

Creating new ideals, fashion influencers and their portrayal of body positivity.

Exploring the intrinsic motivations of the female fashion content creator

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ABSTRACT

Within the social media bounds of the platform Instagram, it seems that the body positivity movement has found a place of community, as the production of body positive centered images has become ever more prevalent (Cohen et al., 2020). Within this the place of the fashion influencer is of interest as in this online media landscape, the persuasive abilities of the content creator could provide a movement presenting a new definition of what is considered “the fashionable ideal” (Perthuis & Findlay, 2019, p.226). This is placed in the context of the continuous representation of the thin ideal (Cohen et al., 2019) within traditional fashion media, as well as on social media. Thus, for this research it will be looked at how fashion influencers take part in the body positivity movement through posting content on Instagram. Furthermore, it will especially be looked at how the fashion influencers convey themselves as authentic whilst taking part in the body positivity movement.

For this research to be able to answer the research question, it was decided to use the method of qualitative content analysis, as this will aid in obtaining a deeper understanding of fashion influencers’ participation in the body positivity movement (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Then, to obtain the sample for this research, it was chosen to use purposive sampling. This resulted in a dataset of 150 Instagram posts, each containing thirty Instagram posts from five different fashion influencers situated in the body positivity community. This data was further complemented by textual data of four in-depth interviews, conducted with fashion content creators in the field of the body-positivity community. Lastly, a thematic analysis was conducted using a combination of a deductive and inductive approach, allowing for it to be reflective of the influencer’s aims behind the creation of the content as well as being placed within important previous theory concerning the subject (Duffy & Kang, 2019).

From the analyses three main themes were found that guide the answering of the research question, these were: The body positive sisterhood, expressing the body positive persona, and a redefining of beauty ideals. These were then further contextualized through two themes exclusively found from the analyses of the interview data, these being: facing cultural norms & struggles of the fashion industry and the hidden labors of the Instagram influencers. With these themes, it was then concluded that the fashion influencers take part in the body positivity movement through conveying a genuine balance of their inspirational expertise and their ability of seeming relatable to their audience. From this they not only convey an aspirational value in their content, they as well built on their ever important persuasiveness. This was seen to be accomplished by the influencers as they conveyed their credible expertise, and portrayed a transparent display of their authentic persona, strengthening this through a community creation that heightens the sense of similarity (Dekavalla, 2019).

KEYWORDS: *Influencers, Body Positivity, Authenticity, Beauty Ideals, Instagram.*

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1. Introduction

When looking at the representation of the female body within the fashion media industry it is often found that there is a predominant image portrayed, namely that of an “underweight, white, young women.” (p.255) by fashion magazines as found by Freitas et al. (2017). Similarly, Perthuis and Findlay (2019) found that fashion media outlets often center their content around a female ideal body type; thin, fit and young. This phenomenon can be referred to as the thin ideal where thus the thin body is idealized by the media as the dominant cultural idea of beautiful often through appearance-based images (Cohen, 2019). From a larger perspective the negative influence of the traditional media, such as fashion magazines, as well as social media portraying these ideal body standards can be seen as a reason for mental as well as health issues (Cohen et al., 2020).

Even though the promotion of this thin ideal can be found on social media platforms, a counter reaction has become prevalent in the form of the body positivity movement. With its main aim to counteract against the thin ideals prevalent in our society, this movement centers around the idea of body acceptance of all sizes, looks and forms, as well as the appreciation of what the body is capable of (Cohen et al., 2019b; Cohen et al., 2020). Additionally, it is explained how this movement seems to be ever more prevalent on Instagram (Cohen et al., 2020), and the awareness of such body positive content has been found to have a positive influence on the mental health concerning self-image (Cohen et al., 2020).

Then, as the prevalence of content concerning body positivity on social media (Lazuka et al., 2019), and its possible positive and negative effects (Cohen et al., 2020) have been researched extensively, the participation of influencers in this movement has been scarcely researched. Furthermore, as it can be seen that fashion media often represents a thin ideal referred to as “the fashionable ideal” (Perthuis & Findlay, 2019, p.226), the growing engagement with fashion on Instagram can mean that fashion influencers continue representing this ideal. However, they could as well, when producing body positive content for their accounts, be seen as creating a new alternative of the fashionable ideal.

With this, an important part of the influential power of, fashion, influencers, is the portrayal of authenticity within their content, as this brings them the all-important trust of their audience (Dekavalla, 2019). As this is often how their followers are able to relate to their lives, whilst they are still considered to be aspirational by showcasing their professional fashion side (Perthuis & Findlay, 2020). As influencers thus have the ability to convey this specific form of authenticity, with the subsequently earned

trust they are able to gain a larger audience, as well as represent brands in a compelling manner (Dekavalla, 2019). Then, this underlines the importance of analyzing the activity of fashion influencers in the body positivity context. As, this could showcase how they convincingly take part in the spreading of the body positivity movement, conveying their persuasive authenticity, and use this too in their professionalization when promoting fashion brands (Dekavalla, 2019). By situating the research in this specific context, the following research question, as well a sub-research question, were created:

RQ: How do fashion influencers take part in the body positivity movement through posting content on Instagram?

How do fashion influencers convey themselves as authentic whilst taking part in the body positivity movement when posting content on Instagram?

First of all, as is explained before Cohen et al. (2020) gives us a detailed explanation of body positivity, stating that it aims at counteracting the societal ideal of what is considered to be beautiful in regard to the body, otherwise referred to as the thin ideal, through acceptance of all body sizes. Body positivity can then, for example, be seen within image-based content that focuses on the acceptance of larger sizes, such as with fat acceptance references (Cohen et al., 2020). Furthermore, Cohen et al. (2020) extends the explanation of body positivity with not only the acceptance of size, but as well valuing the varying features and shapes that bodies can have. Thus, including the acceptance of all different kinds of bodies, not only plus size, that differ from beauty ideals set by our society. Within their research of body positive Instagram posts, Cohen et al. (2019b) found the alignment with positive body image, which for example focuses on mental health in relation to appreciating yourself and your body.

Then, when more specifically looking at the visual part of the portrayal of body positivity on social media it is mentioned in Cohen et al. (2020) that by participating in the movement, there remains a focus on the importance of appearance. This, is then seen in pictures with a large focus on the appearance of the subject, and can for example include objectification of the body (Cohen et al., 2020). This is an interesting notion, as is explained by Cohen et al. (2020) that objectification of the body, for example scarcely clothed women or sexual suggestive images (Cohen et al., 2019), is often found with thinspiration or fitspiration images as expression of the thin ideal suggesting things as shaming obesity or importance of weight loss. However, in contrast to thin ideal expressions in images, appearance-based body positive expressions are associated with a better self-image (Cohen et al., 2020).

Finally, it is important to recognize the persuasive power of the fashion influencer, which is based on a careful curation of produced content signaling their professional fashion leadership as well as authenticity (Perthuis & Findlay, 2019). The authenticity of the influencer can be conveyed through a myriad of things, such as the follower being able to relate to the influencer thus indicating a amateur side

next to being a professional (Leadbeater & Miller, 2004). This could result which in a form of closeness between the influencer and follower (Driel & Dumitrica, 2020). Additionally, authenticity is as well based on the perception that the influencer truthfully communicates their opinions (Driel & Dumitrica, 2020). Thus, for fashion influencers participating in the body positivity movement this duality might be seen in the portrayal of their relatability, resulting in the perception of authenticity, as well as conveying their professionalism in order to make their opinion in relation to the fashion industry valid.

Moreover, as is mentioned by Cohen et al. (2019b) it has been found that popular accounts taking part in the body positivity movement have become commodified, for example by accepting paid collaborations with brands. One can see a relation to the authenticity of an influencer with such practices as it has been mentioned that creating such paid content can result in an audience perception of finding the influencer inauthentic (Driel & Dumitrica, 2020; Duffy & Kang, 2019). This perception could occur when the brand does not align with the influencer's portrayed values. Yet, it has been found by Cohen et al. (2019b) in their research that the messages of body positivity values continued to be consistently expressed even when the popular accounts featured sponsored content. This, can be seen as an expression of passionate authenticity, as explained by Audrezet et al. (2020), aligning their collaborations with brands with their truthful identity as a person thus related to what they value as important.

In order to, answer the research question, and sub research question, the method of qualitative content analysis was chosen in order to gain a deeper understanding of how fashion influencers are taking part in the body positivity movement (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The sample was selected through purposive sampling, using adjusted criteria for this research that were found within the research of Cohen et al. (2019), and were found to have a similar relevancy (Silverman, 2015). Through this, 150 Instagram posts from five different fashion influencers (see Appendix A) situated in the body positivity community were chosen, as well as being complemented by four in-depth interviews conducted with content creators considered to be experts on this subject (see Appendix B). Then, a thematic analysis was conducted using a combination of an inductive and deductive approach, in order to obtain themes that will guide the answering of the research question.

2. Theoretical Framework

Within this chapter the concept of body positivity, as has been explained by Cohen et al. (2020) as the aims of counteracting the societal ideal of what is considered to be beautiful in regard to the body, otherwise referred to as the thin ideal. This act then cumulates itself in the acceptance of all body sizes, which will be explained further by relating it to the concept of positive body image. Furthermore, it was found that the ever-expanding spread of body positivity has been prevalent on the social media platform Instagram, with the rise of what has been termed, the “body-positive movement” (Cohen et al., 2020, p.1).

Then, the relation between the body positivity movement and the fashion industry will be discussed. Within this, it will be noted on how influencers could play a role in providing counterdiscourses (Limatius, 2019) to the societal “fashionable ideal”, often established and proliferated by traditional fashion media (Perthuis & Findlay, 2019, p.229). Consequently, underlining the role that social media influencers could play in the body positive movement, the persuasive abilities of these influencers will be discussed. As well as their claim on authenticity, which is often based on a careful balance of relatability and professionalism (Perthuis & Findlay, 2019), which could result in an increase sense of trust amongst their following. Lastly, the commodification of these influencers will be discussed and the connection that can be made with authenticity. The reason for this being that collaborating with brands can result in an increased awareness on how to convey transparency to their audience, as is mentioned that influencer audiences expect a truthful conveyance of opinions (Driel & Dumitrica, 2020).

Thus, this chapter will advance the current research by giving the necessary theoretical outline in order to answer how fashion influencer are taking part in the body positivity movement through posting content on Instagram. Furthermore, it will be specifically looked at how the body positive fashion influencers convey themselves as authentic when posting content on Instagram.

2.1 The Body Positive movement

Throughout the literature that was found concerning body positivity, there seems to be a general consensus on what it entails, namely that the act of body positivity aims at redefining what is considered to be beautiful within our modern-day society. Thus, creating the notion that all different shapes and sizes

should be accepted (Cohen, Newton-John & Slater, 2020; Cohen et al., 2019b; Lazuka et al., 2020). Furthermore, body positivity is placed in stark contrast with a different appearance-focused phenomenon currently found on social media, specifically Instagram, centering around the belief of a thin ideal and upholding this through the production of content often termed “thinspiration” (Cohen et al., 2019b, p.47).

This content celebrating the thin ideal often includes females in objectifying poses accompanied by messages promoting weight loss (Cohen et al., 2020), presumably giving social media users ample opportunity to compare their body to what is perceived as the ideal body. It has, perhaps unsurprisingly, been found that content pertaining this thin ideal can be connected to mental health related issues, such as body dissatisfaction and negative self-esteem (Cohen et al., 2020; Lazuka et al., 2020). These outcomes might be found even more problematic when it is considered that a lower sense of self-esteem has been found in relation to problematic social media use, including behavioral aspects such as prioritizing online life over “real-life” interactions (Kircaburun et al., 2018). However, when researching the possible effects body positive content could have on mental health related issues, it was found that this type of engagement could have a positive effect on body satisfaction and a women’s mood in general (Cohen et al., 2019b).

Then, when looking at the produced social media content promoting body positivity, it has been found to align in its core messages with the concept of positive body image (Cohen et al., 2019b). This concept has been broadly conceptualized by Tylka and Wood-Barcalow (2015) as one’s general feeling of “love and respect for the body” (p.121), resulting in several positive psychological outcomes such as body appreciation and increased confidence (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015; Cohen et al., 2019a). Further, it was found that positive body image cannot be considered as a single measurable concept, as it contains multiple different elements, such as “Body appreciation.” and “Broadly conceptualizing beauty.” (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015, p.22). Using the concept of positive body image and its six different components in their content analysis of popular body positive accounts, Cohen et al. (2019b) thus found an alignment between the produced body positive Instagram content and the outlined definition of positive body image. This finding then lead to the presumption that viewing this content could lead to similar positive psychological outcomes found to be connected to positive body image amongst women (Cohen et al., 2020).

Furthermore, in congruence with the phenomenon of thinspiration and the spreading of the thin ideal, body positivity has been found as the main subject of an increasing amount of content over the last years, often spread through the accessible channels of social media, specifically through the visual-based platform Instagram (Cohen et al., 2020). Through Instagram users have been found to promote body positive messages vastly, which can be seen through hashtags obtaining high popularity such as Cohen et al. (2020) mentions: “with over 11 million posts tagged with #bodypositive,” (p.2). We might thus state

that this increasing prevalence of body positive content has become a true social media movement or what has thus evidently been referred to as the increasing spread of “the body positivity movement” (Lazuka et al., 2020, p.86).

Moreover, the notion that this movement has become ever-growing on Instagram might be connected to what is noted on in the research of Riquelme et al. (2017). The reason for this being, that it is explained by them that the affordances of Instagram have been found to have somewhat of an effect on psychological empowerment, which is explained as a process that can result in several mental abilities; “sense of meaningfulness/impact, self-determination and self-esteem” (Riquelme et al., 2017, p.1123), amongst women. This sense of psychological empowerment is, further, found to be mediated through the creation of self-efficacy. It is explained that the sense of self efficacy centers around Instagram’s affordances, as they allow for women to communicate their opinions and feelings more easily through, for example, the creation of posts whilst having a sense of ownership (Riquelme et al., 2017). Concurrently, this ability supports the continuously improvement of an Instagram skillset, and thus increases the feeling that they are able to execute valuable actions (Riquelme et al., 2017), such as posting about or supporting posts about social values important to them.

Additionally, a manner which gives women this increasing sense of self-efficacy, and thus subsequently psychological empowerment, is taking part in hashtags (Riquelme et al., 2017), as it is commented on that this makes women feel that they taking part in an empowered movement. As it has been found that the body positivity movement employs many hashtags of high popularity, such as #bodypositive (Cohen et al., 2020) we might see this as a mode to generate self-efficacy in body positivism within this Instagram community. Similarly, Riquelme et al. (2017) found that sense of community, which is described as women feeling that they belong to a certain community, seen in engagement on Instagram might have an outcome of psychological empowerment as well. It especially was found to have an effect on the feeling of meaningfulness, a specific part and outcome of psychological empowerment, amongst women (Riquelme et al., 2017). The reason for this being that women thus sense that by being a part of community, will make their taking part in empowering activities more meaningful.

Lastly, it was found that sense of community and self-efficacy can have a combined effect as women could feel that through the support of their online community, they have a stronger belief in their own abilities to be of value. This is further illustrated by mentioning that the role mentorship in an online environment can positively influence this sense of efficacy (Riquelme et al., 2017). Perhaps even through body positive influencers who apply themes of body acceptance and love within their content (Cohen et al., 2019a), in order to encourage their followers to adopt this same mindset.

2.2 The countermovement of the fashionable ideal

Not only does Instagram, next to other popular social media platforms, seem to be used to proliferate messages of body positivity in an exuberant rate, to illustrate 71 % of Americans within the age group of 18 till 29 years old are using Instagram (Cohen et al., 2019a; PEW research centre, 2021). The social media channel can as well be considered to provide the platform for a counter movement against the idealized appearances portrayed in traditional media (Cohen et al., 2020). This movement, then, provides users with the opportunity to create content that reflects their bodies and creates an inclusive space that they have not found satisfactorily within traditional media.

The specific observance of inclusivity of all body sizes within social media spaces, and specifically the Instagram community, has been found by Lazuka et al. (2020) within their content analysis of visual body positive content. As they conclude, it was found from their sample of Instagram posts, using the hashtag Body Positivity, that slightly less than half of the posts portrayed an individual perceived to have a plus size body. Thereby, it was thus found that the usage of this hashtag contributed to a wider portrayal of different body sizes within the media spheres (Lazuka et al., 2020). Similarly, Cohen et al. (2019b) found in their research, which focused more specifically on popular body positive accounts, that “over two thirds of bodies perceived to meet overweight or BMI criteria” (p.53).

Furthermore, it is noted that traditional media, such as magazines or television, have been found to be at the base of spreading the before mentioned thin ideal. This ideal often concerns a representation of the female body as thin and often idealized in the sense that most women are not able to emulate such an appearance (Cohen et al., 2020; Duffy, 2020). A similar, or perhaps identical, concept can be found in relation to fashion media, specifically print, which is referred to as the “fashionable ideal” (Perthuis & Findlay, 2019, p.229). As is explained, this concept refers to the fashion industry’s portrayal of what is considered to be beautiful by society, often represented through the female body, and is ever changing throughout time. Currently, thus, the fashionable ideal it seems is conveyed as that of a beautiful woman who is thin, young and healthy (Perthuis & Findlay, 2019). This ideal is further upheld by the fashion industry as continuously select models for their brands, or magazines on the basis of these criteria, as is explained by Holla (2017), placing them continuously in the part of “ ‘aesthetic objects” (Holla, 2017,

p.256).

Similarly, this representation of a fashionable ideal in traditional fashion media has been illustrated in the research of Freitas et al. (2017). As it is explained in their research that there is a widespread prevalence of rather thin female appearances, next to the usage of techniques such as photoshop in order to idealize these bodies even further, in fashion magazines. Moreover, Freitas et al. (2017) considered the possible effect of policies on more diverse representations of female appearances in fashion magazines. It was, then, found within their research that the portrayal of women as very thin and young persisted regardless of any made policies.

A similar point is made by Hermans (2021) as she notes on a somewhat new trend of magazines, aimed at female audiences, embracing a body positive message throughout their publications. However, as she further explains by referencing the British version of the magazine *Cosmopolitan* these messages proclaiming a diverse representation of the everyday woman are often found in contradiction with articles giving the reader advice on how to hide for instance body imperfections. Additionally, as Perthuis and Findlay (2019) explain this idealized image is not only portrayed by traditional fashion media, this same ideal it is now through the affordances of social media as well spread by fashion influencers, albeit whilst employing different engagement efforts.

As is further explained by Cohen et al. (2020) this widespread portrayal of a the thin ideal by the media places an undeniable importance on the outer appearances of women, and that their worth should be based on this, which is then internalized by these women or otherwise referred to as “self-objectification” (p.1547). As is explained by Cohen et al. (2020) objectification within the body positivity research context is often found in the form of a specific focus on certain body parts or the content being “sexually suggestive” (p.3). However, as is noted on by Holla (2017) within objectification theory it is widely considered that the objectified subject has little agency or being capable of having their own subjective experience, culminating to the belief of it being “inherently negative” (p.251). Within this, then, the often-female subject is reduced to only it’s bodily functions and the relation to how this can serve the consumption of others (Holla, 2017). Within the research of Holla (2017), this notion is rebutted, as it underlines the existence of subjectivity within different social contexts, making objectification not necessarily negative.

As is explained by Holla (2017), models can take pleasure from objectification, as they explore and express their creativity by “working it” (p.265) in their own way, one could consider that influencers creating content in the body positivity movement could find this pleasure as well. The reason for this being that they are still partaking in objectifying practices, however they are the ones in control now, holding the autonomy, and expressing it in their own creative view. Turning away from the male gaze that has so often, as is mentioned by Rocamora (2011), been found in fashion media, and taking control of

their own female gaze. Similarly, Cohen et al. 2019 found that almost all the appearance related posts they found within their sample of body positive content, were in line with one of the features of positive body image. One could, thus, see this as a way of creators working the “appearance-focused” (Cohen et al., 2019b, p.54) created content in their own creative manner, as they showcase (Holla, 2017) their body positivity and present the viewer with a new interpretation of what can be considered the fashionable ideal (Rocamora, 2011).

Moreover, Rocamora (2011) discusses how within our current society the prevalence of male-produced images has resulted in the internalization of a male gaze amongst women, which is practiced by constructing their femininity through the usage of fashion and even make-up and thus evaluated by first and foremost looking at themselves in mirrors. Adding to this, it is mentioned that with the introduction of new media women have the ability to evaluate themselves within the bounds of the male gaze even further through self-produced images, specifically using fashion blogs (Rocamora, 2011).

However, the authority that comes with self-producing these images could on the other hand result in a greater awareness of the images that they produce, and thus realizing the prevalence of the male gaze (Rocamora, 2011). This could then result in breaking the male gaze by producing images that showcase alternative views on the feminine ideal, referred to as the “female gaze” (Rocamora, 2011, p.420). As is mentioned by the author these differing representations of femininity can be personified in stylistic choices or fairly differing fashion looks found on fashion blogs. This construction of the female gaze could as well be considered in terms of body positive content, as by differing from what is considered the thin ideal these social media users could aim for the construction of an alternative feminine fashionable ideal.

Further, we could relate this to the prevalence of objectifying images, explained as a specific focus on the subject’s body, within body positive content on social media (Cohen et al., 2020a). In the research of Cohen et al. (2019) it was for example found that “around a third of the women were in very or extremely revealing clothing and featured some degree of objectification,” (p.53). This, then, which has been noted by Cohen et al. (2019) as well, could be seen as an active effort to establish an alternative fashionable ideal, by showcasing bodies that are different from the traditional perception of beautiful or the thin ideal. In a similar vein the aim of establishing an alternative fashionable ideal, or referred to by Limatius (2019) as “counterdiscourses” (p.2) can be seen in the employment of specific language by plus-size fashion bloggers as well. For instance, this is illustrated by the act of them reappropriating words that were previously used against them in a harmful manner, and are now thus used as empowering speech, such as with the word fat (Limatius, 2019).

2.3 The persuasiveness of the influencer

As has been mentioned before, Instagram has allowed for what one might consider the regular everyday person, in contrast with the handful of people that control the content of traditional media, to have a voice. This, then, has perhaps allowed for the creation of a wider and more inclusive representation of what is considered beautiful such as with different appearances (Cohen et al., 2019b), and thus contributes to cultural discourse (Duffy, 2013). These considered normal people can then become social media influencers, whose aim is to create a space of wider diversity and promotion of body positivity through using their large following (Cohen et al., 2019), which is often built on their unique persuasive abilities.

As is explained by Dekavalla (2019) these influencers produce content on social media platforms, such as Instagram, that is completely based on their own lives which often includes an element of aspirational expertise. The prevalence of this element, then, underlines their ordinariness and consequently creates a perceived similarity between them and their following. It is the showcasing of this ordinariness, making them a perceived authentic person, that together with transparency narratives establishes a sense of trust within their following, and thus making them persuasive (Dekavalla, 2019). The ability to relate to influencers can as well be assisted through applying “a full frontal gaze.” (Rocamora, 2011, p.417), which creates a level of identification as their following returns the gaze in a similar manner that can be found when looking in a mirror.

The importance of conveying authenticity amongst the following of these influencers, as an undeniable condition of their persuasiveness’, is as well noted on by Perthuis and Findlay (2019) specifically in the context of fashion media. Fashion influencers it seems find themselves in a fragile balance of needing to convey their expertise in fashion, to install trust that their advice is to be adopted. As well as the need to convey that the influencers themselves have an element of relatability, leading to the trust found in authenticity (Perthuis & Findlay, 2019; Delbaere et al., 2020). A similar notion is made by Duffy and Kang (2019) in their thematic analysis of travel blogs, as they note that influencers seem to continually take part in so called “dual performances” (p.8). As it is explained that within these dual performances the influencers enact a sense of ordinariness that is part of their personality, being just as mundane as their readers coming from for instance similar small towns. Whilst the influencers simultaneously live an extraordinary life, as their frequent travelling adventures are not a common lifestyle (Duffy & Kang, 2019).

Furthermore, it seems that the dual performance as well generates within their audience a want and the ability to emulate this life, as the relatability of their ordinariness gives the possibility of extraordinariness (Duffy & Kang, 2019). It is, additionally, explained by Driel and Dumitrica (2020) that

authenticity is as well based on the perception that influencers truthfully communicate their opinions. Thus, for fashion influencers participating in the body positivity movement this duality might be seen in the portrayal of their relatability, resulting in the perception of authenticity, as well as conveying their professionalism in order to make their opinion in relation to the fashion industry valid.

However, as is mentioned, this upholding of a balance is fragile and when lost the built authenticity amongst an influencer's audience can transform into a perceived disingenuousness and a decrease of credibility (Perthuis & Findlay, 2019; Dekavalla, 2019). It can thus, be found that, concurrently with the conveyance of authenticity, portrayals of transparency are communicated in order to avoid a loss of the ever-important trust (Dekavalla, 2019). As is further explained by Dekavalla (2019) establishing transparency can be done by showcasing honesty in their involvement with brand partnerships. Yet, this needs to be regulated in order to not endanger their relatability, which can then perhaps be balanced with "establishing authentic taste" (Dekavalla, 2019, p.8) showcasing for example that they share their loved products without financial incentives.

Thus, this balancing act that influencers participate in results in them having to be continuously aware of the content they produce in order to remain authentic and transparent, which then when knowing the struggle put into this as is mentioned by Khamis et al. (2017) can seem quite the opposite of being authentic. Being continually aware and portraying the same authentic image on social media can, then, as well be considered as "emotional labor" (Duffy & Hund, 2015, p.3), as they cannot deviate from the performance of authenticity without there being consequences. Additionally, as is mentioned by Duffy and Hund (2015) the conveyance of authenticity does not only need to be managed within the influencer's content, but it can continue to be managed throughout their commenting sections on social media in which they engage in an authentic manner with their following, similar to a friend-like relationship (Audrezet et al., 2020).

Moreover, it is mentioned that fashion influencers often weave "discourses of "passion"" (Duffy & Hund, 2015, p.4) throughout their content, aiming to convey that their presence on social media is based on their need for a manner to channel their passionate creativity and not based on any financial incentives. This, then, adds to the overall portrayal within the fashion influencer's content that their labor is "effortless" (Duffy & Hund, 2015, p.9), and brushes over the non-stop work it takes to maintain their authentic persona. Similarly, Quelhas-Brito et al. (2020) mentions that when influencers are considered to be "intrinsically motivated" (p.145), thus their inner enjoyment when advising their followers on fashion decisions, can have a positive effect on their leadership in terms of fashion. Consequently, the possibility of increasing their positive leadership as a social media fashion influencer (Quelhas-Brito et al., 2020) could then possibly result in a larger influence for brands.

Finally, Duffy (2013) explains authenticity in relation to beauty ideals, in the research of

magazines aimed at women audiences portraying authenticity, as is mentioned that it entails “those physical forms and aesthetics that are typically excluded from heteronormative beauty culture” (p.148). One might see a similarity with body positivity, and fashion influencers expressing this in their produced content as they widen the cultural perception of what is considered to be beautiful, supported by an increased inclusivity of all different body sizes and appearances.

2.4 Influencer professionalization and commodification

When defining influencers further, it is found within the literature that an importance is placed on their ability to use their persuasiveness. As it has been discussed that this is often based on their ability to convey authenticity and use the resulting influence in terms of large audiences to commodify their activity through collaborating with brands (Dekavalla, 2019; Khamis et al., 2017). Additionally, it is mentioned by Dekavalla (2019) that the showcasing of their ordinariness, authenticity, and transparency behaviors can lead to a seemingly personal relationship from the follower’s point of view with the influencer. The trust installed from this seemingly close relationship can then be commodified by the influencers, or as is referred to by Dekavalla (2019), when referencing Berryman and Kavka (2017), “commodification through intimacy” (p.3).

The conveyance of authenticity amongst consumers is not only a necessity for being effective persuasive influencers but has as well been found to be increasingly important for fashion brands’ communication to for instance have a positive effect on buying behavior (Audrezet et al., 2020). Further, as is noted by Duffy (2013) it seems that consumers currently demand from fashion brands and media a more authentic representation of the women, in stark contrast what has been communicated to them before as being an idealized version of what it is to be a woman. The reason for them wanting a more authentic representation is, as is explained, that they find the products that they buy must complement and enhance their own personal authenticity internally as well as externally. This is found next to the effect of buying these products can have on consumers having a feeling of empowerment, as they can showcase their authentic self (Duffy, 2013). Additionally, Kim and Sullivan (2019) similarly explain how brands, especially fashion brands, have the ability to no longer advertise the idealized version that a consumer should be. The reason for this being that consumers seem to be more susceptible to brands that reflect what they assume is a more realistic version of what they personally see themselves as, or as is referred to by Kim and Sullivan (2019) the “authentic self” (p.4).

Thus, we can see a general importance of conveying authenticity within influencer content as well as fashion brand's communication, in order to keep and attract consumers. The effort to attract an engaging audience of consumers is as well noted on by Driel and Dumitrica (2020). As it is explained in their research, when influencers aim at obtaining financial incentives from their social media activity, they often create content in accordance with what they perceive are their following's wants and needs in order to ensure brand collaborations and deals. This, then, can result in professionalization amongst the influencers as they create more well-produced content, such as creating posts that are more aesthetically pleasing, and being able to navigate the so called "Instagram algorithm" (Driel & Dumitrica, 2020, p.15). As is further explained by Dekavalla (2019) influencer might participate in the conveyance of "taste leadership" (p.9), through lamenting their credibility in terms of their personal taste or style as showcase themselves being invited or present at for example fashion events.

Furthermore, as is mentioned by Cohen et al. (2019) it has been found that popular accounts taking part in the body positivity movement become commodified, for example by accepting paid collaborations with brands. One can see a relation to the authenticity of an influencer with such practices as it has been mentioned that creating such paid content can result in an audience perception of finding the influencer inauthentic (Driel & Dumitrica, 2020; Duffy & Kang, 2019), for example when the brand does not align with the influencer's portrayed values. Yet, it has been found by Cohen et al. (2019) in their research that the messages of body positivity values continued to be consistently expressed even when the popular accounts featured sponsored content. This, can be seen as an expression of "passionate authenticity", as explained by Audrezet et al. (2020, p.565), aligning their collaborations with brands and their truthful identity as a person thus related to what they value as important.

Additionally, a different manner to manage authenticity when working with brands on sponsored content was mentioned by Audrezet et al. (2020), this being "transparent authenticity" (p.565). With this specific type of authenticity conveyance, in terms of professionalization, influencers aim at giving the complete details of their brand collaboration as well as their personal reasoning for it, and together with passionate authenticity these are both motivated by their intrinsic passions to produce social media content (Audrezet et al., 2020), such as on the world of fashion.

Furthermore, it was found that when applying these strategies within their self-branding it can result in several enactments of authenticity throughout their content production. Again, as it was found that body positive values remained expressed throughout sponsored content, and this then being an intrinsic motivation for these body positive influencers, we can argue that either they engaged in "absolute authenticity (passionate and transparent" or "fairytale authenticity (only passionate)" (Audrezet et al., 2020, p.565), with the latter being most moved by intrinsic motivations.

3. Method

3.1 Research method

In order to answer the main research question as to how fashion influencers take part in the body positivity movement through posting content on Instagram, the method of qualitative content analysis was chosen. The reason for this being that this approach of a method will generate a deeper understanding of the phenomenon that is the body positivity movement (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), and specifically the participation of fashion influencers in this phenomenon. Furthermore, as with qualitative content analysis the researcher has the ability to look beyond the manifest meaning of the data, and thus latent meaning is described, one as well looks at the context of the phenomenon under study, resulting in more detailed descriptions (Schreier, 2013). Additionally, as within this research the data will consist of 150 Instagram posts by fashion influencers and four expert interviews with body positive content creators, qualitative content analysis will aid in reducing this data in more manageable aspects or themes that will be important to answer the research question, and sub question. (Schreier, 2013).

This reducing of the data into larger themes that relate to the research question is as well aided by the flexibility aspect of qualitative research, as it first allows concept-driven categories based on the previous theory (Schreier, 2013), such as on body positivity, positive body image and the persuasiveness of influencers with conveyance of authenticity. Additionally, it allows for data-driven categories as well, which then will reflect the data (Schreier, 2013). The data-driven categories will give a detailed description of the phenomenon under study, the body positivity movement, in the specific context of this research which is the participation of fashion influencers in this movement and how they specifically do this.

In similarity, to the research of Driel and Dumitrica (2020) in which they analyzed how influencers explore the tension between authenticity and professionalization, this research choice a combination of the thematic analyses of Instagram posts, as well as in-depth interviews with the content creator experts. The reason for this being that the analysis of the Instagram posts will showcase how they actively take part in the body positivity movement whilst weaving through narratives of authenticity (Driel & Dumitrica, 2020). As where, the interviews will give the necessary contextualization through

exploring their meaning making processes of the influencers when creating content situated in the social context of the body positivity movement (Duffy & Hund, 2015).

3.2 Sampling strategy and data collection

The social media platform of Instagram was chosen for the retrieval of the data in the form of visual main feed posts, as it has been noted that this platform has played a role in the wider spread of the body positivity movement and the accompanying content that was created through this (Cohen et al., 2019b). Furthermore, it is noted how Instagram opens up a wider playfield for social change, as it allows anyone with the ability to create an account to take part in activists conversations such as surrounding body positivity. This can then be done not only through textual engagement, but as well by contributing to the visual representation of body positivity (Cohen et al., 2019b).

In order to obtain the sample, purposive sampling was chosen for this research, the reason for this being that it allows for using several specific criteria to obtain the sample that will be relevant for answering the research question (Silverman, 2015). These criteria were based on the criteria created by Cohen et al. (2019b), as they similarly created a sample containing popular body positive Instagram accounts for their content analysis. However, in this case they will be fashion influencers, taking part in the body positivity movement, accounts. Thus, following the sampling strategy set by Cohen et al. (2019b) as well as adjusting them slightly to the purpose of this research, the following four criteria were established to obtain the sample for this research.

First, the criterium of popularity was established, which conditioned that each account had a minimum of 50 000 followers. The second criterium regarded the activity of the influencer with a “minimum 100 posts, including the most recent post being made within two weeks of sampling” (Cohen et al., 2019, p.49). Then, there is as well the criterium of the influencer’s account containing body positivity movement related content, as well as for this research fashion related content. Finally, the last criterium concerns the influencer using English as their main language used on their Instagram profile in order to be able to understand the content posted to its fullest extent. However, it was of importance to obtain an international sample, as one can consider the body positivity movement to be spread worldwide, and this should than thus be reflected in the sample obtained.

Through this then five fashion influencers were chosen as the units of analysis, having a diverse background of nationalities. Thus the following fashion influencers were included as the units of analysis; @vivianhoorn, @nataliemeansnice, @sonnyturner____, @raeannlangas, and @itsmekellieb. As can be

found within Appendix A, the influencers come from different nationalities, these being Dutch, British and American. Then, from each influencer thirty posts were obtained for the analysis, excluding videos posts, starting from the date of the 1st of January 2021. More specifically, for the posts, if it is a gallery, it was looked at if the photos differ largely from each other content wise, if not the first photo of the gallery was used.

Finally, in order to obtain the expert interviews, forty-five body-positive fashion content creators were contacted over a period of two months. The content creators were contacted through the contacting of a direct message on the social media platform of Instagram (see Appendix C), as well as through an email send to their personal email or management (see Appendix D) in the hopes of increasing the possibility to reach them. Ultimately four influencers responded, stating that they would like to participate in the research, and the interviews were scheduled accordingly. Thus, the following influencers were willing to participate in the research; @missalexlarosa, @dany_rocchi, @cinzia.in.wonderland, and @lucybennettmodel (see Appendix B). The reasoning behind the quite low response rate, is considered to be the lack of financial incentive that could be given within this research, as one of the responses from an email request even read “wat is the fee?”. In addition to this, a different reasoning could be the lack of reach to the content creator’s preferred audience, which is more often found when their interviews are represented in online media articles or at times fashion magazines

3.3 Method of analysis

Once the data was collected a thematic analysis was be conducted, giving the ability to recognize larger themes within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006) that will lead towards answering the research question of how fashion influencers take part in the body positivity movement through posting content on Instagram. The thematic analysis will take a combination of an inductive and deductive approach, creating concept-driven for the main categories using previous established theory, and creating data-driven subcategories. Through using this approach, the ability was given to find themes that are representative of the intentions made by the influencers when creating the data, as well as being situated in the literature that was found relevant for this research (Duffy & Kang, 2019). Furthermore, the subcategories were be created through “Subsumption” (Schreier, 2013, p.176) in which the data was be exhaustively analyzed until the point of saturation and thus allowed for a detailed analysis of the phenomenon that is the body positivity movement.

In order to analyze the data, the program of Atlas.ti was be used, to code the data systematically through using the setting affordances provided by the program, such as the ability to assign codes to

certain visual and textual aspects of the data. Within the program each thirty social media posts were organized under their respective social media influencer creator, as well as the inclusion of the four documents of the interview transcript being grouped together with each respective content creator. Finally, it is important, as stated by Schreier (2013), that the main categories who are concept-driven are unidimensional, and the subcategories created through a data-driven approach are mutually exclusive. The resulting themes found from this analysis were then used to answer the research questions as well the sub questions, keeping in mind the relations between these themes.

3.4 Operationalisation

In order to adequately carry out the thematic analysis, it is of importance to operationalize the theoretical concepts that are of significance in answering the research question and the sub-research questions. This will, then, aid in obtaining the right analysis on how fashion influencers are taking part in the body positivity movement, through posting content on the social media platform Instagram. The first two concepts of importance when undertaking the analysis of the social media posts, as well as the interview data, are body positivity and positive body image. The reason for this being that within this research one of the main themes that was looked at, was how the fashion influencer took part in the body positive community through representing new beauty ideals in fashion media. This can be seen within the interview guide (see Appendix E), within the section containing questions specifically focused on the fashion content creators' description of their positioning in fashion media. Thus, as has been noted on by Cohen et al. (2019b) within their research of the body positivity movement, and specifically body positive accounts on Instagram, it was found that several features of positive body image were expressed within this content.

As has been mentioned, within the found literature body positivity is often explained as the redefinition of what society has traditionally found to be beautiful, generating a conception that all body shapes and sized should be accepted and considered beautiful (Cohen, Newton-John & Slater, 2020; Cohen et al., 2019b; Lazuka et al., 2020). When analyzing the manners in which fashion influencers take part in this movement this conceptualization thus will be used, by identifying how they are redefining societal beauty standards. However, this conceptualization can be considered very broad, and as positive body image has been found to be expressed within body positive content this can give one specific feature to identify.

Then, in order to conceptualize positive body image one can, look at the overarching definition given by Tylka and Wood-Barcalow (2015), stating the broad definition as the general feeling of “love

and respect for the body” (p.121). More specifically, Tylka and Wood-Barcalow (2015) found that the concept can be identified through six different elements, with several of these being largely prevalent within body positive content (Cohen et al., 2019b). For this research then the three aspects of positive body image found to be most prevalent by Cohen et al. (2019b) in their analysis of the body positivity movement’s produced content, will be used for this specific conceptualization. The most common found feature by Cohen et al. (2019b) was “Conceptualising Beauty Broadly” (p.51), referring to the importance of finding inner and outer beauty in all bodily appearances, and next to this “Body Acceptance/love” (p.51) was found very often, encouraging the love of all body types and features even if these do not align with the societal ideal. Finally, the third most common found feature of positive body image was “Inner Positivity” (Cohen et al., 2019b, p.51), referring to the behavioral and mental health aspects that nurture a positive body image.

Further, in order to analyze how the influencer aim at representing new beauty ideals the prevalence of a “female gaze” (Rocamora, 2011, p.420) will be looked at. Within this research this will be conceptualized by identifying manners in which the fashion influencers represent beauty ideals through alternative choices in terms of style or the stylistic presentation of their bodies (Rocamora, 2011), that differ from the established thin ideal to be found in traditional fashion media. Furthermore, as the influencers are now the producers of these images (Rocamora, 2011), it will be looked at how they produce elements of objectification within their images through the lens of the “female gaze”. In order to recognize elements of objectification, the definition of Cohen et al. (2020) will be used which is described as a “focus on a specific body part, a sexually suggestive pose or absence of a clearly visible head and/or face” (p.3).

Then, the community aspect of Instagram was as well considered to be of importance as one of the themes of this research, specifically looking at how the influencers took part in and described the body positivity movement on the platform of Instagram. Thus, it will be looked at how the fashion influencers create a communal environment in which they convey a sense of belonging to their following (Riquelme et al., 2017). Specifically in this research it will then analyze which types of Instagram’s affordances are used by the influencers to convey a sense of self-efficacy (Riquelme et al., 2017), such as the usage of community hashtags which have in previous research found to be prevalent in the body positivity community (Cohen et al., 2020). This can be found in the interview guide (see Appendix E), through the specific questioning in relation to the growth and spread of the body positivity movement on Instagram, as well as questioning of how the content creator describes, in her experience, the role she performs on the platform.

Finally, the expression of authenticity in relation to the personal self of the influencers was found to be of importance in the thematic analyses of this research. Then, within this research it will be looked

at how the influencers convey their authentic personalities, with a relation to the body positivity movement, through narratives of transparency expressing themselves in a seemingly truthful manner (Driel & Dumitrica, 2020). This transparency of their truthful opinions, extends itself to the professionalization of the influencer, as it will be looked at how they establish “authentic taste” (Dekavalla, 2019, p.8). Specifically, this will be analyzed through the usage of the concepts described by Audrezet et al. (2020) as “transparent authenticity” (p.565), which is exemplified in the interview guide (see Appendix E). As through questioning the content creators as to what degree they find of importance to be transparent about their brand collaborations. Additionally, the conveyance of “passionate authenticity” (Audrezet et al., 2020, p.565) will be analyzed, as is as well exemplified within the interview guide (see Appendix E), when questioning the content creators on their selection process with brand collaborations.

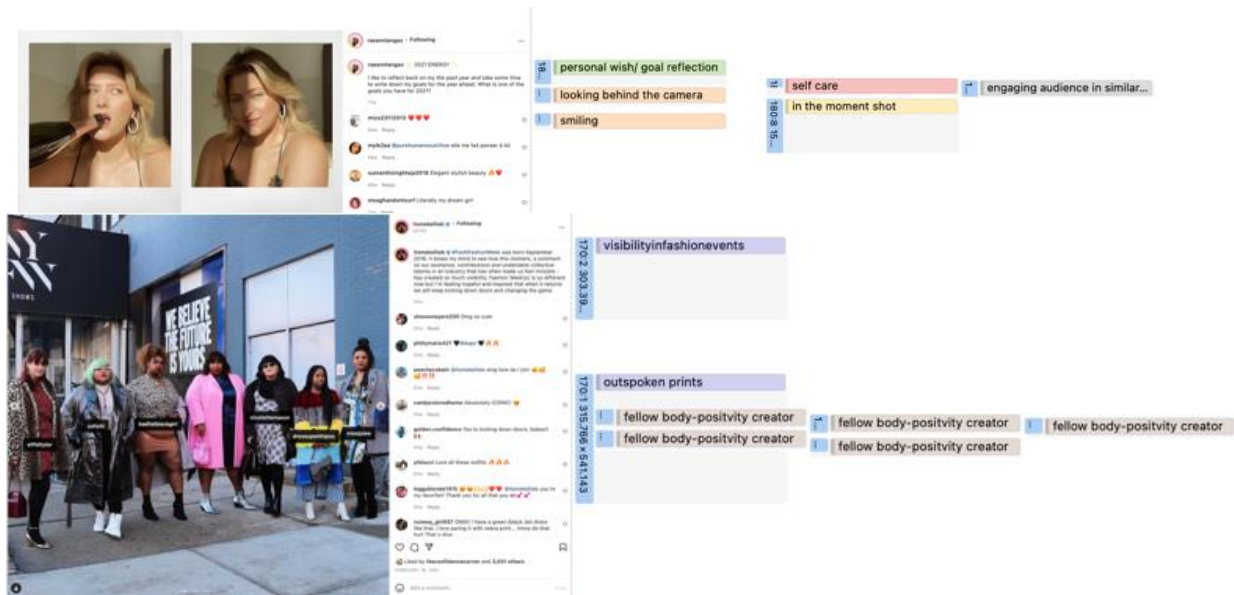
4. Results

Within this chapter, the results of the thematic analysis of both the visual data of Instagram posts from five body-positive fashion influencers, as well as the interview data will be presented. First, three themes are presented that were found from the analyses of the Instagram posts and are further supplemented with the interview data in which codes from these themes were found as well. The three themes are; The Body Positive Sisterhood, Expressing the Body Positive Persona and A Redefining of Beauty Ideals. Finally, two themes found from the thematic analysis of the interview data will be presented, as these were themes that were especially found from this as it centers around a contextualization and explanation of the influencer experience. These two themes are; Facing Cultural Norms & Struggles of the Fashion Industry and The hidden labors of the Instagram influencer.

4.1 The Body Positive Sisterhood

The first main theme found from the thematic analysis of the sample of 150 Instagram posts is that of the Body Positive Sisterhood, as through descriptive text often found in the description of the influencer one could see a creation of sense of community (Riquelme et al., 2017). This creation of a community feeling is in this case referred to as a sisterhood, as mostly the references in the codes are female, as well as in the interviews, such as when one the content creators explained her main drive of partaking in the body positivity community

“I, I want to do this, like, I want to be in this space and I love the plus-size community and I love helping women feel powerful in their bodies and I love helping women embrace. Honestly, just like vulnerability.” (LaRosa-Williams, 32, United States).



Furthermore, it was as well found that this sense of togetherness in body positivity community was expressed by showcasing their similarity to their followers in the movement. This is in part through seemingly creating a personal relationship (Driel & Dumitrica, 2020) by engaging in “authentic talk” (Dekavalla, 2019, p.10), which can be found in the code *Connecting with audience* – descriptive (see Figure 4.2

Appendix F). In this specific code, it is then often found that influencers from the sample address their following directly with for example “you”, as well as asking their audience questions on the basis of a mundane similarity between them, as can be seen in figure 4.1, where the influencer questions what goals her following has for the new year.

Then, a second code that could enhance the feeling of similarity between the influencer and their following is found in *Connecting with Audience – visual cues* (See Appendix F), in which the influencer often stairs directly in the camera or has an inviting facial expression (see figure 4.1). One could find these visual cues to be similar to the concept which Rocamora refers to as “a full frontal gaze” (p.417), as the influencer looks directly at the follower similar to when would look in reflective surface, resulting in the ability to identify with them and being able to envision how they could be successful in similar activities. One might as well see an aim to create the perceived resemblance of a friendship with their following within the code *Relations with Body Positivity Peers* (see Appendix F), in which this is mainly seen in the inclusion of body positive content creators within posts in friend-like manners (see figure 4.2).

The reason for this being that one could see it as a portrayal of the supportive friendship group

that can be found within the body positivity community, as it as well found within the interviews that content creators credit their peers or showcase how they have learned from them. An example of this can be seen in one of the content creators crediting her peers for guiding a change in what is considered to be stylish in the plus-size community;

“You know, when I think of like Gabby right and like Nicolette and, like the OG’s who’ve been around forever they were taking all those f*cking ugly clothes and figuring out how to make them cute and people were like “Oh...”, and then like literally curating from anything and everything that was available to make one outfit and people are like “Oh my god, she looks like the skinny girl or like she has like an outfit that’s trendy”, like you know? [She] was trying to get fashion and she looks amazing like just that one little bit of seeing I think representation is a big thing, right? You need to like see it to have that mind of like; oh, maybe people want to wear this like her..” (LaRosa-Williams, 32, United States).

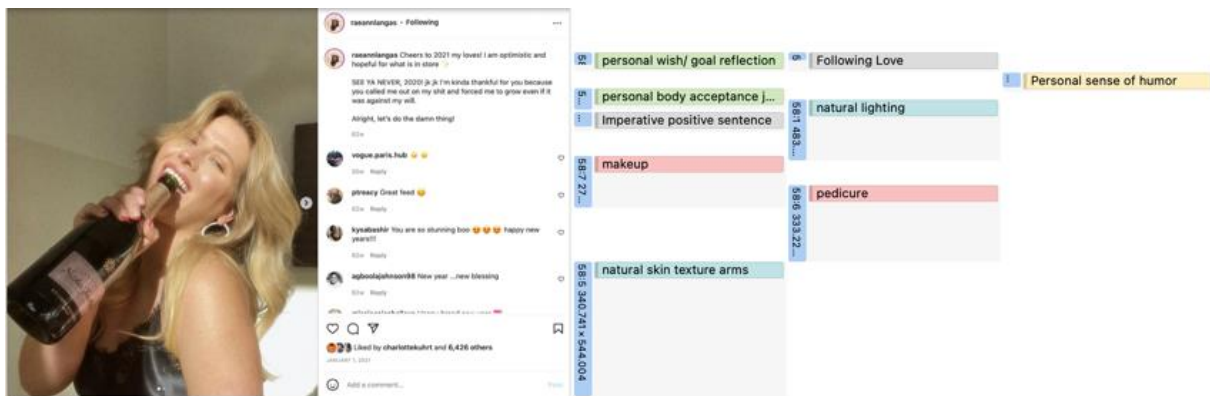


Figure 4.3

Then, one of the codes found in the body positivity sisterhood theme was that of *Body Positive Hashtags & Practices* (see Appendix F). Such hashtags include for example #fatbabesdoingthings or can include a larger summing up of hashtags related to the body positivity movement. As is mentioned by Riquelme et al. (2017) the usage of these hashtags and social media practices, in this case specific to the body positivity movement, could aid in a feeling of self-efficacy and sense of community. This sense of community seems to be found within the sample in the form hashtags, as is previously mentioned, as well as found within the code *Connecting with the Audience – Descriptive* (see Appendix F), with phrases that connect the influencer and their following in a collective imperative action, as can be seen in figure 4.3.

Further, an example of this can be seen in figure 4.1, as the influencer engages her audience in a collective positive mindset for the new year. Furthermore, the sense of community as described by Riquelme et al. (2017) seems to have a great impact on the viewing of partaking in the community as meaningful. This sentiment can as well be found within the interviews as when asked how one would

describe the growth of the body positivity movement on Instagram, the content creator recognized the positive impact it has had;

“So, I think like over the years it's grown so dramatically, I think it's great to see on Instagram, these days I feel like I see all body types talking about all variations of body positivity and self-acceptance and I just think that's so refreshing and, it just like it makes Instagram a nicer place to come to.”

(Bennett, 26, United Kingdom).

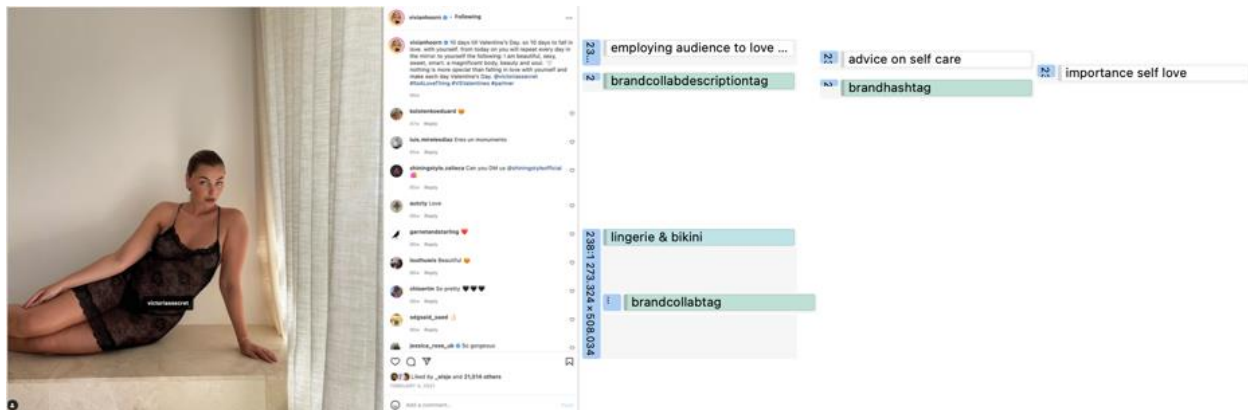


Figure 4.4

Additionally, with the creation of a sense of community it is mentioned by Riquelme et al. (2017) that it can have a positive effect on its member’s feelings of capability within the body positivity movement, when the members guide each other or help create a better understanding of its practices and values. This notion can be found from the sample as well, within the code *Advice on Self-love* (see Appendix F), as can be seen within figure 4.4, in which the influencer aims to guide her following in how to practice self-love, as well as underlining the importance of self-love. Another reference to the guiding of their following can be found within the interview sample, as one of the content creators exemplifies how she guides her followers in a practice of self-love that will help them mentally as well as in their practical life:

“So I think, and that's what I promote and that's why I talk about that people should feel like a model all the time, because if you have that strength, that confidence in you about how you look and what you think about yourself and the way you feel with yourself. If anyone, you know, is looking for a job, doing an interview, proposing a project, selling something, it will be different.” (Rocchi, 38, Mexico).

As is explained by Duffy and Kang (2019) the content creator is in control of its own content narrative, weaving through its descriptive and visual cues that can be interpreted by the follower as them being on a similar path or stage of life. However, next to their embodiments of similarity, to retain this

believe that what the influencer is projecting on their social media page is mirroring their actual life, the following can as well take charge with “direct intervention” (Duffy & Kang, 2019, p.13). This could for example result in, when the influencer is not deemed credible, negative commenting or a loss of likes. Yet, within the body positivity movement, it seems that this second indicator could as well be seen as facilitating or enhancing the first one, that of seeming similar to the audience. As one of the content creators for example referred to her conversations with followers, and even this leading to remaining in touch over a longer period of time;

“I, I, I love to kind of I go through my comments and reply to all those and DM’s as well, try to stay on top of my DM’s and kind of you see who is kind of like constantly supporting and getting back to you on things, and so you, I then want to make an effort to kind of stay in touch with those people...” (Bennett, 26, United Kingdom).

Additionally, a different manner that this feedback relationship manifested itself was mentioned by one of the influencers, as them using the comments on their social media posts and contacting brands in an effort of change for the body positivity community. As is mentioned by LaRosa-Williams (32, United States):

“And a lot of us do, like we literally will wear whatever outfit, we will compile all of like these comments from our audience, all these DMs or whatever it is. [...] and we get these like hundreds of them all the time and we'll compile them send it to brand and be like it would sell if you made it.”.

4.2 Expressing the Body Positive Persona

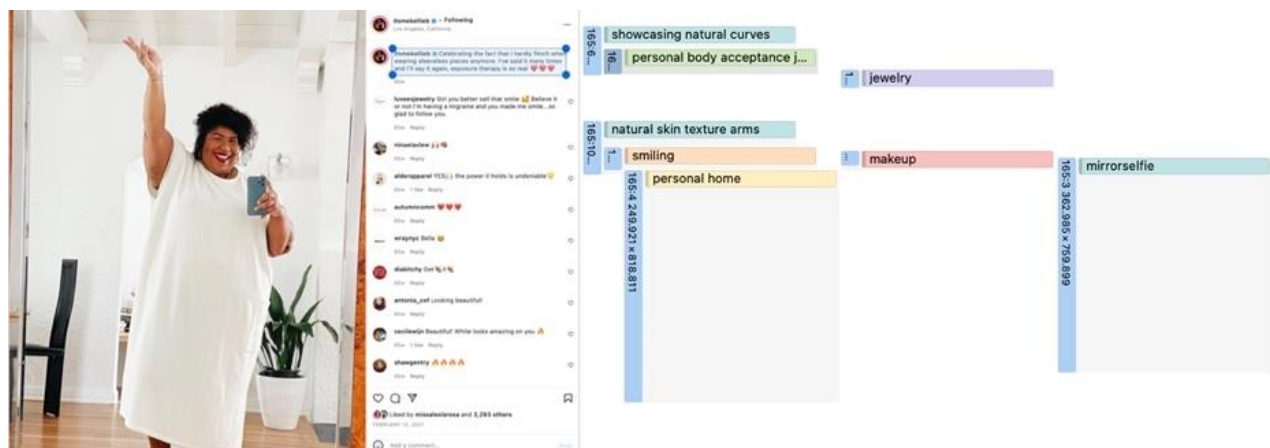


Figure 4.5

The second theme found from the thematic analysis is that of Expressing the Body Positive Persona, as it was often found that the influencer’s aims of conveying authenticity, was expressed in transparency of

their personality, often aligned with their body positive beliefs (Driel & Dumitrica, 2020), and in brand partnerships. Within the code of *Transparency – Self-love Development* (see Appendix F) one can see a manner of how this is done. The reason for this being that within this code this alignment was enacted by being open about their mental health, as it not only shows their transparent honesty (Driel & Dumitrica, 2020) and ordinariness of how everyone can struggle with their self-image, or inner positivity. It is as well connected to the expression of body positivity as it aligns with one of the core enactments of positive body image, namely as referred to by Tylka and Wood-Barcalow (2015); “Body Acceptance/love” (p.51).

An example of this can be seen in figure 4.5, as the influencer shares about their own personal journey with accepting their body, now being able, simultaneously admitting that this was not always the case, to love her arms. This willingness to be transparent about their own body positive and self-love experiences is further explained in the interviews, as one of the content creators explains how it is received by her audience:

“Yeah definitely because I kind of noticed a huge difference from when my platform was a lot more strictly modelling to when it was more personal I suppose. And I think that after, I think, the first time I shared quite a for me vulnerable post and it started conversations. It kind of felt like that was, I don’t know, it just felt more important to me than what I had been sharing previously.” (Bennett, 26, United Kingdom).

Additionally, in order to express their transparency further and with this convey their authenticity to their following, it was found that the influencers offer details about their personal day-to-day life (Duffy & Kang, 2019). This is then found in the code of *Transparency – personal life* (see Appendix F), with the influencers often sharing visual takes of their homes, personal relationships and in the descriptive manner of narrating their posts with a personal sense of humor. By sharing these posts the influencers then showcase their mundanity, underlining within their following a sense of “ordinariness” (Duffy & Kang, 2019, p.5).

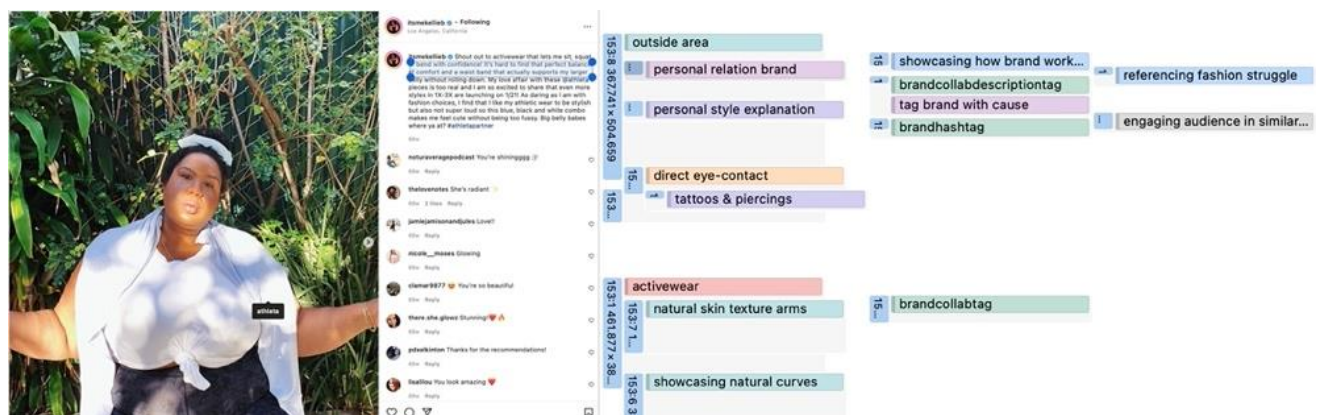


Figure 4.6

As is explained by Driel & Dumitrica (2020) the influencers can express their authenticity in their brand partnerships as well, by relating an own personal story to why they are using or are a fan of the brand. This can be seen from the thematic analysis with the code of *Expertise – Fashion with a Cause* (see Appendix F), where this choice is often exemplified in the brand partnerships of the influencers. As the companies often have a body positive theme at the center of their brand, next to the influencers often connecting an aspect of their personality as to why they love and use the brand. In figure 4.6 this is exemplified as the influencer has worked together with a brand that is size inclusive, as well as is a B corporation, and thus aligning with her personal values of being a body positive influencer. Additionally, it can be seen how she connects a personal aim of hers, this being able to be confident in her body and its abilities to her reasoning of passion for the brand.

Furthermore, this then can be perceived as an expression of “passionate authenticity” (Audrezet et al., 2020, p.565), as these specific brand collaborations, seem to be driven by a love for the brand based on shared morals such as size inclusivity, and are as well considered to be an aid in their own body positive journey as well as for their followers. This notion can as well be found within the interviews, as one of the content creators explains how working with size-inclusive brands can give her a sense of contribution to the community, as she explains;

“ It feels special to know that you're working with a brand that operates with a mission like that is cool or working with a brand- like one thing, specifically in plus sizes, like a lot of brands stop at like a size 20 or a size 24. Like working with brands that I know cater to my audience, who are bigger than that is important to me.” (LaRosa-Williams, 32, United States).

Finally, the last code found within this theme is that of *Transparency – Partnerships* (see Appendix F), in which the influencer was found to be transparent in their partnerships with brands, as well as photographers. In the sample, thus, the influencer can be seen being transparent about there being a partnership with a brand through the usage of #ad or the mentioning in their description of them being a partner (see figure 4.6). This can be seen to be in accordance with which is referred to by Audrezet et al. (2020) as “transparent authenticity” (p.565), through which the influencer makes an effort to be as transparent as possible about the detailing of their collaboration and give their audience an honest review of the brand. Similarly, within the interviews this code is as well found. However, the content creators conveyed this transparency by conveying their personal opinion of the brands that they have partnered with. As they explained this is then often done through detailing their personal experience with the brand, in order for them to convey their partnership as an honest one, which can be seen from the following explanation;

“I think when brands try to dictate your voice, dictate your opinion, like when brands are like you have to say only good things about this product. I'm like well I only do honest stuff now so like well, I'm happy if you wanted to send it to me and like we don't have to do this kind of partnership, yet, and if I do like it I'll reach back out and I'll let you know.” (LaRosa-Williams, 32, United States).

This specific brand transparency narrative can be seen as similar to the “establishing of authentic taste” (p.8) as found within the research of Dekavalla (2019). As is explained in their research how this pertains to the exclusive personal experience with products, without the involvement of brands or PR firms. Yet, within this research it is explained how these partnerships are conditionally, on the basis that they will only feature a product if their own personal experience away from social media is a positive one.

4.3 A Redefining of Beauty Ideals

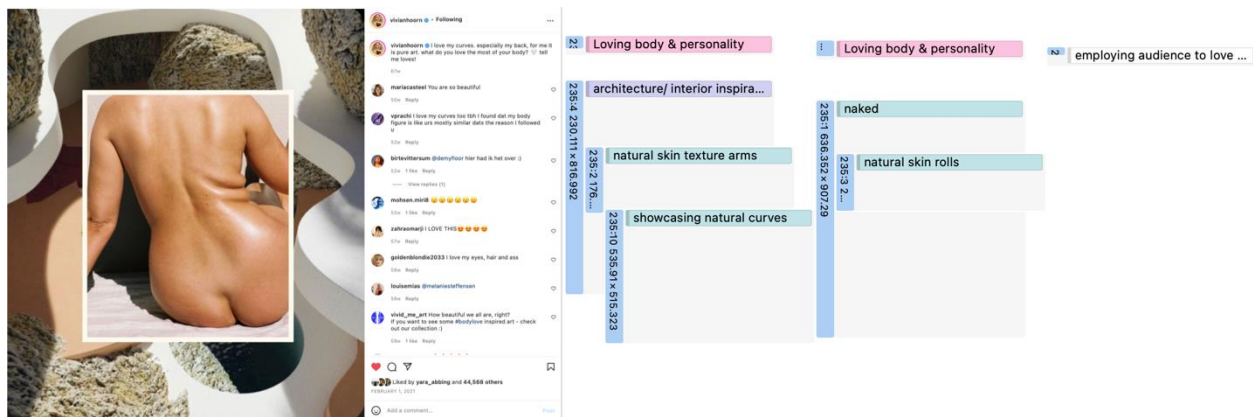


Figure 4.7

The third theme found from the thematic analysis is A Redefining of Beauty Ideals, and centers around the notion that the influencers seem to partake in the creation of new beauty ideals within the larger environment of the fashion world. Through, the first code *Showcasing of Alternative Bodily Appearances* (see Appendix F) we can see this form of establishment as the influencers showcase through the imagery of their own bodies a defiance from what has been described throughout the previously literature as a thin ideal (Cohen et al., 2020) or specifically in the fashion context, “the fashionable ideal” (Perthuis & Findlay, 2019, p.223).

As can be seen within figure 4.7, the influencer showcases her natural, naked, body and her body rolls from the side. As she further compares her body to “pure art” in her description, we could see this as what Cohen et al. (2019b) describes as “Conceptualizing Beauty Broadly” (p.51), visualizing for her viewers how a wide arrange of bodies and bodily features, can be considered as being beautiful. Within

the visual data this was as well shown through the portrayal of the influencer's natural skin texture, from legs to arms and their belly, in the form of, for example, cellulite. Furthermore, when the influencers showcased these alternative bodily appearances, this was often accompanied by the stylistic of natural light (see figure 4.8). One could consider this to be a deliberate choice, in order to evoke the sense that these appearances are natural to every body and should be considered as beautiful. Within the interview data the sense that beauty should be conceptualized broadly is as well noted on by one of the content creators, as she explains that through her content, she wants to celebrate the differences that can be found in each individual person, and how we should learn to love them;

“So, what I'm sharing is that we should embrace our differences and find each one, that makes it special. You know? And I think that, that's what makes you different, it's what makes you special.” (Rocchi, 38, Mexico).

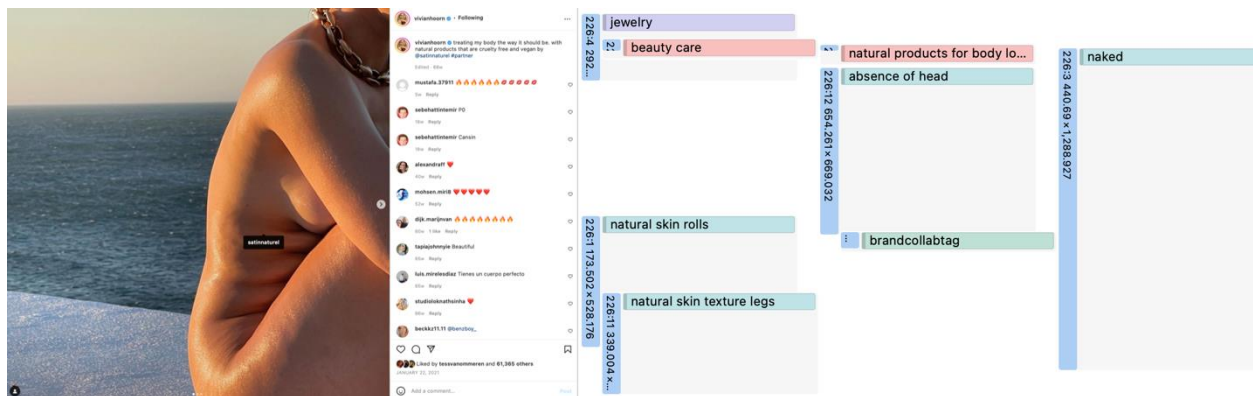


Figure 4.8

Similarly, it was found from within the interview data that the content creators placed an importance on conveying to their audience that all different sizes should be considered as beautiful. As they explained, this meant that they did not want to exclusively focus on conveying the plus-size body as beautiful, and extent this to all body sizes that can be found in the community. This was found to be explained by one of the content creators;

“I think a lot of body positivity for me at the time, sometimes went too far in terms of shaming other body types and it just gave me a real sense of kind of purpose, I guess, with the growing of Instagram at the time, that I just wanted to share. Just like a certain level of authenticity, but also kind of to highlight the struggles of every body type.” (Bennett, 26, United Kingdom).

In addition, within the code of showcasing alternative bodily appearances, it was as well found that some of the posts created by the influencers included the wearing of lingerie or swimwear, to be exact 16 of 150 posts, 6 posts included a part of or the influencer being fully naked, as can be seen in

figures 4.7 and 4.8, and nine posts were framed without the influencers face in the picture (Cohen et al., 2020). This, then, could be seen as a form of objectification of the body as it focuses on certain areas of, for example the naked body, or includes sexually suggestive posing such as with lingerie (Cohen et al., 2020). However, we can recognize an agency in this as it is coined by Holla (2017) that individuals could engage in “working it” (p.265) when taking part in the objectification of their body.

Especially, within this data, as the influencers are the producers of the image, they could be seen as expressing their creativity, presenting their bodies as an “ ‘aesthetic objects” (Holla, 2017, p.256), and thus simultaneously representing a new beauty ideal. This is as well noted on by one of the content creators, as she explains that wearing certain clothes or even simply showcasing her body, is often mistaken as a chance for people to sexually objectify her. As she argues that this might not always be the case, and is more often an exploration of her creativity, or what one might consider an expression of body-love;

“I think that, especially as having like a curvier body and that shouldn't always be deemed sexual and I think that for a long time, even just wearing [...] like low cut tops and stuff I just thought my boobs were too big, it was like too aggressive it was too, too in people's faces. And I just thought, but like the same outfit on a skinnier body isn't seen that way and [...] I think it's important that we kind of highlight that what people wear is their own choice it doesn't mean that they're looking for, asking for anything and it's about self-expression rather than what other people think.” (Bennett, 26, United Kingdom).

This, then can be seen as them breaking free from the established male gaze, which often used to produce this fashion imaginary which contained the thin ideal and portraying a new “female gaze” (Rocamora, 2011, p.420). This portrayal then thus includes a new personification of a feminine ideal, which is inclusive of all body sizes and shapes. Furthermore, one could see that the influencers aim at representing this new feminine ideal as legitimate through establishing their “taste leadership” (Dekavalla, 2019, p.9), showcasing their professional expertise within the world of fashion. Within the data this is illustrated through the codes *Style Advice*, as well as *within Expertise - Traditional Fashion Inclusion/ Personal Style* (see Appendix F). Within the latter code, the data showed how the influencers would validate their expertise, and thus aspirational ability (Perthuis & Findlay, 2019), through either their inclusion in what one would consider traditional fashion world events, or through documenting their own personal style differentiating this from the “traditional feminine ideal” (Rocamora, 2011).

This breaking away from traditional beauty ideals through their own creation of Instagram posts, establishing “a female gaze” (Rocamora, 2011, p.420), underlines the importance they place on a new body positive fashionable ideal away from the traditionally male produced fashion imagery. An example

of personal style can be seen in figure 4.2, with the influencer wearing bright, outspoken neon colors, and similar to her body positivity peers who can be seen in the post, showcases her personal style. Similarly, this code was as well found within the data through outspoken fashion choices, the wearing of piercings, and showcasing personal tattoos.

Furthermore, the influencers seemed to aim at positively effecting their credibility as a leader in taste (Dekavalla, 2019) through sharing posts in which they were seen at fashion events or with fashion designers, signaling their success through such invitations or inclusions. However, within the data it was also seen that these relations to, what one could consider, the traditional fashion world were often regulated in such a way that it did not endanger their authentic body positive persona. Within figure 4.2 this can be seen as well, as the influencer shares a picture of her at a fashion event, yet this is a body positive fashion event which the influencer notes #fatatfashionweek. This showcasing of expertise, whilst retaining their core message of the importance of body positivity, is as well noted on within the interview data, as the content creators explained how their start as a model often in the plus-size fashion world became a first step into the body positivity spheres. As it is explained by one of the content creators, that when starting as a model she recognized the importance of her representation and wanted to spread this not only through traditional channels, as well as on social media;

“And then I wanted to get into plus size modeling, and so I started to do that, and I was one of the bigger plus size models represented by a major brand and I knew that that was important, and I knew that that was new. Early agencies weren't really like working with a lot of girls my size, and so I felt like I was making a difference and feel important, and so I started documenting it on social.”

(LaRosa-Williams, 32, United States).

When looking more specifically at the code *Style Advice* (see Appendix F) we could see this as an expression of the term, referenced by Dekavalla (2019), “ordinary expert” (p.4). The reason for this being that through their experience as experts within the fashion industry, whilst maintaining their body positive focus, they give advice on how you could wear certain clothes or where to find them. Their ordinariness comes into play as they thus give advice on for example which clothes to buy for a plus-size body, deriving from their own experience in finding clothes, as they have often been excluded from the traditional fashion media, and even fashion brands. This is noted on within the interview data as well, as one of the influencers explains why she thinks her following comes to her for advice.

“But I think that it's quite hard to actually navigate finding the right things, and I mean it's hard for everyone to buy a pair of jeans, [...] so yeah I think like I tend to try to help people navigate where

to buy things yeah.” (Bennett, 26, United Kingdom).

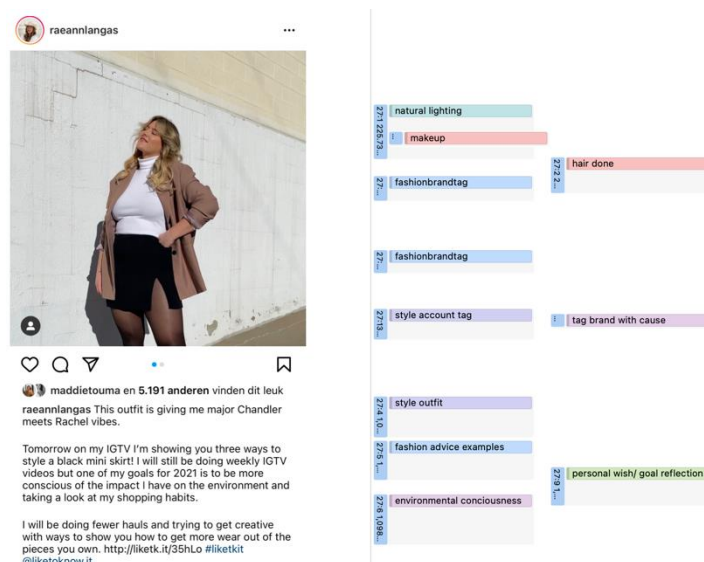


Figure 4.9

Similarly, within the visual data this is seen through the influencers giving advice on how to style certain clothes, as can be seen in figure 4.9 where the influencer announces that she will share how one can style a black mini skirt. Additionally, influencers shared recommendations through tagging brands in posts, with which they did not have a partnership with, and sharing how certain clothing brands enhance the feeling of body positivity no matter what size you are. This sentiment was as well noted on by one of the content creators from the interview data, as she noted what her aim was when creating her Instagram profile;

“And from this point, I wanted to demonstrate that you can be stylish in fashion, in your body, no matter your size.” (Tommasi, 32, Italy).

Then, the final two codes for this theme were found to be *Expressing Love – Body & Abilities* and *Taking Care of Body Inside & Out* (see Appendix F). These two codes seemingly underline the validity of the establishment of a new all-inclusive fashionable ideal. As the influencers not only express love and appreciation to their body and its features, thus conveying its rightful place within the fashion industry. It as well shows how they maintain their bodies on a physical and mental degree, in order for them to be able to continue their visualization of body positivity. This could be seen as, referred to by Holla (2017), “aesthetic labour” (p.256), finding here that the influencers set the aspirational values through which they

maintain their body as an aesthetic work of art, which similar to the mind of the greatest artists, is something that can ever be improved.

Thus, within figure 4.7 code *Expressing Love – Body & Abilities* (see Appendix F), of this theme can be found, as the influencer expresses love towards a specific part of her body. As it can be seen in the description of figure 4.7 the influencer expresses a specific love towards her curves, even employing her audience to take part in a similar mental exercise of purposefully appreciating their favorite body parts. With this specific code a similarity could be found with the concept described by Cohen et al. (2019b) as “Body Appreciation” (p.51), as within the data it, thus, was found to showcase the thankfulness of the influencer towards their bodily abilities. This was as well illustrated with influencers appreciating their curves and, for example, one of the influencers being thankful to their body as it was able to carry them through Covid-19.

However, within the data found from the analyses, the influencers’ appreciation of themselves seemed to extent from only the appreciation of the physical abilities to the loving of their personality as well, and the abilities it granted them. This was found within the visual data through the influencers expressing proudness of their achievements, such as within their modeling career or even publishing a book. Additionally, this was noted on by a content creator within the interview data as well, as she explained how through her personality trait of strength, she was able to showcase how she loved and appreciated her body. As she comments;

“But I think there's so a lot of people that actually kind of admire, it's not that they admire what I do, it's that they admire that I have the, the strength to show myself, which like that is impressive, you know? People admire people that, just show the body the way it is. It's like, “oh, you are so strong” or like a wire, you know? It's like, “I admire that from you because I cannot do it myself.”” (Rocchi, 38, Mexico).

This, as she further noted was something that her following admired as it was something they were not able to do so proudly on Instagram, and her strength in this ability did have a helpful effect on the following’s own body acceptance journey in their day-to-day lives, as she mentions;

“...I think people feel attracted to that even if they cannot do it themselves; they would love to do it, but they can't. So, they're like, I think they follow me more for that than being a model, I think.” (Rocchi, 38, Mexico).

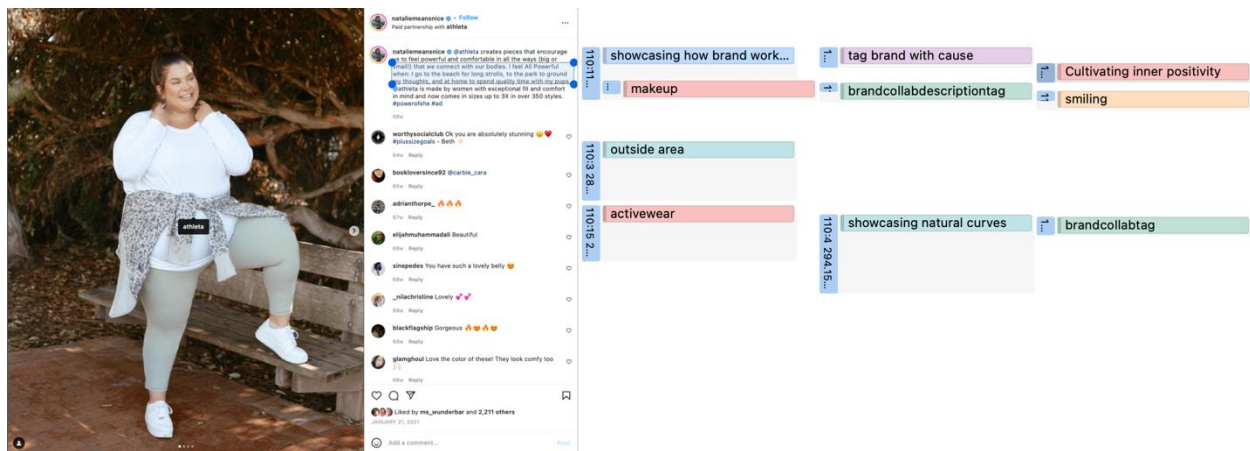


Figure 4.10

Then, the third code found within this theme is that of *Taking Care of the Body Inside & Out* (see Appendix F), which was found to be similar in its findings to the concept of “Adaptive Investment in Body Care” (Cohen et al., 2019b, p.51). The reason for this being that within the data the code was found to refer to self-care acts the influencers from the sample participated in, that was considered to aid in a healthy lifestyle. The influencers thus showcased parts of their day in which they partook in a sports activity, for example running, yoga, or even stretch exercises, or even signaling an upcoming activity with wearing what can be considered active wear, as can be seen in figure 4.10. The wearing of work-out leggings or other sportswear was a widespread found code, as four out five influencers were found to be, in at least one post, sporting activewear. Taking care of their body extended itself further in the data, as often the influencers were found to showcase beauty regimens that were part of their self-care activities, as can be seen in figure 4.11. Here one can see the influencer illustrating how she maintains a healthy body and mind, as she wears eyepatches attaining to a healthy skin, as well as lifting here mood through a self-care behavior of buying flowers.

Within the data this is further found through the influencers showing self-care in the form of subtly showing beauty routines, such as personal make-up and hair style, as well as manicures and pedicures. Within the interview data this was as well noted upon by one of the content creators, as she explained how she wants to convey to her following, and even outside of this circle, that whichever body type you have, you can have a healthy lifestyle, and enjoy the benefits of this;

“I’m referring to that everyone can have a healthy lifestyle, not only certain body types, I play, for example volleyball, three times a week and I dance. So, I always have a lot of sports, I’m a sporty girl I like to do sports I, I don’t want to be stopped by my body just because I have a body like this.” (Tommasi, 32, Italy).

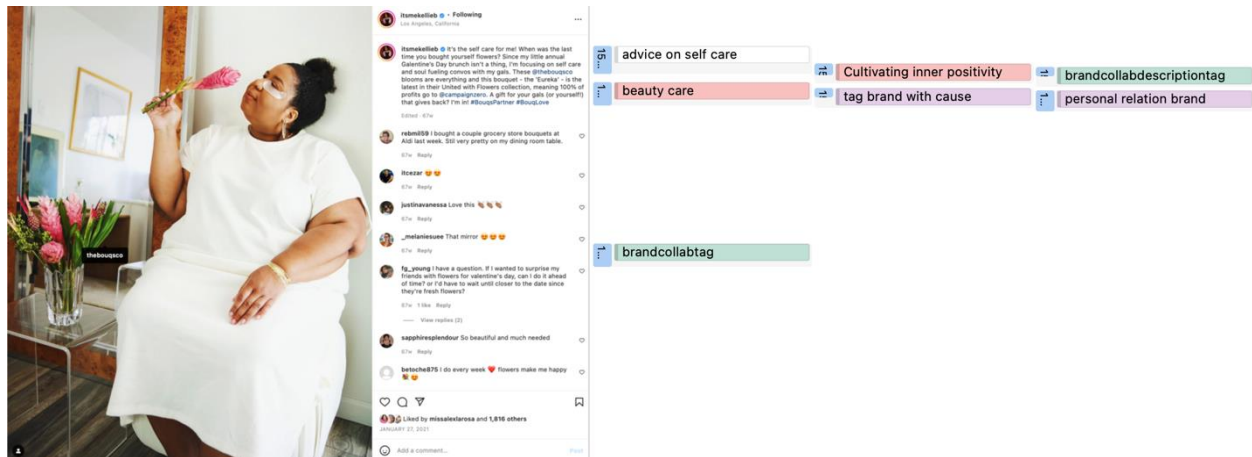


Figure 4.11

In addition, this code was as well found to have a similarity with the code mentioned by Cohen et al. (2019b) “Inner Positivity” (p.51). It was found within the visual data that the influencers at times referred to practices, which aimed at cultivating their inner positivity, through the usage of specific positive behaviors. An example of this can be seen in figure 4.11 as the influencer mentions how she will have soul fueling convos with her gals, and thus through social behavior aims to have a positive effect on her mental state. Similarly, within figure 4.10 this is described by the influencer as well, as she explains how her behavior of for example spending time with her dogs aids a stronger feeling of powerfulness for her. This is noted on within the interview data, as one of the content creators explains that how on some days you might feel lower than other days, and how it is of importance to find out how you can at that time improve your happiness.

“It’s a path, so everyone finds the things that make them feel better and pursue, to reach some or maybe their goals of acceptance of love, that they want to reach.” (Tommasi, 32, Italy)

Furthermore, from within the interview data it was found that an importance was placed, by the content creators to their audience, on the ability of working on your best self. This included the notion that within body positivity it is of importance to continually work on your mental abilities on acceptance and self-love, through activities of mindfulness (Cohen et al., 2019b). One of the content creators explained how sharing these practices were important for her to convey to her audience, as it was something that she as well as her audience could then be reminded of to improve on.

“How do we go within ourselves to discover the route to figure out is it something outside of ourselves, is it something that we're saying to ourselves, is it our own personal self-talk? How can we adjust that so that, at the end of the day we leave having a better relationship with ourselves, loving ourselves a little bit more trusting ourselves a little bit more. It needs to be deeper than just like your body is great, and you know it, and I know it and you should accept it because that's unhelpful for someone who has an eating disorder and is like struggling in a real f*cking way, like that's not helpful to that person.” (LaRosa-Williams, 32, United States).

4.4 Facing Cultural Norms & Struggles of the Fashion Industry

Similar as to what Duffy (2013) describes in her research, fashion brands as well as magazines seem to find a necessity to represent a more authentic representation of women. This then seems to be driven by an economic incentive, as within the current day culture women's demand is more skewed to products that can enhance their personal authenticity (Duffy, 2013), or as being reflective of their personal self (Kim & Sullivan, 2019). Duffy (2013) references this further as she mentions how this authentic representation within fashion magazines has seemingly had a positive effect on their selling numbers. This, than can be seen as a reason why fashion brands are more inclined to have body positive influencers represent their brands, as with their relateable ordinariness (Dekavalla, 2019), as well as their representation of the authentic women (Duffy, 2013), they could have a more influential effect on the buying behavior of female consumers. This is as well noted on by the content creators as they explain the change in the professional fashion industries marketing;

“Like we, as models are losing jobs because of the influencer, you know? [...] Yeah. Brands are changing the structure.” (Rocchi, 38, Mexico).

Furthermore, it seems as though especially fashion magazines have found it rather difficult to consistently represent this new authentic women. As it is mentioned by Hermans (2021) that a more inclusive representation is contradicted with body perfection techniques. This is as well noted on by Duffy (2013) as she explains that externally, throughout fashion magazines, body positive articles are placed next to editorial and advertising images of models representing the thin ideal. Perhaps these body positive efforts of the traditional fashion media have made them seem even more inauthentic, as this is as well referenced by the content creators as they explain the frustration in the inexperience of the fashion media, and even traditional media;

“But it kind of has felt a little stilted and it has felt a little bit sparse, and I think that the usage of plus size models specifically has kind of been because of their name, rather than the fact that they are a beautiful model that happen to be plus-size.” (Bennett, 26, United Kingdom).

Similarly, this frustrating experience is found with the produced lines by fashion brands, especially regarding size inclusivity, as the content creators explain how often it is rather difficult for them to acquire better-quality, high-end clothing. The content creators explain one of the reasons behind this might be the inexperience of these fashion brands to produce more size inclusive lines, as well as the setting within the larger fashion industry, to exemplify the production aspect is not accustomed to size-inclusivity. As one of the content creators explains that even when there is an intention of size-inclusivity, this is at times difficult to attain due to the financial aspect;

“Basically, like the cheaper manufacturers, they just have like a smaller size range. To go to one of the manufacturers, that has a bigger size range costs a lot more money so like brands that don't have a lot of investments, right up front like you're starting with a smaller size range and that's how you start the brand.” (LaRosa-Williams, 32, United States).

However, a different reasoning that is given for the lack of size-inclusivity is based in a negative cultural understanding of body positivity, and specifically the plus-size community. Within the traditional high-end fashion industry some of the content creators explained how they continue to represent the thin ideal (Cohen et al., 2019a), due to the for example French beauty ideals that these fashion houses see as integral to their brand. Even further, one of the content creators explained how next to the clinging to these “fashionable ideals” (Perthuis & Findlay, 2019, p.229), these fashion houses seem to have a misunderstanding of body-positivity;

“I feel like major designers and couture designers think that people with fat bodies are just waiting to lose weight, so why would they invest in something expensive at this size of their body.” (LaRosa-Williams, 32, United States).

This misunderstanding of the body positivity is further referenced in relation to the general public, as similar to what Cohen et al. (2020) describes of the framing of body positivity within general media, this is often construed or understood as the promotion of an unhealthy lifestyle. This experience is underlined by one of the content creators, as she explains the negative response she often receives when explaining body positivity on traditional media platforms;

“I have the general public target the comments after my appearances, they are not very positive because people think that body positive is the promotion of certain body types, which for their vision

represent a certain way of life which is wrong. Without even knowing me, without knowing that I, I eat well, I do a lot of sports, without knowing anything they say; “Okay, body positive is bad because it promotes body types which are not healthy. We don’t have to approve this kind of movement because than we approve obesity and all these diseases and the general public don’t understand.” (Tommasi, 32, Italy).

The general public’s misunderstanding of body positivity often seems intertwined with cultural ideals found within the content creators’ country of residence. Not only is this, then, often stated as one of the reasons they found the body-positivity community, or wanted to spread the body positive message, as explained by one of the content creators;

“It pushed me to want to be what I didn't have growing up really and just for somebody else to kind of feel as though it is okay to be as they are, and I just think like how refreshing would it have been when I was growing up to not be constantly thinking about how I was going to lose weight and being so obsessed with that. Because I thought that was like an end goal to like happiness and it never was.” (Bennett, 26, United Kingdom”.

Further, it is one of the reasons they want to spread this message, on social media, and on traditional media platforms, as this is, they find, a manner to reach the general public as well, and might give the possibility to slowly change this cultural beauty ideals. The importance of spreading this message is referenced by one of the content creators;

“If we could have more correlation, and we could have a more visibility, maybe in national media, I think that maybe something could improve, because you know to change the culture of a country, it’s the most difficult thing to do.” (Tommasi, 32, Italy).

Ultimately, the goal of being able to change or effect the cultural understandings of beauty ideals that the content creators described is found within the description of body positivity by Cohen et al. (2020), as it is stated that the movement “aims to challenge dominant appearance ideals” (p.2).

4.5 The hidden labors of the Instagram influencer

The last theme found from the thematic analyses of the interview data, found that the interviewers referenced the labor of being a content creator that one might not see from their social media activity. As they explained continuously authentically portraying their body positive persona on their Instagram profiles, does come with what one might consider mentally straining sensitivities that their general

following is not aware of, which can be referred to as “emotional labor” (Duffy & Hund, 2015, p.3). In order to exemplify this, the content creators first explained how they are aware of a sense of responsibility when producing their content, as they mention that younger girls might be following them and seeing in them a source of inspiration. One of the content creators explained that this sense of responsibility urges her to be as authentic as possible about her own struggles;

“I just I try not to hide away from anything and in my own time, I tried to talk about everything that I've struggled with because I think that there [are] kind of things that we all struggle with, and especially seeing there's quite a few teenage girls that follow me I certainly feel like a responsibility to be kind of as unfiltered and honest with them as possible.” (Bennett, 26, United Kingdom).

Furthermore, as one of the content creators explained within the body positivity community, she and her peers need to be aware of the “Instagram algorithm” (Driel & Dumitrica, 2020, p.15), that supports the spread of the thin ideal (Cohen et al., 2019a). As is explained by the content creator that the portrayal of bigger bodies is made difficult through the guidelines set by Instagram, yet these same guidelines do not apply for skinnier bodies;

“I will say Instagram as a company, one thing that is super f*cked up that they do is [...] so they don't use individual employees to like see if, like “Hey, is this porn? Hey, is this like against community guidelines? Like hey, whatever.” Like they use technology, and so, if you're a bigger body, it shows more skin, even if you're in a bathing suit or whatever, it's more likely to be commented on as against community guidelines, then a thin person for the exact same outfit and it's fine. And so, it's like that has definitely been like a huge thing the Instagram, the company, hasn't addressed. We've brought this up, like for years we've been bringing this up.” (LaRosa-Williams, 32, United States).

Not only is this a part of their professionalization, as this specific awareness is essential when trying to reach audiences for monetary purposes (Driel & Dumitrica, 2020, p.15), it is as well part of their authentic aim of spreading body positivity as this needs extra labor to still be able to spread such images. This, thus can be seen as a mental labor that the content creators need to be aware of when creating content, and are striving by having conversations with Instagram behind the scenes to have changed. Additionally, this can be seen as influencing their emotional state as when content creators have bigger bodies, they are not treated in the same manner.

Finally, the content creators underlined that having an authentic motivation when creating the content was integral to being a body positive content creator. This was exemplified by one of the content creators as she reflected on her experience of feeling as though she had become too motivated by

monetary incentives, instead of by her own intrinsic pleasures (Driel & Dumitrica, 2020) of inspiring and motivating her audience within the body positive community;

“It's funny like all of a sudden going on Instagram wasn't about connecting with people, it was about did my numbers perform, did I reach the engagement percentage that I needed for this post to work with the brand. Like it just sucked the joy, out of a lot of it and I, you know, when I first started, [...] I was really balanced like I was still creating content for brands, and I was still like doing the job. But, at the end of the day it was more about making sure I was okay, like my own, mental health, mental physical health my own everything and then also it was about helping other women, you know, and then I lost that for a while. [...] But I was able to do both, and I think there is a way to do both. [...] You have to have your kind of like purpose or like your why your mission, however, you want to say it at front of mind.” (LaRosa-Williams, 32, United States).

5. Conclusion

From the thematic analysis of both the social media posts and the influencer interviews, it was found that fashion influencers take part in the body positivity movement through maintaining a careful balance of their inspirational expertise, which is conveyed through them redefining beauty ideals within the world of fashion media, and their relatability. The inspirational expertise the influencers convey, when taking part in the body positivity movement, is based on the theme of a redefining of beauty ideals. As through using a “female gaze” (Rocamora, 2011, p.420) to portray alternative bodily appearances the influencers are, together with showcasing their personal style and inclusion in fashion events, able to create a sense of “taste leadership” (Dekavalla, 2019, p.9). Furthermore, by conveying love towards their body and through the usage of self-care, the influencers seem to validate their redefinition of beauty ideals, as well as giving it an aspirational value by showcasing how they are able to visualize body positivity.

The relatability of the influencers is expressed through their establishment of a body positive community, which can be seen in the theme of the body positive sisterhood. Within this it was found that they relate to their audience that they are similar to them as they are in a perceived sisterhood, resembling a personal relationship between them and their following (Driel & Dumitrica, 2020). Additionally, their relatability is conveyed through truthfully presenting an authentic persona reflecting their real-life personality, as they share transparency narratives relating to their personal body positive struggles and their professionalization on the Instagram platform, which was found through the theme of expressing the body positive persona. Through this balancing act the influencers seem to build on their persuasive abilities (Driel & Dumitrica, 2020), given by the credibility that can be found in their inspirational expertise, as well as the trust installed from their transparent representation of the authentic persona and the similarity function of the community creation (Dekavalla, 2019).

Furthermore, their audience are given the ability to find aspirational value in their content (Perhuis & Findlay, 2019) as the influencer is able to weave their ordinariness through inspirational content based on their expertise in the body positive fashion community. Relaying to their audience that they, as ordinary people, with the same struggles in body acceptance (Cohen et al., 2019) and being in the same family-like community, are able to represent and redefine beauty ideals, which could thus be emulated by their ordinary follower as well (Duffy & Kang, 2019). However, this is then slightly different from previously found research in which this balancing act is often ascribed to the professionalization of the influencer, in which there is a necessity of remaining persuasive in order to obtain monetary value from their content creation (Dekavalla, 2019; Duffy & Kang, 2019; Driel & Dumitrica, 2020).

Within this research it was found that perhaps next to this conditioning of professionalization, the

influencers genuinely aimed at having a persuasive inspirational effect on their audience in terms of finding more body acceptance and spreading body positivity. This can be found through the two themes found from the interview data, as firstly it was found how they seem to be struggling with the existence of cultural beauty ideals and the continued portrayal of the thin ideal (Cohen et al., 2019a) in traditional fashion media (Perthuis & Findlay, 2019), and finding importance in having a possible effect in changing these. Moreover, in the second theme it was found that they ascribed “emotional labor” (Duffy & Hund, 2015, p.3), that has come with their status as a content creator, to a continued awareness of responsibility when taking part in the body positivity movement, as well as underlining the importance of an intrinsic motivation (Driel & Dumitrica, 2020).

Then, when looking at how the fashion influencers portrayed themselves as authentic in relation to their professionalization when taking part in the body positivity movement, this is seen within their transparency with brand collaborations. The reason for this being that it was found within the theme of Expressing the Body Positive Persona that when the influencers’ referenced brand collaborations they expressed “passionate authenticity” (Audrezet et al., 2020, p.565), as the brands had similar values of body positivity. Additionally, it was found that the influencers expressed “transparent authenticity” (Audrezet et al., 2020, p.565), as they were transparent about the details of collaborations through the usage of for example #ad. Ultimately, as it was found by the research of Cohen et al. (2020) that body positive expressions within visual social media content is associated with better self-image, it might be of interest to employ the expertise of fashion influencers within fashion media to persuasively spread this message. Especially within marketing, as the persuasiveness of the family-like community created by the influencers and intrinsic motivation behind the conveyance of their authentic persona, as well as their inspirational expertise, could be transferred to the product, expressing this as an enhancement of their own body positive personality (Duffy, 2013).

For future research it could be of interest to interview the followers of fashion influencers situated in the body positivity community. The reason for this being that it could be of interest to analyze how they would respond to what one can term objectifying posts. As it is described by Cohen et al. (2020) that this been found to have a negative effect on one’s mental state. Yet, within the research of Cohen et al. (2020) followers were found, after viewing content made within the body positive community, to have an overall deeper appreciation of their bodies. It could, then, be of interest to see how followers of body positive influencers with a specific focus on fashion within their content, respond to objectifying posts especially accompanied with “objectifying words” (Cohen et al., 2020, p.1559), which were found in this research as well. Specifically, the inclusion of the fashion focus could be of interest, as this is a subject to focuses on the outside appearance of an individual. However interviewing professionals working at size inclusive focused brands.

Finally, regarding the limitations of this research it was found that the content creators were hard to reach, perhaps as within this research no monetary incentive could be offered, which is often something that is included in their general partnerships, such as with brands. In illustration, forty-five influencers were contacted requesting to take part in an interview, however only four responded. The low response rate meant that more time than beforehand was imagined was accounted to the scheduling of the interviews.

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Appendix A

General information influencers used in sample.

Influencer	Instagram handle	Nationality	Number of followers	Number of posts	Management
Kellie Brown	@itsmekellieb	American	151 000	3040	itsmekellieb@gmail.com
Natalie Drue	@nataliemeansnice	American	223 000	1481	natalie@nataliemeansnice.com
Vivian Hoorn	@vivianhoorn	Dutch	576 000	2315	Scala Management - info@scalamanagement.com
Raeann Langas	@raeannlangas	American	173 000	1723	raeann@rae-everyday.com
Sonny Turner	@sonnyturner_____	British	269 000	984	Milk Management – info@milkmanagement.co.uk

Appendix B

General information content creators from interviews

Influencer	Instagram handle	Nationality	Number of followers	Number of posts	Age
Lucy Bennett	@lucybennettmodel	British	35 700	1458	26
Alex LaRosa-Williams	@rmissalexlarosa	American	185 000	1609	32
Dany Rocchi	@dany_rocchi	Mexican & Italian	29 700	916	38
Cinzia Tommasi	@cinzia.in.wonderland	Italian	17 100	648	32

Appendix C

Example Direct Message send to fashion influencer on Instagram

Hi Alex!

I hope you're doing well 😊! I'll just get straight to the point; I would like to ask you to join mine and Dr. Sylvia Maria Holla's body positivity research project for the Erasmus University of Rotterdam.

We find your message of self-love very inspiring and applaud your contribution to the much-needed positive representation in the fashion industry. We, and presumably most people, consider you as one of the key creators in the body positivity movement. This is why we would love to get the opportunity to interview you, in order to map this movement more precisely, from your expert viewpoint. The interview would be focused on why certain aspects of your body positive content are important to you, the movement and your following.

We hope you'd like to join, because we want to illuminate how your content pushes the body positivity movement forward.

Love

Marit ❤️

Appendix D:

Example Email send to management

Dear Mrs. Larosa-Williams,

With this email, we would like to ask you if there would be any possibility for us to interview you. This interview would help vastly in developing relevant and robust research for the Erasmus University Rotterdam. The subject of this research is the body positivity movement, and specifically, the participation of fashion content creators on Instagram within this movement.

For this research project, my collaborating researcher is Dr Sylvia Maria Holla, postdoctoral researcher at the Erasmus School of History, Culture and Communication with previous research experience in the fields of gender, diversity, and emancipation. Together, we will ensure that the interview process runs smoothly by continuously considering your needs.

The body positivity movement will be studied within this research by taking a theoretical and a thematic approach. However, it is additionally vital to include the expert viewpoint of the content creator throughout this research—specifically, your role as a fashion content creator within the body positivity movement, as you play an essential role in the much-needed positive representation in the fashion industry.

Our hope is that you see the possibility of an interview. Your contribution will aid in developing crucial new research within the social sciences by adequately illuminating the body positivity movement. Additionally, you will contribute to a wider understanding of the body positivity movement amongst the public, as the research will be published on the Erasmus University research database, next to our aim of publishing its important outcomes in print media as well.

I am looking forward to your response!

Kind regards,

Marit Haven

Appendix E

Interview Guide

Hi ...!

Icebreaker questions

How are you?

I saw on Instagram that you ..., it looked great!

Introduction

In order to be able to analyze this interview, and with this for us to be able to use your perspective in a significant manner for this research, this interview will be recorded, do I have your permission for this?

Just to have it formally on the record, could you please repeat the next phrase? “I give my consent that my answers and information can be used for the purpose of this research”

First, let me introduce myself again, my name is Marit Haven, and as you know I am currently working on my Body Positivity movement research project, in order to successfully finish my master’s in media and Business at the Erasmus University Rotterdam.

With this research I want to explore how fashion influencers such as you, are taking part in the body positivity movement, what it means to you and your experiences as a body positivity fashion influencer.

Again, thank you so much for participating in this research it means a great deal to us to be able to include your opinions and perspective on this important movement.

I can imagine that you are very busy, so thank you as well for fitting me into your schedule and having this Zoom interview with me today!

As I mentioned before, the interview will take about 30 to 45 minutes and will have an open structure for us to explore your experiences and expert perspectives on the body positivity movement at length. In order to guide our discussion, there will be three general topics, which are the following;

- The usage of Instagram in the body positivity movement.
- Your position in fashion media as a fashion content creator.
- What authenticity looks like from your viewpoint.

Thank you so much, so let’s start with the interview then, and the first topic.

The Navigation of Instagram

When you were starting as content creator on Instagram, were you aware of the body positivity movement?

- What attracted you to become a part of the movement?
- What were your experiences when starting to get involved in the movement, and during?

What do you think your role looks like in the body positivity movement?

- Friend that gives advice, big sister, just the same as your followers, expert, mentor?
- Has your perspective on your role in the movement changed over time?

What would you say are the center activities or maybe even certain types of behaviors you find most important to take part in within the movement?

As you have gained followers in your work as a body positivity influencer, what messages do you think are the most important for you to send out to your followers?

- Body appreciation?

In your opinion, do you feel there are any responsibilities tied to your representation of beauty ideals of inclusivity?

- Could you describe these responsibilities?
- Awareness of thin idealization on Instagram, and what is your opinion about that, does it have any influence on your content?
- Importance of mental health messages?

How would you describe the growth of the body positivity movement on Instagram?

- Are there certain aspects of the movement that from your experiences are more widely spread or picked up on than others?
- Would you say the growth is fast or would you have expected it to grow more quickly?

From your experience, have certain aspects of Instagram helped the spread of the body positivity movement?

- Easy access and usage?
- Easy to reach an audience?
- You can produce content yourself, eliminating the need of for example print media.

The potential power shift in fashion media

In your opinion, what influence do you think you, as a fashion influencer, nowadays have on traditional fashion media? REFER TO PRINT MEDIA

- How would you describe this influence? (only certain parts of the fashion industry are changed -> inclusivity,

Looking at the inclusivity in fashion print media, what do you think that they could learn, or have already learned, from your representation of the body positivity movement on Instagram?

- Do you see any similarities? (which)
- Do you see any differences? (which)
- Do you think that the fashion print media gives you credit when they refer to parts of the body positivity that came from the online movement?

When you produce content for your Instagram account, how important is it to you to showcase inclusivity within fashion?

- How do you do this? (Reels, working with brands, giving background on brands)

From your experience what messages are most important to connect to this?

- Body love & appreciation
- Mental health

In your opinion, do you think it is important to give your audience as well content that shows inclusivity in parts of fashion that in traditional media have only been reserved to thin ideal? (Why)

- Such as bikini & lingerie

As you are a fashion influencer, in order for your followers to trust your opinion on fashion related issues, how do you express your expertise?

- For example, do you show this by going to fashion week, working with brands or fashion brand related events?

In your opinion, why would you say it is important to work with fashion brands?

- Opinion leader -> so showing and selecting for your followers which inclusive brands are there.
- Inspire them, to show how more brands are becoming inclusive

When showing your expertise through working with fashion brands, how do you choose which brands to work with?

When working with brands, do you think it is important to be transparent to your audience about this? (Why?)

- Could it effect your authenticity if not?
- How do you do this? -> For example showcasing the details of the brand deal, or explaining to your followers why you are working with a certain brand?

The balance of authenticity and expertise

As being part of a wider community such as the body positivity movement, is it important to you to engage with your followers?

- Do you do this by following them back?
- Do you do this by engaging with them in the commenting section?
- Do you do this by responding to them on direct messages?

What does authenticity in the world of social media mean to you?

Is the conveyance of authenticity on your Instagram account important to you?

- Why?

How do you convey authenticity within your Instagram posts or stories?

- How do you think your audience perceive your authenticity? (In the way you intended it)

From your experience, what is the importance of being relatable to your audience?

How do you maintain a balance between your relatability and your fashion expertise?

This was my final question, do you have any questions for me, or anything you would like to discuss with me?

Appendix F

Codes	Code distribution
The Body Positive Sisterhood	242
Connecting with audience – visual cues	66
Connecting with audience – descriptive	61
Relations with body positivity peers	40
Advice on self-love	32
Body positive hashtags/ practices	43
Expressing the body positive persona	382
Transparency – partnerships	157
Transparency - personal life	103
Expertise – fashion with a cause	63
Transparency – self-love development	59
A redefining of beauty ideals	566
Showcasing of alternative bodily appearances	235
Expertise – traditional fashion inclusion/ personal style	165
Taking care of body inside & out	150
Expressing love - body & abilities	16
Facing Cultural Norms & Struggles of the Fashion Industry	126
The hidden labors of the Instagram influencer	62