

Meta-Critique:
Critiquing Visions on the Female Body on Instagram

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1 – Introduction



The deleted photo of Nicholas-Williams

Where the internet is often presented as an online sphere in which people are provided with the freedom to explore who they are and the way in which they would like to express themselves, social media platforms do not abide by these ideals but rather encourage practices that uphold gender norms and on which traditional femininities are celebrated. A recent example of this is when photographs from model and activist Nyome Nicholas-Williams or @curvynyome on Instagram, were removed from the platform because of policies that especially targeted plus-size women and Black plus-size women. The photographer who took the photo of Nicholas-Williams, Alex Cameron, notes that she shared much more revealing photos on Instagram that never got deleted, but that the one she took of Nicholas-Williams did.¹ Moreover, photos of

thin white women in the exact same pose were not deleted or flagged by the algorithm.² This signals that Instagram's policies are discriminatory towards particular bodies. Although Nicholas-Williams got such policies changed by sending an open letter to Instagram, this example shows how Instagram is not neutral and how a platform facilitates particular kind of content while removing other content. It appears that Instagram facilitates particular content and censors others, and it exemplifies how online platforms are hotbeds for contestations around body normativity, especially with regards to women's bodies.

With the internet's quick rise to popularity, there also appeared to be an increased opportunity for women to reconfigure online spaces to suit their own interests and to thus fight sexist ideas regarding the way in which women are expected to behave, look and compose themselves. Valerie Steeves writes that in the past, women were restricted to exploring who they truly wanted to be within the four walls of their own bedroom, because in public women are supposed to perform a particular kind of femininity which is deemed "appropriate."³ Nowadays however, Steeves writes "the potential for resistance is amplified by networked technologies because the virtual bedroom is no longer relegated to the private sphere so long associated with repression; indeed, the benefit is that these technologies provide girls

¹ Amy Fleming, "The Model Who Made Instagram Apologise: Alexandra Cameron's Best Photograph," *The Guardian*, last edited February 11, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2021/feb/10/model-instagram-apologise-nyome-nicholas-williams-alexandra-cameron-best-photograph>.

² Lacey-Jade Christie, "Instagram Censored One of These Photos but Not the Other. We Must Ask Why," *The Guardian*, last edited October 19, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2020/oct/20/instagram-censored-one-of-these-photos-but-not-the-other-we-must-ask-why>.

³ Valerie Steeves, "'Pretty and Just a Little Bit Sexy, I Guess': Publicity, Privacy, and the Pressure to Perform 'Appropriate' Femininity on Social Media," in *eGirls, eCitizens: Putting Technology, Theory and Policy into Dialogue with Girls' and Young Women's Voices*, ed. Jane Bailey and Valerie Steeves (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2015), 154.

with unrestricted access to the public sphere.”⁴ It thus seems like the apparent unrestricted access to the internet, and thus to the public sphere, is supposed to empower women to show versions of themselves that they personally deem “appropriate” rather than versions which are imposed upon them. In reality however, patriarchal restrictions are resilient, and Steeves finds that going against the dominant ideas of how women are supposed to present themselves online can leave women isolated.⁵ For women who are present on the internet, this means they cannot simply be themselves, but often choose to present a highly curated version of themselves. Whether in the form of photoshopping, airbrushing or thinking about the clothes they are wearing, women constantly evaluate they present themselves online.⁶

Although it is difficult to critique and question the online dominant discourse regarding women’s bodies and the way they ought to present themselves, there are many women who actively choose to do so. Izzie Rodgers, shown on the right is an example of a creator on Instagram who actively goes against the grain of abiding by Instagram’s rules for women as she uses her “imperfections,” as the main subject of her Instagram content. Rodgers frames her account as a place for acne positivity and in which she is exploring her recently found self-love.⁷ On the photo on the right, Rodgers can be seen wearing bright makeup and posing and curating the photo in manners which are normal on Instagram.⁸ Where her content differs from the dominant Instagram aesthetics regarding skin however, is that she makes no effort to hide her acne and thus does not abide by Instagram’s silent rules which aim for perfection. Making visible, that which is usually hidden and not in line with Instagram’s status quo is something which I consider a form of critique throughout this thesis. Specifically, this form of critique dismantles the individualist postfeminist stance often found on Instagram and creates a form of online female solidarity. Thus, Rodgers is not only critiquing the notion of what women on Instagram are supposed to look like, but is also critiquing Instagram’s individualist postfeminist discourse. This however, raises the question in what ways the form of critique in which one makes public and visible can be understood as a form of platform critique and what this notion of critique actually entails.



The research by Katrin Tiidenberg and Andrew Whelan is the main inspiration behind this thesis. Tiidenberg and Whelan provide a first framework through which to analyse critical online

⁴ Steeves, “‘Pretty and Just a Little Bit Sexy, I Guess’,” 155.

⁵ Steeves, “‘Pretty and Just a Little Bit Sexy, I Guess’,” 169.

⁶ Although I do not believe that women paying extra attention to the way in which they present themselves to the public is something that happens solely online, I believe these practices are heightened and strengthened by the dominant online culture.

⁷ izzierodgers, Instagram, accessed May 20, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/izzierodgers/>.

⁸ izzierodgers, Instagram, accessed May 20, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/Cdq3-KULCdJ/>.

content. Furthermore, the authors' discussions of affordances, the way in which critique can emerge on social media platforms and voluntary vulnerability is fruitful to my analysis and the lens through which I look at the analysed content. As they write that they "suggest – and hope it will be taken up for further research – that the sociotechnical conditions for problematizing dominant sets of norms hold even if different (i.e., nonsexuality-related) normative ideologies are questioned" it is clear that further research is encouraged, and especially research that shows "how the convergence of technical and social conditions incited practices that qualify as critique *per se*."⁹ This is exactly what I aim to do through this thesis as well. I aim to show and unpack how Instagram's affordances in combination with its dominant culture incite practices that qualify as critique within certain groups. In my research sexuality is an aspect, but not the main subject of this critique but gender is rather at the forefront. Issues of feminism and postfeminism come back throughout the content that I analyse and therefore I explain ideas regarding postfeminism below throughout my theoretical framework. In my theoretical framework, I also position myself in an array of debates regarding being critical online while also being wary of postfeminist thought. As the quote by Tiidenberg and Whelan posed above suggests, more research ought to be done regarding practices of critique online. In this thesis I do so from a feminist perspective, taking into account both postfeminist and feminist discourses and the way in which they are presented on Instagram. I thus contribute to feminist debates as well throughout my research. Considering the things mentioned above, I formulate the following research question which will be the centre of this thesis:

In what way do Instagram's affordances, in combination with its dominant culture, incite practices that qualify as critique on the visions on the female body that are persistent on the platform?

With regards to "practices that qualify as critique," I point to the creation of Instagram content that to an extent follows the beautifying rules on the platform, while also going against the female body norms and being explicit about that. Furthermore, it should be noted that I show these practices to not be critical of other women, but rather of the beautifying female body standards that are normalised on Instagram. This again points to the establishing of a female solidarity, which goes against the individualist postfeminist narratives on the platform. Postfeminism will be discussed further in chapter two, as well as in chapter five. Considering a social media platform's affordances in relation to the way in which people critique a platform on that same platform has been researched by Katrin Tiidenberg and Andrew Whelan as well as they analyse the way in which Tumblr users critique Tumblr's NSFW (Not Safe For Work) policies. They note that those "interested in social media platforms' affordances for critique can look for affordances for self-reflexivity and *parrhesia*, as these evidently increase collective

⁹ Tiidenberg and Whelan, "Not like That, Not for That, Not by Them'," 87.

capacity to problematize the normalization of hegemonic norms.”¹⁰ Thus, Tiidenberg and Whelan have found that certain affordances increase the possibility to critique that which has been normalised on a platform. In my case this will be the normalisation of the edited and unattainable beauty standards for women on Instagram. In order to answer my main question I have formulated three sub-questions which I explain below. Before I answer any sub-question however, I first lay the theoretical groundwork in my theoretical framework and provide a description of my methods. After that I answer each sub-question separately in a different chapter, which leads to my concluding chapter in which the main question will be answered.

When researching a digital platform such as Instagram, it is important to take its technological and social affordances into account. I will do so by first analysing Instagram’s affordances and question how these shape and constrain online identity performance for critical accounts on the platform. As I find throughout that analysis, the high levels of editability and visibility play important roles in the way in which users interact with the platform. Editability is discussed as a problem in the way in which expectations of the body are shaped on Instagram by Isabelle Coy-Dibley as well, and she notes that such an affordance is not neutral but argues that editability as “beautifying” creates a discourse in which unreal beauty standards become the norm. Coy-Dibley writes that “this form of modification has been normalized almost to the point of being expected in our current beauty culture, perhaps most starkly among Instagram stars and their viewers. The repetitive societal saturation of such modified images within the media has likely normalized these aesthetics to such an extent that any mode of subversive innovation with nontraditional beautifying options was likely thwarted before these technologies even became available for public consumption.”¹¹ As I wish to analyse Instagram’s affordances and research how these inform identity performance on the platform, I answer the following sub-question first: how do Instagram’s affordances shape and constrain online identity performance on critical accounts? In answering this question I lay the foundation for my second sub-question.

Throughout my thesis, I analyse the way in which dominant discourses about the female body are critiqued on Instagram through critical accounts. In order to be able to do this, I must first establish which discourses around the female body have gained the most traction on the platform. I will do so by analysing accounts critical of the dominant discourse and use those as anti-examples. I choose to use anti-examples because I want my analysis of the dominant discourse on the platform to be informed by the way in which critical users experience the platform, rather than to project my own experiences of Instagram onto this thesis. The sub-question that I answer in chapter five, in order to determine what the dominant discourse around female bodies is, is the following: which dominant discourses about female body norms are explored on critical Instagram accounts?

¹⁰ Katrin Tiidenberg and Andrew Whelan, “Not like That, Not for That, Not by Them’: Social Media Affordances of Critique,” *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 16, no. 2 (April 2019): 98, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14791420.2019.1624797>.

¹¹ Isabelle Coy-Dibley, “Digitized Dysmorphia” of the Female Body: The Re/Disfigurement of the Image’, *Palgrave Communications* 2, no. 1 (December 2016): 16040, <https://doi.org/10.1057/palcomms.2016.40>.

The last sub-question that I answer digs deeper into how exactly norm-defying accounts provide a form of critique through their visibility on Instagram and what forms of critique are produced. In answering this sub-question I show that the visibility of that which is usually hidden on Instagram, can be considered a form of critique but also that showing something that is usually hidden can be difficult for users of that platform. I reflect on the difficulty for women of going against the grain and the way in which patriarchal ideas seep through in women's digital lives as well. The sub-question I answer is as follows: which forms of critique do norm-defying accounts on Instagram produce through visibility?

After I have answered the three sub-questions described above, I have the tools to provide an answer to the main question. I take on Tiidenberg and Whelan's analysis of critique online and formulate a new version of online critique, namely *meta-critique*. *Meta-critique* because those providing the critique remain on the platform they are critical of and engage in practices popular on that platform which often popularise unreal and digitally beautified female beauty standards. Through their engagement with popular practices on Instagram, they provide a kind of critique which does not target women who also engage in such practices, but rather what these practices stand for. *Meta-critique* in this sense builds up female solidarity on Instagram and breaks down postfeminist individualist narratives.

2 – Theoretical Framework

Throughout this theoretical framework I position myself within an array of debates regarding the ability to be critical online as well as debates regarding postfeminism. I begin by focussing on the notion of postfeminism. Although this is a concept that can be discussed at length, considering the theories that exist with regards to it, I will provide some context as well as a working definition and I link the concept to neoliberalism and interactivity. Neoliberalism and interactivity are important concepts on their own with respect to my argument as well, as these are concepts that are at work in mediatised life in the online world. Then I explain the notion of critique as it was conceptualised by Michel Foucault, after which I refer to Katrin Tiidenberg and Andrew Whelan's research in which they pull Foucault's theory into the mediatised twenty-first century. I then shortly discuss ideas regarding solidarity online, which often arises when people are forming critique online and I end this theoretical framework with a discussion of online affordances.

2.1 – Postfeminism

If I am dealing with questions of feminism of today, I must inevitably discuss the notion of postfeminism as postfeminism is a concept heavily discussed in research regarding how women present themselves online.¹² As I find in my analysis, the culture on Instagram is one that is predominantly postfeminist and therefore I must first lay down the groundwork for what postfeminism means when it is the culture that the object of study exists in. Although there is no singular definition of postfeminism, I will discuss the concept and form a working definition in order to provide a clear explanation of the lens through which the platform that I analyse has been created. Before I begin this explanation something must be made explicit. My research will *not* adopt a postfeminist perspective as I am not a postfeminist. Rather, my research will consider postfeminism a *critical object* which I will analyse through Instagram content. I cannot phrase it any better than Rosalind Gill has: "I am a *feminist* analyst of postfeminist culture, and *not* a postfeminist analyst or theorist."¹³ Thus, Instagram will be described as a platform on which ideas of postfeminism appear to thrive, and I analyse these postfeminist ideas on the platform from a feminist perspective. This distinction is important to emphasise because there should be no confusion about what I am implying. Throughout my thesis I argue that Instagram is a platform which can be considered to thrive on postfeminist discourse. This means that the content that Instagram encourages its users to create and post to the platform, can often be considered postfeminist critical objects. As I study examples of Instagram content that go against the dominant narrative on the platform, I also research whether

¹² Both post-feminism and postfeminism are accepted spellings but I have chosen to go with postfeminism because most scholars who write on the topic use this spelling.

¹³ Sarah Banet-Weiser, Rosalind Gill, and Catherine Rottenberg, "Postfeminism, Popular Feminism and Neoliberal Feminism? Sarah Banet-Weiser, Rosalind Gill and Catherine Rottenberg in Conversation," *Feminist Theory* 21, no. 1 (2020): 5, <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1464700119842555>.

these objects of study are informed by postfeminism as well, or whether they actively go against this persistent postfeminist thought on the platform and I do all this from a feminist perspective.

According to Sarah Gamble, the term postfeminism first appeared in the 1980s when the narrative around the feminist movement began to shift. Gamble argues that the term postfeminism “originated from within the media in the early 1980s, and has always tended to be used in this context as indicative of joyous liberation from the ideological shackles of a hopelessly outdated **feminist** movement.”¹⁴ Two things stand out from this statement by Gamble. Firstly, postfeminism in the 1980s is described by Gamble as a form of resistance against the feminisms that it had known before, specifically that of second wave feminism which was heavily critiqued for its victimisation of women, especially with regards to sexual violence. The narrative that feminism was suppressing women by creating victims out of them, led to widespread resistance against feminism and to a need to prove that women could be as free and sexually liberated as men.¹⁵ Secondly, Gamble mentions that the term postfeminism is one that originated from within the media and at a particular point in time during the early 1980s. Gamble argues that this happened because we live in a society that is defined by visual images, which get to the public through mass media. Because of the way society was defined through images, Gamble argues that it was/is getting easier to persuade people to believe particular narratives through media images as there was an acceleration in the spread of mass media. In the case of feminism, Gamble writes that it is easy for media to persuade women that feminism is no longer fashionable or necessary. She writes that the message that media gave off (at her time of writing) is that “we’re all ‘post-feminist’ now,” “meaning not that women have arrived at equal justice and moved beyond it, but simply that they themselves are beyond even pretending to care.”¹⁶ The reason for this easy rejection of the need for feminism is also rooted in the backlash to second wave feminism as described before. This backlash against second wave feminism grew even stronger during the 1990s during which the belief was growing that second wave feminism led to women believing that they had no agency.¹⁷ Keeping that narrative in mind, it was easy to believe that feminism was missing the point or had gotten out of hand and thus postfeminist narratives were adopted more easily. One of the problems with postfeminist narratives that Gamble notes, is that postfeminist commentaries towards feminism that were popularised during the 1990s are rooted in a view of feminism that is too monolithic and didactic.¹⁸ Gamble argues that too narrow a view was constructed of feminism and that the wide array of perspectives on feminist issues is deflected by postfeminist voices.

The turn towards postfeminist narratives thus signals a clear change in the narrative around feminism throughout the 90s and early 00s. Angela McRobbie describes a part of this new feminist

¹⁴ Sarah Gamble, *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism* (London: Routledge, 2008), 36, <http://www.vlebooks.com/vleweb/product/openreader?id=none&isbn=9780203011010>.

¹⁵ Gamble, *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism*, 38-39.

¹⁶ Gamble, *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism*, 38.

¹⁷ Gamble, *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism*, 38.

¹⁸ Gamble, *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism*, 39.

debate in 2004, when she published her widely influential text “Postfeminism and Popular Culture,” in which she establishes ways for engaging with postfeminism. Throughout this text, McRobbie gives clear examples of what postfeminism means in order to provide a clearer definition of the term. She does this at a time when she locates a “hyper-culture of commercial sexuality.”¹⁹ This hyper-culture of commercial sexuality is argued to be a reaction to the backlash against second wave feminism as described by Gamble. As a response to the so-called victimisation of women by this wave of feminism, it was normalised to portray women no longer as an object of desire, McRobbie explains, but rather as having gained complete agency over their sexuality and thus as being free to be sexual in any way that they see fit. This is a societal sentiment that is also described by Rosalind Gill in 2006, when she writes that “[w]omen are not straightforwardly objectified but are portrayed as active, desiring sexual subjects who choose to present themselves in a seemingly objectified manner because it suits their liberated interests to do so.”²⁰ Gill thus also draws attention to the fact that the narrative is that women have been freed completely and that sexist content can thus no longer be sexist, because women have gained the agency to agree to such content. What remains contentious about Gill’s point however, is whether this idea applies to the highly visible individual on a social media platform, or to women as a collective category. I will argue that the idea that women are completely liberated is applied to women as a category, but that these freedoms are not enjoyed by women as a collective category. What exemplifies this, is that those who want to critique the obvious sexism at play in media content is that any kind of feminist critique can easily be deflected by arguing that women have been freed and can now be as sexual as they want to be. This means that critiquing the hyper-culture of commercial sexuality can come across as anti-sex or prudish when it is not. Gill digs deeper into this issue as she writes that we should continue to highlight the exclusionary practices that are persistent in a society that claims that women can look however (sexual) as they want to be as she notes that this space only exists for thin, young and beautiful women.²¹ Women with wrinkles, older women or bigger women are not allowed to exist in the public space the same way that women who are considered beautiful are. Thus, Gill notes “to critique this [sexualised standard] is to highlight the pernicious connection of this representational shift to neoliberal subjectivities in which sexual objectification can be (re-)presented not as something done to women by some men, but as the freely chosen wish of active, confident, assertive female subjects.”²² From this, it follows that critiquing the postfeminist norm that is visible in the media remains necessary, since postfeminist “freedoms” only allow people who look a certain way to take up space in public media spaces. The descriptions of postfeminism above have remained fairly theoretical and leaves me with the question of how postfeminism can be located in the media around us and what we can do with

¹⁹ Angela McRobbie, “Post-Feminism and Popular Culture,” *Feminist Media Studies* 4, no. 3 (November 2004): 259-260, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1468077042000309937>.

²⁰ Rosalind Gill, “Postfeminist Media Culture,” *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 10, no. 2 (2007): 151, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/1367549407075898>.

²¹ Gill, “Postfeminist Media Culture,” 152.

²² Gill, “Postfeminist Media Culture,” 152-153.

such observations. The section below will address such questions and will go deeper into what it means that postfeminist “freedoms” only exist for those who are deemed worthy of those freedoms.

As mentioned at the beginning of my discussion of postfeminism, Rosalind Gill makes a clear distinction between being a feminist looking at postfeminism as a critical object and being a postfeminist analyst.²³ Gill makes this distinction through what she calls a sensibility of postfeminism. Gill describes taking the perspective of a postfeminist sensibility as follows:

“From this perspective postfeminist media culture should be our critical object – a phenomenon into which scholars of culture should inquire – rather than an analytical perspective. This approach does not require a static notion of one single authentic feminism as a comparison point, but instead is informed by postmodernist and constructivist perspectives and seeks to examine what is distinctive about contemporary articulations of gender in the media.”²⁴

What Gill is making very explicit in the quote above, is that postfeminism is not a perspective from which academics can look at certain phenomena, but rather that postfeminism should itself be the topic of study. Postfeminism is the critical object which means that postfeminism can be studied through media outings informed by postfeminist discourse. What this means for my argument is that I can show that postfeminist discourse is prevalent on Instagram, because it is easy to locate in the dominant visual discourse on the platform. What remains, is the question of when something can be considered postfeminist. Gill located that one of the issues with studying postfeminist objects was that there was no clear set of criteria or characteristics that can show that something is indeed postfeminist. In her research however, she establishes the following features that she deems stable in postfeminist discourse: 1) femininity is a bodily property, 2) the shift from objectification to subjectification, 3) the emphasis upon self-surveillance, 4) monitoring and discipline, 5) a focus upon individualism, choice and empowerment, 6) the dominance of a makeover paradigm, 7) a resurgence in ideas of natural sexual difference, 8) a marked sexualization of culture and lastly 9) an emphasis upon consumerism and the commodification of difference.²⁵ These nine characteristics do not present a complete list of the characteristics of postfeminism, but do provide a good starting point in a thesis in which aspects of postfeminism are analysed. Throughout my analysis and argumentations I find that these nine characteristics often resurge. For example, as I find in answering my second sub-question, critical users describe that they find themselves in an online space that strongly informs them that they are responsible for their own happiness, that they have to practice self-surveillance and that they can buy their way to happiness by buying certain products which are supposed to make them look more “beautiful.” Instagrammer Nelly London describes the prevalence of being told how to look and how to behave online as “...diet culture

²³ Banet-Weiser, Gill and Rottenberg, “Postfeminism, Popular Feminism and Neoliberal Feminism?,” 5.

²⁴ Gill, “Postfeminist Media Culture,” 148.

²⁵ Gill, “Postfeminist Media Culture,” 149.

madness that is screaming at us right now...” but other characteristics of Gill’s characteristics of postfeminism resurge in answering my second sub-question as well.

2.2 – Postfeminism and Neoliberalism

Next I discuss the strong ties that postfeminism has to neoliberalism. Multiple authors have explored these connections and have positioned postfeminism in our current day cultural and social context which can be considered neoliberal. In the next section I explore these connections in order to explain in what way Instagram can be considered to exist in a postfeminist, neoliberal context. Neoliberalism can be described in many ways, but Catherine Rottenberg provides a definition that I think captures the most important characteristics of the notion. She writes that neoliberalism “is a dominant political rationality that moves to and from the management of the state to the inner workings of the subjects, normatively constructing and interpellating individuals as entrepreneurial actors.”²⁶ She also uses Foucault’s notion of governmentality as she describes that this neoliberalism leads to a specific mode of neoliberal governance. She notes that “neoliberalism is never simply about a set of economic policies or an economic system that facilitates intensified privatization, deregulation, and corporate profits, but rather is itself a modality of governmentality in the Foucauldian sense of regulating the ‘conduct of conduct.’”²⁷ To thus put it simply, in a neoliberal society people are constructed, addressed, and come to understand themselves as “entrepreneurial actors” who are tasked with the job to create a good life for themselves and when they fail to do so, the only actor that is pointed to is to the person themselves. The individual is put at the centre and is asked to consider oneself entrepreneurial.

Rosalind Gill argues that postfeminism is informed by a “grammar of individualism that fits perfectly with neoliberalism.”²⁸ What she means with this, is that often found characteristics of postfeminism such as its individualism, its narratives of being able to choose freely and the self-managing and self-discipline aspects, are characteristics that can be ascribed to a neoliberal informed narrative of womanhood.²⁹ That this neoliberal narrative is embedded in our current day society is highlighted by a conversation between Gill, Sarah-Banet Weiser and Catherine Rottenberg in 2020. Throughout the conversation that was published as an article, the three discuss the ties between neoliberalism and postfeminism from their three respective angles. What the three of them emphasise and agree on, is that personal choice and an apparent freedom to choose whatever you want to do, buy and look like as a woman, is the main underlying thought behind postfeminist discourse.³⁰ This freedom of choice and the freedom to buy anything you want is reminiscent of neoliberal thinking which posits the ability to buy whichever product you want from an endless number of companies as long as you

²⁶ Catherine Rottenberg, “The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism,” *Cultural Studies* 28, no. 3 (May 2014): 420, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09502386.2013.857361>.

²⁷ Rottenberg, “The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism,” 420.

²⁸ Gill, “Postfeminist Media Culture,” 162.

²⁹ Gill, “Postfeminist Media Culture,” 162-164.

³⁰ Banet-Weiser, Gill and Rottenberg, “Postfeminism, Popular Feminism and Neoliberal Feminism?,” 12.

have the money as a pillar of its ideology. Rottenberg explains in the conversation, however, that she does not merely “understand neoliberalism [...] as a set of economic policies but as a dominant political rationality that moves to and from the management of the state to the inner workings of the subject, recasting individuals as human capital and thus capital-enhancing agents.”³¹ Describing neoliberalism as a political rationality in which individuals have become human capital, and capital-enhancing agents puts emphasis on the individualism of neoliberalism, as well as on the idea that one is responsible for one’s own life. In postfeminist discourse, self-surveillance and self-discipline are of great importance. How notions of self-surveillance and self-discipline function on a platform such as Instagram will be explained further in chapter four regarding Instagram’s affordances. For now I want to circle back to the implications of postfeminist thought. Since the postfeminist idea is that nowadays there are no longer any limits to how women can represent themselves as well as an assumed unlimited access to products and lifestyles that are supposed to make women’s lives better, self-surveillance has reached new heights. Women are being held to impossible beauty standards as well as lifestyle standards which are only becoming increasingly impossible with the rise of social media and women’s presence in online spheres. This sentiment is shared by Amy Shields Dobson, who argues that women, and especially young women “are under particular pressure to conform with yet another idea: that of girls as girl-powered, neo-liberal success stories, subjects of ‘capacity.’”³² In other words Dobson is arguing that online, failing is not an option for women. Thus even as one might ‘fail’ in her offline life, this should never be reflected in the image she presents online of that same life. Naturally, abiding by this sentiment means feeding the neoliberal postfeminist idea that imperfections are not welcome online. Of course it is not women’s responsibility to provide pushback to the impossible standards that they need to abide by, but this pressure to be “perfect” online shows how difficult it is to try and critique the societal standards in the first place. This difficulty will be explored and explained further as I answer my final sub-question.

2.3 – Postfeminism and Interactivity

As became clear in the section above, postfeminism and neoliberalism are strongly connected and the idea that a woman herself is solely responsible for her happiness and her success is an idea deeply engrained in this connection. From this also follows that ideas of “girlpower” and the “girlboss” are strongly related to these neoliberal postfeminist discourses. Also related to such discourses, is the idea of the woman as a brand that is for sale. As postfeminism has always been strongly entangled with consumerism as described above, it comes as no surprise that women are urged to brand themselves in

³¹ Banet-Weiser, Gil and Rottenberg, “Postfeminism, Popular Feminism and Neoliberal Feminism?,” 9.

³² Amy Shields Dobson, "Performative Shamelessness on Young Women's Social Network Sites: Shielding the Self and Resisting Gender Melancholia," *Feminism & Psychology* 24, no. 1 (February 2014): 101, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0959353513510651>.

a way that is marketable as well.³³ With regards to self-branding, Sarah Banet-Weiser writes: “self-branding is positioned by marketers and brand managers as the proper way – perhaps even the necessary way – to “take care of oneself” in contemporary advanced capitalist economy.”³⁴ When taking such ideas and putting them in the context of new forms of technology and social media which put the individual at the centre, the idea that one can market herself seems like an almost natural next step. This development is also described by Banet-Weiser as she notes:

“The visible self on global display gains traction in the contemporary context of postfeminism. Here, [...] postfeminism is both an ideology and an increasingly normative strategy of engaging with the world. These practices – theoretical and practical alike – connect traditional liberal feminist ideas about everything from freedom to choice to independence, to an expansive and distinctly contemporary capitalist engagement with media, merchandise, and consumption.”³⁵

In other words, Banet-Weiser directly comments on the way in which postfeminism and neoliberalism inform our lives in a society in which the self is increasingly visible. As she notes that postfeminism is both an ideology and a way of engaging with the world, she thus notes that every aspect of our life is increasingly influenced by these individualistic ideas. McRobbie comments on this as well as she argues that there is an increased pull towards individualism and people being responsible for their own fate because of the assumed freedom to control every aspect of your own life by means of purchasing the right products. According to McRobbie this also means that women are denouncing their connection to other feminists, because they believe that feminism is no longer necessary. Postfeminism online can thus mean the breakdown of solidarity and the erosion of the collective. As I find in my analysis, the opposing forces on Instagram, the critiquing accounts, form a kind of online female solidarity and thus rebuild the solidarity that was lost to postfeminism. Returning to McRobbie however, the prominent belief that feminism is no longer necessary is what she calls the “cultural space of post-feminism.”³⁶ I consider this cultural space of post-feminism the space that Banet-Weiser’s findings are based in when she talks about postfeminism and its connection to the notion of interactivity. Banet-Weiser describes the interactive subject as someone who “realizes self-empowerment through her capacity and productivity.”³⁷ This productivity is especially measured through the ways in which she manages to hold people’s attention through certain technologies and especially through those technologies that allow the broadcasting of the self. The interactive subject can thus also be described as a subject that actively

³³ Sarah Banet-Weiser, *Authentic™: The Politics of Ambivalence in a Brand Culture*, Critical Cultural Communication (New York, NY: NYU Press, 2012), 56, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=480992&site=ehost-live>.

³⁴ Banet-Weiser, *Authentic™*, 54.

³⁵ Banet-Weiser, *Authentic™*, 55-56.

³⁶ McRobbie, "Post-feminism and Popular Culture," 257.

³⁷ Banet-Weiser, *Authentic™*, 56.

participates in online spaces that exist on social networking websites, which are often spaces that are informed by neoliberal and postfeminist discourse.

Social networking websites such as Facebook and Instagram are online spaces which Banet-Weiser describes as places on which one must not only self-brand, but must do so in such a way that appears to be authentic.³⁸ She writes that in “a postfeminist context, this ‘authenticity’ is tied to a particular version of femininity, so that it is increasingly normative for gender and sexual identities to be expressed through girl-oriented websites, personal profiles, and YouTube videos.”³⁹ In other words, Banet-Weiser argues that although authenticity is considered an important value on social media platforms, only particular forms of authenticity are considered appropriate. For women, this means that they have to find a balance between performing their authentic selves online, while also abiding by the postfeminist rules which inform how women think they are supposed to present themselves online. Another important part of this online presence is the self-reflexivity of women’s (especially young women’s) presence on social media as Banet-Weiser argues that “media made by youth are also viewed primarily by those youth, so that users constantly revisit their own web productions and update them, as well as see how many ‘hits’ or comments they might have generated.”⁴⁰ She thus locates a self-reflexive feedback loop in which users create content that is viewed by their peers and which makes users not only look at themselves, but also at the way in which others look at them. Because users are aware of the fact that online, they are visible to others, their awareness of the way in which they are supposed to perform themselves raises as well. This along with the knowledge that following trends and the status quo is likely to gather more likes and more positive attention, this kind of performativity usually leads to the reaffirmation of e.g. gender normative ideas.

One way in which gender normative ideas come back throughout outings of popular culture is described through McRobbie’s idea of “taking feminism into account.” McRobbie takes advertisements as an example and argues that the narrative has shifted in such a way that when a model takes off her clothes in an ad, the audience does not reject this as a sexist ad anymore because they no longer consider this to be exploitation.⁴¹ After several waves of feminism, the dominant narrative has become that as long as the model gets paid a lot of money for the advertisement, this means that she is taking off her clothes by choice and that the advertisement can thus not be sexist. McRobbie notes the following: “[o]nce again, the shadow of disapproval is introduced (the striptease as site of female exploitation), only instantly to be dismissed as belonging to the past, to a time when feminists used to object to such imagery.”⁴² Thus, the idea of “feminism taken into account” means that the underlying idea exists that women are now empowered to take off their clothes freely and by choice, and that because (famous)

³⁸ Banet-Weiser, *AuthenticTM*, 80.

³⁹ Banet-Weiser, *AuthenticTM*, 80.

⁴⁰ Banet-Weiser, *AuthenticTM*, 81.

⁴¹ McRobbie, "Post-feminism and Popular Culture," 259.

⁴² McRobbie, "Post-feminism and Popular Culture," 259.

models get paid lots of money to do so for advertisements, the argument of sexism and thus the need for feminism are not longer relevant. Feminism, in these instances, is already considered to be taken into account. This kind of attitude towards media outings means that critique towards those same media outings is usually shut down quickly by arguing that someone is prudish or anti-sex as previously described by Gill as well. This makes getting one's critical attitude towards certain media outings difficult to get across. McRobbie continues that young women are happy to endorse or at least to not condemn the "hyper-culture of commercial sexuality" that they found themselves in, because refraining from critiquing this culture signals freedom.⁴³ Feminism taken into account thus signals the idea that feminism is no longer necessary because women have the freedom to present themselves in any way they want. However, this idea also leads to a self-reflexive feedback loop which preserves gender normative ideas. I find this in my analysis as well as the users whose content I analyse create relatively gender normative content even though they are critical of particular norms for women. This brings me to the next topic of discussion: critique.

2.4 – Critique According to Foucault

Critique is a notion that features prominently throughout this thesis. As I research the ways in which Instagram users can be openly critical of cultures on the platform I must first lay down a definition of critique. In doing so, I follow the way critique is understood by Michel Foucault. It should be noted that Foucault described his understanding of critique in 1997, just before the internet became widely popular and certainly during a time in which our lives were far less mediated through online spaces. However, his ideas remain useful and I will explain why after I first explain Foucault's ideas regarding critique.

Foucault presented his paper wherein he explicates his ideas regarding the notion of critique in 1997. Foucault explains that critique can only exist in relation to external forces. Thus, it cannot exist on its own. Critique, Foucault notes "is an instrument, a means for a future or a truth that it will not know nor happen to be, it oversees a domain it would want to police and is unable to regulate."⁴⁴ From this quote, it is important to note that critique is an instrument, not a destination. Foucault thus considers critique a means to get somewhere else. In order to explain this he uses the notion of governmentalisation. Governmentalisation, Foucault explains, means that there is a small group of people in power who have the means to make decisions which will influence and affect those who do not have governing power.⁴⁵ In 1997, Foucault argues that those in power usually belong to institutions such as the State or the church. This thus means that some are governing, whereas others (the larger group) are governed. This in turn leads to practices of governmentality in which people are (albeit at times implicitly) informed how they are supposed to conduct themselves. In such a society, Foucault

⁴³ McRobbie, "Post-feminism and Popular Culture," 259-260.

⁴⁴ Michel Foucault, "What Is Critique?," in *Politics of Truth*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer, trans. Lysa Hochroth (New York: Semiotext(e), 1997), 25.

⁴⁵ Foucault, "What is Critique?," 25-26.

argues, critiquing the governing powers can be difficult because those who are governed do not have the governing power to initiate actual change. In Foucault's words, such governed societies lead to questions like: "how not to be governed *like that*, by that, in the name of those principles, with such and such an objective in mind and by means of such procedures, not like that, not for that, not by them."⁴⁶ In other words, Foucault provides a first description of the presence of a critical attitude by citizens through which they can resist the way they are governed via critical thinking rather than by force. An important aspect of this kind of critical attitude is that citizens with a critical attitude have found a way to critique the system that they are in without having to step outside of that system. This is where the instrumentality of critique resurfaces as citizens have found a way of attempting to change the way they are governed, through critical thinking. Foucault describes this way of critiquing the system as "the art of not being governed quite so much."⁴⁷ In other words, this critical attitude that people adopt means that they have accepted the fact that they are governed, to some extent, but that this does not mean that they feel like they have to abide by the rules of their government completely. Rather, their critical thinking allows them to tweak minor aspects of the way they are governed.

As mentioned before, Foucault presented his ideas regarding critique in 1997, at a time when the internet was not widely popular yet and when people's everyday lives were not as strongly intertwined with the online sphere as they are now. Nonetheless, Foucault's description of critique is still useful in our modern society.⁴⁸ As Foucault describes ideas of governmentalisation and resisting this governance, it becomes clear that such ideas do not only belong to the time during which Foucault presented his arguments, but that such power structures are visible in our current-day society as well as in online spaces. As I explain throughout chapter four, the dominant discourses that can be found in online spaces such as on Instagram, inform the way in which people think they should behave online. Such dominant discourses can be considered forms of governmentalisation, although not put in place by the State or the church but rather by dominant norms and values that have seeped through from other parts of society. Providing critique on a social media platform such as Instagram, can thus be seen as a form of critique in the Foucauldian sense since it goes against the dominant discourses on the platform, while remaining on that same platform. It is also a form of critiquing from inside the structure. Further theory which pulls Foucault's theories into the twenty-first century is provided by Karin Tiidenberg and I elaborate on this further below.

⁴⁶ Foucault, "What is Critique?," 28.

⁴⁷ Foucault, "What is Critique?," 29.

⁴⁸ It should be acknowledged that Foucault's notion of critique is closely related to the Marxist ideas and the idea of resistance against hegemonies by Antonio Gramsci. The reason I have opted for Foucault's interpretation of critique is because Foucault focuses specifically on governmentalisation in relation to surveillance and the normalisation of particular discourses. When it comes to social media, ideas regarding surveillance and specifically self-surveillance are prevalent and the way in which some discourses are normalised and others are not come to the forefront as well. Moreover, Tiidenberg and Whelan have conceptualised Foucault's understanding of critique for use in the mediatised twenty-first century, making it a fitting choice for my research regarding critical thinking on Instagram.

2.5 – Not Like That Online

As my research has taken inspiration from previous research by Katrin Tiidenberg and Andrew Whelan, I want to provide a brief summary of their research, their findings and in what way my analysis will add onto their research.

In their 2019 research, Tiidenberg and Whelan analysed Tumblr affordances that allow its users to critique the rules of the platform by breaking those rules through loopholes. This in turn allowed those who broke the rules of Tumblr to remain on the platform and to use the platform as they wished. In their article, the authors “operationalize a ‘working theory’ from Foucault’s conceptualization of critique.”⁴⁹ Through this, they pull Foucault’s theory of critique into the twenty-first century and connect his ideas to the workings of social media platforms as they “conceptualize social media platforms as spaces wherein [...] critique might be practiced.”⁵⁰ Social media platforms are argued by the authors to be microsystems in which governance, technology, providers and users are interconnected and come together.⁵¹ According to Tiidenberg and Whelan, for critique on a platform to be able to emerge, “a particular constellation of conditions must emerge at the intersection of (a) social media platform architecture, (b) specific use cultures and (c) shared ethics.”⁵² In other words, they argue that the ability to form critique or give critique on a platform are not given but can only arise when a particular set of affordances and cultures comes together on a platform. When this does happen, they describe that “[s]ocial media platforms shape rather than facilitate social acts.”⁵³ Thus, if, and how people perform social acts on social media platforms are a result of the architecture of the platform. Although social acts do not necessarily have anything to do with critique or critical thinking, Tiidenberg and Whelan argue that under particular circumstances, social acts can arise on a platform that can be considered a form of critique. For this possible formulation of critique, the authors argue that the platform’s affordances, its functionality and ToS are all important to consider. Before I continue I should note that Tiidenberg and Whelan specifically research NSFW practices on Tumblr. This kind of research deals heavily with ToS because the ToS of the platform itself decide what kind of content is NSFW. In my research however, I find that although higher or lower levels of affordances such as persistence and visibility make some forms of critique more likely than others, critique can and will be formulated anyway. This brings me back to Foucault’s notion of governmentality and disciplinary power. When it comes to informal everyday norms and discourses, we can consider those to be constricted and perpetuated by institutional structures such as those present on Instagram. These structures uphold everyday norms and discourses and these norms and discourses uphold the structures of the platform. Considering users find themselves on a particular platform, they thus know they have to abide by the (unwritten) rules of that platform. In

⁴⁹ Tiidenberg and Whelan, “‘Not like That, Not for That, Not by Them’,” 83.

⁵⁰ Tiidenberg and Whelan, “‘Not like That, Not for That, Not by Them’,” 87.

⁵¹ Tiidenberg and Whelan, “‘Not like That, Not for That, Not by Them’,” 87.

⁵² Tiidenberg and Whelan, “‘Not like That, Not for That, Not by Them’,” 83.

⁵³ Tiidenberg and Whelan, “‘Not like That, Not for That, Not by Them’,” 87.

my analysis, I first focus on Instagram's affordances, allowing me to analyse the interplay between ToS and other forms of platform governance guided by its affordances, after which I turn to user interactions with the platform and its dominant discourses. As I explain in my analysis, I find that the Instagram users behind the critical accounts show a form of critical solidarity with regards to critiquing the unattainable body normativity on Instagram. Concerning affordances on a social media platform, Tiidenberg and Whelan argue that both social and technical aspects of affordances exist and are important to research because social media platforms are sociotechnical platforms with sociotechnical affordances.⁵⁴ Social affordances are described as "indicating the perceived possibilities of actions as relational to social networks entangled with that action," whereas technical affordances are described as "indicating the perceived possibilities of actions in relation to the platform as a technological artifact or interface."⁵⁵ Thus the social affordances specifically focus on the entanglement of actions on a social media platform with social networks and technical affordance are described purely as the possibilities that arise through the functionalities of the platform. For my research, I must thus locate these social and technical affordances and I will in answering my first sub-question. I discuss theory with regards to affordances in more detail at the end of this chapter.

Another important point that Tiidenberg and Whelan raise is that of (self)-representation. The act of (self)-representation is described by the authors as a practice which is informed by the literacies of localised communities.⁵⁶ They write:

"We define (self)-representation as a set of emergent, intertextual practices of content production and consumption, recognized by both producers and audiences as flexible statements of identification. Shared practices of representation are, in this context, inextricably entangled with shared practices, norms, and conventions of interpretation and interaction."⁵⁷

Intertextuality is thus considered an important part of analysing (self)-representation online by Tiidenberg and Whelan. They note that all the components of a post should be analysed, and not simply the visuals. The caption, the way someone poses, the composition, the hashtags, the colours, the filters, the accessories and the way in which a photo is edited all add meaning to a post.⁵⁸ This intertextual approach to analysing online content will be explored further in my method section, but for now the idea of (self)-representation is important because according to Tiidenberg and Whelan it denotes a certain literacy that exists within certain online communities which in turn allows members of that community to form critique within their language. In such a community, interpreting critique or other kinds of

⁵⁴ Tiidenberg and Whelan, "'Not like That, Not for That, Not by Them'," 88.

⁵⁵ Tiidenberg and Whelan, "'Not like That, Not for That, Not by Them'," 88.

⁵⁶ Tiidenberg and Whelan, "'Not like That, Not for That, Not by Them'," 91.

⁵⁷ Tiidenberg and Whelan, "'Not like That, Not for That, Not by Them'," 91.

⁵⁸ Tiidenberg and Whelan, "'Not like That, Not for That, Not by Them'," 91-92.

content is crucial since this gives meaning to the content. The authors have located three different modes of interpretation throughout their research which can be described as follows: 1) empathic interpretation, which denotes an immersion within similar self-representational content, 2) participatory interpretation, through which users can imagine themselves in the content and 3) a cultural-consumption response, which is more detached and means the users consider the content to be aesthetically pleasing or appealing.⁵⁹ These three modes of interpretation mainly show that although an image can be interpreted as e.g. “beautiful,” this same image might not be interpreted as such by those who are not familiar with the language of particular online communities. In my analysis of the way in which critical accounts on Instagram form their critique, this will become visible as well as they use language or visual cues that can only be interpreted correctly by those familiar with the implicit rules of the community.

The last aspect of the text by Tiidenberg and Whelan that I wish to touch upon, is their discussion of the notion of *voluntary vulnerability*. According to the authors, this notion “refers to the continued posting of NSFW selfies despite cognizance that sharing them makes the sharer multiply vulnerable.”⁶⁰ In their research, this voluntary vulnerability refers to people who voluntarily post nude photos of themselves on Tumblr as an act of resistance, knowing that they will either be banned from the platform or at the very least can be the subject of moral scrutiny. The act of voluntary vulnerability is usually performed by those who know that such an act is considered especially inappropriate by them. An example of this would be of a woman who is not thin, and does not have the perfect spotless skin to share a nude picture of herself in which she is clearly framing herself as sexy. Since this narrative is unusual in the online sphere, the woman in question knows that what she is doing is being voluntarily vulnerable, but she is doing so in order to make a point about gender and the way in which different bodies are viewed online.⁶¹ Although the content that I analyse usually does not warrant the possibility to be banned from Instagram, the critical creators that I analyse do have to deal with moral scrutiny and the ways in which their ethics are questioned by those outside of their (online) social circles. As such, they can also be argued to show a kind of voluntary vulnerability by e.g. explicitly showing off their acne, their real bodies that do not fit the unattainable beauty standard and other “imperfections” while also sharing the opinion that their bodies and faces are beautiful too. This is something that will be discussed in depth in the final part of my thesis as I analyse the way in which critical accounts actually formulate a form of *meta*-critique as they hop on popular Instagram trends, but put a twist on them to make clear to their audience that they do not agree with the dominant discourse around these Instagram trends.

⁵⁹ Tiidenberg and Whelan, “‘Not like That, Not for That, Not by Them’,” 93.

⁶⁰ Tiidenberg and Whelan, “‘Not like That, Not for That, Not by Them’,” 94.

⁶¹ Tiidenberg and Whelan, “‘Not like That, Not for That, Not by Them’,” 94-95.

2.6 – Solidarity Online

As my analysis focuses on Instagram users who are openly critical of ideas closely related to postfeminism and strongly informed by neoliberal views, it begs the question which aspects of these postfeminist and neoliberal narratives are challenged by these users. My analysis shows in what way the users critique the status quo on Instagram, but something that should be noted beforehand is that the users analysed can be considered to be part of an online solidary community. Although they critique similar narratives, they do so through their own separate accounts but do follow each other and create a form of online solidarity by interacting with each other, using similar hashtags and by existing in the same online sphere. Solidarity online is described as mediated solidarity by Natalie Fenton in her 2008 article. She provides a description of social solidarity which she describes as “a morality of cooperation, the ability of individuals to identify with each other in a spirit of mutuality and reciprocity without individual advantage or compulsion, leading to a network of individuals or secondary institutions that are bound to a political project involving the creation of social and political bonds such as the anti-globalization movement.”⁶² When it comes to such solidarity online however, Fenton notes that there is a slight shift since a whole array of fragmented subjectivities can say something about a topic they share common ground with. Fenton writes that the “mediated world that embraces fragmented political subjectivities connects with the material world at the site of conflict, bringing together disparate experiences of political reality and finding common ground, though that ground may be uneven, contested and complex.”⁶³ This thus points towards the wide array of different voices that can comment on the same political issues with their slightly different viewpoints, that still manage to form some form of online solidarity. Throughout my analysis I use this notion of online solidarity as a way to posit the critical accounts against the individualist, postfeminist and neoliberal informed popular narratives on Instagram. I show the accounts that are critical of such narratives to not only be critical of the popular content on Instagram, but to also be critical of the individualist ideas by forming some form of online community of solidarity. That women can form solidary groups online is also emphasised by Anita Thaler who notes that social media “can offer feminist solidarity and empowerment” through three paths.⁶⁴ Thaler argues that online, women can 1) spread awareness for shared issues, 2) share experiences among other women and 3) point out misogyny and push back against sexism through speaking out online.⁶⁵ Solidarity online can thus entail individuals sharing their experiences and opinions with other individuals and finding common ground. This common ground can feel empowering to women as they find others that agree with them and aim to fight a similar fight online. Critical accounts on Instagram show a form of solidarity as well through their formulation of *meta*-critique. Although

⁶² Natalie Fenton, "Mediating Solidarity," *Global Media and Communication* 4, no. 1 (April 2008): 49, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1742766507086852>.

⁶³ Fenton, "Mediating Solidarity," 51.

⁶⁴ Anita Thaler, "Online Harassment and Online Solidarity – a Technofeminist Perspective," *STS Conference, Graz: "Critical Issues in Science and Technology Studies* 6 (May 2014): 4.

⁶⁵ Thaler, "Online Harassment and Online Solidarity," 4.

their formulation of critique is an individual practice, the accumulation of such critiques shows an overarching solidary stance against postfeminist individualist narratives on Instagram. Throughout my analysis I show different feminist perspectives coming together on the same platform, Instagram, by users who are connected by following each other and by their common ground, namely through their ideas of body positivity.

With regards to the notion of body positivity I should say a few things. Body positivity does not have one clear definitions. Where body positivity means fat acceptance to some, to others it means radical body positivity but body neutrality can also be an interpretation.⁶⁶ I do not provide a clear definition of the term in this thesis and this is on purpose. The notion of body positivity is one that is too broad and especially too personal to try and explain through one definition.⁶⁷ That does not mean there is no research regarding body positivity, on the contrary, many scholars have done fruitful and important research about body positivity. For my research however, digging deeper into this research is not necessary as I analyse different people's specific and personal outings with regards to their personal ideas about body positivity. For this analysis, I do not need an academic definition to guide my research, as I allow these users' definition of the term to guide my analysis.⁶⁸

2.7 – What Are Affordances?

In my brief summary and explanation of the research by Tiidenberg and Whelan, the idea of social and technological affordances was mentioned. As I will analyse the affordances of Instagram in chapter four, I must however first take a step back and discuss how affordances can be understood in the first place. The notion of affordances is one used very often in descriptions of the workings of social media platforms, but according to Sandra K. Evans, Katy E. Pearce, Jessica Vitak and Jeffrey W. Treem, the notion of affordances is often used by scholars without addressing any additional studies regarding the idea of affordances.⁶⁹ So I will introduce a definition of the word first.

⁶⁶ Helena Darwin and Amara Miller, "Factions, Frames, and Postfeminism(s) in the Body Positive Movement," *Feminist Media Studies* 21, no. 6 (2021): 874.

⁶⁷ It should also be noted that aside of body positivity, ideas of body neutrality exist as well in which people feel like rather than celebrating their body, they choose to simply exist and be okay with their bodies as it provides them with the tools to live their lives. Some interpret body neutrality as a form of body positivity as well which is one example of the multiplicity of opinions that exist within the body positivity movement. I do not regard one definition as the correct one, rather I regard body positivity as a movement that aims to change the narrative about bodies (positively), in whichever way that may be.

⁶⁸ I should note that throughout this thesis I reflect on and analyse accounts that appear to all be run by white women (as far as I can tell). This entails that I by no means research the whole scope of Instagram accounts that are openly critical of the beauty standards on Instagram. I realise voices are missing and viewpoints are as well. Given the scope of my thesis however, and the way in which I found the accounts that I analyse, I simply cannot account for every viewpoint available on the platform. Nonetheless, the lack of certain points of view throughout my analysis should be considered.

⁶⁹ Sandra K. Evans, Katy E. Pearce, Jessica Vitak and Jeffrey W. Treem, "Explicating Affordances: A Conceptual Framework for Understanding Affordances in Communication Research," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 22, no. 1 (January 2017): 35, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcc4.12180>.

Evans et al. describe the concept of affordances as the relational structure “between an object/technology and the user that enables or constrains potential behavioral outcomes in a particular context.”⁷⁰ In other words, Evans et al. describe an affordance as a possible behaviour that can result from the way in which someone interprets the ways in which they can use a particular object or technology. This interpretation, importantly, can vary. They build this definition upon Gibson’s original definition of the term, when he coined it in 1979. Gibson’s definition describes an affordances as the possibilities of actions that arise from someone’s relation to the environment they find themselves in.⁷¹ Thus, in the simplest terms, Gibson described that when people see a chair when they no longer want to stand, that the chair presents itself as an object to sit on, whereas seeing that same chair when one is angry, might lead to seeing the chair as an object to throw around the room. As Gibson’s defined the notion of affordances in 1979, the concept in itself was not related to the domain of social media which did not exist yet. Nonetheless, Gibson’s idea of affordances has become very important in the field of social media research. The importance of the term is where Evans et al. also locate the problem with the way in which the notion is often used by scholars. The authors argue that although “affordances theory” is often described and used in academic writing, “affordances theory” does not actually meet the requirements of being a theory. They note that “affordances are better considered as a process concept, depicting specific ways things vary.”⁷² As one of the characteristics of researching affordances is that it analyses the ways in which things vary, Evans et al. argue that threshold criteria are necessary in order to allow researchers to explore, apply and build upon the notion of affordances. They write they want to “facilitate a more consistent approach to conceptualization and application of affordances” because they find that in studying the ways in which scholars have used the notion of affordances is not consistent at all.⁷³ To create more consistency the following three threshold criteria are established by Evans et al. that must be confirmed in order to confirm that something can be considered an affordance:

- 1) “Confirm proposed affordance is neither the object nor a feature of the object.”⁷⁴
- 2) “Confirm the proposed affordance is not an outcome.”⁷⁵
- 3) “Confirm the proposed affordance has variability.”⁷⁶

Before moving on, I briefly explain these three criteria. The first one makes a sharp distinction between an affordance and the object or the feature of an object. Evans et al. describe this criteria because they emphasise the importance of understanding that an affordance does not belong to the technology itself, and that it does not belong to the individual using the technology either. Rather, they argue, that an affordance belongs to “the relationship between individuals and their perceptions of the environment.”⁷⁷

⁷⁰ Evans et al., “Explicating Affordances,” 36.

⁷¹ Evans et al., “Explicating Affordances,” 37.

⁷² Evans et al., “Explicating Affordances,” 37.

⁷³ Evans et al., “Explicating Affordances,” 37.

⁷⁴ Evans et al., “Explicating Affordances,” 39.

⁷⁵ Evans et al., “Explicating Affordances,” 40.

⁷⁶ Evans et al., “Explicating Affordances,” 40.

⁷⁷ Evans et al., “Explicating Affordances,” 39.

Affordances thus shape the interaction between an individual and a technology. The second criterion that Evans et al. describe, denotes that although affordances “invite behaviors and other outcomes,” that those affordances “are not the outcome itself.”⁷⁸ Again, the authors are contrasting two different aspects that relate to the use of technologies by individuals but that should be strictly separated when speaking of affordances. Evans et al. furthermore note that for this criterion “scholars should also assess whether an affordance can be associated with *multiple* outcomes.”⁷⁹ The reason for this is because the authors argue that although someone’s intention might change, the affordance will remain relatively stable, as the same affordance can be associated with different people with different goals and intentions. The last criterion asks scholars to assess whether an affordance has variability and is in line with the criterion. The research performed by Evans et al. shows that the “variability of affordances is evident in empirical work demonstrating contradictory behaviors of individuals using the same features to achieve different outcomes.”⁸⁰ Thus, although many can perceive the same affordance, this affordance will not lead to similar outcomes as different people have different intentions and ways of using an affordance. In other words, what must be assessed is whether an affordance has range because affordances are considered to be different from features, as such that they are not binary. The authors exemplify this through the description of visibility as an affordance. Visibility, they argue is not a binary, but rather something that can exist in lesser or greater extent. What this criterion strongly denotes is that an affordance is very different from a feature of a technology. Where having a camera on a phone is a clear yes/no binary, the affordance of recordability that arises from this feature in relation to an individual using the phone, exists in a range. Some users might record everything all the time, whereas others barely use the camera at all. The three criteria described above will be taken into account in my description of Instagram’s affordances in chapter four.

What lies at the core of these three criteria described above, is the idea of three levels that exist in the descriptions of the three criteria. Evans et al. explain these three levels further through the hands-on example of the smartphone. According to the authors, the smartphone’s feature is that it has a camera, which in interaction with a user means that the affordance is its recordability. This in turn, can create the outcome of e.g. documenting human rights violations.⁸¹ They thus describe three levels present in the interaction between technology and individuals: a technology has *features*, these features in interaction with an individual present *affordances* and those affordances can lead to a variety of *outcomes*.⁸² Features can thus be considered the most basic level of looking at a piece of technology or an object, and these features lead to affordances when they are interacted with. This interaction in turn, can lead some outcomes being more likely than others. What can be concluded from these three levels,

⁷⁸ Evans et al., “Explicating Affordances,” 40.

⁷⁹ Evans et al., “Explicating Affordances,” 40.

⁸⁰ Evans et al., “Explicating Affordances,” 40.

⁸¹ Evans et al., “Explicating Affordances,” 39.

⁸² Evans et al., “Explicating Affordances,” 39.

is that in order to research Instagram's affordances, I must begin at a description of its technological features. This description can be found in chapter four.

2.8 – Conclusion

Throughout this theoretical framework, multiple concepts have been discussed at length. The idea of critique, and especially the way in which Foucault's ideas regarding critique are still useful in our mediatised society have been discussed through the use of Tiidenberg and Whelan's exploration of critique on the social media platform Tumblr. Their research will help guide my argument as well, and I add on to their argument as I provide an example of a similar form of critique, but on a different platform and which critiques a different topic. As I analyse the way in which Instagram users critique body normativity on the platform they show themselves critical of the postfeminist and neoliberal discourses on the platform. This expands and strengthens the claims made by Tiidenberg and Whelan. With regards to postfeminism, my exploration has been expansive, but when it comes to the notion of postfeminism, no exploration can be expansive enough. Many takes on the term have not been discussed as the space within this thesis does not allow for such an exploration of the term. However, I have shown links between postfeminism, neoliberalism and interactivity and I have discussed the notion of authenticity and ideas regarding femininity on a visual platform. These ideas will play an important role in answering my main question and sub-questions as I argue that the critical accounts analysed show a form of critique on the body normativity present on Instagram which is informed by postfeminist thought. Towards the end I have provided a definition of affordances and the way in which I use the term throughout my thesis. My theoretical framework was then wrapped up by a discussion of what can be considered solidarity online and some notes on the body positivity movement.

3 – Method

Before turning to my analysis I first explicate my method of analysis. I begin by explaining my personal experience with Instagram, as it is impossible to distance myself from those experiences while doing this research. After this I explain how I found and gathered the content that I analyse throughout my thesis. Lastly I lay down some basic difficulties when analysing visual content that is garnered through social media platforms and go over the analysing methods that I use.

3.1 – Instagram as a Personal Platform

Because of the way in which I approach analysing Instagram content, I should disclose some personal information about myself, considering that I have probably fed information to Instagram's algorithm and that my Instagram bubble is likely to differ from those of others. In collecting and interpreting my corpus I have made use of digital autoethnography. Ahmet Atay describes that although unconventional, someone's social media presence can be described as digital autoethnography. Atay notes that online, we constantly read stories that "are a collage put together by multiple people, but when we read them, they make sense because they tell us a story both as an image and as short, written vignettes. We become producers, authors, coauthors, and audiences of the digital stories that we tell."⁸³ In other words, when analysing the content on a social media platform, the way in which this content is interpreted is highly informed by one's own social media presence. Since I used my personal profile to follow the Instagram users mentioned below, some basic information that I can assume Instagram to know about me should be disclosed. I have been active on the platform since January of 2017 and throughout the years I have started using the platform more intensely, with my daily Instagram screentime going from twenty minutes a day to two hours a day. On average however, I spend about an hour daily on the platform.⁸⁴ It is likely that Instagram knows that I am a young white woman in my mid-twenties, who lives in the Netherlands as I have shared my location and photos of my birthday on the platform. Furthermore, I have left traces of my online Instagram presence on the platform for over five years as of writing. Although I do not know the workings of the Instagram algorithm, it is safe to say that the content that I have liked or have interacted with in those past five years, still influences what Instagram is showing me today.⁸⁵ As I began using Instagram, my main interest was following professional ballet dancers which resulted in an Instagram feed full of incredibly fit people. Over time I started following more close friends and famous people outside of the dance world, but the focus with regards to the female body was still on thin people or on women otherwise sharing photos of themselves which could be

⁸³ Ahmet Atay, "What Is Cyber or Digital Autoethnography?," *International Review of Qualitative Research* 13, no. 3 (November 2020): 273, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1940844720934373>.

⁸⁴ I wish this screentime was a result of this research which revolves around Instagram content, but alas, I must admit that Instagram manages to grab and hold on to my attention quite well.

⁸⁵ I use "Instagram algorithm" as an overarching term here. I do not think there is "one all-knowing and deciding" algorithm that controls what I see but that there are far more complicated and sophisticated systems in place. I however, do not know how these work and neither do I have any access to such embedded structures.

regarded traditionally feminine. It was only during 2020 that I unfollowed everyone who posted content which I felt contributed to an unhealthy view of the way in which women ought to look as the global pandemic made me reconsider the amount of time I spent on Instagram in the first place, and especially the kind of content that I was consuming. I became more critical of the individualist representations of womanhood online and the online denouncement of real world problems. This meant I unfollowed every professional dancer and every celebrity or influencer whose content focused on showing off their thin bodies. After this, I only followed close friends, some left-winged political activist accounts, some accounts of cultural institutions and an array of (mostly female) tattoo artists. It was during 2021 that I began to develop an interest in famous people who often shared photos of themselves not looking perfect, or who were not incredibly thin. This included actresses but also professional dancers who were vocal about not having the body that most ballet companies would like them to have. This was my first introduction to users on Instagram being openly critical about dominant discourses about the female body. Towards the end of 2021 posts by the user *izzierodgers* first started to appear on my explore page. I thus knew of the existence of this account before I began following it and considered it a good starting point for my research as I did not actively sought after similar accounts but was rather fed them by Instagram. After this I began following the accounts mentioned below and allowed those accounts to become part of my daily Instagram intake. I describe my history with Instagram in detail because all these years of experience with being on Instagram and using the platform cannot and must not be dismissed. It is important to disclose all the information shared above to because they have inevitably informed parts of this thesis. I feel however, that this does not weaken this thesis but rather strengthens it as I have been embedded in a variety of Instagram communities throughout the years and have thus learned to understand their visual languages. I know what it is like to be a young women who is visible online and I know what it is like to present yourself on Instagram. This does not mean that I can speak for all women, but I can certainly speak for myself. Tiidenberg notes that she realises that her claims do not speak for all depictions of womanhood on Instagram, since some accounts might be private or she might not have found the public accounts that show a completely different narrative.⁸⁶ I must also take into account that a “wider range of themes and discursive elements than those I present” might be present on Instagram.⁸⁷ I do not claim to speak for all women on Instagram in my analysis, but rather let the women whose accounts I have chosen to analyse speak for themselves. This choice comes from the knowledge that although the starting point of finding my corpus lies in autoethnography, this method is not sufficient as “pure autobiography is not and cannot be used as the hallmark of high-quality research [...] Instead of relying on mere raw autoethnographic autobiography, research should see the

⁸⁶ Tiidenberg, “Visibly Ageing Femininities,” 64-65.

⁸⁷ Tiidenberg, “Visibly Ageing Femininities,” 65.

possibilities from more subtle positions.”⁸⁸ In my research, this subtlety will come from locating the researched accounts through autoethnography, but to let these accounts speak for themselves.

3.2 – Collecting Content

Where Tiidenberg uses a scraping tool that scrapes Instagram for posts with certain tag-words, I do not follow such an approach. Tiidenberg researches specific hashtags in her article which makes it easier to use such a tool. I however, have chosen to focus on a set of accounts that I have followed over the course of a longer period of time. I began by following the Instagram account *izzierodgers*, as Instagram had recommended the account to me on multiple occasions before. Although this could be due to me looking for critical accounts on Instagram, I cannot remember whether I first started looking for such content, or whether this algorithmic coincidence incited my interest in this phenomenon. Regardless, I started following this account in February of 2022. After this I let the Instagram algorithm recommend me other profiles. This meant that I was getting recommended profiles that Instagram considers similar to *izzierodgers*, or users that follow her account as well. Next, I started following *allywithacne*, *its_just_acne*, *briannas_day*, *_nelly_london*, *meganjaynecrabbe* and *breeelenehan* (in that order) as they were recommended to me as well and can be regarded as users who are critical of the dominant discourse around the female body on Instagram. The reasons why, are further explored as I answer my second sub-question. These users and their content thus became a part of my everyday Instagram content and I followed them from February of 2022 until May of 2022. As Margreth Lünenborg and Christoph Raetzsch note that studying (online) publics must be done in a way that “approach[es] constellations of actors, messages and media as necessarily fleeting, unstable and mutable,” I choose to study Instagram in a manner that exemplifies that using the platform in a “normal” way can give rise to critique in the right circumstances.⁸⁹ As described above, my increased use of Instagram lead to a slowly growing resistance of the dominant culture on the platform. The accounts that I study show a similar gradual estrangement of the dominant discourses on Instagram, after which they immersed themselves into posting critical content. I should also note that I found that some of the users whose content I analyse, appear to first have been through something serious, such as an eating disorder as is the case for *briannas_day* and *_nelly_london*. This possibly signals that people first need to experience extreme repercussions of the unrealistic beauty standards that have imposed upon them through social media, in order to create enough urgency to be vulnerable online and to critique the status quo. Of course, I cannot be sure of any such motivations but these observations are important to include nonetheless.

⁸⁸ Johanna Uotinen, "Digital Television and the Machine That Goes 'PING!': Autoethnography as a Method for Cultural Studies of Technology," *Journal for Cultural Research* 14, no. 2 (April 2010): 164, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14797580903481306>.

⁸⁹ Margreth Lünenborg, and Christoph Raetzsch, "From Public Sphere to Performative Publics: Developing Media Practice as an Analytic Model," in *Media Practices, Social Movements, and Performativity: Transdisciplinary Approaches*, ed. Susanne Foellmer, Margreth Lünenborg and Christoph Raetzsch (New York: Routledge, 2018), 29.

As mentioned before, I have analysed recent posts by the accounts mentioned. This means I went back until posts created in December of 2021 and stopped analysing posts created in April of 2022. I have chosen not to include screenshots of full accounts or to reproduce more posts than I deemed necessary to get my findings across. This is in line with Tiidenberg's ethical considerations in her research regarding the visibility of women over forty on Instagram.⁹⁰ I have chosen to do so because I agree with Tiidenberg's considerations and I feel that users should feel free to delete previously posted content as they wish and once their content is reproduced in this thesis they can no longer completely do so. By only reproducing the content that is absolutely necessary I hope to respect their privacy as much as I can. The reason why I feel comfortable citing the accounts mentioned above is because they have relatively large followings and show an awareness of their online visibility. Lastly, I only chose to include surnames when these were provided by the Instagram user in question. If a surname is not provided I simply refer to the creator by their first name as provided on Instagram.

3.3 – Analysing Online Visual Content

Throughout this thesis, I focus on the way in which visibility can be used in forming critique on the social media platform Instagram. Analysing content on a social media platform is not a straightforward task however. As Alessandro Caliandro and James Graham note, "Instagram is not only huge, it is also dynamic, since, as with other prominent social media platforms, its architecture is always evolving to adapt to the latest market and cultural trends."⁹¹ Studying a platform that is dynamic and constantly evolving and changing poses challenges. That the platform is constantly changing however, does not mean that there is not a somewhat stable visual language which is a result of the technical and social affordances of the platform.⁹² These affordances create an online environment in which certain visual languages are more likely to appear than others. For my research as well, it is important to first establish the way in which Instagram's affordances are more likely to lead to certain outcomes than others and this is what I analyse in answering my first sub-question.

Since analysing and researching Instagram is a relatively new field of study, there is no consensus on what the best way to go about it is. However, I follow Katrin Tiidenberg's approach in her research about the way in which Russian-speaking pregnant women present femininity on Instagram. Furthermore I combine affordance analysis, as mentioned in my theoretical framework, with textual analysis. Tiidenberg follows ideas by both Catherine Kohler Riessman and Gillian Rose who "recommend reading images interpretatively to explore how and why they are produced and read by

⁹⁰ Tiidenberg, "Visibly Ageing Femininities," 64.

⁹¹ Alessandro Caliandro and James Graham, "Studying Instagram Beyond Selfies," *Social Media + Society* 6, no. 2 (April 2020): 1-2, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305120924779>.

⁹² Caliandro and Graham, "Studying Instagram Beyond Selfies," 2.

different people.”⁹³ Riessman summarises Rose’s list of questions to ask when analysing visual content into three parts:

“The first interrogates how and when the image was made, social identities of image-maker and recipient, and other relevant aspects of the image-making process. The second interrogates the image, asking about the story it may suggest, what it includes, how component parts are arranged, and use of color and technologies relevant to the genre [...]. The third focus is the ‘audiencing’ process – responses of the initial viewers, subsequent responses, stories viewers may bring to an image, written text that guides viewing (e.g., captions), where the spectator is positioned, and other issues related to reception.”⁹⁴

This summary provides a good framework for the way in which Instagram’s visual content throughout my thesis will be analysed. Furthermore I approach my analysis in a manner similar to that of Tiidenberg in her research regarding visual discourse about women over forty and fifty on Instagram. She notes that she

“...started with immersing myself in the 36 accounts, conducting a deep read of the streams of posts (each posts consists of an image, hashtags, very often a textual caption, and more often than not a string of comments). I then searched for key themes in the accounts, and patterns among those themes. I looked for key visual and textual elements that repeat in different themed accounts, and the rhetorical functions of those repetitive elements in building a discourse of over-40/50 visibility. I paid attention to how visual, textual, and hypertextual rhetoric was used by women to make truth claims, and blend, mix, or reject elements from visual economy’s dominant discourse.”⁹⁵

To summarise, Tiidenberg analyses her data contextually and she treats her data as “intertextually relational.”⁹⁶ I approach my analysis similarly. Once I located the accounts that I analyse, I immersed myself into the accounts, analysed recent posts (usually going up back up to four months) and located recurring themes and elements of their content. Furthermore I located how recurring themes and elements could be found across different accounts and were thus not exclusive to particular users. This intertextual approach is also described in the research by Tiidenberg and Whelan as they note that an

⁹³ Katrin Tiidenberg, "Odes to Heteronormativity: Presentations of Femininity in Russian-Speaking Pregnant Women’s Instagram Accounts," *International Journal of Communication* 9 (2015): 1748.

⁹⁴ Catherine Kohler Riessman, *Narrative Methods for the Human Sciences* (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2008), 205.

⁹⁵ Katrin Tiidenberg, "Visibly Ageing Femininities: Women’s Visual Discourses of Being over-40 and over-50 on Instagram," *Feminist Media Studies* 18, no. 1 (January 2018): 64, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2018.1409988>.

⁹⁶ Tiidenberg, "Visibly Ageing Femininities," 64.

intertextual reading of social media content is an important part when analysing (self)-representation online. They also note that not only the visual aspects ought to be analysed, but also the colours, filters, accessories, captions and the way a photo is edited should be analysed as they all add meaning to a social media post.⁹⁷ I combine the methods mentioned above with affordance analysis as was explicated in my theoretical framework, in order to get a thorough understanding of the way in which the users who's content I analyse can formulate a form of *meta-critique*.

⁹⁷ Tiidenberg and Whelan, “‘Not like That, Not for That, Not by Them’,” 91-92.

4 – How do Instagram’s affordances shape and constrain online identity performance on critical accounts?

On a social media platform such as Instagram people’s actions are strongly informed and shaped by its affordances. In the span of this chapter I explain how these affordances shape and constrain online identity performance, and then especially on critical accounts. Throughout this chapter, I describe the kind of identity performance that Instagram’s affordances may lead to. After this I explain how those same affordances are used differently by critical accounts.

4.1 – The Dominant Outcome of Instagram’s Affordances

As discussed before, Evans et al. argue that features in their interaction with individuals lead to affordances and that these affordances can lead to a variety of outcomes. Below I discuss each of the affordances that Evans et al. describe as well (visibility, persistence, editability and association), and signal the kinds of outcomes that come from these affordances as well as how these affordances work together to create situations that make certain outcomes more likely than others.

I want to begin at the affordance of visibility. With regards to visibility on Instagram, Kreling et al. argue that visibility is higher in posts than it is in stories because of “technological differences that concern (1) visibility of content to other users and (2) visibility of interactions of others with one’s own content.”⁹⁸ Regarding the visibility of content to other users, posts are visible to everyone who follows the account in question, or, when the account is public, to everyone on Instagram. This is in contrast to stories, for which users have more hands-on control with regards to who can view the stories. Stories can be posted only to the group of followers that a user has listed as a “close friend,” meaning that only that group of people can view the story. Furthermore, users can exclude any particular Instagram follower from viewing any of their stories quite easily. Users thus have much more agency when it comes to stories to decide who is allowed to see them or not. When it comes to reels, similar forces are at work as with posts. However, users can choose to not have a reel show up between their “normal” posts, which means that the reel in question is only visible in the specific reels tab on their profile. Visibility and privacy go hand in hand, as is also discussed by Valerie Steeves in her discussion of the pressure that women feel to perform a certain type of femininity on social media. In posts and reels especially, considering their high levels of visibility, posting content through either posts or reels also means that women think about what kind of content they post. Steeves writes that “participants [of her research] indicated that social media only makes the pressure to be ‘beautiful’ worse. The ‘like’ function means that each image they post is judged by their peers, and certain images are more likely than others to receive positive attention...”⁹⁹ In other words, women on the platform are very aware of their visibility

⁹⁸ Kreling et al., “Feeling Authentic on Social Media,” 3.

⁹⁹ Steeves, “‘Pretty and Just a Little Bit Sexy, I Guess’,” 165.

on the platform, resulting in added pressure to perform a kind of femininity that will be well-received by those who view their content. This is in line with the individualised neoliberal postfeminism described in my theoretical framework as individual achievements are celebrated and one may feel at competition with other women on the platform to perform the “best” version of femininity. This “best” version of femininity could be judged from the amount of positive attention that women receive for the kind of content that they post. As will be discussed more in depth further on, this can lead to women heavily curating their photos in order to receive positive feedback from their online peers. In the case of stories however, the narrative is slightly different, as is discussed by Kreling et al. when they note that because stories only stay visible for twenty-four hours, and that the responses to stories are only visible to the user who uploaded the story, that its level of visibility is much lower than for posts.¹⁰⁰ They argue that this lower level of visibility means that “Instagram Stories appear to be a tool facilitating more authentic self-presentation than Posts.”¹⁰¹ In other words, the content that people post to their stories is less curated and is deemed less self-censored because there is less fear of other people’s judgement to their content.¹⁰² Thus, it comes to show that when women are aware that they are less visible, or at least less permanently visible, that they allow themselves to portray less curated versions of themselves. More visibility may lead to less solidarity as visibility enforces and encourages competition among women. This may thus breaks down the possibilities of collectively going against the grain on the platform.

The outcomes named above are also strongly related to the level of persistence that goes with either posts, reels or stories. According to Treem and Leonardi, “[c]ommunication is persistent if it remains accessible in the same form as the original display after the actor has finished his or her presentation.”¹⁰³ Thus, content is persistent if it remains and does not disappears. In the case of Instagram stories, persistence of the content is low, as stories disappear after twenty-four hours and only remain visible after that when the user decides to add them to a “highlight” on their profile. For reels and posts however, persistence is high since this content does not disappear unless the user decides to delete or archive it. The content posted through posts and reels is thus highly reviewable whereas stories, that disappear, are not. As users know that their posts remains visible on their profile unless they delete or archive them, and that stories only stay visible for twenty-four hours, users also understand that there is a difference in the content that they feel comfortable posting through either posts or stories. As Kreling et al. put it: “Stories afford ephemeral self-presentation, while Posts are highly persistent.”¹⁰⁴ In other words, users are more likely to post more spontaneous content which focuses on what is happening in the current moment to their stories, whereas content that is posted to the more permanent posts is more highly curated and well thought through. This persistence of posts that is described by Kreling et al. and

¹⁰⁰ Kreling et al., “Feeling Authentic on Social Media,” 3.

¹⁰¹ Kreling et al., “Feeling Authentic on Social Media,” 4.

¹⁰² Kreling et al., “Feeling Authentic on Social Media,” 4.

¹⁰³ Treem and Leonardi, “Social Media Use in Organizations,” 155.

¹⁰⁴ Kreling et al., “Feeling Authentic on Social Media,” 3.

which can be attributed to reels as well, leads to higher levels of self-surveillance in the representation of women online. This self-surveillance was also located by Akane Kanai when she writes that “girls’ practices of identity can be understood by reference to the social and cultural discourses within which girls’ identity-making is implicated.”¹⁰⁵ On Instagram, and considering the levels of visibility and persistence, women do not create content in a vacuum, but rather make content informed by the online sphere that their content will exist in. As is explained in detail throughout my theoretical framework, this online sphere is strongly related to postfeminist thought. According to postfeminist thought, women are no longer in need of feminism, and can now post freely content that fits their liberated interests. The kind of content that women are supposed to be sharing is thus not open to interpretation, but rather informed by Instagram’s affordances as well as by the existing postfeminist discourse on the platform. This leads to practices of self-surveillance as described by Kanai, in which women feel like they need to look like the beautified and idealised versions of women that are often found online. This may incite feelings of competition, but certainly feelings of comparison to other women on the platform as well as a feeling that one must be more beautiful or at least equally beautiful as the unattainable idealised versions of women that are visible.

This brings me to the affordance levels of editability. This affordance is described by Kreling et al. as “the fact the individuals can spend a good deal of time and effort crafting and recrafting a communicative act before it is viewed by others.”¹⁰⁶ The authors argue that the editability for both stories and posts are similarly high.¹⁰⁷ I do not wholly agree with this however. Although yes, both posts and stories allow for high levels of editability, their editability are of different calibres. Where in posts, the integrated editability means changing the lighting of photos or adding filters that change the colours, and shadows of photos are very much present, the option to use filters in stories is much more extensive and these filters change the photos in a different manner as well as they can also change people’s facial features. For both stories and reels the interface is similar with regards to editability with the biggest difference being that in stories one cannot edit different videos together, but for my argument with regards to filters, when I speak of stories, I also speak of reels as they use a similar filter interface. The filters in stories differ from those that can be used to alter posts because the filters for stories do not only change the lighting or the colours of a photo or video, but a great deal of them also change the apparent facial bone structure and other facial features of people. Filters make people’s lips look bigger, their nose narrower and some give people the appearance of having clear skin or wearing makeup, when in reality they are not. These kinds of filters are not integrated in the editing sphere of posts. It should also be noted that in stories and reels, when photos or videos use an Instagram filter, this filter is mentioned either at the top of the story or at the bottom of the reel, thus making it clear to other users that the creator

¹⁰⁵ Akane Kanai, “Thinking beyond the Internet as a Tool: Girls’ Online Spaces as Postfeminist Structures of Surveillance,” in *eGirls, eCitizens: Putting Technology, Theory and Policy into Dialogue with Girls’ and Young Women’s Voices*, ed. Jane Bailey and Valerie Steeves (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2015), 87.

¹⁰⁶ Treem and Leonardi, “Social Media Use in Organizations,” 159.

¹⁰⁷ Kreling et al., “Feeling Authentic on Social Media,” 3.

has used a filter. This is not the case in posts, where one could use any Instagram filter to their heart's content without making this clear to viewers of the post unless they decide to explicitly state it themselves in the caption. For both stories and reels the body (mostly the face) can be easily edited, whereas in posts this is not an integrated feature of the platform. Thus the levels of editability are high in stories, reels and posts, but this editability is not the same. The normalisation of editing oneself on the internet can result in problematic outcomes as is discussed by Isabelle Coy-Dibley as she describes the phenomenon of "digitised dysmorphia." According to Coy-Dibley, this digitised dysmorphia is a result of the female body online being a battlefield of "diverging concepts, regulations, values and modifications."¹⁰⁸ This battlefield, in combination with the online affordances for digital modification of the body, which are also strongly integrated in Instagram's interface, results in the normalisation of posting digitally altered female bodies in the online sphere, which according to Coy-Dibley, results in digitised dysmorphia. This digitised dysmorphia means that women who present themselves online know an offline version of themselves as well as an online version and that those versions do not necessarily align because the online version changes so often through editing. According to Coy-Dibley, women digitally alter their appearance because they feel like they have to fit into a certain image of what a woman ought to look like online. What exactly this image is of what a woman ought to look like online, will be discussed in the next chapter. For now it is important to reflect on the way in which this digital dysphoria is not acknowledged as such on Instagram. Editing the visual presentation of one's body is completely normalised and rarely questioned. As will I show in chapters four and five however, is that there is a community on Instagram which actively questions the way in which women are asked to digitally alter their body for the sake of looking Instagram "appropriate." In this community, this digitised dysmorphia is acknowledged and actively fought.

The final affordance I wish to discuss is that of association. This affordance is defined by the authors as "established connections between individuals, between individuals and content, or between an actor and a presentation."¹⁰⁹ These connections are divided into two kind of connections by Treem and Leonardi, namely connections between individuals and between individuals and content.¹¹⁰ Both types of association are argued by Kreling et al. to be more present in posts than in stories, because posts are simply more permanent and because they show comments and conversations in the comment section to everybody who can view the post.¹¹¹ The fact that comments on posts are equally permanent as the post itself, unless of course the user decides to delete comments, makes users consider what kind of response they expect a post of theirs will attract before posting it.¹¹² This is an important expectation to consider, because it adds to the idea that users heavily consider what kind of content they post and an

¹⁰⁸ Coy-Dibley, "'Digitized Dysmorphia' of the Female Body," 1.

¹⁰⁹ Treem and Leonardi, "Social Media Use in Organizations," 163.

¹¹⁰ Treem and Leonardi, "Social Media Use in Organizations," 163.

¹¹¹ Kreling et al., "Feeling Authentic on Social Media," 3.

¹¹² Kreling et al., "Feeling Authentic on Social Media," 3.

awareness of the sphere in which they post their content. For reels, similar rules are at work as for posts as reels are equally permanent and comments are equally visible as those on a post. For stories, association works slightly different as users can like comment on someone's story, but this response is only visible to the user who uploaded the story in question. Connections between individuals are therefore possible, but less public. Thus the level of association on posts and reels can be considered high, whereas the level of association on stories can be considered moderate. These levels of association may result in women being very aware of the fact that they are being looked at on the platform. Angela McRobbie notes similar forces at work in her research regarding Facebook and she notes that the "seemingly fun, globally popular and friend-oriented nature of Facebook disguises its capacity for gender re-traditionalisation in the form of being 'looked at'."¹¹³ In this argument, McRobbie relates social media and its strong ties to neoliberalism to the competition that exists online for women to be better than others, to be perfect. The idea that women get responses to the content that they post re-establishes the idea that women are supposed to be looked at and McRobbie asks the question whether "the rhetoric of the image [is] not that requests a response (positive or negative) from its viewers?"¹¹⁴ I would argue that yes, the rhetoric of the image is one that traditionally warrants a response from the viewer, and that on a social media platform such as Instagram, its affordances are working (whether the platform wants it or not) to re-establish ideas that women ought to be looked at. In the case of this affordance as well, just as described above, women's awareness of the fact that they are being looked at leads to self-surveillance and presenting oneself in a way that one considers appropriate, rather than in the way that one authentically is.

What is important to note with regards to the four affordances discussed above, is that they do not separately exist in their own vacuum, but rather that they work together and are influencing outcomes of other affordances as well. Furthermore, the affordances cannot be strictly divided from each other. For example, visibility and persistence have overlap in that higher levels of persistence create more visibility and more visibility creates higher levels of persistence. They strengthen each other. There are a couple of outcomes discussed above that the different affordances can result in. First of all, the affordances can lead to high levels of self-surveillance in woman as they feel like they need to make themselves look like a particular type of woman in order to be accepted online. As noted before, these platform affordances thus foster competition over solidarity because of the pressure to conform to the platform's unattainable beauty standards. Furthermore, the affordances can lead to a re-traditionalisation of femininity in terms of accepting that women are supposed to be looked at. What these two outcomes have in common, is that they can be considered expressions of postfeminist discourses that are present on social media platform.

¹¹³ Angela McRobbie, "Notes on the Perfect: Competitive Femininity in Neoliberal Times," *Australian Feminist Studies* 30, no. 83 (January 2015): 5, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08164649.2015.1011485>.

¹¹⁴ McRobbie, "Notes on the Perfect," 6.

4.2 – Using Instagram’s Affordances Critically

From what is discussed above, the question arises how critical accounts are shaped and constrained by Instagram’s affordances, especially because of the strong ties that Instagram has with postfeminist thought. Being critical on Instagram, given its affordances and its embeddedness in postfeminist discourses is not a given and a similar sentiment is described by Rosalind Gill as well as she notes that in postfeminist environments “women are not straightforwardly objectified but are portrayed as active, desiring sexual subjects who choose to present themselves in a seemingly objectified manner because it suits their liberated interests to do so.”¹¹⁵ It is thus hard to be critical in an online postfeminist culture because the idea is that women have the freedom to choose however they want to present themselves online and that any presentation is thus freedom, even when it is overly sexual or clearly adhering to a particular norm.

With regards to the Instagram affordances discussed above, it is important to keep in mind that especially high levels of visibility and persistence can make it harder for women to be critical of the dominant discourse on Instagram. This in contrast to popular ideas regarding the internet and the empowerment of women that have been described before. Steeves writes that “unlike the girls of the 1970s, who largely consumed pre-packaged media products, today’s girls can, it is hoped, become media producers and distributors in their own right” through which she indicates a hope that existed for girls to be liberated from external pressures as it became possible for them to present themselves in whichever way they wanted online.¹¹⁶ In her same research however, Steeves found that resisting the norm online is easier said than done. “Being ‘pretty’ and ‘a little sexy’ will attract a certain level of approval, but girls who post revealing or highly sexualized images are likely to receive the most likes.”¹¹⁷ This finding in Steeves research indicates that although the girls in her research wished to present themselves in whichever way they want, they are more likely to choose to present themselves in a way that receives praise from their peers. Again, this indicates that the way in which one behaves online does not exist in a vacuum but is strongly related to the way in which social media platforms function as well as to the pressure that women feel through other representations of women.

That critiquing is difficult on a platform such as Instagram, does not mean that it does not happen. Considering the high levels of the affordance of editability that can be found, women actively choosing not to edit their photos means that they are actively resisting a norm that is present on the platform, which can be considered a form of critique in and of itself. This practice can be considered collective in nature as the accounts I analyse tend to follow each other and some even comment on each other’s posts with encouraging and affirmative words. An example of this is Maia from *its_just_acne*, commenting on *allywithacne*’s latest post, with “Beautiful ❤️.”¹¹⁸ Also, the language used by the

¹¹⁵ Gill, “Postfeminist Media Culture,” 151.

¹¹⁶ Steeves, “‘Pretty and Just a Little Bit Sexy, I Guess’,” 155.

¹¹⁷ Steeves, “‘Pretty and Just a Little Bit Sexy, I Guess’,” 165.

¹¹⁸ *allywithacne*, Instagram, accessed May 18th, 2022.

critical accounts at times show that they aim for collective calls for action, but this will be discussed further in chapter five. Furthermore, considering the high levels of visibility in both posts and reels, it can be argued that visibility in itself can already serve as a form of critique. This is also discussed in the text by Minh-Ha T. Pham, who argues that selfies can be empowering to those who usually do not see themselves represented in mainstream media. She specifically uses the example of the #feministselfie campaign in which women posted selfies usually accompanied by captions that describe why they felt it was important for them to be able to share a photo of themselves online.¹¹⁹ Usually these users who posted a selfie accompanied it with a caption that made clear that they do not often see themselves represented in mainstream media and that they consider it valuable to be able to share their face online. Pham writes that the “#feministselfie campaign and images exemplify the potential of user-generated media to allow minoritized individuals the means to self-create and self-name identities that challenge dominant ways of seeing and knowing beauty and personhood.”¹²⁰ Thus, Pham describes that through visibility, minorities are provided with the opportunity to show themselves and to represent themselves more. This thus creates more visibility for minorities and others that often do not see themselves represented in everyday media.

In terms of the final affordance described above, namely association, the question posed by McRobbie which was mentioned above comes back into play. As McRobbie questions whether “the rhetoric of the image [is] not that requests a response (positive or negative) from its viewers,”¹²¹ one can also argue that the rhetoric of the image is that it warrants a form of critique. No image is neutral, and not everybody is going to interpret the same image in the same way. Although some form of discourse around the female body might be the dominant one, that does not mean that it goes unquestioned. Quite the opposite is true, as will be discussed in answering the other sub-questions, where I find that people actively take a stance against the dominant norms that are visible on Instagram. Because of the high levels of association that can be found throughout content on Instagram, people expect responses from other users on the platform and people expect their content to be viewed by others. This interaction between users inevitably leads to disagreements among users as to what is considered appropriate, what is right to advertise and what should be considered normal. Because Instagram is a platform that has high levels of association, content that is posted to one account does not necessarily reach only followers of that account, but can also end up in circles that do not necessarily fall in the same realm of content creators on the platform. This mixing of opinions allows users to be critical of one another. Of course, it should be noted that in some cases this critical attitude can result in hateful comments or cyberbullying, but giving nuanced critique on Instagram is possible. As can be learned from the examples that I will provide throughout the rest of my thesis, users manage to provide critique on the dominant discourse

¹¹⁹ Minh-Ha T. Pham, “‘I Click and Post and Breathe, Waiting for Others to See What I See’: On #FeministSelfies, Outfit Photos, and Networked Vanity,” *Fashion Theory* 19, no. 2 (February 2015): 227-231, <https://doi.org/10.2752/175174115X14168357992436>.

¹²⁰ Pham, “‘I Click and post and Breathe,’” 231.

¹²¹ McRobbie, “Notes on the Perfect,” 6.

around the female body on Instagram in a way that does not personally attack anyone but rather challenges the overarching narrative. In other words, they are performing some kind of online group effort and show a form of collective action. This kind of critique can be considered constructive and to be open to dialogue. How exactly this functions will be explained in answering the other sub-questions.

What I have thus found from locating the way in which the four affordances mentioned above are interpreted by critical accounts on Instagram, is that affordances can lead to different outcomes, as was also previously argued by Evans et al.. Simply because the dominant discourse on a platform follows from a set of affordances, does not mean that being critical cannot exist within those same affordances. People interpret the affordances of a platform differently and manage to use affordances in a way that favours their personal preference in using a platform. In the case of Instagram, the affordances of visibility, persistence, editability and association can create an environment in which women feel like their need to abide by particular aesthetic standards in order to fit into the culture of the platform, but it can also lead to groups of women interpreting those same affordances as ways in which to critique the culture that that same platform makes them feel like they need to fit in to.

4.3 – Conclusion

Thus, in answering the question “how do Instagram’s affordances shape and constrain online identity performance on critical accounts?” I have come to the conclusion that Instagram’s affordances facilitate multiple outcomes and that one of these outcomes is that women feel like they have been provided with the tools to critique that which they deem in need of critique. Through the affordances of visibility, persistence, editability and association either already dominant standards can be upheld, while simultaneously critical accounts aim at taking down those same standards. Thus, Instagram’s affordances shape and constrain online identity performance on critical accounts in a way that allows critical accounts to be very visible, while critical accounts also have to navigate characteristics that are deemed important on the platform. As will be discussed in the next chapter, individuality and being the best and most beautiful that one could possibly be, are dominant narratives on Instagram and the critical accounts aim to break this down, albeit all in their own way, by forming some kind of online collective through providing collective critique. This critique will be analysed in the next chapters and through this analysis I find that the online critical collective that I study does not aim their critique at the women going along with the sexist dominant discourse on Instagram, but rather targets the discourse itself.

5 – Which Dominant Discourses about Female Body Norms are Explored on Critical Instagram Accounts?

In making the argument that Instagram users can provide critique through their visibility on Instagram, it is necessary to begin with an exploration of what users can (and should) be critical of on the platform, namely the dominant discourse on the platform. Since my thesis specifically focusses on issues regarding the ideals of the female body on the platform, I first analyse critical Instagram accounts as anti-examples.¹²² Since those accounts actively go against the norm, they provide an idea of what the people behind those accounts consider the norm to be. After that I explore ideas regarding the female body in general, and connect these to the other observations through the anti-examples. This first exploration will help me develop the answer to the question posed above.

5.1 – Analysing the Norm Through Anti-Examples

In order to argue that users of the platform go against the grain of what is normalised on the platform, it is important to first establish what Instagram users consider the norm to be. In order to establish what the dominant discourses are on Instagram with regards to the female body I look at posts of accounts that are openly critical of the dominant norm for women on Instagram which I in turn can use as anti-examples of the norm. As these accounts clearly voice what exactly they are critical of on the platform, they inform those who view their content implicitly of what they consider the norm to be. I find this way of describing the norm on Instagram fruitful because it allows the Instagram community that is providing critique to speak for itself. As I analyse what content creators on Instagram who provide critique are critiquing, I can establish what the assumed norm is on Instagram. It should be noted that nobody's Instagram feed is the same and therefore people's perception of what the norm is on Instagram might differ as well. It also for this reason that I choose to follow the ideas of what the Instagram beauty standard is according to the content creators mentioned below, rather than choosing to analyse my own perception of the norm as this might be one that is highly personal. By collecting multiple angles from multiple creators I aim to provide general points with regards to the norm for body type, skin and lifestyle as I have found these three subjects to inform the way in which people look at women's bodies online the most.

Although much research exists to locate the beauty standard for women, I want to add my own analysis to this research because I think different beauty standards exist across different media platforms as beauty standards in magazines or in advertisements might differ from those which are rooted in

¹²² Although the notion of the anti-example is not necessarily an established term with a clear definition, I have found many analytical papers making claims through anti-examples as well. Authors using anti-examples are (to name a few) Jayne C. Lammers, David T. Z. Mindich, Ulf Hagen and Jill Dolan. When they use anti-examples they find something that shows the contrary. In other words, through an anti-example these authors locate examples that show the opposite of what they are researching in order to understand their topic of study better.

content that is created by ‘normal’ people. Furthermore, beauty standards change over time and I aim to capture what this standard is on Instagram at the time of writing. Thus, in order to figure out how various female social media influencers discuss the beauty standard on Instagram, I analyse different accounts that openly critique what they consider the beauty standards on Instagram to be. It is important to consider that this analysis of beauty standards on Instagram is focussed solely on the beauty standard for women. Naturally there is one for men as well that might be just as unattainable and toxic, however this will not be discussed in the span of my thesis because it focusses on women. Here I also want to address that my case studies consider of (as far as I can tell) only white women, or light-skinned women. It should thus be considered that they mostly tackle the beauty standard for white women and thus do not deal with issues of race, which are issues that must be discussed as well when it comes to beauty standards. Similarly, as far as I can tell my case studies only exemplify cisgendered women meaning that I cannot dig deeper into issues regarding being trans on Instagram either.

5.2 – Body Type



Figure 1 – Megan Jayne Crabbe “Exactly As I’m Supposed to Be”

The first anti-example of what the beauty standard is on Instagram, is one taken from the Instagram account of Megan Jayne Crabbe. Crabbe has a following of 1.2 million people as of writing. Apart from managing her Instagram account, Crabbe has written the book *Body Positive Power* and works as a presenter. As her book clearly suggests, she is a body positivity advocate and her online presence echoes this. Figure 1, shown on the left, exemplifies the content that Crabbe usually posts, which consists of stylised images that show her body as it is, and that make clear that she does not aim to change her body anymore (as she previously struggled with an eating disorder).¹²³ Crabbe’s Instagram account mainly revolves around being happy with the person that she is and the body that she has. Although not all of her content is directly body positive, she often posts photos of herself in

swimwear or lingerie without trying to make her body look any different than she claims it to really be. Through this, she means to convey the message that her body is also worthy of being visible and existing on the internet and that she does not need to hide it.

¹²³ meganjaynecrabbe, Instagram, accessed April 8, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/meganjaynecrabbe/>.

The screenshot above shows one of Crabbe's posts in which the viewer can see a photo of her stomach, and the cut out words "exactly as I'm supposed to be -MJC [Megan Jayne Crabbe]."¹²⁴ This image is accompanied by the following caption:

"What if the parts of yourself you've always believed are wrong aren't wrong at all? What if your body is doing exactly what it needs to do to carry you through this moment in your life? What if the body you're supposed to have is the one you're already in? In a world where we're told in countless ways every day that we're supposed to be something we're not, there's power in saying no, I'm exactly as I'm supposed to be. Love from someone who was always supposed to be soft-bellied and covered in flowers 🌻🌿💜"

*[Image description: a close-up photo of Megan's stomach which is brown and softly rolled, there are dried sunflowers, daisies and leaves on her skin surrounding torn pieces of paper with hand lettering that reads "exactly as I'm supposed to be". She's wearing green and pink floral underwear.]*¹²⁵

The caption and the photo work together to tell the viewer that the media images that they are usually fed, are not real and not healthy. When Crabbe says "what if the parts of yourself you've always believed aren't wrong at all?" it is important to question where the belief that certain parts of ones body are wrong has come from in the first place and this is where Crabbe signals a beauty standard. As she notes that she is now at peace with knowing that she was "always supposed to be soft-bellied" we learn that the beauty standard that she always felt like she needed to abide by told her that she was not allowed to have any fat on her stomach. Thus Crabbe notes that she perceives a norm in which stomachs are supposed to be flat in order to be allowed to exist on the internet. This is further amplified by Crabbe's statement in which she says: "there's power in saying no,"¹²⁶ because in her post, Crabbe is saying no to the standard that makes her feel like she must be thin in order to be beautiful. The statement through which she makes clear that she is no longer accepting the idea that she can only be beautiful by losing weight and is a first signal that one must be thin to be celebrated on the internet.

¹²⁴ meganjaynecrabbe, Instagram, accessed April 8, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CTPzgWFMucB/>.

¹²⁵ meganjaynecrabbe, Instagram, accessed April 8, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CTPzgWFMucB/>.

¹²⁶ meganjaynecrabbe, Instagram, accessed April 8, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CTPzgWFMucB/>.



Figure 2 – Nelly London “You Don’t Have to Hate Your Body”

Another anti-example of what the norm is for female bodies on Instagram, is the post pictured above, by Nelly London, who has about 485.000 followers as of writing. London describes herself in her Instagram bio as “that girl with the hip dips / normal stuff / eating disorder recovery / everything else.”¹²⁷ Especially the part in which she notes that her profile exhibits “normal stuff” is telling. London feels like she has to explicitly state on her Instagram profile that what can be seen there, is in fact normal, and not the outlier. Figure 2, which shows a carousel, is a good example of the kind of content that London posts about every other day. She often takes photos or makes videos of herself in basic underwear, special lingerie or athletic wear and in which she unapologetically shows off her body and emphasises the parts that are usually not considered Instagram appropriate, such as loose skin on her stomach.

In the post shown above, London is visible in white lingerie which is sponsored by *Lounge Underwear*, a lingerie brand which describes itself as a brand that makes comfort sexy, and which is supposed to empower the one wearing their underwear.¹²⁸ Visiting the Instagram page of the brand shows the expected content, namely of thin women with hourglass figures and flat stomachs wearing their lingerie, but it also features women who do not necessarily fit this standard wearing their brand. Models who do not fit the standard on their page are pregnant women, breastfeeding women, plus size women, women with stretch marks and amputees.¹²⁹ It makes sense for this brand to sponsor women who actively go against the grain of the beauty standard on Instagram, and London fits this image neatly. Circling back to London’s post, she shows herself in special lingerie without compromising how her body looks. She uses this lingerie to draw attention to her body and she is not hiding it. The words

¹²⁷ _nelly_london, Instagram, accessed April 11, 2022, https://www.instagram.com/_nelly_london/.

¹²⁸ loungeunderwear, Instagram, accessed April 11, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/loungeunderwear/>.

¹²⁹ loungeunderwear, Instagram, accessed April 11, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/loungeunderwear/>.

featured in the photos that say “you do not have to hate your body” reflect the sentiment of the photos. She explains her feelings further in the photo’s caption as she notes:

“It seems like a weird concept right? Not hating your body. We were always taught that we should hate them, like, really hate them. We are expected to torture them with restriction and excessive exercise and do everything we can to shrink them, and then grow them, but only in certain places, but then actually shrink them again. It’s exhausting.

You don’t have to love your body every day, you don’t even have to like it all the time, but you can be okay with it. You can appreciate it for what it does for you, for keeping you alive, letting you breathe and letting you feel. It would be amazing if you could wake up and passionately fall in love with every single inch of your body, but that’s probably not realistic for most of us. Next time you feel yourself thinking unkind thoughts towards your body, try gently reminding yourself something like - “hey, it’s okay that I don’t love my body today, maybe I’ll feel differently tomorrow, but I know I don’t hate it” ❤️.

Beautiful underwear: [@loungeunderwear](#) [#loveletterswithlounge](#)”¹³⁰

In this caption, London describes a kind of body acceptance in which she feels like it is not necessary to constantly love your body. This in contrast to that she feels like she has been told over and over again that working towards a body that she would constantly love is the right thing to do. London walks a line between following Instagram’s culture and critiquing it, as she wears lingerie, has her nails done, has clearly thought about the way in which the photos look and even managed to get her post sponsored by a brand. The way in which she does this however, highlights those parts of her body which are often not accepted as beautiful on Instagram. London chooses body acceptance as she notes that she would love to “wake up and passionately fall in love with every single inch of your body, but that’s probably not realistic for most of us.”¹³¹ As Helena Darwin and Amara Miller write: “Mainstream Body Positivity is strongly characterized by postfeminist sensibilities. This faction generally constructs individual choice as the primary means of personal empowerment, while embracing ideals of beauty and sexiness as key elements of positive body image.”¹³² Thus going against this extreme positivity, London notes that for some people body acceptance is the only thing attainable and that that is okay. What has thus become clear is that for London, she finds that the standard on Instagram is that stomachs have to be flat and bodies have to be thin, but not only that, she ought to love her body constantly as well. She goes against

¹³⁰ _nelly_london, Instagram, accessed April 11, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CZfLf8Eq3kb/>.

¹³¹ _nelly_london, Instagram, accessed April 11, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CZfLf8Eq3kb/>.

¹³² Darwin and Miller, “Factions, Frames, and Postfeminism(s) in the Body Positive Movement,” 880.

this postfeminist informed view of body positivity through arguing for body acceptance in which she sometimes sits with her body as it is, without a clear opinion of it.

Brianna, who runs the Instagram account *briannas_day*, also notes the idea of body acceptance in her Instagram bio. Specifically, she has a focus on the way the female body looks postpartum as well

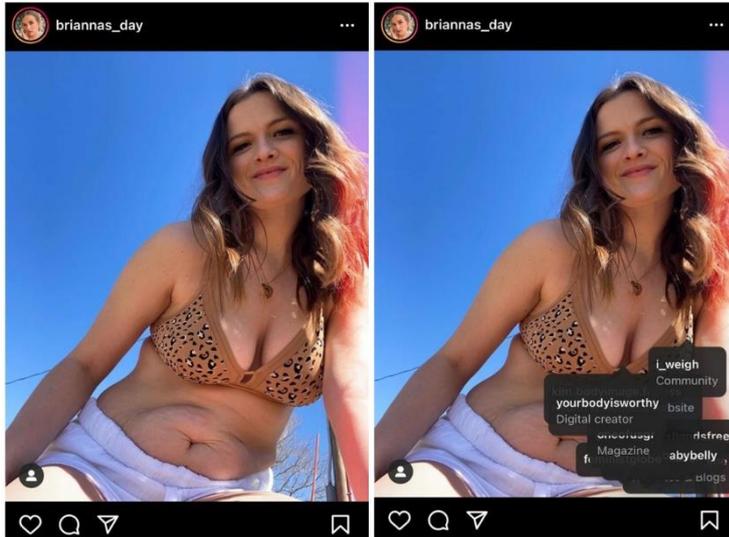


Figure 3 – Brianna “Here’s the Thing...”

as on eating disorder recovery.¹³³ At the time of writing, Brianna has about 21.000 followers on Instagram. Figure 3, shown on the left, shows her most recent post as of writing and shows off her postpartum body unapologetically. Brianna can also be seen to smile in the photo which is recurrent in her content. In the post, Brianna has captured herself at peace with the way her body looks. The caption accompanying this post makes specific points of critique

regarding the way in which people constantly feel pressure to post pictures of themselves or to share visual representations of their bodies on the internet in other ways. Brianna writes:

“Here’s the thing...

You are not in debt to anyone.

You don’t owe anyone a single thing.

You don’t owe anyone the perfect bikini picture, or pictures to convince people that you are happy in your body. Or pictures to put off that you’re happy or live an exciting life.

And you definitely don’t own anyone an explanation as to why you are who and how you are.

You just don’t.

Self love can be represented through those things, but it lives mostly outside of photos, videos and captions.

Here’s your permission slip to live like that. Exist in your body. For you.

Because you DO owe yourself that.

¹³³ *briannas_day*, Instagram, accessed April 11, 2022, https://www.instagram.com/briannas_day/.

[#normalizenormalbodies](#) [#selflovejourney](#) [#humanizehumanbodies](#) [#yourbodyunleashed](#)¹³⁴

I want to focus on two important statements that Brianna makes. First, she notes that “[y]ou don’t owe anyone the perfect bikini picture, or pictures to convince people that you are happy in your body.”¹³⁵ With this, Brianna implies that the norm is that people share photos of their perfect bikini body in swimwear in order to convey to others that they are happy with the way they look. Brianna, on the other hand, shares a photo of herself in which she does not show off a flat stomach, but rather one that she describes as normal. She appears to do so happily, as she is smiling in the photo. This furthermore conveys the message that one can be happy with a “normal” body but also denotes that “normal” bodies are not considered normal on Instagram. Her use of the hashtag [#normalizenormalbodies](#) as well as [#humanizehumanbodies](#) shows her critical view toward the usual perfect bikini body photo that is persistent on Instagram and Brianna’s message is clearly that photos of “perfect” bodies are not normal, but should be considered the outliers. She shows that she perceives a norm on social media that she does not consider normal and is thus actively contesting standards of beauty on the platform. Secondly, Brianna continues her caption by arguing that self love can be represented through selfies of oneself, but that it “lives mostly outside of photos, videos and captions.”¹³⁶ This last part signals that Brianna has found that the culture on Instagram tells her that she must show off her happiness through photos and videos on the platform, but that she has decided that that is not what happiness lies in. Nonetheless, content on Instagram is thus perceived as a vehicle through which people show off how happy they are with their body and thus that publicly voicing a discontent with one’s body is unwanted on the platform. This is reminiscent of the in the theoretical framework discussed notion of voluntary vulnerability. As Brianna makes it clear that she knows that posting a photo in which her postpartum stomach is clearly visible is not considered normal, this content can be considered an act of resistance as she knows she can be the subject of moral scrutiny.¹³⁷ This further exemplifies that what Brianna is showing through her post is not considered normal on Instagram and that the norm thus consists of flat stomachs and thin youthful bodies.

Although the three anti-examples described above voice their critique of the platform differently, they are critiquing a similar culture. All three find themselves in an online culture that regards being thin, happy with oneself and perfect as the norm. Especially the dominance of having to be happy with who you are signals a prevalence of neoliberal informed postfeminist thinking on the platform. Furthermore, having looser skin, a stomach that is not perfectly flat or an otherwise “imperfect” body is something that one ought to hide on the platform. Something important to note here

¹³⁴ briannas_day, Instagram, accessed April 11, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CcL9qxqOslh/>.

¹³⁵ briannas_day, Instagram, accessed April 11, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CcL9qxqOslh/>.

¹³⁶ briannas_day, Instagram, accessed April 11, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CcL9qxqOslh/>.

¹³⁷ Tiidenberg and Whelan, “‘Not like That, Not for That, Not by Them’,” 94-95.

is that the three examples posed above are examples of women who still present themselves as fairly traditionally feminine. Posing in underwear with clothing that shows off the body is something that is perceived as the feminine thing to do online and they are abiding by this rule. Like noted in my theoretical framework, it is what Gill describes when she notes that “femininity is defined as a bodily property rather than a social, structural or psychological one” and that “in today’s media, possession of a ‘sexy body’ is presented as women’s key (of not sole) source of identity.”¹³⁸ All three are thus anti-examples that are still relatively gender-normative. Other anti-examples of women who do not abide by traditionally feminine ideas are sure to exist, but as I have not focussed on such accounts I cannot say much about that. Thus what can be concluded from these anti-examples is that the beauty standard for feminine women on Instagram means being thin and athletic and be willing to show off this body.

5.3 – Skin

Another important aspect of the beauty standard on Instagram is the skin. As selfies often focus solely on one’s face, the body can be easily hidden and the face and its skin are in focus. Airbrushing and photoshopping photos are common practice, as noted in my theoretical framework, and such practices are not limited to the body but happen in photos and videos of the face as well. Especially taking Instagram’s integrated filters into account, changing the appearance of one’s face is common practice on the app as levels of editability are high as well which the previous chapter has shown.

Someone who critiques the normalisation of airbrushing the skin and the use of facial filters is Maia, from the Instagram account *its_just_acne* whose account has around 101.000 followers as of writing. Maia describes herself as acne-positive, as she is “just a girl with acne, helping you to love the skin you’re in.”¹³⁹ Her account exists mainly of images in which the acne on her face is the main subject of the photo or video as well as images in which she compares the fake, airbrushed skin with real

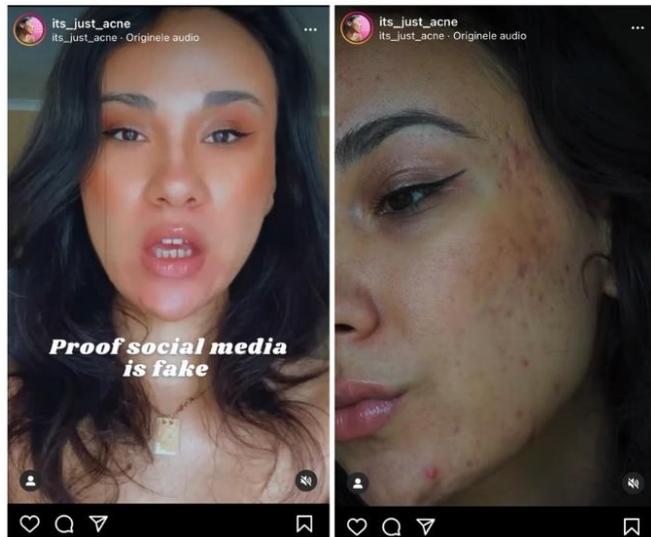


Figure 4 – Maia “Proof Social Media is Fake”

skin. The images shown in figure 4 are from a reel that she created, which is exemplary of the kind of content that her account is full of. The video begins with Maia lip-syncing to a song that is about posing for a picture, and on which she is using one of Instagram’s build-in filters. After a while, the shot changes

¹³⁸ Gill, “Postfeminist Media Culture,” 149.

¹³⁹ *its_just_acne*, Instagram, accessed April 12, 2022, https://www.instagram.com/its_just_acne/.

to a seemingly unedited video in which she shows off her cheeks and on which the acne on her face is clearly visible. Maia further strengthens her critique with the following caption:

“⚠️ *This is your reminder: filters are not real life. Flawless and airbrushed skin is not a skin type and it's more than okay to have acne. It's more than okay to have scars. Please don't ever compare yourself to an app that can alter everything that makes you BEAUTIFUL* 🍓

[#socialmediavsreality](#) [#acne](#) [#bodypositive](#)

[#itsjustacne](#) [#texturedskin](#) [#beyou](#) [#nofilter](#) [#weartheredlippie](#) [#acnepositivity](#)
[#youarenotalone](#) [#acnecommunity](#) [#quotestoliveby](#) [#worthy](#)”¹⁴⁰

Maia's caption clearly signals how normal it is on Instagram to airbrush one's skin or to use filters on the content that one uploads. Furthermore, she uses the hashtag [#socialmediavsreality](#) which also signals that Maia feels like there is a clear divide between the way people look in real life and the way in which they represent themselves on social media. Kanai's argument in which she notes that online, women feel pressure to look like the best version of themselves is strengthened by the integration of face filters which make people's skin look clear and even changes the shape of their nose, lips or their entire face.¹⁴¹ As Maia is making clear, using such filters and thus keeping up unreal appearances on the platform is common practice.

Someone with similar critiques but a different Instagram aesthetic, is Ally who runs the account [allywithacne](#). Her account has a smaller following than Maia's with a following of almost 16.000 users. In her Instagram bio she describes the profile with the following: “🍓 acne positivity, skincare, & pcos.

🦋 helping you feel beYOUtiful in your skin 🦋.”¹⁴² She thus also focusses on acne positivity but also incorporates skincare. This is visible in the content she creates as she tags the products she uses and often posts Instagram stories in which she walks through her current skincare routine. The use of the strawberry emoji in her Instagram

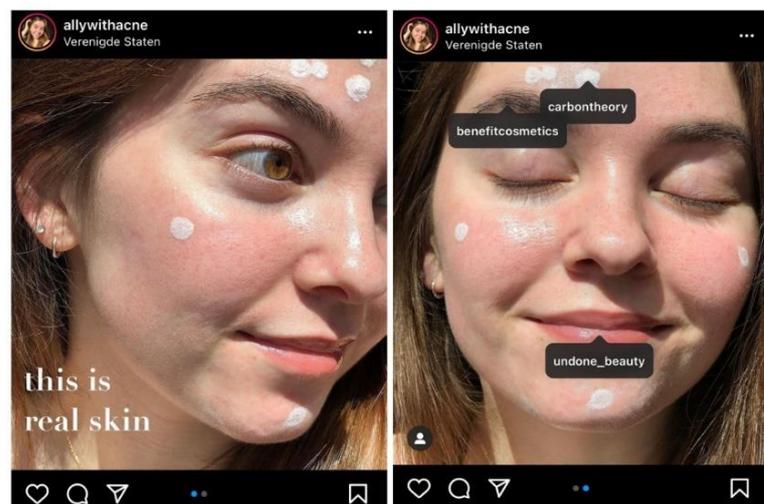


Figure 5 – Ally “This is Real Skin”

¹⁴⁰ its_just_acne, Instagram, accessed April 12, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CcLGL6TDaah/>.

¹⁴¹ Kanai, “Thinkin beyond the Internet as a Tool,” 88-89.

¹⁴² allywithacne, Instagram, accessed April 12, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/allywithacne/>.

bio is something seen before in the caption of Maia of its_just_acne and appears to be an important emoji in acne positivity circles as the strawberry refers to the red spots on people's skin caused by acne. Some refer to acne as "strawberry freckles" as well. The incorporation of this emoji signals an attempt to destigmatise acne and the people who suffer from it and it also shows that on Instagram, a community exists which understands the way in which "strawberry freckles" ought to be understood. Tiidenberg and Whelan describe this literacy within communities as they note that within online communities people know how to interpret images or emojis whereas those outside of it would interpret that same image or emoji completely differently.¹⁴³ In other words, a collective which is solidary in its support of destigmatising visible acne exist on the platform. This destigmatisation is also visible in her latest post, shown above, in which she tackles what she thinks real skin should look like on social media.¹⁴⁴ As can be seen in figure 5, Ally has photographed her face from two angles in which she is visibly wearing anti-breakout cream on her spots and on which her pores and the redness of her skin can be seen. The caption that accompanies these also emphasises that she is showing "real" skin:

"Real skin reminder on your feed 🍓"

It's easy to feel insecure when all we see are airbrushed pictures of fake skin on social media

Real skin looks like real skin! Your pores, hair, texture are all so so normal

*Hope you show yourself love today because you deserve it ❤️."*¹⁴⁵

The caption that Ally writes signals that she has found Instagram to be a place where there is no visible real skin which in turn causes people to feel insecure about their own skin. She notes that most skin is airbrushed and thus that skin textures are removed from such images. Real skin, she argues, has pores, hairs and other textures that are not supposed to be visible on social media such as Instagram. The emphasis that Ally puts on her showing *real* skin, allows me to deduct that most skin that she sees on Instagram is skin that she considers *fake* which is taking a turn from the way in which the notion "real" is used. In the section discussing the norm for women's bodies online, real was used as being equal to normal. By noting that most skin on Instagram is airbrushed, but that hers is not, Ally is contrasting

¹⁴³ Tiidenberg and Whelan, "Not like That, Not for That, Not by Them'," 93.

¹⁴⁴ I am aware that "real" on a platform such as Instagram is a contested notion as nothing on the platform is unmediated. Even content that presents itself as "real" is shaped by the platform's restrictions. People who present themselves through mediated content are always shaping this mediated version of themselves whether they realise it or not. This does not mean that allywithacne's version of "realness" on Instagram should not be taken seriously however. She is actively going against the airbrushed standard on the platform and chooses to show a version of herself that she considers a "real" representation of herself.

¹⁴⁵ allywithacne, Instagram, accessed April 12, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CcLHmP7LVDU/>.

“real” with “fake.” Ally thus understands the way in which clear skin is represented online is inherently fake and edited. Although she notes in the accompanying caption that pores, hair and skin texture are normal, she argues that mediations of skin that do not include pores, hairs and texture are thus fake. What Ally from allywithacne thus locates on Instagram is that airbrushing and photoshopping selfies in order to create perfect and unblemished skin can be assumed to be normal in Instagram, leading to the beauty standard that skin must be perfect and flawless. Where “real” is equalled to “normal” in the previous section on body type, photoshop and airbrushing is not discussed as much but the focus is more on the exclusion of bodies that do not fit the norm. For Ally on the other hand “real” is the opposite of fake, and she notes that it is common practice to airbrush one’s skin to make it look “perfect.”

The last post that I analyse in order to establish what the skin ideal is on Instagram, is a post from Izzie Rodgers. In her Instagram bio she explains to her 198.000 followers that she is “exploring [her] newly found self-love” with regards to acne and body positivity.¹⁴⁶ Her account shows a colourful array of different commentaries of the dominant Instagram ideals but for now I focus on a post that tackles the problematic skin ideals on the platform. In this post, shown in figure 6, Rodgers shows her take on the Instagram trend called “no makeup Sundays” in which people post a photo of themselves without any makeup. Rodgers shows that even when people claim to not be wearing any makeup, that they twist the truth by still wearing makeup or by using filters or other photoshopping programmes that change their natural appearance. The photo on the left of the post shows the kind of “no makeup Sundays” selfies that Rodgers considers most common, whereas the photo on the right shows what her face actually looks like without makeup.¹⁴⁷ As she puts it in the caption:



Figure 6 – Izzie Rodgers “No Makeup Sundays”

“I’ve always struggled with thinking everyone else is way more ‘naturally beautiful’ than me...

When in reality, most of the ‘no makeup selfies’ we grew up idolising... aren’t even the real deal.

¹⁴⁶ izzierodgers, Instagram, accessed April 12, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/izzierodgers/>.

¹⁴⁷ Although I can never be sure that this is actually what Rodgers looks like without makeup, she is telling me, as a member of her audience that she is. Photos are performative mediations and especially so on a platform like Instagram.

So I thought I'd take one for the team and expose myself to help you feel a little better.

This is what truly comes with a 'no makeup selfie' - dark eyes, overgrown brows, pigmentation differences, acne, scars, dry lips and pores.

I find it SO unbelievably sad that, as a society, we have gotten to the point of actually feeling embarrassed about our faces as they naturally are. Imagine birthing a child into this world knowing that one day that beautiful face will feel like it needs to be hidden. It's tragic really.

I hope this helps any young girls out there realise the image on the left is truly what a no makeup selfie is.

Happy Sunday chicken 🍗



[#acne](#) [#acnescars](#) [#acnepositivity](#) [#bodypositivity](#) [#bodyconfience](#) [#selfcare](#) [#selflove](#) [#bereal](#)
[#selfacceptance](#) [#loveyourself](#) [#cysticacne](#) [#instavsreality](#) [#instagramvsreality](#) [#nofilter](#)¹⁴⁸

As Rodgers writes that the “no makeup selfies” are not even real and that she thus felt like she needed to “expose” herself in order to help others feel better about themselves it becomes clear that lying about whether you are being real online or not is common practice as well. As Rodgers’ “real no makeup selfie” comes off as radical, it signals the abnormality of being unfiltered on Instagram. Rodgers also uses the hashtag *#instagramvsreality* which is similar to Maia’s use of *#socialmediavsreality* through which both denote that social media is fake and should all be taken with a grain of salt which the both of them are willing to provide. Furthermore, it appears that Rodgers agrees with Ally as she also posits real against fake as she writes that “most of the ‘no makeup selfies’ we grew up idolising... aren’t even the real deal.”¹⁴⁹ She thus also sees the online representation of people’s skin as a fake representation and thus as the opposite of what “real” skin looks like in “real” life. The critique, that these acne positive content creators are thus providing through their Instagram content, is taking content that is popular on the platform, such as selfies, but going against the popular narrative around such content. In this case this means showing off “imperfect” skin and not hiding acne in selfies. This form of critique exemplifies the earlier mentioned *meta*-critique, as the content creators engage with popular practices on Instagram

¹⁴⁸ izzierodgers, Instagram, accessed April 12, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CaNdix9rNiv/>.

¹⁴⁹ izzierodgers, Instagram, accessed April 12, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CaNdix9rNiv/>.

and through this engagement critique the practices often associated with this content. This helps to break down postfeminist individualist narratives while building up a kind of female solidarity.

The acne positive content described above critiques the photoshopping and airbrushing practices that people perform on their own photos as well as the build-in filters of the Instagram environment. Through this critique it follows that such editing of one's photos and in this case specifically one's skin is normal on Instagram which feeds into the beauty standard for women that tells women they can only show clear and flawless skin on the platform. Most importantly, the three examples appear to posit their representation of "real" skin against the "fake" representations of skin that they often find on Instagram. "Fake" skin, or airbrushed skin is something that the three women find recurrent and persistent on the platform. Something that should be noted is that the acne positive community that I have analysed is overwhelmingly white. Searching for the hashtag *#acnepositive* for example shows almost exclusively white people showing off their acne. Furthermore, accounts on which different acne positive example are collected are usually also almost exclusively a collection of content created by white people or at least by people who at first glance appear white. Although I cannot know precisely what the reason for this is, it is likely that it has something to do with white people's privilege to explore such issues because they are not also burdened by discrimination against their race. Perhaps being white provides one with the freedom to explore other types of injustices and prejudice. On the other hand, the whiteness of acne positive spaces might also reflect the society-wide exclusion of Black people because of their skin colour. Although all of this is mere speculation it should be taken into account for further research.

5.4 – Lifestyle

Not only women's bodies and skin have to abide by certain norms on Instagram, but their lifestyle has to as well. The strong focus on being responsible for one's own happiness and health, as previously discussed in my theoretical framework is one that comes back strongly in dominant discourses regarding how women ought to behave on Instagram.

The first anti-example for the dominant discourse around lifestyle on Instagram is from Nelly London, whose account I have mentioned in the section regarding body as well. On the photo shown on the right in figure 7, she has clearly photoshopped herself in a satirical manner. She is wearing athletic wear and is standing in a gym while posing to show off her “muscles.” She has photoshopped the photo in such a manner that she has a tiny waist, wide hips and large



biceps. Zooming in on the edited photo also shows that she has drawn the outline of a sixpack on her stomach. She has thus photoshopped the preferred bodily features that are usually pushed on Instagram onto her body in a satirical manner. This critique of what the female body on Instagram ought to look like has been discussed above, but her critical stance towards Instagram-pushed lifestyles becomes clear when looking at the caption:

“To get these amazing results all you have to do is buy my meal plan, download the app, enter my giveaway, tag 73 friends, join a 402 day challenge, run 6 marathons simultaneously, and whisper ‘macros’ into your pillow until you run out of oxygen. Oh, and don’t forget it’s not a diet, it’s a 🦄LifEsTylE chAnGE 🦄

I’m joking, obviously.

Jokes aside, if you find something that you love and works for you (whatever you may be trying to achieve) that’s amazing. Moving my body and eating what it needs is a pleasure and a privilege that I will never take for granted, some of the resources out there are actually pretty wonderful. It just so happens that this time of year is especially shit when it comes to feeling pressured to change. This week has been nothing but diet ads (pretending not to be diets, obviously) endless exercise plans, get in shape this, drop a dress size that. It’s a lot. Weight watchers, noom, slimming world, we know the rest, spending thousands on targeting us through ads at this very moment.

If you can manage to drown out the diet culture madness that is screaming at us right now,

even for one minute, try to just listen to what your body needs, listen to what YOU need. The rest is not worth hearing.

 I saw [@lucymountain](#) [@nobsapp](#) do this to a photo and it made me laugh so much, who by the way has a wonderful anti diet culture app, 10/10 recommend.”¹⁵⁰

What becomes clear from this caption is that London has found Instagram to be deeply embedded in a culture of dieting and fitness. Especially the first part of the caption denotes the way in which diet culture and fitness culture is embedded into Instagram’s economy as London satirically writes that “all you have to do is buy my meal plan, download the app, enter my giveaway, tag 73 friends, join a 402 day challenge, run 6 marathons simultaneously, and whisper ‘macros’ into your pillow until you run out of oxygen. Oh, and don’t forget it’s not a diet, it’s a ✨LifEsTyLE chAnGE ✨.”¹⁵¹ Giveaways and tagging friends is a practice on Instagram which is often used to grow one’s audience as this leads to reaching more people on the platform. As London is poking fun at this practice, she signals an inauthenticity at the kind of lifestyles that are pushed on the platform. The question rises why people are urging their followers to follow their diet plans or fitness plans. It is likely not out of the goodness of their heart, but rather because such lifestyle plans are a business plan. A discrepancy thus exists between people trying to come off as authentic to their audience while at the same time trying to sell their audience products to keep their business going. As noted in my theoretical framework, Banet-Weiser goes into this discrepancy with regards to authenticity as well and she found such discrepancies to largely be the result of people trying to be authentic in a neoliberal context.¹⁵² London’s critical attitude towards the fitness and diet culture, signals that for her, this kind of culture is prevalent on the platform. Thus, London finds that on Instagram it is common practice to try and sell an audience a certain lifestyle and that this practice is inauthentic. In other words, one could argue that London considers this practice “fake,” which allows me to circle back to the contrast between the real and the fake which was also denoted in the acne positive community.

¹⁵⁰ [_nelly_london](#), Instagram, accessed April 9, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CYHrMxaqBFI/>.

¹⁵¹ [_nelly_london](#), Instagram, accessed April 9, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CYHrMxaqBFI/>.

¹⁵² Banet-Weiser, *Authentic™*, 80.

Another big staple of lifestyle examples which are embedded in diet culture on Instagram are videos such as “what I eat in a day,” sharing recipes, and sharing ways to eat healthier. As food plays a big role in people’s lifestyles, Instagram’s lifestyle section heavily feeds into this. The anti-example of Megan Jayne Crabbe, who I have mentioned before, clearly signals what the standard “what I eat in a day” videos denote. In her video,



Figure 8 – Megan Jayne Crabbe “What I Eat in a Day”

Crabbe shows seven shots of different foods, on which she has stuck words. Together, these seven shots create her answer to the question what she eats in a day: “whatever the fuck I want. Intuitive eating means listening to my own body and not comparing with people on the internet.”¹⁵³ Screenshots from this video can be seen in figure 8. Crabbe is thus being critical of the idea that one should base their eating habits on, or compare their eating habits to, people’s ideas regarding food on the internet. From this, I can derive that Crabbe has found that comparing food and eating habits with other people on Instagram is considered normal. Because she is critical of this idea, she signals that she considers this a toxic trend on Instagram. Thus, Crabbe notes that self-surveillance on Instagram can also seep into people’s offline lives as they allow their food choices to be influenced by e.g. “what I eat in a day” videos that they see online. This observation strengthens Kanai’s self-surveillance argument as it makes clear that the self-surveillance that happens both off- and online appears to be intertwined. It is difficult to completely separate these two spaces of self-surveillances because what people see online, appears to influence how they feel about themselves and their lives offline. Furthermore, Crabbe’s critique of comparing practices on Instagram shows that comparing oneself to other people online is something she finds prevalent on Instagram. Considering the neoliberal and postfeminist informed narratives on Instagram, the breaking down of solidarity on the platform due to such comparison practices also seeps

¹⁵³ meganjaynecrabbe, Instagram, accessed April 12, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CT2ZojfIOuQ/>.

through. The idea of comparing one's lifestyle with others' lifestyles on Instagram is, according to Crabbe, something that is persistent and normalised.

Where Crabbe is being strongly critical of the lifestyle ideas posed upon women on Instagram, Bree Lenehan takes a more nuanced approach in which she follows certain preferred lifestyle aspects,

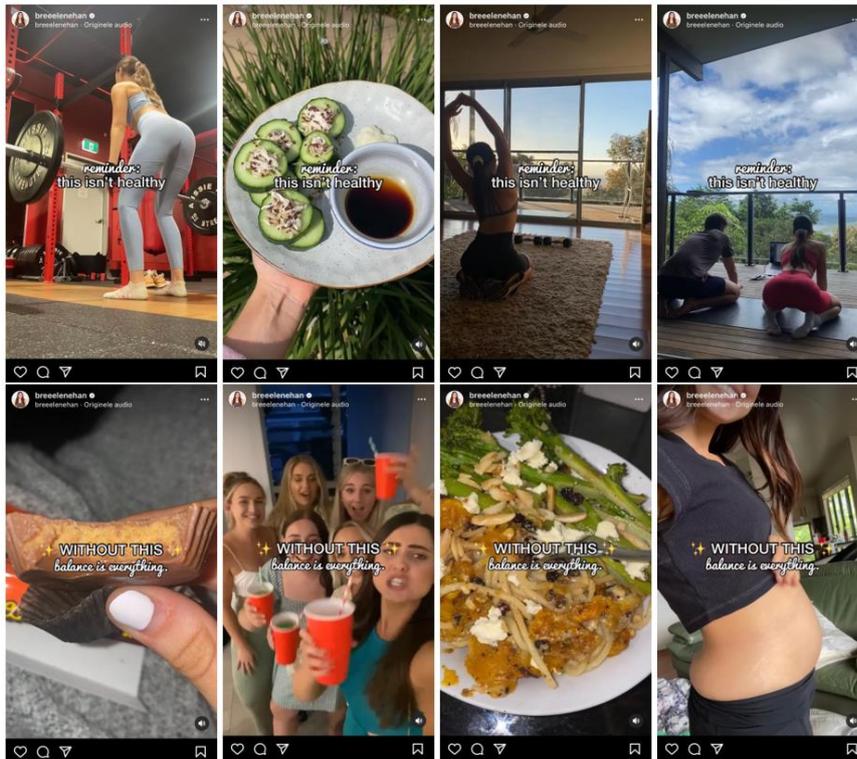


Figure 9 – Bree Lenehan “Reminder: This Isn’t Healthy...Without This. Balance is Everything”

but also notes that a good lifestyle is all about balance. She describes herself to her 636.000 followers as “your Aussie internet BFF” who is into health, self love and positivity.¹⁵⁴ In contrast to all the creators mentioned above, Lenehan built an extensive business around ideals of fitness on Instagram by being the owner of a game called “Sweat Roulette,” which promises its users to make exercise fun as well as

being the co-owner of Macro Mike’s mug cakes, which brands itself as a vitamin/supplement business on Instagram, and thus targets those who want to live an “appropriate” lifestyle.¹⁵⁵ Lenehan’s profile is full of classic workout selfies, but also features “honest” photos of her wearing that same workout attire in which she shows her bloated stomach or in which she shows how posing and wearing high-waisted yoga pants can completely change the way one’s body looks in photos. Thus, Lenehan is not critiquing the idea of following online diets and fitness regimes but she is trying to change the narrative around them. The screenshots shown in figure 9 are from a reel of Lenehan’s Instagram page. The first four images show the text “reminder: this isn’t healthy” on top of different videos in which Lenehan works out, eats healthy and meditates. The last four images show the text “without this, balance is everything” on top of different videos of Lenehan eating “unhealthy” snacks, partying, eating big meals and with a bloated stomach.¹⁵⁶ Lenehan’s content signals how normal lifestyle content revolves around eating healthy and working out as a way of taking good care of yourself while Lenehan also feels like this

¹⁵⁴ breeelenehan, Instagram, accessed April 13, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/breeelenehan/>.

¹⁵⁵ breeelenehan, Instagram, accessed April 13, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/breeelenehan/>.

macr0mike, Instagram, accessed April 13, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/macr0mike/>.

¹⁵⁶ breeelenehan, Instagram, accessed April 13, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CcSSvK9BYnU/>.

image of taking care of oneself must be more balanced. In other words, she fights for an approach to health that is less all or nothing. At the same time however, her account exists in the context of her appearing to earn money through the popular lifestyle ideas on Instagram such as working out and eating healthy. Lenehan can be considered to walk the difficult line between authenticity and inauthenticity while making money from it, like described above and in line with Banet-Weiser's arguments. Lenehan has managed to create a brand that sells the idea that one should be kind to oneself and to not believe everything one sees online, while at the same time providing the products that promise their users that they will be healthier and happier. The reel mentioned above is accompanied by a long caption in which Lenehan further explains what this "healthy balance" is all about to her:

"This isn't healthy... without THIS! (wait for it)

The "all or nothing" mindset is not it.

Having a sustainable, balanced, long-term approach to your lifestyle is what will last. The key to being truly healthy, happy & feeling fit is to create healthy habits, not restrictions. You don't have to be extreme, just consistent! A healthy lifestyle should add to your life, not take things away from it 🌱

First of all, I've learned that health & fitness isn't what I first thought it was... It's NOT:

- 👉 all or nothing*
- 👉 eating small amounts of food*
- 👉 a quick, overnight, easy fix*
- 👉 working out for hours every single day*
- 👉 very low body fat*
- 👉 ignoring hunger cues*
- 👉 sweating as much as possible*
- 👉 weighing myself every morning*
- 👉 forcing myself to say "no"*
- 👉 filling my mind with unkind, harsh, restrictive thoughts about my body, diet & routine*

What I've learned is that a healthy lifestyle & werkin' on my fitness isn't actually about a certain body shape, for me it's about the state of my mind & quality of life...

★ when I'm taking care of my body

- ★ *creating sustainable habits*
- ★ *nourishing my body well*
- ★ *allowing it to rest*
- ★ *feeling strong*
- ★ *accepting that my body has fat & my weight will fluctuate*
- ★ *focusing on how I FEEL rather than how I look*
- ★ *actually enjoying exercise*
- ★ *eating nutrient-dense foods, but also sometimes just eating plain yummy foods that offer no real nutritional value*
- ★ *letting go of guilt & unnecessary stress*
- ★ *appreciating what my body does for me*
- ★ *saying “YES” more... YES let’s go out for dinner, YES a hike sounds great, YES I’ll have some dessert, YES I GET to workout today (instead of “I have to”), YES my body has changed a little & YES that’s okay!*

That’s when I feel my healthiest, fittest & BEST 🤍

Remember, it’s not a short-term thing, there’s no finish line or end date... So make healthy choices / additions to your lifestyle that you love & can maintain FOREVER 😊

Leave a “🤍” in the comments if ur a healthy queen, do it for the accountability — remember it all starts in the mind!! 😊👑

inspo: [@growingannanas](#)

*[#healthjourney](#) [#nutrition](#) [#healthylifestyle](#) [#fitness](#) [#fitnessmotivation](#) [#healthmotivation](#)
[#balanceiskey](#)”¹⁵⁷*

Through this caption, Lenehan challenges the status quo with regards to Instagram’s fitness culture as well, but does not dismiss it altogether. Rather, Lenehan continues to promote fitness and focusing on one’s healthy as a good thing, through using hashtags such as #healthylifestyle, #fitness, and #fitnessmotivation, but is more nuance in her approach as appears from her focus on balance. As she writes that what she has learned “is that a healthy lifestyle & werkin’ on my fitness isn’t actually about

¹⁵⁷ breeelenehan, Instagram, accessed May 19, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CcSSvK9BYnU/>.

a certain body shape, for me it's about the state of my mind & quality of life..." Lenehan tries to reframe fitness as a means to look a certain way, to a means to feel good in your own skin, to try and be healthy to improve your quality of life and to "create healthy habits, not restrictions."¹⁵⁸ Lenehan thus finds herself in a lifestyle culture on Instagram that she deems too extreme and too focused on the way one looks, as she aims to nuance the fitness and lifestyle narrative on Instagram by adding balance to it and arguing that one should aim to be healthy for one's mind and life quality.

From the examples described above it follows that lifestyle content on Instagram often revolves around notions of eating healthy and working out. Instagram content is thus body-centric and about body regimes. Through these narratives, the frame that women are their bodies is re-established. Furthermore, these kinds of lifestyles have been shown to be very marketable, as certain lifestyles require certain workout attire, recipe books or other products to attain a particular way of living. As noted in my theoretical framework, the option to buy all these products and the freedom to buy certain lifestyles is often framed as a postfeminist freedom on neoliberal social media platforms. As Gill writes: "in the popular cultural discourses examined here, *women* are called on to self-manage and self-discipline."¹⁵⁹ On Instagram this is exactly what women are asked to do as well and this is taken even further. In order for women to maintain this self-discipline and self-management they are implicitly asked to buy the appropriate products to keep up appearances. In that same text, Gill wonders whether "neoliberalism is always gendered, and that women are constructed as its ideal subjects?"¹⁶⁰ From my analysis above, this does appear to be the case. Telling women they must look a certain way and following up with selling the products that promise women they will look that way seems like the ultimate marketing strategy that Instagram lends itself very well for. Bringing this analysis back to Foucault's notion of critique and the circumstances in which critique arises, the question of "how not to be governed *like that*, by that, in the name of those principles, with such and such an objective in mind and by means of such procedures, not like that, not for that, not by them" comes back into play.¹⁶¹ Although I go into this further in the next chapter, the examples shown above already show that self-discipline is assumed on Instagram, as certain femininities are deemed appropriate, where other are not. Going against the dominant discourse that women are supposed to present a particular, and highly curated version of themselves will be discussed as a form of *meta*-critique in chapter six.

5.5 – Being Visible as a Woman on Instagram

Now that I have laid down the dominant discourses that the Instagram users mentioned above appear to experience, I want to focus on previous research regarding visibility as a woman online. The female body is one that has historically never been neutral. Going from having the right to make decisions about

¹⁵⁸ breeelenehan, Instagram, accessed May 19, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CcSSvK9BYnU/>.

¹⁵⁹ Gill, "Postfeminist Media Culture," 164.

¹⁶⁰ Gill, "Postfeminist Media Culture," 164.

¹⁶¹ Foucault, "What is Critique?," 28.

their own bodies to having to look a certain way to be considered good enough, the female body is a continuous site of battle. Isabelle Coy-Dibley agrees with this as she describes the female body as “a battlefield of diverging concepts, regulations, values and modifications. It is seen as reproductive, sexual, insatiable, as a commodity, a place of purity, as Mary and Eve, of sin and flesh and monstrous appetites – a map of spatial, temporal and lives female experiences.”¹⁶² This description of the female body alone shows the complicated, conflicting and continually changing ideas that revolve around the female body. Women ought to look sexy but should not be overly sexual. Women must look beautiful, but cannot be vain. Women should be thin, but not care about what they eat too much. In other words, the behaviour and representation of women is constantly under surveillance by others. As John Berger writes in 1972:

“And so she comes to consider the *surveyor* and the *surveyed* within her as the two constituent yet always distinct elements of her identity as a woman. She has to survey everything she is and everything she does because how she appears to others [...] is of crucial importance for what is normally thought of as the success of her life. Her own sense of being in herself is supplanted by a sense of being appreciated as herself by another.”¹⁶³

Thus even during a time period relatively long before the internet, Berger notes that women are surveyed by others while also surveying themselves precisely because of this surveillance by others. It shows that way in which one ought to be a woman appears to be determined by external forces rather than by each individual woman separately and through her own reflections on womanhood and that this has been a trend which did not start with the rise of the internet, but one that began long before. External factors determining how women ought to look is something reflected in the first post by Nelly London that I discuss above. In her caption she notes that “[i]t seems like a weird concept right? Not hating your body. We were always taught that we should hate them, like, really hate them. We are expected to torture them with restriction and excessive exercise and do everything we can to shrink them, and then grow them, but only in certain places, but then actually shrink them again. It’s exhausting.”¹⁶⁴ In this quote, London directly refers to how she felt pressured into looking a certain way and her choice of words emphasise just how difficult this was for her. As she describes that women are taught that “we should hate [our bodies]” and “are expected to torture them” she makes clear that beauty standards are not harmless. This is reiterated by Amy Shields Dobson as she argues that young women are under immense pressure to look and behave a certain way and that the ways in which different women deal with this may vary, but that this pressure should not be considered lightly.¹⁶⁵ Because young women feel the pressure of being

¹⁶² Isabelle Coy-Dibley, "'Digitized Dysmorphia' of the Female Body," 1.

¹⁶³ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin Books, 1972), 46.

¹⁶⁴ *_nelly_london*, Instagram, accessed April 11, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CZfLf8Eq3kb/>.

¹⁶⁵ Dobson, “Performative Shamelessness,” 101.

looked at and having to abide by certain norms, many perform acts of self-surveillance. These acts of self-surveillance that are dominant on Instagram, are described by Brianna in her caption as well as she writes that “[y]ou don’t owe anyone the perfect bikini picture, or pictures to convince people that you are happy in your body.”¹⁶⁶ Through this statement, Brianna locates a type of self-surveillance in which women feel like they can only present a version of themselves online which shows off to the world that they are happy with themselves and their perfect bodies. Akane Kanai describes the act of self-surveillance as a feminine practice in which women constantly check up on themselves to make sure they look okay or otherwise match the high standards that are imposed on them.¹⁶⁷ Considering this practice of self-surveillance, Kanai takes a step back and notes that “girls’ practices of identity can be understood by reference to the social and cultural discourses within which girls’ identity-making is implicated.”¹⁶⁸ In other words, in order to understand the way and why girls construct certain identities, the social and cultural discourses within which these identities are created, must be taken into account. Kanai takes her argument further into the realm of online identity forming as she argues that online the act of self-surveillance manifests itself as well, and perhaps even stronger. On social networking sites especially, Kanai notes, girls are preoccupied with only uploading those photos in which they look “good” and she also notes that airbrushing or photoshopping photos in order to keep up appearances are normalised on social media.¹⁶⁹ These acts of self-surveillance are thus not only about trying to make yourself look a certain way through clothes, makeup and behaviours, but also mean that women make themselves look like a version that they could never achieve without digital alterations. This not only creates standards that are unachievable for other women, but also for the women who edit their photos digitally themselves. They have created a version of themselves that is quite literally unreal. This dominance of the unreal on Instagram is critiqued by Maia, Ally and Rodgers and Maia puts it as follows: “filters are not real life. Flawless and airbrushed skin is not a skin type and it’s more than okay to have acne. [...] Please don’t ever compare yourself to an app that can alter everything...”¹⁷⁰ Maia thus explicitly describes that she finds Instagram to be a platform that mainly shows airbrushed and unreal skin. She finds that there is very little space for sharing imperfections or real-life struggles that one might deal with offline. These factors might strengthen practices of self-surveillance.

Through the arguments made above, it becomes clear women cannot simply exist as themselves, and especially not online because they must abide by societal rules for women. This is in line with Sarah Banet-Weiser’s stance, that female bodies are still docile bodies.¹⁷¹ This means that even though women’s rights have been greatly expanded over the last hundred years, the female body is still one that is supposed to be submissive. Thus, for those who have a body that is thought to be female by others, it

¹⁶⁶ briannas_day, Instagram, accessed April 11, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CcL9qxqOslh/>.

¹⁶⁷ Kanai, “Thinking beyond the Internet as a Tool,” 88.

¹⁶⁸ Kanai, “Thinking beyond the Internet as a Tool,” 87.

¹⁶⁹ Kanai, “Thinking beyond the Internet as a Tool,” 88-89.

¹⁷⁰ its_just_acne, Instagram, accessed April 12, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CcLGL6TDaah/>.

¹⁷¹ Banet-Weiser, *Authentic™*, 79.

is considered appropriate to follow and not to lead. In terms of women's online presence, this means that critiquing the norm is unwanted behaviour. It is through this unwanted behaviour however, that I have explored what some consider the norm on Instagram to be in the first place.

5.6 – Conclusion

To conclude, with regards to the dominant discourse about female body norms I have located dominant discourses in three different areas about which the users mentioned above are critical. Firstly I discussed dominant ideas regarding women's body type on Instagram. Through my analysis I found that women are supposed to be thin, have flat stomachs and are supposed to show themselves being happy with their bodies. I also reflected on the dominant idea that for women, their bodies are constructed as being their most important characteristic, which strengthens the need for women to present themselves in a way that is deemed appropriate. After this, I turned to dominant discourses regarding women's skin and found that edited skin is considered the standard by the accounts I analysed. Airbrushing the skin and thus creating a skin type that by the analysed accounts is deemed "fake" appears prevalent on Instagram. Furthermore it should be noted that when it comes to skin, skin colour should be acknowledged as well. Although my analysis does not provide the appropriate amount of space to also dive into issues of racism, it should be acknowledged that clear skin is often also associated with white skin on the platform. As I researched the anti-examples I found that most acne positive accounts are also run by women who appear to be white, but stumbling upon accounts that do fit the dominant discourse around skin usually showed white women showing off their skin care routine to achieve the so-called "clean" look.¹⁷² This apparent relation between whiteness and the preferred skin on Instagram is a topic that requires much more research. Lastly I focused on ideas regarding lifestyle and found that women are made to feel like they are solely responsible for their own happiness and for the way they look. On Instagram, products are marketed towards women that are supposed to help them achieve the goals that are externally imposed on them. Self-discipline and self-management are important on Instagram and feed into neoliberal and postfeminist narratives on the platform.

¹⁷² This apparent connection made by Instagram users between "cleanliness" and whiteness is reminiscent of the narrative between cleanliness and whiteness as described by Toni Morrison in *The Bluest Eye*. In her 1970 novel, Morrison describes how one of the Black characters is incredibly concerned with keeping herself and her house as clean as possible, as this cleanliness is one of her only gateways into the white standards that are imposed on her. I wish to refer to this novel because the novel does not exist in a vacuum but rather reflects on the way racism functions on different levels on society. It comes to show that now, fifty-two years later, similar ideas are still at work in a digitised context.

6 – Which forms of critique do norm-defying accounts on Instagram produce through visibility?

What has become clear from the previous two chapters, is that norm-defying accounts make visible that which was previously hidden. On a visual platform like Instagram, visibility, looking, and being looked at are crucial factors when it comes to the way in which users are perceived. The question remains however, why this visibility can be considered a form of critique and what the implications can be for those who make themselves visible online and what forms of critique this visibility can result in. In this chapter I reflect on such question by providing an answer to the question of which forms of critique norm-defying accounts produce on Instagram.

As I have established before, the dominant discourse around the female body on Instagram is one that centres around the way in which women ought to look, and the kind of femininity they ought to perform. Considering the focus on visuality on a platform such as Instagram, that which is visible and that which is not, is no longer neutral but is telling with regards to what is considered normal on the platform and what is not. In order to show why visibility of that which is usually not visible can be considered a form of critique on Instagram, I refer back to the posts previously mentioned in answering my second sub-question. Now however, I do not focus on what kind of dominant discourse they are actively distancing themselves from, but rather on how the visibility of that which is usually not shown on the platform is sending a message that can be interpreted as critique. I refer to one example of critique on dominant body type, one of skin and one of lifestyle and each example presents a type of critique. Below I denote happiness, exposing yourself and parodying as forms of critique which I have found in analysing norm-defying Instagram accounts.

6.1 – Happiness as Critique

To begin, I want to refer back to the post by *briannas_day*, in which she shows off herself in a bikini

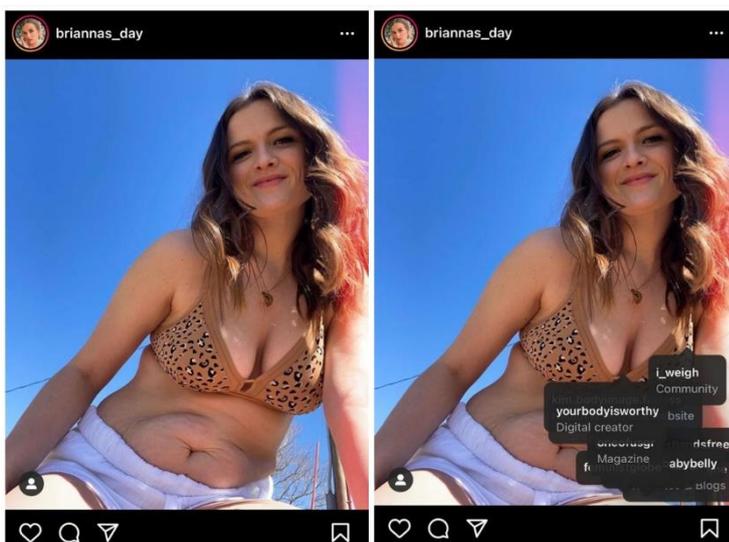


Figure 10 - Brianna "Here's the Thing..."

and in which her postpartum stomach is clearly visible. As noted before, existing happily in an imperfect body is not considered normal on Instagram, as the focus is on being the best version of yourself and constantly bettering yourself. Brianna actively critiques this in the accompanying caption however as she writes that self love can be represented through pictures of someone living a healthy, happy and exciting life in which they show off

their perfect bikini body, but that such content is not the only way to be represent self love. Rather, Brianna argues, self love can also be represented on Instagram through simply existing in your body as it is and most importantly, that a happiness “lives mostly outside of photos, videos and captions.”¹⁷³ Although Brianna argues that one’s happy reality that is not picture perfect does not need to exist on the internet in order to show to others that they are happy, she has chosen to explicitly show off her body and more importantly to make clear that her body is a normal body, as she uses the hashtags *#normalizenormalbodies* and *#humanizehumanbodies*. These two hashtags can be interpreted as a call for collective action in which normal bodies are normalised and in which human bodies are humanised. Most importantly, Brianna is not only showing off her normal body, but she also appears to be happy to do so as she is smiling contently in the photo shown above. She is thus showing that one can also post a happy photo of oneself that might not be considered normal by Instagram’s standards and precisely because of her smile in the photo and her lack of being ashamed of her body (as the dominant discourse implicitly tells her to be) she is critiquing the normalised unattainable body on the platform. Showing oneself off so publicly in a way that is not normal on the platform, is reminiscent of Amy Shields Dobson’s ideas regarding performative shamelessness by women. This performative shamelessness is described by Dobson as women “exposing” behaviours online that are usually deemed inappropriate. This can go from being drunk or being “laddish” to showing off that their bodies are not perfect but that they are completely fine with it.¹⁷⁴ Thus, this kind of performative shamelessness can be considered a way in which women resist and try to combat social stigmas surrounding women’s bodies. Performative shamelessness can be considered a result of the postfeminist embedded online environment that women find themselves in. “Keeping in mind the broad social-cultural context I have described,” Dobson writes after noting the postfeminist context of social networking sites, “it is not difficult to see the kind of public discourses about young women that would perhaps engender a sense of needing to perform confidence, boldness and shamelessness publicly in their online personas. It is also not difficult to see why young women would feel they need to defend the online personas they are presenting from scrutinising adult gazes.”¹⁷⁵ This performative shamelessness can also be located in the post by *briannas_day* and the accompanying caption shown and described above. As Brianna makes it very clear that her body is not considered normal on Instagram, she is also very aware that showing off her body as it is, is making a statement. Taking the accompanying caption into account as well, this statement can be considered not only to be critique, but also to be a call for collective (online) action to change the narrative around women’s bodies and to start considering normal bodies as something normal. Through her apparent happiness with her body exactly as it is, Brianna is commenting on the dominant discourse which usually tells her she should feel unhappy with her “imperfect” body. Her display of happiness can thus be considered a commentary on the beautified body norm for women that exists on Instagram.

¹⁷³ *briannas_day*, Instagram, accessed April 11, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CcL9qxqOslh/>.

¹⁷⁴ Dobson, “Performative Shamelessness,” 102.

¹⁷⁵ Dobson, “Performative Shamelessness,” 109.

6.2 Exposing Yourself as Critique

Secondly, I want to reiterate an anti-example concerning ideals around skin on Instagram. I want to focus again on Izzie Rodger's Instagram post regarding "no makeup Sundays." Rodgers focuses clearly on the difference between the fake reality that has been created on Instagram, and the way in which people look in real life, using herself as an example. Rodgers uses language reminiscent of Dobson's ideas regarding performative shamelessness quite clearly as she voices her thoughts around the editing of photos on Instagram as she writes "I've always struggled with thinking everyone else is way more 'naturally beautiful' than me... When in reality, most of the 'no makeup selfies' we grew up idolising... aren't even the real deal. So I thought I'd



Figure 11 - Izzie Rodgers "No Makeup Sundays"

take one for the team and expose myself to help you feel a little better."¹⁷⁶ Especially the use of the word "expose" denotes that what she is doing is something that is out of the ordinary on the platform and that thus required some form of sacrifice on her part as she is sharing her imperfect skin with the public on Instagram. The way in which Rodgers incorporates words like "reality" and "expose" are furthermore noteworthy as Rodgers thus juxtaposes that which is shown on Instagram with that which is real and thus not shown on the platform. This is further exemplified through the hashtags that she uses such as *#bereal*, *#instagramvsreality* and *#nofilter*.¹⁷⁷ These three hashtags all point to Rodgers showing off the "real" her, and especially one that is usually excluded from the narrative on Instagram. Where Rodgers' critique differs from Brianna's however, is that Rodgers focuses more on the individual to be real rather than Brianna who aims to target societal structures which she also finds on Instagram. In other words, Brianna is in a way forming an online collective, whereas Rodgers' critique fits more with the neoliberal standard on the platform. I reflect on these differences in critiquing the status quo further at the end of this chapter. It should be noted that, as discussed before, Instagram is a platform on which people look and on which people are looked at. This means that showing that which was previously hidden, in this case imperfect skin, is not a neutral action. Like Minh-Ha T. Pham argues that for minorities it can be incredibly empowering to see someone who looks like them on social media. It can thus also be empowering for women with acne to see someone feel comfortable with their imperfect skin on their Instagram feed as well.¹⁷⁸ Of course it should be noted that Rodgers is by no means a minority in the

¹⁷⁶ izzierodgers, Instagram, accessed April 12, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CaNdx9rNiv/>.

¹⁷⁷ izzierodgers, Instagram, accessed April 12, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CaNdx9rNiv/>.

¹⁷⁸ Pham, "I Click and Post and Breathe," 227-229.

sense that she is a white, cis-het woman (at least so it appears from her profile), but this does not mean that Rodgers saw people who looked like her in mainstream media as airbrushed skin has been so normalised. As Pham writes: “a do-it-yourself technique of visibility, the selfie and related methods of networked vanity can direct our attention to bodies and experiences that are invisible in traditional sites of fashion and beauty imagery or, when they are visible at all, are only visible as the inferior Other in the beautiful/ugly binary.”¹⁷⁹ In other words, showing yourself, when you do not often (or never) see yourself represented in media, can be a means of taking back agency and can be a way of critiquing the status quo as well as it is valuable for others who feel like they are not often (or never) seen. This is what Rodgers is doing through her post. As she notes that she is “exposing” herself, she makes clear that she is doing something which is uncommon on the platform, namely showing yourself without any makeup or filters. Exposing herself is thus a way of critiquing the normalised practices on Instagram in which people beautify themselves through the use of makeup, filters and/or photoshop.

6.3 Satire as Critique

Lastly, I want to focus on one example regarding ideas around lifestyle on Instagram. For this I want to

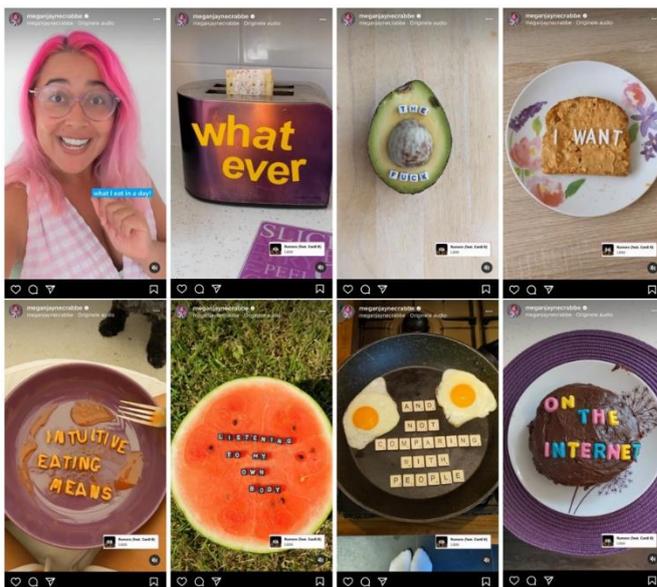


Figure 12 - Megan Jayne Crabbe “What I Eat in a Day”

refer back to the post by Megan Jayne Crabbe, in which she critiques the diet culture that exists on the platform. As Crabbe appears to hop onto the “what I eat in a day” trend that is persistent on Instagram, she uses the opportunity to comment on the practice of such videos as she shows images of different foods with words on them which form the sentence: “whatever the fuck I want. Intuitive eating means listening to my own body and not comparing with people on the internet.”¹⁸⁰ Crabbe is thus not so much directly juxtaposing the real and the fake but

is rather critiquing an Instagram practice and calling out a practice that she does not like to see on the platform. “What I eat in a day” videos can be considered to be neoliberal informed as they often imply the narrative that if one eats what a particular user is eating in a day that they will look similar. People who create such videos are often focused on fitness and usually are slim and able-bodied influencers and often preach diets that are supposed to be “clean” and “healthy.” Crabbe directly critiques this through her satirical video and this critique shows Instagram’s potential for resistance of dominant

¹⁷⁹ Pham, “I Click and Post and Breathe,” 231.

¹⁸⁰ meganjaynecrabbe, Instagram, accessed April 12, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CT2ZojfIOuQ/>.

discourses. It is like Cat Mahoney writes in her text discussing what visuality means in a neoliberal visual economy on Instagram as she notes that “[i]n the case of individual users, the fact that they have turned the camera upon themselves and taken some control of Instagram’s means of production grants them a degree of agency. This agency is, in some instances, enough to reframe the conversation and carve out a space for feminist interactions and discourse.”¹⁸¹ What Mahoney thus argues, and is exemplified by Crabbe’s post, is that although there are persistent dominant discourses present on social media platforms, those can be critiqued and even changed by users who “turned the camera upon themselves” and critique that which they do not agree with. In Crabbe’s case, creating the post that she created and explicitly critiquing “what I eat in a day” videos has provided her with some level of agency and the ability to reframe an existing conversation on the platform. Her visibility, and the visibility of her post create an environment in which the reframing of such narratives is made possible.

6.4 Different People, Different Forms of Critique

Both Brianna and Rodgers frame themselves as users who reveal “realness” and “expose” their real and unfiltered selves on the platform. Although Crabbe focuses less explicitly on the idea of real vs. fake in her content, she does note that there is difference between life that is shown on the internet by “strangers on the internet” and what her body feels and requires. It thus appears that the examples discussed above shape a new form of authenticity on the platform. One in which women “expose” themselves by showing what they actually look like and eat like. Banet-Weiser describes that in “a postfeminist context, this ‘authenticity’ is tied to a particular version of femininity, so that it is increasingly normative for gender and sexual identities to be expressed through girl-oriented websites, personal profiles, and YouTube videos.”¹⁸² However, Brianna, Rodgers and Crabbe show a different kind of authenticity, namely one in which they do not feel like they need to abide one particular version of femininity and one in which they go against postfeminist discourses. They do not follow the popular online narrative that feminism is no longer needed because women can present themselves in any way they want but present themselves in the way they want precisely because they believe that women often do not feel like they are allowed to show off their “real” selves. Where women find themselves in an online sphere in which they often feel the need to edit their online selves in order to fit into the dominant discourse around women online, the critical accounts researched throughout my thesis show that yes, women can present themselves in any way they want, but that does not mean that this is encouraged or deemed appropriate. It should be noted however, that both Brianna’s and Rodgers’ posts do still exemplify traditionally feminine Instagram content, namely posing in one’s bikini and posting a selfie. In the case of Brianna however, she is aware that she does not have what the internet considers the “right” bikini body, and shares the sentiment in

¹⁸¹ Cat Mahoney, "Is This What a Feminist Looks like? Curating the Feminist Self in the Neoliberal Visual Economy of Instagram," *Feminist Media Studies* (August 2020) 5, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2020.1810732>.

¹⁸² Banet-Weiser, *Authentic™*, 80.

the accompanying caption that she wishes to change the narrative around women's bodies. Through Brianna's, Rodgers' and Crabbe's examples it comes to show that they feel like they are exposing their real selves on the internet because the culture online is usually telling them to hide real parts of themselves away. When it comes to Rodgers' post, she is showing that selfies do not have to look the way in which users on Instagram usually make themselves look. Selfies can contain acne, dark circles and imperfect skin. The three examples mentioned above all take a popular type of Instagram content but spin it in such a way that they critique the normalised problematic narrative around them. Furthermore, the three women are showing a more collective activist kind of performance of authenticity in which they do not necessarily dismiss practices on Instagram such as posting a bikini or a selfie, but make it clear that the narrative around such practices must be changed. They critique the dominant discourses as they make it their own and make visible that which is usually hidden. This type of critique that I have thus located on Instagram is one that I refer to as *meta-critique*.

6.5 – Meta-Critique

Now, the answer to the main question remains. In what way do Instagram's affordances, in combination with its dominant culture incite practices that qualify as critique on the visions on the female body that are persistent on the platform? I want to propose to call the kind of critique that I have located throughout this thesis *meta-critique*. Considering that I have located a forms of critique that specifically critique practices on a social media platform, on that same platform, I consider there to be meta feedback loop. Also, because I have located this kind of critique on a social media platform owned by the company *Meta*, previously known as *Facebook*, I consider *meta-critique* to be a fitting term. Three important factors form these kinds of critique, as well as the answer to my main question: affordances, solidarity and the difficulty to escape Instagram's neoliberal informed postfeminism.

As shown, when it comes to posts, Instagram has high levels of the affordances of visibility, persistence, editability and association, for reels this is similar, whereas for stories, the affordances for visibility and persistence are low, whereas editability is high and association is moderate. These differing levels for different kind of content can eventually result in high levels of self-surveillance for content that is persistent such as for posts or reels. This self-surveillance might present itself by editing oneself or trying to abide by Instagram's unwritten social rules in order to try and fit in on the platform. With regards to critique, the users who I analysed and went against the dominant discourse around the female body on Instagram, follow Instagram's unwritten rules to an extend as well, but put their own spin on it. Taking Crabbe's "what I eat in a day" video as an example, she shows an awareness of the online culture she finds herself in and she appears aware of the trends that she is supposed to follow on the platform. However, she chooses to go along with the trend in a way that she sees fit and through this she sends the message that she considers "what I eat in a day" videos to be a toxic practice on the platform. She thus form *meta-critique* on a practice which is normal on Instagram. Another example of putting a

common visual on Instagram on its head is London's post in which she poses in underwear but in which she does not abide by the body standards that the platform imposes on women. As she is shown wearing "fancy" lingerie while not having a flat stomach, and even emphasises the loose skin on her stomach, she comments on a common practice on Instagram which is posing in one's underwear, but twists it so that it becomes a critique of the way in which the practice is usually framed. Here again, this twist on something that is normalised in the culture of Instagram, makes this form of critique *meta*-critique.

Solidarity is something that appears to be broken down by postfeminist narratives on Instagram. As shown, the platform is strongly informed by both neoliberal and postfeminist informed discourse and such discourses in combination with Instagram's affordances often result in a strengthened feeling of competition while weakening solidarity among women on the platform. Looking at the critical users that I have analysed however, a different dynamic appears to be at play. Especially considering the language that they use in their captions as well as the hashtags accompanying that caption, the critical users have shown practices which appear to aim at creating a bond, or a collective solidarity among women. The captions that I analysed often refer to "you" and urge that "you" to learn to love themselves again exactly as they are, as the writer of the caption has learned to as well. This signals that the authors of such captions feel like they are speaking to other people, or a group of other people. Furthermore, hashtags such as #normalizenormalbodies, #youarenotalone and #acnecommunity clearly mark the creation of some form of online community, of some kind of online solidarity, that is longing to be freed from the beauty standards that are imposed on them. Thus, although the critical users find themselves in an online space which is strongly informed by neoliberalism and postfeminism, they manage to go against the individualist narratives and against the breaking down of solidarity which can result from the female competition on Instagram. The reason why one of the characteristics of *meta*-critique is the building up of solidarity is precisely because solidarity is often broken down on social media platforms, as has been discussed throughout my theoretical framework and analysis. Going against this, thus going against that which often characterises a social media platform, through the infrastructure of that same platform means forming a kind of *meta*-critique.

Although I describe above that the critical accounts manage to escape parts of the neoliberal and postfeminist informed culture that they find themselves in on Instagram, I have also found that it appears very difficult to escape this culture completely. Examples of this are usually somewhat subtle, while others are more clear. A more subtle example is what Maia describes in her Instagram bio, as she writes that she is "just a girl with acne, helping you to love the skin you're in." From this, and from other content that can be found on her profile, it becomes clear that Maia, although being an advocate to make acne more normalised and more visible in mainstream media, is also urging her followers to begin at loving themselves before society as a whole will accept their skin. Rodgers voices similar sentiments as she describes in a the caption which accompanies a recent reel that she posted how much good things embracing her acne has brought her:

“[...] This just shows how much one small act of courage can change your entire world. I no longer hate who i am, I’ve connected to thousands of people just like me, I’ve made new friends, I’m a better person, i have a job that i absolutely love, I’m financially stable and I’m finally free... all from something that I thought would be the end of me.

Positive energy goes where positive energy flows 🍷 surround yourself with love and believe me soon enough you’ll feel it all around [...]”

Although clearly a positive caption with positive intentions, some neoliberal and postfeminist undertones can be found as well. Rodgers makes it clear that she has gained everything described above through her personal act of courage. This is reiterative of the neoliberal individualist idea that one is responsible for one’s own happiness and portrays a rather one-sided perspective of the situation. I believe that Rodgers’ work on Instagram is of unsurmountable value, as many people see her shine with her acne, but factors of luck and the inexplicable way in which Instagram’s algorithm pushes certain content to people, which allowed Rodgers to grow on the platform, is not addressed. Another way in which critical users walk a fine line between being critical and cooperating in the system they are critical of, is by endorsing particular brands. Lenehan for example, often recommends mug cakes by the company Macro Mike, of which she is the co-creator. This brand is clearly targeted at people who wish to enjoy sweet things while also eating clean and as healthy as possible. Although this company fits well with what Lenehan often preaches, namely a balance between doing what is healthy and doing what you want, she thus also feeds into the neoliberal and postfeminist narrative that you can buy your way to the “right” body and a “healthy” mindset. This is something that is recurrent in the critical accounts that I have analysed. The accounts of Maia, Rodgers, Ally and Lenehan are not so much trying to deconstruct the neoliberal and postfeminist discourses prevalent on Instagram, but are rather walking the line between finding their own voice in these discourses, and actively critiquing these discourses. The difficulty to break free from the neoliberal and postfeminist discourses can be considered a result of the strong embeddedness of Instagram within such narratives. Finding oneself in a grey area that at times reflects postfeminist and neoliberal sentiments while also appearing to go against them can also be considered a characteristic of my described *meta*-critique, as it shows how difficult it is to truly break free from the online infrastructure that one creates their content through.

6.6 – The Risks of Critique

As noted above, providing critique in an online environment that only deems a particular perspective on femininity to be “correct,” it can be very difficult to go against the grain. What should thus also be noted is the mental strain that providing critique can put on people. As Valerie Steeves describes in her discussion of the way in which girls resist patriarchal forced through their presence online, is that such

resistance “remind[s] us of the resilience of both patriarchal restrictions and girls’ ability to challenge those restrictions.”¹⁸³ Thus, both patriarchal restrictions and women’s resilience are persistent. She continues by arguing that the mere “access to the public sphere has not been a complete corrective, because the commodification of online spaces privileges a narrow performance of ‘appropriate’ femininity in order to be recognized in a ‘visual/gendered economy of representation for unknown numbers of watching others.’”¹⁸⁴ Steeves’ arguments rings true in my findings as well, as I have found that online, women feel like they have to pursue a particular accepted form of femininity that they must embody in content they post to the online sphere. Where Steeves emphasises a visual/gendered economy, I also focus on the way in which this visual economy is informed by neoliberalist and postfeminist thought, which users need to navigate as well. As users have found ways to critique the dominant discourse, they also find themselves stuck in an environment entangled to neoliberal informed postfeminist narratives. Steeves argues that being aware that one is actively going against the norm can be draining on users as she argues that some users find it easier to leave social media platforms all together rather than publishing content that does not agree with the status quo.¹⁸⁵ Steeves notes that in her study, “participants were well aware of the negative effects of media stereotypes and sought to avoid gendered conflicts...”¹⁸⁶ Thus, deciding to engage in a “gendered conflict,” in which one goes against the preferred feminine standards thus requires courage and to an extend a sacrifice on behalf of the user who chooses to do so because they know they might (and likely will) be met with resistance and negative feedback by their peers (or strangers on the internet). Here the notion of voluntary vulnerability also comes back into play. As described by Tiidenberg and Whelan, when it comes to forming critique online, a form of voluntary vulnerability is usually present as well. This shows that critiquing the status quo is not without risk. The one providing critique might be met with counter-critique or moral scrutiny and this can also be straining on those providing critique. Those choosing to formulate critique online might thus putting themselves at risk when being publicly critical, which merely emphasises how important those who are critical consider their point to be.

6.7 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have described three different forms of critique that I found in the Instagram content that I analysed. These three were critique through happiness, by exposing oneself and through satire. These three different kinds of critique have shown that different people use Instagram’s affordances in slightly different manners to frame their critique in slightly different ways. What these three different forms of critique have in common however, is that they critique the dominant discourse around the female body on Instagram by engaging with trends on the platform, but putting a spin on these trends. I

¹⁸³ Steeves, “‘Pretty and Just a Little Bit Sexy, I Guess’,” 170.

¹⁸⁴ Steeves, “‘Pretty and Just a Little Bit Sexy, I Guess’,” 170.

¹⁸⁵ Steeves, “‘Pretty and Just a Little Bit Sexy, I Guess’,” 168-169.

¹⁸⁶ Steeves, “‘Pretty and Just a Little Bit Sexy, I Guess’,” 169.

have referred to this way of formulating critique as *meta*-critique. With regards to *meta*-critique, I then argued that this type of critique arises through three important factors, namely Instagram's affordances, the way solidarity is broken down and build up on Instagram and the difficulty to escape Instagram's neoliberal informed postfeminism. Lastly, I reflected on the difficulty of critiquing the dominant discourses online with regards to the resistance and moral scrutiny that people might be met with. I have thus shown how Instagram's affordances in combination with its dominant culture, is likely to incite particular practices of critique that I have described as *meta*-critique.

7 – Conclusion

Throughout this thesis, I have made a vast array of observations with regards to the way in which Instagram users critique the dominant discourse around female bodies on the platform. These have all informed the answer to my main research question: in what way Instagram's affordances, in combination with its dominant culture incite practices that qualify as critique on the visions on the female body that are persistent on the platform? Below I provide a brief summary of my findings, as well as reflections on my research process and suggestions for further research.

7.1 – A Brief Summary

In answering the first sub-question which questioned how Instagram's affordances shape and constrain online identity performance on critical accounts, I found that Instagram's affordances facilitated multiple outcomes but that because the platform itself is embedded in a culture informed by neoliberalism and postfeminism, one of the outcomes was that women can feel like they are at competition with each other. This is in line with McRobbie's argument that because of its embeddedness in neoliberalism, there exists a culture of competition for women online as they are informed to be better than others, or even to be perfect online.¹⁸⁷ On the other hand however, it has become clear that women can also feel like they have been provided the tools to critique the platform they find themselves on. Although the described affordances of visibility, persistence, editability and association appear more likely to uphold dominant standards on the platform, critical accounts use those same affordances in an attempt to break down those same dominant standards.

Throughout the chapter in which I answer my second sub-question, I explore which dominant discourses about female body norms are explored on critical Instagram accounts. There, I found that the users that I analysed made three main claims. With regards to body type, the analysed users reflected the dominant discourse on Instagram that female bodies need to have flat stomachs and that they must show off that they are happy and comfortable in their own bodies. With regards to skin, I found that the analysed users located that practices such as airbrushing the skin or editing the skin in other ways were normalised on Instagram to the point that having the skin that is visible on Instagram is literally impossible. When it came to notions of lifestyle on Instagram, the accounts analysed, appeared to find themselves in a culture in which women are made to feel solely responsible for their own looks and happiness and that products that are supposed to make women feel better about themselves are heavily marketed on the platform. What these three main observations tell me about the dominant discourse regarding female bodies on Instagram, is that on Instagram, levels of self-surveillance are heightened because of the high standards that women feel like they have to abide by. This in turn, may foster feelings of competition among women, as they feel like they must be better than other women on the platform

¹⁸⁷ McRobbie, "Notes on the Perfect," 6.

or must at least try to be perfect. As competition is thus easily fostered on the platform, solidarity is broken down. In an attempt to go against the grain on the platform however, not only do the critical accounts critically go against dominant discourses on Instagram, but they also attempt to form online collectives of solidarity. This was explored in the next sub-question.

The final sub-question that I answered considered how norm-defying accounts provide critique through their visibility on Instagram. What has become clear through that exploration is that visibility can be incredibly empowering to those who usually do not see themselves represented in everyday media. Critiquing the standard however, has been shown to be difficult for the one providing critique, by several academics because people have a natural sense of wanting to belong. Going against the grain online, a space where both patriarchal restrictions as well as women's resilience are persistent, can be challenging even when it appears that online, women have been provided the means to do so. Nonetheless, users that I analysed exemplify that providing critique on the culture on the platform that they find themselves on is possible. They share similar sentiments with regards to body normativity on Instagram and manage to create a form of online solidarity through their use of hashtags, commenting on each other's content and using language which indicates they are speaking to a larger crowd. Although the examples discussed throughout my thesis do so in different ways, they manage to go against the deconstruction of solidarity that is often found on Instagram with its focus on competition and its neoliberal and postfeminist informed discourses.

All in all, I have located a form of critique on Instagram that I named *meta-critique*. This type of critique has been described to arise through the workings of three factors on Instagram namely the levels of different affordances on Instagram as described in chapter four, notions of online solidarity and the difficulty to escape Instagram's neoliberal informed postfeminism. The content that I have analysed shows that women can use Instagram's affordances in order to show that which is usually hidden, such as "imperfect" skin or "imperfect" bodies. This is not done by dismissing popular Instagram practices such as posting selfies of photos of oneself wearing a bikini, but rather by taking these popular Instagram practices and trying to change the narrative around them. It has also become clear that although critical Instagram users have found themselves in an online environment which is strongly informed by neoliberal and postfeminist narratives, they manage to go against these narratives. These practices showed by the critical accounts that I analysed have shown what I consider to be *meta-critique*.

7.2 – Reflections on Empowerment Online

As discussed before, the recurring postfeminist and neoliberal informed narrative online is that women are responsible for their own happiness and that nowadays they can be because they supposedly have access to all the means to make themselves happy. This however, is a vast oversimplification of women's lived reality. Elisabeth Prügl reflects on this as well as she discussed the process of neoliberalising feminism. Prügl argues that there is market interest to neoliberalise feminism because "[n]eoliberalism

in this way constitutes a strategic project that thrives on the basis of biopolitical power, i.e. of a power that constitutes dependable individuals that hold themselves accountable to norms of market-embedded gender equality.”¹⁸⁸ In other words, neoliberalising feminism is not in the interest of women, but rather in the interest of those who earn money through profit. By holding biopolitical power over women, or by making women feel like they have to abide by certain (unattainable) standards, companies can earn money by selling products that will make women fit those same company’s standards for women. It all appears to lead back to an observation made by Angela McRobbie: “When we talk about empowerment, then, it is crucial to be very specific about what we mean, and we must not simply state it as if it is self-evident. Instead, we must finish the statement with the necessary clause: empowerment for whom? And for what? What are we empowering girls to do?”¹⁸⁹ This question is an important one to ask. What exactly are we empowering women to do on Instagram? Why do we consider “exposing” oneself online as a form of empowerment when we still name it as an action of “exposing”? Are these women truly empowered? I believe my research makes clear that online, we are mostly “empowering” women to abide by traditional rules of femininity, as well as to re-establish women’s value to be a direct result of the way in which they present their bodies. Online, women are mostly “empowered” by postfeminist and neoliberal discourses to show off their bodies as women are constantly informed that being ultrafeminine, gender conforming and sexy online is, to paraphrase Rosalind Gill, something that suits their liberated interests. Nonetheless women also show that they are not merely “victims” of these postfeminist and neoliberal informed narratives online as critiques are present online as well. The women who created the content that I have analysed throughout this thesis have shown resilience and a resistance towards dominant discourses on Instagram. Through their critiques they show that empowerment online is possible, but not necessarily the most prevalent outcome of Instagram’s affordances in combination with the dominant discourses on the platform. Empowerment online appears to be the outlier rather than the standard as women are encouraged to conform to societal standards rather than to be exactly what and how they want to be.

7.3 Reflections on Findings

Throughout my analysis I have made observations with regards to my findings and the limitations of my findings. Here I summarise the limitations of this research.

It should be noted that because I used my own Instagram account to collect the content that I have analysed, the accounts that I ended up finding were likely suggested to me because I fit these accounts’ target audience. This meant that although all the women whose account I have analysed are unique in their own ways, they share characteristics with me such as being young, being white or light-skinned and performing a kind of femininity that is still relatively gender normative. I have thus not

¹⁸⁸ Elisabeth Prügl, "Neoliberalising Feminism," *New Political Economy* 20, no. 4 (July 2015): 620, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13563467.2014.951614>.

¹⁸⁹ Banet-Weiser, “Keynote Address,” 59.

analysed accounts that go against the gendered norms on Instagram more radically whose outcomes with regards to their critiques might be very different. Furthermore, as far as I know at the time of writing, all the women whose accounts I have analysed are cisgender women, and the scrutiny that trans women, non-binary people or other gender nonconforming people might face when critiquing dominant discourses on Instagram have thus not been discussed. This however, is an important topic that is in need of extensive research.

With regards to my choice of method, although I consider the method appropriate for the kind of research I have done, the incredibly personal approach to collecting my corpus means I must have excluded other kinds of critique present on Instagram, and especially critiques by users who Instagram does not regard as belonging to the same online sphere as me. Moreover, I have let the content that I analysed speak for itself as much as possible, but some interpretation by myself was necessarily. Although I am a woman who exists in the online space of Instagram and is thus familiar with the dominant discourse regarding women's bodies on the platform, I cannot pretend to speak for all women or to understand every woman's critique on the platform completely correctly. I acknowledge that much more research must be done in order to create a more varied and diverse interpretation of the ways in which women formulate critique on social media platforms.

7.4 – Further Research

As I have established a first, likely oversimplified, definition of *meta*-critique, I acknowledge that this term needs much more analysis and finetuning before *meta*-critique can be researched more extensively on social media platforms. I also want to direct the reader's attention to the fact that my analysis of Instagram critical accounts has focused exclusively on women who appear white and cisgendered. This means that although they do not fit the Instagram norm in some aesthetic manner, they by no means face the same scrutiny as for example women of colour or trans women, who are made to feel like they do not fit dominant societal standards in a much more extreme way. I therefore suggest that further research focuses on the way in which minorities manage to find ways of critiquing the online dominant discourses that do not include them and to focus on the additional struggles that they face as they manage to find ways to critique the damaging dominant discourse.

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