Aerie's Instagram posts. In this pattern, it was observed that Aerie aims to show its identity through the celebration of woman's body inclusivity in the fashion industry. Besides, this pattern addresses the idea that beauty is for every woman and beauty comes in many different fashion styles. The sub-themes discovered from the data were every woman is beautiful, thin/fit portrayals, multiple ethnicities, different clothing style, women with disability and illness, and various body sizes.

The data revealed the presence of women with distinct ethnic backgrounds, namely Black/African, Asian, White, Middle Eastern, and Hispanic. Moreover, different body sizes, such as thin, fat or plus size, curvy, and medium appeared throughout the dataset. The depictions of the marginalized body were also shown, notably the disabled women (e.g., blindness and woman with a leg supporter), a woman with hijab, and women with special health and physical conditions (e.g., vitiligo skin condition and cancer survivor). In terms of the fashion styles, the data found that Aerie does not solely display revealing clothes, such as bikini, swimsuit, and bra, but also modest clothes, such as long sleeves tops, T-shirts, and long legging or pants. These portrayals are illustrated in figure 4.12. below.

It can be seen that there is a picture of a woman with vitiligo skin condition wearing a bikini set, a picture of a woman with a leg supporter, a woman with a hijab, and women with different skin colors, ethnicities, and fashion styles. These results indicated that the meaning of a beautiful body in fashion conveyed by Aerie is broad as it comes in various forms. Building on these findings, the notion of fashion inclusivity adopted by Aerie involves respect and tolerance for every single type of woman's body and condition. The meaning of beauty and an attractive body is therefore extensive and does not always have to correspond to the societal standard of body.

These findings reflected the *broad conceptualization of beauty* element of body positivity by Cohen et al. (2019), which demonstrated the various depictions of bodily appearances that facilitate people to build positive conceptions and perceptions of a variety of attractive bodily looks. Thus, the visibility of body inclusivity and diversity in media is one of the paramount steps of

addressing body positivity (Diedrichs & Lee, 2011). In line with the literature, Aerie utilizes Instagram to communicate its brand identity by showing that woman's beauty, sexiness, and attractiveness have no limits and exceptions.



Figure 4.12. The inclusivity of woman's portrayals

Aside from the distinct visual representations of beautiful bodies, the data also found that Aerie conveys the messages about body inclusivity through the captions that attempt to motivate and inspire women to feel appreciated. One of the examples of the caption is "Also a friendly reminder that every body is a bikini body." (Aerie, n.d.). It is apparent from the caption that Aerie emphasizes its value on the inclusion of woman's bodies in fashion. Drawing on these results, Aerie tries to expose customers with messages that motivate them to stay active and do something that brings positive outcomes to their bodies regardless of their physical conditions. Additionally, since *information filtering* cultivate positive experience and emotion of customer concerning body-related messages (Cohen et al., 2019), the findings are consistent with this element because the content generated in Aerie's Instagram facilitate women to be exposed to the information that enhances positive view and evaluation toward the concept of woman's body.

This pattern defines the *physique* and *culture* facets of brand identity. As seen in previous figure 4.12. above, the *physique* facet is reflected through the various products offered by Aerie on Instagram, ranging from modest clothes (e.g., long sleeve shirt, cardigan outer, and long legging) to revealing clothes (e.g., bikini and sleeveless tops). The data also showed that there is an extensive

size range of woman's lingerie, swimwear, activewear, and other apparel products offered by Aerie. This is also a form of Aerie's *physique* facet that the brand aims to address in representing its brand identity. This facet refers to the concrete aspect that people usually associated the brand with (Kapferer, 2012; Ross & Harradine, 2011), therefore, it can be highlighted that Aerie's *physique* lies on the inclusive woman's clothing that caters to every size and type of body.

Finally, this pattern constitutes the *culture* facet. Building on the various portrayals (e.g., the woman of color, women of every size, a woman with hijab, and disabled women) of woman's bodies to promote woman's apparel products, it can be noted that Aerie's ideology lies in the inclusion of woman's body. The data also showed that through inclusiveness, Aerie represents its unique brand identity that contained a meaningful value that defines the brand. This pattern also shows Aerie's stance in society, which is to support the underrepresented bodies by allowing women who belong in marginalized groups to confidently express themselves and feel beautiful by wearing Aerie products. In accordance with Kapferer (2012) regarding the *culture* facet that shows the brand's ideology, Aerie stresses its core vision and ideology about the inclusion of woman's bodies. It can thus be pointed out that Aerie represents its brand identity through the notion of fashion inclusivity on Instagram.

#### 4.5. *Caring toward own body*

The final theme identified from the data was 'caring toward own body', in which this theme entails motivational messages that encourage and inspire women to do self-care practices and habits that could improve physical and mental health, respectively. Throughout the data, the importance of taking good care of one's body was shown by Aerie as a form of self-love in the body positivity movement. The following sub-themes: treating yourself, promoting wellness/healthy lifestyle, self-care, and active pose were discovered from the analysis of data.

The data reported that the posts about the promotion of a healthy lifestyle and well-balanced life frequently appeared in Aerie's Instagram posts. The pictures of women wearing a sports bra and doing a yoga pose, the captions about healthy eating and living a well-balanced life, women doing self-pampered activities, women treating themselves with good food, and Aerie's online events about self-care (e.g., Instagram Live meditation, kickboxing, and yoga, and cooking events) were the examples found in the data. In addition, the data indicated that Aerie displayed pictures of disabled women being active, notably by doing sports. As presented in figure 4.13. below, the women were doing yoga and playing basketball. These posts implied the importance to take care of own's body by keep being active and healthy regardless of the physical conditions.





Figure 4.13. Representations of disabled women being active

Based on the data, the messages about body care and mental health were conveyed through the examples of the following captions: “Does that mean you should stop working out and just give up? HECK NO! Keep working out and eating healthy. But do it for YOUR body. Do it for YOUR health. As long as you’re happy and healthy, that’s what matters!”, “... so, bake the cookies, get cozy in sweats, go for the workout..whatever makes you feel your best.” (Aerie, n.d.). These captions were accompanied by the pictures of a disabled woman dressed in Aerie’s sportswear doing a yoga pose, and a woman at home, dressed in a cozy oversized Aerie’s T-shirt. These findings implied message about the importance to treat the bodies by having a well-balanced life and understand that each woman deserved to do anything that makes her body and mind healthy. The captions also attempt to motivate women to not giving up on loving their bodies through what they consume and do.

Figure 4.14. below illustrated how Aerie inspires women to take care of their bodies as well as their mental health as a form of body appreciation. As seen in figure 4.14. the words, phrases, and sentences, namely “Balance in what I eat”, “...helped me love & accept myself for who I am.”, “...improve my mental wellness”, “meditation”, and “healthy eating” (Aerie, n.d.). contained the messages that valuing the body and the self through positive activities. The first picture in figure 4.14. above displayed a woman wearing a sports bra and leggings with the exposure of stomach rolls. A closer inspection of the first photo showed that the woman was inside the gym, which indicated that she was doing a workout. The second picture portrayed a woman holding a cup of tea which implied hydration and calm. Building on these results, it can be noted that Aerie wants to remind women that appreciating and loving the body can be done by investing in a healthy lifestyle. Besides, being healthy does not always mean having a flawless body or a thin body. Instead, regardless of the body types and physical conditions, women should engage in positive activities that allow them to maintain the function of the body and mental wellbeing. Thus, building a positive body image.

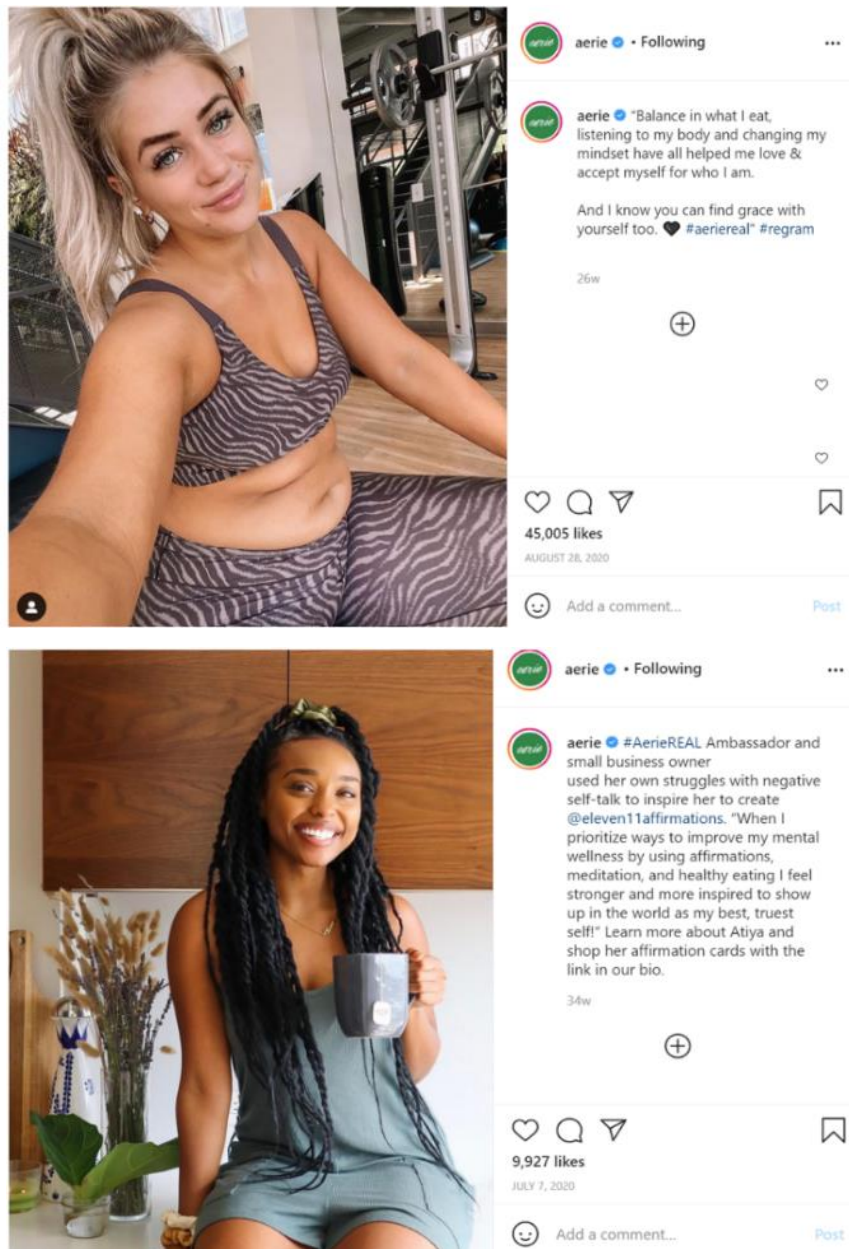


Figure 4.14. Healthy life balance

These findings confirmed the *body care* element of body positivity by Cohen et al. (2019) which entails behaviors that promote a healthy body and life. From this view, Aerie’s brand identity is not solely represented through the embracement of women’s diverse physical looks, but also on the maintenance of a healthy body in pursuing a better and happier life. In particular, the data found that taking good care of the body should be balanced by treating self with good food or activities and doing health exercises and meditation. For instance, the posts about Aerie’s online Instagram Live workout and cooking events represent the idea of body care of body positivity.

The examples of captions about the body care-related events shown in Aerie’s Instagram posts were as follow: “Manuella will be hosting a cooking demo making homemade poptarts (recipe

in bio!)...”, “Join her at 3PM EDT as she cooks vegan cinnamon rolls (Aerie, n.d.). Check out our IG Story for the ingredients & turn on your notifications for IG Live...”, “Get your sweat on with #AerieREAL Role Model as she takes over our IG Live tomorrow...”, and “Kickboxer, Stuntwoman, & Trainer (anonymized personal Instagram account) is going LIVE on our Instagram TODAY at 7pm EDT for a core & kickboxing class.” (Aerie, n.d.). These caption contained messages to motivate and help women to stay active (e.g., doing kickboxing and other physical workouts) but also give them ideas to treat themselves (e.g., making and eating cinnamon rolls). It can be highlighted that what Aerie aims to convey is all about a well-balanced life in order to have a good relationship with own’s body. These results reflect Aerie’s *relationship* brand identity facet because it demonstrates the way Aerie attempts to build and maintain relationship with customers through Instagram online events concerning body care. Through online Instagram activities, namely sports and cooking, Aerie not merely wants to show its brand identity about body care but also ask customers to be involved in body care activities in creating positive relationships with them.

This theme also constitutes the *personality* brand identity facet of Aerie because the brand values a self-care behavior that contributes to accepting and appreciating the body. Hence, one of the characters that reflect Aerie’s brand is related to caring toward own body. Consistent with Kapferer (2012) and Ross and Harradine (2011), *personality* includes specific values and traits of a brand that enhance customers’ emotions and psychological-related aspects. On this account, Aerie’s body care value communicates the prominence to build positive feelings toward oneself, specifically to cope with body insecurities. Figure 4.15. below showed how Aerie’s *personality* element is presented through the pictures of women eating cookies, putting on a face mask as a form of self-pampering activity, and doing a kickboxing pose.

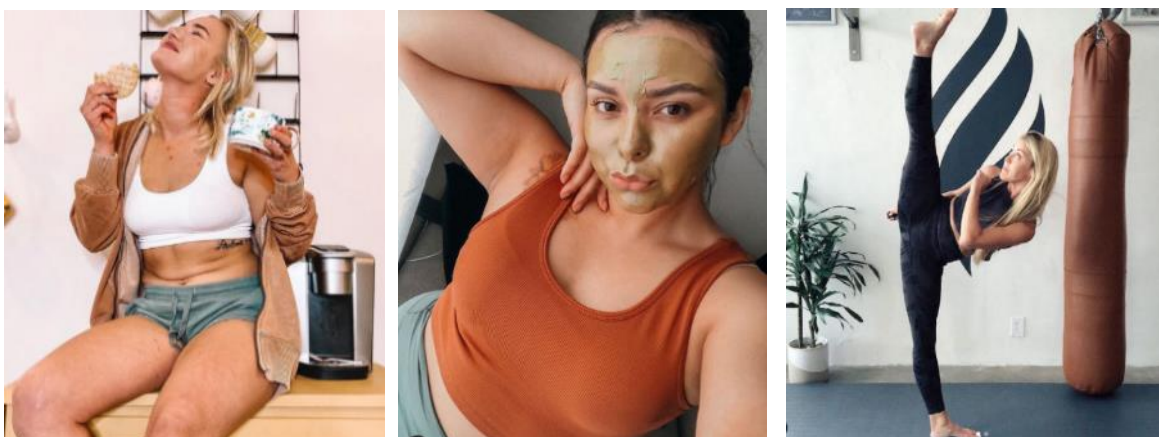


Figure 4.15. Treating self, pampering self, and active pose

It can be pointed out that the visual representations of body care could inspire women to realize that loving their bodies means doing the things that make them feel good, both feeling good psychologically and bodily. Besides, the activities are depicted in figure 4.15. represented Aerie’s

attempt to display the body care practices in generating women's positive moods. Drawing on these findings, respecting, loving, and accepting the body by taking good care of it are parts of Aerie's unique brand associations that the brand strives to represent on Instagram.

#### *4.6. Summary*

To sum up, the entire five main themes give insights into the strategies employed by Aerie to represent its brand identity on Instagram through body positivity. In terms of the 'beauty on the inside' theme, there was the presence of values and messages about woman's positive personality traits in Aerie's Instagram posts, namely kindness, mindfulness, optimism, bravery, and confidence. Through the notion of inner beauty, Aerie addresses that the concept of beauty is not limited to bodily appearances, but also about what lies inside a woman's heart, attitude, and mind.

The second theme is about the way Aerie facilitates customers to be aware of and involved in body positivity movement in the fashion context. Aerie showed its body positivity brand value and activism through the Instagram content, particularly #AerieREAL and #MyAerie, in which Aerie's influencers and customers share their experiences with Aerie products and show unretouched pictures of themselves. These hashtags provided opportunities for customers to be reposted and featured in Aerie's official Instagram account.

Concerning the third theme, Aerie displayed its value of women's body empowerment. This pattern indicates that Aerie strives to empower women through individual and collective approaches. The former focused the self-love and the idea that every individual can obtain beauty and attractive bodily looks. The latter emphasizes the idea of women supporting each other in celebrating their unique bodily features.

In the fourth theme, the value of inclusivity in fashion was communicated by Aerie. The inclusion of disabled women, women of color, women with different body sizes as well as ethnicities, and women with illness were depicted on Aerie's Instagram. These inclusive depictions convey the meaning of tolerance and respect for every type of woman's body. Hence, Aerie attempts to broaden the concept of a beautiful body as beauty comes in many different forms.

The last theme contained Aerie's value of loving and appreciating the body through self-care activities that aim to encourage women to have a healthy and balanced life. The activities presented in Aerie's posts, such as meditation, yoga, healthy eating, online cooking events, online workout events, kickboxing, and hydration were the forms of love and respect toward own's body. Through body care, Aerie also strives to show customers that loving the body should be about positively treating the body.

## 5. Conclusion

The present study was designed to examine the way Aerie represents its brand identity through body positivity on Instagram. A total of 153 posts from Aerie's official Instagram account were collected and analyzed. The thematic analysis has resulted in five main themes that contribute to reaching the objective of this research. The findings revealed that the elements of body positivity were all included and presented in brand identity facets of Aerie. Besides, the authenticity of Aerie's brand activism is established. The overall theoretical backgrounds were demonstrated to be relevant to answer the research question and sub-questions.

There are two sub-questions formulated in this study that assist to provide insights on answering the main research question. The first sub-question is formulated as follows: "How does Aerie portray the authenticity of body positive movement?". Building on the analysis of findings, the body positive movement was portrayed through Aerie's values, messages, and brand activism practices presented in the pictures, captions, and events (both online and offline) that embrace the unique features of woman's bodies and celebrate the diverse portrayals of woman's physical looks.

In particular, Aerie's strategic Instagram content, notably #AerieREAL, #MyAerie, and body positivity storytelling by Aerie's influencers have not only contained messages about the importance to love own body unconditionally, but also showed how Aerie facilitates customers to appreciate their bodies through the real activities initiated by the brand. These results are all in accord with the authentic brand activism proposed by Vredenburg et al. (2020) that emphasizes the alignment of brand values, purposes, and actions in achieving authentic brand activism. As found in the data, Aerie offers an opportunity for customers to share their body positivity experiences by using hashtags. It can be noted that this is one of Aerie's strategies to show its values and practices about body positivity to customers. On this account, the power of Instagram is paramount to convey the authentic social brand activism conducted by Aerie.

Concerning the second sub-question: "How does Aerie frame body positivity movement?", the brand employs *mainstream body positivity* and *radical body positivity* frames of body positivity movement. As previously described in the theoretical framework, the *mainstream body positivity* frame focused on self-love and the liberation to obtain beauty for every individual, and this frame is influenced by the postfeminist view (Darwin & Miller, 2020; Johnston & Taylor, 2008). Aerie's Instagram posts contained individual empowerment messages that attempt to encourage women to be self-empowered by loving their bodies and feeling proud of it. Furthermore, the posts stressed that each woman is deserved and allowed to feel beautiful. The pictures of women with saggy belly skin, blemished facial skin, and other unique real bodily features were also shown.

Regarding *radical body positivity*, it is mentioned in chapter 2 that this frame addresses the

need to support and include marginalized groups in the movement, such as disabled and aging women groups (Darwin & Miller, 2020). Aside from individual empowerment, the appearance of collective empowerment was also displayed on Aerie's Instagram through the diverse portrayals of women including disabled women, a woman with hijab, and women with illness. The brand also highlights a sense of togetherness between women who have various body types, sizes, and ethnic backgrounds. The term *Aerie's fam* which presented on the posts is also adding a collective meaning that attempts to encourage women to empower each other in the context of body and fashion. Taken together, the body positivity movement is framed by Aerie through *mainstream* and *radical* body positivity approaches, which emphasized individual and collective empowerment, respectively.

The aforementioned answers to the sub-questions assisted to answer the following main research question: "How does Aerie represent its brand identity through body positivity on Instagram?". Aerie represents its brand identity through body positivity on Instagram by embracing woman's unique bodily features, cultivating appreciation toward own body, enhancing a positive mindset, and celebrating the diversity as well as inclusivity of women's bodies. All of these aspects are presented in the alignment of Aerie's messages, values, and brand actions on Instagram and framed with the *mainstream* and *radical* body positivity views. Besides, the aforementioned aspects are included in the six brand identity facets of Aerie (see figure 5.1.).

Since brand identity is prominent to help a brand remains competitive and relevant in the evolving business markets (Kapferer, 2012; Nandan, 2005; Roy & Banerjee, 2014), Aerie strives to be stand out by not only delivering the meaning of body positivity but also providing opportunities for women to feel beautiful and empowered through brand activism. As a brand that offers woman's lingerie, activewear, swimwear, and apparel products, Aerie is rather bold and unique compared to other similar brands, such as Victoria's Secret, Hunkemöller, and Intimissimi, because Aerie has been displaying unretouched photos to promote the products on Instagram and using models who have distinct appearances. While other brands remain to portray body perfections, Aerie wants to empower women through the celebration of the real body that includes imperfections. This reflects Aerie's brand identity that makes the brand exceptional compared to other woman fashion brands as the brand highlights the importance of inner and outer beauty. This unique brand association is what makes the brand remains competitive in the market although Aerie is considered as a new brand because as stated by Ghodeswar (2008) and Knox and Bickerton (2003), differentiation brings a competitive value to the brand.

As presented in figure 5.1. below, the *physique* brand identity facet of Aerie is represented through the promotion of Aerie's products that ranging from bra, bikini set, activewear, and casual apparel that cater to every type and size of woman's body. The *relationship* facet is communicated through Aerie's effort in initiating the #AerieREAL and #MyAerie hashtags that ask customers to

share their experiences with Aerie's products. The *reflection* facet is presented through Aerie's values, messages, and brand practices about the importance of inner beauty. Regarding *personality*, this facet is conveyed through Instagram pictures and captions that entail respect and care toward the body.

The *culture* facet is presented through Aerie's ideology that centered on the woman's body inclusivity, empowerment, and diversity. Lastly, the *self-image* facet is expressed through the Instagram content that attempts to enhance a positive mindset to make women feel worthy about themselves and feel proud with their body no matter the way it looks. To sum up, it can be pointed out that the entire body positivity elements proposed by Cohen et al. (2019) that comprised of *body appreciation, acceptance of body and self-love, a broad conceptualization of beauty, body care, positive inner characteristics, and information filtering* were included in the brand identity facets of Aerie.

In conclusion, the unique brand association or brand identity that Aerie strives to convey is about beauty for everyone, which means that every woman deserves to feel beautiful and be appreciated despite their looks. This unique association is shown through the consistency of Aerie's values, mission, purposes, and actions regarding the celebration and embracement of all woman's body types.

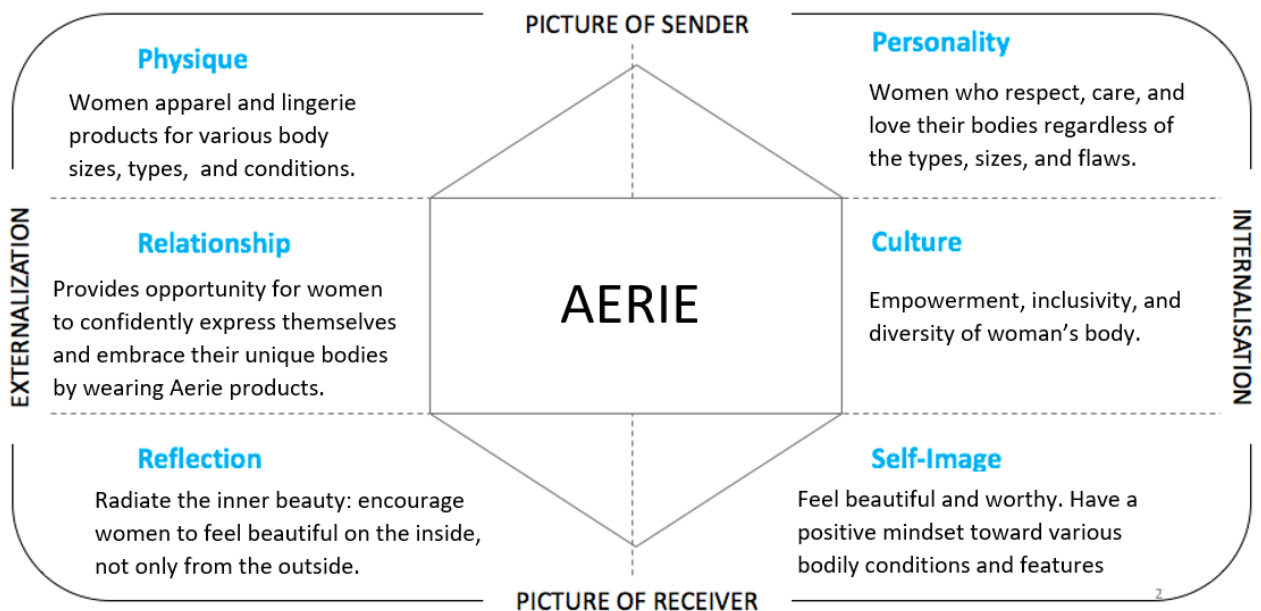


Figure 5.1. Kapferer's brand identity prism of Aerie. Adapted from *jocelyneleannec*. <https://jocelyneleannec.com/lumo-plays-brand-guidelines>. Copyright (n.d.) by Jocelyne Le Leannec.

### *5.1. Theoretical and practical implications*

Concerning theoretical implications, the findings of this research contribute to the body positivity, brand activism, social media content, and strategic brand identity areas of study by showing the application of the body positivity elements to the brand identity strategy on Instagram, in the context of the fashion business. The results of this study extend the knowledge of Kapferer's brand identity prism because this model can be implemented to promote and elevate social brand activism on Instagram by keeping in mind the consistency of the entire facets as shown by Aerie (see figure 5.1.). The results support the prominence to include informational and emotional message appeals in social media (Kusumasondjaja, 2018) in enhancing the differentiation of a brand (Muhonen et al., 2017). Moreover, the findings regarding the alignment of Aerie's values, mission, and practices displayed on Instagram validate the significance of authentic brand activism. Overall, this research offers a different perspective to maximize brand identity strategy on Instagram by using the discourse of body positivity. The subsequent research can therefore explore the effect of the body positivity activism of a fashion brand on customers. This is important to acknowledge the effectiveness of brand identity strategy from customers' perspectives.

The findings also have practical implications especially for brands in the fashion and beauty industries that might consider adopting body positivity value for their brand identities. The application of body positivity elements to Aerie's brand identity strategy on Instagram could guide fashion brands to effectively show their stance on the diversity and inclusivity of woman's bodies through social brand activism. Although the results demonstrated coherent body positivity elements presented in Aerie's brand identity facets, the implication that should be taken into account by the brands is the authenticity of the Instagram content that concentrates on body positivity. This is important to note because such content could contain sensitive concerns to people concerning the conceptualization of a woman's body and beauty. Hence, fashion brands, including Aerie should maintain the authenticity of their brand activism to avoid backlash. Finally, the implication of the results engages fashion brands and society into a discussion of the refinement of woman's standardized bodies and beauty that reflect inclusivity and diversity.

Additionally, this research has social implications concerning the refinement of woman's beauty and body standard that is more inclusive to every physical condition. Furthermore, the findings also could have an impact on understanding the importance to engage underrepresented bodies in the fashion industry and social media. Hence, attractive appearances do not merely belong to flawless women, but also every woman regardless of their unique looks.



## *5.2. Limitations and future research*

Since the data of this research was solely obtained from Aerie Instagram, the analysis and discussion of the data are subject to the researcher's interpretations. This study is limited by a lack of information and insights from the perspectives of Aerie's customers and brand representatives. The validity and reliability of the results in this study are therefore cannot be entirely guaranteed due to the researcher bias that might have happened during the data analysis process. To improve the validity and reliability of the findings, the theoretical transparency, detailed steps of thematic analysis as proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), extensive explanations of the operationalization of sensitizing concepts, and exhaustive data treatment were described and performed.

Future research might explore the extent to which Aerie's body positivity activism on Instagram influences customer purchasing behavior toward Aerie's products. The perspective of Aerie's customers is an intriguing one that could be usefully examined in further research. A greater focus on customers' viewpoints would produce interesting findings that account more for brand image. Given this paper addressed brand identity which focused on the brand's perspective (Kapferer, 2012), future research about brand image could complement the current study. On the whole, despite of its limitations, this research offers valuable insights into the brand identity strategy of fashion brands using the discourse of body positivity.

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**Appendices**  
**Appendix A.**

Initial coding tree

Theme name	Categories/Sub-themes	Open codes
<b>Inner beauty and characteristics</b>	Encouraging mindfulness	Aerie's online IG meditation event
		message about meditation
		having a peaceful mind
	Expression of happiness	smiling with teeth
		bright-colored background
		slightly smiling with mouths closed
	Being courageous	message about overcoming anxiety
		message about taking risk
		disrupting status quo
	Good personality	message about optimism
		not being judgmental
		be kind
<b>Loving and embracing the body</b>	Body skin exposure	belly fat
		bare thighs
		bare arms

	Positive affirmation toward oneself	feeling good
		feeling loved
		feeling confident
	Facial skin flaws	blemished skin on the face
		freckles on the face
		acne
	Body acceptance	stop comparing ourselves
		thanking own body
		being grateful
	Bodily flaws	stretch marks
		stomach rolls
		surgery scars
<b>Invitation to participate in Aerie's campaign</b>	Body positivity campaign	reposted picture
		unretouched picture
		Aerie "REAL" messages
	Instagram hashtags	#AerieREAL campaign
		#AerieREALSummit
		#MyAerie
	Bringing positive impact	being a changemaker
		message to donate

		Aerie's environmentally-friendly products
<b>Women's body empowerment</b>	Collective empowerment	Aerie's role models
		helping others
		Aerie's community
	Individual empowerment	message about self-navigating
		your body means your own rules
		create your own happiness
	Achievement in life	motivation to achieve goals
		being the best
		reaching dreams
<b>Celebrating women's body diversity in fashion</b>	Every woman is beautiful	every body is a bikini body
		imperfect but pretty
		realizing we all have different bodies
	Thin/fit portrayals	flat stomach
		toned abs
		arm muscles
	Multiple ethnicity	Black/African ethnicity
		White ethnicity
		Asian ethnicity
	Revealing clothes	bikini

		swimsuit
		bralette
	Modest clothes	T-shirt
		hijab attribute
		long sleeve top
	Various body sizes	medium body size
		plus size/fat body
		curvy body
<b>Representation of marginalized bodies</b>	Disability	wheelchair
		leg supporter equipment
		guide dogs for a blind
	Illness	woman with illness
		vitiligo skin condition
		illness survivor
	Disabled women being active	disabled women doing workouts/exercises
		the achievements of disabled women
		disabled woman as a motivational speaker
	Treating ourselves	treat yourself
		holding a cookie
		pampering day

<b>Body care encouragement</b>	Promoting wellness/healthy lifestyle	eat healthy
		Aerie's kickboxing online event
		doing yoga
	Self-care	self-care investment
		prioritizing mental health
		live a balance life
	Active pose	kickboxing hand pose
		jumping pose
		standing yoga pose

**Appendix B.**

The refinement of coding tree

Theme name	Categories/Sub-themes	Open codes
<b>Inner beauty and characteristics</b>	Encouraging mindfulness	Aerie's online IG meditation event
		message about meditation
		having a peaceful mind
	Expression of happiness	smiling with teeth
		bright-colored background
		slightly smiling with mouths closed
	Being courageous	message about overcoming anxiety
		message about taking risk
		disrupting status quo
	Good personality	message about optimism
		not being judgmental
		be kind
		being grateful
<b>Invitation to participate in Aerie's campaign</b>	Body positivity campaign	reposted picture
		unretouched picture
		Aerie "REAL" messages
	Instagram hashtags	#AerieREAL campaign
		#AerieREALSummit
		#MyAerie
	Bringing positive impact	being a changemaker
		message to donate

		Aerie's environmentally-friendly products
<b>Women's body empowerment</b>	Collective empowerment	Aerie's role models
		helping others
		Aerie's community
	Individual empowerment	message about self-navigating
		your body means your own rules
		create your own happiness
	Achievement in life	motivation to achieve goals
		being the best
		reaching dreams
	Body skin exposure	belly fat
		bare thighs
		bare arms
	Positive affirmation toward oneself	feeling good
		feeling loved
		feeling confident
	Physical flaws	blemished skin on the face
		stretch marks
		stomach rolls
Body acceptance	stop comparing ourselves	
	thanking own body	
	being grateful	
<b>Celebrating women's body diversity in fashion</b>	Every woman is beautiful	every body is a bikini body
		imperfect but pretty
		realizing we all have different bodies
	Thin/fit portrayals	flat stomach
		toned abs
		arm muscles
	Multiple ethnicity	Black/African ethnicity
		White ethnicity
		Asian ethnicity
	Different clothing style	bikini

		swimsuit
		long sleeve top
	Various body sizes	medium body size
		plus size/fat body
		curvy body
	Women with disability and illness	wheelchair
leg supporter equipment		
vitiligo skin condition		
<b>Body care encouragement</b>	Treating ourselves	treat yourself
		holding a cookie
		pampering day
	Promoting wellness/healthy lifestyle	eat healthy
		Aerie's kickboxing online event
		disabled women doing workouts/exercises
	Self-care	self-care investment
		prioritizing mental health
		live a balance life
	Active pose	kickboxing hand pose
		jumping pose
		standing yoga pose



**Appendix C.**

Final coding tree

Theme name	Categories/Sub-themes	Open codes
<b>Beauty on the inside</b>	Encouraging mindfulness	Aerie's online IG meditation event
		message about meditation
		having a peaceful mind
	Expression of happiness	smiling with teeth
		bright-colored background
		slightly smiling with mouths closed
	Being courageous	message about overcoming anxiety
		message about taking risk
		disrupting status quo
	Good personality	message about optimism
		not being judgmental
		be kind
		being grateful
<b>The power of Instagram</b>	Body positivity campaign	reposted picture
		unretouched picture
		Aerie "REAL" messages
	Instagram hashtags	#AerieREAL campaign
		#AerieREALSummit
		#MyAerie
	Bringing positive impact	being a changemaker
		message to donate

		Aerie's environmentally-friendly products
<b>Women's body empowerment</b>	Collective empowerment	Aerie's role models
		helping others
		Aerie's community
	Individual empowerment	message about self-navigating
		your body means your own rules
		create your own happiness
	Achievement in life	motivation to achieve goals
		being the best
		reaching dreams
	Body skin exposure	belly fat
		bare thighs
		bare arms
	Positive affirmation toward oneself	feeling good
		feeling loved
		feeling confident
	Physical flaws	blemished skin on the face
		stretch marks
		stomach rolls
Body acceptance	stop comparing ourselves	
	thanking own body	
	being grateful	
<b>Fashion inclusivity for every woman</b>	Every woman is beautiful	every body is a bikini body
		imperfect but pretty
		realizing we all have different bodies
	Thin/fit portrayals	flat stomach
		toned abs
		arm muscles
	Multiple ethnicity	Black/African ethnicity
		White ethnicity
		Asian ethnicity
	Different clothing style	bikini

		swimsuit
		long sleeve top
	Various body sizes	medium body size
		plus size/fat body
		curvy body
	Women with disability and illness	wheelchair
		leg supporter equipment
vitiligo skin condition		
<b>Caring toward own body</b>	Treating ourselves	treat yourself
		holding a cookie
		pampering day
	Promoting wellness/healthy lifestyle	eat healthy
		Aerie's kickboxing online event
		disabled women doing workouts/exercises
	Self-care	self-care investment
		prioritizing mental health
		live a balance life
	Active pose	kickboxing hand pose
		jumping pose
		standing yoga pose

