

Plus-Size Women and Instagram: How Plus-Size Women Use Instagram and How Society Responds to that Usage

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

by

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Abstract

Social media, specifically Instagram, has become a major aspect of American culture. Unlike traditional media, it gives each individual user the ability to create and share their own content. Likewise, it also gives these users the ability to respond to others' content. The goal of this study is to analyze how plus-size women utilize Instagram and how that usage reflects their position and identities within society. I surveyed sixty-nine women who self-identified as plus-size. The survey asked these women questions on what they post, why they post it, and how the public responds to and influences these posts. There was also an examination of identity and how being plus-size influences a person's individual and social identities. The results of the study showed that while these women post unique types of content, they have similar experiences on Instagram. Overall, the women received more positive responses than negative responses to their posts. These negative responses featured the reinforcement of common plus-size stereotypes including the connection to health-related problems. Within the positive comments, there was an interesting dichotomy between being considered inspirational and confident. The most discussed social rules involved how much skin a user should show in her posted pictures and whether or not this would cause them to be censored by the app or other users.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Dr. Melinda Messineo for advising me on this project. Without her constant encouragement and endless energy, this study would not have been possible.

I would also like to thank my family and friends for encouraging me to pursue this project.

Special thank you to Abbey and Susan for putting up with my constant rambling and for supporting me throughout this entire process.

Process Analysis Statement

My thesis was focused on the ways in which plus-size women use Instagram and how society guides and responds to that usage. The overall purpose of the study was to gain a better understanding of plus-size women's experience with the image-based social media platform of Instagram. A majority of the secondary research I conducted showed that there was a lack of first-hand experience being discussed. What research there was in this area referred more towards the body positive movement and social media accounts dedicated to promoting that movement rather than every day and average users.

To conduct this research, I created a survey that included four categories of questions: respondent demographics, societal responses, respondent identity, and perceptions of social rules. In the demographic questions, participants were asked questions regarding their Instagram accounts and usage (follower count, frequency of posting, and type of content posted). The societal response section was focused on how other users viewed and responded to the plus-size women's posts. Respondents were asked to describe both positive and negative reactions they have received on their posts. The identity-based questions strove to see to what extent being plus-size influenced the respondents' sense of identity. The social rules section was focused on the unwritten social rules the respondents believed they had to navigate as plus-size women.

Creating and distributing this survey proved to be two of the biggest challenges in this project. In theory, creating a survey appears to be a relatively easy task: think of questions and type them out. However, I had quite a few questions in the beginning, and not all of them were conducive to the current study. I actually started with around thirty-five questions I wanted to include in my survey. This was far too many questions for anyone to be willing to sit through. As such, I took some time to sort through my questions and really focus on the main concepts and

areas that I wanted to study through this thesis. My advisor helped show me the difference between what would be helpful for the present study and what would just be interesting information to know. After many debates, I was able to get the survey down to a manageable sixteen questions.

After creating the survey, I came face-to-face with my next obstacle: distributing it and receiving responses. My survey was focused on American women who self-identify as plus-size and use Instagram. To recruit participants, I used two different methods. The first of these was to post the link to the survey on my personal social media platforms (Instagram, Facebook, and Snapchat). This was arguably the easier of the two methods as I only had to create three posts, and the people who would see them on my profiles (family and friends) would also be the most likely to want to help me.

The second method, however, is where the struggle emerged. For this method, I used Instagram's search feature to find accounts with users who identify as female and plus-size. At this point, I private-messaged or emailed (depending on what was provided or explicitly preferred by the potential participant) the account users asking if they would like to participate. When I came up with this method, I did not realize how labor intensive it would be. I sent 200-300 individual messages and emails out to these users. It took an immense amount of time and had a negative effect on my confidence. After sending the first fifty messages, I had received very little feedback. I felt extremely disheartened and anxious that I would not receive enough responses to conduct a quality study. However, I continued messaging every day for about a week. As the days went on, I began to receive messages back not only saying they would love to participate, but that they also thought my study was important. Receiving those messages reminded me of why I was conducting this research and they gave me the boost I needed in my

responses. By the end of the study, I received sixty-nine survey responses with some incredible data.

While these aspects of the study created some difficult tasks for myself, I do not think I would have changed it. Working through my many, many questions allowed me to solidify my research focus while also gaining insight into the information I was wanting to discover. The two methods I used in recruitment allowed me to gain a variety of respondents who each have a unique experience I feel privileged to have been able to see a glimpse into.

As a plus-size woman myself, this research is incredibly important to me. Throughout my pre-teen, teenage, and even early college years, I would agonize over what to post on my social media. I kept a list of rules in my head of what was “allowed” for a girl my size and what was decidedly not. And this did not just stop with social media. I debated every item of clothing, pair of shoes, hair style, and even behavior, trying to decide how people would perceive me and how I wanted them to. Size or weight is a level of diversity that is not often discussed, even in our classes here at Ball State University. It is seen more as a simple aspect of a person’s physical appearance, but that is not the case in today’s society. Size or weight influences how society perceives and responds to certain individuals. While some are praised, others are ostracized. Even though this level of diversity permeates every level of our society, it is not openly discussed.

One of my main goals of this research project was to give a voice to the plus-size community so as to better understand their relationship within society. It was not until near the end of the study that I realized just how important what I was doing was. Again, when recruiting people to take my survey, I sent private messages and emails. Occasionally, I would get a response other than a completed survey. I had multiple people telling me that they were thankful

for the work I was doing for the plus-size community and that it was incredible to have their voices heard in such an academic setting. I also had some unique experiences when presenting my research at the Ball State Student Symposium. A majority of the people who stopped to talk with me at this event were women who identified as plus-size themselves. At one point, one woman saw my project, gasped, and quickly dragged her friend over to it saying she had to see the project. Multiple people commented on their own experiences and how they matched up with the research I was presenting. One person actually thanked me for doing this study. All of these interactions showed me just how important this research is. I was able to see a direct impact this type of research and representation can have on individuals. My experiences with this project have certainly been heartwarming and humbling. I am unbelievably proud to have been able to give this community the voice it so desperately deserves.

Introduction and Review of the Literature

Introduction

Social media has become a vague and ambiguous term encompassing numerous apps and websites that each hold a unique user experience. Likewise, the term plus-size has become skewed and vague. This term has grown to have a variety of meanings and includes many different life experiences. This study aims to take a closer look at the experience of plus-size women on the social media app Instagram. It is important to first study how the current literature defines the plus-size experience and how that experience relates to social media.

What is Plus-Size?

The term plus-size, according to the Cambridge Dictionary, refers to “a size of clothing designed for people who are larger than average, or someone like this” (Cambridge Dictionary). This definition is vague and seemingly malleable as it does not select specific sizes but instead bases itself around the societal perceptions of what is considered “average.” It is at this point that the definition becomes a little hazy. In the fashion world, the sizes this encompasses shifts depending on the brand and their location. In general, this term usually includes women’s clothing sizes 14 and up (Bogenrief, 2012). However, the average American woman wears clothing between sizes 16 and 18, again depending on the brand and the clothing items themselves. It is currently estimated that over 67% of American women wear plus-size clothing (Bogenrief, 2012). As such, we can begin to see a paradox in the ways plus-size is defined. While it denotes clothing or someone of “larger than average” size, it encapsulates sizes that are actually smaller than and on par with the average sizes women wear. What then is the actual definition of plus-size?

Due to societal contradictions such as the one seen above, this question is not so easy to answer. In fact, there are numerous ways in which plus-size has been defined depending on what is being referenced. As previously discussed, plus-size is a term used in the fashion industry to denote the larger sizes of clothing a brand or store may carry (Bogenrief, 2012). It can also be used as an adjective to describe a person who wears clothing of these sizes (Jaffe, 2008). Plus-size individuals are also referred to and refer to themselves as a myriad of other terms: fat, curvy, big boned, husky, full-figured, etc. In essence they all refer to a larger body type, specifically around the stomach and hip areas.

That being said, the term has become much more than a simple statement of size. Instead, it has become an aspect of identity (Peters, 2014). According to Social Identity Theory, a person's sense of identity is influenced by the groups of which they believe themselves to be members ("Social Identity Theory"). Sizes, specifically the generalized groups of "fat" and "skinny," can be seen as such groups that influence a person's self-identity. When a woman is asked what size they wear, they often say "I *am* a size..." rather than "I *wear* a size..." (Christel et. al., 2019). In this instance, we can see that a person's size can become a way in which they define themselves rather than simply a description. Being fat or plus-size is a dual construct made up of physical or biological truth and social experience (Jaffe, 2008). The first of these aspects clearly refers to a person's size and whether or not she is considered larger. However, the second of these reflects on how a person is perceived and then treated within society. It can then be argued that one can only have a plus-size identity when they experience both of these conditions. In this way, fatness or being plus-size is a learned identity based how a person is physically built in combination with the ways in which society interacts with or perceives them (Jaffe, 2008).

Again, the dictionary definition of plus-size is general and relies on societal perceptions of what is considered average or above it. While these perceptions are not always strictly correct (as a majority of women are larger than what fashion sizes dictate to be average), they still influence the ways in which those who are considered plus-size are interacted with and how they personally identify. Society has generated the dualities that to be thin is to be successful and to be fat or plus-size is to be “oppressed” (Johnston & Taylor, 2008). Much like the term “fat,” plus-size bodies are seen as negative and a sign of “moral negligence” (Peters, 2014). However, this isn’t how size has always been perceived. Throughout history, what has been defined as beautiful or desirable has shifted. Usually these shifts depend on the desires of men and the changes in women’s roles within society (Bonafini & Pozzilli, 2011). Such changes can be seen in the carvings of the Venus statuettes from as far back as the Paleolithic period. These statues featured large stomachs and large breasts, both usually taking up a majority of the figure. By focusing on these two body parts, there is an apparent focus on the woman’s fertility and ability to bear children, a trait that was highly prized in women during this time (Bonafini & Pozzilli, 2011). The fact that these statues were named “Venuses” also indicates that these features were connected to and exemplified the traits of the goddess of sexual desires, love, and beauty (Bonafini & Pozzilli, 2011). As time moved on, so did the perception of beauty. Around the fifth century B.C., society began to admire more precise proportions and a “suppression of more physical aspects” (Witcombe, 2000). Bigger sizes of women in art were deemed admirable, but when it was connected to an ordinary woman, it became scandalous. This shift was also caused by the change in women’s position in society. As women began to join the work force, there were different expectations placed on them. Beauty began to deemphasize fertility and instead emphasize a more linear and almost masculine appearance (Bonafini & Pozzilli, 2011). Now,

being “fat is linked with poverty, stress and unhappiness and the concept of ‘femininity’ is negatively perceived by a large part of the population” (Bonafini & Pozzilli, 2011). Regardless of which era we are discussing, the ideal body image is dictated by men and what they expect of women both sexually and within our society.

One of the ways in which women are working against the stigmas that come with being plus-size is by “coming out” (Saguy & Ward, 2011). Typically, the phrase coming out refers to publicly announcing something that is not obvious to the general public such as one’s sexuality. Being plus-size, in contrast, is not something that people can physically hide. As such, coming out for the plus-size community refers to disregarding the generally accepted “on-the-way-to-thin” persona and openly accepting the plus-size identity (Saguy & Ward, 2011; Johnston & Taylor, 2008). Coming out can change how people interact with society. By claiming to be plus-size or fat, they are reclaiming the terms and utilizing them as a descriptor rather than an insult. In coming out, plus-size women do not feel the need to be constrained to the societal rules of being plus-size. Instead, they can “engage in activities usually thought proper only for thin people, [give] up futile diets, and [rebuild their] self-esteem[s]” (LeBesco, 2004). In openly, and often times publicly, claiming the identity of plus-size, they are able to challenge the societal rules by which they would otherwise have been constrained.

The fashion definition refers strictly to size and the identity definition refers to size and a person’s relationship with society. While the identity definition does not directly influence the fashion definition, fashion does have a major impact on identity. Fashion plays a large role in how plus-size women interact with society. The label “plus-size” itself has created a separation between women who are plus-size and those who are not. Most clothing stores that carry plus-size clothing do so in a section that is separate from the “average size” clothing. The larger sizes

are seemingly so different from those that are smaller that they warrant their own section in the store. These “dark corners” create a physical separation between the two generalized groups of fat and skinny and reflects that same differentiation that is seen within society (Peters, 2014). The fashion industry has also furthered this division in the clothing that is made for each group. Plus-size clothing is traditionally less form fitting, less colorful, and altogether less fashionable (Peters, 2014). While this has been changing with recent body positivity movements, the vast majority of plus-size fashion remains the same. In creating clothing in this way, the fashion industry appears to be advocating plus-size women to hide their bodies instead of having them stand out. This fashion concept then furthers the societal expectation that plus-size bodies are not suitable or appropriate for the public eye (Peters, 2014). Overall, plus-size fashion appears to work to “contain those bodies that threaten to break out” rather than to allow them to express themselves as other fashion aims to do (Adam, 2001). In these ways, fashion plays an integral part in reflecting and creating identity. It influences how plus-size women are able to express themselves in a public setting and how society perceives them.

Social Media

Social media is a unique form of media as it allows for others to directly interact with the shared content through likes, comments, and additional shares (Lazukaa et. al. 2020). This interactivity separates social media from traditional media and creates a new dynamic for users to navigate. Whatever a user posts can be instantaneously and publicly judged and shared. Users also have access to countless posts and images from all over the world. Social media has truly connected the world in a way that had not been seen before. Where once a person could be expected to only interact with the people in their immediate circle (family, friends, colleagues,

etc.), they can now be expected to interact with hundreds, if not thousands of people through their social media accounts. This change in social dynamic has changed the way people present and perceive themselves.

Social media gives users almost direct and instantaneous access to others and their shared content. This can impact users psychologically as well as socially. Again, the interactivity of social media allows users to gain feedback and judgement from others (Butkowski et. al., 2019). Oftentimes, this feedback can be internalized by the users and impact their senses of self-esteem and self-worth (Butkowski et. al., 2019). The more “likes” and positive comments a person receives, the more likely they are to have a positive impact on that person’s self-esteem. This can especially influence a person’s views of their own body image. A study found that the more women invested in social media feedback, “the more they reported engaging in body surveillance and, in turn, the higher their body dissatisfaction” (Butkowski et. al., 2019). Body surveillance refers to the constant judging of one’s own appearance (Butkowski et. al., 2019). As such, social media feedback can have a direct influence on a person's self-body image.

Furthermore, social media can have less direct influences on a person’s perceptions of themselves and other people as well. Social comparison theory states that people compare themselves to others in order to assess their own lives, beliefs, and values (Festinger, 1954). Social media has allowed these social comparisons to become easier to do and more prevalent thanks to the seemingly limitless posts and accounts a user has access to. An important aspect to these comparisons is what is considered the ideal body type and how it, and other body types, are presented on social media. Currently, the ideal body type is thin or skinny (Bonafini & Pozzilli, 2011). This ideal becomes a sort of baseline for women when it comes to comparing themselves with others based on physical appearance. Social comparisons have two different directions:

upward and downward (Moreno-Domínguez et. al., 2019). Upward comparisons result in a feeling of inferiority while downward comparisons lead to a feeling of superiority and higher self-esteem (Moreno-Domínguez et. al., 2019). When it comes to social media, women often times experience upward comparisons when viewing images of others with their ideal body type, and they experience downward comparisons when viewing images of others with their body type or a body type they see as less than ideal (Moreno-Domínguez et. al., 2019).

Even when a user is not directly comparing themselves with others, the knowledge of this comparison can also have an impact. A study was conducted to see the influences of potential comparisons on women. It was found that plus-size women experienced a drop in self-esteem related to their appearance when informed their image would be compared with another, even if the comparison would be done by themselves (Darlow & Lobel, 2010). This study indicates that plus-size women know that they do not match the ideal body type and expect to be judged as such. This awareness of the potential judgement and negative reactions to their body types could have an impact on what these women post, specifically on visual social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok.

However, the ideal body type these comparisons and idealizations are based on is increasingly unattainable and has created social divisions (Moreno-Domínguez et. al., 2019; Lazukaa et. al., 2020). Even as the beauty ideal has become skinnier, the average size of women has become larger. This creates an ever-growing gap between the ideal body image and most women's realities (Dittmar et al., 2009). Due to this, there has been a growing movement to increase the visibility of plus-size women in the hopes of shifting societal beauty ideals. The body positivity movement involves the fight against the current unattainable beauty standards and for the increased acceptance of appearances that go against these beauty standards. This

movement has become mostly focused on media, being most popular on social media sites such as Instagram. Social media users share images of themselves or others who do not share the current beauty ideals. This movement is not strictly focused on differences in body sizes and weight, but these differences do make up a portion of the movement. A content analysis found that 43% of the sample images under the #bodypositive on Instagram depicted bodies that are plus-size (Lazukaa et. al., 2020). Furthermore, stomach rolls and softer stomachs are among the most posted features that directly go against the current beauty standards (Lazukaa et. al., 2020). A majority of the posts under the #bodypositive tag are “images that contain features that are often edited or hidden on social media,” which can have a potentially positive impact on the current unattainable beauty standards (Lazukaa et. al., 2020).

However, there are still some setbacks in the movement. While these posts do show features that are not normally depicted or called beautiful, they also do portray a majority of features that actually do align with the common beauty standards (Lazukaa et. al., 2020). Furthermore, some of the posts promote weight loss journeys or sell weight loss products such as teas and supplements. These promotions appear to be going against the main message of the body positive movement as they work to help people attempt to achieve the skinny body ideal (Lazukaa et. al., 2020). There are similar issues in the representation of plus-size women in traditional media. In 2015, plus-size models Robyn Lawley and Ashely Graham made a big impact in the modeling industry after being the first plus-size women to appear in *Sports Illustrated* (Czerniawski, 2016). After this, there was an increase in plus-size models in traditional media, however they were all sizes ranging from 10 to 16 and no larger. At a size 22, Tess Holiday became the first plus-size model over the size 18 in late 2015 (Czerniawski, 2016). This led to an additional boost in larger plus-size women modeling as customers appealed to

Holiday. However, this increase of publicity did not completely rectify the plus-size modeling situation. The modeling industry began to sort plus-size women into “smaller” and “larger” categories. Those in the larger category are then used by designers behind the scenes in the development of clothing. Once the garments are complete, a smaller plus-size model is used to sell the clothing. Oftentimes, the clothing is too big for the smaller models. As such, they wear padding in certain areas (hips, chest, butt) to give the illusion of a bigger size “because clients want a curvy body but a thin face” (Czerniawski, 2016). This form of plus-size representation creates physically unattainable body images that are similarly promoted outside of the body positive movement. While it can be argued that the increased plus-size representation is a positive, it can also be stated that this form of representation is just as damaging as the lack thereof as it continues to promote unattainable ideals.

Methods

Survey

The study was conducted through an online survey run through Qualtrics. This survey was comprised of seventeen questions, including a question regarding informed consent. After the informed consent question, there were questions to ensure the participant met the requirements of the study. While no distinguishable or identifiable information was acquired, there were a few demographic questions regarding the usage on the participants’ Instagram accounts (“How many followers do you have?”, “On, average, how often do you post a week?”, etc.). At this point, questions regarding the societal responses to the participants’ posts, the participants’ identity regarding being plus-size, and the influences society had on the participants’ posting were asked.

Of these eleven remaining questions, four were open-ended, allowing the participants to express their unique experiences with posting on Instagram.

See Appendix A for full survey.

Participants

In order to participate in this survey, the potential participant had to be a woman, identify as plus-size, and post on Instagram. They also had to be from the United States of America so as to focus on one cultural environment and be over the age of 18 to avoid any ethical problems. The overall study was approved by Ball State University's Institutional Review Board. Two methods were used to recruit participants for this study. First, the primary investigator utilized Instagram's search and hashtag features to find accounts with users who identify as female and plus-size either in their post captions or in their account biographies. At this point, intended participants received an invitation to participate in the survey either through private message on Instagram or through email (depending on what was provided or explicitly preferred by the potential participant). Second, the primary investigator shared the link on her personal social media accounts on Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat. From there, the survey link was shared by a few of the investigator's friends and followers. By the end of the study, sixty-nine viable responses were received.

Analysis

Upon the completion and closure of the surveys, the investigator analyzed the data using SPSS and the Qualtrics platform. The open-ended responses were coded to fit specific themes that

were seen throughout the responses. The quantitative data was analyzed through SPSS frequency distributions and those tables are provided at the end of the manuscript.

Results

Demographic Data

Again, there was a total of sixty-nine survey responses that were received and analyzed. All of these participants indicated that they utilize Instagram and that they identify as a plus-size woman. While there was no identifiable information gathered, the survey did ask demographic questions regarding the participants' usage of Instagram. The first of these questions referred to the number of followers the participants had. As **Table 1** shows, 45.5% of the respondents had fewer than 1,000 followers and 42.4% had between 1,000 and 10,000 followers. This means that 87.9%, or 58 of the 66 responses, had 10,000 or fewer followers. The overall mean of follower count was 1.76, again showing the lean towards these lower follower counts. The remaining eight respondents ranged somewhere between 10,001 and 500,00 followers. As such, the majority of respondents remained under the 10,000 followers mark.

Table 2 shows the breakdown of how often the participants claimed to post, on average, each week. Again, there was a trend towards the lower end of the scale. 52.3% of the respondents claimed they do not post every week. The overall mean of number of posts per week was 2.02, which aligns most with the "1-2 times" option. This choice received 16.9%, or 11, of the responses. The next most

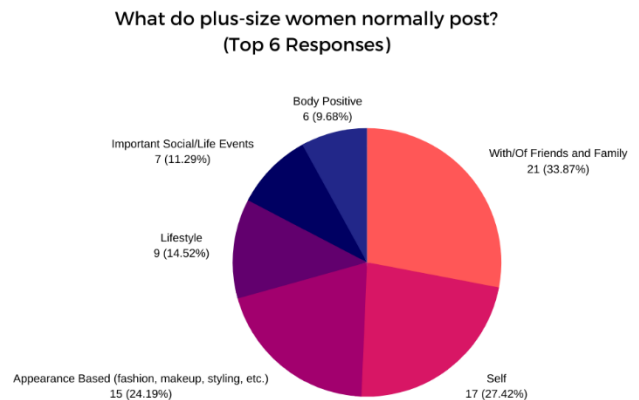


Figure 1

selected was “5-6 times” which received 15.4% of responses followed by “3-4 times” which had 12.3%. Only 2 respondents chose 7 or more times.

Respondents were then asked to describe the type of content they usually post. This question was left open-ended. The responses were later coded based on the themes found. The top six types of content these women posted, from most to least, were pictures with or of friends and family (33.87%), pictures of themselves (27.42%), appearance-based content (25.19%), lifestyle content (14.52%), important social or life events (11.29%), and body positive content (9.68%). See **Figure 1** for a breakdown. Appearance-based content is content focused on appearance enhancers such as makeup and clothing or fashion. Lifestyle content can include anything within a person’s daily life. In the responses to the survey, this type of content included parenting, professions, and outdoor activities among other things. Other content types mentioned include fitness, pets, nature, food and drink, and hobbies and travel.

Societal Responses

The questions meant to measure societal responses focused on whether or not the respondents saw positive or negative responses to their posts, where these responses were seen, and what the responses entailed. When asked whether or not they see positive reactions to their posts, 62 of the 66 responses claimed yes they did with only 3 responses saying no they did not (see **Table 3**). It is important to note that these three respondents also stated they saw no negative reactions, however one later described negative comments and responses she received. The mean of the positive responses was 1.08, again showing that the findings leaned towards “yes.” The mean of whether or not the respondents received negative responses, however, was 1.78, showing a lean towards “no.” As seen in **Table 4**, 51 respondents, or 78.5%, stated that they did not see negative

reactions to their posts. The other 21.5% or 14 respondents claimed that they did in fact see negative reactions to their posts. For both positive and negative responses, a majority of respondents claimed to see these reactions in the comments section. As seen in **Table 5**, 72.1% of the respondents claimed positive responses were seen in the comments section, and **Table 6** shows that 78.6% of the negative responses were there as well. The next most selected option for where positive reactions were seen was “other.” Most respondents who selected this option shared that they saw a majority of their positive reactions from “likes” and “shares” rather than direct comments or messages.

The survey included two open-ended questions asking what the positive and negative comments usually entailed. The responses were later coded based on the themes found. When asked about the positive responses received, there were six main categories: Overall physical appearance-based compliments (36.92%), other compliments (16.92%), outfit or style-based compliments (15.38%), emojis (10.77%), inspirational comments (10.77%), and comments praising confidence or openness (9.23%). In these responses, “other compliments” refers to anything that is not appearance or outfit based such as comments saying “I love you” or “I miss you” or they are proud of the poster. There appears to be a difference between being considered “inspirational” versus “confident” and how that influences the users or is influenced by them.

Again, there were considerably fewer responses saying they received negative comments. However, these responses can also be broken down into six categories: weight-based insults (52.94%), health-related comments (23.53%), insults of physical features other than weight (5.88%), emojis (5.88%), fetishizing (5.88%), and other insults (5.88%). Health-related comments include people commenting and saying things like the respondent is “disgusting and going to have diabetes and die from heart disease”. One respondent also reported a sense of

backwardness in some comments: “Many have good intentions but are actually rude, like ‘you’re not fat you’re beautiful’ feels gas lighty (sic) & just irrelevant when I’m not talking about beauty.”

Identity

One aspect of the plus-size identity is the terminology. For the purposes of this study, I have been using the term “plus-size” as my research deemed it one of the most used and agreed upon ways of denoting this population. However, it is not the only way to label this group of people. The survey asked respondents which term(s) they preferred to use when describing their weight. The options were full-figured, big boned, fat, plus-size, outsize, curvy, obese, overweight, and other. None of the respondents selected the term outsize. This term is the United Kingdom’s version of “plus-size,” and considering the survey population was American women, this omission makes sense. Likewise, the option to receive the highest number of selections is plus-size with 49 responses. Again, this makes sense given the way the respondents were recruited for the study overall. The next most selected option, as seen in **Table 7** was “curvy” with 40 responses. After this term, the responses varying with the selections dropping in number. The third most selected term was full-figured with 19 responses, and fat was right behind with 18 responses.

When asked “To what extent would you say being plus-size is a part of your identity?”, there was a range of responses (see **Table 8**). The overall mean was 2.97, meaning there was a lean towards “to a moderate extent.” The most selected response was “to a large extent” which garnered 24 responses. However, “to some extent,” also received 22 responses. Surprisingly, two

respondents claimed that being plus-size did not influence their identity at all, even though they self-identified as plus-size.

Social Influences

There are social rules that we unconsciously follow every day both in reality and online. These rules can be different from person to person depending on the individual’s unique experience and identity. When survey respondents were asked “Do you believe there are different social ‘rules’ that plus-size users have to keep in mind that non-plus-size users may not have to follow?”, 53 of them said “yes” and 11 said “no,” with one claiming they would prefer not to answer (see **Table 9**).

Respondents were then asked “Are there any social "rules" you have had to navigate when posting on Instagram? If so, please explain what they are and how you've navigated them.” This question was left open-ended and responses were later coded according to recurring themes. Again, there were six main themes that appeared: “How much skin to show” (25%), “what to wear” (19.23%), “hiding size” (13.46%), “censorship” (13.46%), and “there are no rules” (13.46%).

Are there any social "rules" you have had to navigate when posting on Instagram? (Top 5 Responses)

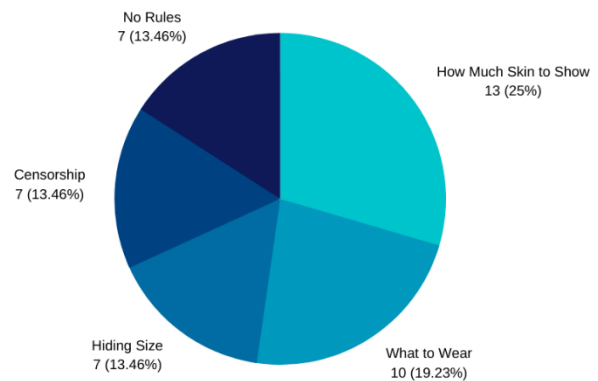


Figure 2

Based on the responses, censorship is closely connected to the category of how much skin to show. This censorship is both from the users themselves as well as the Instagram app. Plus-size

users feel the need to censor themselves and what they post based on social and societal influences, one of those influences being Instagram. The platform censors content creators by flagging or banning certain content that may not fit in the platform's guidelines. Oftentimes, showing too much skin can get a user flagged for being inappropriate. The respondents also showed their frustration in how often they get flagged versus users who are smaller than them but showing just as much skin. One respondent claimed, "I posted a topless photoshoot (I was completely covered up) and it was taken down. I was frustrated because I see naked/half naked women throughout my timeline daily." Another respondent echoed these thoughts in her response: "When someone in our size category posts swimwear or lingerie, it is seen as nudity and can be blocked. With other sizes the same rules don't apply. I have to actually pose differently when wearing swimwear to not get blocked."

Discussion

A majority of the categories used to describe the content the women post are not uncommon for Instagram users of all sizes. The body positive category, however, is a little more unique to the demographic. This phrase as a category for what is being posted is vague as it does not actually explain what is being depicted. The concept of body positivity, in general, refers to the movement of accepting bodies and appearances that do not match with the current beauty standards. In posting under the body positive category, these women are showing two things: they know or believe that what they are posting goes against the common beauty standards and or they are deliberately disregarding these standards. In using the body positive category, these users are acknowledging that whatever or whomever they are posting, which is oftentimes themselves, does not fit the beauty standards. However, again, there are women who use this

category to deliberately show that they go against these standards and do not care about societal expectations.

This trend is also seen in conjunction with another phenomenon regarding confidence and inspiration. When respondents were asked what kind of positive reactions they received, seven respondents claimed they received comments regarding them being inspirational. Another six respondents claimed they received comments complimenting their confidence and openness. Both confidence and inspiration within the social media landscape can be seen as similar concepts, but in the context of the responses received there were some decided differences. The biggest difference was the ways in which the respondents viewed why they posted the ways they do. Six out of the seven women who discussed inspiration also remarked on plus-size users working or posting outside of the socially dictated rules. They either blatantly stated that they know of a rule, but simply do not follow it or talk about how they or other creators are posting certain images and promoting diversity through their accounts. Below are excerpts from these women's responses:

“They usually attack my other features. They [can't] really comment about my body because I own it. I already know I'm fat so they can't use it against me.”

“Influencers, models and other plus size people are breaking those rules and setting a different standard.”

“I just kinda choose not to adhere to them and post as authentically as I can. I'm [me] and no one can take that from me.”

“Probably what we wear but I honestly don't care to follow those rules.”

“I'm able to show body diversity/ representation for everyday women with different brands and it's been very satisfying. Just because someone is plus size doesn't mean they have to cover up and I try to show case that.”

“[M]y purpose on Instagram is to show [plus-size women] are more widely accepted than we believe.”

To add to this theme of “going against societal expectations”, some of these women's accounts feature content that appears to go against the stereotypical representation of plus-size

women. Two of the accounts focus on outdoor activities, two others have a fitness element, and four of them involve fashion, makeup, or styling tips. Arguably this last appearance-based category has become more mainstream for plus-size users, but outdoor activities and fitness remain outside of the typical representations.

The experiences shared from those who claimed to receive comments regarding their confidence or openness were decidedly different. Like those from the inspiration category, these women reported different social rules they felt that they needed to follow. However, with the exception of one respondent, these women did not state that they went against these rules. These women appeared to post more within the social rules they believed they have to navigate than the women from the inspiration category. While these six respondents reported the comments about their confidence as positive responses, there appears to be an interesting argument as to whether or not “confidence” is a compliment. One of the women who reported this as a positive comment actually put it in quotation marks: “Usually people liking the outfit! Or my ‘confidence’”. This could just be the respondent’s way of singling out the term, but it could also hint at the debate surrounding confidence. Another respondent who did not remark on confidence in her positive reactions actually discussed the debate in another question:

*“I, and other plus-size women I see and interact with, do not receive as many of those comments, and if we do, they seem to always be about how “confident” we are or how awesome it is that we are posting something like that. Where it’s just normal for others to post photos that show off their bodies, for us it is a “stance”. If I posted a “thirst-trap” photo just because I felt good in it, it would be an act of “bravery”. As if to say that I *should* feel self-conscious about my body because it is larger, but it’s soooo amazing that I have decided *I’m* okay with it and can post it. That thought honestly*

makes me feel worse than a negative comment would, because it feels very fake and makes me more nervous...I also think the other direction that plus-size women are forced into on Instagram, which is to be incredibly confident and only post their bodies and only talk about being plus-sized, is just as unfortunate. Your identity shouldn't have to revolve around the size of your body, regardless of what that size is."

This response shows that the term "confidence" can almost be seen as weaponized in the eyes of some plus-size women. However, as seen through the positive comment responses, it can also be viewed as a positive comment or a compliment. It is completely dependent on the individual.

When it comes to these positive and negative comments, there were far more positive comments reported than negative. However, the most reported categories for both of these comment types involved the user's physical appearance. Given the image-based nature of this platform, this is to be expected. A majority of the negative comments were related to weight and often involved fat-shaming or telling the user she needed to lose weight. Again, based on the literature, this fatphobia is to be expected in some capacity. The next most reported category was the health-based comments. In these instances, users commented on the respondents' posts implying that, because of their weight, the respondents would develop health risks. One respondent claimed that people commented that she was "disgusting and going to have diabetes and die from heart disease". These comments insinuate that plus-size women posting images of themselves promotes obesity or other health problems related to heavy weight including diabetes and heart disease. This implication matches up with the conclusion from the literature that larger weights are perceived as implications of poor health. It also creates a dilemma. If simply posting an image of yourself, as a plus-size person, is seen as promoting health risks, is there a way to

exist without appearing as the problem? This connects to the argument that there are good and bad ways to be fat or plus-size, even online. One respondent actually remarked on this dichotomy: “A good fat person eats healthy & exercises, so yeah I feel like I tend to follow that ‘rule’ on [Instagram] so I’m perceived as ‘good’”. Keeping this in mind, it appears that, in some instances, there are social rules that dictate how a plus-size woman should present herself on social media so as to not appear to be adding onto perceived problems.

However, there also appear to more nuanced rules with following the “good fat” protocol within the plus-size community. A few of the respondents claimed to have fitness or weight-loss as some of the content they choose to post. This would seemingly go along with the “good fat” persona just discussed, but these respondents related that they still had rules to follow and the potential for fall out. These potential negatives, however, appear to be coming from the plus-size community itself rather than the general public. One respondent stated: “I feel hesitant to talk about weight loss. I love my body, but I also recognize I feel better when I lose weight. I am proud of my weight loss but feel like I can't talk about it in fear it will be considered plus size shaming.” For this respondent, what is considered the way to be a “good fat” according to general society actually goes against being a positive person within the plus-size community. By attempting to lose weight, the respondent and others like her could be seen as shaming their bigger body type and others like it. This creates a unique paradox in which a plus-size user must choose whether to be deemed a “good fat” person within general society or within the plus-size community.

A majority of the respondents did state they believed there were social rules that influenced the ways in which they posted on Instagram. The most mentioned social rule was focused on how much skin a user should show in her pictures. Many of the respondents

mentioned that they needed to be careful about what they wore in their pictures because of how much skin was showing. Swimsuits and bikinis were particularly mentioned in regard to this rule:

“No swim suit pics...I never post picture other than the water at the beach or I use shadow photography.”

“I have definitely avoided posting pictures that show more of my body, especially in bathing suits or even just tighter fitting clothes”

“I always have to make sure [I’m] showing just enough skin.”

“You can’t post pictures in bath suites (sic) or crop tops like a skinny person can”

However, the reasoning behind this social rule appears to be less about receiving direct negative feedback and more about being reported on the Instagram platform. This directly connects to the censorship category as well. Respondents remarked on the fact that they had to be more cautious about what they post because Instagram (the app itself and its regulatory features) work to ban certain images and accounts that perpetuate these images:

“I have to make sure my pictures don’t come off as provocative from poses or clothes I wear so that my page doesn’t seem inappropriate”

“A lot of my fellow plus size content creators get their work censored”

“Never look underdone or sloppy, consider angles, be very careful not to show too much skin because it WILL get flagged by Instagram if it gets too much attention”

Oftentimes these images are banned because they have been deemed inappropriate or seen as nudity. As seen in the above and below quotes, a few of the respondents remarked on their own frustration at having a post taken down because of this censorship. They also remarked on the fact that it appears to be targeted towards users of heavier weights. These respondents compared their posts and bans with those of skinnier users and noticed that skinnier users showing just as much skin are not deemed as inappropriate or banned. Meanwhile, the plus-size posts are banned.

“I posted a topless photoshoot (I was completely covered up) and it was taken down. I was frustrated because I see naked/half naked women throughout my timeline daily.”

“When someone in our size category posts swimwear or lingerie, it is seen as nudity and can be blocked. With other sizes the same rules don’t apply. I have to actually pose differently when wearing swimwear to not get blocked.”

“Plus size bodies aren’t as normalized and “socially acceptable” as straight sized bodies, so plus size creators have to navigate frequently being reported”

“I have to experienced it directly, but I have seen plus size models and creators saying that Instagram has threatened to ban their account's for posting in swimsuits and half naked pics. It's unfair because they're only targeting plus women. Women of smaller bodies are not treated the same way”

The censorship and targeting of plus-size women through the Instagram platform itself give the social rule of how much skin to show a new level of authority. It also demonstrated the oversexualization of plus-size women on Instagram. Instagram is using the same algorithms to identify whether or not a plus-size woman’s or a straight size woman’s posts are inappropriate. However, the platform also appears to be reporting more plus-size women than straight-sized women for similar levels of shown skin. If the only difference between the two women is their sizes, the fact that the algorithm is reporting the plus-size woman shows that being heavier and showing skin is more sexualized than being straight sized and showing that same level of skin.

Future Research

This research was focused on the individual experiences with of sixty-nine plus-size women with Instagram. It has uncovered patterns and concepts that are not found in the current literature. As such, future research in this area can branch off in a variety of directions. Focus can again be drawn to the unique individual experiences of plus-size women by pulling out certain phenomenon such as that regarding confidence and inspiration and gathering the perceptions of these concepts from plus-size women. The respondents in this study naturally drew comparisons between themselves and straight sized women. This comparison can also be done in a more scientific and effective way in future research. Surveys such as the one included in this study could be given to two populations: plus-size women and straight sized women. By doing this, the researchers would be able to draw impactful comparisons between the two groups of Instagram users. Likewise, Instagram also does not have to be the only social media platform to be studied. Currently, the platform TikTok is increasing in popularity. A future study could involve this or other social media sites.

The most crucial data for this study came from the open-ended questions that allowed respondents to express their experiences using their own words. Future researchers could expand on these questions and gain more information by conducting interviews rather than surveys. This way researchers could get better ideas of the entire picture involved in a respondent's unique experience and her Instagram usage. Similarly, future research could focus on life experiences different from those of women. Studies similar to the one done here could also be done with different genders, races, ethnic groups, or sexualities. This would create a diverse array of information that would be more generalizable for the plus-size community than focusing on women is.

Conclusion

This study analyzed how plus-size women utilize Instagram and how that usage reflects their position and identities within society. After surveying sixty-nine women who self-identified as plus-size, I was able to gain a better understanding of these women's experiences on social media. The study showed that these women connected to the plus-size identity in some capacity when it comes to their social media experience. While they receive more positive responses than negative, the negative comments they do receive often reinforce plus-size stereotypes including the connection to health-related problems. Within the positive comments, there was an interesting dichotomy between being considered inspirational and confident. The most discussed social rules involved how much skin a user should show in her posted pictures and whether or not this would cause them to be censored by the app or other users. Overall, this study was able to delve into the unique experiences of plus-size women and to bring light to the different expectations and stressors they face when posting on Instagram.

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Table 1**How many followers do you have?**

| | | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|---------|------------------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
| Valid | Fewer than 1,000 | 30 | 43.5 | 45.5 | 45.5 |
| | 1,000-10,000 | 28 | 40.6 | 42.4 | 87.9 |
| | 10,001-50,000 | 4 | 5.8 | 6.1 | 93.9 |
| | 50,001-100,000 | 2 | 2.9 | 3.0 | 97.0 |
| | 100,001-500,000 | 2 | 2.9 | 3.0 | 100.0 |
| | Total | 66 | 95.7 | 100.0 | |
| Missing | System | 3 | 4.3 | | |
| Total | | 69 | 100.0 | | |

Table 2**On average, how often do you post a week?**

| | | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|---------|--------------------------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
| Valid | I do not post every week | 34 | 49.3 | 52.3 | 52.3 |
| | 1-2 times | 11 | 15.9 | 16.9 | 69.2 |
| | 3-4 times | 8 | 11.6 | 12.3 | 81.5 |
| | 5-6 times | 10 | 14.5 | 15.4 | 96.9 |
| | 7-8 times | 1 | 1.4 | 1.5 | 98.5 |
| | More than 8 times | 1 | 1.4 | 1.5 | 100.0 |
| | Total | 65 | 94.2 | 100.0 | |
| Missing | System | 4 | 5.8 | | |
| Total | | 69 | 100.0 | | |

Table 3**Do you see positive reactions on your posts?**

| | | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|---------|----------------------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
| Valid | Yes | 62 | 89.9 | 93.9 | 93.9 |
| | No | 3 | 4.3 | 4.5 | 98.5 |
| | Prefer not to answer | 1 | 1.4 | 1.5 | 100.0 |
| | Total | 66 | 95.7 | 100.0 | |
| Missing | System | 3 | 4.3 | | |
| Total | | 69 | 100.0 | | |

Table 4**Do you see negative reactions to your posts?**

| | | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|---------|--------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
| Valid | Yes | 14 | 20.3 | 21.5 | 21.5 |
| | No | 51 | 73.9 | 78.5 | 100.0 |
| | Total | 65 | 94.2 | 100.0 | |
| Missing | System | 4 | 5.8 | | |
| Total | | 69 | 100.0 | | |

Table 5**If yes, where do you see a majority of these positive reactions? - Selected Choice**

| | | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|---------|------------------------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
| Valid | Comments | 44 | 63.8 | 72.1 | 72.1 |
| | Direct message | 6 | 8.7 | 9.8 | 82.0 |
| | Other (please specify) | 11 | 15.9 | 18.0 | 100.0 |
| | Total | 61 | 88.4 | 100.0 | |
| Missing | System | 8 | 11.6 | | |
| Total | | 69 | 100.0 | | |

Table 6

If yes, where do you see a majority of these negative reactions? - Selected Choice

| | | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|---------|------------------------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
| Valid | Comment section | 11 | 15.9 | 78.6 | 78.6 |
| | Direct message | 2 | 2.9 | 14.3 | 92.9 |
| | Other (please specify) | 1 | 1.4 | 7.1 | 100.0 |
| | Total | 14 | 20.3 | 100.0 | |
| Missing | System | 55 | 79.7 | | |
| Total | | 69 | 100.0 | | |

Table 7

| | | When it comes to describing your weight, which terminology do you prefer? Select all that apply. - Selected Choice Full-figured | When it comes to describing your weight, which terminology do you prefer? Select all that apply. - Selected Choice Big boned | When it comes to describing your weight, which terminology do you prefer? Select all that apply. - Selected Choice Fat | When it comes to describing your weight, which terminology do you prefer? Select all that apply. - Selected Choice Plus-size | When it comes to describing your weight, which terminology do you prefer? Select all that apply. - Selected Choice Outsize | When it comes to describing your weight, which terminology do you prefer? Select all that apply. - Selected Choice Curvy | When it comes to describing your weight, which terminology do you prefer? Select all that apply. - Selected Choice Obese | When it comes to describing your weight, which terminology do you prefer? Select all that apply. - Selected Choice Overweight | When it comes to describing your weight, which terminology do you prefer? Select all that apply. - Selected Choice Other (please specify) |
|---------|---------|---|--|--|--|--|--|--|---|---|
| N | Valid | 19 | 4 | 18 | 49 | 0 | 40 | 4 | 11 | 4 |
| | Missing | 50 | 65 | 51 | 20 | 69 | 29 | 65 | 58 | 65 |
| Mean | | 1.00 | 1.00 | 1.00 | 1.00 | | 1.00 | 1.00 | 1.00 | 1.00 |
| Median | | 1.00 | 1.00 | 1.00 | 1.00 | | 1.00 | 1.00 | 1.00 | 1.00 |
| Mode | | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Minimum | | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Maximum | | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 |

Table 8

To what extent would you say being plus-size is a part of your identity?

| | | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|---------|----------------------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
| Valid | Not at all | 2 | 2.9 | 3.1 | 3.1 |
| | To some extent | 22 | 31.9 | 33.8 | 36.9 |
| | To a moderate extent | 17 | 24.6 | 26.2 | 63.1 |
| | To a large extent | 24 | 34.8 | 36.9 | 100.0 |
| | Total | 65 | 94.2 | 100.0 | |
| Missing | System | 4 | 5.8 | | |
| Total | | 69 | 100.0 | | |

Table 9

Do you believe there are different social "rules" that plus-size users have to keep in mind that non-plus-size users may not have to follow?

| | | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|---------|----------------------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
| Valid | Yes | 53 | 76.8 | 81.5 | 81.5 |
| | No | 11 | 15.9 | 16.9 | 98.5 |
| | Prefer not to answer | 1 | 1.4 | 1.5 | 100.0 |
| | Total | 65 | 94.2 | 100.0 | |
| Missing | System | 4 | 5.8 | | |
| Total | | 69 | 100.0 | | |

Appendix A

Informed Consent

My name is Julia Tharp, and I am an undergraduate student at Ball State University working on completing her Honors Thesis. I am conducting a study on how and why women who identify as plus-size interact with social media platforms such as Instagram. It is my hope that this study will bring more attention to how weight diversity can influence a person's interactions with society, especially in the digital world.

This survey will ask you question about your Instagram posing habits, how people respond to your posts, and how being plus-size influences your identity. It should take approximately 10 minutes to complete. The risks in taking this survey are minimal. However, it will ask questions about your weight and how it has influenced your life. These questions may be personal or upsetting. Please keep in mind participation in this survey is completely voluntary and you can skip any question(s) or stop the survey at any time. All responses to this survey will be completely anonymous. These responses will be retained from the date of collect to the end of Ball State University's spring semester April 29, 2022.

If you have further questions or concerns about your rights as a participant in this study or about the study in general, contact the principal researcher Julia Tharp at jmtharp@bsu.edu or the thesis advisor Melinda Messineo at mmessine@bsu.edu.

IRB Contact Information For questions about your rights as a research subject, please contact the Office of Research Integrity, Ball State University, Muncie, IN 47306, (765) 285-5052 or at orihelp@bsu.edu.

- I have read and understand the above information and give my voluntary consent to participate in this study
- I do not consent to participate in this study

Qualifications

- Do you identify as a plus-size woman?
- Yes
- No

Do you post on Instagram?

Yes

No

Demographic Information

How many followers do you have?
Fewer than 1,000

1,000-10,000

10,001-50,000

50,001-100,000

100,001-500,000

500,001-1 million

More than 1 million

On average, how often do you post a week?
I do not post every week

1-2 times

3-4 times

5-6 times

7-8 times

More than 8 times

Please describe the type of content you normally post.

Positive Societal Response

- Do you see positive reactions on your posts?
Yes
- No
- Prefer not to answer

- If yes, where do you see a majority of these positive reactions?
I do not see positive reactions to my posts
- Comments
- Direct message
- Other (please specify)
- Prefer not to answer

What do these positive comments usually entail?

Negative Societal Response

- Do you see negative reactions to your posts?
Yes
- No
- Prefer not to answer

If yes, where do you see a majority of these negative reactions?

- I do not see negative reactions
- Comment section
- Direct message
- Other (please specify)
- Prefer not to answer

What do these negative comments usually entail?

Identity

When it comes to describing your weight, which terminology do you prefer? Select all that apply.

- Full-figured
- Big boned
- Fat
- Plus-size
- Outsize
- Curvy
- Obese
- Overweight
- Other (please specify)

To what extent would you say being plus-size is a part of your identity?

- Not at all
- To some extent
- To a moderate extent
- To a large extent
- Prefer not to answer

Social Influences

Do you believe there are different social "rules" that plus-size users have to keep in mind that non-plus-size users may not have to follow?

- Yes
- No
- Prefer not to answer

Are there any social "rules" you have had to navigate when posting on Instagram? If so, please explain what they are and how you've navigated them.

Final Thoughts

Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience on Instagram?

Appendix B

Office of Research Integrity
Institutional Review Board (IRB)
2000 University Avenue
Muncie, IN 47306-0155
Phone: 765-285-5052
E-mail:
orihelp@bsu.edu



**BALL STATE
UNIVERSITY**

DATE: March 7, 2022
TO: Melinda Messineo
FROM: Ball State University IRB
RE: IRB protocol # 1876787-1
TITLE: Plus-Size Women and Instagram
SUBMISSION TYPE: New Project

DECISION: APPROVED
PROJECT STATUS: EXEMPT
DECISION DATE: March 7, 2022
REVIEW TYPE: Exempt Review

The designated reviewer for the Institutional Review Board (IRB) reviewed your protocol and determined the procedures you have proposed are appropriate for exemption under the federal regulations. As such, there will be no further review of your protocol, and you are cleared to proceed with the procedures outlined in your protocol. As an exempt study, there is no requirement for continuing review. Your protocol will remain on file with the IRB as a matter of record. All research under this protocol must be conducted in accordance with the approved submission and in accordance with the principles of the Belmont Report.

Exempt Categories:

| |
|---|
| <p>Category 1: Research conducted in established or commonly accepted educational settings, that specifically involves normal educational practices that are not likely to adversely impact students' opportunity to learn required educational content or the assessment of educators who provide instruction. This includes most research on regular and special education instructional strategies, and research on the</p> |
|---|

| | |
|---|---|
| | effectiveness of or the comparison among instructional techniques, curricula, or classroom management methods. |
| x | Category 2: Research that only includes interactions involving educational test (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met: (i) The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects cannot readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects; (ii) Any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research would not reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, educational advancement, or reputation; or (iii) The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the humans subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by 46.111(a)(7). |
| | Category 3: Research involving benign behavioral interventions in conjunction with the collection of information from an adult subject through verbal or written responses (including data entry) or audiovisual recording if the subject prospectively agrees to the intervention and information collection and at least one of the following criteria is met: (A) The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of human subjects cannot be readily ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects; (B) Any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research would not reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, educational advancement, or reputation; or (C) The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can be readily ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by 46.111(a)(7). |
| | Category 4: Secondary research for which consent is not required. |
| | Category 5: Research and demonstration projects that are conducted or supported by a Federal department or agency, or otherwise subject to the approval of department or agency heads, and that are designed to study, evaluate, improve, or otherwise examine public benefit or service programs, including procedures for obtaining benefits or services under those programs, possible changes in or alternatives to those programs or procedures, or possible changes in methods or levels of payment for benefits or services under those programs. |

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| | <p>Category 6: Taste and food quality evaluation and consumer acceptance studies, (i) if wholesome foods without additives are consumed or (ii) if a food is consumed that contains a food ingredient at or below the level found to be safe, by the Food and Drug Administration or approved by the Environmental Protection Agency or the Food Safety and Inspection Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture.</p> |
| | <p>Category 7: Storage or maintenance for secondary research for which broad consent is required: Storage or maintenance of identifiable private information or identifiable biospecimens for potential secondary research use if an IRB conducts a limited IRB review and makes the determinations required by 46.111(a)(8).</p> |
| | <p>Category 8: Secondary research for which broad consent is required: Research involving the use of identifiable private information or identifiable biospecimens for secondary research use, if the following criteria are met: (1) Broad consent for the storage, maintenance, and secondary research use of the identifiable private information or identifiable biospecimens was obtained in accordance with §46.116(a)(1) through (4), (a)(6), and (d); (2) Documentation of informed consent or waiver of documentation of consent was obtained in accordance with §46.117; and (3) An IRB conducts a limited IRB review and makes the determination required by §46.111(a)(7) and makes the determination that the research to be conducted is within the scope of the broad consent referenced in paragraph (d)(8)(i) of this section; and (iv) The investigator does not include returning individual research results to participants as part of the study plan. Note: This provision does not prevent an investigator from abiding by any legal requirements to return individual research results.</p> |

Editorial Notes:

1. Please be aware that it is the researchers' responsibility to keep your social media account safe. So please be cautious when sending the recruitment message.
2. Please add the study title and IRB number to each message (private message, email, and post).

While your project does not require continuing review, it is the responsibility of the P.I. (and, if applicable, faculty supervisor) to inform the IRB if the procedures presented in this protocol are to be modified or if problems related to human research participants arise in connection with this project. **Any procedural modifications must be evaluated by the IRB before being implemented, as some modifications may change the review status of this project.** Please contact the Office of Research Integrity at orihelp@bsu.edu or Sena Lim, HRPP manager at 765-285-5034 or slim2@bsu.edu if you are unsure whether your proposed modification requires review or have any questions. Proposed modifications should be addressed in writing and submitted electronically to the IRBNet as a "Modification/Amendment" for review. Please reference your IRB protocol number 1876787-1 in any communication to the IRB regarding this project.

In the case of an adverse event and/or unanticipated problem, you will need to submit written documentation of the event to IRBNet under this protocol number and you will need to directly notify the Office of Research Integrity (<http://www.bsu.edu/irb>) **within 5 business days**. If you have questions, please contact the Office of Research Integrity at orihelp@bsu.edu or Sena Lim, HRPP manager at 765-285-5034 or slim2@bsu.edu.

Reminder: Even though your study is exempt from the relevant federal regulations of the Common Rule (45 CFR 46, subpart A), Ball State has elected to hold you accountable to these regulations to encourage best research practices. You and your research team are not exempt from ethical research practices and should therefore employ all protections for your participants and their data which are appropriate to your project.