

From Nutrients to Narratives: How Nutritional Wellness Brands Represent Self-Care and Wellness on Instagram

Student Name: Fleur de Jong

Student Number: 499246

Supervisor: Linda Kopitz, MSc

Master Media Studies - Media & Creative Industries
Erasmus School of History, Culture and Communication
Erasmus University Rotterdam

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ABSTRACT

Since the Covid-pandemic, self-care has emerged as a pivotal concept within the (nutritional) wellness industry. Especially focused on women, self-care practices gained a large amount of attention on social media platforms. Following this trend, nutritional wellness brands have started to portray practices of self-care in their marketing efforts to sell their products, both on their own platforms and by making use of social media influencers. This present study examines how branded social media posts represent self-care and how these representations become part of a larger discursive meaning of what it means to live a ‘good’ life. The research question that this thesis answers is: “*How is self-care represented in the social media marketing efforts of nutritional wellness brands?*” To answer this question a qualitative approach was taken. More specifically, a thematic analysis is employed to examine the Instagram content of three nutritional wellness brands: AG1, Bloom Nutrition and Free Soul, to uncover the current representation of self-care. By means of purposive sampling, a dataset consisting of 215 branded reels and Instagram posts was formed. The analysis of this data involved systematic coding and the interpretation of the visual posts to identify recurring themes and narratives regarding the representation of self-care in the content. Following the thematic analysis six main themes emerged from the data. *Self-care as a community practice* explores the community aspects of self-care. The second theme, *self-care as a natural practice* shows how self-care is often represented as connected to nature, whether through ingredients or through showing the outdoors. *Self-care as an accessible practice* emphasises that self-care can be done everywhere, in an easy and convenient manner. *Self-care as a routine* portrays how self-care is represented as part of a routine, something that people participate in on a daily basis. *Self-care as an aesthetic practice*, explores how self-care is being romanticised. Whether through a pretty presentation of the product, seasonal aesthetics or trendy outfits, self-care is represented as something that always looks good. Lastly, *self-care as a physical practice* focuses on the presence of the physical nature and benefits of self-care in the branded Instagram content. Brands lack the focus on the mental benefits of self-care, but instead focus mainly on the physical health benefits. In conclusion, six main representations of self-care emerged from the branded social media content of the chosen nutritional wellness brands.

KEYWORDS: *Self-care, Representation, Nutritional wellness, Instagram, Thematic analysis*

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1. Introduction

During the coronavirus outbreaks in 2020 and in the following years, self-care practices - especially for women - have gained a large amount of attention online (Martínez-Jiménez, 2022, p. 2814; Wood, 2024, pp. 82-83). According to Martínez et al. (2021) self-care is “the ability to care for oneself through awareness, self-control, and self-reliance in order to achieve, maintain, or promote optimal health and well-being” (pp. 418). Self-care practices are behaviours that maintain and improve physical and emotional well-being, these practices may include sleep, exercise, healthy eating and social support (Myers et al., 2012, pp. 56). Since the pandemic, the focus has started to shift from an attention of care to a more commodified approach (Martínez-Jiménez, 2022, p. 2815). The further commodification of wellness, self-care and its practices has opened up for the potential of commercial exploitation of these practices and their related products like perfume, skin care and weight loss products (Martínez-Jiménez, 2022, p. 2824). Following this trend, brands have started to portray practices of self-care in their marketing efforts to sell their products, both on their own platforms and by making use of social media influencers. In addition, the aim of marketing self-care products is starting to shift from an aesthetic approach (i.e., using this product will make you *look* good) to a more affective approach (i.e., using this product will make you *feel* good) (Wood, 2024, p. 84). Hence, a shift has been happening in the representation of self-care since the Covid-19 pandemic (Martínez-Jiménez, 2022, p. 2815; Wood, 2024, p. 84). This has also caused a rise in popularity for nutritional supplements, specifically nutritional wellness supplements in the form of greens powders (Hines, 2023, para 2).

Self-care is a hot topic on social media right now and its (re)presentation can influence consumer’s behaviours and perceptions (Wood, 2024, p. 84). Since it is important to understand the representations and their impact, this thesis aims to research how nutritional wellness brands (re)present self-care on their social media platforms and how this becomes part of a larger discursive framing of what it means to live a ‘good’ life. To reach this goal, the following research question has been developed: *‘How is self-care represented in the social media marketing efforts of nutritional wellness brands?’*

1.1 Societal and academic relevance

Self-care has become somewhat of a buzzword on social media since the coronavirus pandemic in 2020 (Martínez-Jiménez, 2022, p. 2815). This ‘trend’ can also be seen on Instagram, when looking up the hashtag #selfcare, 81.3 million posts come up, for #wellness, 69.4 million posts pop up. Self-care and wellness can thus be considered popular concepts on

Instagram. Previous research has indicated that self-care is being represented in popular culture in ways that influence people's perceptions and behaviours regarding the concepts (Martínez-Jiménez, 2022, p. 2824; Wood, 2024, p. 84). It is thus important that an understanding is formed on the ways in which wellness brands (re)present self-care on social media. Hence, this research has societal relevance in the sense that it is important to understand the representations of self-care and the impact they can have on consumer's lives. Especially when considering its status as a buzzword and popularity on Instagram, which means social media users will likely be confronted with self-care in one way or another during the time they spend online.

The analysis of the (re)presentation of self-care by nutritional wellness brands provides an insight into the cultural and societal discourses on wellness and self-care, providing additional academic insights into these topics. The exploration of visual representations of self-care practices, values and ideals helps in contextualising the current landscape of wellness culture and the intersection with a 'good' life. This thesis will thus contribute valuable insights into the complex dynamics of wellness marketing and the implications this has for individuals, society, and public health.

1.2 Research design

To answer the research question, a qualitative approach was taken as this allows the researcher to discover the creation of meanings within a dataset (Fossey et al., 2002, p. 717). For discovering the representation of self-care and its meaning creation, this approach was found most productive in answering the research question. More specifically, a thematic analysis of branded Instagram content of nutritional wellness brands selling greens supplements was done to uncover the current representation of self-care, as this allowed for the identification, analysis and interpretation of themes that are discovered in the dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2016, p. 297). The brands that were subjects for this research are AG1, Free Soul and Bloom Nutrition, three popular nutritional wellness brands. Considering the sample of this research, purposive sampling was used. To be included in the dataset, posts from the three selected nutritional wellness brands had to adhere to previously determined rules. Examples of these rules include but are not limited to: (1) the post has to be posted between February 2023 and February 2024, (2) should include the greens powder and (3) should be solely by the brand. This sampling method led to a dataset consisting of 215 branded reels and images posted by nutritional wellness brands that were analysed by means of a thematic

analysis. A more in-depth discussion of the research methodology, sampling and reasoning for specific decisions, can be found in chapter 3.

1.3 Thesis outline

This introductory chapter aimed to introduce the current research, the research topic and both its academic and social relevance. Self-care as a concept and its relevance over the last couple of years was presented as the context for this research project. Moreover, thematic analysis and purposive sampling were presented as the main research design for this thesis. The remainder of this thesis is structured as follows. Chapter 2, which consists of the theoretical framework, provides an extensive overview of existing literature discussing self-care as a concept and its history, self-care as a (post)feminist practice and the aestheticization of everyday practices, under which self-care notably falls. By discussing self-care in these contexts, a theoretical base for argumentation in the results chapter is formed. In chapter 3, thematic analysis is introduced and argued for as the best option to research the current (re)presentations of self-care in branded social media content. In addition, the used nutritional wellness brands AG1, Bloom Nutrition and Free Soul are introduced and argued for, the purposive sampling process used for this thesis is also presented. Regarding data collection, several rules for posts to be included in the dataset are introduced and explained. In the next chapter, results from the research are presented and discussed in light of previous research. The connection between the themes that emerged from data analysis and self-care as a feminist and aestheticized concept is formed and discussed in depth. Lastly, chapter 5 provides an answer to the research question “*how is self-care represented in the social media marketing efforts of nutritional wellness brands?*” by looking back at the results from the research. In addition, the societal and academic implications of this research regarding the (re)presentation of self-care in branded social media content are discussed, followed by a brief discussion of the limitations of this thesis project and potential directions for future research.

2. Theoretical Framework

In this section of the thesis, an overview into previous research of the (re)presentation of self-care and the theoretical concepts that come with it will be presented. These theoretical concepts will form the theoretical framework of this thesis, providing a clear theoretical basis for the current research. First, an explanation of care and the development of self-care will be given. Through this, a clear understanding of what constitutes self-care and how it developed over time to the ‘trend’ it can be considered nowadays. Next, self-care as a feminist practice will be discussed. Self-care finds its origins in feminist theories; hence it is important to consider how feminism and self-care are connected. Lastly, the aestheticization of everyday practices, under which self-care arguably falls will be explained. As more and more everyday practices become aestheticized, self-care does not fall far behind. Discussing the aestheticization of everyday practices will provide the basis for understanding how self-care is represented nowadays.

2.1 Self-care: an overview

Self-care is considered to be a difficult concept to define, considering that scholars often use multiple terms when referring to self-care (Godfrey et al., 2011, p.3; Riegel et al., 2021, p.2). Terms like self-management, self-monitoring and self-help are used interchangeably within the same article, often making it unclear to the reader how self-care is defined (Riegel et al., 2021, p. 2). Hence, several definitions of self-care are used, but they are all considerably different depending on their contextual situation. This confusion around the definition of self-care seems to be caused by different conditions that arise in specific situations, but also by the different uses of the concept within different disciplines (Godfrey et al., 2011, p. 3). The definition of self-care used in research depends heavily on the context of the situation. For example, self-management and self-monitoring are often used interchangeably with self-help in the medical field when it comes to individuals self-monitoring their diabetes (Riegel et al., 2021, p. 2). Thus, context is considered to be an important factor in determining what self-care means in the scope of this research. For this research, the context heavily relies on uses of nutritional wellness supplements and the way they are marketed to the audience. Hence, in defining self-care for this thesis, the act of taking nutritional wellness supplements is the main focus. For this thesis, self-care is defined as “the ability to care for oneself through awareness, self-control, and self-reliance in order to achieve, maintain, or promote optimal health and well-being” (Martínez et al., 2021, p. 418). Since this research focuses on the representation of self-care in the context of branded content

of nutritional wellness brands, self-control and self-reliance are important factors of self-care that need to be considered. This is because people need to be self-reliant to remember using a nutritional supplement on a consistent basis. Moreover, it is considered that self-care refers to “those actions in which a person engages for the purpose of promoting and maintaining life, health and wellbeing,” and that it is a deliberate action a person undertakes (Berbiglia & Banfield, 2018, p. 200; Martínez et al., 2021, p. 418). Using nutritional supplements is a conscious decision a person makes, often in order to maintain or improve their health and wellbeing and can thus be considered a deliberate action that a person undertakes. Specific practices that come with self-care thus are the behaviours that help maintain and improve a person’s physical and emotional wellbeing (Myers et al., 2012, p. 56). Hence, self-care is understood to be something that enhances both physical and mental wellbeing. Self-care practices may include, but are certainly not limited to, a healthy sleep schedule, exercise, healthy eating and making use of a social support system (Myers et al., 2012, p. 56). Taking nutritional supplements is a habit that can help improve someone’s physical and emotional wellbeing and, based on the previously discussed definition of self-care and previous research, is thus considered to be a practice of self-care.

2.1.1 The history of self-care

People have been participating in forms of self-care ever since the beginning of humankind, often in order to stay safe but also to stay healthy (McCormack, 2003, p. 48). However, self-care as a concept was first coined in the 1960s, through work of the Nursing Development Conference Group and its members (Denyes et al., 2001, p. 48). Both self-care and the theory of self-care (Orem, 1995, as cited in Denyes et al., 2001, p. 48) form around the thought that human beings attend to and deal with themselves. Thus, this views self-care as something that people do by themselves to take care of themselves. This view on self-care can be considered complex, because the agent of care (the one acting) and the object of care (the one acted upon) are the same person (Denyes et al., 2001, p. 48). This is also the case when coming back to the act of taking nutritional supplements. The person who decides to take a specific supplement, does this for their own health and wellbeing. This person thus is both the agent and the object of care. This view of (self-)care distinguishes self-care from dependent-care and nursing care, in which the person who acts and the person who is acted upon are different agents (Denyes et al., 2001, p. 48).

In addition, the origin of self-care can be found in several social movements, which include both women’s and wellness movements (Martinez et al., 2021, p. 419). Understanding

these historical roots of self-care provides a comprehensive context against which the current practices of representation of self-care on social media can be analysed. The rise of the concept of self-care in the light of feminist, postfeminist and wellness movements thus provides a valuable context to interpret contemporary representations of self-care in the branded Instagram content of the selected wellness brands. Hence, it is important to consider that self-care and thus contemporary representations of the concept are shaped by the rich history of self-care.

According to Martínez et al. (2021, p. 419), since the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 and the following years, self-care has become extremely important in the context of this pandemic. Through this health-crisis and its lockdowns, people have realised how important it can be to take care of themselves to stay healthy both physically and mentally. Moreover, overloaded healthcare systems worldwide led to reducing non-urgent services, or moving them online (Martínez et al., 2021, p. 419). This shift in providing health care services led to a high importance for self-care in order for people to prevent contagion and to stay healthy (Martínez et al., 2021, p. 419).

Moreover, the pandemic caused a rise of trends in self-care focussing more on holistic well-being, a beauty-from-within approach and immunity support (Poole, 2023, para 1). Before the pandemic, the main focus was on self-care as aesthetic work, meaning that people took part in self-care practices because it makes them look good (Wood, 2024, p. 86). After the pandemic, instead of focusing on how they look, people started to put more importance into how they are feeling. Therefore, self-care and its (re)presentations are shifting more towards being considered as affective work, meaning that participating in self-care practices is meant to make somebody feel good, rather than look good (Wood, 2024, p. 86). This shift to self-care from within has caused a rise in the popularity of nutritional wellness supplements (Poole, 2023, para 1). Supplements gained popularity because people started to focus more on how they are feeling internally, meaning that they spend more time researching how to feel better. Hence, the covid pandemic caused a shift in the (re)presentations and understandings of self-care (Martínez-Jiménez, 2022, p. 2815; Wood, 2024, p. 86). Since the pandemic led to people thinking more about their health instead of their looks, this is also reflected in the shift in representation of self-care.

Moreover, self-care is represented as something that an individual does to portray that they are adhering to beauty standards, which in turn often stimulates women to take part in self-care practices (Martínez-Jiménez, 2022, p. 2818). To enhance the idea of taking care of oneself, specific products or programs are being recommended that will help women reach

this idea of wellbeing (Martínez-Jiménez, 2022, p. 2823). Thus, self-care is being portrayed as something that is necessary to feel good, but also that you need certain products in order to take part in self-care practices. This can in turn be seen as a further commodification of self-care.

2.2 Self-care as a (post)feminist practice

The rise of self-care as a concept finds itself for a large part in feminist movements. Hence, self-care is often seen as a feminist practice and is often aimed at women in marketing efforts. Understanding the feminist nature of self-care provides a productive basis to interpret contemporary representations of self-care. In feminist theories, two types of self-care are distinguished (Wiens & MacDonald, 2021, p. 221). There is a postfeminist approach to self-care that is tied up into practices of consumption, which is also considered commodified feminism, and there is the use of self-care as a way to form communities and resist against consumerism, which finds its origins within black feminism (Wiens & MacDonald, 2021, p. 221; Caldera, 2020, p. 714). As can be seen, these two approaches are vastly different. One focuses on commodified feminism, where people buy things to make themselves feel better. On the other hand, there is the approach that sets itself apart from commodified feminism, and even resists consumerism. According to Wiens & MacDonald (2021, p. 221), there is a clear distinction between the postfeminist perspectives of self-care that favours white, upper-class lifestyles and black and brown feminist approaches who use self-care as a way to actively decentre whiteness and consumerism.

Postfeminism puts the focus on promoting individualism, empowerment and free choice, puts the female body in the centre of attention, and self-transformation and self-discipline are seen as ways to become profitable (Gill, 2007, as cited in Martínez-Jiménez, 2022, p. 2818). Commodified feminism builds on these ideas, but throughout time developed into something that can be consumed by the larger public (Frisinger, 2021, p. 204). Within commodified feminism, feminism is taken as something that next to being an approach, is also something that can be consumed. The message behind feminism is commodified by brands, marketers and media by producing and selling products that sell the message of feminism: “girls can do or be anything, so long as they work for it” (Frisinger, 2021, p. 204). In this sense, postfeminism works for the hegemony of neoliberal capitalism, in a sense that it stimulates women to willingly take care of themselves for the purposes of their own wellbeing (Martínez-Jiménez, 2022, p. 2818). Commodified feminism adds that for women to portray themselves and take care of themselves, specific products or lifestyles are needed. These

products and/or lifestyle changes often have to be bought, making consumption an essential part of taking care of oneself. In this sense, postfeminist commodified self-care reinforces power structures because of how the privileged take part in self-care, making it less accessible for the less privileged (Caldera, 2020, p. 714; Martínez-Jiménez, 2022, p. 2818). This means less fortunate groups are less represented and taken into account when it comes to the representation of self-care, because they might lack the resources to buy products that are represented as ‘needed’ to take care of oneself.

In black feminist theories, self-care takes up a different space. This is important to consider because of the rich history of self-care and feminism in black communities. From a black feminist perspective, self-care is seen as an observable, purposeful demonstration of love for their bodies, minds and spirits (Caldera, 2020, p. 713). When women, more specifically black women, partake in self-care, they “reject the notion that their bodies and minds are valuable only when profitable to others” (Caldera, 2020, p. 713). This means that they are less considerate of taking care of themselves with the sole purpose of being valuable to others. In a sense, they thus resist commodified feminism because they believe in order to take care of themselves, they do not need to buy products or make commodified lifestyle changes. Instead, these women come together and build a self-care community; they participate in self-care as a community practice (Wiens & MacDonald, 2021, p. 221). The contemporary, commodified focus of self-care often lies in luxurious, mostly expensive experiences such as manicures, dining out at restaurants, shopping or getting facials and waxes (Caldera, 2020, p. 714). Black feminist self-care theory opposes these activities. These self-care practices are considered to be products of capitalism (Caldera, 2020, p. 714). Instead, (black) women see self-care as a way to resist these capitalistic exploitations and state that self-care should not be an elitist practice, but that it is a right for all (Caldera, 2020, p. 714). Hence, they argue that self-care is a practice that should be available to everyone, everywhere without limitations.

2.3 Aestheticization of everyday practices

The commodification and commercialisation of feminist ideas has paved the way for the transformation of daily practices into visually appealing, aspirational experiences. This set the stage for everyday practices, such as working routines or outfits, to be shared on Instagram, creating a visually appealing aesthetic representation (Duffy & Hund, 2015, p. 5). The aestheticization of everyday life also impacts the portrayals and practices of self-care. Self-care is becoming a practice that is aestheticized. Most often, the aestheticization of self-

care is represented through women that fully adhere to current beauty standards (i.e., they are white, slender and free from any imperfections). Often, comfortable and flattering clothes are used when portraying self-care in images (Martínez-Jiménez, 2022, p. 2824). Moreover, to enhance the idea of taking care of oneself, specific products or programs are being recommended that will help women reach this idea of wellbeing (Martínez-Jiménez, 2022, p. 2824). This can then in turn also be seen as the commodification of self-care.

The aestheticization of everyday life is a concept that was coined in the 1980s, originating in British cultural sociology (Xian, 2021, p. 183). There are two ways in which the concept can be approached. First, aestheticization can be found in transforming everyday objects into art (Xian, 2021, p. 183). On the other hand, the aestheticization of everyday life also implies that people are turning their everyday lives into more aesthetic experiences and practices by for example finding a personal clothing style, self-care routine or interior designs (Xian, 2021, pp. 183-184). According to Cova & Svanfeldt (1992), a popular trademark of the aestheticization practices is: “Everyday life is an art, as art is part of everyday life” (p. 297). The change to seeing everyday life as something aesthetic also opens new opportunities for brands and companies to market their products (Cova & Svanfeldt, 1993, p. 297). However, this also works in the opposite direction (Venkatesh & Meamber, 2008, p. 45). In other words, there is an increase of commercial influence on popular culture, in which aesthetics make their way into daily consumption practices (Bloch et al., 2003, p. 551; Venkatesh & Meamber, 2008, p. 45). Instead of focusing on just the technologies or characteristics of a product, the aesthetics (i.e., looks, feel and experience) of a product now matter more to consumers as well (Cova & Svanfeldt, 1993, p. 297). The utilitarian experiences of products are starting to be taken for granted and more importance is placed on their aesthetics. In addition, consumers rely on aesthetic experiences and meanings to guide their practices as much as logical reasoning does (Cattani et al., 2021, p. 3; Hansen et al., 2007, p. 546). In conclusion, the aestheticization of everyday life has serious implications for consumption practices and individual’s identities (Cattani et al., 2021, p. 3).

3. Methodology

In this chapter, the methodological approach for the thesis project will be presented. In order to answer the research question: *How is self-care represented in the social media marketing efforts of nutritional wellness brands?* a thematic analysis of visual branded Instagram content has been executed. For this, the brands AG1, Free Soul and Bloom Nutrition were selected. First, the sample and sampling process for the data collection process are presented and justified. Second, the data collection process itself will shortly be discussed. Lastly, the proposed method of data analysis will be discussed.

3.1 Research Design

To answer the research question for this thesis project, a qualitative approach has been taken. Taking a qualitative approach allows the researcher to delve into the creation of meaning in the dataset (Fossey et al., 2002, p. 717). Since this research is focused on understanding the representation and meaning creation around self-care in branded social media content, a qualitative approach is best suitable for this thesis research. Looking at the used methodology more specifically, a thematic analysis has been conducted. According to Braun & Clarke (2016, p. 297), a thematic analysis allows the researcher to identify, analyse, and interpret patterns of meaning, also called themes, within a qualitative data set. Moreover, according to Braun & Clarke (2006, p. 87), a thematic analysis is a productive option when a researcher is looking for meanings that are created within text. Hence, considering the aim of this thesis to discover the meanings created in the representation of self-care in branded wellness content, a thematic analysis is the best suitable method.

Using thematic analysis allows the researcher to have an organic approach to coding and the development of themes (Braun & Clarke, 2016, p. 297). Moreover, a thematic analysis provides the researcher with a set method that is unbound by theoretical commitments (Braun & Clarke, 2016, p. 297). Thus, considering the limited amount of previous literature available on the representation of self-care in branded wellness content on social media, a thematic analysis provides a productive analysis approach for this research.

In addition, the aim of this research is to have theory emerge from the collected data. Hence, a grounded theory approach, which works inductively, has been followed during the data analysis process to reveal relevant concepts that are present in the dataset (Chun Tie et al., 2019, p. 2). This pairs well with a thematic analysis, as a thematic analysis provides the

opportunity to work both inductively and deductively, offering the researcher great flexibility during the research process (Braun & Clarke, 2016, p. 297).

3.2 Sample & sampling

Branded Instagram accounts of wellness companies have been selected because they use Instagram to create branded social media content that drives consumer engagement, and ultimately purchasing behaviour (Tafesse & Wien, 2018, p. 745). In other words, branded content on Instagram is often designed to make the audience buy the product that is shown. The commodification of wellness products by wellness brands can often clearly be distinguished in their marketing efforts. In addition, the advertising industry relies on people buying more products (Aiello & Parry, 2020, p. 189). Hence, wellness companies are marketing their products in order to sell more. However, as Aiello & Parry (2020, p. 189) emphasised, consumers are not only buying a product, but they are also expressing their personality through the products they buy. Thus, by buying specific self-care products, consumers express themselves in the way that they want to be seen

More specifically, nutritional wellness brands were chosen because buying wellness supplements can be seen as a way of showing how someone is living a healthy life, whereas the supplements by themselves do not make a lifestyle healthy. After the Covid-19 pandemic, the nutritional wellness market is being driven by holistic ideas of wellness and a beauty-from-within principle (Poole, 2023, para 1). This means that approaches to self-care have shifted to also include taking care of one's nutritional health, supporting beauty-from-within. Hence, the (re)presentation of self-care in branded social media posts regarding nutritional wellness becomes part of the larger discursive framing of what it means to live a 'good' life.

The decision to focus on nutritional wellness brands selling and promoting green powders specifically is based on its current popularity on social media, where the virality and marketing initiatives are making a severe impact on the popularity of the greens (Hines, 2023, para 2). Moreover, according to Industry Research (2022, para 2) the global market for green supplement powders was valued at 255 million American dollars in 2020 and is expected to grow to 597.4 million American dollars by 2027. Hence, the market for green powder supplements is expected to consistently grow over the coming years, providing an explanation for the need to research the representation of self-care in the marketing of brands that sell these products.

The brands that have been selected for this research are: Athletic Greens (AG1), Bloom Nutrition and Free Soul. All three of these brands sell supplements in the form of

green powders. An overview of the existing media reporting on green supplements was made as a first step, and this overview was then narrowed down to the three selected brands as all of them are named consistently in various articles about the top green supplements currently on the market (Achonwa & Murden, 2024, para 3; Barraclough, 2023, para 2; Davenport, 2023, para 2; Head, 2023, para 29; Silva & Davis, 2024, para 7; Snell, 2024, para 4). The accounts that will be looked at are the official Instagram accounts for these brands. For all the brands, this is their main account on Instagram, and they do not have any other accounts. Next to accounts on Instagram, all three brands are also active on other social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter (now X) and TikTok.

Instagram has been chosen as the platform of analysis because of the visual nature of the platform. These visual elements provide brands the opportunity to sell their products, but at the same time also sell a commodity-generated lifestyle to their followers (Wiens & MacDonald, 2021, p. 220). Moreover, there is a large prevalence of lifestyle content on Instagram. According to Naeem & Hussain (2022, p. 37), accounts that share modern lifestyle posts are likely to gain more followers, engagement and appreciation on their posts. This shows that lifestyle content is popular and in demand by audiences on Instagram.

The choice was made to solely look at Instagram visuals because visuals are the main purpose of Instagram. Moreover, the visual element of an Instagram post is what often gets people to look at a caption, therefore, when selling a product and/or lifestyle the visual is the first important element that consumers consider. In addition, according to Valentini et al. (2018, p. 371), the visual content that consumers get presented on Instagram influences their engagement with the posts and their purchase intentions for the products presented in the post. Fardiah et al. (2023, p. 88) also found that the visuals in Instagram content are the element that are most likely to elicit responses from consumers. Finally, Instagram was chosen as a platform because research has proven that the visual content that consumers get presented with on Instagram impacts their social perceptions and self-images (Mahmood & Malik, 2022, p. 360). Hence, this further proves the importance of looking at the representation of self-care and wellness in the visual contents of wellness brands on Instagram.

Purposive sampling has been used to gather the dataset required for this research. This type of sampling is often used in qualitative research, on the occasions that a researcher wants to gain detailed insights into a specific concept or experience rather than say something about the larger population (McCombes, 2023, para 34). To be included in the data set, the data had to adhere to previously determined characteristics. First, the post should be posted between February 2023 and February 2024. Considering how nutritional greens and self-care as a

concept gained more traction during and after the Covid-19 pandemic that ended in 2022, the decision was made to include posts by the three brands posted in this time frame. This provides the researcher with the most recent social depictions of self-care, making the research more relevant in current times. Moreover, the post should include the greens powder that the brand sells. In turn, this ensures that it is only researched how self-care is represented in terms of the marketing of green powders of wellness brands on Instagram. The posts including the green powders are representative of a trend to understand self-care from within. However, they are also commercialising the powders as ‘caring consumption’ rather than a caring attitude, as the main purpose of posting the powders is to get the audience to buy the product. Lastly, the post should be solely by the brand. On Instagram it is possible to make a collaboration post, which is often used by influencers who work together with a brand. However, the decision was made to solely look at posts from the wellness brand specifically, as this makes sure that only the views of the brand are included in the research. During the data collection process, additional filtering decisions were made based on the relevance of the content with regards to the research question. Table 1 presents an overview of rules designed to include or exclude branded content from the dataset

Table 1

Overview of content included in/excluded from dataset

Included in dataset	Excluded from dataset
Posted between February 2023 and February 2024	Give-aways, promotional events and business events
Post includes green powder sold by the brand	Posts that mainly revolved around text and tips
Post solely by the brand (no collaborations)	Graphics and non-photos
	Posts that included different products
	Behind-the-scenes where the focus the company and not on the product
	Recipes including the product (e.g., smoothie recipes, breakfast recipes)
	Voice-overed day-in-the-life, morning routines, spend-the-day-with-me videos

3.3 Data collection

Instagram posts posted between February 2023 and February 2024 have been gathered for AG1, Free Soul and Bloom Nutrition. During the data collection process, all posts placed in the aforementioned time frame were downloaded and saved onto the researchers computer. This led to a dataset consisting of 239 pieces of content for the brand AG1, 225 pieces of content for the brand Free Soul and 387 images and reels for the brand Bloom Nutrition. As a next step in the data collection process the researcher commenced a data cleaning process. In this cleaning process, close attention was kept to the previously explained pre-set rules for inclusion in the dataset. After cleaning all the data, the dataset consisted of 78 posts for the brand AG1, 73 posts for the brand Free Soul and 64 posts for the brand Bloom Nutrition. Hence, a total dataset of 215 reels and images was gathered. A short overview of information about the dataset can be found in appendix A. Following the data collection and cleaning process, all collected Instagram reels and images were uploaded into the program Atlas.ti for the data analysis process. The program Atlas.ti allowed for a smooth coding process and analysis experience during the research process.

3.4 Data analysis

When performing a thematic analysis, coding of the data is considered an essential element of the data analysis process. The analysis process for this thesis followed Braun & Clarke (2006, p.87). First, the researcher familiarised themselves with the data, going through the reels and posts multiple times, noting down initial ideas (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 87). Next, initial codes were generated by systematically going through all the data and coding interesting features for each reel or post (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.87). These initial codes identified the most basic features of the data that were deemed interesting and useful in answering the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 88). The initial coding stage led to the creation of 348 initial codes. As the next step, these codes were grouped into potential themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 87). Potential themes were identified and codes relating to these themes were grouped together, leading to six (potential) themes, namely, 1) self-care as a community practice, 2) self-care as a natural practice, 3) self-care as an accessible practice, 4) self-care as a routine, 5) self-care as an aesthetic practice and 6) self-care as a physical practice. Next, these themes were reviewed and a final thematic map of the data was created (see fig 1) (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 87). Once all the themes were checked, a final definition and name was given to each of the themes, providing a basis for the analysis report (Braun &

Clarke, 2006, p. 87). In addition, a codebook was created with exemplary open codes to provide an overview (see appendix B).

Figure 1

Thematic map



4. Results & Discussion

The following section presents and explains the six main themes that were found during the thematic analysis. The first theme, *self-care as a community practice* emphasises the community aspect of self-care. In this theme, self-care is seen as something that people are doing together, as opposed to by themselves. Moreover, it also shows how self-care is a practice that is for everyone. The second theme *self-care as a natural practice* shows how self-care is often represented as something that is connected to nature. It contains the representation of self-care in connection to healthy foods, nature, the outdoors and the presence of sunlight. The third theme, *self-care as an accessible practice* explores how self-care is represented as a practice that can easily be done everywhere. It shows how self-care is represented to be easy and convenient and can take place wherever the individual wants. The fourth theme, *self-care as a routine* portrays how self-care is represented as something that should be a routine, something that takes place every single day. It explores habits and daily practices. The fifth theme, *self-care as an aesthetic practice* explores how self-care is represented as a romanticised, aesthetic practice. Whether through pretty presentation, seasonal aesthetics, or nice-looking outfits, self-care is represented as something that always looks good. The sixth and last theme, *self-care as a physical practice* focuses on the physical nature of self-care. It is represented as something that only takes place physically, as opposed to both physically and mentally. All these themes contain sub-themes that allow deeper exploration of the representation of self-care within the theme.

4.1 Self-care as a community practice

The first theme that emerged from the thematic analysis is *self-care as a community practice*. This theme explores the communal aspects of the representation of self-care. First, it connects social occasions and self-care, representing self-care as something that people often do together. In addition, it also explores how self-care is represented as something that can be done by anyone, regardless of gender or ethnicity.

Self-care is often represented as a social activity. Posts contain groups of people, or specifically mention self-care as a social occasion (see figure 2). Reels posted by the brand FreeSoul show girls meeting up together to have so-called “bestie greens dates”. These presented “greens dates” are social occasions, where the girls meet up together and have their greens. Hence, self-care here is presented as something that girls do when they are together, making it a collaborative experience instead of an individual one. This is reinforced by posts

that contain groups of people and organised activities. For example, a post by the brand AG1, showed a woman's morning routine, in which she takes her greens on a run with her group of friends (see figure 2). Another post by the brand Bloom Nutrition portrayed a group of friends meeting up for a "paint & sip," where they drink their greens and paint pumpkins (see figure 2). Specific 'events' are being organised by groups of friends where they partake in activities that allow them to take care of themselves, instead of doing it by themselves at home. In addition, as part of their brand, FreeSoul has released merchandise that contains the text "women's wellness club". This text can be found in quite a few of their postings, either on caps that the girls are wearing, on bags they are using, or on the cups that they use to carry their greens in (see figure 2). By essentially creating a community within their brand called a women's wellness club, FreeSoul presents self-care as a community practice. This idea of self-care as a community originates from black feminist self-care theories. These theories argue that women come together and build communities around self-care, partly to resist the notion that taking care of themselves is solely designed for them to be valuable to others (Caldera, 2020, p. 713; Wiens & MacDonald, 2021, p. 221). Combining these insights, the brands represent self-care as a community practice, where women come together, not just to take care of themselves, but also to make this an enjoyable experience for themselves, resisting previous notions of self-care.

Figure 2

Screenshots from posts showing community building in self-care representation



As a sub-theme, it emerged that the brands place importance of self-care as an inclusive practice, meaning that it is represented as something that everyone can partake in regardless of their gender or ethnicity. FreeSoul has focused their branding mainly on females, portraying self-care as something that girls do when they come together. A so-called “women’s wellness club” merchandise line reinforces this idea presented by FreeSoul that self-care is something that is only done by women. However, the other two brands, AG1 & Bloom Nutrition take a more gender-inclusive approach to presenting self-care by also including males in their social media content. For example, Bloom Nutrition even goes as far as posting a reel in which they ask their male employees if they drink greens and why (see figure 3). The first male starts off by saying “men definitely drink greens”, after which multiple other male colleagues explain that they drink greens daily too. Hence, self-care in this situation is presented as something that can also be taken part in by males, proving that it is not solely females that are taking care of themselves. When looking at the three brands, there is thus a clear divide in the representation of self-care when it comes to gender specifically. Where FreeSoul presents self-care as something that is only done by women, AG1 and Bloom Nutrition take the approach that self-care is something that males also take part in. Taking another approach to inclusivity, the brands all represent self-care as something that can be done by anyone regardless of their ethnicity or nationality (see figure 3). The brands all portray different ethnicities in their posts, giving the impression that self-care can thus be done by anyone without taking ethnicity into account as a limiting factor. For example, FreeSoul often has girls from different backgrounds present in their videos, AG1 and Bloom also do this, but in a less frequent manner. The idea that self-care is a practice that can be done by anyone, regardless of their backgrounds, can also be connected back to black feminist theories. The black-feminist movement believes that self-care is a right for everyone and should thus be available to all (Caldera, 2020, p. 714).

Figure 3

Screenshots from posts showing male-usage and different ethnicities



Considering all these findings from the data regarding self-care as a community practice, it can be found that self-care is often represented as something that people do in groups. Whether it is hanging out with friends, doing something fun or going for a run, drinking greens (and thus self-care) is seen as something that people do as a community. Moreover, when considering inclusivity, it was found that self-care is represented as a practice that can be done by anyone, regardless of their gender or background. Hence, self-care is represented as something that can be performed by whoever wants to and as a collaborative practice.

4.2 Self-care as a natural practice

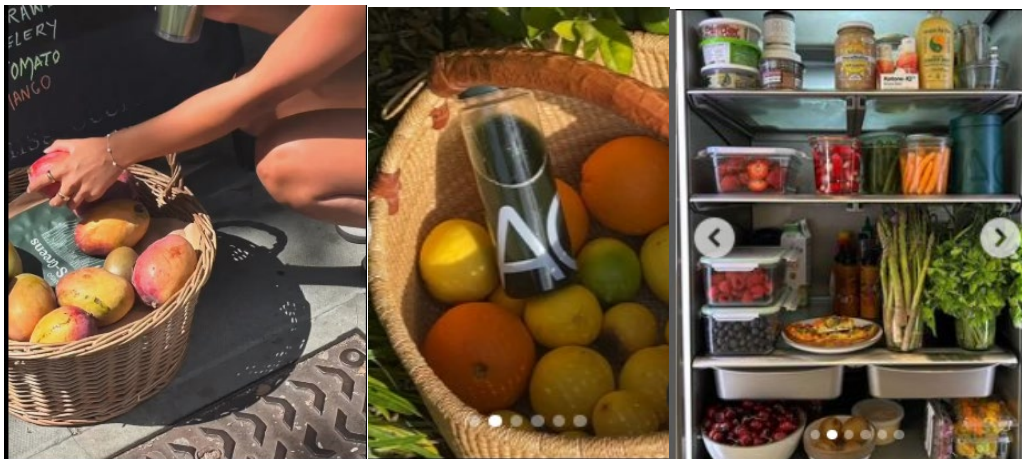
The second theme that emerged from data analysis, *self-care as a natural practice* explores how self-care is represented as connected to nature and natural elements. It revolves around the implementation of healthy fruits and vegetables and how they help frame self-care as a healthy, natural practice. In addition, it explains the role of nature and the outdoors in the representation of self-care on branded social media accounts. It also explores how plants and flowers are used to bring natural elements back into the representation of self-care, whether that is explicitly being outside, or through implementing them in the background of videos or pictures. Lastly, it explains the role of sunlight and the creation of shadows in the representation of self-care as a natural practice. By representing self-care as a natural practice, it seems that the brands are trying to play into the fact that their greens supplements are

healthy. The natural elements that are used can all be tied in some way as being perceived as healthy, eating fruits and vegetables, spending time outdoors and sitting in the sunlight are all self-care practices that are deemed good for an individual.

In many of their posts, the three brands feature fruits or vegetables (see figure 4). Whether this is to promote a new flavour of their greens powder, or just to fill the background, ample posts contained fruits and/or vegetables. With this approach, it seems like the brands want to emphasise that their products are natural and healthy. According to Kato & Sugaira (2024, p. 1), the addition of realistic images of fruits and vegetables to product packaging and images gives off the impression that a product is deemed healthy and attractive. Hence, the addition of fruits and vegetables to social media content including greens supplements, next to making the posts look nice, can make the audience believe that this product is healthy.

Figure 4

Screenshots of posts containing fruits and vegetables in the background



Besides using fruits and vegetables to represent self-care as a natural practice, the brands also literally take their products, and thus self-care, outside. It seems that by doing so, the brands aim to represent self-care as a calm and peaceful practice. The product is shown on the beach, in a forest or in a park (see figure 5). Looking at the Instagram pages of the brands, these places always seem quiet and peaceful. However, next to being peaceful and calm, being outside in itself is often also a recommended self-care practice (Myers et al., 2012, p.56). Thus, taking the greens outdoors also plays into self-care being healthy. Hence, self-care is being represented as a healthy, natural, calm and peaceful practice, taking people and self-care practices outside. Next to content directly related to nature and the outdoors, the

brands also include several natural elements in their posts to maintain the link between self-care and nature. For example, the brands tend to bring back flowers and plants in their posts to create some sense of nature in their content (see figure 5). In baskets, in shops or just in the background of pictures, flowers and plants are added to highlight the association between self-care and nature. The outdoors and natural elements are used in the brands' efforts to represent their products and self-care as a healthy and natural practice.

Figure 5

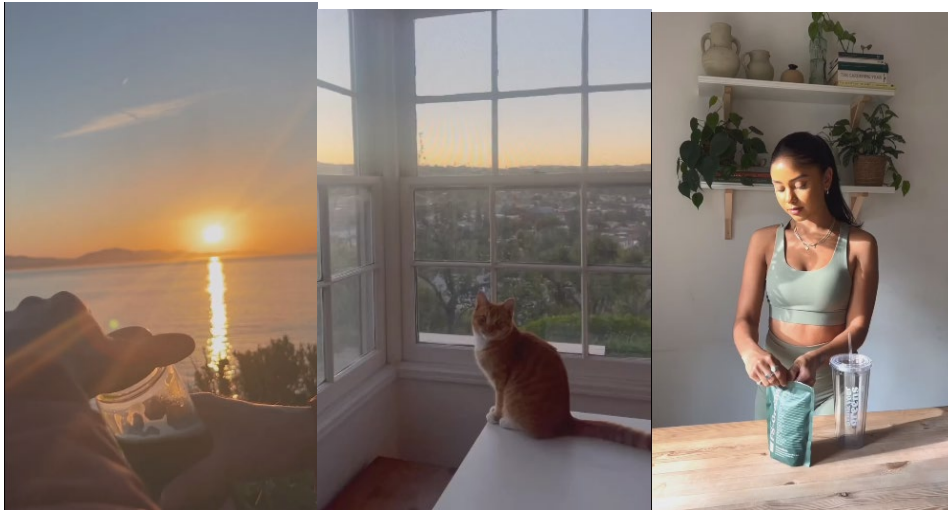
Screenshots of posts containing outdoor and nature elements



Another sub theme that emerged when looking at *self-care as a natural practice* was the presence of sunlight and shadows in Instagram posts (see figure 6). Considering sunlight, sunrise and sunset were often used in the social media content of the brand. Sunrise specifically holds value here, as drinking greens is often referred to as a morning practice, which will be further discussed in chapter 4.4. What is noticeable in the usage of sunlight, shadows and the outdoors is that sunlight was used a lot more than rainy days. This plays into the positive, peaceful and calm nature of using the outdoors in representing self-care (Hy, 2024, para. 5). Sunny days are often considered to be more peaceful than storms and/or rainy days (Hy, 2024, para 5). Hence, the usage of sunlight portrays self-care as a natural, peaceful, calm and positive experience.

Figure 6

Screenshots of posts representing self-care regarding sunlight



4.3 Self-care as an accessible practice

The third theme that emerged from the data analysis process, *self-care as an accessible practice* explores how self-care is represented as a practice that is accessible and available for everyone. First, it explores how using the greens supplements is talked about as easy and convenient. The emphasis lies on the easy and quick process of preparing the greens supplements. In addition, it explores how self-care is represented as a practice that is accessible regardless of someone's location. Travel and mobility is a subtheme that explores the accessibility of self-care through travel-sized products that can be taken everywhere. Whether on holiday, or just on the go on a day out, the greens are representing self-care in a manner that shows consumers can take the practice wherever they want. Lastly, the theme explores how the brands, specifically Bloom Nutrition, are representing self-care as something that is available for everyone, as their products are being sold in supermarket

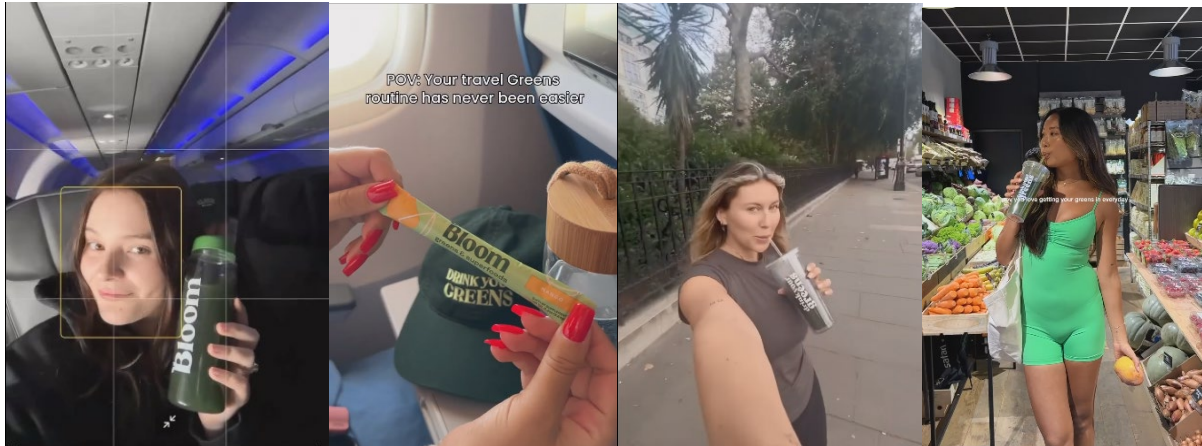
The first sub-theme that emerged from delving deeper into *self-care as an accessible practice* is ease and convenience. As the name suggests, posts relating to this theme focus on everything ease and convenience related when it comes to the representation of self-care in the branded social media content of AG1, FreeSoul and Bloom Nutrition. Phrases like “drink your greens,” “easiest way to get your greens in,” “your travel greens routine has never been easier” and “mix it, sip it, drink it” all prove one thing: using greens is an easy and convenient manner to take care of yourself. This is further proven by the wide array of tutorial videos that are posted on the process of making the greens. In just three simple steps, the protagonists of these videos prepare their greens and take the viewer along in this ‘easy’ process. By focusing

on this ease of use and convenience, the brands represent self-care as something that does not have to take a long time, instead it is a rather short and clear-cut process. Hence, self-care is represented as an accessible practice, because not having the time to take care of yourself is not an issue anymore when using greens supplements. Therefore, the ease and convenience of using greens supplements to take care of yourself ties into ideas of both commodified feminism and black feminist theories. On one hand, the focus is placed on how consumers need the greens in order to take care of themselves, showing the commodified feminist notion that specific products or lifestyles are needed for self-care (Caldera, 2020, p. 714; Martínez-Jiménez, 2022, p. 2818). On the other hand, it shows black feminist tendencies by showing that the ease and convenience of the product make sure it is accessible for everyone (Caldera, 2020, p. 714).

The second sub-theme regarding *self-care as an accessible practice*, travel and mobility, explores how brands show that taking your greens (and thus self-care) does not have to be confined to one place. For example, Bloom Nutrition specifically takes the notion of taking your greens whilst travelling and shows how their products are easily used on holiday or even whilst on an aeroplane (see figure 7). The availability of travel-sized products makes this notion of taking your self-care on the go even more prevalent, showing that self-care is something that can be done wherever the consumer wants it to. This notion of having self-care available to consumers whenever and wherever they want, again ties into the idea of black feminist theories that self-care is something that should be available for everyone, whenever and wherever they want (Caldera, 2020, p. 714). In addition, all the brands represent self-care as something that can be done on the go, during one's day-to-day life. Depictions of people making their greens in a bottle and taking them out on the go with them are not rare in the branded social media content of the three brands. On a walk, at the farmers market, or even on the beach, the three brands show people taking their self-care practices with them wherever they desire (see figure 7). These depictions of the ease and convenience through which the audience can take their greens when- and wherever they want represents self-care as an accessible practice, something that the audience has full reign over; they can decide when and where they want to use the greens in order to take care of themselves.

Figure 7

Screenshots from posts that depict greens usage whilst traveling and on the go.



The last sub-theme that arose within the theme *self-care as an accessible practice*, shopping and availability, explores the brands showing how available their product is to the audience. For example, Bloom Nutrition places great importance in showing their audience that their products are widely available in supermarkets, especially in the United States. Posts containing shelves of their products in supermarkets, employees posting with branding of the supermarkets or a new product launch in supermarkets, the brand makes sure that their audience knows their products are readily available in supermarkets all across the United States (see figure 8). In doing so, Bloom Nutrition specifically, represents self-care as something that is available for everyone, tying into black feminist theories again (Caldera, 2020, p. 714). However, what should be noted here is that the focus on buying the product to take care of yourself is highlighted in this sub-theme. Hence, it ties into commodified feminism as well, since specific products that one might need to take care of oneself are recommended in these posts and the focus is placed on where and how to buy them (Frisinger, 2021, p. 204; Martínez-Jiménez, 2022, p. 2818). Consumers can just go to their local Target or Walmart to buy the product, without needing to order it online or to buy a subscription to their products. Hence, self-care here is represented as something that is accessible for everyone.

Figure 8

Screenshots of posts containing Bloom Nutrition showing their product availability in supermarkets.



4.4 Self-care as a routine

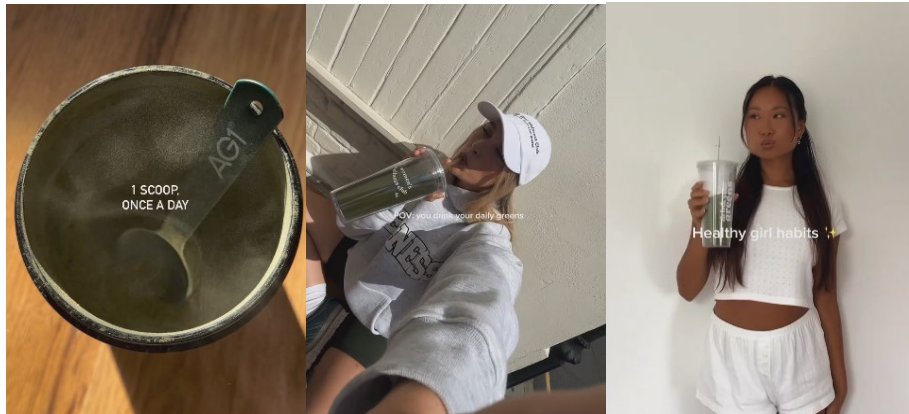
The fourth main theme that emerged from the thematic analysis, *self-care as a routine* explores how self-care is represented as (part of) a routine that consumers participate in. First, it takes a look at how taking one's greens, and thus taking care of oneself, is a practice or habit that consumers undertake daily. Moreover, it also explores how self-care is specifically represented as a part of someone's morning routine. The emphasis in this theme mainly lies on how consumers practise self-care on a daily basis, and how it really becomes part of someone's routine.

Firstly, self-care is represented as a daily practice, something that consumers make a habit of. Captions such as “1 scoop, once a day,” “healthy girl habits,” “pov you drink your daily greens,” “wellness routine” and “you turn your daily greens into a summer spritz” all show that these brands represent taking care of yourself as something that is done on a daily basis (see figure 9). More specifically, these phrases underscore the importance of consistency in self-care practices. Looking further into these consistent habits, daily practice ensures that self-care becomes a regular part of someone's life, maximising its efficiency (Riegel et al., 2021, p. 3). In addition, the representation of self-care as a daily practice and habit also illustrates how self-care can be seamlessly integrated in someone's life; the simple approach to daily practices and habits mentioned can be seamlessly added to someone's existing routine, tying back to how black feminist theories argue that self-care should be accessible and practicable for everyone (Caldera, 2020, p. 714). Thus, by playing into these notions of small daily habits, self-care is represented as something that involves a routine practice. However,

the simple approach to routines and habits taken in the branded posts, makes self-care less daunting and thus more accessible for the audience, who are then encouraged to make self-care a part of their daily routine.

Figure 9

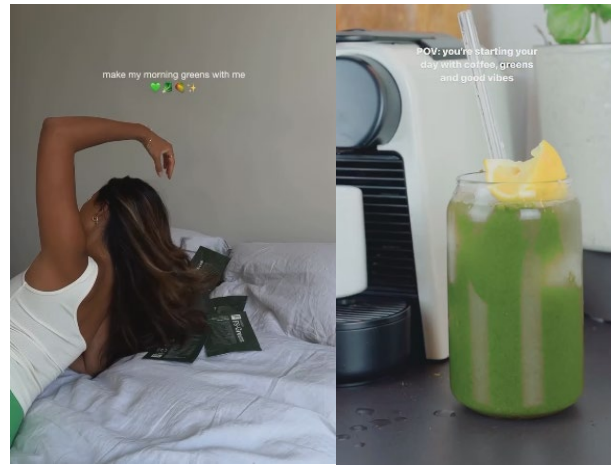
Screenshots of posts revolving around self-care as a daily practice and habit



The second sub-theme of *self-care as a routine* explores the focus on morning routines when referring to self-care and healthy habits. Morning routines have become the cornerstone of self-care practices, often offering a structured and intentional start to the day. Especially when it comes to routines and habits, the brands seem to focus on routines and practices that take place in the morning (see figure 10). The representation of self-care as a routine through morning routines explores and emphasises the idea that starting the day with self-care practices that nourish the body is important. This representation of self-care as a routine indicates that in order to take care of themselves consumers need to buy specific products (e.g., coffee to drink, greens to drink) and make specific lifestyle changes in the mornings (such as drinking greens in the mornings). Hence, the representation of self-care as a routine reinforces ideas from commodified feminism, as buying products and making lifestyle changes is a large part in this (Frisinger, 2021, p. 204; Martínez-Jiménez, 2022, p. 2818). The placed importance of starting the day with your self-care practices can be found in captions like “make my morning greens with me” and “starting the day with coffee, greens and good vibes”. These posts illustrate the idea of starting the day with a purposeful and health-oriented routine. Self-care as a morning routine is also represented by the emphasis of health benefits through practices like drinking your greens in the morning. Again, the emphasis on a routine explores the importance of consistency when considering self-care as a routine practice.

Figure 10

Screenshots of posts regarding representing self-care as a morning routine



4.5 Self-care as an aesthetic practice

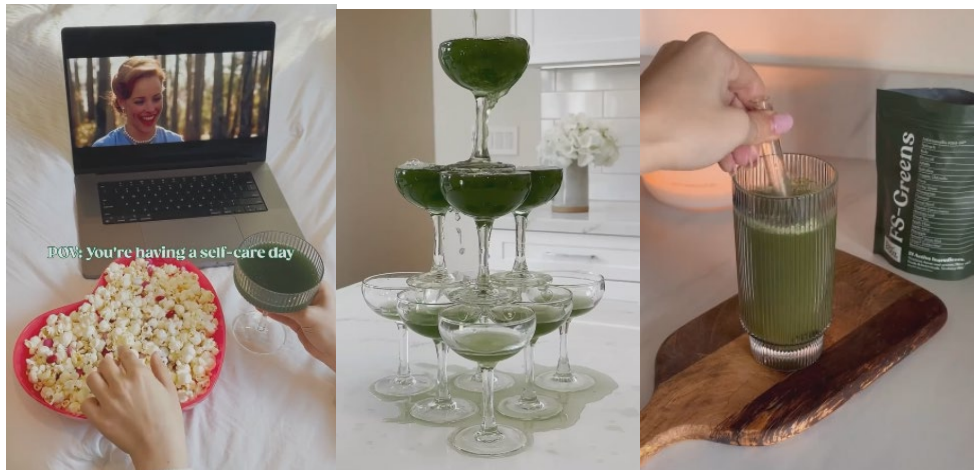
The fifth theme that emerged from the thematic analysis, *self-care as an aesthetic practice* explores the aestheticization of self-care and its representations in branded social media content. Everyday life activities are being aestheticized, and self-care is no exception (Martínez-Jiménez, 2022, p. 2824; Xian, 2021, p. 185). By making self-care activities look and feel more pretty, for example through models wearing trendy clothes or using pretty glasses to drink greens from, the representation of self-care becomes an aesthetic experience. First, this theme explores how the presentation of greens is part of the aestheticization of self-care. In addition, themed and seasonal aesthetics that are used are discussed. The theme also explores how settings and backgrounds are used to make posts look nicer, and thus aid in the aestheticization of self-care. Lastly, it is discussed how outfits and accessories are an element of aestheticization when it comes to the representation of self-care.

The first sub-theme within *self-care as an aesthetic practice*, the aesthetic presentation of greens, explores how the greens are presented in the branded social media content of nutritional wellness brands. It specifically focuses on how the greens are often presented in an aesthetic, nice-looking manner. By presenting the product in an appealing manner, it seems like the nutritional wellness brands are trying to make self-care look like an aesthetic, pleasant experience for their audience. For example, the greens are often presented in cocktail glasses, drunk using pretty straws or sunlight is used in the post to make the images look more appealing to the audience (see figure 11). By using these pretty presentations of the greens supplements the brands enhance the aestheticization of self-care practices, making everyday practices such as taking care of yourself a more aesthetic experience (Xian, 2021, pp. 183-

184). The usage of pretty glasses, heart shaped bowls, sunlight or pretty straws make the act of drinking greens seem more aesthetically pleasing than it would likely be in ‘real life’, enhancing the experience for the audience.

Figure 11

Screenshots of posts showing aesthetic presentation of greens.



The second sub-theme focuses on how themes and seasonal elements are used to present self-care as an aesthetic and appealing practice. It explores how the brands use seasonal elements, like holidays, the weather or specific themes in their branding to appeal to their audience (see figure 12). By doing so, not only do the brands represent self-care as something that looks pretty and is related to someone’s current experiences, but they also make self-care out as something that is done on special occasions. These special occasions are often celebrated by buying aesthetically pleasing decorations that match the holiday that is being celebrated. This sub-theme thus ties in to both the commodification and aestheticization of self-care; pretty decorations, such as fitting cocktail glasses or straws are bought to drink the greens from, meaning that the simple act of taking self-care is enhanced and made more pleasing by buying these decorations. Following this, there is an increase of commercial influence around these seasonal holidays, when consumers buy these pretty decorations, where aesthetics make their way into daily consumption practices (Bloch et al., 2003, p. 551; Venkatesh & Meamber, 2008, p. 45). Hence, within this sub-theme, self-care is represented as an aesthetic experience, but also as a practice that is enhanced on special occasions. For example, around Halloween, the brands focused their content mainly on “spooky greens,” a “pumpkin paint and sip,” or included other aesthetic looking Halloween-themed items such as cookies. The same was found around Christmastime, where the content was mainly focused

on this specific holiday. Christmas trees were present in the background of several posts, greens were presented in Christmas-themed mugs and the overall vibe was presented to be very cosy. These holidays thus play a large part in the aestheticization of self-care, where pretty products and decorations make their way into the daily consumption habits of consumers.

Figure 12

Screenshots of posts showing usage of seasonal or themed aesthetics.



The third sub-theme within *self-care as an aesthetic practice*, aesthetic settings and backgrounds, explores how the setting of the branded Instagram content contributes to the aestheticization of self-care. It focuses on the backgrounds and settings of posts, exploring how these are used to make the content look more appealing to the audience. In making the content appeal more to their audience, the nutritional wellness brands make use of aesthetic-looking locations, such as farmers markets, gardens, clean-looking white and beige rooms or nicely made beds (see figure 13). By using these aesthetic backgrounds and/or settings, the brands create an environment where the feel of the products and self-care as a practice begin to matter more to consumers than the characteristics of the products themselves (Cova & Svanfeldt, 1993, p. 297). The audience likely perceives the situations presented in the branded social media content aesthetically pleasing, and imagines that using the product advertised can make their life look and feel the same. According to Cattani et al. (2021, p. 3) and Hansen et al. (2007, p. 645), consumption practices are determined by aesthetic experiences and meanings as much as logical reasoning nowadays. Hence, by the aesthetic representation of self-care present in this sub-theme, self-care practices are being shaped not only by the product that is used (i.e., the greens supplements) but also by the aesthetic experiences and

meanings these social media posts communicate. The settings and backgrounds often aid in representing self-care as an aesthetic practice.

Figure 13

Screenshots of posts showing aesthetic settings and backgrounds present in posts



The fourth and final sub-theme in *self-care as an aesthetic practice* explores how outfits and accessories are used to make self-care seem more aesthetic. The people in the branded Instagram content of the three nutritional wellness brands always look put together. They often wear comfortable, but trendy and nice-looking outfits and accessories. Next to making self-care seem like an aesthetic practice because the models in the Instagram content are always looking extremely nice, this does not portray reality (Martínez-Jiménez, 2022, p. 2824). Not everyone always walks around in trendy sports clothes, comfortable tracksuits or oversized t-shirts. Instead, this representation of self-care can result in people not recognising themselves in the content, making them less likely to relate to the brand and/or content. Previous research has also indicated that outfits and accessories are elements that are used to aestheticize self-care. For example, Martínez-Jiménez (2022, p. 2824), in their research on current representations of self-care, found that in representing self-care in visual content, comfortable and flattering clothes are often used.

Figure 14

Screenshots of posts showing presence of aesthetic outfits and accessories



4.6 Self-care as a physical practice

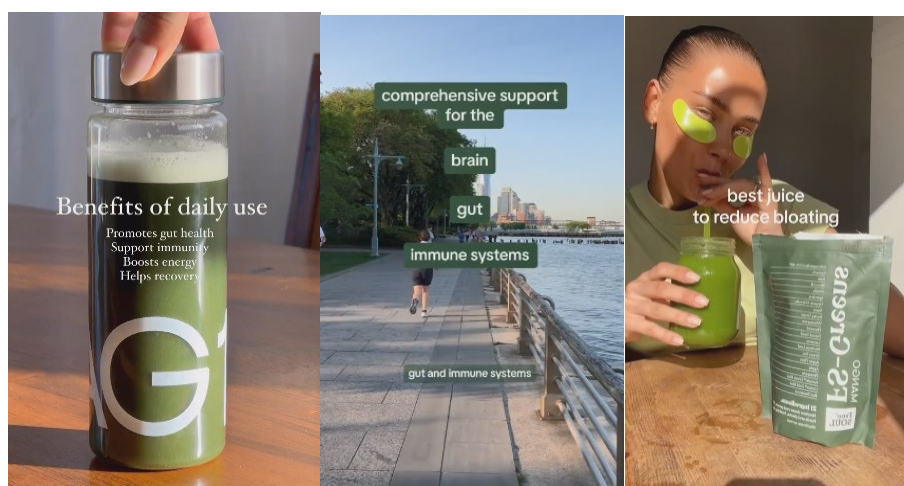
The last theme that arose from data analysis, *self-care as a physical practice* explores the focus of the wellness brands on the physical aspects of drinking greens supplements, and thus self-care. On one hand, the brands place the focus on the physical benefits of self-care, such as boosting one's energy or helping recovery. On the other hand, the brands focus on the representation of self-care as a physical practice by placing the focus on physical exercise and aspects that come with this form of exercise, such as focusing on running, running outfits or yoga mats. By representing all of these physical aspects of self-care, the brands seem to place high importance on the physical sides and benefits of self-care, rather than also exploring the mental benefits of taking care of oneself. Hence, self-care is represented as physical practice, rather than also taking the approach of seeing self-care as a mental practice.

The first sub-theme of *self-care as a physical practice* explores the emphasis on the physical health benefits of self-care, and specifically drinking greens supplements daily. In their posts, the brands place high priority in mentioning the physical benefits of greens supplements, but they tend to neglect the mental benefits that come with daily self-care practices. Instead, their focus lies on physical health benefits like boosting energy, helping recovery, supporting immunity, getting one's voice back or preventing/solving bloating (see figure 15). The focus here clearly lies on how self-care is nowadays designed to *feel* good, rather than *look* good. This focus is in line with previous research that has indicated that over the past few years, there has been a shift in the representation of self-care. Whilst aesthetics are still important, meaning that a product is often talked about as making the consumer *look* good, Wood (2024. p. 84) found that there has been an ongoing shift to communicating that

products/self-care practices will make consumers *feel* good. By mentioning the physical health benefits, the brands show the ways in which their products, and thus self-care, can assist the audience in feeling like “their best”, or supporting their physical health in a quick and convenient manner. What the brands seem to neglect in their branded social media content are the mental benefits of self-care. Self-care can have a positive effect on someone’s well-being, leading to lower levels of stress and negative affect, and higher levels of positive affect (Posluns & Gall, 2019, pp. 3). Hence, by only focusing on the physical benefits of self-care, these brands represent self-care as a physical practice only, whereas it should also be considered a mental practice.

Figure 15

Screenshots of posts mentioning physical health benefits of self-care



Lastly, *self-care as a physical practice* is represented by a focus of the three brands on physical exercise. Posts often contained some form of physical exercise, either as the main focus of the post or as a secondary activity that was done by the individuals in the posts (see figure 16). In addition, posts contained people wearing sports clothes, indicating that they were participating in some form of physical exercise. Again, the focus was mainly placed on physical exercise, leaving out mental exercises like meditation or journalling, that people can partake in when taking care of themselves. Hence, self-care was represented as a mainly physical activity in the analysed branded social media content by the three wellness brands.

Figure 16

Screenshots of posts containing elements of physical exercise or sports clothes.



5. Conclusion

This research aimed to explore the representation of self-care in branded social media content by three nutritional wellness brands. More specifically, the aim of this research was to answer the following research question: “*How is self-care represented in the social media marketing efforts of nutritional wellness brands?*” Using a thematic analysis, the current research has provided additional insights into the different representations of self-care within the branded social media landscape. In this chapter, the research question will be answered. In addition, the social and academic implications and limitations of this research will be presented. Lastly, directions for future research are given.

5.1 Addressing the research question

The main focus of this research was to answer the research question: *How is self-care represented in the social media marketing efforts of nutritional wellness brands?* To answer this question, a thematic analysis of branded Instagram content from nutritional wellness brands AG1, Bloom Nutrition and Free Soul was performed. The dataset was gathered using a purposive sampling method, adhering to specific predefined rules. Following the data collection phase an inductive approach to data analysis was taken, assuring that the themes found during analysis arose from the data and not previously discussed theory. Doing so, six main representations of self-care were found in the branded social media content of the nutritional wellness brands. Namely, 1) self-care as a community practice, 2) self-care as a natural practice, 3) self-care as an accessible practice, 4) self-care as a routine and 5) self-care as an aesthetic practice, 6) self-care as a physical practice.

Self-care as a community practice explored how self-care is represented as something that is often done together. The brands showed that self-care is something that people often do through social self-care activities, where they meet up to partake in a self-care related activity. In addition, this theme explored how self-care is represented as something that can be done by anyone, regardless of for example their background or gender. *Self-care as a natural practice* revolved around the representation of self-care as connected to nature and natural elements. It explored the role of fruits and vegetables, nature and the outdoors and sunlight in the representation of self-care as a practice that is deeply connected to nature. In this theme, self-care was found to be portrayed as a positive, healthy and natural practice. *Self-care as an accessible practice* explored how self-care is shown to be accessible and available for everyone, everywhere. It focused on how self-care is represented as something that individuals can easily do wherever they are, whether this is on-the-go in their daily lives or

when they are on holiday. A focus on the ease and convenience of self-care practices was discovered in the branded social media content of the nutritional wellness brands. As the brands explained how easy the process was to make and drink your greens, a clear focus was put on ease and convenience. Moreover, this theme showed how self-care is represented as something that is available for everyone, specifically through the brands placing a focus on their products being easy to come by, for example by buying them in a supermarket. *Self-care as a routine* explored how self-care is represented as something that needs to be done consistently. It took a look at how self-care is shown to be a practice or habit people undertake daily. It also explored how self-care is presented as something that is specifically part of a morning routine, focusing on habits of self-care that are often only done in the mornings. *Self-care as an aesthetic practice* focused on the aestheticization of self-care. It explored how through their branded social media content, the brands make self-care look and feel more pretty and appealing to their audience, for example by presenting greens in aesthetic cocktail glasses or by models wearing trendy, comfortable clothing. This theme explored how self-care is represented as something that always looks good, really putting a focus on having their branded social media content look appealing to their audiences. This theme mainly focuses on an aesthetic approach to self-care, visually representing self-care as something that makes you look good, as opposed to a more affective approach that would show self-care as something that makes you feel good. *Self-care as a physical practice* the last theme that was found during the thematic analysis, focuses on how self-care is represented as a solely physical practice. It explored how the brands emphasise the physical health benefits of partaking in self-care activities, such as boosting one's energy or helping them recover. In addition, it showed how physical activities, such as running or yoga are used to represent self-care activities. As can be seen, the main representation of self-care by nutritional wellness brands was placed on a physical level, ignoring mental approaches that individuals can also explore to take care of themselves. These six themes revealed to be influenced by different feminist theories, such as commodified feminism and black feminist theories, and the aestheticization of everyday life to a certain extent. Hence, the contemporary representations of self-care are influenced by the rich history of the concept.

5.2 Societal and academic implications

The social implications of this research are important to be considered as the research highlights the ways in which nutritional wellness brands (try to) shape consumer perceptions and practices of self-care through their branded social media presence. This is especially

important to keep in mind as previous research has indicated that current representations of self-care influence consumers' perceptions and behaviours (Martínez-Jiménez, 2022, p. 2824; Wood, 2024, p. 84). Specifically, by revealing the aesthetic and often idealised notions of these representations, the study could imply that consumers should critically evaluate the self-care messages they come across online, thus promoting more critical consumption patterns. This could lead to more a more thoughtful and realistic approach to self-care and wellness.

Considering academic implications, this research adds new insights from the nutritional wellness field to the understanding of the representation of self-care in branded social media content. Next to building on previous research by replicating their findings, such as the use of pretty-looking clothing in the aestheticization of self-care, this research employed existing theories and showed them in an industry that is becoming more popular. The research utilises theories of commodified feminism, black feminist theories and the aestheticization of everyday life, providing an understanding of how these concepts play out in branded social media content. Empirically, this research fills a gap in literature by providing case studies of three nutritional wellness brands, providing new data and insights that help enrich the current academic discourse on self-care, wellness and their representation in branded social media content.

5.3 Limitations of the research

The first limitation of this research process can be found in researcher bias. As someone who is a heavy user of social media herself and has an interest in self-care, the researcher likely has own biases and perspectives on self-care and wellness that may have influenced the analysis and interpretation processes of the data. In addition, a thematic analysis of visual content can be highly subjective. Different researchers may interpret images and visuals in different manners, meaning that it would lead to more reliable and valid results if this research would have been performed by multiple researchers. Hence, researcher bias and subjectivity are limitations that are present in this research.

In addition, the sample size of this research is also considered a limitation. Only focusing on three different brands likely does not capture the full diversity of self-care representations within the nutritional wellness industry. The three brands that were selected may not be representative of the nutritional wellness industry as a whole. Moreover, because of the scope of this research it proved impossible to include all the branded Instagram content

posted by the brands within the selected timeframe. Hence, strict rules were set up for posts to be included in the dataset. Researching all the posts placed by the three brands would have led to a deeper and more comprehensive analysis of the representation of self-care in branded social media content. Hence, the limited sample size of the dataset is also considered to be a limitation for this thesis.

Moreover, analysing content from one platform only, in the case of this research Instagram, can lead to platform bias. Analysing branded content solely on Instagram may limit the understanding of the representation of self-care across other social media platforms. Different social media platforms, for example Facebook or TikTok may have different audience demographics or brand content strategies, leading to a different representation of self-care on these platforms. In addition, social media trends can be fleeting. Hence, representations of self-care that were present in the current research may be influenced by short-lived trends, making it more difficult to draw conclusions about the long-term patterns of self-care representation by nutritional wellness brands.

5.4 Directions for future research

Based on the previously discussed limitations of this thesis several potential directions for future research have been identified. First, it is suggested that future research expands the research of the representation of self-care in branded social media content by (nutritional) wellness brands to more than the three brands used in this present research. Researching the representation of self-care in a broader manner leads to more generalisable and reliable results. In addition, it is also suggested that future research explores the representation of self-care by nutritional wellness brands on different platforms. As previously explained, looking solely at Instagram content may lead to platform bias. Hence, researching the representation of self-care on different social media platforms such as Facebook and TikTok leads to a more comprehensive understanding of how self-care is represented on social media. Additionally, another manner in which a more comprehensive understanding of the representation of self-care on (branded) social media that future research could focus on includes also looking at the captions and/or comments that accompany the visual content. By looking at the captions and comments, a deeper understanding of the current representation of self-care in branded social media content by nutritional wellness brands as captions often contain more specific information than visual content. Lastly, something that could be an interesting direction for future research would be the conduction of longitudinal studies to research the changes in the representation of self-care over time. As explained at the start of this thesis, self-care and its

representations have changed quite severely over the last decades. Hence, researching the ways in which the representations of self-care have changed over time could be an interesting addition to the current research as this will give a comprehensive understanding of the changing practices when it comes to talking about self-care online.

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Appendix A. Overview of dataset

Table A1

Overview of collected data and Instagram accounts

Brand	Instagram account	Number of posts collected	Number of posts included in dataset
Athletic Greens (AG1)	@drinkag1	239	78
Bloom Nutrition	@bloomsupps	387	64
Free Soul	@freesoul	225	73

Table A2

Overview of posts included in/excluded from dataset

Included in dataset	Excluded from dataset
Posted between February 2023 and February 2024	Give-aways, promotional events and business events
Post includes green powder sold by the brand	Posts that mainly revolved around text and tips
Post solely by the brand (no collaborations)	Graphics and non-photos
	Posts that included different products
	Behind-the-scenes where the focus the company and not on the product
	Recipes including the product (e.g., smoothie recipes, breakfast recipes)
	Voice-overed day-in-the-life, morning routines, spend-the-day-with-me videos

Appendix B. Codebook

Theme	Subtheme	Exemplary open codes
Self-care as a community practice	Social self-care activities	Perfect drink for holiday with your friends
		Wanna go on a greens date?
		Therapy to us is bestie greens dates
		Multiple people shaking greens
		Picknick baskets with products
	Inclusivity	Two non-white girls
		Males and females
		Non-white females
		Men definitely drink greens
		Males
Self-care as a natural practice	Healthy fruits and vegetables	Fruits
		Fruits in background
		Apples
		Vegetables shown
		Strawberries
	Nature and the outdoors	Beach
		Outside
		Grass in background
		Nature
		Sea in background
	Sunlight and shadows	Sunlight
		Shadows used
		Sunset/sunrise
		Sunshine
		Sunny weather

Self-care as an accessible practice	Ease and convenience	Drink your greens
		Easiest way to get your greens in
		Mix it, sip it, drink it
		Convenient
		Ease of preparations
	Travel and mobility	Bottle to have greens prepared
		Wherever you go
		Shot of travel sized product
		Your travel greens routine has never been easier
		Greens in to-go cup
	Shopping and availability	Girl walking from supermarket with greens
		Person grabbing product from shelves
		Products flying into Target
		Products in shopping basket
		Scanning multiple products at supermarket
Self-care as a routine	Daily practices and habits	1 scoop, once a day
		Healthy girl habits
		Holiday routine
		Pov: you drink your daily greens
		When you make the same green glow smoothie daily but you still post it on your story as if it's the best thing you've ever made

	Morning routine	A morning of pilates followed by a healthy and debloating breakfast
		Make my morning greens with me
		Starting the day with coffee, greens and good vibes
		First things first
		Morning habit
Self-care as an aesthetic practice	Aesthetic presentation of greens	You turn your daily greens into a summer spritz
		Bows on products
		Flowers on greens in glass
		Greens in cocktail glasses
		Heart-shaped ice cubes
	Themed and seasonal aesthetics	Girls summer forever
		Spooky greens
		Christmas themed mug
		Christmas tree in background
		Pumpkin paint and sip
	Aesthetic settings and backgrounds	Aesthetic white kitchen
		Candles burning in background
		Colour scheme of background fits with product
		Organised fridge
		White aesthetic room
	Aesthetic outfits and accessories	Focus on outfit
		Fancy pyjamas
		Girl in tracksuit
		Trendy outfits
		Wearing bathrobe

Self-care as a physical practice	Physical health benefits	Feel my best
		Pov: I saw the girls fix their bloating
		Boosts energy
		Support immunity
		Greens for immunity, energy and digestion
	Fitness and exercise	Running outfit
		Sports outfit
		Shots of running
		Yoga mat
		Wearing sports clothes