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The Thin Ideal and Body Positivity: How Do Influencers Affect Female Instagram Users?

Jeralynn Servos

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THE THIN IDEAL AND BODY POSITIVITY: HOW DO INFLUENCERS AFFECT

FEMALE INSTAGRAM USERS?

by

Jeralynn Servos

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Dr. John Meyer, Committee Chair
Dr. David Davies
Dr. Brent Hale

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ABSTRACT

With the vast increase in social media use, there has also been an increase of exposure to body image ideals via photos shared online. Accordingly, it has become more important to understand the association between social media and how its users view their body image, as well as how social media users' practices are affected by posted pictures. Therefore, this study employed three focus groups to explore young women's perceptions of potential ideal images, how they compare themselves to these images, and how these ideas affect the practices used within their own Instagram accounts. An analysis of the qualitative data from 15 participants revealed three themes and one subtheme: admiration, but not participation; panel for posting with the subtheme "three is a sweet spot"; and societal standards destroy self-image. The themes and subtheme represent the participants' thoughts and actions surrounding social media images and practices carried out within their own Instagram accounts. Further, the analysis revealed a dual and paradoxical pattern related to the thin ideal as participants do not like the thin ideal, but want to fit into it, while also understanding that they should not model themselves after thin-ideal influencers. They also support the body positivity movement but are not comfortable posting body positive content. To manage the paradox, participants took actions to create an idealized Instagram account while also taking steps to avoid the thin ideal.

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DEDICATION

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CHAPTER I – INTRODUCTION

Social networking platforms have seen a vast increase in recent years (Sokolova & Perez, 2021). Accordingly, social media have become a regular and major form of media consumption for young adults. As of April 2021, 84 percent of young adults between the ages of 18 and 29 reported being users who are active on social media every day (Auxier & Anderson, 2021). Social media platforms, such as Instagram, allow for photo sharing, but they can come with a downfall. Images found on Instagram can be carefully selected, edited, and enhanced. This means that they can contain idealized and unrealistic depictions of one's physical appearance (Fardouly et al., 2017). These photos can become idealized by other users and lead individuals to compare their body and appearance to the person in the photos (Cohen et al., 2017). With the extensive growth of photo sharing, literature has reported negative physical and mental health effects of social media consumption (Vartanian & Dey, 2013).

In an attempt to reduce the negative health effects that come from idealizing thin bodies found in images, a movement known as the body positivity movement began on social media in 2012 (Sastre, 2014; Gelsinger, 2021). This movement challenges the dominant body image and feminine beauty ideals while criticizing the societal influences and construction of body norms (Cwynar-Horta, 2016). It promotes self-love, acceptance of a variety of body types, and helps people learn to appreciate the functionality of their bodies (Cwynar-Horta, 2016; Sastre, 2014). Research has found that social networking websites can be beneficial as they can be used to promote healthy behaviors and serve as a place for people to share their health habits (Vaterlaus et al., 2015). Because of the rapid growth in social media use (Perrin, 2015), different body image ideas are being

shared and viewed by users. It has become more important to understand not only the

association between social media and how its users view their body image, but also how

social media users' practices are affected by posted pictures. Therefore, this study

examines young women's perceptions of potential ideal images, how they compare

themselves to these images, and how these concepts work together to affect the practices

used within their own Instagram accounts.

CHAPTER II – LITERATURE REVIEW

Social Comparison Theory

For the theoretical framework, this topic lends itself to explanation using social comparison theory. Festinger's social comparison theory explains that people process social information by comparing themselves to recognized similarities and differences with others (Festinger, 1954). The theory emphasizes an individual's judgments, experiences, and behaviors (Corcoran et al., 2011). The major processes of social comparison involve gathering social information, thinking about the information in terms of how it relates to oneself, and reacting to the comparisons (Wood, 1996; Thompson et al., 2021). Buunk and Gibbins (2007) described social comparison as "a central feature of human social life" (p. 3). The phrase 'social comparison' refers to the process in which people decide their social and personal worth based off how they compare to others in certain categories, such as attractiveness (Thompson et al., 2021).

In order to compare, one must choose a target to assess (Gerber, 2020). A comparison target that is perceived to be similar or relevant, such as in sex, age, and achievements, can also have more of an impact on the results of the comparison than when comparing oneself to a dissimilar target (Miller et al., 1988; Lockwood & Kunda, 1997). This type of comparison is known as lateral comparison, which helps the individual evaluate themselves on a focal attribute (Thompson et al., 2021). Gerber (2020) further explained that there are three motives for comparison: self-evaluation, self-improvement, and self-enhancement. Self-evaluation comparisons are used to collect information about attributes and social expectations to evaluate where one stands when compared to others (Krayer et al., 2008; Thompson et al., 2021). While explaining self-

evaluation, Krayer, Ingledew and Iphofen (2008) used the example of "How do my muscles compare to my peers?" (p. 893). Next, self-improvement comparisons are used to learn how to improve specific characteristics about oneself (Thompson et al., 2021). For example, one might say, "How could I learn from her to be more attractive?" (Krayer et al., 2008, p. 893). Self-enhancement comparison takes place when one compares themselves in a way that creates a positive evaluation of oneself (Thompson, et al., 2021). To explain this concept, Krayer et al. (2008) shared the example of how an individual could think "He might be muscular, but he has no sense of humor" (p. 893).

High levels of social appearance comparison have been linked to having lower levels of both self-esteem and mood (Convertino et al., 2016). Individuals who are greatly involved in social media, especially emotionally, are likely to face forms of depression and anxiety (Woods & Scott, 2016). However, self-enhancement and self-improvement comparisons can have positive effects (Martin & Gentry, 1997), but Clay, Vignoles, and Dittmar (2005) suggested that improvement comparisons can have damaging effects because many of these comparisons can be based on idealized images. Wood (1989) expressed that social comparisons can produce self-enhancement concerns, but also shared that people do not always accept the comparative information and will instead make comparisons that will improve their self-esteem.

Influencers are defined by Abidin (2015) as "ordinary Internet users" who gather a large following on social media "through textual and visual narration of their personal lifestyles, engage with their following in digital and physical spaces, and monetize their following by integrating advertorials" into their posts (p. 1). Because influencers have more similarities with their followers than traditional celebrities, conditions for envy are

fitting for the context of influencers (Chae, 2018). For example, many influencers are young adults, but they might have beauty that a regular women might wish to have but finds hard to obtain. Chae (2018) discussed how in order to feel envious towards the influencers' lives or other people's advantages, one must take part in the social comparison process. This context commonly results in an upward comparison. Upward comparison with superior individuals can influence self-improvement because people who are motivated by superior models tend to try to make progress (Chae, 2018). However, upward comparisons can be damaging as they can threaten one's positive self-image (Corcoran et al., 2011). Smith and Kim (2007) explained that when social comparison leads to poor self-image, individuals feel envious towards those who have the quality that they are lacking. Therefore, upward comparison makes the individual feel envy towards the target they compare themselves to. On the other hand, downward comparison with people who are perceived to be inferior can help individuals sustain a positive self-image (Chae, 2018).

Thompson et al. (2021) explained that social comparison has been associated with a variety of consequences. In the original formulation of the theory, Festinger predicted that individuals would feel a pressure towards uniformity (Thompson et al. 2021). For example, when a woman is not pleased with her body image and chooses to learn from her favorite Instagram model, she might choose a workout or diet that is not best for her overall health. In a case like this, the comparison could cause a change in the person's characteristics and lead to similarities between the person and the standard (Thompson et al. 2021). Later studies have also concluded that individuals are likely to feel better or worse after an upward or downward comparison, so the whole process can lead to either a

positive or negative contrast (Corcoran et al., 2011; Thompson et al., 2021). For example, if a CrossFit trainee has a good performance, it can help boost their self-confidence, but if the trainee is not as successful as others, it can make them feel quite frustrated or it can encourage them to work harder to reach the level of the upward target (Thompson et al., 2021).

<div align="center">Social Media and Instagram</div>

Social media is defined as a collection of online platforms used for social connection (Lisitsa et al., 2020). Users can create, share, and exchange information online (Tufts, 2021). Pew Research Center's 2021 social media report shared that young adults were the first age group to adopt social media and continue to be the group that uses social media sites at the highest level. Instagram, a photo-sharing social networking site, allows users to take, edit, and post pictures that can be shared with followers who are also on the social network (Statista Research Department, 2021a). A 2021 report shared that Instagram has approximately one billion monthly active users with 170 million Instagram users in the United States (Statista Research Department, 2021b). However, Instagram is dominated by users below the age of 35. Many of these users utilize Instagram to follow friends and peers, but also as a way to follow celebrities' personal accounts, since many have an interest in gaining a look into celebrities' lives (Statista Research Department, 2021a). With the ever-growing use of social media, there has been a rise of 'bedroom culture,' which is "a set of performative practices and identity representation induced from the confines of the bedroom" (Aziz, 2017, p. 5). Current generations are becoming more invested in the virtual world, spending time on social

media, and creating idealized online personas that they can display as an extension of themselves (Gonzales & Hancock, 2011; Aziz, 2017).

<center>Social Media Influencers</center>

Within this age of social media, a new type of celebrity has emerged. This type of celebrity, known as a microcelebrity, is characterized by a person who regularly presents themselves on social media (Chae, 2018) and creates an online image to attract attention and followers (Khamis et al., 2017; Marwick, 2015). Senft (2013) described microcelebrity as a mind-set and a set of self-presentation practices that are prevalent on social media. Microcelebrities strategically craft a profile and disclose personal information to increase attention in order to improve their online status (Senft, 2013). Through the Internet, microcelebrities are able to accumulate a large enough fan base to support themselves through their online activities, yet also be disregarded by the mainstream media (Marwick, 2015). These microcelebrities, often referred to as social media influencers, are people who both textually and visually display their personal lives to a large number of followers (Abidin, 2016).

Many influencers become famous solely through social media (Brown & Tiggemann, 2021) and can range from models, fitness trainers, wealthy people, and even pretty high school girls (Abidin, 2016; Marwick, 2015; Saul, 2016). However, this study's definition of influencers also includes celebrities who gained their fame through other mediums, but also have a large following on social media and post regular textual and visual narrations of their lifestyle and daily personal lives (Abidin, 2016). Traditional celebrities, such as actors and singers, have also embraced social media platforms to

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develop direct yet unmediated relationships (or at least the illusion of relationships) with fans and followers (Marwick, 2015).

Research has shown that female celebrities in contemporary media often represent the essence of cultural beauty ideals (Brown & Tiggemann, 2021). Hund (2017) explained that female influencers regularly adhere to the conventional Western beauty norms, such as being trim and feminine. These current beauty ideals put an emphasis on a thinness for women; therefore, scholars have argued that constantly presenting celebrities with thin-ideal qualities reinforces the unachievable thin ideal, which leads to more body dissatisfaction (Brown & Tiggemann, 2016; Maltby et al., 2005). Brown and Tiggemann (2021) shared that the thin and attractive online celebrities are commonly described as being a source for "thinspiration" and "fitspiration" (combinations of 'thin' and 'fit' with 'inspiration') that individuals use as motivation to achieve an idealized body type (Brown & Tiggemann, 2021). These fitspiration type posts might have the intention of motivating others to live a healthier lifestyle, but they can also have unintended negative consequences on an individual's body image (Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015) and can promote unhealthy behaviors (DiBisceglie & Arigo, 2021).

Research has confirmed that girls and women commonly used celebrities as appearance comparison targets (Chae, 2017, Fardouly et al., 2015). Women compare themselves to models and celebrities because they are believed to set the standard for cultural norms of thinness that women often think is the standard that they will be judged against (Strahan et al., 2006). Further, Marwick (2015) described influencers' postings as a "catalog" filled with what numerous young people "dream of having" (p. 155). However, the cultural norms and standards for thinness continue to become more

unrealistic because a widely accepted practice within the Instagram influencer industry is the use of image-enhancing apps, editing apps, and Adobe Photoshop to alter one's photos (Abidin, 2015). The perceived pressure to conform to the culturally defined body and beauty ideals that people observe in the media has been identified as a significant source of negative body image (Levine & Murnen, 2009; Shroff & Thompson, 2006). Brown and Tiggeman's 2021 research added further support as they found that for some females, having access to private information about celebrities and their lives (Maltby et al., 2005), was related to image concerns (Utami, 2019) and eating disorder attitudes (Aruguete, 2014). Further, Abanina and Baqri (2021) shared that the use of retouched images in the media can lead to mental illnesses, such as dysmorphophobia, and physical health problems, such as eating disorders.

Cotter (2018) explained that engagement is strategically maximized and necessary for influencers to measure their levels of success, while Abidin (2015) and Duffy (2018) explained that influencers often cling to an ideal of authenticity in order to gain strategic advantage. Influencers are described as giving off the impression of realness, which fosters a sense of intimacy and relatability. This helps create the foundation of affective relationships with their followers (Abidin, 2015; Duffy, 2018; Marwick, 2015). These practices are pursued for attention and marketing purposes to attract people's attention in a media-saturated world (Fairchild, 2007). Marwick (2013) explained that attention-getting techniques used by consumer brands have flowed down to individual users that are increasingly using them to grow their online popularity. Instagram provides users and influencers with a relatively open-ended social media tool, which suggests that they get to choose how to represent themselves by utilizing a variety of techniques (Marwick, 2015).

Because of this social media and influencer related information, this study asked the following question:

RQ1: How do young women perceive posted pictures of individuals in terms of bodily appearance?

Thin-Ideal Images

The thin ideal is defined by Harrison (2000) as the portrayal of thinness as a desirable trait and one that is accompanied by other desirable traits, such as being beautiful and successful. Paeratakul et al. (2002) provided an accompanying view that explained that there are strong messages in America that portray having body fat as a sign of having poor self-control. Consequently, women who do not attain this thin ideal, even those who are an average weight, will experience negative attitudes towards their bodies (Cafri et al., 2005). Cafri et al. (2005) described that past research shows a woman's body image, which is defined as a set of evaluations about oneself regarding the physical appearance of their body (Cash, 2004), can be negatively affected by how they think about the thin ideal.

Media is commonly deemed a main contributor to "the dominant standard of body ideals" that have "power to generate healthy body-positive messages as well as negative ones" (Aziz, 2017, p. 8). The thin ideal is a concept which can be viewed as an extension branching from objectification theory that posits that the female body is something to be gazed at (Fitzsimmons-Crafts et al., 2012). Thus, many women internalized this idea and started viewing themselves from this perspective. The thin ideal has been reinforced through television shows and magazines, further perpetuating an idealized body that has no imperfections (Aziz, 2017). The thin-ideal images that commonly appear in the media

today are often idealized and can be challenging, even sometimes impossible, for many women to achieve (Cafri et al., 2005). Tiggemann and Slater (2013) found that young Australian female Facebook users reported more concerns about their appearance and their dieting behaviors than those who did not use Facebook. Manago et al. (2008) explained that people tend to show a more idealized version of themselves on social media. This can be a cause for concern as the tendency to make appearance-related comparisons is a significant factor that can contribute to a person having a negative body image. This means that users are likely to upwardly compare themselves to the bodies in the shared images (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2015).

An individual's belief about their own level of physical attractiveness also likely comes from assessing themselves, comparing their appearance-related qualities to other people, and then learning how others react to their appearance (Richins, 1991). Women commonly assess their appearance against other females that they view as superior to themselves (Leahey et al., 2007). Kruglanksi and Mayseless's (1990) research can add support to this idea as they stated that people often choose to compare themselves to those who are not similar to them but could potentially provide valuable information, even if the evaluation is hurtful. Lin and Kulik's 2002 study investigated social comparison processes by looking into the effects of upward and downward comparisons on body satisfaction and affect. The study showed pictures of thin peers and overweight peers to female undergraduates. The students were then asked to decide their own level of attractiveness and the level of attractiveness of the individual in the picture. They found that the upward comparisons led to reduced body satisfaction and an increased negative affect, while the downward comparison had no effect on the students' body satisfaction

and affect (Lin & Kulik, 2002). Social comparison has been found to be a major contributor to women's body dissatisfaction and negative affect (Leahey, 2007). Therefore, media exposure is linked to feeling dissatisfied about one's body because of the inclination for appearance comparison to take place (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2015).

Mask and Blanchard (2011) discussed how literature also suggested that not all women respond in the same way to the thin ideal displayed in media. Past findings indicate that some women are negatively affected by being exposed to portrayals of the thin ideal in the media, while others are not affected (Mask & Blanchard, 2011). For example, samples of women with preexisting concerns about their appearance led to larger effect sizes when compared to samples of women that did not have concerns (Want, 2009). Further, studies pointed towards thin-ideal media leading to self-enhancement responses among restrained eaters that were characterized by increases in self-esteem and self-image, as well as perceiving oneself as having a smaller body size (Joshi et al., 2004; Mills et al., 2002).

<center>Thin-Ideal Influencer</center>

Groesz et al. (2002) found that women who viewed images of thin models consistently reported having poorer body image-based outcomes than those who viewed images of models that were of an average weight or plus-sized. In the context of social media, influencers who post pictures of their body tend to fit the thin-ideal category (Grabe et al., 2008). Therefore, this study used 26-year-old model and influencer, Kendall Jenner, as an example of the thin-ideal body type. Jenner, who was ranked as the number one Instagram model as of April 2021 (Shubham, 2021), has 223 million followers (Jenner, 2021). By the end of 2019, Jenner earned $15.9 million on Instagram

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and was at the top of *Buzz Bingo's* list of the most paid female Instagram influencers (Randolph, 2019). During the *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* reunion, Jenner explained that her family prioritizes staying healthy and hopes that this is what her fans take away from their posts on social media (Frey, 2021). However, *Fizzy Mag*, an online magazine that covers fashion and beauty, shared how some fans claimed that Jenner has set unrealistic standards and beauty ideals, and consequently triggered body issues (Ahern, 2021). The Instagram account Problematic Fame spoke out about a post that showed Jenner posed in undergarments. It pointed out that while "Kendall is obviously very gorgeous…these are not her real proportions, nor are they anybody's" (Schaffstall, 2021). The account also included a message for people to not compare themselves to edited images and stated that even Jenner does not look like the images of herself in real life (Schaffstall, 2021). While celebrities can have a particular responsibility as role models to their fans and followers, Ahern (2021) expressed the idea that being comfortable in one's own skin should be something people look up to, instead of a quality used to tear someone down. She stated that it's a hard argument to make that celebrities are responsible for others' ideas about their own self-image (Ahern, 2021). Therefore, this study asked the following question:

RQ2: How do young women compare themselves to influencers within the thin ideal?

<div align="center">Body Positivity Movement</div>

The body positive movement was created to counteract the continuous stream of media images that fostered unrealistic and unattainable appearance ideals (Cohen et al., 2020). The body positivity movement is defined as a movement that rejects narrowly defined beauty ideals that are often considered unattainable (Cohen et al., 2019b). Its goal

is to inspire people to not focus on how their body appears to others. Therefore, the movement uses images to encourage people to be accepting of various body sizes, to see these body sizes as attractive, and to appreciate the functionality of their body (Cohen et al., 2019b). To further encourage body acceptance, the images also attempt to normalize a variety of body types that have been underrepresented in the media. Individuals can join the movement by simply posting images of themselves that make them feel empowered or by confronting those who shame individuals for their physical appearance (Chiat, 2021). Posts within the movement also commonly feature inspiring captions about self-acceptance (Cohen et al., 2019b).

Cohen et al. (2019a) pointed towards progress in the movement's goal of normalizing diverse body types as they explained the results of a content analysis that contained 640 Instagram posts that were shared from popular body-positive accounts. These posts included images of several body sizes and appearance aspects that are not commonly shown in mainstream accounts, such as cellulite, stomach rolls, and skin imperfections. Overall, the study found that body positive posts by popular Instagram accounts did contain a larger variety of body types and more underrepresented body types than mainstream accounts (Cohen et al., 2019a). Webb et al.'s (2017) content analysis found that images with the hashtag "#fatspiration" frequently showed messages of accepting body fat through beauty-related activism. Images with the hashtag "#HealthAtEverySize" encouraged physical activity, health, and wellbeing (Webb et al., 2017). Webb et al. (2019) explained that Instagram posts with body positive hashtags, such as "#CurvyYoga," included messages that spread a holistic approach to health, showed portrayals of health and fitness by people of many sizes, and individuals taking

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pride in the functionality of their bodies. Messages with hashtags, such as "#CurvyYoga" and "#HealthAtEverySize," (Webb et al., 2017) were consistent with the Health At Every Size (HAES) principles (Cohen et al., 2020). The HAES approach promotes a weight-neutral approach to health with a focus on prioritizing wellness, instead of focusing on weight loss. It encourages balanced eating, physical activity, and respect for many different body shapes and sizes (The Association for Size Diversity and Health, 2020.) Overall, Cohen et al. (2020) explained that these posts seek to promote the idea that all bodies are worthy of respect.

Having a positive body image can be connected to an increase in social, psychological, and emotional health (Swami et al., 2018) and has also been associated with health promoting behaviors, such as exercise and mindful eating (Andrew et al., 2016). Cohen et al. (2019) explained that the content shared on leading body-positive Instagram accounts is notably consistent with theoretical tenets of positive body image. Therefore, the researchers concluded that interacting with body-positive content may be linked with both psychological and protective benefits for women. Characteristics of positive body images include: "appreciating the unique features of one's body, accepting aspects of the body that are inconsistent with idealized media images, broadly defining beauty, inner positivity, tending to the body's needs, and filtering information in a body-protective manner" (Cohen et al., 2020, p. 3). Therefore, positive body image is described by Andrew et al. (2015) as protective against the idea of the thin ideal that individuals frequently come across in media.

While social media and body positivity's popularity continues to grow, negative reactions have risen from the movement. One of the most widespread arguments is that

some body positive supporters glamorize obesity (Chiat, 2021) and thus, do not encourage people to live a proper healthy lifestyle, but instead provide a convenient excuse for individuals who are already living an unhealthy lifestyle (Haye, 2019). A headline from *The Sydney Morning Herald* stated, "The body positivity movement is admirable, but it isn't liberating women" (Reilly, 2017). Oltuski (2017) argued that body positivity produces a new pressure on women to love their bodies and consequently, might make women feel worse about themselves if they do not love their body for what it is. Another criticism is that even though the messages about one's body are positive, this type of content still focuses on appearance and can continue the underlying issue of having a focus on the body (Oltuski, 2017).

A 2019 study's findings noted that participants who viewed body-positive posts said more positive statements about their appearance when compared to participants who viewed thin-ideal posts (Cohen et al., 2019b). These findings add support for body-positive content still existing and growing on Instagram, but point out that the movement includes appearance-focused images that show women in revealing clothing (Cohen et al., 2019b). Cohen et al. (2020) said viewing body positive content may be associated with negative outcomes that are in line with the objectification theory, which describes several negative psychological consequences of self-objectification that are experienced by women. Examples include disordered eating, appearance anxiety, and body shame (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Further, Haye (2019) argued that spreading body positive content can be harmful to one's health and praise unhealthy standards.

Body Positivity Influencers

An additional aspect of body positivity is the use of influencers to reach a large audience to share the ideals of the movement. Pop star Lizzo has been described as a pioneer in the body positivity movement (Rosa, 2019). Christopher Rosa of the online women's magazine, *Glamour*, stated that the 31-year-old rapper gives "unapologetic interviews about being a plus-size woman" and that she has problems with the way culture views larger, confident women (Rosa, 2019). A result of Lizzo's popularity was becoming a face of the body positivity movement. She embraces this role, but wants people to stop finding it surprising that a plus size woman can have confidence. In the interview with *Glamour*, Lizzo shared that she thinks there is a double standard for women (Rosa, 2019). She also explained that she does not like when people think it is hard for her to see herself as beautiful.

Lizzo works to normalize the image of a confident plus-sized woman. She remains an advocate for making space for women of all sizes (Rosa, 2019). She gives partial credit to social media for helping change the narrative about body size and providing visibility to women of all sizes. In April 2021, Lizzo shared on her Instagram account, @lizzobeeating, that she was excited to be partnering with Dove for their Dove Self Esteem Project that strives to reverse the negative effects of social media and change the conversation about beauty standards. In one of her Instagram captions she said, "I wanted to show u how I do it au natural" and ended by saying "Let's get real y'all." (Lizzo, 2021).

A 2019 controversy about celebrity trainer Jillian Michael's comments towards Lizzo can serve as an example of how critics and professionals are concerned that the

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body positivity movement has gone too far with body acceptance. While on BuzzFeed News's *AM2DM* show, Michaels questioned why everyone was celebrating Lizzo's body and not her music. She continued her statement by saying "Cause it isn't going to be awesome if she gets diabetes" (Esmonde, 2020). Later, in an interview with *People*, she stood by her comments and said, "there's nothing beautiful about clogged arteries" (Esmonde, 2020). Prior to the controversy, Michaels stated in *Women's Health UK* that "obesity in itself is not something that should be glamorized," but people have tried to become so politically correct that no one wants to be the one to say it (Esmonde, 2020). Critics, along with Michaels, said that the movement had made it to the point where some people were ignoring the risks of unhealthy body weights (Esmonde, 2020).

While Lizzo, who has 12 million followers on Instagram, is a celebrity that remains a prominent figure in the body positivity movement, Bree Lenehan is a microcelebrity in the movement who is also working to promote confidence in those who have various body sizes. Lenehan, who has 548 thousand followers on Instagram, told *Daily Mail* in 2020 that she used to be obsessed with being skinny (Stathis, 2020). However, in 2019 she decided to focus on educating herself about health. She now uses her social media to promote confidence and encourage the appreciation of one's body (Stathis, 2020). She stated that "learning to appreciate your body as it is and what it can do is really important no matter what your personal goals are." (Stathis, 2020).

In October 2021, she posted a series of side-by-side photos as part of her "Real Me Monday" series. The photos on the left show posed, edited pictures of herself, while the photos on the right show relaxed, unedited photos of herself. In September 2021, Lenehan wrote that up to that point, she had shared 245 posed versus real photos side-by-

side. Through her caption, she told her followers that she posts this type of content because she decided she did not want to spend her life feeling like she needed to delete any pictures that were not "Insta-worthy" or not a "perfected, filtered, aesthetic, version" of herself (Lenehan, 2021b). So, she decided to encourage her followers to appreciate their body by choosing to post pictures of her own body that go against society's body standards. Posting these body positive pictures help her point out that people tend to only post the 'perfected' pictures of themselves, when in reality, they too likely have a 'normal' body. Because of conflicting attitudes about the body positivity movement, the following question was asked:

RQ3: How do young women compare themselves to influencers within the body positivity movement?

<center>Instagram Practices</center>

While there are numerous studies on both the thin ideal and the body positivity movement, social media users' practices in terms of selecting and editing photos to post are understudied. By 'practices,' this study refers to the way users incorporate ideas from body image ideals into their own Instagram accounts. Instagram users regularly come in contact with differing body image ideas as its one billion monthly users share images to the networking site (Statista Research Department, 2021b). Because individuals can edit images of themselves using Instagram's editing features or using other apps before posting them, they can present an idealized version of themselves (Fardouly et al., 2017). This can be concerning as individuals process social information by comparing themselves with others to determine similarities and differences, either purposefully or by being confronted with them in social information (Wood, 1989; Krayer et al., 2008).

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Social comparison theory proposes that people have an inherent drive to compare themselves to others to decide where they stand on certain aspects of their lives, such as physical attractiveness (Festinger, 1954). However, it should be noted that the majority of people are aware of societal beauty standards, yet not everyone adopts the standards to the same extent (Fardouly et al., 2018) and therefore, might not compare themselves at the same extent. Because of this gap in literature, this study sought to answer the following research question:

RQ4: In what ways are ideas from the thin ideal and/or body positivity movement carried out in the Instagram accounts of young women in 2022?

CHAPTER III - METHODOLOGY

To explore how young women perceive and compare themselves to influencers in relation to bodily appearance and how these ideals may be reflected in their own personal Instagram accounts, this study utilized focus groups. Kennedy, Kools and Krueger (2001) explained that when compared to interviews with an adolescent and an adult expert, focus groups that include peers can help decrease one's self-consciousness. Further, including peers who are known to one another or who have a similar culture or background can increase one's comfort and promote group discussion (Hughes & DuMont, 1993; Kennedy et al., 2001). Burnette, Kwitoswki, and Mazzeo (2017) said that because social media networks are interactive, the interactive nature of focus groups would assist the expression of both individual and shared experiences among participants (Hughes & DuMont, 1993; Kitzinger, 1995). Finally, focus groups can be beneficial over other methods when exploring topics, such as body image, that might be embarrassing for participants to talk about because more outgoing participants can help break the ice for more reserved group members (Kitzinger, 1995; Tiggemann et al., 2000).

Participants

A 2019 study found that approximately 90% of people ages 18 through 29 reported being active social media users who were regularly exposed to different images (Aparicio-Martinez et al., 2019). Chae (2018) shared that women could be more interested in female influencers than men. Additionally, Duffy and Hund (2015) shared that influencers' posts may embody traditional femininity, such as beauty and fashion, but present themselves in more self-empowering ways. Therefore, females between the ages of 18 and 29 who use the Instagram app at least once a day were recruited for this

study. The three focus groups resulted in a total of 15 participants. The 15 individuals were females that ranged in age from 18 to 26 years old. Nine (60%) participants identified themselves as white, five (33.33%) identified as black or African American, and one (6.67%) identified as both white and black or African American.

Participants were recruited from a midsized southern university via email. The email contained a link to a two-part online survey that was used prior to the focus groups to ensure that the participants met the desired criteria and to collect demographic information. The survey also provided the qualified participants with a link to sign up for one of the three focus group sessions. The participants received a free meal upon arrival to the focus group session and were entered into a raffle containing two $25 gift cards.

<div align="center">Data Collection</div>

Focus groups were conducted face-to-face on the university's campus. The first focus group had two participants, the second had five participants, and the third had eight participants. Each focus group was recorded for transcription purposes. To collect data on participants' thoughts surrounding pictures posted on Instagram, each group viewed four pictures (see Appendix B) with discussion occurring between each. The same set of 17 questions were asked to each group with varying follow-up questions. The focus group started with two questions (see Appendix A) to get participants thinking about pictures they see online. Then, a 'thin' picture of Bree Lenehan was shown, and questions were asked to gather responses on how women perceive posted pictures of individuals in terms of bodily appearance. Next, participants were shown a picture of Kendall Jenner and asked questions about how they compare themselves to the person in the photo in order for the researcher to collect information on the thin ideal. Then, they were shown a

picture of Lizzo and asked the same comparison-based questions to gather data on the body positivity movement. Finally, participants viewed the 'body positive' picture of Bree Lenehan and discussion was shifted to investigate how any of these ideal-body type thoughts flow into the participants' own Instagram accounts. It should be noted that the first two focus groups viewed and discussed the thin-ideal images first and the body positive images second. The third focus group viewed and discussed the body positive images first and the thin-ideal images second.

<center>Data Analysis</center>

Upon completion of the focus group sessions, the recordings were transcribed and then analyzed for themes. Using an inductive approach, the researcher started with the primary coding cycle to examine all responses and assigned words or phrases that captured the main ideas within the data. The constant comparative method that Tracy (2013) described as comparing and modifying code definitions and/or splitting them up to fit new data was used throughout the coding process. Using a computer, codes were organized into categories based on similarity. Next, the researcher re-examined the codes identified in the primary coding cycle to find second-level codes that identified "patterns, rules, or cause-effect progressions" (Tracy, 2013, p. 194). The second level codes were reviewed to find main themes. Because the primary researcher performed the analysis and created the codes, samples of the data, along with the created codes, were given to two of the researcher's colleagues to test for reliability. They were asked to match the data samples to the codes to see if any codes needed to be reevaluated. The colleagues were able to successfully match the majority of the sample data with the codes and

helped the researcher make minor adjustments to the names of a few codes in order to

better summarize the ideas within the data.

CHAPTER IV – RESULTS

This study aimed to better understand young women's perceptions, comparisons, and practices within the context of Instagram. An analysis of the responses revealed three main themes and one subtheme. The first theme admiration, but not participation explains how the participants admire body positive influencers, but are not comfortable posting pictures of themselves that could be considered body positive content. The second theme panel for posting describes the participants' desire to get others' opinions on their pictures before posting to social media. The subtheme "three is a sweet spot" represents some of the participants' belief that the ideal post consists of three pictures. The third theme societal standards destroy self-image explains the negative attitudes the participants expressed about the societal pressures to look a certain way, as well as the existence of a double standard and stigmas about having fat on one's body. Each of the themes represent commonalities within the thoughts and experiences of the participants. The subtheme provides additional insight into the practices performed in the participants' own Instagram accounts. All 15 participants used the Instagram app at least once a day and therefore shared experiences about the images they see when viewing content and the processes that take place when posting to the app.

Admiration, but not participation

During the focus groups, the majority of participants made references to admiring people in the body positivity movement and feeling inspired by them to be confident in themselves. However, when discussing what types of pictures they would post to their own accounts, many of the participants shared that they would not post content that would be considered body positive or did not match the thin ideal. Therefore, admiration,

but not participation was a theme that emerged from the data. Examples of this theme were found in several statements from multiple participants. Participant 4 shared her admiration towards Lizzo as she told the group about how Lizzo makes her "try to be confident" and have "self-love within her life." She explained that she likes her body now and that Lizzo gives her the confidence to love herself. She also shared that body positive content is "like showing appreciation for your body." However, she later explained that she will not post a picture if part of her body does not look how she hoped it would. While sharing examples of when she will not post a picture, she said that it does not matter how her face looks, but that "if my stomach is sticking out...no ma'am." Further into the session, she explained that she chooses to have her account fit into the thin ideal and that "nothing on my profile is body positivity. It's just that I want to look good to simply look good."

While viewing the body positive picture of Bree Lenehan, participant 12 told the group that she would not be brave enough and does not have the confidence to wear the same tight dress that Lenehan was wearing in the picture. Shortly after, she referred back to the picture Lenehan posted on Instagram and stated,

> I could not do anything like that. I saw that picture and was thinking back to a picture I took fairly recently. It was a horrible angle. Good picture, but just horrible angle. I was like I will never post this. This is a cute picture for me to have, but it will never go anywhere. So, I admire her (Lenehan) greatly for that.

Through this quote, participant 12 expressed her admiration surrounding Lenehan's confidence and for posting the picture. Regardless, she still expressed not being comfortable partaking in sharing pictures that do not match the thin ideal and said,

"if it doesn't fit what I think I should portray to others, it just does not get posted." This same concept can be seen through participant 14's views as well. Participant 14 made several comments about admiring Lizzo and how she makes her feel powerful. She pointed out that Lizzo has a stomach and said, "If Lizzo tried something on and she looks good in it, I'd wear it too. She's really inspirational." However, she later mentioned that she personally does not like when her own stomach is visible in pictures and said that she does not wear revealing clothing in pictures that she posts, but because of her larger size, her stomach will still be visible in them. She feels that her stomach is what people pay attention to, so she will try to pose for pictures in a way where it does not look as big. Even though she admired Lizzo's confidence to post in an outfit that revealed her stomach, participant 14 did not feel comfortable doing the same. Participant 10 served as a final strong example of this theme. She explained that she wants the world to perceive her in a certain way, but when she looked at the photo of Lizzo, her thought was "Oh my gosh. She looks so beautiful. Like I want people to look at me that same way." Similar to the other participants, she later explained that she would not post a picture that does not match the thin ideal.

> I would feel very scared and anxious, which is why it's something I don't do; which makes me feel kind of bad because I want to contribute to something like that (referring to body positivity content). I constantly speak it in my words to my friends, but I don't really show it in my actions towards myself. I'll do it towards others, but I think I would feel way too scared.

Multiple of the other participants made similar comments about having "a bit of a belly" and having a smaller body type that does not receive hate, but still expressed

admiration, as well as positive feelings about themselves after viewing Lizzo's picture. However, their thoughts also fit in this theme as they too agreed they would not post pictures that do not fit into the thin ideal. Participant 8 said it would even "hurt her feelings so much" if someone was to say they saw her picture and felt better about themselves because they viewed her post as body positive content. Because of the commonality among the participants' views and statements, the researcher found that even though the participants expressed admiration and feeling inspired by body positive influencers, the majority of the participants expressed that they would either not post body positive content or if they were to post content that was considered more body positive, they would feel insecure and most likely delete the post shortly after uploading it.

Panel for posting

Panel for posting is another main theme that contained the subtheme: "three is a sweet spot." The majority of the participants explained that they prefer to get outside opinions when selecting which pictures to post on Instagram. The subtheme shares additional findings about the number of pictures participants feel they should post. Several participants explained that they send their pictures to their friends, group chats, and boyfriends to get their input on which pictures they think should be posted. For example, participants 2 and 6 explained that they pick their favorite pictures and then send those pictures to their friends. They ask their friends to pick their favorites in order to narrow down the number of pictures that will be posted. Participant 2 explained that she sends her pictures to her friends because she is too used to her face and sometimes cannot tell if a picture of herself looks good or bad. She said that she knows that her

friends will be honest with her about which ones look best. Participant 6 shared that it makes her feel better if her friends pick the same ones that she chose because then she knows those pictures look good. While discussing how she chooses which pictures of herself to post, participant 12 said, "I get a panel. This sounds horrible, but we all have group chats and send pictures to our friends." Participant 12 sends her pictures to friends to have them help narrow down which they think are best; however, participant 1 sends her pictures to friends for a different reason. Participant 1 shared,

> I show every photo that I took to my boyfriend, then my best friend, and then my other really good friend. I give them all the photos and say, 'you choose which photos I look best in and I'm just going to post those.' I don't even look at them first… I know I can be extremely overly critical of myself, so I take all of the negativity and power away from myself to judge myself.

She also expressed that she does not like the way she thinks about herself, so in order to gain confidence, she prefers to see the pictures that her friends think she looks prettiest in. While participant 1 wants help selecting pictures to post because of how overly critical she is of herself, participant 3 seeks the opinions of friends because she is "looking for attention." She will send her pictures to her friends and say, "which one of these do you think is going to really get me the most likes from people because I'm craving it right now." Whether the participants sent their pictures to their friends because they simply could not decide which ones to post or because they knew they would feel insecure without getting more opinions, most of the participants admitted that they have a select group of people that help them narrow down their pictures to the few that will be posted. Therefore, panel for posting was a prominent theme among the group.

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The subtheme "three is a sweet spot" represents the information collected about how many pictures participants think should be posted at a single time. Multiple participants voiced that they prefer to post three pictures as opposed to the ten that can be posted in a single upload on Instagram. For example, participant 12 explained that Instagram is where the better pictures are posted, so if she has ten pictures, she will send them in her group chat and ask her friends to pick their top five. From there, they will vote on them to narrow it down to their three favorites, which will be the only pictures that get posted. Participant 6 also shared that "I pick out the pictures that I like, and it might be a lot of pictures. You know like ten, but I can't post all of those on social media." She explained that because she cannot post all ten, she gets her friends to choose three or four and will keep the rest of the pictures to post at a later date. Participant 10 shared that instead of spending time editing several of her pictures, she will choose three to edit and post. Participant 11 asked the group where three being the ideal number came from and explained that her cousins and sisters often remind her that she should only post three pictures. Participant 10 answered by saying "the three is important. It's like a sweet spot." Participant 11 explained that she thinks posting one picture only works if its "one really good, long picture" and that two is "just an awkward number," but three pictures is just right. A consensus among the participants was that only their best pictures get posted on Instagram; however, some of them felt that the post should still be limited to three pictures. Therefore, "three is a sweet spot" for how many pictures to upload emerged as a pattern.

Societal standards destroy self-image

There were no specific questions asked about societal beauty standards for women, yet multiple participants in each focus group brought the topic into the discussion. Accordingly, the theme societal standards destroy self-image emerged from the data. This theme represents the negative attitudes participants expressed about feeling pressured by society to look a certain way, as well as the existence of a double standard and stigmas. Participant 2 captured these thoughts as she spoke about big corporations gearing products towards women and perpetuating societal beauty standards.

> I'm like that's ridiculous. Are you kidding me? How did you manage to gender this product in another way? It feels almost hopeless because there are so many hundreds of thousands of people perpetuating the issue that the body positivity movement is trying to solve. And like you (referring to participant 1) said how you know men in a lot of cases get so angry. It's that double standard of like your body needs to be this way, but my body can be as gross as I want. I don't know, it feels hopeless because there are so many big people and big corporations working against it, along with all of the smaller individuals posting like 'look at how skinny I am.'

The double standard was described as being an issue among females, but hardly an issue with males. Participant 11 said, "It makes it even harder on girls. It's not fair." Participant 10 followed this by sharing her views that men tend to feel entitled to comment on a woman's body, even if the man's appearance is not put together or what society would consider attractive. When asked at the end of the session if there was anything else anyone wanted to share, participant 1 used the opportunity to share similar

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views and discuss the double standard. She shared that it amazes her how mad some people get about the body positivity movement and mentioned that "it's interesting to think about the fact that our ideas of beauty and how we should view ourselves are based off of what men want and not what we want." She expressed that she wants to be beautiful in her own eyes and not "for some guy walking next to me." Because of her strong feelings on the matter, she believes that "our self-confidence and our image of ourselves are completely destroyed for money basically and that's gross. It's really gross."

Multiple other participants expressed the negative ways they have been affected by society's beauty standards, which led participant 6 to question how people would feel if society was different. She asked, "What if everybody was fat and everyone loved all the big people?" However, she seemed to second guess her question to the group as she answered it herself by explaining that everyone wants to look like everybody and that in society people tend to feel like there is a standard to be compared to. "We just feel like you need to look like this instead of that."

While referring to the picture of Lizzo, participant 9 explained that society has a stigma about how "fat equals unhealthy." She said that even though she is smaller than Lizzo, she believes Lizzo is healthier. Both participants 10 and 11 also took Lizzo's defense and explained that contrary to societal views, Lizzo is healthy even if she is plus-sized. Participant 10 shared that she personally struggles to eat properly, but "Lizzo is such a good advocate for eating well." Participant 11 referred to Lizzo as an important role model that encourages a healthier mindset and shares the message that you do not have to be the "best acceptable body type. You just need to be the best version of you."

She ended this statement by asking, "Why not just be the best version of you? Why is that not acceptable?"

Further, participant 10 shared a story about her plus-sized aunt that portrays the stigma that if you have fat on your body, you are not viewed as attractive.

She would say stuff like 'I'm fat' and people would be like 'no, you're so pretty.' She'd be like 'I didn't say I wasn't pretty. I said I'm fat.' That doesn't instantly mean ugly. You have just made that connection.

Participant 9 told a similar story about her mother who is plus-sized. She explained how upsetting it is as a more average-sized person to watch her plus-sized mother struggle with body image issues that come from the media. She said that her mother listens to society's standards and has become so insecure because of the way media talks about people, such as Lizzo. Participant 11 pointed out that in society, the standards are on women twenty-four seven and that nobody talks about it in the same way in which the focus group was able to share their thoughts and feelings. "Nobody talks about it like this ever. It's just kind of like, you know deep down, but nobody talks about it." She then explained that until its more common to talk about the thin-ideal standards being a "not good thing," she is not comfortable posting pictures that could be categorized as body positivity. Overall, all participants who spoke on societal beauty standard topics had strong feelings and both willingly and passionately shared their thoughts with the group. The data revealed that the participants' attitudes towards the standards were overwhelmingly negative and provided several examples of how the standards can negatively impact a woman's self-image.

CHAPTER V – DISCUSSION

This study collected data about young women's thoughts and experiences surrounding the thin ideal, the body positivity movement, and practices carried out on Instagram. To address the four research questions, all participants were asked the same set of questions. The first research question asked: How do young women perceive posted pictures of individuals in terms of bodily appearance? Brown and Tiggemann's 2016 research, along with Maltby et al.'s 2005 research, suggested that constantly viewing celebrities with thin-ideal qualities reinforces the unachievable thin ideal that consequently leads to more body dissatisfaction. The majority of participants would agree with this research as they shared that they believe thin celebrities do perpetuate the unachievable thin ideal and that it makes them feel that they should not post pictures if their bodies do not match the thin-ideal standards. Participant 14 said, "We're just set to a certain standard that's so unrealistic, but influencers make it look realistic." Several others shared that they perceive social media as often being fake, whether it is because the individuals have a fake smile, look ungenuine, or have been photoshopped. These responses add support for Abidin's (2015) research that explains how Instagram influencers commonly use image-enhancing apps, such as Photoshop, to alter their images. While discussing pictures of people they see online, participant 14 said they seem standardized, while multiple others said they feel as though people are often trying to brag about their lifestyle, an award, or their own bodies. Accordingly, they perceived these types of pictures as showing off.

Despite the existence of the body positivity movement, the thin ideal still dominates the participants' perceptions of bodies they see online and what they perceive

as the ideal body. The participants' responses suggest that the thin ideal is strong on Instagram and that many influencers have the same look as they attempt to post content that matches the dominant thin ideal. Senft's (2013) research explained that social media influencers have a set of self-presentation practices that are prevalent on social media, which could help explain why participants reported seeing a substantial amount of standardized content that fits in the thin ideal. Because thin-ideal content is constantly being spread by influencers and users, the thin ideal continues to overpower the body positivity movement; thus, leading participants to perceive these bodies as the ideal body type.

Chae (2017) and Fardouly et al. (2015) stated that females commonly use celebrities as appearance comparison targets. Interestingly, several of the participants mentioned that because they perceive images of celebrities as unrealistic or fake, they do not always use them as appearance comparison targets. For example, when shown the thin-ideal picture of Lenehan, participants 4, 6, and 7 said if they saw the same picture in their feed, they would not be affected by it and would instead simply skip it and continue scrolling. Further, Brown and Tiggemann (2021) explained that it is common for thin and attractive online celebrities to be viewed as a source for "thinspiration" and "fitspiration" that can motivate people to work towards achieving a body type that matches the thin ideal. However, several participants stated that because they often view these pictures as unrealistic and will even choose to scroll past it, these types of pictures can have the opposite effect. Participant 3 mentioned that Jenner does not motivate her to be fit, but a fitness influencer who explains their workouts might be able to motivate her more. Several participants once again agreed that it is "too unrealistic" so "why even bother."

Participant 8 explained that "It's just one of those things you have to look at it and be like good for her that she looks like that, but don't set yourself to that standard. I'm never going to reach it." Because of this understanding that comparing yourself to the thin ideal can be unhealthy, several of the participants' thoughts on how they perceive these images did not lead them to participate in unhealthy behaviors that were discussed by DiBisceglie and Arigo (2021). Instead, some participants said they try to avoid looking at "fake" or "photoshopped" content that could be harmful to their mental health. They shared that they unfollow certain people to change their feed or create 'spam accounts.' These spam accounts are secret accounts that only close friends know about. The participants said they are used to follow only their friends and for them to view content and post any pictures they want without feeling pressured to have an ideal Instagram account or fit into their idealized persona.

These actions suggest a rebellion against the thin ideal. The thin ideal clearly influences the participants, but they take steps to either ignore the thin-ideal content or to create an alternative place to avoid it. Vartanian and Dey (2013) reported that social media consumption can have a negative effect on physical and mental health. The participants were aware of these negative health effects that could occur from viewing influencers' thin-ideal content and therefore, they resisted looking at it and rebelled against it in their own ways. While some participants would continue scrolling and not stop to get a further look at thin-ideal pictures, others would unfollow accounts that posted thin-ideal content. Clearing one's feed of thin-ideal content can be viewed as a rebellious act as they are doing away with what society would consider popular content. However, unfollowing accounts is not always enough. Some rebel further by creating

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spam accounts that help them avoid more of the content because spam accounts typically follow other spam accounts that are also avoiding the social rules and norms of Instagram. These spam accounts can be viewed as a way for users to rebel, as well as a community that turns away from the thin ideal that is commonly found on users' regular accounts.

Several scholars say influencers give off the impression of realness to cultivate a sense of intimacy and relatability in order to create affective relationships with their followers (Abidin, 2015; Duffy, 2018; Marwick, 2015). The analysis of the data showed that participants tend to perceive thin-ideal influencers as "fake," "typical," "standardized," or portraying unrealistic standards, but perceived body positivity influencers as more "genuine" and "inspirational." Participant 2 served as an example of perceiving influencers' content differently. She explained that while on Instagram, she notices "a ton of super tan skin, super blonde hair, and super white teeth," but one thing that really bothers her is the fake smile that is "not a genuine smile." She continued this thought by explaining that she does not think everyone she sees online will look the same in person and that it feels like a lot of the influencer content is the same. Therefore, she often perceives people online as being fake. However, after she viewed the picture of Lizzo, she shared that when she sees a heavier or more body positive influencer or model on her feed, she does not "feel anything negative." Instead, she perceives them as "gorgeous and just confident more than anything." She also added that this type of content is much better for her to see when she is feeling down about her body. This example once again reflects a resistance to the thin ideal. She expressed that she perceives thin-ideal content as fake or presentational and therefore, does not idolize the

thin-ideal bodies she sees online. Rather, she has a negative view of the thin-ideal bodies, but takes a positive stance on the body positive content found online. Because she is looking for more genuine content as opposed to fake content, she rebels against the concept of the thin ideal.

The second research question asked: How do young women compare themselves to influencers within the thin ideal? Research shows that women commonly assess their appearance against other females that they view as superior to themselves (Leahey et al., 2007) and will also choose to compare themselves to people who are not similar to them, but could provide them with information, such as the thin ideal (Kruglanksi & Mayseless, 1990). Participant 10 was very vocal about how she tends to compare herself to images online and how it "definitely has an effect. Like it's kind of undeniable." Participant 11 said her rate of comparison was so unhealthy that she had to deactivate her own Instagram account. While several of the participants admitted to comparing themselves to thin influencers, the majority who were vocal about it had an understanding that they should try not to compare themselves. These results support Fardouly et al.'s (2018) research about how people are aware of societal beauty standards, but the standards are not adopted to the same extent, so people might not compare themselves at the same extent. Participants 8, 9, and 11 reported that they understand they should not compare themselves to thin influencers. Participant 11 said, "I feel like it's harmful to compare yourself to that. Not saying that she's like edited or anything, but her job is to look good." She explained that she does not have the same amount of time or resources to be able to look the same way as influencers and asked, "So why set that as a standard?" Further, when presented with the picture of Jenner, participants 1, 3, 5, 6, and 13 expressed that

they do not want to look like the influencers or have the same body as the ones in the thin-ideal images. This data adds support to Mask and Blanchard's (2011) view that not all women respond in the same way to the thin ideal that is found in media. Accordingly, more than half of the participants were not motivated to make changes to their bodies based off their comparison to the thin-ideal pictures. The feeling of indifference, rather than feeling motivated, does not align with literature about upwardly comparing oneself to models and the idea that models are an influence for self-improvement (Chae, 2018).

However, a few of the participants did report feeling insecure when they compared themselves to the thin ideal. For example, participant 1 decided to post a picture that she felt did not match the thin ideal but felt scared of how others would react as she believes that there are mean people in the world who judge people's bodies. Because she felt insecure, she turned her account to business mode, which allowed her to see if anybody sent her post to another user. If somebody shared her post, she said she would have become more insecure and deleted it. Participant 15 asked the third focus group participants if they would delete a negative body related comment off their post. Some of the participants responded by saying they would not just delete the comment, but delete the whole post, "probably have a meltdown," and "would probably cry." Richins (1991) would explain that the participants in these two examples assessed themselves by comparing their appearance related qualities to others and then learned from the way others reacted to their appearance. While the participants articulated that they do not typically use celebrities as appearance comparison targets, they expressed that it is natural for people to compare themselves to posted pictures and feel negatively towards their own body image. These results add support to past findings about how

women compare themselves to celebrities because they believe that models and celebrities set the standard that they will be judged against (Strahan et al., 2006). However, the majority of the participants had a strong awareness of their own bodies and noted multiple reasons, such as genetics and it being impossible for everyone to look the same, that led them to gain an understanding that they should not compare themselves to the thin ideal. Though they try their best not to compare, many explained that because they feel they will be judged, they will only post their best pictures and not post content that others might view as body positive content. This pattern reflects Thompson et al.'s (2021) definition of 'social comparison' that explains that people decide both their social and personal worth based off how they compare to others in certain categories, such as attractiveness.

Through these examples, a dual and paradoxical pattern was observed. The participants are subject to the thin ideal as it is a strong norm and expectation within society. As a result, they seem to be embarrassed by their own pictures that are not flawless and will try to avoid viewing and comparing themselves to thin-ideal content. However, they understand that it can be impossible to model themselves after influencers within the thin ideal and take the mindset that they should not bother trying to change their physical body. These results are self-contradictory because several participants seek to avoid the thin ideal yet want their own pictures to fit into thin-ideal content.

It is also important to mention that because of the thin ideal, multiple participants expressed that they feel as though society has made the female body into something to be gazed at, which directly aligns with Fitzsimmons-Crafts et al.'s (2012) research on how the thin ideal can be viewed as an extension that branches from objectification theory.

Several participants shared stories and experiences that expressed this idea of feeling that their body is something people look at. Accordingly, a couple of participants remembered specific comments other people made towards their bodily appearance and shared that they will think about the comments when they are deciding which pictures to post online. Participant 1 articulated that for years she has been struggling with the concept that her body is something to be gazed at. She said she wants to recreate what she views as beauty and not continue to fall into the idea that she should look a certain way to please others. Because of these responses, the researcher concluded that the growth of social media and emergence of influencers have exacerbated and perpetuated the idea that the female body is something to be gazed at. Multiple participants shared that they think social media posts have turned into a way for people to show off their body features that match the thin ideal. When this information is combined with past research about how influencers create an online image to attract followers (Khamis et al., 2017; Marwick, 2015), one can infer that thin-ideal influencers understand that their bodies are gazed at and intentionally pose certain ways or carry out actions, such as dieting and working out, to have a body that will please others. While influencers might use the objectification to gain more likes and followers, the researcher concluded that the participants view it as another negative aspect of the thin ideal that they often wish to avoid.

Research question three asked: How do young women compare themselves to influencers within the body positivity movement? Cohen et al. (2019b) explained that the movement uses images to encourage people to accept various body sizes, to see them as attractive, and to learn to appreciate their bodies. These ideas are reflected through participant 2's response when discussing body positive influencers. "I'm just like oh my

gosh she's gorgeous and just confident more than anything. That makes me feel so good and makes me feel happy for the person." She then explained that body positive content is "a much better thing to see when I'm feeling down about my body." More than half of the participants had positive reactions and expressed feelings of admiration, encouragement, and inspiration after viewing the body positive images. These positive feelings represent progress within the body positivity movement. Similar to how Webb et al.'s 2017 study found that body positive content encouraged physical activity, health, and wellbeing, the participants in this study noted feeling as if they can accept their body and treat themselves kinder, as well as feeling inspired to be healthier. Additionally, after viewing the picture of Lizzo, one participant who pointed out that she has a smaller body type noted that she appreciates that there is an option to have varying body types. She said, "It's one of those things where you don't think about it until somebody else is putting it out there and then you're like, 'oh, I have it pretty good.'" The researcher concluded that the participant was comparing herself using self-enhancement that Thompson et al. (2021) explained as comparing in a way that creates a positive evaluation of oneself. Multiple participants talked about their stomachs and seemed to compare themselves to the body positive influencers using self-evaluation comparisons, which are used to evaluate where one stands compared to others (Krayer et al., 2008; Thompson et al., 2021). Through these comparisons, participants reported feeling better about themselves as they discussed that they are not as large as Lizzo and do not want to reach the point of being as plus-sized as her. For example, participant 4 said the picture makes her want to appreciate how her body currently looks, but also makes her realize

that she needs to change her eating habits because she does not want to eventually look like Lizzo.

While the majority of the participants had positive reactions to both the body positive pictures that were presented, there were conversations among a couple of participants that matched the criticisms discussed by Oltuski (2017) about how body positive content still puts a focus on appearance and perpetuates the underlying issue of the body being the focus of attention. The participants explained that because of Lizzo's weight, she needs to understand what she should and should not wear. Participant 4 described Lizzo as "going overboard" with her choice of outfits and participant 6 stated that people need to lose some weight to wear the outfit Lizzo had on. However, she then pointed out that this idea is also what society tells us and that it is not healthy to think that way. Further, participant 14 explained that people in the body positivity movement are negatively compared to thinner celebrities in the way they dress and act, but that Lizzo still inspires her to work out and show herself more love. There were some negative attitudes about comparing oneself to body positive content, but overall, the attitudes from the comparisons were positive. The participants further reported that body positive content is typically more likely to motivate them to be healthier than thin-ideal content. The positive attitudes and motivations go against the argument that body positive supporters can glamorize obesity and therefore do not encourage people to live a proper lifestyle (Chiat, 2021). These responses can lead one to see that the body positive movement is appreciated, but does not fully win in terms of the participants' expectations and perceptions.

Additionally, Oltuski (2017) argued that body positivity might make women feel worse about themselves if they do not love their body for what it is. However, through the experiences that the 15 participants shared about comparing themselves to different content found online, it can be concluded that they want to love their body and that the body positive movement inspires them to feel confident or to work towards feeling confident with their body image. Nevertheless, they passionately expressed that society's thin ideal has the potential to make them feel worse about themselves and because they feel pressured to match the thin ideal, it slows their progress of joining the body positivity movement. The thin ideal still dominates and wins in their minds. To manage this paradox, participants will do just enough to fit into the online societal standards. They will post unedited content that still matches the ideas of the thin ideal, such as choosing only their best pictures and adding filters to change the colors. However, they do not let the ideas from the thin ideal consume too much of their time or thoughts due to its ability to cause negative feelings. If they want to share pictures that do not match the thin ideal or match their idealized persona, they will utilize their spam accounts. Posting on their spam accounts allows them to share pictures with people they know will not be critical of the posts.

Research question four asked: In what ways are ideas from the thin ideal and/or body positivity movement carried out in the Instagram accounts of young women in 2022? Fardouly et al. (2017) explained that individuals can edit their images before posting them in order to present an idealized version of themselves. This phenomenon is something participants believe thin-ideal influencers partake in, but is not something that all the participants choose to participate in. Five of the participants said they do not edit

their pictures in any way. Seven said that they only edit their pictures by adding filters that change the overall color to enhance the appearance or by adding doodles and/or stickers to the pictures. A few participants shared stories of people they know who edit their bodies in pictures, but only one participant disclosed that she will use an editing app to change parts of her appearance, along with using filters to change the overall color. The remaining two participants stated that they do not post often, but did not make it clear if they edit their pictures in any way before posting them. Participant 10, who edits herself in pictures, explained that she will typically only edit out her acne, fix her clothing if needed, and remove objects in the background using an app called Retouch. However, she mentioned that she tries not to majorly edit her body or face because she knows it will make her feel bad. Several participants mentioned that they tend to look for if people edit themselves in their pictures and shared stories of Photoshop fails that made it obvious that the users edited their bodies. Interestingly, the majority of the participants had negative views about editing pictures and expressed their belief that many influencers use Photoshop to obtain the unrealistic beauty standard within the thin ideal. Yet, most of the participants shared that they still want their Instagram accounts to match the thin ideal even though they personally do not use editing apps to enhance their bodies.

Only two participants reported that they would happily and willingly post body positive content. Both participants explained that they do not care what others think about them. However, participant 13 explained that she will wear tight clothes that show her stomach because she has accepted her body, believes that she looks good, and believes that "you can be your own person and like yourself." Her ideas and the content that she posts to her Instagram account are consistent with the characteristics of positive body

image described by Cohen et al. (2020), such as appreciating features of one's body, accepting aspects of the body that do not align with thin-ideal images in the media, and broadly defining beauty. A few other participants admitted that they would try to spread these positive body image ideas to others. They said they reluctantly would post body positive content if it would "make a difference for somebody possibly" or because they might be viewed as a role model and would want to show younger children that they should not have an issue with their bodies. Their ideas that they could help someone else have a better body image are consistent with Andrew et al.'s (2015) view that having a positive image is protective against the thin ideal that people typically see in media. Nevertheless, it can be concluded that because the thin ideal is so instilled in society, many of the participants feel it is better to not post at all if their pictures will not be viewed as the thin ideal. Participant 1 explained that after posting a picture she knew she was bloated in, she felt negative feelings because it did not fit the ideal of what she wanted her body to look like and described posting it as "definitely hard." She also shared that she prefers to only post content that would match the thin ideal, but is not willing to edit herself in order to obtain the societal beauty standards within the thin ideal that she feels negatively about. However, because she still wants to fit into the thin ideal, only her best pictures get posted. This phenomenon is a common practice among several of the participants and once again highlights the dual paradoxical pattern of not liking the thin-ideal standards, but wanting to fit into it, while also understanding that they should not model themselves after influencers or bother changing their overall bodily appearance. They also appreciated the body positivity movement, but did not want to fully show support for it through their own pictures. Because of this dual paradox, most

of the participants will partake in the thin ideal just enough by posting pictures that their bodies look best in, but will also remain cautious of getting too wrapped up in comparing and using editing apps that they believe would negatively affect their mental health. They also verbally support the body positivity movement, but most of them admit to not being comfortable posting body positive content to their accounts. The researcher concluded that they find ways to participate in both of the ideal body type categories. By having a regular Instagram account, participants see and post thin-ideal related content, but the use of spam accounts and viewing body positive content provides an outlet for them to support ideas from the body positive movement. Overall, because the thin ideal is the dominant ideal body type, their regular accounts tend to match the thin ideal.

Marwick (2015) described influencers' posts as a "catalog" that presents a lifestyle that many young people "dream of having." (p. 155). The theme panel for posting, along with the subtheme "three is a sweet spot" add support to this "catalog" idea as participants choose only their best pictures to post to Instagram. Furthermore, it supports research that says current generations are more invested in the virtual world and creating idealized online personas that they can present as an extension of themselves (Gonzales & Hancock, 2011; Aziz, 2017). Participants will take numerous pictures, narrow them down to their favorites, receive help from friends to further narrow them down, and potentially add a filter in order to help create their desired online personas. When they do not want to feel the pressure to uphold their idealized online persona, but still want to upload pictures for their friends to see, they will use their spam accounts. Participant 14 explained that her spam account does not match the thin ideal or body positivity movement because it is just content that she shares with close friends, so she

can post any content she feels like sharing. Participant 10 explained that with spam accounts, there are not really any social rules. She said, "The good thing about a spam is that you don't have to keep up with it. You can post 30 times a day or you cannot post at all." Participant 11 explained that her spam account allows her to keep her feed to content from her friends, jokes, and items she might want to buy. She shared that she made the spam account so that when she is bored, she can scroll though her desired feed instead of "scrolling through all of these filtered girls that just made me feel bleh inside."

Past research has found that many Instagram users utilize the social media platform to follow friends and peers, but also as a way to follow celebrities' personal accounts, since users may also have an interest in celebrities' lives (Statista Research Department, 2021a). While many of the participants reported that they use their spam accounts to connect with friends, they also reported that they use their regular Instagram account to connect with friends, family, and acquaintances, as well as to view lifestyle content, memes, or to help pass the time when they are bored. However, several participants mentioned unfollowing celebrities, and as previously stated, some turned to spam accounts to avoid viewing content from people who are not their friends or part of their interests. Therefore, the majority of participants in this study expressed having little interest in celebrities' lives. Overall, participants shared stories, experiences, and ideas that led the researcher to conclude that the majority of the participants carry out practices that align their regular Instagram accounts with the ideas within the thin ideal. The actions they carry out in order to have the most ideal Instagram account include: taking numerous pictures, gathering friends' opinions to evaluate how others react to certain

pictures, selecting a few of the best, adding filters to improve the colors or make their

skin look warmer, and potentially adding designs and stickers for aesthetic purposes.

CHAPTER VI – LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study aimed to add information to social media, thin ideal, and body positivity literature. However, there are limitations that should be mentioned. The first limitation is that several of the participants recognized Lizzo and because of her fame, had prior knowledge of her participation in the body positivity movement, as well as praise and backlash she has received for being body positive. Yet, several of the participants did not initially recognize Kendall Jenner. There did not seem to be any strong bias that affected the responses, but some of the responses could have been biased depending on how the participants felt about the celebrities. Therefore, if this study is conducted again, researchers could use lesser-known people to help limit the chance of biased responses. Another limitation was having varied numbers of participants in each focus group. The study ran into both recruitment and attendance problems with the in-person focus groups due to the Covid-19 pandemic. People may have been cautious of in-person events with others that they are not familiar with and decided not to participate. Attendance was also a limitation as the study had between eight and ten participants signed up for each focus group, but Covid exposures and illnesses caused multiple people to be unable to attend at the last minute. Consequently, the researcher had trouble filling the open spots as it was hard to find people who were willing to participate with such short notice. Lastly, the qualifying survey should have included a question about how often participants post pictures of themselves. Through discussion, some of the participants mentioned that they had not posted a picture of themselves in quite a while. The researcher believes that additional valuable information could have been collected if more participants who actively post on their accounts were included in the focus groups.

Because of the sensitive nature of the topics discussed, the researcher would suggest having smaller focus groups of approximately five participants if the study was to be conducted again. The smaller focus groups allowed for more time to be spent on each question and for the researcher to gather deeper information. The focus group of eight participants began to get fatigued as the session neared the end. Therefore, holding more focus groups with less participants would allow time for more insightful answers and limit participant fatigue.

The study's qualifying survey collected information about how many years participants have had their Instagram accounts. Future research could take this information into consideration to see if any themes emerged among participants who have had Instagram accounts for longer when compared to participants who are relatively new users. Several participants also shared experiences about how they have grown to be more confident with their body image but mentioned that the thin-ideal images viewed during the focus groups would have likely affected them when they were in high school. Future research could explore high school aged females' thoughts surrounding the discussed topics. It would also be interesting to repeat this study or carry out a similar one with male participants to collect their perceptions and experiences, as well as to see if there are any similarities between how females and males react to body image ideals.

CHAPTER VII – CONCLUSION

Because of social media's popularity, different body image ideas are constantly being shared and viewed by users (Perrin, 2015). When viewed through the lens of social comparison theory, one can see how social media platforms, such as Instagram, can have an effect on an individual's body image. This study provided insight into young women's perceptions of potential ideal images, how they compare themselves to the images, and how these ideas affect the practices used within their own Instagram accounts. Through three focus groups and an analysis of the data, three themes and one subtheme emerged. The researcher also found that the participants support the body positive movement and feel strong negative emotions towards the thin ideal and societal beauty standards that make the majority of them feel insecure about their body image. Because of the pressure to fit into the thin ideal, participants prefer to post only a limited number of their best pictures to Instagram. These pictures are typically selected with help from friends and might have a filter added to enhance the appearance. If participants want to post, but do not want to feel pressured to fit into their idealized online persona, some will turn to their spam accounts that are only followed by close friends.

The findings suggest several implications about the body positivity movement and the thin ideal. The data points towards progress in the body positivity movement as the participants expressed support for both its message and the influencers who are involved. Unfortunately, the results of this study led the researcher to believe that it will take many more years of influencers, everyday users, and companies sharing body positive content for significant progress to be made and for the majority of young females to feel comfortable with their body image. Therefore, the movement does not seem to have

made enough progress to overpower the deeply rooted societal belief that thinness equals beauty and success. A larger implication from the thin ideal still being the dominant ideal body type is that young females will continue to develop mental and physical health problems from feeling pressured to look a certain way in order to receive approval from society. Participants mentioned that because of the wide use of editing apps by influencers, they find themselves questioning if some of the people they see online look the same in person. If the thin ideal continues to be perpetuated, this concept of looking like an idealized version of oneself online and looking different in person could become normalized, which would likely lead to further health problems and body dissatisfaction. This could also lead to an increase in both the number and use of spam accounts by users who are trying to avoid thin-ideal content and seeking a place with fewer social rules.

Based on the study's findings that show young women are rebelling against the thin ideal in order to save their mental health, the researcher believes that society needs to work towards normalizing bodies, rather than focusing on what is and is not considered a desirable body. The body positivity movement has made strides since its start in 2012, but more needs to be done for young females to become comfortable showing their support through their own pictures, rather than supporting it from the sidelines. It can be suggested that society needs to relearn what a healthy body looks like. The researcher believes this relearning can begin by users being exposed to more body positive content, such as Lenehan's "Real Me Monday" posts, as well as seeing thin-ideal influencers post unedited content. Until the body positivity movement gains more strength, one can conclude that young females will continue to feel pressured to post thin-ideal content and feel insecure about their body image.

However, the findings in this study can be used by family members, friends, doctors, psychologists, companies, and anyone who has an influence on the lives of young females to gain a better understanding of the pressure they feel from society, why they carry out certain practices on social media, and why they might have a desire to change their bodily appearance. In conclusion, this research adds up-to-date qualitative information to existing literature on body image ideals and social media. It also helps fill in the gaps in the understudied areas of literature related to how body image ideals affect social media practices. Overall, this study revealed the substantial effects that images on social media can have on a female's body image, social media use, and everyday life.

APPENDIX A – FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

RQ1: How do young women perceive posted pictures of individuals in terms of bodily appearance?

1. What do you think of pictures of people you see online?

2. What are things you notice about those pictures?

3. Who influences you to look at posts online?

4. What are your initial thoughts about the person in this picture?

5. What do you notice about her?

6. How do you feel after viewing this image of her?

RQ2: How do young women compare themselves to influencers within the thin ideal?

7. How do these pictures make you feel towards your own body?

8. In what ways does this relate to the treatment of your own body?

RQ3: How do young women compare themselves to influencers within the body positivity movement?

9. How do these pictures make you feel towards your own body?

10. In what ways does this relate to the treatment of your own body?

RQ4: In what ways are ideas from the thin ideal and/or body positivity movement carried out in the Instagram accounts of young women in 2022?

11. Who influences you to post pictures online?

12. How do you decide which pictures of yourself to post?

13. When you are getting ready to post pictures, in what ways (if any) do you edit them?

14. How do you feel when you post pictures that may not match a thin ideal?

15. How do you feel when you post pictures that may match a body positivity movement ideal?

16. In what ways do you feel that your Instagram account reflects either of these body image categories?

17. Is there anything else you would like to share about these topics?

APPENDIX B – PICTURES

Kendall Jenner
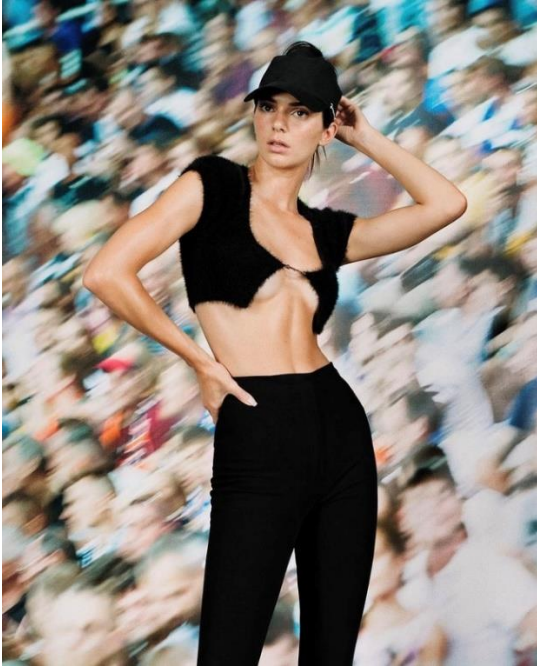
Lizzo

Thin-Ideal Bree Lenehan

Body Positive Bree Lenehan

APPENDIX C – IRB APPROVAL LETTER

Office of Research Integrity

THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MISSISSIPPI

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NOTICE OF INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD ACTION

The project below has been reviewed by The University of Southern Mississippi Institutional Review Board in accordance with Federal Drug Administration regulations (21 CFR 26, 111), Department of Health and Human Services regulations (45 CFR Part 46), and University Policy to ensure:

- The risks to subjects are minimized and reasonable in relation to the anticipated benefits.
- The selection of subjects is equitable.
- Informed consent is adequate and appropriately documented.
- Where appropriate, the research plan makes adequate provisions for monitoring the data collected to ensure the safety of the subjects.
- Where appropriate, there are adequate provisions to protect the privacy of subjects and to maintain the confidentiality of all data.
- Appropriate additional safeguards have been included to protect vulnerable subjects.
- Any unanticipated, serious, or continuing problems encountered involving risks to subjects must be reported immediately. Problems should be reported to ORI via the Incident submission on InfoEd IRB.
- The period of approval is twelve months. An application for renewal must be submitted for projects exceeding twelve months.

PROTOCOL NUMBER: 21-299
PROJECT TITLE: The Thin Ideal and Body Positivity: How Do Influencers Affect Instagram Users?
SCHOOL/PROGRAM   Communication Studies
RESEARCHERS: PI: Jeralynn Servos
                       Investigators: Servos, Jeralynn~Meyer, John~
IRB COMMITTEE ACTION: Approved
CATEGORY: Expedited Category
PERIOD OF APPROVAL: 27-Jan-2022 to 26-Jan-2023

Donald Sacco, Ph.D.
Institutional Review Board Chairperson

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