#Bodypositive: Performances of Body Positivity by Influencers on Instagram.

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Aroha Moana Jones

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Abstract

Women around the world are increasingly using the social media platform Instagram, a popular photo-sharing application, to promote body acceptance and address unrealistic appearance-related ideals. Drawing on ideas of performance and performativity (Butler, 1988, 1990; Goffman, 1959, 1976) this research examines the performative practices and performances of body positive influencers on Instagram and considers how influencers are self-presenting, both visually and textually, to discursively construct and produce body positive identities. I interpreted the performances of body positive influencers as meaningful practices of resistance that offer promising moments of instability and threaten to destabilise narrow, predominantly white, Western, hetero-normative beauty standards, including the thin-ideal. Instagram appears to offer body positive influencers a productive space for reimagining and re-imaging the ways that bodies are enacted and performed. However, despite this, influencers occasionally slip from body positive discourses to pre-existing discourses of idealised female beauty and conventional feminine rhetoric, thus, at times repeating and (re)producing the very ideologies they purport to reject. An unexpected finding of this research was that many of the influencers discussed body positivism alongside deeply personal accounts of recovery from eating disorders and disordered eating. This thesis is unique and distinguished from previous research, in that it explores body positivity in the context of eating disorder recovery. Key findings are that the current iteration of body positivity on Instagram can be read as an undertaking that troubles hegemonic norms of female beauty, facilitates corporeal performances of resistance, and opens a new space for the performance, documentation, and discussion of recovery.

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Chapter One: Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to explore body image from a sociocultural and feminist perspective. Using social constructionism, feminist principles and critical theory as a theoretical lens, I discuss existing research on body image and traditional media, as well as recent research on body image and social media. I examine important feminist constructs including the thin-ideal, objectification, male gaze, self-surveillance and body management. Then, I consider how dominant sociocultural ideas about appearance, body weight, shape and size are tied to gender, gender-normative practices, and gender roles. Next, I introduce the term body positive and provide a brief history of the fat acceptance movement, from which the notion of body positivity emerged. Finally, I investigate how women use the social media platform Instagram to self-present, construct, perform, and produce body positive identities online.

Body Image

Body image is a complex, dynamic and multidimensional construct. Anthropologist Nicole Sault posits that, "we perceive our bodies through a culturally constructed body image that shapes what we see and experience" (1994, p. 1). Frederickson and Roberts (1997) echo this sentiment stating that bodies are products of the social and cultural context and are, accordingly, shaped by sociocultural practices and through available discourses. When viewed from this perspective, an individual's body image can be described as a multifaceted and multilayered sociocultural construct (Paquette & Raine, 2004), anchored in and influenced by social relationships, and the prevailing ideas and expectations of society (Frederickson & Roberts, 1997; Sault, 1994). Contemporary body image research comprises a vast and rich literature conceptualising body image as a learned concept, influenced by dominant cultural ideals, social relationships, the popular media and social norms. While a large volume of recent work situates body image within sociocultural or feminist frameworks, other theoretical perspectives, including evolutionary theory, genetic and neuroscientific perspectives, phenomenology and cognitive-behavioural perspectives, continue to make contributions to the field (Cash, 2003; Cash & Smolak, 2011).

A sociocultural perspective provides researchers with a useful theoretical framework for understanding how an individual's beliefs, values, behaviours and attitudes are shaped in relation to body image. From this perspective, cultural ideologies and social pressures are

considered paramount to the development and formation of an individual's body image. Research from a sociocultural perspective suggests that parents, peers and the mass media are powerful social agents that transmit sociocultural body ideals (Deighton-Smith & Bell, 2018; Groesz, Levine, & Murnen, 2002; Grogan, 2006; Thompson, Schaefer, & Menzel, 2012; Tiggemann, 2011). In contemporary Western society, these ideals tend to be predominantly White, thin, hetero-normative, and able-bodied. According to sociocultural perspectives, body image and body (dis)satisfaction are influenced by: the messages individuals receive regarding body weight, shape and size, and appearance from social agents (parents, peers and the media); the degree to which individuals internalise (accept or reject) societal pressures to achieve body ideals; and the tendency an individual has to compare oneself to others (social comparison) (Cash, 2003; Cash, Morrow, Hrabosky, & Perry, 2004; Levine, 2012; Thompson et al., 2012).

Dominant social constructions of female beauty, including ideal body weight, shape and size, have shifted over time and across cultures. In America, images of voluptuous, buxom, and maternal women of the late nineteenth-century were gradually replaced with those of the tall, yet curvy, Gibson girl of the early twentieth-century (e.g., Camille Clifford), and later with the almost androgynous, flat-chested Flapper (e.g., Clara Bow). Between the 1930s through to the end of the 1950s, women with hourglass figures, featuring a tiny-waist and ample bosom, reigned again. Images of waif-like fashion icons (e.g., Jean Shrimpton and Twiggy) emerged during the early 1960s, promptly replacing curvaceous celebrities of the 1950s (e.g., Marilyn Monroe and Brigitte Bardot). During the late 1980s tall, leggy supermodels such as Elle MacPherson and Naomi Campbell epitomised the ideal body. However, in the 1990s the ideal flipped again and heroin-thin was chic (e.g., Kate Moss). Today, in contemporary Western societies, thin, toned bodies with full breasts, rounded derrieres, and a small waist-to-hip ratio are revered and desired (e.g., Beyoncé, J.Lo, and Kim Kardashian). Bonafini and Pozzilli (2011) describe the new standard of beauty as one of "mathematically calculated proportions" (p. 1). Although the new ideal resides beyond the reach of most ordinary women, it is ardently pursued by the majority of those women for fear of facing severe social sanctions, including public ridicule, discrimination, and the denial of desired intimacy and romance (Fikkan & Rothblum, 2012; Giovanelli & Ostertag, 2009; Thompson, Heinberg, Altabe, & Tantleff-Dunn, 1999).

The slenderness obsession that emerged during the early twentieth century, and that we continue to see today, is associated with morality, longevity and good health, economic status,

prestige and success (Bordo, 2003; Chernin, 1981; Fraser, 2009; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Wolf, 1991; Wykes & Gunter, 2005). In contrast, fat bodies are deemed deviant and unruly, and fat individuals are assumed to be non-compliant, unhealthy, lazy, self-indulgent, and lacking self-control and discipline (Cooper, 2008; Rothblum & Solovay, 2009; Sault, 1994; Wykes & Gunter, 2005). The binary of fat as "bad" and thin as "good" is deeply embedded in Western culture so much so, that its merits as a fair or reasonable conceptualisation of body diversity are rarely questioned or challenged. It is so insidious that it seems as if it has always been this way. A historical account of body image makes it clear, however, that notions of the ideal female body are indeed socially, culturally and historically located, and that they have changed over time and space, and across cultures, in response to economic shifts, changing gender roles, advances in science, medicine and technology, and as a result of the influence of the fashion and beauty industries (Hatfield & Sprecher, 1986; Sentilles & Callahan, 2012; Wolf, 1991).

The thin-ideal of women in Western societies is a fairly new ideology, appearing between the 1880s and 1920s, following the industrial revolution in America, when changes in the economic landscape, from a subsistence economy (hunting and gathering, agricultural farming practices) to industrial production, made food more readily available and store-bought products more accessible (Fraser, 2009). This shift, from food scarcity to an abundant food supply, meant that corpulence or fatness, a characteristic of prosperity and prestige during hard times, was no longer a distinctive signifier of class or social standing. Increasingly, those with a modest means or a disposition to put on weight in times of plenitude did so, and being fat lost its status. When religious notions of morality, purity and abstinence coalesced with these social and cultural ideological changes, the ideal of slenderness took on a secondary meaning of righteousness (Fraser, 2009; Jutel, 2006; Sentilles & Callahan, 2012). Thus, being thin became increasingly desirable as both a means of distinguishing between social classes and as a sign of one's own virtue.

The emergence of a modern consumer culture is cited as another key shift that influenced discourses on body image (Sentilles & Callahan, 2012). The development of department stores throughout America saw women take up and participate in consumption of all manner of appearance-altering products, on an unprecedented scale. The purchasing of goods, including cosmetics, fashion and accessories, was considered a sign of the good life and an achievement of social and economic success that was only available to those who had the luxury of time and

money (Featherstone, 2010). As female spending power increased, when women left the home and entered the workforce, the fashion and beauty markets capitalised on a woman's growing need and desire to present an acceptable self-image (Wolf, 1991). Consumer goods were readily available to 'help' a woman manage, modify and transform herself. Wykes and Gunter (2005) write that, at once, consumer culture inscribed upon women's bodies identities that told them that they were not quite good enough as they were, but that they could improve themselves with the right commodity. Overwhelmingly, consumer culture has promoted products, both in advertisements and in shop window displays, using images of slender, young, predominantly white, hetero-normative women, that work to reinforce contemporary Western beauty ideals.

Fraser (2009) suggests that the thin-ideal has also been fostered by advancements in the fields of science and medicine, since the end of the nineteenth century, when it became possible to count calories and calculate ideal weights (Jutel, 2006). The growing preoccupation with weight-loss during the 1950s and 1960s is proposed to have been additionally fuelled by physicians, who increasingly prescribed amphetamines, diuretics and other weight loss treatments to corpulent patients (Fraser, 2009; Lyons, 2009). Such pharmaceuticals were also sold over the counter to those who were willing to pay to be a few pounds lighter (Fraser, 2009). The diet and weight-loss industry, which promotes the thin-ideal and encourages the trend for slenderness, is today worth a staggering USD 70.3 billion (Roepe, 2018).

Another industry which has profited off women's concerns with their body weight, size and shape is the cosmetic surgery industry. Industry experts have witnessed a growing demand for surgical (e.g., breast augmentation, liposuction, and tummy tuck) and non-surgical (botox, dermal fillers, and laser hair removal) cosmetic procedures over recent years and expect the global cosmetic surgery and enhancement market to reach USD 43.9 billion by 2025 (Grand View Research, 2018). These powerful industries have transformed the ways in which ordinary, everyday women's bodies can appear and what such women must endure to get there. By presenting the difficult-to-achieve body ideal as a commodity for purchase, consumer culture found a way to capitalise on society's fixation on and cultural obsession with being thinner (Fraser, 2009; Sentilles & Callahan, 2012).

In her book *The Beauty Myth*, Naomi Wolf (1991) cites the changing roles of women from mothers, homemakers, and housewives, to working women and educated career girls as another

major shift that influenced how young women perceived their bodies. Various authors (e.g., Bonafini & Pozzilli, 2010; Sentilles & Callahan, 2012; Wykes & Gunter, 2005) have discussed the shifting role of women in society and suggest that during this period of uncertainty and change in women's social roles, women turned to and increasingly relied on media (magazine and film) depictions of beauty and fashion to help guide them in shaping, clothing and adorning their bodies. For women then, images of fashion models were not simply images on paper, but role models to be emulated, thus implicating the beauty and fashion industries as playing a key role in the social construction of idealised female beauty.

The shift to image-based mass media (the introduction of magazines, television and film), which made images of fashion models and celebrities readily available for consumption, has been cited as perhaps one of the most important events that has impacted the discourse on female body image over the past century (Sentilles & Callahan, 2012). According to Orbach (1993), depictions of near-emaciated models have been glorified in fashion magazines (e.g., Vogue and Harper's Bazaar), romanticised on film, and glamorised on television ever since the 1960s. Today, images of models and celebrities with difficult-to-achieve proportions continue to saturate the visual environment, endorsing a range of 'must have' beauty products, promoting diet and fitness regimes, and flaunting cosmetic enhancements. Such images are invariably airbrushed, photoshopped, re-touched or edited in some way, shape or form (Harrison & Hefner, 2014). They are consistently presented as being happy, confident, independent and successful, and serve as a reminder to ordinary women of the extraordinary lives they could lead, if only they lost weight, ate less, exercised more often, and most importantly, invested more time and money into their appearance.

Nowadays, media audiences are generally aware that images of celebrities and models are likely to have been digitally altered, filtered or edited (e.g., lightened, sharpened, softened) to remove visible flaws – such as cellulite, stretch marks, scarring, wrinkles, age-spots and uneven skin-tone – and to produce the appearance of a thinner, firmer, younger female body that more closely meets the contemporary Western beauty ideal (Bordo, 2003; Wykes & Gunter, 2005). However, as researchers Farid and Bravo (2010) point out, the human visual system is surprisingly inept at detecting or identifying which elements of an image have been altered (see also Farid, 2009). Bordo (2003) describes the re-touched images we see in popular magazines and mass media advertising as 'visual cyborgs' that distort and warp our perception and expectations of the female form. Featherstone (2010) suggests that media images, whether real

or edited, reinforce appearance-related ideals and remind women of who they would like to be. Such images are believed to invite comparisons between the perceived self and an idealised self and have drawn heavy criticism from researchers for promoting unrealistic beauty standards, with possible harmful consequences for women including body dissatisfaction, body shame and disordered eating behaviours (Grabe, Ward, & Hyde, 2008; Groesz et al., 2002; Wykes & Gunter, 2005).

The preoccupation or obsession with thinness, as well as internalisation of the thin-ideal, has been the focus of a number of studies over the past decade (see Cafri, Yamamiya, Brannick, & Thompson, 2005; Donaghue & Clemitshaw, 2012; Huxley, Halliwell, & Clarke, 2014; Rodgers, Chabrol, & Paxton, 2011; Slevec & Tiggemann, 2011; Thompson & Stice, 2001; Yamamiya, Shroff, & Thompson, 2008). Central to this research is the role of internalisation of societal ideals of beauty in the development of body dissatisfaction and eating pathology. Thompson and colleagues (2012) define the construct of internalisation as a personal acceptance of contemporary cultural beauty standards (including the slenderness-ideal) and the incorporation of these ideals, norms and beliefs into one's self-schema or worldview. Body dissatisfaction and body shame are then, conceptualised as products of faulty thin-ideal internalisation processes, and body image disturbance is proposed to emerge when an individual perceives a discrepancy or mis-match between the thin-ideal (which they have presumably taken up as a literal aspiration) and their own body (Donaghue & Clemitshaw, 2012; Wykes & Gunter, 2005).

Feminist perspectives have extended sociocultural understandings of body image to include considerations of gender and power. Critiques of patriarchal constructions of femininity, as well as of the social pressures' women face to achieve the thin-ideal, are longstanding and ongoing projects for feminist scholars (e.g., Bartky, 1988; Bordo 1991, 2003; Wolf, 1991). Critical feminist theorists have written extensively on traditional gender norms and argue that gender-normative practices, gender role stereotypes, and contemporary constructions of femininity influence female body image (e.g., Bartky, 1988; Bordo, 2003; Butler, 1988, 1990; De Beauvoir, 2010). Although feminist scholars conceptualise women's bodies as sociocultural constructs, they contend that these bodies are produced within powerful patriarchal social structures, which serve to regulate and control them. A discussion of women's bodies from a feminist perspective invariably necessitates an examination of gender,

gender-normative practices, and the gender roles, that women and men in a patriarchal Western society are expected to take up.

Historically, gender was unequivocally tied to biological sex and alleged 'natural,' or inherent differences between the sexes determined the distinctive psychological and behavioural tendencies of women and men (West & Zimmerman, 2002). By virtue of their reproductive functions, women and men were assumed to take up predictable positions within society and display a fixed set of enduring attitudinal and behavioural traits that were supposedly 'essential' to their nature (Bordo, 2003; Butler, 1990). Feminist theorists have challenged these evolutionary, biologically reductive and deterministic notions by suggesting instead that gender-normative practices are culturally constructed ideas inscribed upon the sexed body from infancy (Butler, 1990; Grosz, 1994; West & Zimmerman, 2002). Feminist thinkers argue that sociocultural constructions of femininity and masculinity provide women and men, respectively, with ideas about how to behave, shape understandings of appropriate and inappropriate divisions of labour, define the specific daily rituals that women and men should adopt, and communicate ideas about one's place within the social fabric (Butler, 1990; Fenstermaker & West, 2002). Furthermore, they tell us what to eat (how much or how little), what to wear and how to adorn our bodies, what leisure or recreational activities to become involved with, how to attract a romantic partner, and how to make sense of our experience as women and men (Bordo, 2003). Most importantly feminist theorists argue these on-going gender socialisation experiences teach women to view their bodies as unruly, inferior, deficient and deviant, instilling within a woman's psyche the idea that her body must be controlled, monitored, restrained and contained at all times (McKinley, 2011b; Orbach, 1993; Wolf, 1991).

Influential gender theorist Judith Butler (1990) writes that gender is neither an essential attribute of the individual nor a pre-determined quality related to one's biological sex. Rather, it is something someone does. Gender, according to Butler (1990), is an on-going reiterative and citational practice – a performative act - one that is accomplished through the enactment and re-enactment of culturally scripted and socially sanctioned gender-appropriate behaviours. From a Butlerian perspective, failure to faithfully perform according to dominant discourses can be considered a slippage in the performance. Butler's (1988, 1990) poststructuralist theorisation of performativity is useful for understanding how gendered social agents are produced in contemporary society. Traditional Western gender norms typically cast men as active, agentic, conscious beings and women as passive, dependent, subordinate subjects

(Bordo, 2003; Kang, 1997). These gender norms, in turn, form the basis of the gender roles that women and men are expected to take-up within society. For example, in patriarchal Western families, men are expected to fulfil the roles of breadwinner, financial provider, disciplinarian, and ultimate decision maker (Lindsey, 2015; Zuo & Tang, 2000). Whereas, women are expected to play the role of homemaker, housewife, mother, and sex-object (Friedan, 2010; Lindsey, 2015). Sociologists suggest that cultural understandings of gender, gender-appropriate norms, and gender roles are transmitted from one generation to the next. The family, then, can be said to play an instrumental role in the primary gender socialisation experiences of children. However, other social institutions including education, religion, and the visual economy of the media – which transmit and reinforce gender stereotypes - also play a pivotal role as agents of continuing gender socialisation (Lindsey, 2015).

If we accept that the sociocultural landscape communicates ideas that shape how we come to see ourselves and others, then it is reasonable to argue that the visual media culture likely plays a major role in the transmission of patriarchal Western ideas about gender and gender hetero-normative practices, to a far and wide-reaching audience. Gender representations in the media (both traditional print media and social media) have attracted the interest of several researchers (Burns, 2015; Conley & Ramsey, 2011; Giovanelli & Ostertag, 2009; Hirdman, 2010; Kang, 1997; Kyrola, 2014; Lindner, 2004), many of whom agree that the popular media tend to depict women and men in stereotypical, dualistic masculine/feminine gender roles, which emphasise and reinforce the gender binary. The most prominent and widely referenced scholar to write about gendered media representations was sociologist Erving Goffman (1976).

In his book, *Gender Advertisements,* Goffman (1976) describes the so-called 'natural' expressions of gender used in print advertising. These taken-for-granted 'gender displays,' include relative size (women are portrayed as smaller than men), the feminine touch (deliberate self-touching), the ritualization of subordination (tendency for women to be depicted lying on the bed or floor), and licensed withdrawal (women appear lost in thought, or gaze passively into the distance). Goffman's (1976) analysis of visual images in print advertising illuminated how dominant ideas about femininity and masculinity are lifted from the shared cultural understandings of a patriarchal Western society and (re)produced in the popular media.

According to Foucauldian informed feminist scholarship, mass media representations of women and men work to homogenise and normalise our understandings and expectations of

gender, and of appropriate gender displays (Bordo, 2003). Viewed from this perspective the visual media landscape can be understood to function as a medium of power and control, one that supports Western patriarchal ideologies and maintains gendered power relations by both producing and re-producing idealised gender performances. This, in turn, fosters a culture of individual self-surveillance and self-monitoring, wherein individuals practice disciplinary and self-correcting behaviours to conform to gender norms. Kwan (2010) uses the term "body management" to describe the physical adjustments that women make in order to manage, discipline, regulate and control their bodies. According to Kwan (2010) physical management involves body modification and self-correcting practices such as dieting, plastic surgery, wearing shape-wear or flattering clothes, and strategically positioning oneself to reduce or minimise the size of the body. These body management practices help women present the correct version of femininity.

Some important constructs within feminist frameworks that have already been discussed in the preceding paragraphs, include the thin-ideal (Thompson et al., 2012), self-surveillance or self-monitoring, and body management (Bordo, 1991, 2003; Kwan, 2010; Levine & Chapman, 2011; McKinley, 2011a; Murnen & Seabrook, 2012). Two other important ideas that have contributed to feminist understandings of women's bodies, appearance and identity formation, are objectification (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) and the male gaze (Mulvey, 1975). Objectification, whether sexual or not, is described as "the experience of being treated as a body (or collection of body parts) valued predominantly for its use to (or consumption by) others" (Frederickson & Roberts, 1997, p. 174). Objectification theory posits that female bodies in patriarchal Western societies are treated as if they exist for the pleasure of others, in particular men. Frederickson and Roberts (1997) write that women are acculturated or socialised to internalise an external (male) viewer's perspective of the self. Women, thus, learn to understand themselves as body-objects. Which, according to Moradi and Huang (2008) promotes body surveillance, self-monitoring, and a preoccupation or an obsession with one's appearance. Women's bodies are objectified at an intrapersonal level (self-objectification), within social encounters (between the individual and family, friends or unknown others), and perhaps most pervasively, within the mass media. Body dissatisfaction and body shame are proposed outcomes of these states of increased bodily awareness and internalisation of the observer's perspective (Frederickson & Roberts, 1997; Moradi & Huang, 2008).

According to art critic John Berger (1972), women are "seen and judged as sights" (p. 47). This idea was expanded by feminist screen theorist Laura Mulvey in 1975, who used the term 'male gaze' to describe pleasure in looking. Like objectification theory, male gaze theory offers scholars another way of thinking about looking, and about the role of looking in relation to female subjectivity (Riley, Evans, & Mackiewicz, 2016). Mulvey (1975) described women on screen as being objects of desire, "displayed for the gaze and enjoyment of men, the active controllers of the look" (p. 5). According to Mulvey (1975), viewing bodies (the audience) are invariably male, as such, the imaged bodies of women are invariably positioned as a spectacle to be looked at, evaluated and objectified. Although the idea of the gaze originated in the field of film and cinematography, the concept has been used by other scholars across the arts. Visual media including art, print media (magazines and advertising), the mass media (TV and film), and, nowadays, the internet and social media, typically present images of women as passive, sexual, or physical body-objects to be admired, desired and evaluated (Bordo, 2003; Mulvey, 1975; Ward & Harrison, 2005; Wykes & Gunter, 2005). Contrary to this claim, some post-feminist theorists would argue that, today, women are not directly objectified but rather that the media portray women as active autonomous agents who choose to self-present their liberated bodies in sexualized ways (Gill, 2007a; Jackson & Vares, 2015; McRobbie, 2004). Determining whether the power of the objectifying gaze operates externally or is, instead, internalized and taken up by women as a freely chosen disciplinary regime (Gill, 2007a) is beyond the scope of this thesis. What I feel is important to convey here is that women in the media are depicted narrowly, if not as body-objects to be looked at, then, as autonomous sexual subjects who freely choose to self-present in an objectifying manner, and that it is these conceptualisations of women and female bodies which may be problematic for viewing bodies and imaged bodies alike.

In the Western world, print media, the mass media, the internet and social media play a key role in shaping conceptualisations of women and disseminating ideas about acceptable and idealised feminine beauty (Giovanelli & Ostertag, 2009). Kyrola (2014) writes that "our bodies become situated and moved in relation to these imaged bodies" (p. 1) which influences how we come to see ourselves and others. As prominent sources of information, media-endorsed body ideals (including the thin-ideal) may, then, have far and wide-reaching implications for women. Understood within the lens of objectification theory, negative body image, body dissatisfaction, body shame and eating disorder (ED) pathology amongst women are, in large

part, products of a phallocentric media landscape that continues to promote narrow beauty ideals and glorifies unrealistically thin images of the female form in sexually objectified ways.

The academic and clinical literature are replete with studies of women who report dissatisfaction with their weight and physical appearance (Tantleff-Dunn, Barnes, & Larose, 2011). It appears that body dissatisfaction has become widespread amongst women in contemporary Western society, insomuch that it is termed normative discontent and is considered to be the norm, rather than the exception (Murnen & Seabrook, 2012; Rodin, Silberstein, & Striegel-Moore, 1985; Thompson et al., 1999). Research suggests that body dissatisfaction is associated with disordered eating and eating-disorder related behaviours, including restrictive eating, excessive exercise, compensatory behaviours (e.g., bingeing and purging), and laxative abuse (Cash et al., 2004; Thompson et al., 2012). Several scholars have linked negative body image, which is often used interchangeably with body dissatisfaction, with diminished quality of life and mental health disorders such as depression (Pinhas, Toner, Ali, Garfinkel, & Stuckless, 1998) and anxiety (Sabiston & Chandler, 2010). Researchers have also reported associations between body dissatisfaction and an increased desire to pursue elective cosmetic surgery - an undertaking that unnecessarily places one's health at risk (Calogero, Pina, & Sutton, 2014; Sarwer & Crerand, 2004), as well as with other undesirable and potentially harmful psychosocial outcomes, including sexual distress and dysfunction (Ackard, Kearney-Cooke, & Peterson, 2000; Woertman & van den Brink, 2012), and low self-esteem (Tiggemann & Stephens, 1999).

It appears that the 'tyranny of slenderness' (Chernin, 1981) is alive and well in today's Western society. This is exemplified by the multitudes of women, across various age-groups, who report experiencing body dissatisfaction, body image and eating disturbance, and eating-disorder related behaviours (Karazsia, Murnen, & Tylka, 2017), and further, by the alarming number of women who are clinically diagnosed with life-threatening eating disorders around the developed world (Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders, 2018; National Eating Disorder Association, 2018). Researches have heavily criticised the media for its role in promoting a particularly thin-body aesthetic and for its part in disseminating narrow appearance-related ideals, and it is to these critical scholarly investigations that we turn to now.

One area of research which has received significant theoretical and empirical attention from feminist scholars is the role of traditional media (print media and the mass media) and how

exposure to media images is claimed to influence body image (Thompson & Heinberg, 1999; Ward & Harrison, 2005; Wykes & Gunter, 2005). Although several theories have been proposed by psychologists and sociologists describing the mechanism by which traditional media are considered to influence and shape body image, a discussion of these mechanisms and specific theories is beyond the scope of this thesis. It suffices to say that a substantial amount of feminist research points to a connection between the media and body dissatisfaction and purports that exposure to media images depicting the thin-ideal is related to body image disturbance in women (Grabe et al., 2008; Groesz et al., 2002; Paquette & Raine, 2004; Stice, Schupak-Neuberg, Shaw, & Stein, 1994). While the majority of this research has focussed on thin-ideal messaging transmitted through traditional forms of media, such as mainstream television and film, fashion magazines, and advertising (Levine, 2012), a handful of recently published studies (Tiggemann & Slater 2013, 2014; Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015) suggest that female body image is similarly influenced by 'newer' forms of digital media, including the internet and social media platforms like Snapchat, YouTube, Facebook and Instagram (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016; Holland & Tiggemann, 2016).

Critics of media effects models, which focus on the media effects of imaged bodies on the body image of viewing bodies, argue that the literature pathologises women, positioning them as hapless victims who naïvely and uncritically adopt, and attempt to imitate or replicate bodies as they are represented in the media (Budgeon, 2003; Coleman, 2008; Jackson & Vares, 2015). Furthermore, they argue that these models simplify the complex relationship between the self, body and media images (Budgeon, 2003; Coleman, 2008), and obscure the sociocultural transmission of dominant ideals, including body weight, shape and size norms. Coleman (2008) proposes that the relationship between imaged bodies and viewing bodies is better understood as being affective in nature, arguing that "bodies become through their relations with images, rather than being effected by images" (p. 174). Feminist post-structuralist theorists Jackson and Vares (2015) suggest that "bodies [are] negotiated across multiple sites … [and that] representations or media images provide just one space of negotiation" (p. 350). Unlike media effect approaches, these authors introduce ideas of multiplicity and plurality, and describe bodies as continually in the process of being made and remade (Budgeon, 2003; Jackson & Vares, 2015). Importantly, the work of these critics troubles the assumption that there is a straightforward or linear relationship between imaged bodies and the body image of viewing bodies. The consumption of imaged bodies through traditional forms of media or through social media may well influence our understandings of the kinds of women's bodies that are valued

and significant (Coleman, 2008; Kyrola, 2014) within a certain social, cultural and historical context. However, approaches that construct body image as an effect of imaged bodies will likely tend to overlook the complex processes involved in the construction of bodies and fail to acknowledge or inadequately account for the various sites across which women's bodies and body image are shaped (e.g., social pressure from family, friends, and socio-cultural expectations in general).

Research investigating the ways in which individuals engage with images in online spaces is relatively new. However, examining how bodies are portrayed and presented on social media platforms, how they are consumed by audiences, and how bodies 'become' through their relations with social media images (Coleman, 2008), is an important scholarly endeavour. Unlike traditional forms of media, digital media and social media, are available for immediate consumption and are accessible at any time, from a variety of technological devices (smartphones, desktop computers, laptops and tablets). Wykes and Gunter (2005) write that while representations of women in online spaces are similar to images of female bodies depicted in traditional media, the internet and social media platforms as mediums for communicating dominant cultural messages about appropriate body image are widely distributed, readily available and much more multi-layered (comprised of imagery, sound, video and text), which potentially compound their effects. Perloff (2014) cautions that digital media can influence perceptions of body image as much as traditional media and stresses the need for further research in this area highlighting that users of social media platforms tend to be those who are most vulnerable to body image disturbance, namely, adolescent girls and young adult women.

In a U.S. survey conducted by the Pew Research Center the authors reported that 88% of 18-29-year-olds were frequent users of social media (Smith & Anderson, 2018). Furthermore, the results indicated that - with the exception of YouTube - female adolescents and young adult women were more likely than their male counterparts to use platforms such as Facebook, Snapchat, and Instagram (Smith & Anderson, 2018). In a recent report, We Are Social (2018) announced that the number of active social media users globally increased by 13 percent between 2017 and 2018, to 3.2 billion people, the majority of which are 18-34-year-olds (We Are Social, 2018). According to the author, currently, 90 percent of social media users access their preferred platform from a mobile device. The number of active social media users is, thus, predicted to continue to grow as smartphones and mobile data become more affordable. The

ubiquity and rapid growth of social media platforms, coupled with the increased use of such platforms by vulnerable groups (e.g., adolescent girls and young adult women), make them potentially potent sources of influence and valuable sites for future research.

Andsager (2014), like Perloff (2014), considers research in online spaces of the utmost importance and encourages researchers to examine how social media functions and operates differently from traditional media to shape female perceptions of body image. Digital media, as opposed to traditional media, provides users with greater control over the images they seek out and selectively expose themselves to (Perloff, 2014). For example, individuals who feel underrepresented in the mass media may seek out alternative images of bodies on social media (e.g., fat bodies, queer bodies, differently-abled bodies, and women of colour), or independently produce content (visual materials) that challenges gender stereotypes and idealised media representations, which privilege young, unrealistically thin, predominantly white, hetero-normative, able-bodies. Although social media provides opportunities for individuals to challenge media depictions of the female body and seek out alternatives to the thin-ideal, it may also serve to reinforce the ideal of slenderness (Andsager, 2014).

Another distinctive attribute of social media that distinguishes it from traditional media and makes it an important site for research, is the interactive nature of social media platforms, which permit users to share images and other appearance-related content, as well as to send direct messages to other users or comment on uploaded images (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016; Perloff, 2014). These technical affordances which differentiate traditional media from social media require further academic inquiry given the potential implications for adolescent girls and young adult women. Understanding how social media shapes or influences body image concerns amongst this demographic is particularly important considering the sheer number of adolescent girls and young adult women who actively and frequently use, often multiple, social media platforms.

New digital media technologies have enabled internet and social media users to participate in online spaces in ways that were unavailable to them before. Lupton (2017) writes that in today's modern technological era, people of all shapes and sizes have the opportunity to produce, create and curate media content, which they can then share, across various social media platforms, to private groups or wider public audiences. Instead of being passive consumers of media images, these diverse virtual spaces have enabled individuals to become

active producers and curators of media content. Social media has made it possible for individuals to be both sources of user-generated media and receivers of user-created media content (Koskela, 2004; Perloff, 2014). Social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram have, thus, changed the way people engage with media content and afford users opportunities to exert greater control over the media they disseminate and consume. While this thesis does not permit an extensive exploration of the scholarship in this area, researchers (e.g., Albrechtslund, 2013; Koskela, 2004) have developed discussions of agency in online production and explored the potential opportunities for empowerment (Albury, 2015; Riquelme, Rios, & Al-Thufery, 2018; Tiidenberg, 2014; Tiidenberg & Gómez-Cruz, 2015) that social media platforms afford individuals. Importantly, this research has extended to selfie taking and selfie sharing practices (Abidin, 2016; Nemer & Freeman, 2015; Pham, 2015).

The sharing of selfies (a self-portrait usually taken using a smartphone or webcam and uploaded to the internet) has become a highly popular practice amongst users of social media, especially on the photo-sharing application Instagram. Despite the ubiquity of selfies, defining what counts as a selfie image is not an easy task. Selfies have been described as objects, acts of expression, a means for communicating and understanding ourselves, performances, cultural practices and meaningful gestures. In her book entitled, *Selfies: Why we love (and hate) them*, Tiidenberg (2018) describes selfies as 'self-representational, networked photographs.' A selfie, according to Tiidenberg (2018), can be any photograph that has been intended for, and is legible as, a self-representation, and that can easily be shared across social media platforms. This conceptualisation of the selfie extends what counts as a selfie beyond traditional selfie aesthetics – a photograph of the self, typically taken with a smartphone at an arm's length, foregrounding either the photographer's face, parts of the body, or reflection in a mirror (mirror-selfies) (Grogan, Rothery, Cole, & Hall, 2018). Other scholars (Zhao & Zappavigna, 2018) have similarly broadened the scope of what counts as a selfie to include images that they describe as inferred selfies (body parts captured in the image infer the presence of the photographer) and implied selfies (images of objects which imply the presence of the photographer). Although this is not a selfie study per se, the ways that selfies have been defined and conceptualised in recent studies means that, increasingly, many of the images posted to social media platforms, and in particular to Instagram, can be considered selfies. A brief review of the selfie literature is presented below to provide the reader with a basic understanding of the ways that selfie practices have been interpreted by scholars and how they might be understood today.

Early scholarship on selfie taking and selfie sharing practices produced much criticism from academics (e.g., Kim & Chock, 2017; Sung, Lee, Kim, & Choi, 2016) who dismissed selfie practices as vain, narcissistic (cf. Abidin, 2016; Nemer & Freeman, 2015; Pham, 2015;), gendered practices of vacuous, self-absorbed young women. Media coverage following such research has tended to be pathology-based and has, as a result, contributed to the moral panic that surrounds selfie taking and selfie sharing (Senft & Baym, 2015). Such negative coverage has raised concerns amongst pedestrian audiences that selfie practices are positively related to body dissatisfaction and disordered eating (Cohen, Newton-John, & Slater, 2018; Wagner, Aguirre, & Sumner, 2016), online bullying and threats of violence (Burns, 2015; Warfield, 2018). In light of these allegations, much of the selfie scholarship that followed was directed towards critiquing the criticism (see Burns, 2015; Miltner & Baym, 2015; Senft & Baym, 2015).

Recently published academic works, such as those by Walker-Rettberg (2017) and Zappavigna and Zhao (2017), regard selfie practices more positively than previous scholars. The aforementioned authors for instance, suggest that selfies can function as a visual structure, which then allows individuals to visualise and share their experiences and perspectives with others. Ehlin (2015) and Lupton (2017) understand selfie practices as meaningful acts of self-expression, as a tool for self-representation, and as an opportunity to subvert or reproduce dominant cultural ideals, including body weight, shape and size. Meanwhile, Tiidenberg and Gómez-Cruz (2015) believe that selfie practices "can be conducive to positive becomings of bodies" (p. 95), describing the taking and sharing of selfies as an empowering therapeutic practice that allows women to get to know, understand and celebrate their bodies. In my research, I do not conceive of selfie practices as inherently good or bad, rather, I consider how they are used, by whom, what function they might serve, and how they might be interpreted by the audience, within the context of this thesis.

Self-Presentation and Performance

In the field of social media studies, expressions of the self, including selfies, can be construed as representations (photos that are distinct from the image-maker) or as presentations (curated or theatrical performances) of selfhood. Walker-Rettberg (2017) writes that although there is not a strict difference between the two terms in social media scholarship, the perspective that a researcher adopts bears upon how the phenomenon is analysed. It makes sense to analyse

selfies and other visual materials as representations when the aims of the inquiry are to identify what symbols or objects have been used, to understand what a set of signs signify, or to determine the relationship between the sign and the pre-existing social conventions that give it meaning. An analysis of selfies and other photographic material as presentations, on the other hand, shifts the focus from the meanings associated with specific signs and symbols, to the performance of the actor, the intention of the author or artist, the purpose of the post, and the message that the individual is trying to convey. For the purposes of this research, I will primarily consider expressions of the self in social media as presentations, drawing again from the influential work of Goffman (1959) to understand how individuals self-present on social media platforms, specifically Instagram, to actively perform and construct identities online.

In his book, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman (1959) introduces the idea that individuals perform various social roles, presenting different versions of their "selves" and displaying different kinds of behaviour, depending on their audience and the context or setting. Goffman (1959) distinguished between front stage and back stage performances, suggesting that front stage performances are enacted when individuals are in the physical presence of others or when individuals are aware that they have an audience. Back stage performances, on the other hand, are reserved for moments when the individual thinks they are alone or only in the company of a select few. With front stage performances, individuals tend to be highly conscious of the "self" they are presenting and are inclined to modify their behaviour to fit with the perceived expectations of the audience. Conversely, with back stage performances individuals tend to self-present in a manner that is more relaxed and uninhibited - being free from the expectations of an audience, individuals are in a sense free to be their "true" selves (Cole, 2018). According to Goffman (1959) individuals negotiate between these front stage and back stage performances, whether consciously or unconsciously, throughout their daily lives.

Goffman (1959) proposed that individuals engaged in face-to-face interactions are inclined to present or perform idealised selves. That is, in social interactions, individuals are believed to self-present in ways that are culturally sanctioned, that are consistent with the dominant norms and values of society, and that uphold contemporary societal ideals. Smith and Sanderson (2015) claim that idealised self-presentations can be difficult to manage and sustain consistently overtime. They state that during face-to-face interactions individuals are somewhat limited in what they can say to be true about themselves, because audience members

are physically present and may identify inconsistencies in their behaviour or challenge suspect self-presentation claims. Arguably, opportunities for idealised self-presentations increased exponentially with the advent of the internet. Now, individuals can perform idealised selves to either a wide or carefully selected audience when, where and however they please, with less chance of the performance being perceived as ingenuine, or of the performer being cast as an imposter, a phoney or a fraud.

In the past decade, research on self-presentation has shifted from print media and advertising (Goffman, 1976; Kang, 1997; Lindner, 2004) to technologically mediated environments (Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016; Smith & Sanderson, 2015). The configuration processes and customisation tools embedded in social media platforms, such as Facebook and Instagram, afford individuals with greater control over how they self-present and have provided individuals with greater opportunities to construct salient identities in online spaces (Caldeira, 2016; Smith & Sanderson, 2015). As such, social networking sites have become "an important research context for scholars investigating processes of impression management, self-presentation, and friendship performance" (Boyd & Ellison, 2007, p. 219). Several scholars have already repositioned Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical account of self-presentation as a performance to describe selfie-taking and selfie-sharing practices on social media platforms, including Instagram (e.g., see Abidin, 2016; Caldeira, 2016; Goméz-Cruz & Thornham, 2015; Grogan et al., 2018; Smith & Sanderson, 2015; Walker-Rettberg, 2017; Warfield, 2014). While some individuals may indeed use these platforms to manage and maintain idealised selves, thus, repeating and reproducing societal ideals, research (e.g., Alentola, 2017, Cwynar-Horta, 2016a, 2016b; Wuri & Tambunan, 2018) suggests that others have begun to use these platforms to self-perform in ways that challenge, resist, and reject dominant cultural ideals, including those related to appearance, body weight, shape and size.

Over the past 5 years the body positive movement, which encourages people to appreciate, respect, and celebrate marginalised bodies, including fat bodies, queer bodies, trans bodies, differently-abled bodies, and people of colour has flourished on social media. Increasingly, self-identified body positive women are using social media platforms to address and contest dominant Western beauty standards, including the ideal of slenderness (Alentola, 2017, Cwynar-Horta, 2016a, 2016b; Wuri & Tambunan, 2018). This is happening most visibly on the photo-sharing application Instagram, which boasts over 7.5 million body positive posts. Before I examine the affordances of Instagram as a site for body positivity and explore how

women are using this platform to construct, perform, and produce body positive identities, I present a historical account of body positivity and the fat acceptance movement from which it emerged.

Body Positivity and the Fat Acceptance Movement

The term "Body Positive" was coined in 1996 by Connie Sobczak and Elizabeth Scott, founders of The Body Positive, a non-profit organisation dedicated to supporting people of all ages, sizes, sexual orientations, genders, ethnicities, and abilities in healing their relationship with their bodies (The Body Positive, 2018). Sobczak (2014) describes body positivity as "a growing cultural movement that offers people the opportunity to put down the burdens of judgement, comparison, and shame in order to cultivate a relationship with themselves that is built on a foundation of self-love and trust" (p. 17). From its inception, the spirit and intent of body positivity has been one of size diversity, size pride, and self-acceptance. Firmly rooted in feminist and fat liberation movements (also called the fat acceptance or size acceptance movements), body positivity is inherently political. As a consequence, how the term is used, whom it is used by, and who it is used to represent are controversial topics, fraught with much debate within the movement.

The fat liberation movement originated in the United States of America in the late 1960s – early 1970s. Cooper (2008) cites the "Fat In" in 1967, a fat activist rally in Central Park, as the first public demonstration protesting fat discrimination. In 1969, a formalised fat advocacy group, The National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance (NAAFA), was founded by self-identified fat admirer William Fabrey (Saguy & Ward, 2011). The NAAFA was established to advocate for fat rights, change negative public perceptions of fat people, eliminate weight-based discrimination, and encourage self-acceptance amongst its fat members – goals it continues to pursue today (Afful & Ricciardelli, 2015).

In 1973, Californian therapists Judy Freespirit and Aldebaran (Sara Fishman) founded the Fat Underground (FU), a radicalised offshoot of the NAAFA, who adopted a confrontational stance towards fat activism. The "Fat Liberation Manifesto" published by Freespirit and Aldebaran in November of the same year, served as a public declaration of the FU's intentions and goals (Solovay & Rothblum, 2009; Stokes, 2013). Influenced by feminism and women's rights, as well as by other liberation movements of the times, such as the civil rights movement and the gay liberation movement, the FU focussed their efforts on dismantling power structures which

they believed caused and reinforced anti-fat attitudes and fat stigma (Cooper, 2008). From 1973 to 1977, members of the FU vehemently spoke out against and criticised the medical profession and health professionals (general health practitioners, mental health clinicians and public health experts), accusing them of distorting and concealing scientific research and medical evidence about the health risks of fat (Fishman, 2018). Acts which, they further argued, betrayed fat people, and from which, the multibillion-dollar weight-loss industry profiteered (Fishman, 2018).

Fat activism became more visible in mainstream culture in the 1990s. Clothing retailers started to expand their clothing ranges to include larger sizes, which became known as plus-size, and fat fashion was recognised as a niche market (Cooper, 2008). Grassroots size acceptance groups created resources to help dispel the fear of fat, and, to support and educate fat people about the problems (and dangers) associated with yo-yo dieting and weight-loss surgery. Zine publications (cheaply produced, self-published works) became popular and were used as a way to spread and share information. Fat!So? (1998), a book published by author and fat activist Marilyn Wann, who wrote a zine by the same name, presents readers with an insight as to the kinds of material that were circulating during this time. Another source of empowerment and inspiration for fat women was a magazine titled Radiance (1984-2000), which promoted body positivity, drew attention to fat issues and helped to connect large women with products, services and community events that were fat friendly (Price, 2018).

Following the advent of the Internet in the late 1990s, fat activists, who previously marched and held public protests advocating for fat rights in their localities, started to tackle issues of fat discrimination and fat oppression in virtual spaces. Online communities were initially formed on listservs, such as FaT GiRL and Size Queen, and then via online forums and blogs (Cooper, 2008; Snider, 2009). Kate Harding and Marianne Kirby (2009), authors of two fat activist blogs (Shapely Prose and the Rotund), describe 2007 as the tipping point where the "Fat-o-sphere" gained momentum. The availability of the Internet enabled fat people across the world to connect, share personal experiences of being fat, and discuss fat issues - all from the safety and comfort of their homes (Afful & Ricciardelli, 2015).

Fat activist in online spaces have regularly employed terms like size pride, fat acceptance, fat appreciation and body positivity to express and affirm the positive attitudes that they hold towards their own, and other marginalised bodies, including trans bodies, queer bodies,

differently abled bodies, and people of colour. When the term body positive started to garner mass media attention and became part of the mainstream lexicon, circa 2015, it began to be misused by the lay public and media advertisers to represent already privileged bodies (young, straight sized, white, hetero-normative, abled-bodies), both on and offline (Ospina, 2015). The appropriation of the term body positive, to represent thin, conventionally attractive, white women who simply claim to have a positive body image, has attracted criticism from several members of the body positive community and more than a few fat activists have questioned whether body positivity in its current iteration has been diluted and become meaningless (Dalessandro, 2016; Dionne, 2017; Fabello, Bouris, & Forristal, 2016; Gibson, 2017).

Instagram and Body Positivity

Instagram, a social media platform that specialises in photo and video sharing, has risen in popularity since its launch in October 2010. It currently boasts more than 1 billion active users per month, who collectively share over 95 million images per day (Osman, 2018; Statista, 2018). Users create accounts, also known as profiles, and upload visual content (images and videos) and textual material (profile descriptions, text captions and comments) to share, publicly or privately, depending on their chosen privacy settings. Text captions, which are user-generated descriptions of visual material, can contain up to 2,200 characters, including hypertextual material such as tags (the @ symbol immediately followed by another Instagram user's account name), emoji (pictorial icons which depict ideas, emotions or objects) and up to 30 hashtags (any word or phrase preceded by the # symbol). Instagram boasts several communication features which enable virtual interactions amongst Instagram users, including the ability to comment on posts and send private messages, to follow other user's Instagram accounts, to tag or mention users in posts, and to like or share posts.

Hashtags, which were appropriated from Twitter, were introduced to Instagram in 2011 and represent the most popular way for Instagram users to connect related themes or link content (MacDowall & de Souza, 2018). A hashtag is a unique 'user-generated tag' preceded by the symbol # (Schlesselman-Tarango, 2013). Hashtags are considered key semiotic resources, that enable Instagram users to explore and discover images with a specific theme or subject and permit the user to position an image within the relevant framework so that others can easily find it (Zappavigna, 2015). The use of multiple, related hashtags is typically employed by users to enhance audience reach by optimising, or increasing the visibility, of a particular post across a number of connected themes. When users search for specific hashtags using the explore

function of Instagram's desktop application, the platform displays a grid of the nine "most liked" posts at the top of the results page and a chronologically arranged and constantly updated grid of the "most recently" added posts underneath. This algorithm ensures that posts with the most likes and comments, and those that are most popular or trending, will be seen first.

The primary hashtags associated with the body positive movement are #bodypositive and #bodypositivity, which yield over 7,800,000 and 2,400,000 images respectively (Instagram, November 2018). Hashtags similar to, or associated with, the primary hashtag are displayed above the search results enabling people to quickly connect to related content. Other hashtags frequently used alongside #bodypositive and #bodypositivity include #effyourbeautystandards (3,400,000 posts), #honormycurves (1,000,000 posts), #bopo (792,000 posts), #beautybeyondsize (372,000 posts), #bodyposi (301,000 posts), #bodyacceptance (244,000 posts), #allbodiesaregoodbodies (222,000 posts) and #bopowarrior (135,000 posts). As images associated with the body positive movement are user-generated and self-defined, they represent a subjective interpretation of what is meaningful and what counts as body positivity. Consequently, not all images tagged with a body positive, or related, hashtag will be considered relevant by, or representative of, the wider body positive community.

Instagram users typically employ hashtags to increase the visibility of posts and to connect them to specific themes, however, Schlesselman-Tarango (2013) suggests that hashtags serve a secondary purpose, that is, to represent and affirm one's identity in technologically-mediated spaces. Schlesselman-Tarango (2013) describes hashtags as searchable signatures, which allow individuals on Instagram to "assert and perform online selves" (p. 5). From this perspective, hashtags are considered more than a simple descriptive tool, instead, acting as a means for users to form, and claim, online identities and membership to particular groups. Adding a body positive or related hashtag to an Instagram post, may therefore function as a declaration of an individual's position or intent, as opposed to merely describing the content of the uploaded image.

In contemporary society, the use of hashtags on Instagram has become zeitgeist. However, their employment does not automatically grant users membership into online groups or communities. When hashtags receive mainstream attention, or go 'viral', for example, the #metoo campaign - which highlighted the prevalence of sexual assault and harassment, especially in public spaces and in the workplace – the user base grows, without a mediator or

arbiter to control who uses the hashtag and which images are associated with it. The hashtag body positive has received notable attention from the media in recent years and the number of people using the hashtag, and related hashtags, has subsequently grown. This has raised concerns for some members of the body positive community who argue that the movement is being diluted and that some images are not only harmful to those who subscribe to body positivity, but that they are antithetical to the spirit and intent of the movement (Dalessandro, 2016; Dionne, 2017; Fabello, Bouris, & Forristal, 2016; Gibson, 2017).

Instagram is an increasingly popular social media platform. However, compared with the text-based micro-blogging platform Twitter and social networking site Facebook, it has received significantly less scholarly attention, that is, until recently (MacDowall & de Souza, 2018; Woodley, 2018). Over the past couple of years, academic interest in Instagram as a research site has grown exponentially. Today, there exists a wealth of scholarship that has been conducted using this platform (e.g., see Gibbs, Meese, Arnold, Nansen, & Carter, 2014; LaMarre & Rice, 2017; Marwick, 2015; Olszanowski, 2014; Sheldon & Bryant, 2016; Thelwall & Vis, 2017; Tiidenberg & Baym, 2017; Veum & Undrun, 2018; Zappavigna, 2016). Initially research on Instagram focussed on quantitative data, analysing patterns of use (date & time, geo-location), and the types of content being uploaded (e.g., images or video; Highfield & Lever, 2015). More recently, the platform has been used by researchers to explore social, cultural and political phenomena (Aziz, 2017; Carlyle, Guidry, Williams, Tabaac, & Perrin, 2018; Hochman & Manovich, 2013; Pittman & Reich, 2016;), including the development and creation of online movements and cyber communities (Ging & Garvey, 2018; Wuri & Tambunan, 2018).

A small, albeit, growing body of research suggests that the social media platform Instagram has helped foster the development of an online body positive community (Alentola, 2017; Cwynar-Horta, 2016a, 2016b; Gibson, 2017, Rassi, 2016; Wuri & Tambunan, 2018). Findings from these studies suggest that the body positive movement on Instagram is a source of empowerment for the women active in the community (Alentola, 2017); that women who participate in the movement are exploring and reclaiming their embodiment and practicing agency online (Cwynar-Horta, 2016a, 2016b); and that the platform opens new spaces to challenge idealised Western beauty standards (Wuri & Tambunan, 2018). In addition, Tiidenberg (2017) has noted how the photo-sharing practices of women on Instagram interrupt body-normative discourses of femininity and subvert dominant cultural ideals of female bodies.

The findings, however, are not consistent across all studies, with scholars arguing that some women are, in fact, reproducing dominant codes of femininity and reinforcing gender stereotypes under the guise of body positivity (Gibson, 2017; Rassi, 2016). These conflicting views reveal the need to conduct further research into body positivity on Instagram so as to better understand the potential of Instagram as a site for changing, or at the very least challenging and troubling appearance-related ideals, including body weight, size and shape.

Research Aims

The aim of this research is to examine the performative practices of body positivists on Instagram and consider how self-identified body positive women are self-presenting, both visually and textually, to discursively construct and produce body positive identities. Importantly, I explore whether these performances resist or reproduce dominant Western beauty standards, including ideals of body weight, size and shape. The purpose of this thesis is to extend and build upon prior research exploring body positivity on Instagram. It contributes to the emerging field of self-documentation on social networking sites (Veum & Undrum, 2018), discourses on self-presentation, as well as to the existing literature on body image and social media. What is presented is informed by social constructionism, feminist principles and critical studies of body norms and Western beauty standards. The methodology was qualitatively and discursively driven (Fairclough, 2015; Phillips & Hardy, 2002; Reavey & Johnson, 2008; Rose, 2007; Silver, 2013).

Chapter Two: Method

In this chapter I outline the methodological approach employed in this study and explain how the data collection process was carried out. Firstly, I describe the procedure used to identify and select Instagram profiles, including how I established my selection criteria as I became more familiar with the body positive movement as it is presented on Instagram. Secondly, I discuss how individual images, including their associated text captions and hypertextual material, were selected from these Instagram profiles for further analysis and provide a rationale for the methods used. Thirdly, I discuss any methodological challenges that I encountered during the data collection process and explain how I overcame these. Throughout these sections and in a concluding paragraph, I present the ethical considerations as they apply to this research.

The purpose of this study was to extend and build upon prior research exploring body positivity on Instagram. The literature review revealed that there is a lack of scholarship in this area and that further research is required to better understand how women are self-presenting and using the platform to construct, perform, and produce body positive identities. This study, which was informed by social constructionism and guided by feminist principles and critical theory, will contribute to the development of the field. A constructionist epistemology regards human experience, including perception, as a product of social, historical, cultural and linguistic processes (Cooper & Thorogood, 2013; Gergen, 1985; Willig, 2013). Constructionism rejects objectivist notions that knowledge exists independently of human consciousness, that phenomena possess an inherent truth, and that cause-effect relationships can be reliably established (Chamberlain, 2014). Instead, it proposes that knowledge is multiple, provisional and that it is always context-dependent (Chamberlain, 2014; Cooper & Thorogood, 2013). From this perspective, phenomena are understood to be constructed by individuals and groups according to the linguistic resources that they have available to them and influenced by the social, cultural and historical setting (Cooper & Thorogood, 2013; Crotty, 1998). A constructionist position was considered most appropriate for the purposes of this thesis as I was principally concerned with understanding the ways in which body positivity was performed by users of Instagram, as opposed to discovering an underlying objective or generalizable truth about the nature of the body positivity. Adopting a constructionist approach facilitated an interpretive mode of inquiry which enabled me to critically and reflexively examine body positive performances on Instagram (Coyle, 2007; Crotty, 1998; Willig, 2013).

Drawing on feminist understandings of female body image, including ideas of objectification and the male gaze (Frederickson & Roberts, 1997; Moradi & Huang, 2008;), Goffman's (1959) theory of self-presentation and gender displays, as well as and Butler's (1988, 1990) notion of gender as a performative act, this study examined the performative practices of body positivists on Instagram and considered how self-identified body positive women are self-presenting, both visually and textually, to discursively construct and produce body positive identities. Importantly, I explore whether these performances resist or reproduce dominant Western beauty standards, including ideals of body weight, size and shape

Data Collection

In order to establish an understanding of the body positive movement, to familiarise myself with the ways in which body positivity is performed, enacted and displayed on Instagram, as well as to identify potential Instagram profiles for this study, I carried out an exploratory visual and textual examination of body positive hashtags on Instagram. This high-level exploratory review was conducted between December 2017 and January 2018. To study body positivity as it is presented on Instagram, I used the platform's search function and performed a hashtag-search using the primary hashtags #bodypositive and #bodypositivity to locate publicly available visual and textual content utilising these hashtags. I then expanded my searches to include related hashtags (e.g., #effyourbeautystandards, #honormycurves, #bopo, #beautybeyondsize, #bodyposi, #bodyacceptance, #allbodiesaregoodbodies, and #bopowarrior) as my search revealed that these hashtags were frequently employed by members of the body positive community and were used alongside the primary hashtags in users' posts. By including these related hashtags into the exploratory review, I was able to identify other potential body positive Instagram accounts that had not been featured in the initial primary hashtag searches. On average 95 million photos and videos are upload to Instagram daily which means that the "top posts" and "most recent" sections of any given hashtag-search are constantly changing. A broad search using primary and related hashtags thus permitted a thorough examination of body positivity as it is presented on Instagram.

As I reviewed the images, associated text captions and hypertextual material returned in the primary and related hashtag-search results, I noticed that a number of women who self-identified as body positive had posted before-and-after photos which ran counter to the traditional body transformation images that we are accustomed to seeing in the mainstream

media. In contrast to the fat-before vs. thin-after "success stories" that we are used to seeing in women's magazines, on TV and in advertisements, these body positive women had posted images in which they possessed a smaller-sized body in the before photo and boasted a larger-sized body in the after photo. A google search of "reverse before and after images on Instagram" or "backward body transformations on Instagram" revealed that, in the past year, a barrage of media articles had been published on the topic of reverse body transformations. With popular magazines such as Cosmopolitan (Harvey-Jenner, 2018), Teen Vogue (Weiss, 2017), and Glamour (2017) featuring articles applauding the trend. Intrigued by this seemingly rebellious, and unapologetic political act, I decided to base my exploration of the body positive movement on Instagram around this particular phenomenon and proceeded to gather a non-random purposive sample of Instagram profiles, which featured alternative or unconventional before-and-after photos, as a key component of Instagram profile selection. For the purposes of this study, the terms alternative and unconventional will be used interchangeably to describe before-and-after photos that do not conform to the traditional, predominantly thin, white, Western narrative that underlies the idea of body transformation.

In the interests of conducting my research in an ethically responsible and respectful way I also decided to purposively select body positive Instagram profiles that could be considered to possess influencer status by social media standards. According to Abidin (2015) social media influencers are ordinary individuals who amass a significant number of followers on any digital platform and then utilise their sizeable followings to either: to push a political agenda; raise awareness of a political cause; or monetise their personal social media account(s) through sponsored advertising and brand promotion (Fitzpatrick, 2017; Walker-Rettberg, 2017). Simply stated, a social media influencer is someone who has a large following and can influence others on social media. Industry experts usually grant influencer status to social media users who have a minimum of 10k followers (Fitzpatrick, 2017). However, the number of followers is not the only factor taken into account when determining influencer status. Other considerations include engagement rate, the credibility and trustworthiness of the influencer, potential audience reach, and the perceived impact of social media posts (Fitzpatrick, 2017). For the purposes of clarity and for the remainder of this thesis I will refer to the Instagram profiles that I purposively selected for this study as body positive influencers, or simply influencers.

One ethical consideration that lead me to seek out and purposively select body positive influencers, as opposed to drawing my sample randomly from the general population of Instagram users, is that influencers can reasonably be expected to have a lower level of perceived privacy owing to their extensive followings. It is also reasonable to assume, that influencers intend for the visual and textual materials they post to Instagram to achieve maximum viewership and to be seen by a wide audience (Frankel & Siang, 1999; King, 1996). While some scholars have argued that researchers, like myself, are not the intended audience of information posted online and that the found visual and textual materials have not been produced explicitly for the purposes of research (Snee, 2013), other academics contend that visual and textual materials uploaded to a public domain for the purposes of mass communication is 'fair game' (Walther, 2002). By purposively selecting influencers, as opposed to profiles belonging to the general population of Instagram users, I believe I have gone some way to mitigate any potential risk of harm associated with notions of perceived privacy.

A secondary purpose associated with the non-random selection of body positive influencers for analysis in this thesis was to establish who was influential within the body positive community as it exists on Instagram. I was interested in understanding whose voices were most prominent; how these individuals were performing body positivity on Instagram (what visual and textual materials they were posting); and whether these performances served to resist or reproduce dominant Western beauty standards, including the slenderness-ideal. In analysing whether a body positive Instagram user had reached influencer status for the purposes of this study, I purposively selected body positive accounts with more than 10k followers. In addition, I sought-out Instagram users who actively advocated for body positivity and regularly uploaded body positive content (a minimum of one post per week, identified by the use of the primary and related hashtags). At the conclusion of my exploratory review of body positivity on Instagram I ended up with a corpus of 12 Instagram accounts, each of which contained alternative before-and-after photos, and each of whom could be considered an influencer based on the aforementioned selection criteria.

As a preliminary step in the analysis of these body positive influencer profiles and to establish a greater depth of understanding of the visual and textual materials associated with the 12 purposively selected influencer accounts, I conducted a comprehensive timeline analysis of each profile. Timeline analyses were conducted between January 2018 and March 2018. For

each of the 12 purposively selected influencer profiles, I scrolled back to the beginning of the individual's account, to the first image ever uploaded, and looked at each discrete image and the associated caption up until present-day. The number of posts (per influencer profile) ranged between 300 and 1,330. As part of my timeline analysis I took screenshots of images and copied both the image and the associated caption, including any hypertextual material (tags and hashtags) used by the influencer, into a Word document. I recorded what I thought were visual and textual content relevant to the aims of the study and made descriptive shorthand notes against both image and text so that I could return to the data at a later stage in the research process. I reviewed approximately 9,500 images. Video posts were ignored as they did not fit the ambit of this study. Due to the significant number of images reviewed and the sheer size of the comments sections associated with posts, sometimes upwards of 4,000 comments, I scrolled through and read, but decided not to document the comments section.

Two potential Instagram profiles @lizagoldenreal (116k followers) and @khrystyana (232k followers), which underwent an in-depth timeline analysis, were later excluded from further study as it was discovered that their Instagram accounts were primarily utilised to highlight their professional modelling portfolios. As such, the majority of the images uploaded to Instagram by these two users were professional photos, and the re-use of these in this research, may have had potential implications for this study, including the violation of intellectual property rights and copyright laws. Of the 10 remaining Instagram profiles, two more were excluded from further review. @saggysara (255k followers) uploaded what appeared to be alternative before-and-after images, however, on closer examination it became obvious that these side-by-side photos were intended to reveal how the same image or body can look different depending on the lightening, positioning of the body, the way clothes are worn and whether filters or editing apps are used (or not). As these images were not actually unconventional before-and-after transformation photos, as conceptualised earlier on in the research, this user's profile was omitted from the study.

Finally, careful analysis revealed that @jenbretty (275k followers) had not used either of the primary hashtags #bodypostive or #bodypositivity in the past 6 months. Despite the use of primary and related body positive hashtags in the past and apparent body positive advocacy up until May 2017, this user had for unknown and undeterminable reasons ceased using body positive and related hashtags thereafter. This Instagram user no longer met the criteria I had developed earlier for this thesis. I felt it was important to exclude this profile from further study

on account of the user no longer being an active advocate of body positivity. At the conclusion of the timeline analysis stage of the research, the purposive sample for this study comprised 8 Instagram influencer profiles: @bodyposipanda (987k followers), @chooselifewarrior (94.3k followers), @alissbonyt (344k followers), @lexiemanion (42.1k followers), @allisonkimmey (182k followers), @nlhfit (458k followers), @ selfloveclubb (181k followers), and @nourishandeat (127k followers).

The next stage of the research entailed manually selecting individual images from these public and searchable Instagram accounts, that I would use in the final analysis. Individual image selection was conducted across March and April 2018. Image selection was guided and informed by the timeline analysis that I had conducted earlier. When selecting images, I did not follow any rigid or predefined guidelines for determining what was relevant. Instead, I allowed my intuition and familiarity with the body positive movement to guide image selection. Individual images were purposively drawn from those that I had documented in the timeline analysis, as well as from each of the 8 influencer profiles, which I analysed for a second time to ensure that I had captured all relevant body positive visual and textual material. A non-random sample of between 5 and 30 posts, which contained the primary and related hashtags and sufficient visual and textual content, were selected from each influencer profile. As a primary feature of this research was the posting of alternative before-and-after images, unconventional before-and-after images were included in the data set. I made it a priority to conduct my research in a way that was respectful and considerate of the influencer whose profile had been selected for the purposes of this research. Therefore, in a bid to minimise any potential risk of harm to the influencer I excluded any posts that contained images of the influencer as a minor (under the age of 16) and any images that contained the influencer with third parties such as family, friends, romantic partners or others (Silver, 2013). In order to prevent the breach or violation of intellectual property rights and copyright laws I also excluded all obvious professional images, images re-posted from other Instagram accounts and artistic posts credited to third parties.

Sampling issues emerged at the stage of individual image selection. Early on, I discovered that one of the Instagram influencers @chooselifewarrior (963 posts) had renamed her profile to @iamdaniadriana (199 posts) and had, in the process, deleted or removed several hundred posts from her Instagram account, including all alternative before-and-after images. For the sake of clarity, I will continue to refer to this user throughout this thesis as @chooselifewarrior only.

Another Instagram influencer @lexiemanion had also deleted all 12 alternative before-and-after images from her account. Likewise, @nourishandeat had removed all alternative before-and-after images as well as others (approximately 100 posts) from her account before the stage of individual image selection began. While @chooselifewarrior and @nourishandeat offered no specific explanation for the removal of images from their accounts, @lexiemanion detailed her reasons for intentionally removing all alternative before-and-after photos in an Instagram post uploaded in March 2018.

The deletion of images from the abovementioned influencer accounts reflects the volatile nature of social media platforms as sites for research. Had I not captured and already documented the image, text caption and related hypertextual material from profiles during the timeline analysis stage I could have lost significant amounts of my data. As it was, there were a couple of instances where, during the timeline analysis, I had copied and pasted the body positive influencer's text caption and related hashtags but had, for time-saving purposes, only described the associated image (with the view of coming back to it later), as opposed to going through the full process of taking a screenshot, uploading the image to my computer, then copying and pasting the image into a Word document. To maintain data integrity and data quality in this thesis, only posts that contained an image, text caption and hypertextual material were selected from the data collected during the timeline analysis stage. All posts that had been only partially recorded during the timeline analysis stage were excluded from further analysis. The question of whether it is ethical to analyse visual or textual material, which has since been removed from an open access, publicly available social media platform, was one that I gave careful consideration. In deciding that I would proceed with an analysis of some of the data that had since been deleted from the present-day influencer's profile, I reasoned that the posts had been shared publicly and had been available to a wide audience for an extended period of time – in some cases up to 3 years. The visual, textual, and hypertextual material obtained during the timeline analysis for Instagram influencers @chooselifewarrior and @lexiemanion were plentiful and I was able to purposively select a number of individual images from each influencer's profile for further analysis. @nourishandeat was excluded from further analysis at this point as the timeline analysis contained insufficient visual, textual, and hypertextual material.

At the conclusion of the individual image selection phase of research, the total number of body positive influencer profiles were 7 and the total number of posts collected for the final stage of

analysis were 139. In considering that each post contained an image and a text caption of up to 2,200 characters I was satisfied with the quantity of visual and textual data retrieved for the purposes of this qualitative research project.

Methodological Challenges

Technologically mediated spaces are unstable, constantly changing and fluid. For this reason, researchers using qualitative research methods to explore phenomena on social media platforms, such as Instagram, Twitter or Facebook, are only able to observe and capture textual content as it appears in a newsfeed, discussion thread or comments section, at a specific point in time (Murthy, 2013). Instagram and other social media platforms each contain various comment moderation features which allow users to delete comments, report inappropriate comments, blacklist keywords from the comments section, and block follower or other user accounts. Such user control permissions mean that newsfeeds, discussion threads or comments sections - of any given social media account - may be highly regulated and favourably curated by the account holder. Instagram, like other social media platforms enables Instagram users to permanently delete both their own and other people's comments, which they consider inappropriate, rude or abusive, from posts that the Instagram user has personally authored. Instagram users can also block follower or other user accounts who troll or harass them, which then, prevents the blocked individual from finding or viewing the Instagram users account, (past, present and future) posts or story. The deletion of comments, blacklisting of key words and blocking of other Instagram users can be problematic for researchers working in this space as it obscures and limits what we can know about the interactions that occur between Instagram influencers and their audiences. Furthermore, it can skew these interactions to appear more positive than is actually the case.

In research in online spaces it is acknowledged that sometimes comments on social media platforms are not particularly useful for answering research questions. For example, the prolific use of emojis (pictorial icons which depict ideas, emotions or objects) as a substitute for actual textual content and the use of hypertextual material, such as the tagging of other Instagram users, as a means of sharing the post with other individuals, or the use of hashtags to connect the post with other ideas, themes or related content, can sometimes be of little value to the researcher. As I purposively selected images for this study I scrolled through the associated comments section and determined that much of what was available was indeed of little use and of little value for the purposes of answering the research question associated with this thesis.

Interactions between the Instagram influencer and followers, or the general audience, were often limited to emoji, hypertextual material (tags and hashtags), compliments (directed towards the influencer), and responses from the Instagram influencer thanking the user who made the compliment. I did not discover anything in the comments section that revealed anything more about the performance of body positivity on Instagram. In addition, negative comments were few, if any, suggesting that comment sections are indeed highly curated spaces and that Instagram users may actively and tightly control who can contribute and what they can say.

Ethical Considerations

Over the past two decades, the internet and social media platforms have become popular tools and important sites for academic scholarship (e.g., Hair & Clarke, 2007; Holtz, Kronberger, & Wagner, 2012; Snee, 2013). Online spaces possess an abundance of rich and meaningful data however, research in digitally-mediated settings presents scholars with unique, context-related ethical dilemmas that are not yet fully understood (Buchanan, 2011; Hibbin, Samuel, & Derrick, 2018; Markham & Buchanan, 2012; Townsend & Wallace, 2016). Although academics conducting internet-mediated research are subject to the same ethical principles underpinning research in offline contexts, the lack of a standardised approach to guide the collection and analysis of internet-based data, as well as an absence of clear procedures for the dissemination of it, means there is variability amongst the practices of the research community. At the time of writing, there are no universally agreed upon ethical standards for conducting research in technologically-mediated environments. Best practice guidelines and recommendations as set forth by the Association of Internet Research (AoIR: Markham & Buchanan, 2012) and the British Psychological Society (2013) have guided this study. This study employed unobtrusive data collection methods to analyse open access, publicly available internet-based data and, therefore, did not comprise human subjects. As the research is considered low-risk, full ethics committee approval was not required. A low-risk ethics notification was submitted to the Massey University ethics committee in January 2018.

While human subject research norms such as informed consent did not apply to this study, several ethical decisions were made during the stages of profile and individual image selection to ensure that this research was conducted in a way that demonstrated respect and consideration for the body positive influencers whose accounts were selected for the purposes of this research. Ethical considerations specific to this research project included: determining that the

nature of the found visual and textual material was public and likely intended for a wide audience; mitigating the risk of potential harm associated with notions of perceived privacy by selecting influencer profiles with significant followings, as opposed to those from the general public; and acting responsibly and reflexively to establish which visual and textual materials it was ethically and legally appropriate to include in this study.

Chapter Three: Analysis

In order to make the transition from data collection and analysis to data interpretation and reporting it is necessary to discuss, albeit briefly, the theoretical works that I consulted to carry out the analysis of the final dataset. Granted that it is somewhat unconventional to introduce theory at this point, but in the interest of establishing context and positioning the analysis it is necessary to present the reader with a few key ideas from the field of visual cultural studies that I drew upon in conducting my analysis. To begin, I examine the nature of visual materials and consider the role of photographs in relation to truth and reality. Next, I consider how digital technologies have influenced understandings of visual phenomena and the technological affordances that have changed and extended image taking and sharing practices. Then, I explore how images can been seen and looked at, how they can be understood and interpreted by audience(s), and how images acquire or produce meanings. To conclude, I describe how I analysed the visual and textual materials that body positive influencers posted to Instagram.

Visual materials

The notion that photographs mirror reality or are a mimetic copy of the objects, landscapes, and people that appear in the world has been the subject of much debate amongst scholars (Bourdieu, 1990; Hall, 1997; Sontag, 2008; Sturken & Cartwright, 2009). Throughout history, these debates have considered whether photographs offer photographic-truth and incontrovertible 'proof' of a thing, or whether their meaning is context dependent, historically specific, culturally determined, and made through social practices. The shared belief that photographs function as precise records or as transparent renderings of reality has diminished overtime. However, the role of photographs in relation to truth, reality, meaning-making and knowledge production continues to be discussed and debated at length in the literature (Roberts, 2014; Rose, 2012a, 2014; Sontag, 2008; Sturken & Cartwright, 2009).

Debates on the truth-value of photography have intensified in recent years owing to new digital technologies, in particular camera-phone and photo-editing applications, which allow images to be enhanced or altered with greater ease and at much faster speeds than ever before. Added to this, social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook and Twitter have enabled individuals to produce and curate media content in ways that have, inevitably, extended and transformed the social and cultural practices of image making and sharing (Hand, 2016). The photo-sharing app Instagram, for instance, has its own built-in-filters and photo-editing

software, which lends it towards being used to edit or manipulate images before they are shared with the audience. Tiidenberg (2018) cites Instagram as the platform that "mainstreamed (at least in the Western context) the idea that editing is, or should be, a default action prior to posting an image to social media" (p. 56). A related challenge to the notion of photographic-truth in the new technological era is that individuals can take a multitude of photos, delete unsatisfactory images, and post to social media a highly curated, often idealized, version of themselves (Hirdman, 2010; Schwartz & Halegoua, 2015). The idea that individuals carefully select one image from an infinite number of other possible images (Berger, 1972; Sontag, 2009) is an important idea that needs to be considered when analysing and interpreting visual materials as these practices shape our 'frames of vision' (Pham, 2015) and construct the apparent truth-value of visual phenomena. As a result of these modern-day technological affordances and changing image taking and sharing norms, it is widely accepted that images shared to platforms like Instagram are mediated by such practices and processes. If images do not lead directly or unproblematically to truth, how then might we conceive of the images we see?

Tiidenberg (2017) considers how images on Instagram are used by individuals to make visual truth claims, suggesting that "images function as truth claims by lending genre-specific authenticity" (p. 8). From this perspective, images can be seen and understood as elements, creative objects, or visual materials that reify phenomena and reinforce the idea that something like the thing depicted in the image exists or has truth-likeness. Images can also be interpreted as phenomena that tell audiences something about what counts as photographable (Bourdieu, 1990) or photo-worthy (Van House, 2009, 2011). I found these ideas useful for understanding the images in my dataset and draw upon them later in the analysis. How an image is made (what technology is used), what it looks like (the structure of the image, formal qualities, and aesthetic conventions, as well as the content of the image), who it is viewed by (the audience and practices of looking), and where/how it is displayed and consumed (context), influence the meanings and effects that an image acquires or produces (Rose, 2007, 2012b; Sturken & Cartwright, 2009). Thus, there is no singular, agreed upon 'right way' to analyse imagery. Theoretical debates concerning the interpretation of visual phenomena can be understood as disagreements between scholars over the importance placed on different aspects of an image, and how and why they are important.

Visual materials can be interpreted in a variety of ways. As such, scholars conducting qualitative research with visual materials need to consider their standpoint carefully and clearly articulate their analytic approach to the audience. For the purposes of this research, I focused my analysis on what Rose (2007, 2012b) describes as the site of the image, including the formal qualities and aesthetic components of the image, its composition, and the meanings and effects it is thought to have - as opposed the site of image production (e.g., the technologies used to produce, the genre, and the socioeconomic conditions in which it is produced), or the site of the audience (e.g., processes of distribution, how the image is displayed, how it is interpreted, and by whom). Like Tiidenberg (2017), I attended to the ways that influencers used images to make visual truth claims and sought to understand the types of practices and performances that could be considered representative of the influencers in the dataset.

Data Analysis

As part of the analysis that follows, I explain how I analysed the final dataset of visual and textual materials that these body positive influencers posted to Instagram. As I did not choose to conduct this analysis using a codified approach, I hope that I have above sufficiently introduced the reader to some of the big conceptual ideas that have emerged from the field of visual culture studies which give context to, and position, the analytic work presented in the following section. At the conclusion of the data collection stage the total number of body positive influencer profiles were 7 and the total number of posts collected for the final analysis were 139 - each of which contained an image, text caption and hypertextual material (tags and hashtags). The theoretical works of Rose (2007, 2012b), Hand (2016), as well as previous scholarship by Tiidenberg (2017) helped me to develop a critical, multi-modal analytic approach to the images body positive influencers posted to Instagram. Rose's (2007, 2012b) articulation of sites and modalities highlighted for me the complex and varied practices, processes, technologies and knowledges that contribute to the meaning-making of images. In order to address the aims of this research I determined it was most important to analyse the site of the image and how body positive influencers self-present in the images they post to Instagram (Rose, 2007, 2012b). In my analysis I paid close attention to the subjective choices of aesthetics and compositional arrangement of the influencer (e.g., bodily gestures, facial expression, and gaze) as these practices can be conceived of as, intentional or unconscious, acts that narrow and highlight ways of seeing (Berger, 1972) and of being seen. Moreover, they simultaneously emphasise and make visible some aspects of the image and render invisible or obscure other possibilities.

For example, body positive influencer @alissbonyt (Figure 1) could have taken any number of other possible photos to advocate for body positivity, however, this is the one that she chose to post on this particular occasion. In the image @alissbonyt is sitting on a bed in a slightly reclined, carefully positioned, yet relaxed and effortless looking pose. Her head is slightly tilted, and she smiles playfully, but does not look directly down the camera lens. She is wearing black lingerie, her hair is done, and her make-up appears freshly applied. The bedroom in which the photo has been taken is softly lit. As with the majority of the images analysed in the dataset, it is hard to know whether a filter or photo-editing software has been used to manipulate or alter the image in any way. To the pedestrian audience, this photo may appear natural, 'real,' or authentic, however, as a critical reading of the image shows, it is carefully staged and has been thoughtfully and deliberately produced. As a visual truth claim, we could also argue that this image functions to say 'See, I am body positive," or "I belong to this community".

Figure 1. Mid-length-photo. Sitting on a bed, wearing lingerie, smiling playfully at the camera. Photograph by @alissbonyt, posted March 16th, 2017; Instagram Inc.

Similar to Tiidenberg (2017), I analysed the images contextually – which means I treated the visual (images), textual (text captions), and hypertextual materials (tags and hashtags) as intertextually relational. Like Hand (2016), I extended my analysis to the intertextual dimensions of the images, which involved carefully analysing the text caption related to each image, as well as any associated tags and hashtags (hypertextual materials), while at the same time considering how these visual and textual materials were related to, similar or different from, other visual and textual material in the dataset. I began the analysis by examining the

visual, textual and hypertextual materials of the influencers, one profile at a time, writing down major ideas as I went. Then, I looked across the dataset as a whole to identify which visual and textual elements were repeated or common across influencer profiles and made detailed notes about these. As I viewed and carefully analysed the images, associated texts and hypertextual materials, I noticed that influencers self-presented in ways that seemed to challenge hegemonic norms of female beauty and appeared to resist cultural scripts of traditional femininity. Expressions of resistance were accomplished through the unconventional, provocative and at times transgressive images that influencers posted, the subversive text captions they wrote, and the recalcitrant hypertextual materials they used, such as the hashtag #effyourbeautystandards. During the analytic process, I observed influencers occasionally, either consciously or unwittingly, self-presenting in ways that (re)produced the ideals they purported to reject. In these instances, influencers self-presented in culturally sanctioned ways that more closely reflected dominant Western beauty standards and conventional feminine rhetoric. I drew on the theoretical works of Goffman (1959) and Butler (1988, 1990) to interpret and articulate these juxtaposing presentations, which I describe in the first half of the findings and discussion chapter, as performances of resistance and performances of femininity.

The unconventional before-and-after transformation images that influencers posted to Instagram were a key component of the selection criteria for this thesis and I was curious to examine this sample of images in more detail. I had assumed initially, that the alternative before-and-after transformation images posted to Instagram were, yet another visual strategy employed by body positive influencers to perform resistance and to challenge ideal body transformations. However, undertaking a closer examination of these images in the final dataset, I realised quite unexpectedly, that these functioned as a means for influencers to discuss, document and share deeply personal experiences with eating disorders and ED recovery. Adopting the same analytic approach as before, I returned to the dataset once again. I first assessed each unconventional before-and-after transformation image separately, reading it as its own individual text, then I looked across all of these types of images in the dataset to render a richer picture of how recovery was being performed and enacted and how recovery identities were being produced and created. Finally, I extended my analysis to include all of the images that I had purposively selected for this research and analysed these images, texts and hypertextual materials again to better understand the relationship between body positivity and recovery, and to establish whether the inherently political roots of body positivity were understood in the context of recovery, or whether it had been mistaken as a substitute for self-

love and feeling positive towards one's body. The second half of the findings and discussion chapter is presented in two parts; the first explores ED recovery as it is performed by influencers on Instagram (Performances of Recovery), while the second examines body positivity in the context of recovery (Body Positivity or Self-Love?).

Chapter Four: Findings and Discussion

In this chapter I present majoring findings of the data analysis. To begin, I discuss the performative practices of body positive influencers on Instagram and describe how influencers are self-presenting, both visually and textually, to discursively construct and produce body positive identities. Addressing the aims of this study, I discuss whether these performances resist or reproduce Western beauty standards, including the thin-ideal. I suggest that while performances of resistance offer promising moments of instability and have the potential to destabilise and subvert the standardised feminine ideal, the performative force of these acts is obfuscated and weakened by performances of femininity and (re)enactments of conventional feminine rhetoric, which reproduce and reflect dominant appearance-related norms, including the thin-ideal. Then, I present an unexpected narrative of recovery from eating disorders and disordered eating. In this section, I explore how influencers perform recovery and how they create and produce recovery identities through the images, texts and hypertextual materials they post to Instagram. From there, I illustrate how influencers use their highly visible platforms to contest and reject assumptions about eating disorders and ED recovery. Finally, I investigate whether body positivity, in the context of recovery, has been mistaken as a substitute for self-love, having a positive body image, or simply feeling positive towards one's body.

Body positive influencers purport to love and accept their bodies as they are, at the size and weight they are, and claim to embrace those aspects of their bodies that are generally considered embarrassing or shameful by Western beauty standards (Sastre, 2014), for example, muffin tops, love handles, belly rolls, side rolls and back fat. Critical of unrealistic predominantly white, Western socio-cultural expectations to produce flawless skin, body positive influencers use their platforms to challenge alleged 'imperfections' or 'visible flaws' such as cellulite, acne, wrinkles, scars and stretch marks. As part of the work to normalise bodies of all shapes and sizes, including alleged appearance flaws, body positive influencers intentionally draw attention to these matters. This is accomplished, first and foremost, through the images that influencers choose to post to Instagram. Then, it is reinforced in the text captions which reference body positivity, selflove and body acceptance, and through the use of hashtags, such as #bodypositive, #bodypositivity, #bopo, #bodyposi, #self-love, #radicalbodylove and the more subversive tag #effyourbeautystandards. Some examples of images tagged with #bodypositive and #bodypositivity are presented in Figure 2 (below).

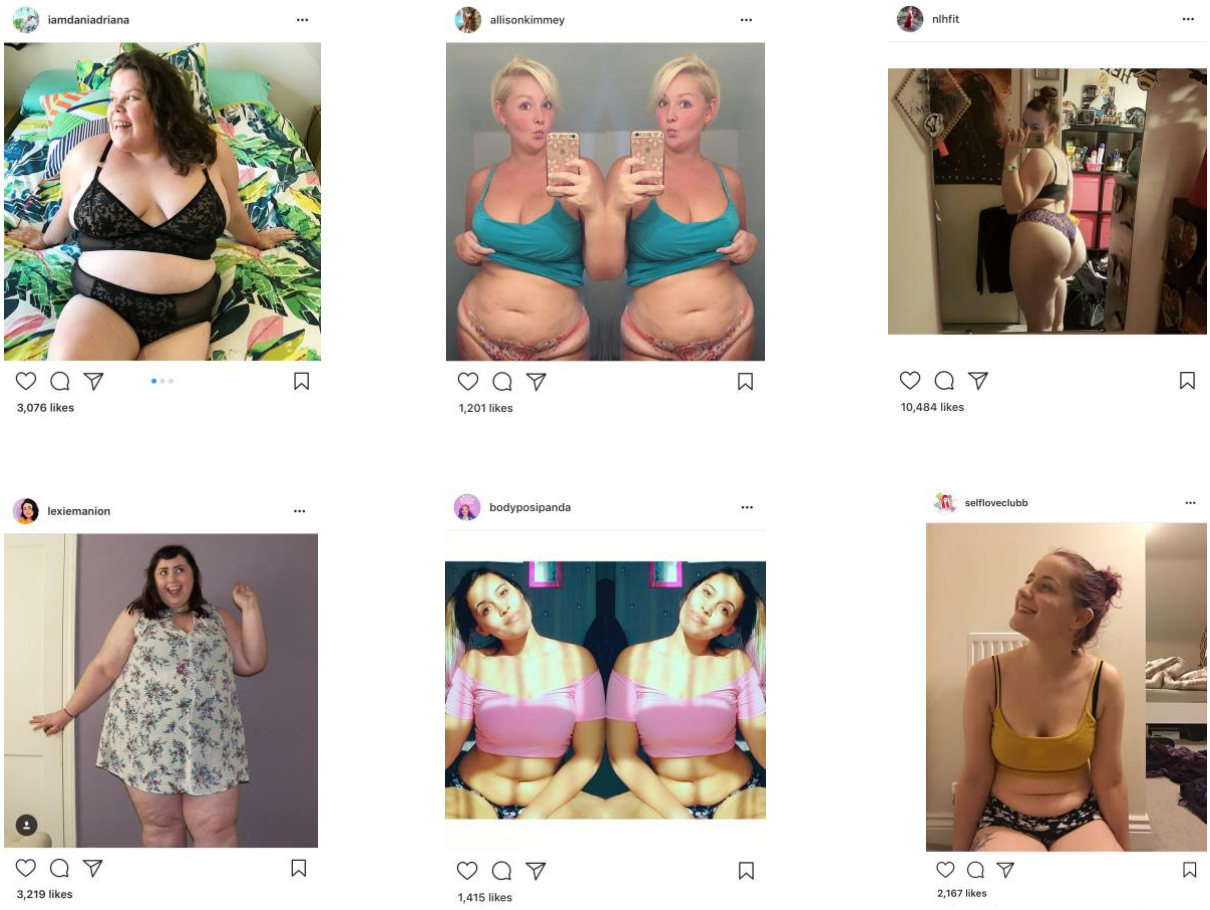

Figure 2. Examples tagged with #bodypositive and #bodypositivity.

Performances of Resistance

Drawing from Goffman's (1959, 1976) theatrical and dramaturgical approach to self-presentation, the sharing of visual, textual and hypertextual materials that challenge, violate, or threaten to subvert dominant discourses of feminine beauty, including the thin-ideal, can be understood as deliberate acts by conscious, intentional subjects, and can be construed as performances of resistance. Discursively performances of resistance are achieved through both the visual and textual materials that body positive influencers posted to Instagram. Influencers accomplished resistance by challenging societal expectations to self-present according to narrow standards of beauty, utilising their platforms to expose what 'real' bodies look like when they are unedited, un-posed, unfiltered, and captured at unflattering angles. In the two examples below (Figure 3), body positive influencers @bodyposipanda and @selfloveclubb post side-by-side images depicting their posed bodies (Left) and their 'real' bodies (Right). This compositional arrangement is a visual strategy used by influencers to expose how bodies

on Instagram can be manipulated, positioned and presented to appear closer to the ideal. It is intended to normalise the 'natural' appearance of real bodies and to challenge the idea that the only bodies worth photographing are those that look like thin bodies we see in the image saturated media landscape.

Figure 3. Examples of influencers utilising their platforms to expose what 'real' bodies look like when they are unedited, un-posed, unfiltered, and captured at unflattering angles.

Influencers also used their highly visible platforms to speak out against diet culture and the fitness industry.

> "Whether I'm fully dressed, half naked or naked is no one's concern but my own. How I chose to express myself, dress and post pictures is my decision and shouldn't be up for discussion by others who don't agree. If you don't agree then move on and mind your own business" *@nlhfit, posted January 23rd, 2018; Instagram Inc.*

> "We do not have to hide our bodies until we reach our goal weight or until you deem us 'acceptable enough'…I don't care for your narrow standards of beauty" *@lexiemanion, posted September 10th, 2017; Instagram Inc.*

> "Fuck you diet culture for making me think I was worthless unless dieting or losing weight" *@selfloveclubb, posted May 13th, 2017; Instagram Inc.*

As seen in Figure 4 (below), influencers criticised the mass media and the fashion industry, at times naming and shaming specific brands (e.g., Victoria's Secret, Gilly Hicks, Abercrombie

& Fitch) and magazine companies (e.g., Seventeen, Closer, Elle) for endorsing the thin-ideal and failing to represent women with bodies similar to theirs.

Figure 4. Examples of influencers disrupting and challenging contemporary beauty standards, including the thin-ideal. Right: @bodyposipanda gives her scales a 'make-over'. Left @selfloveclubb destroys a popular magazine.

Additionally, performances of resistance took the form of reclaiming space by self-identifying as fat, thereby taking back some of the power.

> "One of the first and most important things I did on this body positivity journey was reclaiming the words that used to tear my self esteem [sic] into shreds. Words like 'fat' and 'chubby' and 'thunder thighs." When you reclaim a word like that, you neutralise it, you take away it's [sic] power to bring you down." *@bodyposipanda, posted April 4th, 2016; Instagram Inc.*

In Figure 5 (below), influencer @chooselifewarrior stands proudly and unapologetically in her reclaimed fat body. In the text caption associated with this image the influencer claims the term fat as "just another adjective" citing that the freedom that came with self-identifying as fat has been "unreal". Wearing only her underwear, standing confidently with her hands on her hips this image can be read as a visual truth claim (Tiidenberg, 2017) that reinforces the message that the influencer is happy in her body and that she refuses to accept the word fat as anything more than a descriptor.

Figure 5. Mid-length photo. Black& white image. Standing unapologetically in front of the camera, smiling, wearing only her lingerie. Photograph by @chooselifewarrior, posted December 4th, 2015; Instagram Inc.

Performances of resistance included the sharing images that revealed or emphasised aspects of the body that are usually considered inappropriate, shameful or embarrassing according to dominant discourses of feminine beauty, including ideals of body shape, weight and size. A common visual strategy used by body positive influencers was to post images of themselves in the nude or semi-nude, directly challenging cultural expectations to cover-up or hide their supposed less-than ideal bodies (Figure 6).

Figure 6. Performances of Resistance. Examples of the nude and semi-nude images posted by influencers to Instagram.

Along with Butler (1988) I conceptualised femininity as a 'performative accomplishment' which is achieved through "a stylized repetition of acts…instituted through the stylization of the body" (p. 519). Drawing on this understanding of performance, I interpreted bodily gestures, including facial expression and gaze that deviated from traditional cultural scripts of femininity and idealised feminine beauty, to be destabilising corporeal acts that have subversive potential. The performative act of taking and sharing nude and semi-nude images, as practiced by the body positive influencers, can be read as an intentional rejection of dominant beauty discourses and societal expectations to self-present in an idealised manner. Publicly sharing images of oneself in the nude or semi-nude is not a permissible practice for every 'body,' especially not for bodies that in any way violate or transgress cultural appearance-related ideals, in particular the thin-ideal (Tiidenberg & Gómez-Cruz, 2015). Therefore, the decision to photograph oneself and post such images to Instagram becomes an aesthetic, social, political, and moral choice. Thus, it is reasonable to argue that body positive influencers trouble and subvert dominant, normalising discourses of ideal beauty when they post images in which their unclothed or semi-clothed bodies appear unmade-up, uncontained, unruly, or excessive.

In Figure 7 (below), @allisonkimmey addresses the 'health concern trolls' that suggest her stretch marks are 'an indication of poor health', and that she is 'glorifying obesity'. Adopting a confident stance, staring directly down the lens of the camera, whilst pouting her lips and wearing a bikini, she refuses to cover up or hide from her critics. The reproduction of the original photo to create a side-by-side mirror image is a powerful visual strategy that draws attention to and emphasises the presence of her body. It also serves as a visual truth claim, which speaks to her confidence and her unwillingness to submit to the behest of body-shamers.

Figure 7. Mid-length, side-by-side mirror image. Pouting directly into the camera. Wearing a bikini. Photograph by @allisonkimmey, posted April 4th, 2017; Instagram Inc.

Other examples of resistance include the images posted by @alissbonyt, @chooselifewarrior and @selfloveclubb in Figure 8. In these posts, the influencers reveal their visibly marked and stretched bodies to the viewing audience, known and assumed. These images are performances of resistance, used to challenge Western beauty standards, including the thin-ideal, and cultural norms to produce flawless skin. The degree to which they accomplish this, that is, the performative force of the act, depends on complex relationships between the producer, the audience, the image itself, any associated text or hypertextual material, and the social context. An analysis of these images by a medical professional and a fat activist, for instance, could produce two entirely different readings, each declaring the images to have more or less performative force.

Figure 8. Examples of stretched bodies. A performance of resistance against social expectations to produce flawless skin.

Performances that resist idealised bodies can be argued to simultaneously promote and encourage a discursive turn towards body reclamation. Discourses of reclamation are useful for understanding the female body as a "potential site of symbolic resistance to oppression" (Pitts, 1998 p. 71). The posting of nude and semi-nude images by body positive influencers on Instagram then, can serve as a meaningful practice that allows influencers to reclaim authority and control over their bodies. Or, as Sontag (2008) puts it to "take possession of a space in which they are insecure" (p. 9). Further to this, such posts can be read as a promising strategy for reclaiming control over how bodies are presented in the media.

Performances of resistance as enacted and performed by body positive influencers on Instagram promise to destabilise and subvert white, Western hetero-normative beauty standards, including the thin-ideal. However, the performative force of these performances of resistance is potentially diluted and weakened when the performative acts reproduce existing appearance-related ideals or appear consistent with recognised and sanctioned conventions of feminine beauty. Conducting a close analysis of the purposively selected images posted to Instagram by influencers, I perceived performances of resistance to be punctuated, at times, by performances of femininity, an observation that is consistent with previous scholarship (see Cwynar-Horta, 2016; Gibson, 2017; Marwick, 2015; Rassi, 2016; Tiidenberg & Baym, 2017).

Performances of Femininity

Body positive influencers physically position and photograph themselves in various ways, some of which reproduce pre-existing discourses of feminine beauty. In these instances, the

body (including facial expression and gaze) is posed or carefully arranged within the frame of conventional feminine rhetoric. On such occasions, the image posted to Instagram displays the influencer performing the "correct" version of femininity (Bordo, 2003). The unruly body, in these instances, is often fully clothed, or at the very least dressed 'appropriately'. Furthermore, its true size and any potential flaws are likely to be concealed, obscured from view (through strategic body positioning), or hidden from the audience all together. The influencers face is typically made-up, the facial expression is soft and demure, and the gaze is either averted, withdrawn, or, if it engages with the camera lens, is unserious, submissive, or playful (Goffman, 1979).

Figure 9. Examples of Influencers performing the "correct" version of femininity.

Feminine touch and self-touching are described by Goffman (1976) as conventional forms of feminine rhetoric, typical of media advertisements. Examples of feminine touch and self-touching is visible in Figure 9 (above) as well as in Figure 10 (below). The influencers in these images deliberately pose, using their hands to frame the face or delicately touch themselves, in particular their hair.

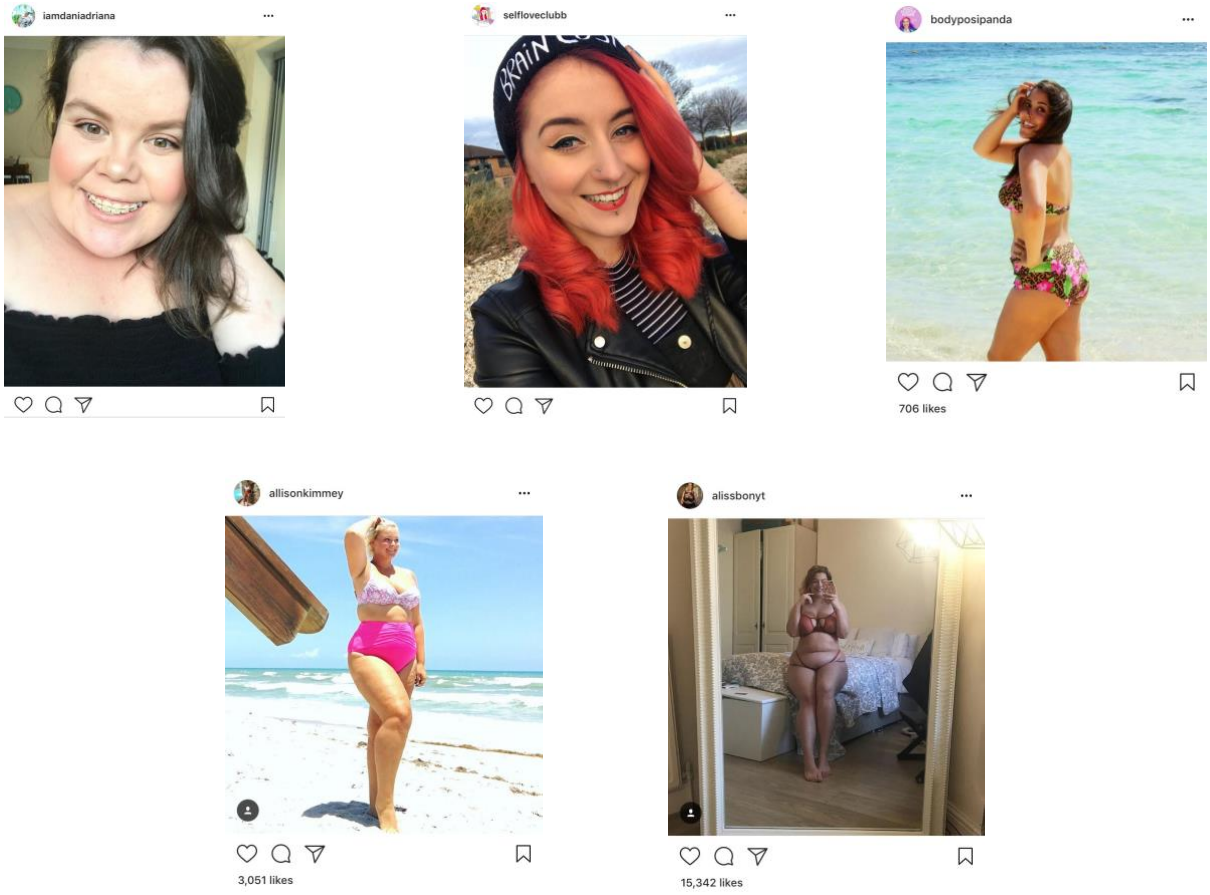

Figure 10. Examples of feminine touch and self-touching.

The influencers in Figure 10 (above) self-present in ways that approximate images of women that are very common in popular magazines and mass media advertisements (Goffman, 1976). According to Dobson (2015) aesthetic conventions of media advertisements and mass media representations of female bodies include seductive gaze, the foregrounding of lips and mouths, presenting the body in swimwear, lingerie or flesh-revealing clothes, and posing in seemingly unnatural, carefully staged positions. The images in Figure 9 depict influencers performing idealised femininity according to these normalised conventions of media and advertising described by Dobson (2015). In these images body positive influencers slip into expected presentations of normative femininity through their facial expressions, gaze, bodily displays (staged poses), and beauty work (wearing make-up, fashion). Arguably, these self-presentations conform with demands to perform in accordance with traditional Western ideologies of female beauty. In this sense, they undermine performances of resistance, by (re)producing and reinforcing the very ideologies around feminine beauty that they claim to reject.

Body positive influencers present themselves engaging-in, undertaking and performing certain activities that can be considered to fall within the realm of conventional feminine praxis (Bordo, 2003). Conventional feminine praxis typically includes beauty work, for example applying make-up, styling one's hair, and body work, including dieting, cleansing, exercising, and surgical or non-surgical cosmetic procedures (see also Kwan, 2010).

Women in Western cultures are expected to focus on appearance and participate in beauty work (Murnen & Seabrook, 2012), for example, wearing make-up, having a skin-care regime, doing one's hair, adorning the body with jewellery and accessories, and wearing fashionable clothes. In today's society beauty work has become normalised and beautifying practices tend to be accepted and are unquestioningly or uncritically taken up by women. The body positive influencers analysed here can be clearly seen engaging in beauty work practices as exemplified in the visual and textual materials they share to Instagram (see Figure 11, below).

Figure 11. Examples of feminine praxis – self-presentation of beauty-work

According to dominant cultural scripts of femininity women are supposed to participate in body work in order to maintain a desirable (read: thin, predominantly white, hetero-normative) female body. The images presented in Figure 12 (below) are examples of how body positive influencers continue to participate in and engage with dominant discourses related to body work (e.g., dieting and weight-loss).

Figure 12. Examples of feminine praxis – self-presentation of body-work. Left: @nlhfit discusses weight-loss and fitness. Right: @allisonkimmey encourages her audience to "take the plunge" and join her on a cleanse.

In the text caption associated with the image produced by @nlhfit in Figure 12, the influencer engages in weight-loss talk writing that she "can't wait to drop some body fat so I can see the muscle definition in my arms." Furthermore, she states that her goal for next year "is to work more on my triceps and hopefully lose some of the fat from there as that's the area letting me down." Yet, at the same time, her post is tagged #bodypositive, #bodyconfidence, and #everyBODYisbeautiful. Similarly, influencer @allisonkimmey engages in dieting discussions, even going so far as to encourage 'serious' members of her audience to join her in a 3-week 'non-starvation method' cleanse. This post is also tagged with #bodypositive, #bopo, and the more subversive #effyourbeautystandards. Despite references to body positivism, a critical analysis of these images and associated text captions reveals that these influencers continue to engage in feminine praxis associated the aesthetic ideal. The performative force of these influencers claims to body positivism is, thus, diminished through their engagement with dieting and weight-loss rhetoric, as it is these very practices and discussions that are typical of discourses of feminine beauty, in particular the pursuit of the thin ideal.

Pursuit of the thin-ideal and idealised feminine beauty entails, for most women, a commitment to beauty work and body work. The cultural script that expects women in Western society to maintain a youthful and lean figure, also insists that women conceal and control their hunger and appetites. In conducting a critical analysis of the images posted to Instagram by body positive influencers it became apparent that influencers did not post images of themselves enjoying or consuming food. It may be argued that, in this way, body positive influencers

comply with cultural demands to suppress, hide, and manage the female appetite. Female hunger is taboo (Bordo, 2003) and can be considered a backstage behaviour (Goffman, 1959), yet it was rare to observe any of the body positive influencers contesting ideas around eating in the visual and textual materials they posted to Instagram. It was interesting to observe the absence of such imagery as it seems to reinforce Victorian values around women, appetite, and eating (Bordo, 2003). Here again, then, body positive influencers can be perceived as conforming to discourses of idealised bodies and feminine beauty as opposed to challenging these ideas.

I argued in the previous section that the decision to photograph oneself in the nude or nearly nude could be construed as a performance of resistance. Indeed, for body positive influencers who occupy bodies that push up against or challenge idealised thinness, these acts of nude or near-nude display can be considered transgressive or subversive of Western beauty norms, in particular the thin-ideal. However, for other body positive influencers, for example those whose bodies appear closer to the norm or thin-ideal (see Figure 13), the posting of nude or semi-nude images may not be considered a performance of resistance. Instead, such images could be construed as eroticised or hypersexualised self-presentations that invite patriarchal male gaze (Mulvey, 1975) and objectification (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Papadaki, 2010).

Figure 13. Examples of hypersexual imagery.

Extending this idea even further, it could be argued that the aesthetic conventions of the images in Figure 13 bear a closer resemblance to the types of images that are seen in soft-pornography, as well as on pornographic websites than to advertisements (Dobson, 2015; Hirdman, 2010). Soft-porn aesthetics according to Dobson (2015) include: facial expressions that are flirtatious

or convey a come-on look; gaze that is alluring, inviting, or seductive; bodily displays which project availability or accessibility; and flesh revealing clothes (lingerie, swimwear, crop-tops etc). A reading of these images as reflections of soft porn and conventional sexual rhetoric diminishes the performative force of resistance and renders the overall performance a parody (Butler, 1990; Salih, 2002).

In these ways, body positive influencers on Instagram, deliberately and possibly unthinkingly, repeat, (re)produce and reinforce dominant discourses of Western beauty as well as cultural scripts of femininity, despite opportunities to self-present alternative identities and to perform resistance. As this critical and reflexive analysis of the visual and textual materials posted by body positive influencers to Instagram reveals, performances of resistance were, at times, punctuated by slippages (performances of femininity) that reproduced traditional female beauty standards and conventional femininity, ultimately, diminishing the performative force of acts of resistance. While many of the images posted to Instagram by body positive influencers show promising moments of instability (i.e. resist and destabilise dominant discourses of feminine beauty, including the thin-ideal) and have the potential to expand our ways of seeing (Berger, 1972) bodies and beauty, others cite and reproduce the all too familiar conventions of advertising and mass media, including feminine touch and self-touching (Goffman, 1979), male gaze (Mulvey, 1975), objectification (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Papadaki, 2010), and soft-porn rhetoric (Dobson, 2015).

The body is clearly a sight of struggle. It appears that despite efforts to address and contest difficult-to-achieve appearance-related ideals, including body weight, shape and size, body positive influencers often repeat and reflect the very ideologies they purport to reject. Slippages from body positive discourses to pre-existing discourses of idealised femininity and conventional feminine rhetoric has been observed by other scholars (Cwynar-Horta, 2016; Gibson, 2017; Rassi, 2016), therefore it did not come as a complete surprise to me. What was unexpected in this research, were the findings that comprise the next section. This was an entirely separate narrative, not unrelated to the previous section, which I describe as performances of recovery.

Performances of Recovery

Returning to the images that piqued my curiosity and lead me to complete this thesis, this section covers the alternative transformation, before-and-after images posted by body positive

influencers to Instagram. Traditionally, transformations - at least the ones we are accustomed to seeing and that we are regularly exposed to in the media, or in weight-loss advertising - are performed according to pre-established visual conventions, whereby, the image that least resembles the feminine ideal is posted on the left and the image that more closely approximates idealised feminine beauty (including the thin-ideal) is posted on the right. The images shared by body positive influencers can be considered unconventional or alternative before-and-after images in the sense that they run counter to what we expect. Examples of alternative or unconventional before-and-after images are presented in Figure 14 (below).

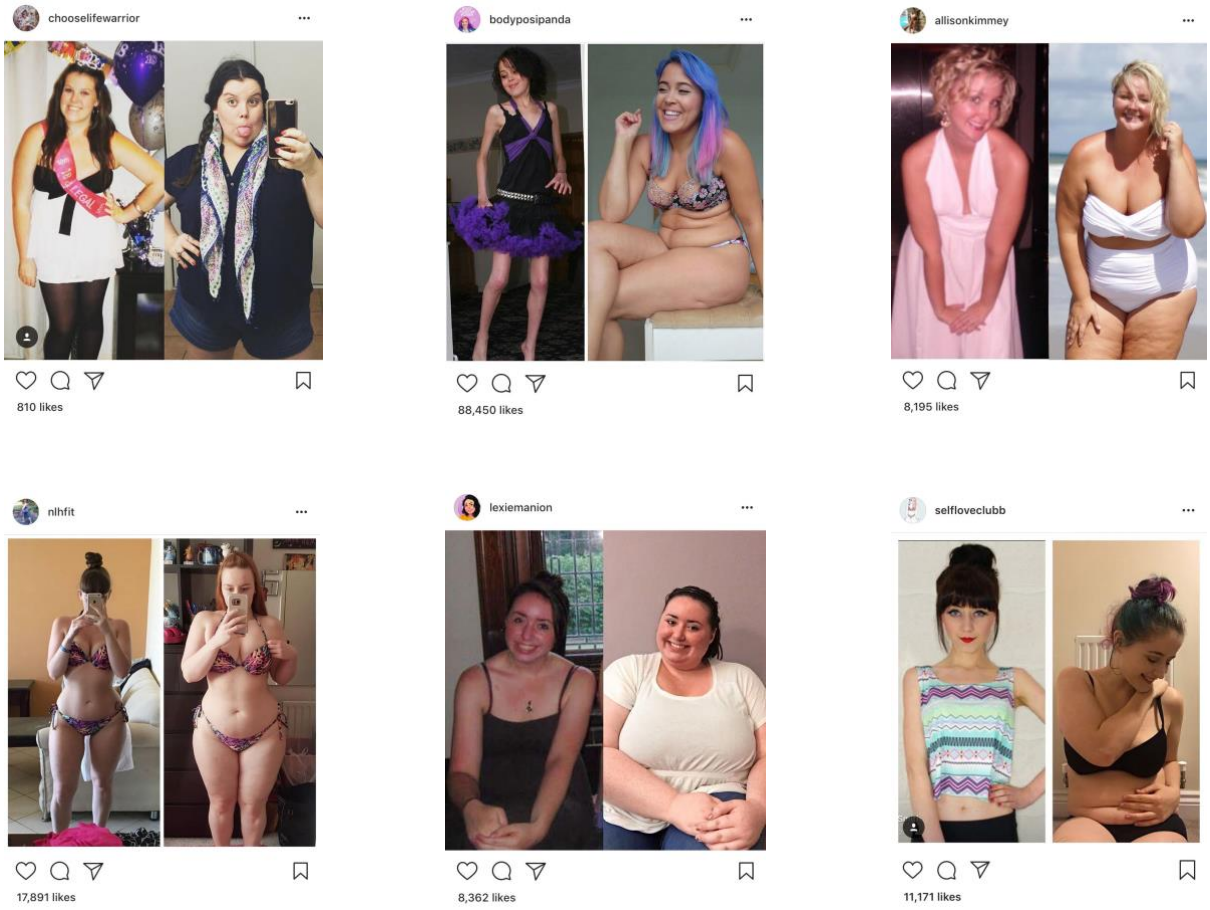

Figure 14. Examples of alternative before-and-after images posted by influencers to Instagram.

What we observe in Figure 14 (above) is that the image on the left more closely resembles idealised femininity, including the slenderness-ideal, than the image on the right. Yet, how we are expected to read or interpret the image has not changed. That is, the Western convention of reading left to right still applies. The transformations presented by the body positive influencers

could perhaps be described as 'backwards' or unusual, but a careful examination of these posts reveals that they are not mistakenly, accidentally, or unintentionally structured in this way. In fact, the transformation that is being presented and enacted in these images isn't really a physical one at all, but rather, a deeply personal transformation from disordered eating and eating disorders to ED recovery.

An unexpected finding of this research was that many of the influencers discussed body positivism alongside deeply personal accounts of recovery from eating disorders and disordered eating. Recovery bodies are discursively produced by body positive influencers through the images, text captions and hypertextual materials posted to Instagram. I initially discovered the connection between body positive posts and ED recovery in the text captions associated with the images, then, in the hypertextual material which included explicit references to eating disorders, for example #bulimia, #anorexia, #osfed, #ednos, and to recovery, including #eatingdisorderrecovery, #edrecovery, #anarecovery, #miarecovery, and #edwarrior. Analysing performances of recovery can be challenging for academics as there are few qualitative studies which explore personal accounts of recovery. Nevertheless, a handful of exceptions exist (e.g., see Darcy et al., 2010; Lamoureux & Bottorff, 2005; Malson et al., 2011; Pettersen & Rosenvinge, 2002; Pettersen, Thune-Larsen, Wynn, & Rosenvinge, 2012). One study that I found particularly helpful for my critical analysis of the visual, textual, and hypertextual materials posted to Instagram by body positive influencers was a scholarly article by LaMarre and Rice (2017), which explored hashtag recovery on Instagram.

Examing ED recovery online is further complicated by the fact that recovery is poorly defined in the clinical and academic literature. Moreover, conceptualisations of recovery and what constitutes 'being' in recovery, or recovered, varies (Bardone-Cone et al., 2010; LaMarre & Rice, 2017). In the analysis that follows, recoveries presented by body positive influencers on Instagram are understood as ongoing performative acts (Butler, 1990) which have the potential to broaden and extend current understandings of recovery. Similar to LaMarre and Rice (2017), this analysis focuses on self-presentations as performances of recovery, and explores the discursive construction and enactment of recovery identities on Instagram. I do not presume to know whether or not influencer performances of recovery constitue full or partial recovery nor do I evaluate or comment on performances of recovery in terms of their success or failure. Throughtout this section I use the term recovery, as opposed to recovered, to reflect the ongoing

performative nature of recovery as it enacted and performed by body positive influencers on Instagram.

Digital technologies and social media platforms enable people who have experienced eating disorders to make sense of their experiences, to record, perform and present their recoveries online, and to share their struggles and achievements with similar others (LaMarre & Rice, 2017). The body positive influencers in my research documented and shared their experiences of eating disorders and disordered eating, both visually and textually on Instagram. Furthermore, they used their platforms to challenge assumptions about what eating disorders and recovery from eating disorders look like. In the critical analysis that follows I explore performances of recovery and how recovery is discursively constructed by body positive influencers through the visual, textual, and hypertextual materials they post to Instagram. Then, I examine how influencers use their platforms to challenge assumptions about what eating disorders and recovery looks like. Lastly, I carefully analyse whether the political roots of the body positive movement are understood, acknowledged and promoted on the highly visible platforms of body positive influencers, or whether body positivity in the context of recovery has been misunderstood as a substitute for self-love, and misused as a descriptor for feeling good about oneself and having a positive body image.

In the examples that follow, I argue that body positive influencers perform recovery using unconventional, before-and-after transformation images. These images can be read as a visual strategy for documenting the recovery journey or as visual truth claims (Tiidenberg, 2017) that function to authenticate the recovery performance. Then, I illustrate how influencers discursively construct and produce recovery identities in the text captions associated with these posts. Finally, I suggest that influencers form, claim, and affirm recovery identities through the use of ED recovery hashtags.

Figure 15. Before-and-After image. Photograph by @bodyposipanda, posted September 19th, 2016; Instagram Inc.

Analysing the image in the above post (Figure 15) shared by @bodyposipanda we can deduce that we are viewing a transformation of sorts because we can see differences between the two images. In the left-hand image we could argue that the influencer self-presents in accordance with contemporary beauty standards, including the thin-ideal. In the right-hand image the influencer clearly presents a softer, fuller figure. Following Western conventions of reading left to right, we can assume that the photo on the left depicts the past and that the photo on the right corresponds to the present. We could in-turn refer to the image on the left as "then" or "before" and the image on the right as "after" or "now." As discussed earlier, in the introduction, the transformation we see here runs counter to what we expect given our exposure to before-and-after images as they are portrayed in the media and weight-loss advertising. Furthermore, this image goes against what is expected of women according to cultural scripts of femininity (which urge restraint and control over the body) and conventional feminine praxis (e.g. body work and beauty work). Thus, it is reasonable to argue, that the influencer has consciously and deliberately used such conventions as a visual truth claim that shows or proves to the audience, known and assumed, that the influencer has struggled with an eating disorder in the past; that the influencer has taken-up a recovery identity; and that she is genuinely happy in her body as it is, at its current weight, shape and size.

Figure 16. Performances of recovery. Before-and-After image. Photograph by @chooselifewarrior, posted November 30th, 2016; Instagram Inc.

Influencers discursively produce recovery identities in the text captions associated with the images they post to Instagram. For example, in the text caption associated with Figure 16 the influencer writes "Before – Suffering from a life threatening eating disorder. After – In recovery and 1645 days purge free. Before – An insecure horrible, grumpy, angry person. After – a fun loving, nice, happy person." *@chooselifewarrior, posted November 30th, 2016; Instagram Inc.*

Figure 17. Before-and-After image. Photograph by @lexiemanion, posted September 13th, 2017; Instagram Inc.

Finally, a critical analysis of the data shows that influencers form, claim, and affirm recovery identities through the use of ED recovery hashtags. In Figure 17 @lexiemanion firmly locates her unconventional before-and-after transformation post within discourses of ED recovery by using a multitude of hashtags including #bulimiarecovery, #eatingdisorderrecovery, #edrecovery, #edfighter, #edsoldier, #edfamily, #edcommunity and #recoverywarrior. In addition to these recovery hashtags, the influencer connects her post with body positivism by employing the tags #bodypositive, #bopo, #bopowarrior.

Body positive influencers use their platforms to challenge assumptions about what eating disorders and recovery look like. Despite the appearance of eating disorders and disordered eating in increasingly diverse populations of both women and men (Bordo, 2003), the mass media tend to depict traditional and stereotyped views about eating disorders. Dominant representations of eating disorders in the mass media tend to reflect skeletal, predominantly white, Western, heterosexual, middle-to-upper class women. Eating disorders are rarely portrayed as problems that women (or men) of other body shapes and sizes, classes, races, or sexual orientations struggle with. As one influencer poignantly writes "before Instagram I didn't know anyone who had suffered from an eating disorder who wasn't thin and emaciated." *@chooselifewarrior, posted November 30th, 2016; Instagram Inc.*

Society and the media expect that women who are legitimately suffering with serious eating problems or 'real' eating disorders will look emaciated and frail. This expectation is recognised by body positive influencers, especially by those who did not feel that their ED bodies ever looked sick enough. In the example below (Figure 18), influencer @alissbonyt shares her experience with anorexia nervosa, expressing her personal transformation as a shift from broken to healing.

Figure 18. Alternative before-and-after image. Described as a personal transformation from broken to healing. Photograph by @alissbonyt, posted June 12th, 2017; Instagram Inc.

Describing the image in Figure 18 (above) @alissbonyt states "my before recovering from an eating disorder pictures aren't shocking, you can't see my ribs, I don't look skeletal – just unhappy." The widely accepted misconception that one must appear waif-like or emaciated to have a 'valid' eating disorder was criticised by some body positive influencers, who argued that a lack of representation of diverse bodies suffering with eating disorders was a barrier to treatment and made it harder for them be taken seriously when they sought help. The following excerpt is illustrative of the frustration that one influencer felt because her ED body did not match societal expectations and media portrayals of eating disorders:

> "I'm so god damn sick of people like me having to jump through extra hoops to validate and have other people believe that we had serious eating disorders. During my eating disorder people I confided in, adults and others told me it was just a phase, to just try to exercise and eat healthy, to stop attention seeking. Those comments and the responses I got from the world…told me 'Nope you're not dying enough for us to care'…See being fat or larger and suffering from an eating disorder you might as well be invisible" *@chooselifewarrior, November 30th, 2016; Instagram Inc.*

In addition to challenging ideas about what eating disorders look like, body positive influencers contest and reject social and clinical expectations to perform idealised recovery. This recovery ideal is summarised succinctly by Rinaldi and colleagues (2016) who write that "recovering subjects are expected to enact femininity—and more precisely, to fuse, in that enactment, an

older white, middle class, restrained femininity with a newer, neoliberalized, heterosexually permissive, fit femininity—in order to express wellness" (p. 164). Body positive influencers are well aware of professional and social expectations to perform recovery in the right kind of way, as influencer @selfloveclubb acknowledges the following post:

> "I'm the 'right' kind of ED recovery/story. I had anorexia and was a hospitalized low weight; I pulled myself out of it and gained weight to a curvy size 12 with an hour glass shape; I didn't gain 'too much' weight as many would say. My recovery is what people want to see, what the media see's [sic] as worthy for a story…I'm praised for my recovery and my recovery body but there's there's [sic] 10000000's of people out there who aren't. Who are belittled for their recovery because they are fat, were never severely underweight or don't possess an hour glass curve" *@selfloveclubb, posted May 11th, 2017; Instagram Inc.*

Expectations to perform the correct version of recovery were contested by influencers whose recovery bodies did not reflect the ideal or conform to narrow recovery codes (e.g., set eating standards and body weight, shape and size norms). Challenging ideas around what recovery bodies look like, influencer @lexiemanion posted the following image (Figure 19) with a text caption that reads "this is #MyRecoveryBody. I'm not ashamed. And I deserve to be seen and heard, along with my fellow recovery warriors who may not fit the 'thin, white woman' mold."

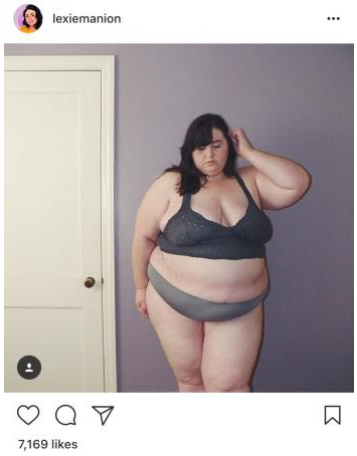

Figure 19. Mid-length image of influencer standing in her lingerie. Face and gaze staring towards the floor. Photograph by @lexiemanion, posted September 22nd, 2017; Instagram Inc.

Similarly, in Figure 20 (below) @chooselifewarrior claims and affirms her recovery body stating "I am not ashamed of this transformation even if people think [it] is a 'backwards' transformation. I'm doing my best."

Figure 20. Unconventional before-and-after image. Photograph by @chooselifewarrior, posted November 22nd, 2015; Instagram Inc.

For some body positive influencers, contesting expectations to perform idealised recovery also included responding to critics who commented on their Instagram posts. The following statements and questions are examples of comments that influencer @bodyposipanda received and shared in the text caption associated of one her posts:

> "Wait so you just decided to ruin your body?"
>
> "But you look so much healthier before to me."
>
> "You could have stayed the same and loved your body, you didn't need to get fat."
>
> "But surely you can't be happy looking like that now, I could never be happy in that body."
>
> *(Posted by @bodyposipanda, February 26th, 2017; Instagram Inc)*

Conducting a pedestrian reading of the visual, textual and hypertextual material posted by influencers to Instagram, one might conclude that recovery and body positivity are

synonymous, that, recovery from an eating disorder naturally entails becoming more positive about and towards one's body and, hence, body positive. While it is easy to see how this assumption might be made, one would be mistaken to confuse body positivity with simply feeling positive about one's body or having a positive body image. If we recall the political origins of the body positive movement discussed in the introduction to this thesis, we realise how the entanglement of body positivism, and body positive terms, with notions of self-love and positive body image in the context of ED recovery, could be potentially problematic.

Body Positivity or Self-Love?

It is important to remember that from its inception, the spirit and intent of body positivity has been one of size diversity, size pride, and self-acceptance. It is, for all intents and purposes, a modern-day extension of the fat acceptance or fat liberation movement. Influenced by feminism and women's rights, as well as by other liberation movements, such as the civil rights movement and the gay liberation movement, body positivity is inherently political. To assess whether the entanglement of body positivism with notions of self-love was problematic I revisited the data to analyse the body positive identities that were being constructed and produced by influencers. As I carefully examined the dataset, I sought to answer whether (or not) the influencers in the sample were aware of the political origins of body positivity, or, whether body positivity had been misunderstood in the context of recovery and used as substitute for self-love, feeling good about oneself, and having a positive body image - as others have suggested (e.g., see Dalessandro, 2016; Dionne, 2017; Fabello, Bouris, & Forristal, 2016; Gibson, 2017).

Surprisingly, more than half of the influencers acknowledged the political origins of body positivity in their posts and used their highly visible platforms to argue for inclusivity, greater representation of marginalised bodies (e.g., fat, queer, differently-abled bodies, and women of colour), and the dismantling of powerful structures that oppress these marginalised bodies. (e.g., weight-loss, fashion and beauty industries). Some examples of body positive influencers acknowledging the essence of body positivity and championing the political objectives of the movement are provided below.

Influencer @bodyposipanda demonstrates her understanding of the origins of body positivity in the posts below (Figure 21). These text-based images are a powerful visual strategy for communicating the essence of body positivity to the audience.

Figure 21. The origins of the body positive movement as presented by @bodyposipanda, 2017; Instagram Inc.

Similarly, @chooselifewarrior articulated the roots of body positivity as:

> "Body positivity is a deeply rooted political & societal belief that marginalised bodies should be treated with equality & respect. Simultaneously it works to end oppression, stigma & stereotypes surrounding marginalised bodies while ending oppressive systems & structures that harm marginalised bodies. While yes feeling beautiful & expressing your beauty or love of your own body can add to the body positive conversation it falls more under the self love umbrella. Self love is important, integral to living a happy healthy life but if your body positivity doesn't extend to others bodies, if your body positivity is not inclusive of marginalised people & voices it is not body positivity." *Posted by @chooselifewarrior, November 9th, 2017; Instagram Inc.*

Influencers @alissbonyt and @allisonkimmey argue that body positivity is about creating a space for the representation of diverse bodies and establishing a more inclusive society - one that recognises the value of all bodies:

> "#bodypositivity is so much more than [self-love], it's about society and and [sic] how we can be more accepting and making a space for everyone of every gender, gender identification, body type, sexuality, ability, age, race e.c.t. [sic]." *Posted by @alissbonyt, February 12th, 2018; Instagram Inc.*

> "Body positivity is normalizing bodies that are NOT SEEN anywhere. It's about showing variety and breaking down our phobic nature by challenging what really is the right way to look (spoiler: there is no 'right' way). It's creating a space where underrepresented (or unrepresented) people can have a voice and it's about showing others that it is possible to be who you are right now and be accepted." *Posted by @allisonkimmey, March 16th, 2017; Instagram Inc.*

In the final example below, body positive influencer @lexiemanion claims and affirms multiple identities through her use of hashtags that represent body positivity, fat acceptance and ED recovery:

> "lexiemanion #bodypositive #bopo #bodyposi #bodypositivity #bodyimage #effyourbeautystandards #allbodiesaregoodbodies #celebratemysize #edrecovery #miarecovery #recovery #visiblyplussize #fat #fatactivism." *Posted by @lexiemanion, February 18th, 2018; Instagram Inc.*

Following a critical analysis of the data, the entanglement of body positivity in the context of recovery does not appear to be problematic. Contrary to claims from some scholars (Dalessandro, 2016; Dionne, 2017; Fabello, Bouris, & Forristal, 2016; Gibson, 2017) that body positivity on Instagram has been depoliticised, diluted and has become meaningless, my findings suggest that many of the influencers analysed for the purposes of this research understand, acknowledge, and promote the original spirit and intent of the body positive movement. In the examples presented above, the terms body positive and body positivity do not appear to have been misused or misunderstood as substitutes for self-love, feeling positive about and towards one's body, or having a positive body image. Nor does it appear that these terms have been blatantly appropriated to enhance audience reach or employed to increase visibility of the influencer's Instagram posts, as some have argued (Dalessandro, 2016; Dionne, 2017; Fabello, Bouris, & Forristal, 2016; Gibson, 2017).

In this findings and discussion chapter, I have illustrated how body positive influencers construct and produce body positive identities through the visual, textual, and hypertextual materials they post to Instagram. I described the performative practices of body positive influencers on Instagram as performances of resistance which were occasionally punctuated by slippages (performances of femininity) that reproduced traditional feminine beauty standards

and conventional femininity. Next, I presented an unexpected finding of recovery from eating disorders and disordered eating and investigated how body positive identities were being constructed and produced in relation to ED recovery. Specifically, I explored whether the political roots of the body positive movement were understood, acknowledged, and promoted on the highly visible platforms of body positive influencers, or whether body positivity in the context of recovery had been mistaken for having a positive body image and feeling good about one's self. I found that the influencers analysed for the purposes of this research understood, acknowledged, and promoted the original spirit and intent of the body positive movement and that they did not misuse or misunderstand body positivity as a substitute for self-love. In the conclusion that follows, I summarise the key findings of this thesis and propose directions for future research.

Chapter Five: Conclusions

This thesis has explored the performative practices of body positive influencers on Instagram and has considered how this popular social media platform enables users to practice meaningful self-presentation online. Furthermore, this research has critically examined the ways in which women self-present, both visually and textually, to discursively construct and produce body positive identities and has questioned whether body positive performances resist or reproduce dominant Western beauty standards, including the thin-ideal. Performances of resistance as enacted and performed by body positive influencers on Instagram were deemed to have subversive potential. That is, for the most part, these performances offer promising moments of instability and threaten to destabilise narrow, predominantly white, Western, hetero-normative beauty standards, including the thin-ideal. However, despite efforts by body positive influencers to address and contest difficult-to-achieve appearance-related ideals, including those related to body weight, shape and size, influencers at times repeat and (re)produce the very ideologies they purport to reject, slipping from body positive discourses to pre-existing discourses of idealised femininity and conventional feminine rhetoric.

Performances of femininity and engagement with traditional feminine praxis (e.g., beauty work and body work) were identified as slippages that obfuscated and weakened the performative force of acts of resistance. Instagram appears to offer body positive influencers a productive space for reimagining and re-imaging the ways that bodies are enacted and performed. Yet, influencers, whether consciously or unwittingly, self-present in ways that potentially undermine their efforts to trouble and subvert socio-cultural demands to perform idealised feminine beauty. From time to time, the aesthetic conventions and compositional arrangement (e.g., pose, bodily gestures, facial expression, and gaze) of images that body positive influencers posted to Instagram more closely resembled the imaged bodies of women in popular magazines and advertising than offer an alternative path forward, or radically broaden the range of possible representations. Moreover, influencers were occasionally observed engaging in and performing conventional feminine praxis, which it was argued, further diminished the performative force of acts of resistance.

At this point, we might ask ourselves whether it is possible to extricate oneself entirely from hegemonic discourses or whether it is reasonable, realistic, or even necessary for body positive influencers to do so, to bring about a change in how we (viewing bodies) conceive of women's

bodies. Must influencers disentangle themselves completely from dominant discourses of female beauty to disrupt and destabilise narrow, predominantly white, Western, hetero-normative beauty standards, including the thin-ideal? Or, is the work to bring about such changes already being accomplished - here and now? My thoughts are that the work is underway and that it would be unreasonable, unrealistic, and unnecessary to expect influencers to execute flawless performances of resistance, before we accept that change is being accomplished. The body positive influencers analysed in this thesis, are at the fore, creating and curating spaces on Instagram that allow for, encourage and promote the representation of more diverse bodies and, by all appearances, efforts to reshape the beauty landscape and create a more inclusive picture of feminine beauty do not look to be slowing down.

What makes this thesis unique and distinguishes it from previous research, was the unexpected finding that many of the influencers openly discussed body positivity alongside deeply personal accounts of ED recovery. Influencers documented and shared their experiences with eating disorders and discursively constructed and produced recovery identities through the visual, textual and hypertextual materials that they posted to Instagram. The use of unconventional before-and-after transformation images was identified as a common visual pattern, or trope, that could be read as a visual strategy used by influencers to chart their recovery journey. These images were presented as truth claims that served to authenticate the recovery performance. Alternative before-and-after transformation images were also accompanied by text captions and hypertextual materials that reinforced, claimed and affirmed recovery identities.

Influencers used their platforms to challenge dominant narratives about what eating disorders and recovery look like. Despite the appearance of eating disorders and disordered eating in increasingly diverse populations of both women and men, it is still widely believed that eating disorders are the purview of young, white, Western, heterosexual, middle-to-upper class women. Depictions of eating disorders in the mass media invariably present bodies that are skeletal, emaciated or frail and it is these traditional stereotypes, as well as social and professional expectations to perform idealised recovery that influencers take issue with. Body positive influencers argue that stereotypical perspectives of eating disorders, which exist in both popular and clinical discourses, influence who seeks help and who is considered deserving of treatment and care. Sharing and documenting deeply personal struggles with eating disorders and ED recovery through visual, textual and hypertextual materials on Instagram, influencers

reimage what eating disorders and recovery look like, offering the audience new ways of seeing and conceiving of eating disorders and recovery.

I had initial reservations, that in the context of recovery, the term body positive might have been misinterpreted and misused as a substitute for self-love, for feeling good about oneself, and having a positive body image. However, as this study has shown, the majority of the influencers understood, acknowledged, and promoted the original spirit and intent of the body positive movement (i.e., fat acceptance movement). Amidst claims from some scholars (e.g., Dalessandro, 2016; Dionne, 2017; Fabello, Bouris, & Forristal, 2016; Gibson, 2017) that body positivity on Instagram has been depoliticised, diluted and become meaningless, my findings suggest that this is not the case. That, in fact, influencers appreciate the political roots of the body positive movement and unreservedly communicate these ideas to their substantial audiences. It seems likely, however, that owing to its popularity in the mainstream media, body positivity will remain a somewhat controversial topic and that debates surrounding how the term body positive is used, who can use it, and who it can be used to represent will continue, both on and offline.

Despite allegations that body positivity has been appropriated by predominantly thin, White, heterosexual, abled-bodied women; watered down; mistaken as a substitute for self-love; and that it is no longer meaningful, this research goes some way to show that not all hope for the original iteration of the term is lost. The body positive influencers who comprised the dataset for this thesis are women with prominent voices and significant followings and they are actively fighting for inclusivity, advocating for greater representation of marginalised bodies and using their highly visible platforms to call out and challenge powerful structures that oppress and discriminate against marginalised bodies.

Future Research

Research in the field of body positivity is still very much in its infancy. As such, there are many possible directions for future academic scholarship. Extending research to explore the role of body positivity in more diverse populations, for example trans, queer, differently-abled, and people of colour is an important next step. Future research should also consider how intersectionality (e.g., race, age, sexuality, gender) influences self-presentation and performances of body positivity on Instagram. An intersectional approach would, further, enable researchers to explore the idea of privilege within the body positive community, and to

perhaps investigate the experiences of members of the community whose bodies more closely resemble the female beauty ideal, as compared to those with social identities and bodies that cross multiple intersections.

I have argued that Instagram enables body positive influencers to reimagine and re-image the ways that bodies are enacted and performed, and to create and curate spaces which encourage and promote the representation of more diverse bodies. Future studies could consider how the architecture of the Instagram platform, shapes the shooting and sharing practices of body positive users. Instagram's community guidelines, for example, limit and restrict the forms of self-presentation that are possible – any images that are perceived to break these guidelines are taken-down by the platform's moderators. A widely held belief amongst members of the body positive community is that Instagram selectively enforces their take-down policies, with many suggesting that while a semi-nude image of a supermodel attracts likes and followers, the semi-nude image of an unapologetically fat woman is quickly deleted. Researchers could explore the types of images that body positivists claim have been unfairly removed from the platform to further investigate alleged double standards, discrimination, and potential misogynistic censorship.

As this thesis has revealed, body positive identities are taken up, enacted and performed by women in ED recovery, yet we know very little about the relationship between recovery and body positivism. Looking ahead, scholars might be inclined to ask what role body positivity plays in the recovery journey? Or, whether it can be used - by those with eating disorders and the professionals that treat them - as a tool on the way to recovery? Inviting body positive influencers to discuss and share their personal experiences with ED recovery and body positivity would facilitate an understanding of the relationship between these two discourses, and potentially lead to developments within the field of ED recovery.

As research continues to move forward, researchers might consider the effects that body positive/recovery content have on viewing bodies. Body positive influencers on Instagram have highly visible platforms, significant followings and a wide audience reach, thus, the question of whether their messaging is helping or hurting audiences, especially those also in recovery, might be worth examining. Future scholarship could take several directions, for example researchers could interview a sample of the influencer's followers, recruit a random sample of

high school students to participate in a study examining a selection of body positive/recovery content, or conduct a study with clinicians to examine the same, aforementioned, materials.

A question I find myself asking, as I draw this thesis to a close is how might this last year of research have changed my understanding of bodies and beauty, including the experience of my own? My relationship with my body was unhealthy for a long time. I, myself, overcame an eating disorder that consumed several years of my life in high school. I had not heard of body positivity and did not know that there was an alternative to pursuing the thin-ideal. I uncritically accepted and diligently took up all forms of beauty work and body work - which I now understand as traditional feminine praxis. Until I started this research, I was unaware that dominant discourses of female beauty and conventional feminine rhetoric were being actively resisted and rejected. And, that women had been out there questioning unrealistic beauty standards, since before I was born. I wonder what my experience of bodies and beauty, including my own, might have been like if I knew then what I know now. My academic hope is that the research I have conducted contributes to the field in a meaningful way. My personal hope is that, in conducting this research, I have grown to be kinder, more accepting and less judgmental of myself and of others. I have recently moved to and now live in, what is perhaps one of the most body conscious, beauty obsessed cities in the world - Los Angeles, and I feel grateful to have arrived with eyes wide open.

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