# The Ideal Remains

*A Semiotic Analysis of Fit Bloggers' Side-by-Side Instagram Pictures*

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**ABSTRACT**

Representations of the female body in media have been widely researched in the field of cultural studies, but also in communication studies, gender studies, fashion studies, history, psychology and sociology. Throughout the research in this interdisciplinary field, current understandings of representing this female body can be found. So-called side-by-side images on the social media platform Instagram are a form of these representations. However, these appear to be seen as new and ground-breaking by some reporters and news websites. In this thesis, therefore, these specific images will be analysed using a semiotic research approach in order to find out whether the meanings these images convey are as ground-breaking as they seem.

The findings suggest that new meanings are indeed conveyed by these side-by-side images. However, there are also meanings present which are similar to or even completely the same as other representations. Similar connotations lie, amongst others, within the use of gazes, the use of the format of a so-called before-after image, and the 'core messages' of the images: women compare themselves with an ideal image and beauty from within comes from changing the outer-self. The new connotations found can be described as 1) progress towards non-idealistic images, 2) insight into how portrayals of the body are always constructions, 3) focus on the different possible portrayals of the body in images, 4) specific combinations of different gazes which connote either that ideal and non-ideal are equal or that the non-ideal is actually the ideal, and 5) the idea that binaries have small steps which make them continuums. When summarising these five new connotations I conclude that by combining existing image formats the fit blogger's Instagram pictures provide new meanings about differences *within* the self (progress, constructions, portrayals and gazes) and the, what I would like to call, 'grey areas' within certain continuums.

In light of these findings, this thesis provides new insights on and adds to the interdisciplinary dialogue about how representations of the female body nowadays occur in the new media environment. It shows that existing meanings and connotations are conveyed in these specific representations but that these also convey slightly changed meanings. With these 'new' portrayals and constructions of the female body, it seems relevant to conduct further research within several disciplines. This future research should not only focus on the specific side-by-side format researched in this thesis but also on other apparently 'new' representations of the female body.

**Keywords**

Representations of the female body – Objectification – Ideal image – Construction of images – The gaze – Differences – Social media – Instagram – Culture studies – Semiotics

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Author

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# The Ideal Remains

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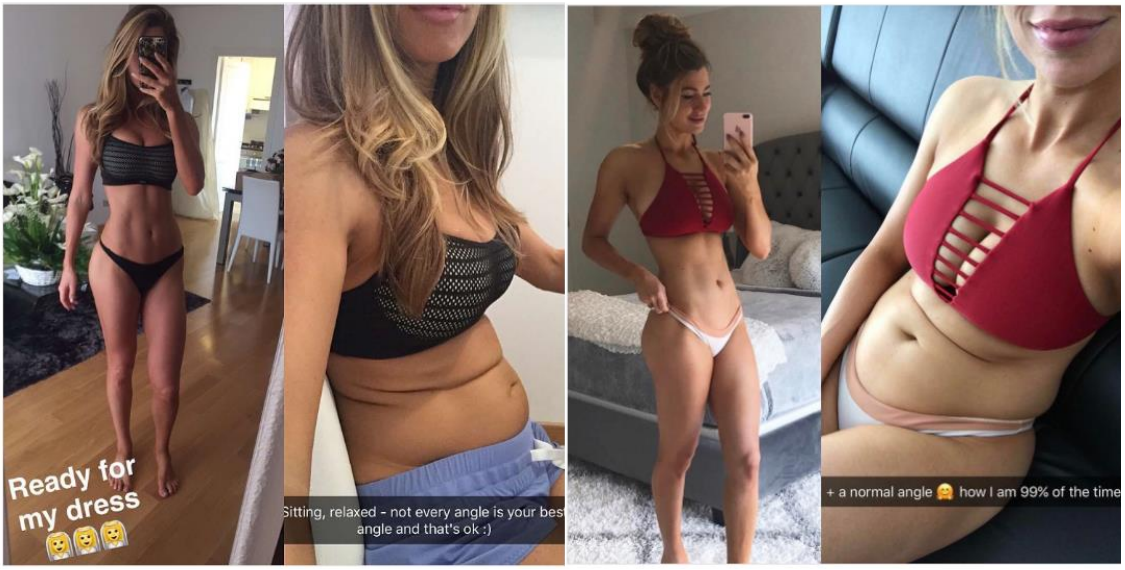
**Side-by-Side Images**

In this Introductory Chapter, I will show that, according to news reporters, there are these apparently 'new' types of pictures circulating on Instagram; side-by-side images. However, I would like to question the 'newness' of these images by researching whether these also produce 'new' meanings. The purpose of this thesis is then to answer the following question: *What meanings do the side-by-side images actually convey in relation to their representational context?*

On May 22nd, 2016 fit blogger Anna Victoria posted an update on her Instagram account comparing two pictures; one in which she is standing up showing her 'perfect body', the other one in which she is sitting down, having a 'normal body' with 'rolls' (Picture 1). Then, on January 17th, 2017 she posted a similar visual with two photos. For this image, she explains she is only looking the way she is portrayed in these perfect pictures in the moments these pictures are taken. The rest of the time, when she relaxes her stomach, she has rolls 'just like everyone else' (Picture 2). Moreover, even before these side-by-side images occurred on Anna's Instagram page, she already posted other pictures like the ones on the right side of the side-by-side images in addition to her regular photos which have more similarities with the left pictures of the side-by-side visuals. By posting these photos of her stomach rolls[1], Journalist Ellen Scott (2016) stated in her news article for Metro UK that Anna was "keeping it real".




Picture 1 – annavictoria, 2016, 5/22 Picture 2 – annavictoria, 2017, 1/17

Ten days after posting her second picture, Fox News (2017) interviewed Anna about these apparently 'honest' side-by-side pictures. In this interview, she explains she feels "a sense of social

[1] For the posts, see the Appendix on Additional Social Media Posts, Part One.

responsibility to show the other side" of the sometimes deceiving images on Social Network Sites (SNS), like Instagram, in order to spread 'body positivity'. In addition, news articles have been written about Anna posting these kinds of pictures (Abrahamson, 2017; Donovan, 2017; Edwards, 2016; Menta, 2016; Scott, 2016; Williams, 2017). In these articles, it is discussed, among other things, how these side-by-side images show "how misleading Instagram can be", as Abigail Williams (2017) journalist for the Huffington Post, suggests in her article (about Picture 2).

Instagram, the website on which these pictures were posted, is an image-based social media platform which launched on October 6th, 2010 (Instagram, 2017a). On this website, users can create an account and post (mainly image-based) updates. The website enables them to edit pictures they update with an increasing range of filter and retouching techniques. With these pictures, captions can be posted in which it is common to use so-called 'hashtags'. Moreover, users are able to 'follow' each other because of which other's updates will appear on one's 'timeline'. Then, they can like and comment on each other's posts. For this thesis, I will thus look specifically at these image-based updates as a new media phenomenon.

In the words of psychologists Leah Boepple and Kevin Thompson (2016) and Courtney Simpson and Suzanne Mazzeo (2017), most of the visuals Anna Victoria posts on her Instagram account can be labelled as fitspiration. Because of the sharing social media platforms enable, fitspiration is, according to Simpson and Mazzeo (2017: 561), "a social media phenomenon that has recently emerged to inspire individuals to exercise". Boepple and Thompson (2016: 99) state that a fitspiration image "includes objectifying images of thin/muscular women and messages encouraging dieting and exercise for appearance, rather than health, motivated reasons". The pictures on the left side of the side-by-side visuals by Anna (Picture 1, 2) are also examples of these fitspiration images. The right sides may be labelled as body positivity. This is described by psychologists Tracy Tylka and Nichole Wood-Barcalow (2015: 5) but also by the communication and culture MA student Jessica Cwynar-Horta (2016: 2, 6-7, 36) as to love, accept and feel comfortable in one's own body and express this; to include sights as beautiful which were first seen as non-beautiful; to be able to represent the self as one wishes; and to address the idea that body norms imposed and influenced by society are unrealistic. In other words, body positive images revolve around sharing self-love with others. Since social media enable sharing and offer this controlling factor of how to present oneself (Cwynar-Horta, 2016: 36), body positive images can be seen as a social media phenomenon as well.

Anna here thus seems to show the difference of motivation to change the appearance of the body (fitspiration) versus comfort with this body as it is (body positivity) by bringing these two typical social media images together in one visual. However, since differences in our society are hierarchical (one thing is always regarded better or superior to the other) it could be academically relevant to see

what this hierarchical relation does for the differences between the two photos in these visuals. Furthermore, because of this formation of the images through digital technologies and the circulating on digital networks, the images might invite some sort of digital or mediated 'gaze'. On the one hand, this gaze can be seen from the perspective of the viewers of the images when they encounter them on their Instagram timeline. On the other hand, this idea of the mediated digital gaze might come from the other direction as well; from the fit blogger depicted in the picture and how her gaze is portrayed. Therefore, researching these images within the scope of a new media studies thesis seemed academically relevant as well.

Anna Victoria is, however, not the only fit blogger posting these kinds of pictures and getting this attention in the news; Ashlie Molstad (2016, 2017) and Emily Skye (2016, 2017) are two of the other fit bloggers who seem to spread this body positive image of themselves by posting pictures similar to the ones Anna posts[2]. Questions which then arise are why there is this sudden attention for these fit bloggers in the news and why these images are approached as something ground-breaking in relation to other images of women in for example magazines or on the internet. So, although these specific pictures are getting this sudden attention, how do they actually differ from current understandings of representations of the female body? For this thesis, I would like to focus specifically on the meanings they convey because this might then show how the construction of these side-by-side images relates to others. Therefore, my main research question will be: *What meanings do the side-by-side images actually convey in relation to their representational context?*

In order to answer this research question, first, an overview of existing understandings of representations of the female body will be given in a Literature and Theory Chapter to outline this representational context. In the scope of this chapter, the reader will already find some ideas about the theoretical frameworks which will be used to analyse the pictures; differences and 'the gaze'. However, thereafter, these theoretical frameworks will be discussed in more detail in a Methodological Chapter. This chapter also contains the explanation of the semiotic research approach I will use in order to determine whether these images are 'new' in terms of what meanings they convey since this approach focuses on meanings of messages. Then, in the Analytical Chapter of this thesis a corpus, consisting of six side-by-side visuals, will be analysed using this semiotic approach. Lastly, the findings of the analysis will be compared to the representational context and a conclusion and answer for the research question will be drawn from this comparison in a Concluding Chapter.

[2] For news articles, see e.g. Abrahamson, 2016 and Patel, 2016 on Ashlie Molstad and House, 2017 on Emily Skye in the Reference List of News Reports.
For the posts, see the Appendix on Case Studies: Corpus and the Appendix on Additional Social Media Posts, Part Two.

**Representation of the Female Body**

The purpose of this Literature and Theory Chapter is to provide the reader with insight in what has already been researched in terms of the meanings representations of the female body convey within two themes (or 'codes'): objectification and ideal image. These two themes were identified by organising the discussed literature and will form the basis of my analysis. Within these themes, the reader will come across concepts like mirrors, 'before-after' pictures and sexualisation of fitness. These concepts can also be found in the side-by-side images, as I will discuss in my Analytical Chapter. Moreover, during the explanation of this representational context, the reader will also encounter two theoretical concepts which are the theoretical framework of this thesis: differences and the idea of 'the gaze'. These will be discussed in more detail in my Methodological Chapter.

Improving the Object versus Being the Subject

In her book *The body project* (1997 [2010]) social historian Joan Brumberg explains how specific bodily characteristics have been associated with norms and ideas already for a long time. They have had a so-called 'connoted meaning'. For example, back in the 19th century it was not-done for a middle or upper-class woman "[t]o be too large or too robust [as it] was a sign of indelicacy that suggested lower-class origins and a rough way of life" (pp. xix-xx). Therefore, in this time-period bodily characteristics seemed to construct hierarchical differences within society; upper-class women with slim bodies were seen as better than the inferior robust bodies of lower class women. Nonetheless, at the same time, she should not be openly preoccupied with her own body since that was seen as "self-indulgence" (p. xx).

However, Brumberg (1997 [2010]: xxi) says that during the 20th century appearance became "a primary expression of [girl's] individual identity". Therefore, this idea that being concerned with your body was something one should not do seems to have completely changed as this concern became the means for creating one's identity. This seems to have been already the case in movies up until the 1970s. According to the feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey (1973 [1999]: 837), women were often portrayed as passive objects to be looked at by a so-called 'male gaze' in these movies. The camera would film from the perspective of the male character looking at the female object. Because of this, women were often associated with their visual representation while men were identified with their inner character. Therefore, this represents a kind of hierarchical gendered difference where the male subject is regarded superior to the female object.

Nevertheless, although first "the cinema doubled as a major means of women's oppression through image […], [it has now become] a means of liberation through transformation and reinvention of its forms and conventions", as stated by Mulvey (2004: 1287) in one of her later

works. Hence, during the transition from the 20th to the 21st century, women were no longer only the object to look at but also became the subject who is looking herself. This is, however, not only true in cinema but, like cultural and social analyst in the fields of media, gender and sociology Rosalind Gill (2007: 151-152) claims, it also appears in other media. Because of this, Gill (2007) explains, this male gaze has made room for a 'female gaze' which may be regarded an internalised male one for women. They identify themselves with the male viewer and see themselves as objects while actually being subjects.

Nonetheless, communications professor, cultural critic and feminist columnist Susan Douglas points out in her book *Where the Girls are* (1994: 256) that this concern with one's own body and to only treat the body with what are considered the best products is seen as showing self-love instead of objectifying the self. Therefore, Brumberg (1997 [2010]: xxii) suggests the contemporary body project is one in which women see "their bodies as a sign of women's liberation, a mark of progress, and a basic American right". Especially this second idea of the body signifying 'progress' is interesting when thinking about what this should contain. According to art history and fashion scholar Rebecca Arnold (2001: 82, 90) and history, politics, media and gender professionals and scholars Ros Ballaster, Margaret Beetham, Elizabeth Frazer and Sandra Hebron (1993: 125, 131), these women are working towards their so-called 'ideal selves'. These authors further state that these ideal selves are derived from unrealistic beauty ideals portrayed in for example magazines. Then, as women think about their ideal selves and look at the beauty ideals with their female gaze, they paradoxically do objectify themselves and each other. Noteworthy, these beauty ideals have more in common with the slim upper-class women than with the robust lower class women from the 1800s; this hierarchy seems to be consistent.

In her article *Notes on the perfect* (2015: 15-17) Angela McRobbie, who specialises in feminist studies and cultural theories, discusses that these self-improvement actions are often shared with others in order to show off having achieved 'the perfect'. This would be the result of competition between women instead of women only competing with men. Fashion scholar Agnès Rocamora (2011) also focuses in her research on how these digital platforms enable women to share these images and have control over them. This 'the perfect', Rocamora (2011: 410) argues, circulating in images on the internet allow women to feel empowered because they are able to produce certain images of themselves. Therefore, 'the perfect' revolves around self-disciplining, self-management and "self-perfectibility"; the latter being how McRobbie labels it in her book *The aftermath of feminism* (2009: 62-63; McRobbie, 2015: 9-10, 17).

Moreover, according to Rocamora (2011: 419), a mirror is sometimes shown in these pictures in order to photograph the self. These mirrors in pictures are then signifiers for focus on appearance and self-improvement because, as Rocamora (2011: 415) says, they are considered crucial

instruments for women in order to work on their appearance. Furthermore, she adds that "[…] mirrors remind the viewers that […] women are not only the bearers of meaning but its makers too [and] that they can be in control of their own image and take over processes of representation" (p. 420). Focusing on this mediated digital gaze in the setting of images on the internet, Rocamora (2011: 419) then states that mirrors "are often used to allow the bloggers to capture their own image" while explaining the following:

> "The camera is often held in front of the blogger's face, sometimes to grant her a desired anonymity, but also simply the better to fully display an outfit [and the body]. However, in appropriating mirrors as a tool for their own practice, fashion bloggers have also produced images that are strangely disruptive of the gaze and visions of women as specular objects; with the camera covering her face, the blogger is shown as the eye, the camera itself, […] hence the subject" (Rocamora, 2011: 419).

So, in these cases, a mirror is actually shown in the picture, and therefore, the viewers of these pictures are experiencing looking at the body 'through the mirror', just like the blogger herself is doing. This, therefore, results in a fusion of three gazes, the camera's, the viewer's and the blogger's, enabled by this digital media platform.

As mentioned earlier, there is this female gaze which identifies with male viewers. Because of this, women see female bodies as objects like the male gaze does (Gill, 2007: 151-152). The women in the pictures are in these cases thus objects as well as subjects, just like Rocamora (2011) pointed out above. Gill (2007: 151-152) then suggests that this internalised gaze is what enables women to constantly 'police herself' – adding to the discipline[3] – as it "constructs [their] very subjectivity". Hence, on these SNS, where women post pictures of themselves and can look at them and at the pictures depicting others, they are guided in a way to look at their own and others' bodies; with a competitive, digitally mediated, female gaze, because of which they are subjects who are objectifying the female bodies they are looking at with a beauty ideal in mind.

## An Ideal Image to Work Towards

### *From the Ugly Odd One Out to the Beauty Ideal*

Cultural anthropologist Brian Moeran (2010) looked at this beauty ideal and how beauty and fashion magazines actually promote this. Essentially, in these magazines, it is all about the outside. However, women are firstly told that beauty "starts within ourselves" and that when changing the 'inner-self' the 'outer-self' changes with it (pp. 493-495). Therefore, these magazines seem to create associations between the appearance of a woman and her moral status. This can be interpreted by

[3] I would like to make a note here. Although discipline, being in control and gazes could be linked to Foucauldian ideas in the field of culture studies, I have chosen to not incorporate them. I am focusing specifically on semiotics and therefore Foucault's theories are simply not of importance for my analysis.

women that if they regard themselves ugly on the outside, they must be bad on the inside as well; they have a problem.

Moeran (2010) then suggests that these magazines seem to give solutions for the problem; in order to change yourself, instead of from inner to outer-self, they "reverse the equation, so that the relationship between appearance and the inner-self is two-way" (p. 495). To contemplate the idea of change, he explains, the focus then returns to how the ideal outer-image may be achieved and to one's appearance after achieving it. He states that this is done by emphasising makeovers, on which McRobbie (1991: 120) agrees in her book on feminist youth culture. She states that it also shows the main message of magazines; "[a]ppearance is of paramount importance […]" (p. 125).

Besides these magazines, other media like television shows have been focusing on changing the body as well in which, according to Gill (2007: 149-150, 156), McRobbie (1991: 120) and Moeran (2010: 495), makeovers and body transformations are central. In order to present the makeover a person has gone through Brenda Weber (2006: 297-298), professor of gender studies, explains that "the after body [is shown] on the same visual screen as the before body". Therefore, this certain type of 'before-after' pictures is often used as it invites this specific gaze to look for progress. Nonetheless, in other representations, merely the ideal is portrayed without a counter image. In these cases, the viewer might consider herself as the 'before' and may incorporate certain aspects of this ideal as the 'after' for her own ideal image (Arnold, 2001; Ballaster et al., 1993).

Psychology scholars Yan Yan and Kim Bissel (2014: 198) state that media are used as a means to distribute content about these beauty ideals and create a norm. For this, they tried to code covers of beauty and fashion magazines in order to find the similarities in how the models are predominantly portrayed. While doing this coding, they were still considering the cultural differences because of which a global ideal cannot exist. They found this ideal had to be "highly feminine […], highly sexual […], conspicuously thin […], and deliberately glamourized […], with the facial expression most often coded as smiling […], blank expression […], or representative of a sexual gaze […]" (p. 201). In addition, this ideal body has, according to Douglas (1994: 258-260), a "slim, dimple-free buttock and thigh" and is "the ultimate signifier of female fitness, beauty and character", "evidence of discipline, self-denial, and control" or even signifies that "you worked hard, took yourself seriously, and were ready to compete with anyone". Therefore, female bodies have become objects of showing how 'in control' one is which, in turn, signifies (potential for) success (Douglas, 1994: 260; Gill, 2007: 150).

*Feminine Fitness versus Masculine Muscles*

Arts and media scholar Dianne Jones (2013: 258) states that through certain representations of female athletes in the media the emphasis lies on her appearance and how she "fits the ideal image

of the toned, strong, lean, conventionally attractive female athlete" rather than on her accomplishment. With this, they thus seem to spread this ideal femininity and represent women as objects just like the magazines. These representations of female athletes seem to portray these women mostly in skirts, dresses and bikinis as shown by gender and sports socio-psychologist Bobbi Knapp (2015: 700). Moreover, media seem to depict them as passive objects when for example explicitly posing rather than photographed in action, which Jones (2006: 116, 124-125; 2013: 257-258) found in her articles about broadcast representations during the Olympic Games.

Sociologists Jesper Andreasson and Thomas Johansson (2013: 4-7) show that on some fitness blogs the emphasis seems to lie on gaining a strong but feminine body as well. One of the bloggers investigated by them poses mainly wearing a bikini. They say this emphasises the representation of "a stereotypical ideal of women […], presenting them as voluntary sexual objects" (p. 6). The sociologists suggest, therefore, that these images "pictur[e] female fitness as a means for achieving […] sexiness […]" rather than real muscle and strength (p. 7). According to Douglas (1994: 260), this is also true in advertisements in the magazines, as she states that beauty and sexuality are emphasised over health and fitness in this medium as well.

Moreover, this is in line with the idea Victoria Felkar (2012: 42), as an MA student kinesiology, points out in her article for the *UBC Women's and Gender Studies Undergraduate Journal*. She explains that women like the first female body builders in 1977, with soft and small muscles, were still considered feminine while the ones from 1983 had become so muscular that they were regarded masculine. Sociologist Michael Messner (1988: 198, in Felkar, 2012: 47), who specialises in gender and sports, explains that the ones from the 1980s are still seen as "contested ideological terrain". However, the ones from the 1970s have been emerged into popular culture as 'fit ideal', highly pedestalled by the female gaze in the contemporary digital area. This fit ideal is therefore identified by culture and health sociologist Regina Kenen (1987, in Markula, 1995: 428) as 'hybrid female ideal' combining the differences between, but also within, gender; feminine, by being thin, a bit soft and weak, and at the same time feminist and more masculine, by being strong, hard and muscular.

So, although between masculinity and femininity, the former is most often dominant in our culture (as I will show in the next section), within the latter differences and hence hierarchy is present as well. On the one hand, a combination of masculinity and femininity is regarded superior, since it shows control and discipline. On the other hand, the inferior is showing too much femininity through roundness, like the lower class women from the 1800s. For this, Douglas (1994: 261) claims that "too much roundness [or] a little fat […]" is not included in the ideal as it signifies a non-ideal: not being in control and not being able to achieve the ultimate goal (showing fitness in appearance which is then considered the hybrid female ideal for the female gaze).

**Images from a Cultural Studies Perspective – A Semiotic Research Approach**

In this Methodological Chapter, I will specify my approach for the representations of the female body by introducing the theoretical framework, as briefly mentioned in the Literature and Theory Chapter, in more detail. Because of these theories (differences and the nowadays digitally created gaze), I might say that concepts of objectification, but also gender and beauty, are constructed within that very representation. Moreover, the representation then ensures that meanings are conveyed which can be analysed with a semiotic research approach. This analysis, as described in the Analytical Chapter, will be structured by a threefold system of texts, literal descriptions and conveyed meanings of which the last part will be based on the codes of objectification and the (beauty and fit) ideal.

Differences and the Gaze

Culture theorist and sociologist Stuart Hall (1997 [2013c]) discusses differences being essential for meaning as stated by semiotician Ferdinand de Saussure; one only derives meaning on the basis of difference because "[meaning] […] is relational" (p. 224). He explains philosopher Jacques Derrida's idea of certain 'binaries' consisting of two components. However, these two components are never connoted equally because of the differences and norms language needs to exist. Therefore, one is regarded dominant and the other one non-dominant. A few examples are **white**/*black*, **men**/*women,* **masculine**/*feminine* and **upper class**/*lower class* (Hall, 1997 [2013c]: 225).[4]

In addition, the idea of subject versus object (which is also a binary: **subject**/*object*) is the difference central to the theory of the gaze as explained by Mulvey (1973 [1999]) and feminist and social theorist Simone de Beauvoir (1949, in Smelik, 2016: 1). This is another interesting theory to acquire as a tool for the research in this thesis. De Beauvoir's (1949, in Smelik, 2016: 1) theory is based on one of Derrida's binaries as she assumes that "[w]omen [are] the oppressed ("second") sex [who] internalize the objectifying gaze of men upon them and do not have the power to own or return the gaze". Therefore, men are regarded the superior subjects and women the inferior objects.

Mulvey (1973 [1999]: 837) continues on De Beauvoir's theory and finds an application of it in cinemas up until the 1970s. Women in movies were portrayed as passive objects and men as active voyeurs watching women with their male gaze. Moreover, in these movies[5], women's bodies were 'fragmented' – only showing some body parts – by not filming the complete body of the woman all at once but, for example, zooming in on her feet and slowly moving the camera towards her head (Smelik, 2016: 1). The women did not look straight into the camera ('return the gaze') and she did

[4] Representations of women being both object and subject in representations nowadays, before-after images and the hybrid female ideal may therefore be very interesting in relation to meanings conveyed. These representations consist of both centred and marginalised aspects of a binary (**subject**/*object*, **beautiful**/*ugly* and **masculine**/*feminine*).

[5] See for example Hitchcock movies like Vertigo.

not notice that she was being watched by the (mostly male) viewer ('own the gaze'). This thus shows she was an object to be watched mainly by this male gaze. Therefore, the mediated gaze of the portrayed object as well as the gaze of the viewing subject is related to the concepts the portrayal represents. Hence, the concept of this objectification is constructed within the representation itself.

Moreover, visual culture professor Anneke Smelik (2016: 1) explains that viewers identify themselves with characters in movies. They look at the cinema screen as some kind of mirror in which they see an ideal version of themselves. As discussed in my Literature and Theory Chapter, nowadays the computer screen is considered a mirror as well (Rocamora, 2011). Nonetheless, according to Smelik (2016: 1), this identification with movie characters is often only taking place between viewers and the (male) 'hero character'. Therefore, whether this viewer is a man or woman, the identification and idealisation will not take place between the viewer and the (female) objectified character. Because the viewer looks at the female objects in the movies through the eyes of the male character, here again, three gazes are fused together; the camera's, the male character's and the viewer's. However, now they are not watching the subject itself, which was the case with Rocamora's (2011) description of bloggers, but a female object. Hence, Smelik (2016: 2) concludes that even the female viewer is forced to look at the objectified female characters with some sort of male gaze.

The Approach: Denotations and Connotations

In order to answer my research question, I will approach the side-by-side pictures as a social media phenomenon from a cultural studies perspective. In his book (edited together with Jessica Evans and Sean Nixon) *Representation* (1997 [2013a; 2013b]), Hall describes cultural studies. For this, he focuses in particular on the semiotic approach based on Roland Barthes (1957 [1972]). This approach revolves around "'reading' popular culture [by] treating […] activities and objects as signs, [and therefore] as a language through which meaning is communicated" (Hall, 1997 [2013b]: 21). Images like the ones researched here are thus, according to Hall (1997 [2013a]: xviii-xix; 1997 [2013b]: 5), built up from signs which "carry meaning". In other words, images *construct* meaning. As I plan to investigate meanings conveyed by the posts, I would argue this approach is suitable.

This semiotic approach by Barthes, explained by Hall (1997 [2013b]: 23), divides language, including images, into two layers of meaning. The first is denotation which is only descriptive; it refers to the specific concepts mentioned or portrayed. Then, on a second level, one can find connotations which refer to the "broader themes and meanings" of how parts of texts or images refer to "*semantic fields"* (p. 23). Thus, it could be said that representations of female body *construct* femininity in a certain way through the themes discussed in my Literature and Theory Chapter; objectification and/or ideal image. These themes can also be seen as certain 'codes' which can form the basis for an analysis, like McRobbie (1991: 91) uses them in her chapter about *Jacky Magazine*.

Corpus and Structure of the Analysis

For this thesis, I will thus take a cultural studies approach. I will do a semiotic analysis as mostly described by Hall (1997 [2013a, 2013b]) – derived from Barthes (1957 [1972]; 1977) and used by McRobbie (1991: 81-134) – of a typical social media phenomenon which is represented through a set of Instagram pictures. I will analyse this set of pictures – my corpus – in order to gain an answer to my research question. This corpus consists of six Instagram posts by three fit bloggers; the two Instagram posts by Anna Victoria (annavictoria, 2016, 2017) as shown in my Introductory Chapter in combination with two from Emily Skye (emilyskyefit, 2016, 2017) and two from Ashlie Molstad (foodiegirlfitness, 2016, 2017)[6]. In these posts, these fit bloggers explicitly show their 'non-perfect' bodies in contrast with their bodies in a pose in which they look 'perfect'; so-called side-by-side pictures[7]. I, therefore, separate these specific posts from others in which these women show their so-called 'food baby' (a bloated belly because of the food she just ate), in which they are only portraying their belly rolls (without comparison) or in which they are covering their abdomen[8].

I will be looking at the images as signs consisting signifiers which refer to signifieds, as explained by Hall (1997 [2013b]: 16). I will thus ask what the meaning behind the pictures is and will, therefore, be looking for connotations (pp. 23-24). When talking about images specifically, Barthes (1977: 32-51) points out a threefold system. The first is linguistic as it consists of texts in and around images. These texts may be '*anchorages*', which are descriptive and are therefore the denotations of images. They can also be '*relays*', which are symbolic and describe some of the possible connotations. Since the image-based Instagram posts that I will use for my analysis have captions, I will first shortly describe and discuss these linguistic messages[9]. The second message is the denotation of the image; what images actually show of reality. For this, I will give a description in my analysis in which I will explain the denoted content of the images. And finally the third message is the connotation of the image; what meanings the objects, subjects, setting, positions, etc. refer to.

For my analysis, I will mostly focus on this last part of this threefold system. I will try to find the connotations these images convey, together with their captions, within two specific 'codes'. McRobbie (1991: 91) points out that these "codes [are the things] around which the message is constructed, [which] constitute the 'rules' by which different meanings are produced and [which are] the basis to the analysis". For this analysis, I will use the codes described in my Literature and Theory Chapter – objectification and ideal image – and the differences they emphasise in combination with the idea of certain gazes shown in the images and the gazes the images invite.

[6] In my analysis I will refer to them only using their first name or Instagram name.
[7] For an overview of the corpus, see the Appendix on Case Studies: Corpus.
[8] For examples, see the Appendix on Additional Social Media Posts, Part Two.
[9] For the captions themselves, see the Appendix on Linguistic Messages.

Possible Limitations

A first limitation of my implementation of this approach is that I use two codes to analyse the side-by-side images. On the one hand, I need these codes in order to structure my analysis. However, by choosing these two specific codes, I limit myself to look at my corpus only through these lenses. Because of this, meanings situated in other codes are not taken into account in my analysis. So, like McRobbie (1991: 93, 133) also acknowledges, connotations other than the ones I research here are certainly present in the side-by-side images. Therefore, my analysis may not be labelled as exhaustive as there is simply more to say about these images regarding other connotations situated in other codes. Nonetheless, I chose to focus on these two as these seemed dominant in the literature; after I had read the research mentioned in my Literature and Theory Chapter and had categorised them, I came to these two main themes to use as codes. Moreover, I also needed to ensure my analysis would fit into the timeframe. Hence, more codes would be too much for the scope of this thesis.

Secondly, a semiotic research approach looks solely at the text, or in this case, images at hand. Therefore, it does not explicitly consider the two (or more) actors in the process of sending a message. So, the intentions of the sender and the various interpretations (and the effects these might have) of the receiver are not taken into account with this research approach. Nonetheless, again, I have thought thoroughly about this choice of method. When considering an appropriate method for researching these intentions and effects, this could be for example by doing ethnographies. However, I did simply not have the time within the scope of my thesis period to conduct that kind of research and therefore I did not include this in my thesis.

A third limitation of this research approach is related to the possible interpretations for a viewer; although a semiotic approach does not include judging objects, it is also not the case researchers are observing it from an unbiased perspective. On the one hand, the researcher is indeed 'decoding' images as neutral as possible. On the other hand, visual semiotician Daniel Chandler (2007, in Ulubeyli, Arslan & Kivrak, 2015: 470-471) suggests that the researcher is still a subject with personal experiences for which individual interpretations are possible to arise. In my case, this might have an effect on how I will be analysing these pictures because I consider myself part of the followers of these fit girls, and are therefore part of the intended audience. However, communication, media and cultural studies scholar Jane Stokes (2013, in Ulubeyli et al., 2015: 471) claims these personal insights do not 'devalue' the analysis. On the contrary, this semiotic approach is open to personal perspectives and as long as I acknowledge that I thus have these individual experiences which could mark my interpretation, it can only add to the overall understanding. Stokes says "it is about enriching readers' understanding of the text" (p. 471). Because I am part of the actual audience of these images, my view might even be more representative than someone who is outside of this community.

**Analysing the Side-by-Side Instagram Pictures**

In this Analytical Chapter, the reader will learn about the linguistic messages, denotations and connotations I found by analysing the side-by-side images. One of the main connotations seems to be that the pictures represent the two photos as constructions of the body. However, because this appears to be especially true for the left fitspiration image, they seem to communicate that the body positivity picture on the right is more 'real' and 'authentic'. Then, I need this and the other meanings the reader will read about below to answer my research question in my Concluding Chapter: *What meanings do the side-by-side images actually convey in relation to their representational context?*

A Summary of the Literature

In order to start my analysis, I tried to summarise the current understandings of representations of the female body as described in my Literature and Theory Chapter in Table 1[10]. In my analysis, I will sometimes use concepts from this Table in order to have a starting point or handheld for the connotations of the Instagram posts.

Linguistic

In comparison to the others, Anna's (2016, 2017) images have a linguistic message within the picture itself. These messages are mostly *relays*; telling the viewer what a dress-ready body looks like, what 'good', 'bad' or 'normal' angles are and how her body looks most of the time. Nevertheless, in her picture from 2016 a more descriptive note can be found as well; that she is "sitting, relaxed".

The linguistic messages in the captions of the Instagram photos of all three fit bloggers are mostly *relays* as well; they describe possible connotations of the pictures by telling how they are to be interpreted. However, with Ashlie's side-by-side image from 2017, a short description of the left photo is given: "thigh gaps, toned abs and strong arms". In addition, I found one sentence in one of Anna's (2016) messages which seems to be an *anchorage* as well: "Picture on the left was taken one day before the wedding and the picture on the right was taken... 2 minutes after". Nonetheless, this sentence does not actually describe what the two pictures show. It tells only about when they were taken. Moreover, because of the '…' a connotation is present as well as this implies that what is coming is not to be expected. Hence, although the picture shows looking both ways at almost the same time is possible, with this construction of the sentence it connotes that this possibility is not common sense.

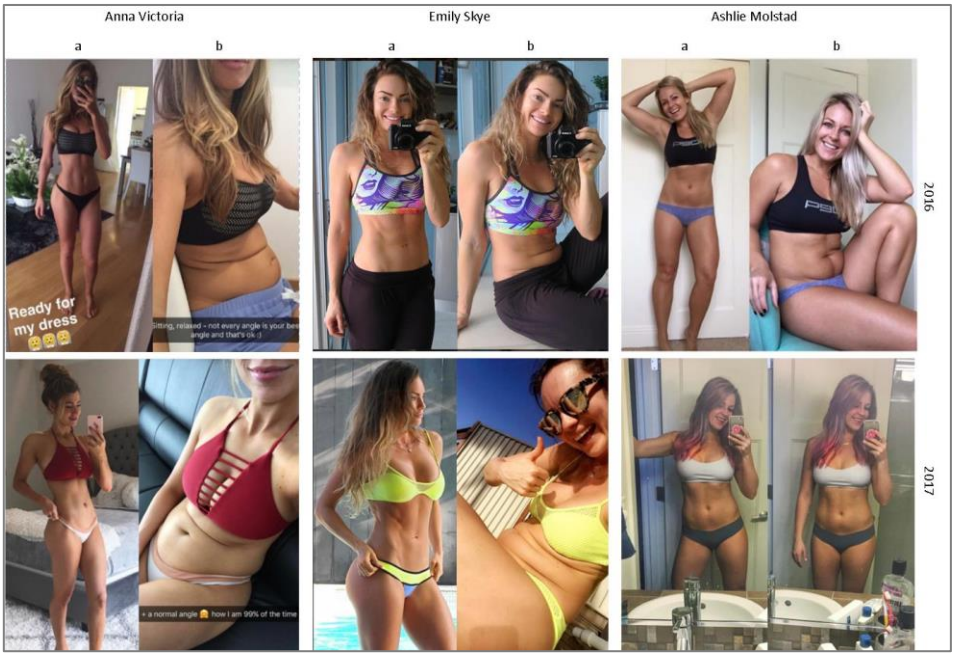
In the rest of the linguistic messages several topics are addressed and these add to the possible connotations of the images. One of them is the angle of the camera, which can either be

[10] For Table 1, see the Appendix on Tables.

'good' or 'bad' according to Anna's linguistic messages or 'best' or 'not so flattering' according to Emily's and Ashlie's. Nonetheless, in Ashlie's messages, the reader can also read about 'different' angles (2016) and that every angle and every shape of the body should be embraced (2017). Furthermore, in Anna's caption from 2017, a similar message seems to be send, since it is states that certain 'flaws' should not be considered something to want to 'get rid of' (2017). Emily's captions are in this sense going a slightly different direction. Readers are told that the way you look should not be attached to your 'self-worth' and that, because of that, these 'flaws' should not matter.

Another topic which comes back in the messages of all three of them is to love your body, to be good for it, to focus on how it feels rather than how it looks and to not compare it with anyone else's. In this sense, the linguistic messages seem to convey that the meaning of the pictures is that women should all be who they are and they should not focus on how they or other's look. Instead, women should focus on loving themselves and seeing themselves either as non-perfect as everybody else or as beautiful just the way they are no matter the shape of their body. However, the act of posting pictures of the body in itself is in contrast with that even when showing these different angles and emphasising they feel beautiful in all of them. Pictures always revolve around the visual. Therefore, these are also likely to enable viewers to compare themselves with these bloggers, just like other pictures representing some sort of ideal do.

Denotations[11]




Picture 3 – Overview of the corpus

[11] In the 'Denotations' and 'Connotations' sections of the analysis I will often refer to the images themselves. The images will be presented once in each section. However, as the images are not present on every page, the reader might want to keep the Appendix on Case Studies: Corpus at hand.

When looking at these visuals (for an overview of the complete corpus, see Picture 3), it can be noted that they all represent an image of the *beauty ideal* in combination with a *non-ideal*. In five of the six visuals, this contrast is portrayed through the difference of standing up versus sitting down. In the sixth picture, the most recent one by Ashlie (2017), she is standing up in both images still emphasising the contrast between the shapes of the body between the two photos. However, this is almost not even visible. The main visible difference between these photos is probably her pose.

As explained by Weber (2006), the very format of these visuals is commonly used for makeovers, which focus on improvement of the body (Gill, 2007; Moeran, 2010; McRobbie, 1991). Hence, these Instagram posts seem to also suggest some kind of progress or body transformation. When using this format for a makeover or body transformation the 'before' photo is mostly situated on the left side and the 'after' on the right side. This enables a gaze for the viewer of comparing the before with the after and looking for improvement as it is related to the western reading direction; from left to right. Since these side-by-side photos represent *the beauty ideal* on the left, it is situated as the before and *the non-ideal* on the right, as the after.

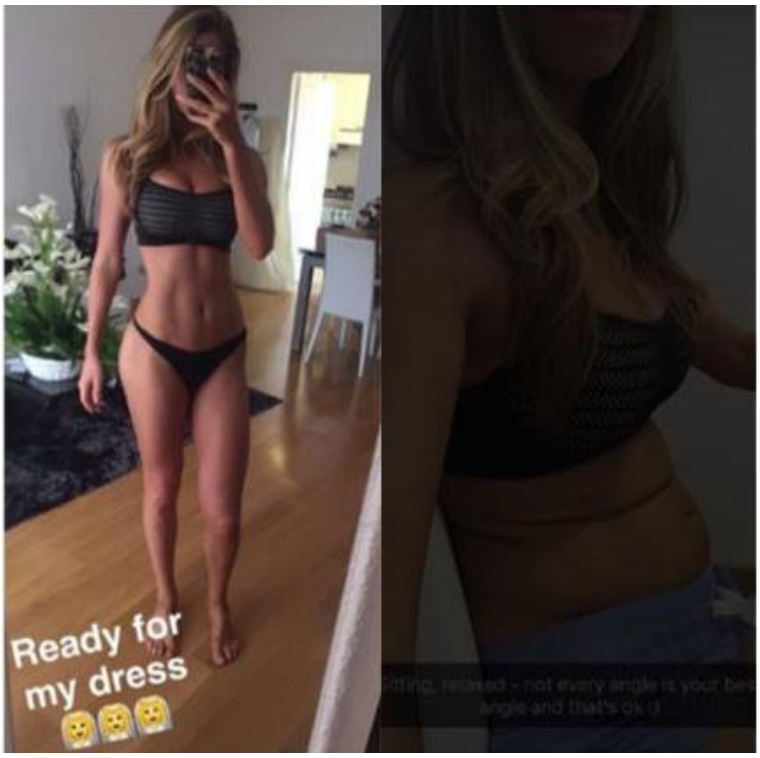
In nine of the photos the women seem to be taking the picture themselves (annavictoria, 2016ab, 2017ab; emilyskyefit, 2016ab, 2017b; foodiegirlfitness, 2017ab). The camera is even visible through a mirror in six of these pictures (annavictoria 2016a, 2017a; emilyskyefit, 2016ab; foodiegirlfitness, 2017ab). In five of the photos, they seem to be looking straight into the camera, constituting a *direct gaze* (pictures below: emilyskyefit, 2016ab; 2017b; foodiegirlfitness, 2016ab).

emilyskyefit, 2016ab

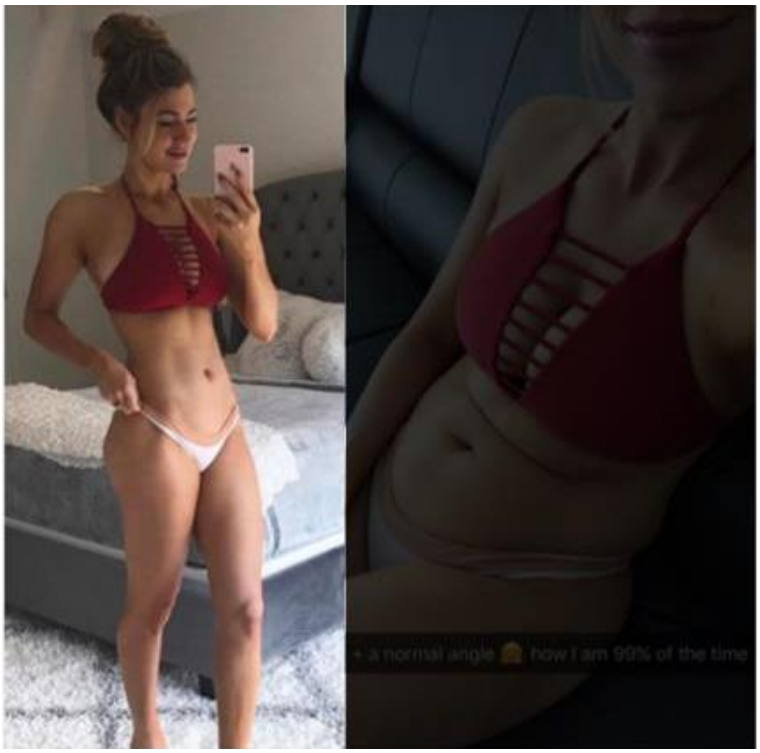
emilyskyefit, 2017b

foodiegirlfitness, 2016ab

In four of them, they are looking towards the camera the photo is taken with, which creates an *indirect gaze* (pictures below: annavictoria, 2016a; 2017a; foodiegirlfitness, 2017ab). In one, Anna 2016a, the picture does not even show her face because of the camera which is displayed in front of it.



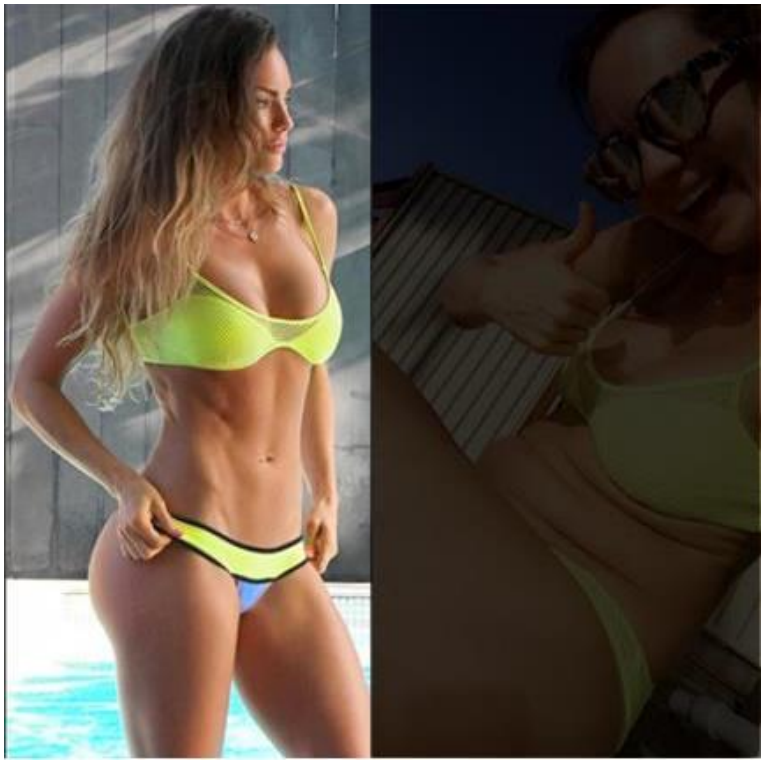

annavictoria, 2016a



annavictoria, 2017a

foodiegirlfitness, 2017ab

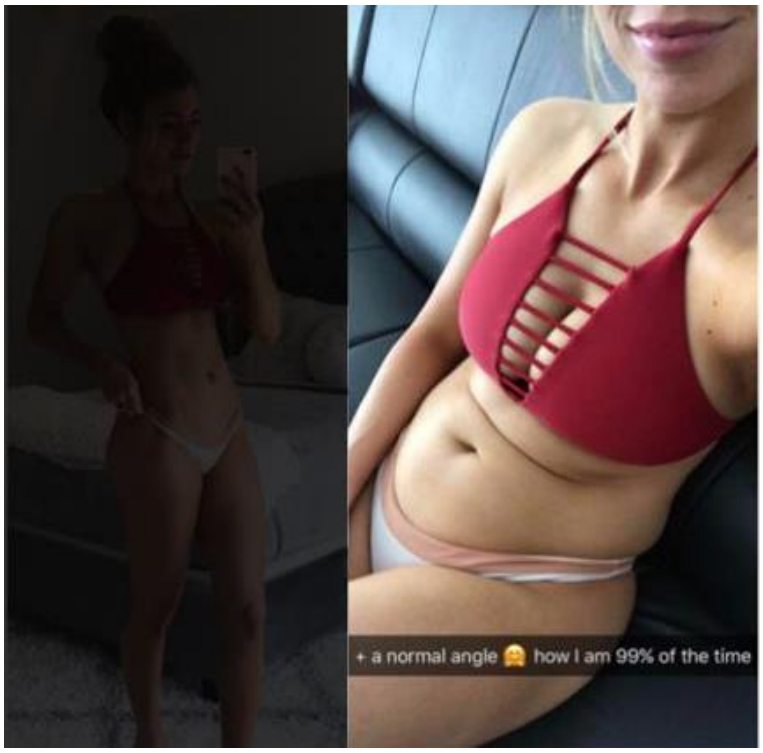
In one the fit blogger is looking away; an *avoiding gaze* (picture below: emilyskyefit, 2017a).



emilyskyefit, 2017a

And in two her eyes are cut off the photo, because of which there is no gaze at all. I will call this a *non-gaze* (pictures below: annavictoria, 2016b; 2017b).

annavictoria 2016b




annavictoria, 2017b

In some cases the viewer sees the fit blogger taking a picture of what she herself sees in the mirror. This representational strategy is visible in Anna's (2016a; 2017a) left photos and in both the right as well as the left photo of one of Emily's (2016) and Ashlie's (2017) side-by-side images. In these cases, the *direct* or *indirect* gaze, but also the interaction of the gazes of the fit blogger and the viewer, is established through a digital medium. This is especially so in the left photo of Anna's 2016 image. In this picture the viewer is looking at the body of 'the object' *through the eyes of 'the object'*, since "with the camera covering her face, the blogger is shown as the eye, the camera itself, […] hence the subject" (Rocamora, 2011: 419). Thereafter, the (digital) media, in this case, the mirror, the camera and Instagram, enable viewers to see the representation of the fit blogger as she herself saw as well, like Rocamora (2011) suggested. The mirror represents the idea that the fit blogger is able to see herself, the camera to capture this very image and the context of Instagram to share it with others. Nonetheless, also in the other pictures, where the mirror is not literally present, some kind of 'fantasised mirror' appears. Because the blogger seems to look in this mirror, the idea of looking at the blogger through her own eyes is present as well.

Furthermore, the left and right photo can be compared in their gaze and framing. For one of Emily's (2016) visuals and both Ashlie's (2016; 2017) no difference can be detected in the gaze of the blogger between the 'a' and 'b' photo. In the case of these three images, the women have either this *direct* or *indirect* gaze. This signifies some sort of agency as it is opposite from the Hitchcock movies where women did not look into the camera at all and were only being watched by the male characters (and therefore the camera and the viewers). Nevertheless, for the other three side-by-side pictures (annavictora, 2016; 2017; emilyskyefit, 2017) there is a difference between the gazes. In left pictures by Anna (2016a, 2017a) her gaze is *indirect*; towards the screen of her mobile phone in which she is able to see what the viewer of the pictures sees. Therefore, she is looking at the picture being taken. However, in the right pictures (annavictoria, 2016b; 2017b) her gaze is cut off from the photo as if she is either not allowed looking or if her gaze is not of importance. In the latest visual by Emily (2017) something else seems to be going on. In the left picture where Emily's body is portrayed idealistically, she has this *avoiding* gaze. On the right side of the visual she is showing the complete opposite; although her body is fragmented, here she has a *direct* gaze, looking straight into the eyes of the viewer of the picture.

Besides Emily (2016) and Ashlie (2017) having the same gaze in the a and b photo, in these pictures even the framing of the body is the same. In the other four side-by-side images, the framing is different in the left and right image (annavictoria, 2016; 2017; emilyskyefit, 2017; foodiegirlfitness, 2016). In the left pictures mostly the complete body is portrayed standing (the only exception is that sometimes the lower legs are not visible) using an *overviewing frame*. In the right ones the body is sometimes 'cut off' because the soft belly with rolls is zoomed in on; a *fragmented frame* is used.

Nonetheless, in all images, the fit blogger can be found in the centre of the picture. In most left pictures her whole body is shown over the length of the portrait-shaped frame. However, in most right pictures her upper body, especially her belly and breasts, is presented in the centre of the picture and the rest of her body is shown in the margins.

Looking at the differences of the bodies in these pictures more closely one can see that these images are not showing extremes. On the one hand, the *beauty ideal* or *hybrid female ideal* on the left side of the side-by-side images may be regarded as fit. However, it does not have that much of muscle as a 'male fit ideal' has. In other words, her body could be far more muscular but this would mean it would be separated from a feminine body shape. On the contrary, it would then be a masculine body shape like the female body builders from 1983, like Felkar (2012) explained. This emphasises that a difference is constructed between what being fit means for women and for men. On the other hand, the right side of the picture does show some body fat but only when sitting or standing relaxed. Nevertheless, it is seen by female gazes who support the *beauty ideal* as less beautiful; it signifies not being in control. This *femininity with roundness* is therefore considered the *non-ideal*.

When focusing on Ashlie's 2017 image, in particular, the contrast between her body on the left and right photo is even more subtle than in the other images. In this case, she does not compare her body in two completely different poses, like in the other side-by-side images. In these pictures, she is standing, only slightly different, in both photos. Therefore, this less obvious difference is actually only visible because the two pictures are placed next to each other in this format of a side-by-side image.

The women are wearing either sports(under)wear or bikinis because of which not much skin is covered and their bellies are shown as the focus of attention. Only in one of her pictures Emily (2016) is wearing a longer model sports pants because of which her legs are not shown. Nevertheless, in this picture as well she is wearing a sports bra. Hence, the skin of her arms and abdomen are exposed just like in the other pictures. Furthermore, in eleven of the twelve photos the women appear to be smiling; only in Anna's 2016a picture, this is not clear as her face is completely covered by the camera. Moreover, whereas in seven pictures the smiling comes from a happy face (emilyskyefit, 2016ab; 2017b; foodiegirlfitness, 2016ab; 2017ab), in four pictures, the smiling is sensual (annavictoria, 2016b; 2017ab; emilyskyefit, 2017a). Moreover, the women's hair is done nicely and they are wearing visible make-up in ten out of the twelve photos; they can be considered glamorised (annavictoria, 2016b; 2017ab; emilyskyefit, 2016ab; 2017a; foodiegirlfitness, 2016ab; 2017ab). This make-up is either covering their whole face or when only their lips are visible these wear lip-gloss. In one picture, Anna's left picture in her 2016 post, her face is covered by the camera, so the viewer cannot know whether she is wearing make-up. However, her hair is visibly done and in the other photo in this image, she is wearing make-up. Therefore, both these factors might indicate that she is

wearing make-up behind the camera. Moreover, in Emily's right photo of her 2017 post, she is wearing sunglasses because of which it is unclear if she is wearing make-up. Nonetheless, if viewers look closely through her sunglasses, they can see her eyes are not visible made-up. Moreover, her hair seems messy and not done. This picture can, therefore, be labelled as non-glamorised.

In most of the pictures the background can be labelled as domestic; five of the pictures are taken in a living room (annavictoria, 2016ab, 2017b; foodiegirlfitness, 2016ab), two in the kitchen (emilyskyefit, 2016ab), one in a bedroom (annavictoria, 2017a) and two in a bathroom (foodiegirlfitness, 2017ab). The bed- and bathroom can be considered most private or intimate in comparison to the living room or kitchen. Only one set of pictures by Emily (2017) seems to have a more public background as the photos were taken next to a pool. Although this firstly conveys the meaning of a more public space, this is actually her own private pool[12]. Furthermore, even in these pictures, a more private setting is created as for example no other people appear on these photos.

Besides this absence of other people in the pictures, some other things appear to be 'missing' as well. Since the left sides of the pictures seem to be portraying the fit ideal, which is sports or fitness related, the viewer could expect a fitness-centre with fitness equipment in the background. In addition, for these pictures, a more active position could be expected as well. Nonetheless, the fit bloggers are in a passive posing position in both photos in all six side-by-side visuals.

The fact that the pictures are set in a domestic place instead of for example the public setting of a fitness-centre seems to also represent the intimate moments of the fit blogger's lives. Even the poor quality of the photos adds to this; especially Ashlie's 2017 pictures. This namely indicates the pictures were not taken with a professional camera and therefore not in a professional environment but within this range of private moments in the women's lives. With this indication of private surroundings, the portrayals in the photos represent letting the viewer of these pictures peek into their lives through the social media platform Instagram. Because of this, Mulvey's (1973 [1999]) terms of the voyeur watching the object appears to be applicable. This might then give a tension with the idea that these women are representing a form of empowerment and being the subject instead of the object. Nonetheless, the major difference with the voyeur and the object in the 1970s movies is that the object represented non-awareness of the voyeur. In the case of these side-by-side images, the fit bloggers represent awareness of them being watched; they are explicitly posing for the photos (or even taking the photos themselves) and are posting them on their public Instagram accounts[13] for everyone to see.

[12] I posted a comment below the picture (emilyskyefit, 2017) asking Emily whether these pictures were taken at home or at a public pool (patty_sondagh, 2017, 4/7). She answered that it was at her house (emilyskyefit, 2017, 4/10). See: https://www.instagram.com/p/BQeZD0kl9Wx/, retrieved on 4/15.

[13] For information about the difference between a public and private Instagram account, see Instagram (2017b).

Connotations

*Objectification*

For the code of objectification, I will start by looking at the pictures with Mulvey's (1973 [1999]; 2004) lens of differences between object and subject and how this is gendered. The women here are representing being object and subject at the same time. This is especially so when keeping in mind that, as she presents herself through her own Instagram account, the portrayed woman is representing the ability to look at herself as well by scrolling through her own Instagram feed. In this case, the computer screen functions as a mirror, just as Rocamora (2011) pointed out. So, different gazes are at play; the gaze of others and this more 'internal gaze' of the fit blogger herself.

However, in some images the relation or difference between object and subject seems to get even more complicated; in the ones the viewer sees the fit blogger having this *indirect* (annavictoria, 2016a; 2017a; emilyskyefit, 2016ab; foodiegirlfitness, 2017ab) or *direct* gaze (emilyskyefit, 2016ab, 2017b; foodiegirlfitness, 2016ab). Therefore, the fit bloggers are explicitly representing being subject and object at the same time. They are subjects by representing an active relation with the viewer. Therefore, the fit blogger represents the hero character and should be considered the ideal image with which the viewer identifies herself through the mirror of the computer screen (Smelik, 2016); it is the *viewer's ideal*. Nonetheless, the fit bloggers are the object in these images as well by showing a representation of themselves which is passive by posing in a private, or even intimate, setting in their lives. Moreover, by making this viewable for everyone who comes across their public Instagram profile, they make their bodies objects to look at. Hence, the fit blogger is the oppressed and the oppressor at once. This is then the exact state in which the viewers see her representing the value construction of empowerment, as explained by Rocamora (2011). Since she is as well the one portrayed as the one who is presented as 'in control' of this portrayal, she is signifying the liberation from the certain, nowadays dominant, beauty standards.

Moreover, because of the presence of a mirror (either this actual mirror or the fantasised one), the images of fit bloggers signify concern with one's body as they focus on their appearance, self-improvement and, therefore, objectification of the self (Rocamora, 2011). Paradoxically, the connotations conveyed through this concern with the self are liberation, progress and rights (Brumberg, 1997 [2010]) which are concepts for a subject. So, here the differences between being object and subject seem to be complicated again; through the objectification of the fit blogger meanings related to her being a subject are conveyed. This refers back to Rocamora (2011) saying women are the bearers of meaning as well as the creators because the fit blogger represents this creation of the meanings she connotes herself through these pictures.

As explained before, the fit blogger's mediated gaze is similar in both photos in three of the six visuals (emilyskyefit, 2016; foodiegirlfitness, 2016; 2017). Emily's and Ashlie's *indirect* and *direct* gazes, therefore, signify that the woman is a subject making her own choice and relates to her viewers in an active way in both photos. These women are therefore connoting she is the hero character, hence, the *viewer's ideal*, in both photos.

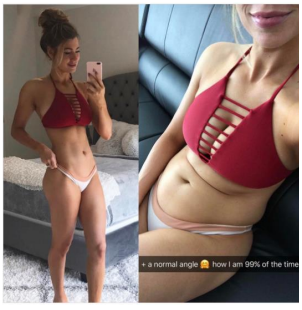
Emily, 2016

Ashlie, 2016

Ashlie, 2017

In Anna's (2016a; 2017a) left pictures she has a similar *indirect* gaze as Ashlie (2017). This therefore also signifies that she is a viewing subject and thus the *viewer's ideal*. Nevertheless, in the right pictures (annavictoria, 2016b; 2017b) there is a *non-gaze*. Because of that, the emphasis is put on the signification of her being the object without any agency. As viewers can never identify themselves with this objectified character, she is not representing an ideal but a *viewer's object*. In comparison to Anna, Emily's visual from 2017 is showing the opposite and thus represents the opposite. In this side-by-side image, the left photo represents Emily as the *viewer's object* having an *avoiding* gaze. In her right photo, on the contrary, she is the subject having a *direct* gaze. Therefore, she is representing the hero character in this right photo; the *viewer's ideal*.

Anna, 2016



Anna, 2017

Emily, 2017

In addition, I also focused on the framing of the two parts of the side-by-side images. There are only two in which the framing of the left and the right picture is the same; Emily's 2016 picture and Ashlie's 2017. Hence, in both photos, they appear to be as much subject as an object because of the

*overviewing* framing. Nonetheless, these side-by-side images are also the images in which their mediated gaze was similar in both photos. This therefore also adds to this equality in being object and subject at the same time in the representations. In the other four side-by-side images, the framing is different between the two photos. When comparing this to how women were portrayed in the Hitchcock movies the *overviewing* frame on the left signifies the subject or *viewer's ideal* whereas the *fragmented* frame on the right is a similar practice as the framing of the *viewer's objects* in these movies.

*Ideal Image: Beauty Ideal*

As explained above, the different framing in four of the six case study visuals means a difference in the representation. In the left pictures, the focus is on the complete body but on the right pictures the focus is shifted towards only one part of the body: the belly. This zooming in constitutes a viewer's gaze of focusing on this specific unclothed part of the body as it needs to be exposed in order for the viewer to see the difference. This body part, the belly, is namely different from the bellies in the left pictures; it seems to contain more fat which signifies not being in control of one's body (Douglas, 1994). As discipline is part of the normative characteristics of the *beauty ideal* – having a strong character is something admirable – this shape of the belly is seen as *non-ideal* or even ugly. With this, specific kinds of differences seem to be constructed: being a strong, disciplined woman with an ideal body shape versus not being in control and therefore having stomach rolls.

This difference is generally taking place between different women when, for example, women compare themselves and their ideal selves with the unrealistically photoshopped pictures in magazines and on social media like Instagram (Arnold, 2001; Ballaster et al., 1993). However, relying on the connoted linguistic messages in the captions of these Instagram posts, the images convey that the focus of these differences should not lie between different women and women should not compare themselves to others or to this unrealistic *beauty ideal*. On the contrary, there are differences *within* the body itself. These images represent that this can be disclosed by constructing bodies differently in photos. Moreover, they state that beauty mainly comes from within, since it comes from loving one's own body, respecting it and treating it well. Nonetheless, these side-by-side images seem to reverse the equation just like the magazines did (Moeran, 2010). They represent that by changing the outer-self, or actually representing this outer-self through a different kind of representation, one becomes more beautiful within. Therefore, paradoxically, the very representation revolving around appearance is what constitutes this self-love.

The left images are more in line with the *beauty ideal*, mainly because of the shape of their bodies. According to Douglas (1994), the *beauty ideal* can be described as conspicuously thin and having a slim, dimple-free buttock and thigh. However, when the aspects mentioned by Yan and

Bissel (2014) about the way the *beauty ideal* is often portrayed on the covers of magazines are taken into account, the right images are portrayed similarly as well. In the right as well as in the left photos, the women represent femininity (softness; either through soft muscles or soft bellies) and sexuality (by wearing little clothing). Moreover, the facial expressions are alike; smiling, either happy or sensual. In addition, in most of the pictures, the portrayals seem glamorised as the women are wearing make-up and their hair is nicely done. However, looking at Emily's side-by-side picture from 2017, differences concerning glamorisation between the left and right photo are present. In the left photo, she appears to be representing this glamorised *beauty ideal*, whereas in the right photo she represents a non-glamorised *non-ideal*. This does not take away the fact the other characteristics are the same (femininity, sexuality and facial expressions). Therefore, in all six side-by-side images, only a few differences between the two photos concerning this representational strategy are visible. This means that the fit bloggers are representing this *non-ideal* as the *beauty ideal*.

When looking at the very format of the pictures, they are similar to the before-after photos for makeovers in for example magazines (Moeran, 2010; Weber, 2006). Hence, this representational strategy ensures the side-by-side pictures convey the connotation that the fit blogger has made this progress of 'self-perfectibility' (McRobbie, 2009). Previously, she would post these 'perfect' pictures in which her body was *constructed* as this *beauty ideal*. Now, she shows progress by also posting these less perfect, *'more authentic' pictures*. With these, she connotes her representation is 'real' and therefore *not constructed* in any way. This after image in these side-by-side images thus signifies that this insight of loving your body no matter how it is portrayed in a picture is seen as paradoxically 'more perfect' than when a lot of effort is put into *constructing* this perfect *beauty ideal*.

However, when thinking critically about this, another insight arises; even these *'more authentic' pictures* are also a *construction* of the fit blogger's body. The Instagram visuals actually show that a body does not look the same in every picture and that this depends on the representational strategies. The pictures add to the idea that photos are always constructions and undermine the idea that a body has only one shape and will always appear the same. The differences between the two pictures in the side-by-side images emphasise that this is not the case. Although in the fit blogger's linguistic messages the connotation is that the right photos are *'more authentic' pictures* than the left ones, this is actually not the case. Based on Derrida's post-structuralist ideas, I can say this is a myth because the two pictures are only two different *constructions*. Even a *'more authentic' picture* is always a *construction*. So, with the help of this post-structuralist perspective, one can see that the right sides of these images are *constructions* of something which actually appears to be *non-constructed*; something 'honest' or 'authentic'. Even more so, the complete visuals are a construction of placing two different photos of one body next to each other. This is a representational strategy because of which the focus lies on this difference between the two photos.

The meaning these pictures, therefore, seem to convey is two-fold. On the one hand, they connote that both images are a *construction* of the body. On the other hand, they maintain the myth that these *constructions* of *non-constructed* concepts are less constructed than their obviously constructed, staged, counter images. Moreover, they are going a step further; they convey that these right photos are also 'better' than the left ones since the left is this *construction* whereas the right is a *'more authentic' picture*. Nevertheless, by placing this *beauty ideal* besides what should be a *'more authentic' picture* and therefore still using it as a reference point, the side-by-side images also still attest this as the *beauty ideal*.

*Ideal Image: Fit Ideal*

As stated above the women in these side-by-side images are focusing on difference *within* the body. The bodies of the women, especially on the left side of these images, seem to be consisting of differences *within* it since it represents this *hybrid female ideal*. This is, as discussed by Kenen (1987, in Markula, 1995), actually a combination of female softness/weakness and male hard muscles with strength. This combination then again conveys meanings concerning the women being masculine (or feminist) as well as feminine, being in control and having discipline and success in life.

Moreover, by placing two photos of the same body in one visual, they emphasise this difference *within* the self as well. Although this body is portrayed and staged differently, it does not show the extreme differences in a binary like fat versus muscular. It only shows the minor differences *within* one person. This represents that the binary consists of – what I would like to call – 'smaller steps'. The format for this binary would in the traditional sense be **muscular**/*fat* as muscles are established as superior to or better than fat. Viewers of these images, therefore, see in the first instance the left picture as representing the dominant part of these smaller steps. Nonetheless, when a new binary was created for the smaller steps based on the format of the before-after images, the right one would be the dominant and the left the subordinate: *hybrid female ideal*/**femininity with roundness**; hence *beauty ideal*/**non-ideal**. So, these pictures might convey that even between small differences there is still a hierarchy. However, in this case, the hierarchy has been reversed.

The most interesting picture for this might be Ashlie's from 2017. In that visual, she is standing in both photos, because of which even smaller steps are shown. A viewer might need the two pictures to be right next to each other in order to see the difference of the belly (fat) clearly. Another difference which is likely to be better visible then is her pose. Therefore, the picture conveys meanings about posing in a picture and how this is to be done best (as the format still resembles a before-after image and the reading order is from left to right). In this case, posing standing straight can be presumed the better positioning. Because this might not be considered posing at all, it again conveys being a *'more authentic' picture*. Posing standing a little oblique with one's legs a little apart

and one's arm away from the waist is presented as the lesser option. In this case, she is obviously *constructing* a certain position of her body. Therefore, although this picture may convey less about the body itself, essentially it conveys a similar meaning; authenticity is better than construction.

Moreover, this very posing is something which is present in the other side-by-side visuals as well. The fit bloggers are posing for the photos and they have not been photographed on, for example, a fitness device like a cross trainer or even a yoga mat. They are thus photographed being in a passive position rather than an active one. As this is similar to the way female athletes are often portrayed according to Jones (2006; 2013), this also emphasises the importance of the women's appearance over their accomplishments. In other words, the connotations conveyed because of this are that these women represent the appearance of their bodies as the centre of attention. On the one hand, the content of their linguistic messages contains sentences indicating feelings and self-worth are most important[14]. On the other hand, by representing the female body in this less active state, the pictures do connote meanings about the appearance of the body as most important.

In addition, the fact that no fitness equipment is visible on the photos and they are not taken in fitness centres is in contrast to them wearing fitness/(swim)sports clothing. As stated earlier in five of the six side-by-side images this clothing only covers a bit of their skin (annavictoria, 2016; 2017; emilyskyefit, 2017; foodiegirlfitness, 2016; 2017), whereas the difference with the sixth is only more coverage of the legs (emilyskyefit, 2016). This is in line with the fact that portrayals of the *hybrid ideal* are often sexualised by showing skin and dressing the women in feminine clothing (Knapp, 2015). The sexualisation of the female fitness body then leads to fitness often being regarded "as a means for achieving […] sexiness […]" (Andreasson & Johansson, 2013: 7). Thus, this indicates that the meanings these images are conveying are not about being fit at all but about having a 'sexy body' which is considered part of the *beauty ideal* and *hybrid female ideal* (Yan & Bissel, 2014).

Nonetheless, these side-by-side visuals do not convey this *hybrid ideal* on the left but the *'more authentic' picture* on the right as the 'better' form of portraying the body through for example Instagram. Therefore, the format of the pictures in combination with the clothing signifies sexiness not only in the *hybrid ideal* but in this *femininity with roundness* as well. Hence, the side-by-side pictures are about these bodies still being sexy even with stomach rolls as these bodies are also able to be portrayed the way they are in the left pictures. However, as this is still the same body and it does not represent differently shaped bodies, it does not explicitly connote the meaning that all body types are beautiful or sexy; it only connotes the *beauty ideal* can include different forms.

[14] For example "[t]his body is strong, can run miles, can lift and squat and push and pull weight around, and it's happy not just because of how it looks, but because of how it feels" (annavictoria, 2017); "it's not healthy when it becomes an obsession and your "self worth" is attached to your appearance" (emilyskyefit, 2017); "[m]y priority is how I feel mentally and physically and I won't sacrifice that to look a certain way OR to get the approval from anyone else!" (emilyskyefit, 2017); and "our worth isn't measured by how many belly rolls we have, or how many dimples on our booty, or how much jiggle hangs out on our arms" (foodiegirlfitness, 2016).

**Differences as well as Similarities**

The purpose of this Concluding Chapter is to show the reader the answer to the research question I posed in my Introductory Chapter: *What meanings do the side-by-side images actually convey in relation to their representational context?* This question will be answered by comparing the outcome of my Analytical Chapter with what I have written in my Literature and Theory Chapter. This Concluding Chapter will then show that the answer to that question is that there are differences as well as similarities between the side-by-side images and their representational context. The title of this chapter does not only refer to these differences and similarities, but also to ones within and between the six the side-by-side images. Furthermore, I conclude that this thesis can be considered a starting point for future research as it uncovers possibilities for an interdisciplinary dialogue.

Summary of the Analysis

In order to create an overview, I have tried to summarise my findings in a second Table[15] and I will further discuss the contents of that Table in this section.

Overall, the representations convey that the fit bloggers are subjects rather than objects because they are mostly taking the pictures themselves. Moreover, in nine of the twelve photos, the *direct* or *indirect* gaze suggests the women are these hero characters because of which they represent being subject as well as explained by Smelik (2016). However, because of the domestic/private settings and the sometimes obvious poor quality of the photos, the viewers get the impression that they are peeking into the private lives of the fit bloggers through the social media platform Instagram. This represents the opposite; the women as objects. The relation between the women being objects versus subjects is, therefore, complicated, but it is also the matrix for representing empowerment.

Moreover, a distinction between the three fit bloggers can be made. In Anna's pictures, her body is mostly conveying more traditional connotations. The left ones represent a complete masculine hero character, who sees what the viewers are seeing. In the pictures on the right, she represents a fragmented feminine character, who does not look into the camera. In relation to the way the body is portrayed, the left picture thus shows more masculinity which is in line with this *beauty/hybrid ideal* and the right one more femininity as it shows more softness. In these pictures, Anna thus conveys more traditional meanings. These pictures connote that the more masculine character (*the hybrid ideal*) is the *viewer's ideal*. The feminine character (*the non-ideal*), however, is an object with which viewers can never identify themselves with and therefore it is the *viewer's object*. Hence, this is in line with the general idea of the *beauty ideal* and *non-ideal*.

[15] For Table 2, see the Appendix on Tables.

However, in both Emily's side-by-side visuals, this is contradicted. In her 2016 image, she represents agency by looking at her audience directly through this mirror on both the left as well as in the right picture. Because of this, an active relation with this audience is created and she is representing the hero character in both photos. Furthermore, in these pictures, her body is framed similarly. Therefore, she connotes equality in objectifying and handing subjectivity to the masculine and feminine character; the *ideal* and *non-ideal* can both be seen as the *viewer's ideal*. This means the traditional meanings of the *beauty ideal* versus a *non-ideal* are replaced by some kind of equal treatment.

In her most recent side-by-side image (2017) Emily's body is framed similarly to what is portrayed in Anna's images; in the left photo viewers see an *overviewing* frame and in the right one it is *fragmented*. However, in this 2017 image, Emily's mediated gaze suggests the opposite. Because of the *avoiding* and *direct* gaze in these photos, the masculine character is represented as the *viewer's object* without agency and this feminine character who knows she is perfect no matter how she looks is the hero character making an active connection with the viewer through Instagram and representing the *viewer's ideal*. This can be regarded rather paradoxically; the *beauty ideal* is the *viewer's object* and the *non-ideal* body shape is the *viewer's ideal*. Thus, again the traditional meanings are replaced; this time not by equality, but by reversing the roles.

The connotations of Ashlie's (2016, 2017) pictures are a mix of Anna's and Emily's connotations. On the one hand, in her picture from 2016, the framing corresponds to Anna's framing; *overviewing* on the left and *fragmented* on the right. Hence, she is conveying traditional meanings. On the other hand, in her 2017 picture the framing is like the framing in Emily's 2016 picture; in both photos the same. Moreover, when looking at Ashlie's mediated gaze in the pictures it is more related to the way Emily is portrayed. By having a *direct* gaze (2016) or an *indirect* one (2017) on the left as well as in the right photos, she is representing agency in both ways of portrayal. Therefore, she connotes that the masculine and feminine character are both as much the hero character. Thus, yet again, an equal treatment seems to be conveyed instead of the traditional meanings; in these pictures, both the *beauty ideal* and the *non-ideal* are the *viewer's ideal*.

Furthermore, the images analysed here are conveying a focus on the differences *within* a person; the different forms one body can include. On the left side, she is in control as she is portrayed glamorised, sexualised, having soft, feminine muscles and smiling or looking sensual, which is in line with the *beauty ideal*. On the right side, she is representing not being in control, but being 'honest' and 'authentic'. This should, according to the linguistic messages, also be seen as beautiful, but then in a *non-ideal* form. Moreover, the women portrayed with the same glamorisation, sexualisation and facial expressions. Only the feminine softness is portrayed not in the form of soft muscles but in the form of belly fat. These *non-ideal* right images are thus conveying

some meanings related to the ideal images, simply because it is portrayed like the *beauty ideal*. Only Emily's 2017 picture differs slightly as the right photo is not as glamorised as the left one. Therefore, she may show that the *beauty ideal* can also truly be a *non-ideal*. However, she does also connote this *non-ideal* to be a version of the *beauty ideal*, because of the similarity of other characteristics of the portrayal (sexualisation, femininity and facial expression).

Nevertheless, when solely looking at the images and disregarding the linguistic messages, Anna's 2016 and 2017, Ashlie's 2016 and 2017, and Emily's 2016 pictures are also not conveying the meaning of these forms being equally beautiful. By consistently showing the ideal in this fitspiration image on the left side and the body with belly rolls as a body positivity message on the right, they constitute a specific viewer's gaze. This gaze is looking for progress or 'self-perfectibility' between the left and right images, like when these types of side-by-side images are used in the format of before-after images for makeovers and body transformations. The pictures turn the dominant and the recessive around, since the *beauty ideal* has been placed as the before and a *non-ideal* image is the outcome of the progress. This hierarchy would then suggest that portraying oneself in a *'more authentic' picture* is preferred on this social media platform and that *construction* of the self is wrong. However, although these right images signify being 'honest', these are as much a *construction* of a certain way of portraying the body, only in a different way.

Moreover, there seems to be a paradox embedded here because of the two types of images (fitspiration and body positivity) and the before-after format. On the one hand, the *beauty ideal* is shown in a fitspiration image which actually motivates women to work towards this body shape. Nonetheless, it is situated on the left side of the before-after images and thus the before; not to work towards but to withdraw from. On the other hand, this *non-ideal* is shown in a body positive image which usually conveys the message that one does not have to change one's body because it is beautiful as it is. Here, however, this image is introduced as the after image and thus implies one should change in order to arrive at this stage.

In addition, because of the two different *constructions*, the viewers are shown that a body can take on different forms as there are differences *within* the self. Therefore, both *constructions* of the bodies represent the *hybrid ideal* only in a different way. This representation is in itself also a combination of feminine and masculine meanings and connotes success, discipline and control. However, in doing so, the pictures actually only show that these particular bodies are beautiful and sexy in either way for a female gaze scrolling through her Instagram feed. However, they do not specifically signify that every body type is equally beautiful. In a sense, these only represent some of the possible smaller steps of body forms within the great binary of **muscular**/*fat* which these bodies can include. Hence, they connote a new binary: *hybrid female ideal*/**femininity with roundness**.

Moreover, the very idea of photographing the body and representing it in a visual way stresses the importance of appearance. This is therefore in line with what Moeran (2010) stated about magazines; they say beauty comes from within, but reverse the equation so women change their outer-selves to become more beautiful on the inside. The fit bloggers also state that beauty is an inner-self characteristic in their linguistic messages. At the same time, the two photos in the side-by-side images, for which these linguistic messages are the captions, convey that one kind of representation or appearance is better than the other. In other words, the fit bloggers' images also reverse the equation; by changing the way of portraying oneself, one will become more beautiful on the inside as it enables self-love.

Furthermore, appearance is also emphasised because the women are posing instead of being photographed in action and fitness objects are missing. These missing objects and the fact that the photos are not taken in a fitness centre are in contrast to what the women are wearing. Nonetheless, these fitness/(swim)sports clothes represent some sort of sexualisation as little skin is covered. Because the women are wearing these types of clothing on both the left as well as in the right photo, the body is representing a sexy female body in both images. This, therefore, emphasises that the body with a little fat can also be sexy for a female gaze. However, as in both photos, the same women is portrayed, the pictures only explicitly connote this *beauty ideal* body is also beautiful in this *non-ideal* shape as shown in the right photo. It does not say anything about other women's bodies. Hence, the *difference within* does not resolve the *differences between*. In other words, the side-by-side Instagram visuals actually exclude all other body types once again. Even more so, by representing the *beauty ideal* and placing this next to this *non-ideal* and stressing the differences between them, the side-by-side photos preserve this *beauty ideal*. Therefore, they are just as much spreading the *beauty ideal* via social media as other images in their representational context were doing all along.

Comparison to Representational context of the Female Body

To answer my research question – *what meanings do the side-by-side images actually convey in relation to their representational context?* – I need to compare the outcomes of what I found in my analysis with the representational context of the female body as discussed in my Literature and Theory Chapter. While doing that, similarities, as well as differences, can be noted. Similarities with the existing representations are the way the women dress; sexualisation of fitness; the fact that they pose; glamorisation; facial expressions; the portrayal of the *hybrid fit ideal* as a combination of masculinity and femininity; and the fact that there is a hierarchy between different body shapes. Moreover, the different uses of the (female) gaze towards the camera are similar to how these are used in the representation context. Some are in line with the traditional portrayals according to

Mulvey (1973 [1999]; 2004) in which there is no gaze towards the audience. In others, the portrayed women (as objects) have this relation with the audience through for example an indirect gaze (via the mirror and camera) like Rocamora (2011) already found in the representational context.

One of the three more important similarities is the use of already existing formats of social media phenomena: the before-after image, the fitspiration image and the body positivity image. The intended audience is familiar with these formats either through other pictures on the fit blogger's Instagram accounts or through other sources of media like magazines and television. A second important similarity is that the fit bloggers seem to represent a similarly reversed equation as other representations; beauty comes from within, but in order to become more beautiful, women should start changing the outside. In the case of these side-by-side images, viewers are told to change the way they represent themselves on social media. Nonetheless, the most important similarity is that through the side-by-side images the same overall thought is communicated: there is this image of an *ideal* body shape and women still measure themselves on the basis of it and compare themselves to it. Therefore, viewers who look at the side-by-side visuals do not see the inclusion of all body shapes, but merely a repetition of exclusion of *non-ideals* through a social media network.

The first difference between the side-by-side images and the representational context has to do with the use of existing social media phenomena. Although the audience is familiar with the formats used in the pictures (the before-after, fitspiration and body positive formats), the meanings the combination of these formats in the side-by-side images conveys are very much 'new'. The meanings of the specific social media phenomena are namely changed by putting them together in this way. Firstly, the fitspiration is not represented as the end-goal but as the starting point. Secondly, the body positivity is represented as an end-goal and therefore as something one needs to change for before being able to arrive at that stage. And thirdly, the before and after are reversed. Therefore, instead of the progress being towards the *beauty ideal*, it is driven away from this fitspiration *construction* towards a *'more authentic' picture* of the *non-ideal* body positive version of the self.

Nonetheless, this image on the right side of the visual is still the same ideal body, merely *constructed* differently. The meaning which is conveyed towards the audience of these pictures contains a message of the right image being a *non-constructed 'more authentic' picture*. However, critical thinkers like myself will notice this right image is as *constructed* as the left one which would give it an extra layer of meaning. Instead of seeing 'progress images', the viewer might be able to set aside the idea that the right picture should be better than the left. This means that viewer has come to the insight that the before-after format is also merely a *construction*. The viewer may then be able to interpret another, second, 'new' kind of meaning from the picture; that however, an image of a body is representing that body, it is always a *construction*.

Furthermore, third a 'new' meaning can be noted. The progress represented in the side-by-side images differs from progresses which are true body transformations in before-after pictures. Instead of solely focusing on the actual differences between the bodies in the left and right photo over oftentimes a large amount of time, the side-by-side images focus on differences to be shown in the here and now. As these are claimed to be taken a few minutes apart, the very portrayal (the positioning, the framing, the gazes, the being more or less feminine versus masculine and other aspects of this portrayal) of the body is centred. In combination with the before-after format, this conveys again the meaning of the right positioning as 'better' than the left. However, the difference with the representational context is that not the body itself is regarded 'better' but this portrayal is.

One of the characteristics of this portrayal might enable a fourth difference; the use of gazes. Although the individual gazes were already present in the representational context, the differences in the gaze between the left and right images have established specific meanings. Because of this, some of the combinations of these gazes in this specific format and what they therefore connote may be 'new'. In two of the six side-by-side images, the *ideal* was represented as being more subject than the *non-ideal* (Anna, 2016; 2017). In this case, it seems to be more in line with traditional meanings again; the *ideal* is the hero-character or the *viewer's ideal*. Therefore, this does not indicate a 'new' meaning in any way. In three of the images, the gaze was on both the left and the right photo the same; a *direct* or *indirect* gaze (Ashlie, 2016; 2017; Emily, 2016). On the one hand, this may not convey completely 'new' meaning as female bodies were already sometimes portrayed as this objectified subject (Rocamora, 2011). On the other hand, this specific combination of the two constructions of the body next to each other in one image both having the same (*direct* or *indirect*) gaze, might convey 'new' meanings. It namely conveys that the *ideal* and *non-ideal* are both equal hero-characters and therefore both the *viewer's ideal*. Hence, these images seem to connote some equality between the *ideal* and *non-ideal* despite the before-after format. In the last one, the traditional connotations are reversed; the *ideal* represented as the *viewer's object* and the *non-ideal* as the hero-character (Emily, 2017). The latter is thus, in this case, the *viewer's ideal*. Therefore, this last side-by-side image appears to be the most surprising, interesting and 'new'. It seems to completely contradict traditional ideas of what is to be seen as *ideal* and literally represents this contradiction. Nonetheless, as I did not find any indication of combining different gazes (and what these convey) in the literature about the representational context, I cannot be sure whether this is actually 'new'.

Finally, a fifth 'new' meaning which viewers can derive from these images is that differences are not as black and white as one might think. The photos show that within the difference between **muscular**/*fat* there are smaller steps. Therefore, it is actually a continuum with a variety of greys. Moreover, the images convey the meaning that bodies are not to be pinned down in one place on

that continuum. On the contrary, they can consist of various forms at the same time. These forms can only be uncovered when the body is portrayed in different ways. However, this again makes the images not inclusive for appreciation of different body types. It only focuses on this particular body and how this is 'beautiful' no matter how it is portrayed.

To conclude, and to answer my research question in only a few sentences, I would say that these images do connote different or 'new' meanings. These 'new' meanings can be shortly labelled as 1) progress towards *non-idealistic* images, 2) insight into how portrayals of the body are always *constructions*, 3) focus on the different possible portrayals of the body in images, 4) specific combinations of different gazes which might connote 'new' meanings (either that *ideal* and *non-ideal* are equal or that the *non-ideal* is actually the *ideal*), and 5) the idea that binaries have small steps which make them continuums. Thus, new meanings about differences within the self (progress, constructions, portrayals and gazes) and these 'grey areas' within certain continuums are provided through incorporating existing social media phenomena and using their different formats together in these side-by-side images. Nonetheless, the images also correspond to the representational context on many levels as there are a large number of similarities as well. The most important similarity is that familiar formats are used to communicate similar overall messages as other images; 1) in order to be or feel beautiful on the inside, one should represent the outer-self differently, and 2) there is this *beauty ideal* circulating in the online community to which women still compare themselves and because of which other body shapes are excluded from being idealistic as well.

Possibilities for Future Research

In contrast with my expectations and although the core message of the images is the same as other representations, differences can be found between the representational context of female bodies and these side-by-side images. Although I expected to find fewer differences, the 'new meanings' I found are important in my opinion. I now see the side-by-side images in a different light because of the thorough analysis I carried out on them. For example, I also would not have thought to find so many differences between the six side-by-side visuals. Just like these first thoughts about the images are biased by the fact that I consider myself part of this community of 'followers', personal experiences and perspectives have probably influenced my analysis as well. Just as I mentioned in my Methodological Chapter, this is one of the limitations of a semiotic approach (Chandler, 2007, in Ulubeyli, Arslan & Kivrak, 2015: 470-471). However, as this personal touch comes from me being part of this community of followers, it might be representable. Nevertheless, if it is not, this specific interpretation derived from this analysis should still be considered an addition to the understanding of these images and to the ongoing interdisciplinary dialogue on representations of the female body.

The specific interpretation in this thesis was based on two codes; objectification and ideals. For future research, it could be interesting to look at other codes for the analysis of the images. However, in order to determine what precisely these other codes could be, more overviewing research into representations of female bodies needs to be conducted first. Moreover, looking back at the specific differences researched in this thesis – beauty, fitness and gender – other characteristics of the fit bloggers may be interesting as well. Future research could, for example, look into the ethnicity, age or social status of these or other representations of the female body. Nevertheless, I would advise the future researchers to include the thoughts from Yan and Bissel (2014). They stressed that, in relation to a beauty ideal, it is impossible that a global ideal exists due to cultural differences. Therefore, especially when looking at these ethnic or social status differences, the cultural context of the researched representations should be taken into account.

Furthermore, the images were presumably posted by the fit bloggers having some kind of intention and the images probably have some kind of effect on the viewer. Some researchers have already focused on effects from other representations of the female body (e.g. Moeran, 2010; Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015; Yan & Bissel, 2014). Nonetheless, since in this thesis it was found these side-by-side images convey new meanings, they might also generate other 'new' effects. Moreover, we nowadays live in a many-to-many communication culture. Therefore, the fit bloggers are not only to be considered senders but receivers of messages as well. I would then like to speculate that the messages they receive from others[16] influence what they post themselves. Hence, research into their intentions for posting the side-by-side images may be interesting as well. The research done in this thesis can, therefore, be regarded a starting point for research into the actors around the messages. The intentions of the fit bloggers and the effects these particular images have for their viewers may thus be researched in future research. This research can then be of interdisciplinary nature.

For a qualitative approach, ethnographies could be carried out in order to observe and interview some fit bloggers and/or followers from one specific fit blogger. However, there are differences between these three fit bloggers and my guesses are that, therefore, there are many differences between other fit bloggers as well. Because of that, my proposal for a more quantitative research approach is to set out a survey to question several followers following different fit bloggers in order to also discover differences in effects. Which variables need to be considered for this, I could not say in the scope of this thesis. Therefore, more literature research would be needed for that.

Furthermore, I shortly went into a post-structuralist perspective during my analysis and found that a concept which calls for non-constructed meanings still can be constructed as well. Even taking

[16] These messages might even be side-by-side images from others, as they are also following each other on Instagram. For example, Anna Victoria and Emily Skye appear to be friends (emilyskyefit, 2017, 1/14). See https://www.instagram.com/p/BPP19VEjkUO/?taken-by=emilyskyefit, retrieved on 4/20.

this further and conducting some more post-structuralist related research into these images could be interesting as well. Maybe future researchers could look at these side-by-side images with Derrida's idea of *deconstruction*. They could find what building blocks are involved when a viewer interprets these images in her (or his) own way while they are "being-in-deconstruction" (Derrida, 1985 [1992]: 4). This kind of research could then also add to the dialogue between the different disciplines which are all conducting research into these representations of the female body.

Finally, as I notice even after writing this thesis, other somewhat different images occur throughout Instagram. Examples of this are posts in which different bodies are photographed next to each other; the focus is on gaining weight; the focus is on difference in lighting; having make-up on versus 'going bare' is compared; 'fit' girls are shown eating something less healthy; or the fit girl is photographed in an active position[17]. In my opinion, this thesis has shown that images which only appear to be 'new' might indeed create new meanings. Therefore, it may be interesting to conduct similar research into these other 'new' images and future 'new' images as well.

In conclusion, this thesis has shown that there are differences as well as similarities to find between 'new' kinds of representations of the female body and their representational context. Although an *ideal* seems to remain, 'new' meanings about how this *ideal* should be approached in combination with *non-idealistic* body shapes are conveyed through these 'new' kinds of images. Therefore, future research either with a similar approach to other images or with different approaches (and from other disciplines) into similar images is necessary to keep the interdisciplinary dialogue about representations of the female body going.

[17] For examples of these kinds of posts, see the Appendix on Additional Social Media Posts, Part Three.

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# Appendixes

## Tables

Table 1. *Overview of Signifiers and Signifieds for Current Understandings of Representations of the Female Body*

| **Visuals (signifiers)** | **Meanings (signifieds)** |
|---|---|
| <u>In general (representations)</u> | |
| Change on the outside | Change on the inside (and vice versa) |
| Smiling, blank expression, a representative of a sexual gaze, showing 'skin', wearing skirts, dresses, bikinis | Femininity, sexuality |
| <u>Object/subject</u> | |
| Female body | Object (but also subject because of her female gaze) |
| Posing for the photograph | Object, femininity |
| Photographed 'in action' | Subject, masculinity |
| Concerned with body | Self-love → body is seen as liberation, progress, right |
| Perfect beauty/fit hybrid ideal | Character, discipline, self-denial, self-perfectibility, control and empowerment, working hard, take yourself seriously, ready to compete with anyone |
| Roundness or fat | Not being in control and not being able to achieve your goal |
| Mirror | Focus on appearance, progress, self-improvement; women as bearers as well as makers of meaning; being in control of your own image; taking over processes of representation |
| <u>Beautiful/ugly</u> | |
| Perfect beauty/fit hybrid ideal (highly feminine, sexual, thin, lean, toned, strong, conventionally attractive (tall, slim, blonde, white, young) with (soft) muscles and a slim, dimple-free buttock and thigh) | Beauty, success (upper class), sexuality and the idea that appearance is more important than health → emphasis on makeovers → focus on individual and her problems → appearance is most important (vicious cycle?) |
| Large/robust | Lower class → difference in society: lower versus upper class |
| <u>Fitness/muscular</u> | |
| Strength, visible muscles | Masculinity (feminism) |
| Softness | Femininity |
| Perfect beauty/fit hybrid ideal | Fitness, femininity and masculinity (feminism) → *difference within one person* → a body is always multiple/plural as it takes different forms |

Table 2. *Overview of Signifiers and Signifieds from the Side-by-Side Instagram Visuals Analysed in this Thesis*

| **Visuals (signifiers)** | **Meanings (signifieds)** |
|---|---|
| <u>Object/subject</u> | |
| Taking pictures of themselves | Subject |
| Background + poor quality photo | Peeking into private lives → objectification |
| Mirror | Objectification + liberation, progress and right = for subject |
| Relation between object and subject = complicated | Peeking into private lives, active relation with viewer → empowerment |
| Anna: indirect gaze in left, non-gaze in right | Subject/viewer's ideal left, (viewer's) object right |
| Emily 2017: avoiding gaze in left, direct gaze in right | (Viewer's) object left, subject/viewer's ideal right |
| Emily 2016 and Ashlie 2016: direct gaze in both photos; Ashlie 2017: indirect gaze in both photos | Subject/viewer's ideal in both photos |
| Emily 2016 and Ashlie 2017: framing same | Both photos subject + object |
| Anna, Emily 2017 and Ashlie 2016: overviewing framing left, fragmented right | Subject left, object right |
| <u>Beautiful/ugly</u> | |
| Framing fragmented + clothes | Focus on belly |
| Soft muscles left | In control + beauty → ideal |
| Fat right | Not in control + honest / authenticity + also beauty! |
| Facial expressions: smiling/sensual | Beauty ideal |
| Format before-after: from left to right | Progress from construction of ideal towards photos of 'more authentic' non-ideal |
| 'Beauty from within', but pictures | Right appearance is important for self-love |
| Anna, Emily 2016 and Ashlie: left: complete; right: only missing 'fit body', but portrayals are the same: facial expression, sexualisation and glamorisation. | Left + right = beauty ideal |
| Emily 2017: left: complete; right: missing 'fit body' AND glamorisation, but rest of portrayal is the same: facial expression and sexualisation. | Left = beauty ideal; right = only non-glamorised |
| <u>Fitness/muscular</u> | |
| Small steps differences + format before-after | Right is dominant, still hierarchy |
| Posing, not in action + missing fitness objects + not in fitness centre | Emphasis on appearance; in contrast with fitness clothing (private live → objectification → appearance) |
| Little clothing; fitness clothing | Sexualisation |
| In both photos the same clothing | Both the left as well as the right photo is portrayal of sexy female body |
| In both photos the same women | In only explicitly connotes this body is also beautiful in this shape in the right photo, but it does not say anything about other women's bodies |
| Ashlie 2017: both standing, even fewer differences in bodily features | Connotation driven away from difference of body towards pose; but message that authentic is better than construction remains |

**Case Studies: Corpus**

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**Linguistic Messages**

Anna Victoria (annavictoria)

May 22nd, 2016:

"You girls requested for me to share this after posting on snap last week ☺ Picture on the left was taken one day before the wedding and the picture on the right was taken... 2 minutes after! Someone recently said to me that we all have our good angles and we all have our bad angles, so why do we let our bad angles carry so much more weight than our good angles? If you focus on how bad you look in the bad angles, at least focus on how good you look in the good ones too!! 😊🏂 Tag a friend if you found this helpful 💗 #fbggirls #loveyourself […]"

January 17th, 2017:

"Me 1% of the time vs. 99% of the time. And I love both photos equally. Good or bad angles don't change your worth ❤ I recently came across an article talking about how one woman stated she refuses to accept her flaws, because she doesn't see them as flaws at all. I LOVED that because it sends such a powerful message that our belly rolls, cellulite, stretch marks are nothing to apologize for, to be ashamed of, or to be obsessed with getting rid of! As I'm getting older, I have cellulite and stretch marks that aren't going away, and I welcome them. They represent a life fully lived (for 28 years so far :)) and a healthy life and body at that. How can I be mad at my body for perfectly normal "flaws"? This body is strong, can run miles, can lift and squat and push and pull weight around, and it's happy not just because of how it looks, but because of how it feels. So when you approach your journey, I want you to remember these things:
I will not punish my body
I will fuel it
I will challenge it
AND I will love it
💗💗💗
If you're following my page, you're a part of helping me spread this message and creating this movement - thank you. #fbggirls […]"

Emily Skye (emilyskyefit)

August 11th, 2016:

"[…] ABS! - Now you see them, now you don't! 😁
Like anyone, I like to show my best angles in good lighting, but I also like to be real with people as well and show the "not so flattering images & angles".
I know this may be obvious to a lot of you but these days there are so many images floating around online of what's perceived to be the "perfect body". People are in their perfectly posed photos, in perfect lighting with filters and photoshopping added to the mix.
The problem I see with this is people (specifically young women) compare themselves to those perfectly posed bodies and wonder why they don't look like that too!
I can look ripped with a tight tummy, then in the next second have a little tummy roll - especially when sitting down! Most of it is skin and the skin has to go somewhere funny enough....and I also have some fat there too but it doesn't worry me because a little bit of fat is healthy! 👆🏽😊 I don't care if I don't have perfectly ripped abs. I live a very happy, healthy and balanced life and I know that perfection doesn't exist so I choose not to put those unrealistic pressures on myself anymore.
Now, I'm not saying it's unrealistic to have abs or that you can't be healthy or happy with them - of course you can! I'm just saying that you don't need to have abs to be happy! You can be happy with either!
I love myself when I'm ripped, holding more fat, muscly, fit, strong or weak.. I just know I feel my best when I'm balanced, strong and healthy! 💗
Be smart and aware when looking at online images and most importantly don't compare yourself to ANYONE. Be your best you! - Perfectly imperfect! 😘
[…]
#selflove #notalwaysripped #abs #noabs #tummyrolls #getreal #realistic #reebok #bemorehuman #healthymind #healthybody #emilyskye #reality #realitycheck"

February 14th, 2017:

"Sometimes I look like the pic on the left, sometimes times I look like the pic on the right. - I don't always have abs or look lean and I'm never "perfect".
So many people are aiming for this idea of "perfection"... but what exactly is perfection?
I used to beat myself up for not being perfect (whatever that is). I'd actually feel like my "worth" was less if I didn't look a certain way. My goal at one stage was to get rid of my belly fat so that when I sat I'd have no "rolls" - now I see how ridiculous and superficial I was being. Yes there's no denying, I like

to look good, as most people do but it's not healthy when it becomes an obsession and your "self worth" is attached to your appearance.
I've just returned from being overseas for a month. I ate what I wanted and enjoyed it, I also gained a bit of extra body fat which isn't a big deal because my lifestyle nowadays isn't about restricting myself & I like it that way. 😁#noregrets .
Life isn't perfect and neither are we. I love myself no matter how I look and it's this self love that motivates me to make changes in my life so I can feel my best... like exercising and eating nutritious food (& treats for mental health hehe). 😁
I was once sitting at a fitness shoot and was told by someone (while pointing at my belly) "Fitness models don't have belly rolls when they sit" - I was so upset about this & felt so inadequate and this only led to me being more obsessed with being "perfect" or as "lean" as I could be.
Nowadays I know better. My priority is how I feel mentally and physically and I won't sacrifice that to look a certain way OR to get the approval from anyone else!
Please consider what goes into a photograph you see online or in magazines... and also what goes into looking a certain way, for example; posing, angles, lighting & even photoshopping! A lot of what we see in these images is not "healthy" or "realistic" and comparing ourselves will never do us any good.
Focus on your health - mental and physical and focus on being YOUR best.
#perfectnever ."

Ashlie Molstad (foodiegirlfitness)

November 28th, 2016:

"That one time @fitnessmagazine shares your #bopo post 😢
And it couldn't have come at a better time because I woke up this morning feeling gross. I think Aunt Flo is coming, my cravings for sweets are fierce, and I gave in and made pancakes {with lots of syrup} at 10pm last night... needless to say I'm bloated AF. And my first reaction is to feel discouraged. But then I remembered, being mad at my body is a CHOICE. Feeling frustrated at my body is a CHOICE. But so is deciding it's beautiful.
We have the power to decide how we feel about OUR bodies. So if, like me, you woke up feeling frustrated, or discouraged, or grossed out, by the shape your body took today, remember that you can't hate yourself thin, or criticize yourself happy. Let's instead lead with love and start a #SelfLoveRevolution."

March 24th, 2017:

"Generally when I take progress pictures in my bathroom I pose like I did on the left. Cause thigh gaps, toned abs and strong arms are what we've been force fed to believe make us more worthy. But when I'm walking around, living my life, not thinking about how to make myself look the most "flattering" by society's standards, I look like the girl on the right {except I generally have clothes on when I'm out and about}.

I have to check myself sometimes and remind myself that beauty isn't limited to a size or perfect pose. Beauty is whatever the fuck I decide it to be. And you know what is the most beautiful? Confidence and feeling fly AF.

So go ahead and work whatcho mama gave you, ladies. Cause your best look is when you're proud and confident and happy, no matter what shape your body takes on."

November 11th, 2016 (caption with the original post on Facebook of foodiegirlfitness, 2016):

"Same girl. Different angles.

If I'm going to show you the posed, put together, professional sides of me, I'm gonna make damn sure you see the not so flattering sides too. Because, contrary to what society has taught us to think, our worth isn't measured by how many belly rolls we have, or how many dimples on our booty, or how much jiggle hangs out on our arms.

Loving ourselves exactly as we are is hard. Because we've been told for years that we're not good enough until we {insert any of the thousands of ideas of perfection that has been fed to us over the years}. But I call BS. I say that the real magic happens when we embrace who we are, at every angle and size.

This doesn't mean I don't also struggle with embracing this body I was given, but it does mean that I understand working on loving me is the most important job I will ever have.

Our bodies aren't broken. The message society is trying to tell us {by airbrushing everything, erasing dimples and rolls and fluff} is.

So even though its really hard, lets remember we are worthy and beautiful and special and ALIVE. Go on and love yourself today, because THAT shit is whats inspiring.

#StopFixingBodies #StartFixingTheWorld — met Ashlie Molstad en Jon Molstad."

**Additional Social Media Posts, Part One**

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