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Disability in a World of Influence

How the presentation of disabled influencers affects body image amongst the disabled
community

Maria Stockinger

Sammendrag

I løpet av de siste ti årene har forestillingen om influencer tatt over sosiale medieplattformer og ført til fenomenene influencer kultur. Ettersom influencer-kulturen har blitt populær og mettet Instagram-plattformen, har effektene av kroppsbilde ofte blitt stilt spørsmål ved. Imidlertid har de fleste studier evaluert hvordan sosiale medier påvirker kroppsbilde blant hvite funksjonsfriske kvinner. I mellomtiden er funksjonshemmede utelatt fra samtalen. Derfor hadde denne oppgaven som mål å forstå hvordan influencer-kultur påvirker kroppsbilde blant funksjonshemmede. For å oppnå dette gjorde jeg en dybdeanalyse av hvordan funksjonshemmede påvirkere representerer seg selv på nettet, ved å bruke en kombinert teoretisk linse av selvsammenligningsteori, interseksjonalitetsteori og kritisk funksjonshemmingsteori. Dataene til dette prosjektet ble samlet inn gjennom en casestudie om funksjonshemmede aktivist og fitness-påvirker, Sophie J. Butler. Gjennom casestudiet ledet av jordet teori og diskursert analyse i sosiale medier, var målet å forstå hvordan Sophie Butler representerer seg selv på nettet og hvordan det påvirker funksjonshemmedes kroppsbilde. Funnene indikerer hvor lett det er for funksjonshemmede aktivistiske påvirkere å bli dratt inn i diktatene til postfeministiske sensibiliteter og nyliberalisme. Koblingen mellom funksjonshemmet suksess og fysisk utseende og evne undergraver funksjonshemmingsaktivisme. På sin side ender funksjonshemmede påvirkere opp med å følge mønstrene de forsøkte å forstyrre.

Abstract

Within the past ten years, the notion of Influencer has taken over social media platforms and led to the phenomenon of influencer culture. As influencer culture has gained popularity and saturated the Instagram platform, the effects of body image have frequently been questioned. However, most studies have evaluated how social media affects body image amongst white, able-bodied women. Meanwhile, the disabled community is left out of the conversation. Therefore, this thesis aimed to understand how influencer culture affects body image amongst the disabled community. To achieve this, I analyzed how disabled influencers represent themselves online, utilizing a combined theoretical lens of self-comparison theory, intersectionality theory, and critical disability theory. The data of this project was collected through a case study on disabled activist and fitness influencer Sophie J. Butler. Through the case study guided by grounded theory and social media discourse analysis, the aim was to understand how Sophie Butler represents themselves online and how it affects the disabled community´s body image. The findings indicate how easy it is for disabled activist influencers to be drawn into the dictates of postfeminist sensibilities and neoliberalism. Postfeminist sensibilities place externally imposed ideals and subjugate disabled people to the dictates of capitalism and its concomitant cruel optimism. The link between disabled success and physical appearance undercuts disability activism and presents an idealized disabled body. In turn, disabled influencers end up following the very patterns they sought to disrupt.

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Maria Stockinger

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CHAPTER ONE: RESEARCH OVERVIEW

1. Introduction

In 2019, I created an Instagram account to document my journey with an invisible disability. By making this account, my goal was to raise awareness, connect with the invisible disability community, and learn more about my condition. Seeing and interacting with other individuals going through a similar experience helped me with my circumstances. However, although I was able to integrate into the invisible disability community, I was quickly exposed to the negative side of influencer culture and the rise of disability awareness on social media. Some of the negative aspects of disabled influencer culture are much like influencer culture amongst white, able-bodied women. However, there are unique experiences of the disabled community that amplify some of these issues. These include toxic positivity and pressure to get better or accept your circumstances. More specifically, many people only portray the positive side of their disability and recovery, which can detriment individuals in recovery or struggling to accept their condition.

However, I am lucky enough to have experienced these issues when I was educated enough to understand that social media does not always portray reality. Social media can be a highlight reel of the positive and exciting moments of our lives, which is no different from the content of many disabled influencers. However, it got me thinking about all the disabled individuals exposed to influencer culture growing up and how it may have affected how they view their bodies. With the rapid growth in social media platforms, young disabled women are exposed to unrealistic body ideals. Unfortunately, social media algorithms adapt and make conventionally beautiful women more visible, which means disabled viewers are not exposed to content representing the disabled community. These algorithms also lead to users not being exposed to diversity, which is essential when educating and normalizing disabilities.

However, disabled women are now starting to cultivate their own Instagram platforms to foster environments for those who may need them. However, it is more important than ever to understand how disabled women are affected by influencer culture because disabled influencers still run the risk of creating unattainable standards. Many disabled influencers are being drawn to the dictates of neoliberal and postfeminist discourse. Therefore, as disabled influencers adopt the patterns of influencer culture, they end up following the same discourse they sought to disrupt. As disabled influencers selective self-represent, they undercut their

disability activism and run the risk of presenting idealized disabled bodies and setting unrealistic standards for the disabled community.

According to the Mental Health Foundation, negative body image is associated with exposure to images of idealized or unrealistic bodies through media and social media, and these issues are further relevant to individuals with long-term health conditions, cultural differences around body ideals, gender, and sexuality (Mental Health Foundation 2019). A study conducted by YouGov also found that 22% of UK adults and 40% of UK teenagers said that images on social media caused them to worry about their body image (Mental Health Foundation 2019). Before social media, magazines bombarded women with photoshopped images and fat-shaming headlines. However, since the emergence of Instagram in 2010, people have become more exposed to unattainable beauty standards, and it has cultivated into a full-blown marketing industry based on influencer culture. Influencers have become a considerable part of society through blogging, YouTube, and Instagram. The utilization of filters, photoshop, ring lights, and make-up fuel unrealistic body ideals. The use of photoshop and filters on social media have become such an issue that Norway recently passed a law that requires users to disclose retouched photos on Instagram. The new regulation from Norway's Ministry of Children and Family Affairs makes it illegal for influencers and advertisers to share retouched photos on social media. However, although awareness surrounding these issues has sparked body positive movements, marginalized groups like the disabled community are still left out of the conversation. In some cases, these movements are toxic and detrimental to individuals that live with disabilities.

Recently, there has been an influx of disabled influencers using their platform to spread awareness and create a community for the disabled community. Although this seems positive, it can still negatively affect the disabled community. Now that there is an increase in disabled influencers, many issues need to be explored. Instagram's algorithm has been known to create algorithmic bias, affecting underrepresented groups such as the disabled community. Therefore, to gain social capital and engagement, disabled influencers are altering their content to present themselves as "influencers." The rise of disability awareness through social media platforms has led to an influx of postfeminist and neoliberal representation. Unfortunately, as disabled influencers get drawn to influencer culture discourse, they associate disabled empowerment and success with physical appearance and ultimately follow the standards they sought to break.

1.1. Research Questions

The primary area of interest that will guide this thesis is how the representation of disabled influencers affects body image amongst disabled women. However, as the scope of the question is complex, I will be answering specific research questions that will guide the research and case study. The research questions are:

1. What types of content and information is shared and exchanged by disabled influencers on Instagram? How does this compare to able-bodied influencers?
2. How do Instagram's algorithm, rules, and regulations affect the content disabled users see? What implications does this have?
3. How do my findings contribute to the current discourse of intersectionality theory, self-comparison theory, and critical disability theory?

To answer these questions, I will be doing a case study that analyses how disabled influencers present themselves online. More specifically, I analyze the profile of disabled influencer Sophie J. Butler through a social media discourse analysis. I will then frame my findings around three major theoretical frameworks, intersectionality theory, self-comparison theory, and critical disability theory. Unfortunately, when it comes to research on body image, especially concerning social media, many theories are based on the experiences of able-bodied women. Therefore, the aim of the study is to gauge some of the gaps in current research.

1.2 Case Study

To answer my research questions, I conducted a case study on an Instagram profile of a disabled advocate and health and wellness influencer, @SophjButler. Sophie J Butler is a queer, disabled advocate who uses their platform to normalize disability while showing their love for fitness and fashion. Sophie became paralyzed in 2017 after an accident with a smith machine at the gym. Sophie loved weight training because it was an activity that was good for their body, and the gym had become their safe place (Buick 2019). However, on July 5th, 2017, when Sophie was using the smith machine, they "lost footing and ended up falling on [their] bum," and "the safety latches weren't on high enough, and the weight came crashing down on [their] back" which left them paralyzed from the waist down (Buick 2019). After adjusting to their new life in a wheelchair, Sophie started to get back into the gym and began documenting their journey on social media. Now in 2022, Sophie is a well-known health and wellness influencer with 125,000+ followers and is Cosmopolitan's influencer of the year and an ambassador for GymShark.

Although Sophie has thrived since starting their Instagram, being a disabled influencer does not come without negative comments and discrimination. Through my case study, I analysed the discourse of their posts, captions, and comments. By doing this, I understood how Sophie used their platform to present themselves. I performed a social media discourse analysis on Sophie's Instagram page and collected qualitative data to conduct this case study. Images, videos, comments, captions, and interactions with their followers were analysed using Speech Act Theory to understand how Soph. J Butler uses their platform to present themself. More specifically, I looked at their use of lexical choices and their non-verbal communication in photos and videos. At the time of research, Sophie had about 1,658 posts, so I analysed their content from the last three years. By looking at the past three years, I understood what Sophie was posting before the pandemic, during the pandemic, and after lockdown and restrictions began to be lifted. The case study aims to understand how Sophie presents on Instagram and its effect on body image amongst the disabled community. Sophie is very successful in the influencer sphere, so they will be an excellent profile to study to understand how the presentation of disabled influences affects body image amongst the disabled community.

1.3 Theoretical Framework

I analysed my findings through the lens of self-comparison theory, intersectionality theory, and critical disability theory. Self-comparison theory is often used when discussing social media. Although it can be applied to the experience of disabled women, much of the current research does not explicitly look at how body image amongst disabled individuals is affected by influencer culture. Therefore, I utilized intersectionality theory to highlight the unique experiences of disabled women, and self-comparison and intersectionality theory were the main theoretical framework. Lastly, I will be using critical disability theory as a theoretical framework to guide my findings. Critical disability theory looks at the social norms and social conditions of disabled individuals and how they might influence society to view and treat the disabled community.

1.3.1 Self-Comparison Theory

Self-comparison theory was proposed by psychologist Leon Festinger in 1954 and suggested that people tend to evaluate themselves, often compared to others (Festinger 1954). When individuals cannot physically test their abilities, they tend to make evaluations based on subjective judgments of correct and incorrect opinions. According to the self-comparison

process, individuals get to know themselves by evaluating their abilities, opinions, and behaviours compared to others. Typically, we compare ourselves to people within our peer groups or similar individuals. According to Festinger, "if the only comparison available is a very divergent one, the person will not be able to make subjectively precise evaluations of [their] opinion or ability," meaning that when individuals compare themselves to others that are not like them, individuals may draw incorrect conclusions and opinions about the way they look or their abilities (Festinger 1954). For example, when young girls compare themselves to Instagram influencers, they are more likely to have negative thoughts about their body image because they are not of a similar age or peer group and do not have much in common. These self-comparisons may lead to body shame which "results when women perceive that their body falls short of cultural ideals for appearance (Fredrickson and Roberts 1997). The focus on women's appearance means that "women with low self-esteem may be more likely to engage in constant body surveillance and/or body comparison to determine how their appearances compares with other women" (Tylka and Sabik 2010, 21). This quote highlights the importance of giving minorities and discriminated groups a platform. However, it not only shows the need for disabled influencers but can also give insights into some of the drawbacks. More specifically, it highlights the adverse outcomes of toxic positivity and the effects of posting unrealistic standards on social media. Lastly, it will give insights into how algorithmic bias can affect one's opinions and abilities. I will be applying Festinger's hypotheses and findings to help me analyse the discourse of Sophie J Butler's Instagram profile.

1.3.2 Intersectionality Theory

Intersectionality theory states that people are often disadvantaged when they have multiple sources of oppression, such as race, gender, religion, and sexual identity. It is grounded in Black feminism and dates to the mid-19th century. During this time, black women were discriminated against by white women and excluded from the suffragette movement, which portrayed black women dealt with prejudice based on gender and race. However, intersectionality theory was officially introduced by Crenshaw, a legal scholar, in 1989 to understand Black women's struggles and experiences (Davis 2008). Crenshaw explains that "ideological and descriptive definitions of patriarchy are usually premised upon white female experiences," which is still prevalent when looking at the effects of influencer culture on body image amongst disabled women (Crenshaw 1989). More specifically, many studies on how social media affects body image focus on able-bodied women.

Intersectionality is vital when answering my research question because disabled women deal with discrimination based not only on their gender but also on their disability. Through the lens of intersectionality theory, we can "rethink dichotomies such as gender that essentialize differences, power and privilege" and commit to asking how the domain of disability becomes more complex when another identity domain is introduced (Steward and McDermott 2004). With so much literature that discusses body image in women, it is essential to understand that research based on able-bodied women does not consider the unique experiences of disabled women. By understanding intersectionality and how it affects disabled women, we can better acknowledge that body image amongst white, able-bodied women may not apply to women of the disabled community.

1.3.3 Critical Disability Theory

Critical Disability theory is an approach centred around understanding disability as a political, cultural, and historical experience. This theory is necessary when considering the postmodern world. Disability theory scrutinizes "the social norms that define particular attributes as impairments, as well as the social conditions that concentrate stigmatized attributes in particular populations" (Schalk 2017). The theory emphasizes that disability is interwoven with systems of power and oppression. This move toward postmodernism within critical disability studies encourages people to be critical of the current information we are given regarding disability. This theory is used to "both describe the socio-political constructs of disability and track the impacts of these constructions on oppressed persons" (Hall 2019). Ultimately, the theory emphasizes that policies and rights are not one-size-fits-all because disability can come in many different shapes and forms. The theory "involves scrutinizing not bodily or mental impairments but the social norms that define particular attributes as impairments and the social conditions that concentrate stigmatized attributes in particular populations" (Minich 2016). In the context of the thesis, it will be essential to explore how the power structures of Instagram and influencer culture affect the disabled population and how disabled people represent themselves online. The current discourse around beauty and success is consistently pushed through Instagram and selective self-presentation. Therefore, modern societal factors such as social media must be considered. Pothier describes this as "a question of politics and power(lessness), power over, and power to," meaning the question of influencer culture, body image, and the disabled community must be analysed through the power of influencer culture (Devlin and Pothier 2006). Therefore, Critical Disability Theory

will be utilized to dissect how the current discourse surrounding beauty ideals influence disabled representation.

1.4 Research Ethics

As I conducted a case study on a public figure's Instagram account, I needed to make sure I approached the study ethically. Sophie J Butler has a public profile with a large following of around 125,000 followers, and their posts are intended to spread awareness and reach large audiences. According to the Norwegian National Research Ethics Committees, contextual integrity states that "the context in which the information exchange or communication takes place is crucial in distinguishing between what is public and private" and that it is vital to consider the concept of reasonable expectation of publicity (De Nasjonale Forskningsetiske Komiteene 2019). The reasonable expectation of publicity refers to "research that does not violate the informant's understanding or expectation that the information and communication are public" (De Nasjonale Forskningsetiske Komiteene 2019). Since Instagram allows users to manually choose whether they set their profile to public or private, Sophie has willingly chosen to set their profile to be viewed by anyone. It is also important to note that all the content under investigation is not private or sensitive information, as it is content that Sophie has posted to a public account.

The Norwegian Research Ethics committee for social science and humanities states that "as a main rule, researchers should be able to freely use the information on issues reported in edited media," so all the background information on Sophie Butler will be from online articles and other public information through edited media (De Nasjonale Forskningsetiske Komiteene 2019). My analysis of Sophie's profile includes comments from other Instagram users. However, when discussing and using comments, I kept usernames anonymous. Based on NESH's reasonable expectation of publicity, it is not clear whether all users that comment on Sophie's posts are aware of the public nature of their comments. Therefore, to keep these users protected, I anonymized usernames in my analysis.

As Sophie is part of the disabled community, the issue of vulnerability and vulnerable groups was essential to consider. In 2005, UN member states adopted a Universal Declaration on Bioethics and Human Rights, a global framework for vulnerability and vulnerable groups in research (UNESCO 2005). Although the declaration does not define specific groups as vulnerable, it points out that certain groups *may* be vulnerable such as if you have a disease, disability, other personal conditions, environmental conditions, and limited resources. However, there has been much debate about these groups being stereotypical and group

individuals as vulnerable based on medical assumptions. According to other ethics guidelines and declarations such as The Belmont Report, The Declaration of Helsinki, and CIOMS, disability is not considered a vulnerable group unless the person is underage, a patient in an emergency room, or terminally ill (International Ethical Guidelines for Health-related Research Involving Humans 2016). Sophie's disability does not hinder their ability to make choices, and therefore their decision to make their Instagram profile public is valid. The Declaration of Helsinki also declares that populations of societies that will not benefit directly from participation in research are considered vulnerable groups (The World Medical Association 2018). However, my research will help fill gaps that can potentially improve the online experience for disabled people; therefore, they will not be harmed by my research.

1.5 Research Value

Influencer culture, social media, and body image are widely discussed and prevalent topics. However, there are gaps in current research and literature that do not consider disabled women. Most research looks at how social media affects able-bodied women and how their body image is affected by other white, able-bodied women. Additionally, many theories are based on the experiences of the same group. For example, self-comparison theory and intersectionality theory were developed based on able bodies. While they can be applied to the disabled community, more research must be conducted to present how these theories apply to the disabled community, especially in our modern world. Therefore, it is essential to look at how body image amongst the disabled community is affected by the representation of disabled influencers. With an increase in disabled women influencers across social media, it is vital to research and evaluate how the unique experiences of disabled women play a role in how they react to influencer content. Although positives may come with more visibility for disabled women on social media, it is essential to understand that there are also negatives for influencers and followers. More specifically, hateful comments on a disability awareness post can be seen by a disabled follower, or a disabled follower may compare their progress to a disabled content creator, both of which may affect their body image. These are complex issues that need to be further explored, and to do that, we must delve into the world of influencer culture and how it affects body image. The goal is to address the gaps in current research so that influencers, especially disabled influencers, understand how their disabled followers react to their content and how they can continue to cultivate safe and positive spaces for disabled women.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

2. Introduction

To frame my research, I explore literature from three main fields of study: disability studies, body image, and influencer culture. I begin by examining the current discourse surrounding disability studies, focusing specifically on how the treatment of disabled people has influenced the way society sees and treats the disabled community and how disabilities have been historically represented in mass media. Next, I discuss how mass media such as magazines, television, and advertising have historically influenced body image amongst women. Next, I discuss the body positive movement, body neutrality, and selective self-presentation on social media and its effects on society. Lastly, I delve into influencer culture and define what influencer culture is, how it has developed, and the ongoing debate and controversy surrounding body image and influencer culture. These topics make up the discussion on how influencer culture affects body image amongst the disabled community. By studying some of the current literature surrounding this topic, it is evident that there is a gap in the research. Although there is sufficient literature surrounding body image, influencer culture, and disability, when all these topics intersect, it is evident that more research and studies need to be done to understand the impact of influencer culture on the disabled community more comprehensively.

2.1 The Concept of Disability

This section explores the history of disability, the field of disability studies, disability in the media, the able-bodied gaze, and internalized ableism. Each of these concepts contributes to explaining how disabled people are discriminated against and why. To explore how influencer culture affects body image amongst the disabled community, it is crucial to understand how disabled people have been treated throughout history, how their past treatment has influenced current society's treatment of the disabled community, and how these elements contributed to online discrimination of the disabled community. Therefore, these sections will start by discussing the treatment of disabled people throughout history and the development of modern disability studies. Both elements help produce an understanding of the discrimination against the disabled community and how it affects disabled people. Next, I will delve into disability in the media and how the representation of disabled people has led to years of stigmatization and stereotyping. Lastly, I discuss the able-bodied gaze and

how it has led to a society built on able-bodied views and how it cultivates internalized ableism. Each of these concepts contributes to how disabled people are treated online, therefore they help lay a foundation for understanding how influencer culture affects the body image of disabled people. However, before delving into these sections, it is important that I define and identify what disability is and what I am referring to when I refer to disability throughout my thesis.

2.1.1 Definition of Disability

The concept of disability and being able-bodied is binary and can be considered to a degree of relativism. According to the UK Equality Act of 2010, you are disabled if you have a physical or mental impairment that has a substantial or long-term effect on your ability to do normal daily activities (GOV.UK 2013). However, the definition of disability and "how persons with disabilities perceive themselves are knotty and complex" (Kaplan 2000, 352). The complexity stems from the definition being broad and differing according to people's perspectives. For example, a study showed that about 31 percent of patients with an ostomy, an artificial opening of the colon which allows waste to be collected in a bag, face ostomy-related disabilities (Bukley et al. 2018). However, the study also states that not all ostomy impairments result in disability (Bukley et al. 2018). The same applies to being able-bodied; someone with a chronic illness may consider themselves non-disabled because it does not affect their ability to do normal activities, yet others may disagree (Gulley et al. 2018). Therefore, a scale of degree and relativism can be applied to specific situations. The wheelchair is the most common symbol of disability. Therefore, much of society automatically assumes that a disability is being a wheelchair user (Fritsch 2015). However, people are unaware of the different degrees and types of disabilities. In this thesis, when I refer to someone as disabled, I consider anyone with a physical impairment. This includes visible or invisible disabilities, no matter the degree of severity. Anyone that uses a medical aid, has a chronic illness, or has a physical impairment is referred to as disabled. When I refer to someone who is able-bodied, I refer to anyone who has not dealt with long-term physical impairment, including chronic illnesses.

2.1.2 History of Disability

Physical and mental disabilities can be recorded back to ancient Greece and Rome. However, disabilities were looked at as a form of inferiority throughout much of history. In ancient culture, disabled individuals were treated as disposable and unworthy. For example,

in ancient Greece, "birth deformity was a curse or even a Malefice and individuals were excluded or left to die by exposure to the elements," while in Hebrew culture, "certain expressions of disability were treated as an impurity" (Stiker 2019). As history has progressed, society's views and understanding of disability have varied. In the medieval period, visible disability was a part of everyday life. Many people during this period were either born with disabilities, became disabled from diseases such as leprosy, or became disabled from years of hard labour. However, at the time, disability treatment was a religious matter. Many believed that disability was a punishment from God or a sign of suffering purgatory. Therefore, the English Christian church encouraged nuns to care for the poor and sick, including the disabled. Although the treatment of disabled individuals was mixed, there was no proper understanding of disability, and disabled people were looked at with sympathy or pity. However, when Henry VIII split from the Roman Church in 1485 and religious houses were demolished, disability treatment changed from a religious service to civic duty (Connolly 2021). This period led to the implementation of The Poor Law Act, which defined England's obligation to help the aged, sick, and disabled (Connolly 2021). Since these groups were assumed to be unable to help themselves, society was legally expected to help them.

However, from the 15th to 19th century, society started to challenge the idea that God caused disability (Gabbard and Mintz 2020). Society started to shift its belief toward the idea that the disabled were suffering hardship and deserved assistance and charity. This new societal mindset meant people believed that disabilities could be helped or even cured with the proper treatment. This period led to an influx of institutions, which quickly led to the growth of asylums, workhouses, and colonies in England. Workhouses were institutions that housed disabled individuals and put them to work, while colonies were rural areas in which the mentally disabled isolated themselves from the outside world. Those in favour of colonies argued that it was economically beneficial to send disabled people to rural areas to work. In contrast, others argued that it was therapeutic for disabled people to be segregated. Disabled individuals were still not considered fit enough to contribute to society. Although society no longer believed God was punishing disabled individuals, disabled people were still not fully understood or treated correctly. Societies were still questioning what disability was and how to fix them rather than how to help them integrate into society. This approach to disability also applied to the Nordic countries. While disability associations did exist from the early 19th century, the care of their members was mainly the responsibility of their family members and charities (Mallett and Runswick-Cole 2015). Instead, institutions were founded that created a system of disability care that segregated disabled individuals from society,

much like in the UK (Mansell and Ericsson 1996). However, as the modern nation state started to form in Europe and the understanding of disability became clearer, the question shifted to social treatment and how to help the disabled population integrate into society.

After the Second World War, many British service members were left disabled, which led to the 1944 Disability Employment Act. The 1944 Disability Employment Act was created to "make further and better provisions for enabling persons handicapped by disablement to secure employment, or work on their own account, and for purposes connected therewith" ("Disabled Persons Employment Act "1994" 1944). The purpose of the act was to assist disabled people in getting employment that suited their needs, skills, experience, and qualifications. However, although the government made efforts to help integrate disabled individuals into the workplace, there was still a lot of misunderstanding and a lack of equality. Unfortunately, the disabled community was still not given proper access to necessities such as public bathrooms or stores.

Meanwhile, around 1945, the Nordic countries were moving toward a modern welfare state in which disabilities were a part of public social security (Mansell and Ericsson 1996). However, although disabilities were covered under the state, state-run institutions were maintained, and disabled individuals were still segregated both geographically and psychologically. The belief that disability was a medical problem greatly affected the treatment of disabled people up until the 1970s, as disabled people were legally put through institutionalized medical practices such as sterilization (Mansell and Ericsson 1996). The belief that disability was a medical issue influenced how modern welfare treated disabled citizens, leading to poor regulation of disability pensions, lack of integration into society, and poor employee training. However, in the 1950s and 60s, groups in the Nordic countries started to object to institutions and their treatment of disabled people (Mansell and Ericsson 1996). These groups advocated for smaller housing units, more personalized care, leisure time, and proper education. Meanwhile, in the United States, the civil rights movement of the 1950s - 1960s became a steppingstone for disability equality. The civil rights movement fought for legal rights for African Americans in the United States. This period was an era of activism for equal rights as both minorities and majorities came together and rallied for social, cultural, legal, and political changes. As the movement grew, disability advocates saw that like-minded people came together to fight for legal equality and better treatment (Pelka 2012). Seeing this fight for justice encouraged disabled activists to come together to fight for social and legal change for disability rights. However, in 1964, when the Civil Rights Act was created and discrimination was outlawed based on race, colour, religion, and sex, it was

not until 1973 that disabilities were considered through Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Fleischer and Zames 2011, 50). The Act included public accommodation, employment, and federally assisted programs, which created a foundation for future disability rights legislation.

However, while disability rights activists were speaking up in the U.S, disability activists internationally came together to start a social rights movement. Disability activists in the Nordic Countries argued that the welfare state was not fully protecting its disabled citizens. People with varying disabilities came together to consolidate their demands. Their efforts sparked a new understanding of disability as a human rights issue affected by political, social, and environmental factors. This time was pivotal for disability rights in the Nordic countries as the view of disability as a medical issue shifted.

While the Nordic countries have services and benefits that allow disabled people to access the care and money they need, not all countries are as advanced in this area. While "most countries have some form of equality legislation for those with disabilities, the areas of guaranteed equality may be limited to education, government services, or employment only" in which private and public services are not always included ("Summary of Global Disability Legislation," n.d). However, while governmental services and benefits allow disabled people more opportunities to integrate into society, it does not take away from the fact that many able-bodied people still have negative perceptions about disabled people and, ultimately, are not educated on how to treat or speak to disabled people. Although society understands disability more deeply, disabled people still face discrimination and struggle to integrate into society. Disability rights were only addressed in 1973 in the U.S, which means that many parts of the world have been built around policies and governmental action that does not consider disabled individuals (Fleischer and Zames 2011, 50). It is also important to note that the U.S. produces many television series and movies, which means their depiction of disability in the media is seen by many parts of the world. Therefore, it is crucial to have disabled people working in the government and leading positions in sectors of society. It is also essential for the daily lives of disabled people that able-bodied people educate themselves on disability.

The treatment of disabled people has differed and changed throughout history and nations. However, the history of the treatment of disabled people influences how society views and treats disabled people today. While the treatment of disabled people has vastly improved from unethical medical treatment, the history of misinformation has severely affected the disabled community and contributes to deeply rooted discrimination. However,

thanks to academic disciplines such as disability studies, we can better understand how society, politics, and other cultural phenomena affect the disabled community.

2.1.3 Disability Studies

Disability studies is an academic discipline that emerged in the late 1970s and has expanded into the 21st century. The field examines disability as a social, cultural, interpersonal, and political phenomenon. By studying the lived experiences of those with physical and mental disabilities, the public can better understand what it is like to live with a disability. Therefore, for this research project, it is vital to understand disability studies as it can help understand how social media's cultural, political, and social aspects can influence body image amongst the disabled community. Therefore, this next section delves into the history and development of disability studies to understand how important it is to examine the phenomena that affect the lives of the disabled community.

Throughout much of history, the awareness around disability has been based on rehabilitation. The public, politicians, and medical professionals have understood disability through a lens of sympathy, pity, and ultimately a condition that needs to be fixed. Much of the medical field views disabled people as patients who should be helped through medical advice, an approach known as the medical model. The medical model claims that people are disabled due to their impairments and focuses on how to medically fix the 'issue,' which takes away autonomy from disabled individuals and can lead to a loss of independence, control, and choice (Johnstone 2016). Although modern society is more educated and medical professionals have a better understanding of disability, stigmas, stereotyping, and a fascination with how to 'cure' disabled people are still very much part of society. For example, there are constant news segments and new articles featuring studies that have fixed people to walk again using electrode implants and stimulating spinal cords (Lanese 2022). Much of the narrative around these news articles is hope, which can lead to false hope amongst the disabled community. In other words, disabled people are not only made to feel that they need to be fixed, but they may get high hopes for a cure that may not be plausible for everyone. Although it is not necessarily a negative that medical professionals want to help patients walk again, it sets a deficiency narrative that people with disabilities should be fixed. However, disability should be celebrated and valued within society. These two views on disability can be differentiated by the bad-difference and the mere-difference distinction (Barnes 2014). The bad-difference distinction views disability as something that makes you worse off, even if society were to be completely accommodating of disabilities. Whereas the

mere-difference distinction believes that disability "makes you nonstandard or different, but it doesn't by itself make you worse off" (Barnes 2014). However, modern disability studies have shifted away from the medical model and bad-difference distinction to the social model of disability.

2.1.3.1 Social Model of Disability

The social model of disability was first coined by disability activist Mike Oliver, who argues that "people with any form of accredited impairment are disabled by an unjust and uncaring society" (Barnes 2014). In other words, the reason disabled people do not live life like able-bodied people is not due to their impairment but because society is built for able-bodied people. To be more specific, based on the social model of disability, an individual in a wheelchair is not disabled due to their inability to walk but because they live in a society that does not have accessible buildings. Many still view disability as a medical problem that hinders one's life, but the social model of disability forces us to focus on disability through a different lens. Studying disability by looking at society can help able-bodied people understand the daily struggles of the disabled community. When applied to this research project, it helps us understand that body image issues amongst the disabled community are stemmed from society's lack of accessibility and discrimination. Understanding how society hinders the lives of disabled people can help activists create a more inclusive society and change the way people treat individuals with a disability. Overall, with the social model, "responsibility is shifted from the individual with an impairment or disability to the restrictions imposed by the construction of social and physical environment and the attitudes of institutions and organizations" (Johnstone 2012). Figure 2.1 is a diagram of the Social Model of Disability and reflects how education, family, environment, employment, leisure, and attitudes contribute to the treatment of a disabled person.
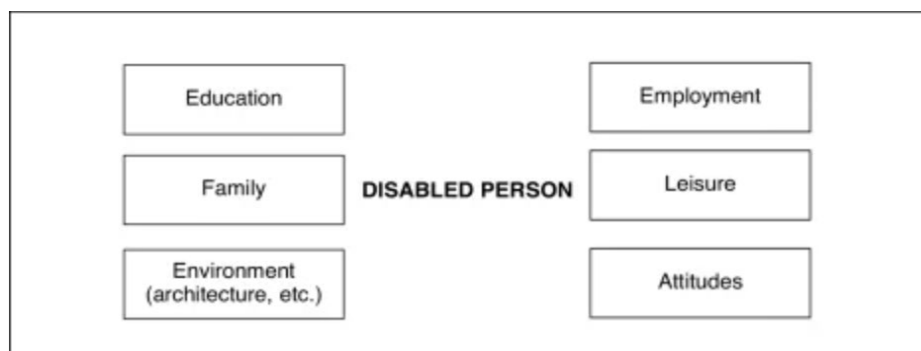
Figure 2. 1: Diagram of Social Model of Disability

Many organizations utilize the social model to advocate for disability equality. The aim of these organizations is to break the stigma of disabled individuals and create policies that better integrate disabled people into society. One of the most influential organizations in the history of social model thinking is the Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS). Members of the UPIAS argue that "disability is something imposed on top of our impairments by the way we are unnecessarily isolated and excluded from society" (Barnes 2014). Again, UPIAS emphasizes the social model theory by bringing light to the fact that disabled people are hindered due to how society is built. When applied to influencer culture and its effects on the disabled community, it portrays that disabled people are hindered online due to how social media platforms are built as opposed to being hindered due to their impairment. UPIAS also produced a crucial distinction between impairment and disability. The organization defined impairment as physically lacking body parts or mechanisms of the body. In contrast, disability was defined as "the disadvantage of the restriction of activity caused by a contemporary social organization which takes no or little account of people who have physical impairments and thus excludes them from participation in the mainstream of social activities" (Barnes 2014).

The social model of disability is also important in our modern world, especially when it comes to social media. When understanding social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and Tik Tok, it is important to understand how these applications hinder the viewability of disabled content creators. More specifically, understanding why disabled influencers get negative comments, why they are not as exposed as able-bodied influencers, why their content gets blocked, and why able-bodied users are not exposed to disabled content are important to consider when dissecting the structure of the applications. To understand how these applications disable the disabled community, we must study and understand how these applications are made, the algorithms, the community guidelines, and who is behind creating these applications. Just like in their everyday lives, disabled people are disabled online by the way social media platforms are structured.

Overall, disability studies and the social model highlight the importance of analysing the contextual elements that disable the lives of disabled people. Therefore, when conducting my case study, it was vital that I considered all the social, cultural, political, and structural elements that affect the lives of disabled people.

2.1.4 Disability in the Media

  Mass media plays a vital role in how disabled people are viewed by society. Therefore, it is important to delve into how media such as television, movies, and magazines have presented disabled people. As this thesis is analysing social media and its effects on body image amongst the disabled community, it is important to understand how disabled people have been influenced by mass media. However, understanding disability in the media can also provide an explanation for how disabled people are stereotyped and stigmatized within society. Lastly, as mass media is the predecessor of social media, it may have influenced how disabled people are treated online.

  Representation in the media is important for all ethnic groups, disabilities, sexualities, classes, and educational backgrounds. Being represented through print media such as magazines and newspapers, broadcast media such as television and radio, and even through books and music, allows minority groups to feel seen, represented, and normalized. The media has become such an influential part of our daily lives, so what is depicted can affect our language, opinions, and perspectives of the world. However, the narrative that surrounds how these minority characters are portrayed is important. Simply featuring minority characters is not enough because when minority groups are depicted in discriminatory ways, stereotypical views continue to spread.

  Much like other minority groups, the history behind disability in the media has influenced and reaffirmed the public perception of disability. Media scholars "have argued that the media offer a selective and mediated construction of reality," which leads to "a negative depiction of individuals with disabilities" (Ellis et al. 2020). Disabled people are typically shown to be pitiable and pathetic, objects of violence, sinister, super cripples, objects of ridicule, and a burden (Barnes 1992). For example, in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, Quasimodo´s disability was used to gain sympathy from the audience, while Tiny Tim in *A Christmas Carol* was depicted as a victim. Another stereotype frequently depicted through the media is the link between disability and evil. The evil cripple trope is commonly seen in *James Bond* films, where most villains have physical impairments or disfigurements. When depicting villains as individuals e turned evil due to their disability, it creates a narrative that disabled people are angry and bitter. Insinuating that disability causes individuals to become evil assumes that disability is negative. However, the reality is that disabled people are multi-dimensional humans that suffer badly from mediated collectivization and demonization.

One of the most common depictions of disability in the media, especially literature and film, is supercrip identity. Smart, the author of *Disability, Society, and the Individual*, defines a "supercrip as the presentation of a person, affected by a disability or illness (often in the prime of life), as 'overcoming' to succeed as a meaningful member of society to live a 'normal' life" (Smart 2001). This can be portrayed through a character that is blind but has super hearing or someone that uses a wheelchair but has an abnormally high IQ. By portraying the disabled community in these essentializing ways, disabled people are not depicted as individuals with their own identities. Instead, their story is based around their disability. As described through critical disability theory, disabled people are more than their disability and deserve to be represented accurately. Unfortunately, the structural powers of the film and television industry are cultivating further discrimination, stigmatization, and stereotyping in society. Disabled people do not just experience the world as a disabled person, they experience it with varying personalities, genders, sexualities, religions, political views, and more, and these are issues that need to be addressed through stories.

The inaccurate and discriminatory portrayal of disabled people in television and movies portrays the need for change at the creative level. There is a need for more disabled writers, directors, casting directors, and actors so that disabled people can be portrayed through captivating stories. However, with the rise of new media such as the internet and social media, disabled creators have been given a platform to gain visibility and raise awareness and a place where they can take back control. Disabled users can control the narrative surrounding their disability and lives. Although social media gives disabled people a sense of control, social media platforms still come with new biases and issues that hinder disabled individuals' ability to express themselves, which I will discuss in more depth later. Overall, the power structures of these industries have contributed to and further cultivated inaccurate assumptions about disabled people. However, these inaccurate portrayals stem from the able-bodied gaze. Unfortunately, much of the world has been built on able-bodied ideas, opinions, and outlooks.

2.1.5 The able-bodied gaze

Many of the issues explored so far, such as lack of accessibility and misrepresentation in the media, are causes of production, operation, and maintenance of ableism. Ableism is the discrimination and prejudice against disabled people. Unfortunately, we live in a world created on the needs of able-bodied people, and therefore society has created an unwelcome world for disabled people. Therefore, it is important to understand the able-bodied gaze, as it

plays a vital role in how disabled people represent themselves online and how users react to their content. Understanding the able-bodied gaze gives a contextual comprehension of how structural powers have been built around able-bodied views. It also gives context as to why disabled people may be self-conscious or have body image issues. Therefore, this section explores the able-bodied gaze and provides examples of how it is manifested in the lives of disabled people.

Due to the able-bodied gaze, society's social, economic, and cultural factors favour able-bodied people. According to Dan Goodley, author of *Dis-Ability Studies: Theorizing Disablism and Ableism,* this is due to "smooth forms of personhood and smooth health, creates space fit for normative citizens, encourages an institutional bias toward autonomous, independent bodies, and leads to economic and material dependence on neoliberal and hyper-capitalist forms of production," all of which ostracize disabled people (Goodley 2014). Furthermore, Ableism leads societies, companies, and industries to make decisions based on the able-bodied gaze, which leads to infrastructures and organizations that do not cater to disabled people. The able-bodied gaze is how able-bodied people view disabled people. According to Minae Inahara, author of *The Disabled Body, The Able-bodied Form: A Feminist Exploration of Dialogue between behaviour and fanon*, the able-bodied gaze refers "to that which is understood as the binary opposite to the able-bodied" (Inahara 2009). This perspective is typically manifested through sympathy and pity toward disabled people. However, not only is it disrespectful to treat disabled people as if they are a burden or need sympathy but when the world continuously views disabled people through an able-bodied gaze, prejudice and stigmatization continue.

A prime example of the able-bodied gaze perpetuated onto society is when able-bodied actors are cast as disabled characters. For example, TV shows such as *Glee* and *Degrassi* hired able-bodied actors to play disabled characters. However, non-disabled actors do not know the experiences of a disabled person, which means they are not adequately portraying the life and emotions of a disabled person. Both characters were based on a narrative that disabled people are helpless and want to be cured, which does not represent the disabled community fairly. In both television shows, the storylines made the audience feel bad for the disabled characters. However, if these characters had been portrayed by actors that were disabled, they could have been portrayed as multifaceted characters with deeper storylines. Depicting disabled characters through the lens of the able-bodied gaze does not correctly educate viewers or depict the characters accurately. Again, when the media continues to perpetuate the able-bodied gaze, the prejudice and stigmatization toward

disabled people continue. Another example is when buildings and events are not accessible. It is not enough to simply have a disabled area at concerts. While concert venues may have disabled areas, they are sometimes placed in an area with low viewability of the stage and are not designed with disabled people in mind (Hamraie 2016). Much of this comes back to educating able-bodied people about disability so that the public can understand the many layers of disability.

Since society's social, political, economic, and cultural factors have been historically built without disabled people in mind, disabled people face daily inaccessibility and discrimination. The able-bodied gaze contributes to the structural powers of Instagram and influences how able-bodied users react to disabled content. Each of these elements contributes to how disabled people view their bodies. Overall, the able-bodied gaze influences what disabled people are exposed to and can lead to internalized ableism.

2.1.6 Internalized Ableism

This last section, under disability, explores internalized ableism. Internalized ableism helps explain why and how disabled people may view their bodies negatively. This section gives contextual information that, when applied to the context of social media, can explain how disabled influencers can affect body image amongst the disabled community.

The oppression of disabled people can affect how disabled individuals feel about themselves, leading to negative internalized thoughts. Internalized ableism is when disabled individuals hold onto negative feelings about themselves based on how society perceives disability. Ableism, like racism, "induces an internalization or self-loathing which devalues disablement" (Campbell 2008). Internalization can impact all minority groups and is defined by Penny Rosenwasser in their journal article "Tool for Transformation: Cooperative Inquiry as a process of healing from Internalized Oppression" as "an involuntary reaction to oppression which originates outsides one's group which results in group members loathing themselves, disliking others in their groups, and blaming themselves for the oppression– rather than realizing that these beliefs are constructed in them by oppressive socio-economic, political systems" (Rosenwasser 2000, 1). As discussed so far, society is built to benefit able-bodied people. When disabled people are consistently met with feelings of sympathy and pitifulness, it may lead to the internalization that disabled people are not strong or capable of success. Internalized ableism can affect how one feels about their abilities, appearance, and feelings of being a burden. Unfortunately, according to Jack Mezirow, author of *Transformative Dimensions of adult learning*, internalization is challenging to transform

due to the deep emotions involved and the continuous bombardment of oppressive messages from society (Mezirow 1991). However, internalized ableism affects both able-bodied and disabled people. Able-bodied people have internalized thoughts about disability, and disabled people have internalized thoughts about their disabilities, which are perpetuated by the able-bodied gaze. For example, when disabled characters are portrayed as pitiful, villains, supercrips, or inspirations, these thoughts can be internalized by disabled people and affect how they view themselves.

One of the most common forms of internalized ableism stems from the universal wheelchair symbol. The universal symbol for disability is a stick figure sitting in a wheelchair, and it is what most people associate with disability. When most people think of disability, they think of someone that uses a wheelchair (Fritsch 2015). However, there are an array of disabilities that have different needs, mobility devices, and care. Since most society automatically considers disability as using a wheelchair, many people with invisible illnesses are discriminated against for using public disabled amenities. Examples of invisible illnesses are having an ostomy, autism, ADHD, chronic pain, and chronic fatigue. Since many people assume disability means using a wheelchair, many disabled people are not considered disabled in the eyes of able-bodied people. People with invisible illnesses are told they are not allowed to park in handicapped spots or use disabled bathrooms. These external messages from the public can lead to internal negative thoughts. These messages tell people with invisible disabilities that they are not disabled or worthy of assistance. Again, this all comes back to society not being educated on the lives of disabled people.

Consistently absorbing ableist messages through media, social media, society, the government, and the population, disabled people are susceptible to negative feelings about themselves. Poor representation leads to misinformation, prejudice, stigmas, and exclusion, which is why internalized ableism is an important topic to understand when discussing disabled people on social media. However, representation matters and can change the way people view the world, so we must have disabled influencers and activists online to help spread awareness of these issues.

2.2 Body Image

This next section concentrates on the concept of body image. There is no set definition of body image, and it is a complex phenomenon made up of multiple elements. However, there are varying factors that contribute to one's body image. To explore how influencer culture affects body image amongst the disabled community, it is important to

understand what body image is, societal factors that influence body image, and the past and present discourse surrounding the topic. Therefore, this section will look at different definitions of body image, how mass media has affected body image amongst women, and the body positive and body neutrality movement. Each of these sections will give information that will be important to know when I analyse Sophie Butler's Instagram profile as it will help me analyse how Sophie's social media presentation affects their followers.

2.2.1 Definition of Body Image

To understand how influencer culture affects body image amongst the disabled community, it is vital to define what body image is and what contributes to one's body image. Although there is no set definition of body image, it typically refers to individuals' "perceptions, thoughts, and feelings with respect to their bodies" (Grogan 2016). The term body image was first coined by German neurologist and psychiatrist Paul Schilder. It quickly became an integral part of a psychological phenomenon. He described the term as "the picture of our own body which we form in our mind, that is to say, the way in which the body appears to ourselves" (Schilder 1950). However, the term has expanded to include how we perceive our bodies' size, shape, and form and our feelings toward these characteristics. In addition, factors such as family members, the environment or culture you grew up in, the attitude of your peers, and media can all influence an individual's body image.

According to a study conducted by Peter David Slade, body image is a complex concept that can be affected by cognitive, affective, and attitudinal variables. (Slade 1994). Slade also states that seven factors contribute to our perception of body image (Slade 1994). The seven factors are the history of sensory input to body experience, history of weight change/fluctuations, individual attitudes to weight and shape, cognitive-affective variables such as individual psychopathology, biological variables such as genes, and cultural and social norms. As described in the study, women exposed to media images of thin body types are more likely to develop an eating disorder and negative body image. Unfortunately, western culture typically encourages 'thin' bodies, which "sharpen up individual attitudes to ideal body size and shape in selected subgroups in those societies" (Slade 1994, 500).

The perception of beauty amongst women has varied throughout history and culture. In ancient Egypt, the ideal woman was described as slender, having narrow shoulders, a high waist, and a symmetrical face. By contrast, during the Italian Renaissance, the beauty standard for women was wide hips, a rounded stomach, and a full butt. Fast forward to the late 1990s, and the media idealized thin women with angular bone structure and pale skin

(Owen and Laurel-Seller 2000). However, the current idealized body shape consists of a tiny waist, big butt, and big boobs. The ideal body type has been dependent on the desirability of different points in history. For example, tiny waists became fashionable in sixteenth and seventeenth-century Europe because Queen Catherine of France introduced the idea through waist binding. After the Depression, women were encouraged to gain weight, grow boobs, and gain a butt because it reflected a better life. In the 1990s, "heroin chic" was all the rage, which consisted of pale skin, a skinny body frame, and dark under-eye circles. This trend was influenced by the model industry and the glamorization of anorexic celebrities. However, nowadays, we are seeing an increase in cosmetic surgery for breast enhancements and Brazilian butt lifts due to the visibility of celebrities such as The Kardashians. The ideal body shape will continue to alter as new and different factors influence our society and culture. The conception of beauty is not constant and has been historically and culturally constructed through power status, culture, and media.

2.2.2 Mass Media and Body Image

Mass media is a pivotal factor contributing to body image issues amongst women. Magazines, tabloids, and celebrity culture have cultivated negative body image amongst women. As celebrity culture influenced the development of influencer culture, it is crucial to recognize how mass media cultivated a discourse of body shaming and bodily pressures. Being aware of mass media and body image will also provide vital knowledge for analysing Sophie's profile. During the analysis, I will be investigating how Sophie presents themselves online and its effects on body image amongst their disabled followers. Therefore, understanding the mass media effects on body image will be important as the body image issues cultivated from mass media are still prevalent amongst women today.

Body image pressure became prevalent with the emergence of tabloid magazines, paparazzi, and the rise of celebrity culture. As seen in figures 2.2 - 2.5, headlines such as "Stars lose the fight to cellulite," "Best and Worst bikini bodies," "Skin and Bones,", and "How I lost 10 lbs. in 10 days" are ways in which the media, specifically tabloid magazines, have body shamed celebrities. These headlines have cultivated a society where young readers feel insecure and pressured to reach certain body ideals. As a result, however, mental health issues such as "compromised emotional well-being, low self-esteem, symptoms of depression, and disordered eating" may arise (Uchôa et al. 2019, 2).

Figure 2. 2: *Who Magazine Cover*

Figure 2. 3*: Star Magazine Cover*

Figure 2. 4*: Star Magazine*

Figure 2. 5: *OK! Magazine*

Meta-analysis has shown that women who are more exposed to media feel dissatisfied with their body image, spend more money on changing their appearance, and have a higher chance of developing an eating disorder (Grabe, Ward, and Hyde 2008). However, that does not stop insecurities and negative body image from being used to the advantage of the beauty and cosmetic surgery industries. As stated by Rosalind Gill, postfeminist media culture has shifted the definition of femininity to "bodily property rather than a social structural or psychological one" (Gill 2007, 149). More specifically, femininity is now portrayed as a sexy body and disregards the "caring, nurturing or motherhood" characteristics central to femininity (Gill 2007, 149).

For centuries, the advertising industry has fueled beauty standards and body image ideals through mass media outlets such as television and magazines. Advertisers have used shame and embarrassment toward women as a selling tactic. In the early 19th century, newspapers featured advertisements for face reshape devices for women. In the 1930s, advertisements were selling feminine hygiene products that "prevented many such tragedies" in which the 'tragedy' was husbands leaving their wives (Hall 2013). However, advertisers still play on the insecurities of young women. Recently, Protein World, a company that sells protein products, sparked controversy when trying to sell its new weight loss supplement program. As seen in figure 2.6, the company used a skinny female model and the words "are you beach ready?" to which thousands of individuals complained. Figure 2.7 also depicts Victoria's Secret's "The Perfect Body" campaign that featured thin, white, able-bodied women. Again, the public complained that this type of marketing insinuated that one must be white and thin to have the perfect body.

The backlash to these advertisements depicts a change in societal ideals as conversations around body positivity have increased. More specifically, companies such as Dove have tried to change the discourse around the female body and what is typically portrayed in the media and advertising with their "real body campaign," seen in figure 2.8. However, disabled women are noticeably missing in these body campaigns. Much like Dove, many companies working toward diversity still fail to include disabled women in portraying "real bodies." Disabled women are still being left out of diversity efforts in mass media.

Figure 2. 6: *Protein World "Are You Beach Body Ready" Campaign*

Figure 2. 7: *Victoria's Secret "The Perfect Body" Campaign*

Figure 2. 8: *Dove "For Real Beauty Campaign"*

However, with the emergence of social media, these body image issues are still prevalent. While Instagram has started a conversation around unrealistic body ideals, body image pressures are ubiquitous. Therefore, factors such as filters, photoshop, and unrealistic beauty ideals must be considered when analysing the relationship between body image and social media. However, social media has embraced body positivity and cultivated conversations around unrealistic beauty standards, much like mass media. However, these movements still leave the disabled community out of the conversation, and they are consistently established through the able-bodied gaze.

2.2.3 Body Positive Movement

Social media has led to body image issues and body positive movements. However, these movements often emerge from the able-bodied gaze, meaning the disabled community is left out of the conversation. Therefore, when answering how influencer culture affects body image amongst the disabled community, it is crucial to be aware of these social media movements and their effects on the disabled community. The most prevalent body image-related movement on social media is the body-positive movement. The body-positive movement is a social movement that encourages self-love and the acceptance of all bodies regardless of size, shape, skin tone, and gender (Cohen, Newton-John, and Slater 2020). According to BodyPositive.org, the movement was created based on a "shared passion to create a lively, healing community that offers freedom from suffocating societal messages that keep people in a perpetual struggle with their bodies ("The Body Positive"). The movement aims to challenge the unrealistic body ideals of modern society, build positive body image amongst men and women, and improve self-confidence. The origin of the movement can date back to the 1960s, but in recent years it has gained popularity through body-positive campaigns and hashtags on social media (Cohen, Newton-John, and Slater 2020). The movement was highly influenced by the fat acceptance movement and the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance by focusing on challenging beauty standards historically influenced by western culture. However, the movement took off through social media when plus-size model, Tess Holiday, founded @EffYourBeautyStandard on Instagram. Social media has played an integral role in the movement's popularity and has helped spread the body-positive message.

Although the intent behind the movement is positive, it is not inclusive of certain minority groups. The narrative around the body's positive movement is to love your body no matter what and that everybody is beautiful. However, this concept may be much easier to

preach when you live in a body that fits the typical body ideals. For example, when women with thin privilege are at a weight that is not subjected to judgment or harassment, they do not face the same struggles as overweight individuals. Thin women have more clothes options, are automatically assumed to be healthy, and do not endure medical gaslighting due to their size. Not having to face these daily struggles may make it easier for someone to preach body positivity and self-love. The body-positive movement encourages individuals to be proud of what their bodies can do. However, this largely stems from able-bodied privilege, as it is much harder to appreciate what your body can do when you are disabled. Many groups, especially the disabled community, struggle to see their body as beautiful, and it disregards the struggles that marginalized communities face when dealing with body image. Stephanie Yeboah, a former follower of the body positive movement, stated that body positivity "has become a buzzword. It has alienated the very people who created it" and created a new set of beauty standards (Shruti 2019). This movement leaves out major groups that already deal with inequality, prejudice, and stereotyping. Since the body positive movement is so popular on social media and has cultivated a broad audience, many disabled individuals are exposed to this narrative. As mentioned, self-comparison theory states that people tend to evaluate themselves compared to others. Therefore, if Instagram is inundated with individuals who focus on loving their bodies, disabled individuals are exposed to a new set of unrealistic standards. The body-positive movement also plays a role in toxic positivity, which will be discussed more deeply. Although the movement was created with good intentions, marginalized groups such as the disabled community are still being left out of meaningful conversations surrounding body image and do not consider the complex factors of the disabled and other marginalized groups. In fact, according to a study, "repeating positive self-statements may benefit certain people, but backfire for the very people who need them the most" (Shruti 2019). In other words, the body positive movement may not be beneficial for disabled groups and can be detrimental. However, more inclusive movements such as body neutrality have emerged.

2.2.4 Body Neutrality

Body neutrality was founded to be more inclusive of marginalized groups such as the disabled community. Body neutrality is an emerging body image movement that aims to steer away from the idea that you should love your body no matter what and instead promotes viewing your body neutrally. Therefore, disabled influencers and activists have started to adopt body neutral messages on their profiles. Since body neutrality is more inclusive of the

disabled community, it is essential to understand the movement as it is an element that encourages positive body image amongst the disabled community. Therefore, this last section of body image will delve into body neutrality.

Instead of pressuring one to accept your body, the body neutrality movement encourages you to stop thinking about your physical appearance. Body neutrality encourages you to view your body as a vessel that helps you get through the world and promotes the idea that if you stop thinking about your physical appearance so much, you have more time to do the things you love (Horn 2021). However, completely disregarding your physical appearance is not easy. Therefore, the movement encourages you to embrace that your body changes, but what you do to respect it does not. It also highlights that it is okay to have self-conscious days, something the body positive movements have steered away from.

Unfortunately, body positivity and the notion of expanding the idea of beauty have backfired, as the advertising industry has used the body-positive movement as a selling tactic. Therefore, body neutrality gives individuals an alternative space that steers away from how their bodies look. In addition, body neutrality has the power to help those with disabilities as "these people are pretty frustrated with the demands to love their bodies when they feel betrayed by them" and "being neutral could feel like a relief" (Shruti 2019). However, although there are movements in place to gauge the gap for the marginalized community, the body neutrality movement has not gained as much attention as the body positive movement. More specifically, #bodyneutrality has been used about 214,000 times, and #bodypositivity has been used around 9.2m times, meaning that disabled individuals are more likely to be exposed to body-positive content, which may put pressure on them to love their bodies when they are not ready to do so.

2.3 Influencer Culture

This final section will review influencer culture and its effects on body image. Influencer culture is the final element that makes up the topic of this thesis and is an important factor to consider when answering the research questions. Therefore, this section will explain the development of influencer culture, selective-self presentation, toxic positivity, algorithms, rules and regulations, and the use of self-help discourse on social media. Each of these concepts helps explain how influencer culture affects body image and the disabled community. Without understanding the contextual elements of Instagram and influencer culture, it would not be possible to answer the questions accurately. However,

first, it is crucial to grasp what influencer culture is and how it took over Instagram to become a popular marketing industry.

2.3.1 Development of Influencer Culture

This next section looks at how influencer culture gained popularity through Instagram. When Instagram launched in October 2010, its primary focus was to feature photos taken on mobile devices (Leaver, Highfield, and Abidin 2020). However, as the application gained popularity, it quickly became a medium for self-branding. The application's popularity intensified the notion of influencers, which allowed individuals to control their content and self-present. There was no need for agents, managers, television networks, or brand sponsorships to garner influence over an audience. Instead, users were able to monetize their celebrity status through content sharing and followers. However, what sets online influencers apart from media celebrities is their representation of realness. Influencers can create effective relationships with followers through a discourse of authenticity and relatability. The relationship between an influencer and followers is a stark difference from celebrities who "often serve audiences carefully crafted fantasies that stand in stark contrast to lived experiences of "real" people" (Cotter 2018, 897).

Over the past ten years, the notion of an influencer has taken over social media platforms and turned content creation into a full-time job. Influencer culture has saturated Instagram with influencers who create "high-quality idealized content, attain celebrity-level following, and often leverage their popularity to earn money through brand/partnerships and promotion" (Lowe-Calverley and Grieve 2021). While the success of influencer culture was created based on authenticity, many influencers present idealized physical appearances, which adhere to conventional western beauty ideals. Since women have historically been socialized to focus on physical appearance, being exposed to idealized photos on Instagram and appearance-related comments lead to body dissatisfaction (Tiggemann and Barbato 2018). The introduction of filters and the ability to alter images also lead to a distorted idealization of beauty. Although there is vast literature indicating the negative impact of idealized photos on Instagram, there has not been as extensive research on how influencer culture impacts body image. Characteristics of influencer culture such as following, popularity, and status may play a role in how users view their bodies. However, a study conducted by Emily Lowe-Crawley and Rachel Grieve found that viewing idealized photographs posted by influencers led to high body dissatisfaction and negative mood (Lowe-Crawley & Grieve 2021). The study found that there may not be a significant difference in

body dissatisfaction for users viewing posts with high popularity metrics instead of low popularity metrics such as followers, views, and engagement. These findings show that photos with more engagements and influencers with more followers do not create higher body dissatisfaction than influencers with lower metrics. The development of Influencer culture leads many people to selectively self-present. With the development of Photoshop and filters, it has become more accessible for people to inaccurately present themselves.

2.3.2 Selective self-presentation on social media

Idealized photos posted by influencers lead to higher negative body dissatisfaction. However, to understand how influencer culture affects body image amongst the disabled community, it is important to understand how selective self-presentation affects users. Therefore, this section delves into selective self-presentation on social media. Selective self-presentation allows users to present themselves online selectively and involves a "conscious effort to enact behaviours to create a desired persona for an audience" (Fox and Vendemia 2016, 59). Individuals have time to carefully revise the information they share through emails, discussion boards, and online dating sites. However, as photographic social media platforms such as Instagram and Facebook have become prevalent, photographic self-presentation has become a factor in how individuals present themselves online. Filters, Photoshop, and other digital altercations allow users to alter their photos to "present themselves in positive ways and achieve social goals" (Fox and Vendemia 2016, 593). Developing a personal identity through self-presentation has been an essential part of social media and is associated with higher self-esteem (Gonzales and Hancock 2011). Studies have shown positive aspects of self-esteem and body confidence when one carefully self-presents online. However, as social comparison theory suggests, people evaluate themselves by comparing themselves to individuals like them. While self-presentation can be psychologically beneficial for the one posting, it can start a cycle of unrealistic beauty standards. Social comparison has led people to believe "others were happier and had better lives compared to their own and agreed to a lesser extent that life was fair" (Cramer, Song, and Drent 2016, 740). This type of comparison online leads to a cycle of unrealistic body standards fuelled by individuals who gain confidence and self-esteem by carefully presenting themselves in a certain way online. The issue has become further perpetuated with the rise of influencer culture, as individuals with large followings are self-presenting online and potentially spreading unrealistic standards. Although the person posting may feel more confident, it is detrimental to the individuals exposed to the content. Posting inaccurate

representations or only posting positive moments of one's life can lead to toxic positivity and cruel optimism.

2.3.3 Toxic positivity and cruel optimism

Toxic positivity and cruel optimism are vital factors that profoundly affect Instagram users, especially the disabled community. Many influencers and Instagram users tend to selectively self-present and only post content that depicts them in a carefully curated way. However, Instagram has also cultivated an environment that preaches extreme positivity. However, dismissing negative emotions comes with adverse side effects. As Instagram has become a platform for disabled people to represent the disabled community and normalize disabilities, toxic positivity is an element that needs to be considered. More specifically, when disabled influencers portray themselves thriving with a disability or push the disabled community to accept their circumstances, it can lead to toxic positivity. Furthermore, toxic positivity and cruel optimism can also affect one's body image. Therefore, this section will delve into the detail of toxic positivity and how it affects the disabled community.

Affirmations, manifestation, positivity quotes, and uplifting phrases have flooded social media feeds. However, this new culture that preaches "stay positive" and "good vibes only" has increased toxic positivity. Toxic positivity assumes that despite someone or oneself emotional pain or struggles, one should keep a positive mindset, which involves "dismissing negative emotions and responding to distress with false reassurances rather than empathy" (Princing 2021). Before social media, toxic positivity could be telling someone going through a tough time to stay positive without listening to what the person is going through. Instagram is filled with "posts that tend to positively biased, as users engage in positive forms of self-presentation and select positive aspects of their lives to display" (Lup, Trub and Rosenthal 2016). However, the issue with toxic positivity is that it can lead to an invalidation of the authentic human experience. Constantly telling yourself that things will get better or that you need to stay positive can lead to a denial of your emotional pain and pressure to be happy. It is also important to note that toxic positivity does not only manifest in others but can also become harmful to oneself. This attitude of positivity, while potentially disregarding valid reasons to be negative, is embedded in cruel optimism. Cruel optimism is an idea coined by Lauren Berlant. It is defined as a "relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility whose realization is discovered either to be impossible, sheer fantasy, or too possible, and toxic" (Berlant 2006, 33). In other words, it is when your goals or something you desire are an obstacle to yourself.

Although this is not a new phenomenon, it has become a topic of discussion concerning social media. Social media has led to a surge of toxic positivity and is "often a highlight reel – where people are typically more inclined to post the positives in their lives rather than the not-so-positive realities we all experience at times" (Radin 2021). A large part of this is related to influencer culture, as social media influencers are paid to promote brands. Many of these brands want to work with users associated with happiness and optimism. Ultimately, this leads to a cycle of toxic positivity, as many compare themselves to the influencers they follow. As stated previously, Festinger suggests that through self-comparison theory, people tend to evaluate themselves, often in comparison to others, which means that when influencers disregard hardships and negative emotions to promote products, users start to feel pressure to be positive (Festinger 1954).

With the rise of disabled influencers on social media, toxic positivity and cruel optimism have affected disabled users. The intent behind many disability awareness pages on social media is to normalize disabilities and spread awareness. However, to do so, many influencers post content that represents the joyous moments of living with a disability and sometimes disregard that not everyone goes through the same experiences, which is a big issue within the ostomy world. Many ostomy accounts, such as @MrColitisCrohns and @billieandersonx, use their Instagram account to show that you can live a happy and fulfilled life with an ostomy. Although they are doing amazing things for the community, it is natural to compare yourself to others. Meaning, based on self-comparison theory, when influencers depict that living with an ostomy can lead to a better quality of life, it can spread toxic positivity toward those struggling. It can also create cruel optimism in users who become attached to the idea that they will have the same results as someone on Instagram. However, many able-bodied and disabled influencers share their struggles on social media platforms to show that social media does not always depict reality, which is essential when combating toxic positivity. Therefore, showing that recovery and disabilities are not linear is fundamental when trying to raise awareness.

2.3.4 Algorithms and Content Regulation

As this thesis utilizes the theoretical lens of critical disability theory, it is important to understand the structural powers that make up Instagram. Algorithms and content regulations play a vital role in how disabled influencers and disabled users interact with Instagram. Therefore, it is vital to understand the algorithms and content regulations of Instagram and how they affect the disabled community. Algorithms play a fundamental role in how users

interact with social media platforms. Social media algorithms influence what content we see and how we interact with the platform. In March 2016, Instagram launched a "new systematics of work and algorithm which adopted an artificial intelligent and big data-based work system" (Ferina et al. 2019). Algorithms typically function so that users are not aware of how it works, and the algorithm was put in place to "avoid cheating by Instagram users" (Ferina et al. 2019). However, in 2021, Instagram changed its algorithm significantly and shifted to a highly sophisticated system design that allows users to explore new content. Before the changes made in 2016, Instagram was organized in chronological order, and no sophisticated algorithmic factors played a role. However, to encourage users to interact with Instagram meaningfully, Instagram shifted to an algorithm based on content curation (Lua 2018). Three primary ranking systems influence Instagram's algorithm to achieve personalized and relevant content for its users. The first ranking system is interest, where the algorithm looks at the likelihood that the user will be interested in specific genres. The algorithm categorizes posts by groups such as fitness, beauty, landscape, and gaming, and based on the user's engagement with genres,the algorithm will share similar content. The feed is also customized to your behaviour on the application, so if you watch many videos, the algorithm will be more likely to recommend that type of content. The second-ranking system is timeliness, which considers how recent content was posted. Finding a balance between the kind of content the user is interested in and how recent the content was posted gives the user a curated timeline of new posts. Lastly, the algorithm looks closely at relationships, which means the algorithm looks closely at the interaction between users on the application. The algorithm will bump up accounts that users interact with, including what photos the user likes, people the user has messaged, and even which profiles the user has frequently or recently searched. The algorithm can create curated timelines to keep users engaged by looking at each ranking system.

After analysing interest, timeliness, and relationships, the algorithm considers frequency, the number of followers, and usage. The algorithm looks at how often the user opens the application and will try to show the best content from your last visit. However, if you visit the application every few hours, it will show more up-to-date and popular content, while if you only visit every few days, it will highlight the most popular content from the past few days. The number of followers a user follows also plays a role in what content is featured. Users that follow many accounts typically see less content from everyone they follow, whereas if you follow a small number of people, you are more likely to see content from your close friends. Lastly, the algorithm considers usage and how long you browse the

application. If the user spends more time or sessions on the application, the algorithm provides more fresh content to browse. However, if you are on the application for shorter periods, it will show the most relevant content. The algorithm's curated content and recommendations create feeds that feel familiar, "with a recognizable narrative and expected buzzwords" (Bouvier and Rasmussen 2022). However, many disabled users do not only follow disabled content creators, which means that popular able-bodied influencers are more likely to get more exposure, which happens because "users discern the participatory norms that algorithms "reward" with visibility" (Cotter 2018, 896). This type of "reward" is called content curation, leading to algorithmic bias. Algorithmic bias happens when algorithms create biased outcomes that typically push up a specific group of users. This bias may be due to algorithms being designed by engineers influenced by external forces such as social, cultural, economic, and political forces (Just and Latzer 2016). These external forces "place particular philosophical frames on the world that render amenable to the work of code and algorithms" (Kitchin and Dodge 2014). Therefore, Instagram's algorithmic content creation can produce social relations and social realities on the user's behalf.

Unfortunately, there are frequent examples of large companies only doing brand deals with skinny, white women. When companies with large followings do not embrace diversity, it means conventionally beautiful, white influencers get more exposure and ultimately more followers and popularity, which leads them to be recommended to more users. This issue regarding algorithmic bias was acknowledged by Instagram CEO Adam Mosseri, as under- and unrepresented groups are affected by it.During the height of the #BlackLivesMatter movement, Mosseri published a post with the following caption:
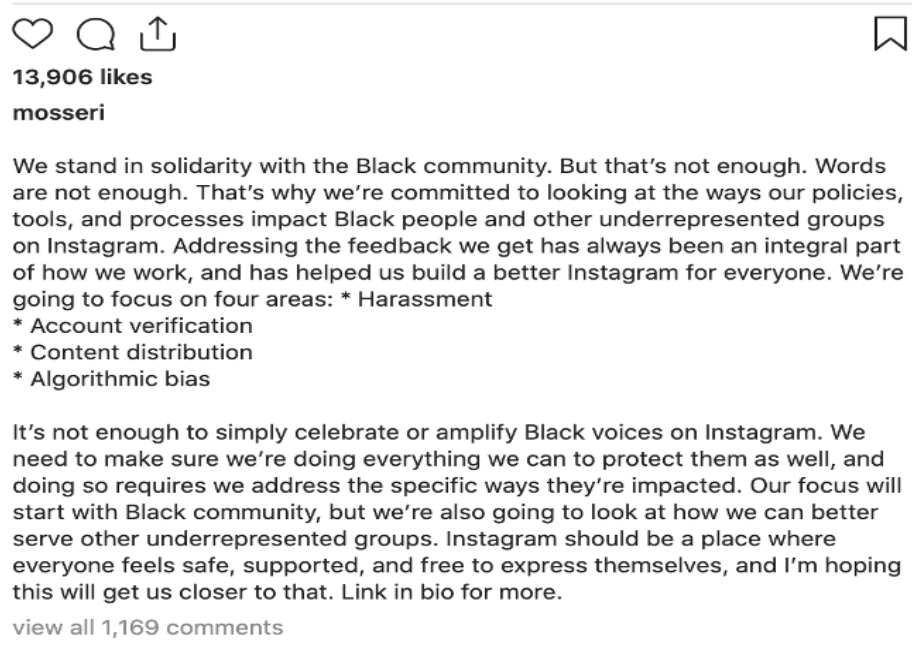
Figure 2. 9: Instagram post by Adam Mosseri, CEO of Instagram

Although this post was directed toward the black community, Mosseri highlights the
need to improve algorithmic bias, account verification, and content distribution for all
underrepresented groups. Mosseri explains each area in more detail on the Instagram news
page, highlighting that Instagram will "review how content is filtered on exploring and
hashtag pages to understand where there may be vulnerability to bias" and that "some
technologies risk repeating the patterns developed by our biased societies" ("Ensuring Black
Voices Are Heard | Instagram Blog," n.d.). This type of bias leads to the lower viewability of
disabled content creators and makes it harder for disabled users to discover other disabled
users. When disabled influencers are not getting the same exposure due to algorithmic bias, it
also means that spreading awareness becomes more challenging, as the algorithm is less
likely to share their information. Much like with other minority groups, when trying to spread
disability awareness through Instagram, the content must reach an array of users. However,
with the way Instagram's algorithm is programmed, users are more likely to see information
and content that reinforces their opinions and biases. When individuals are not exposed to
new ideas and opinions, they are not given the opportunity to educate themselves on issues.
However, unrepresented groups on Instagram also must deal with censoring, trolling, and
community guidelines that unfairly categorize disabled content.

For many years, Facebook and Instagram were considered platforms that allowed users to use freedom of expression. The owner of Instagram and founder of Facebook, Mark Zuckerberg, described technology as a "democratizing force for putting power in people's hands" (Are 2020, 1). However, activist groups have raised the issue that these social media platforms harm and censor vulnerable groups such as minors, LGBTQIA+, women, and disabled individuals. Broad community guidelines, censoring, and a lack of consequences for bullying across the platform are a few of how Instagram is failing the disabled community. Instagram also utilizes its algorithm to enforce its rules and regulations. More specifically, Instagram's sensitive content blocker is censoring disabled content. Instagram describes sensitive content as "posts that don't necessarily break the rules but could potentially be upsetting to some people – such as posts that may be sexually suggestive or violent" however, this explanation is very broad ("Instagram Now Lets You Manage 'Sensitive Content.' Here's How to Use It." 2021). There have been numerous instances of disabled influencers posting images later blocked or removed because it is considered "violent" content. For example, @MrColitisCrohns frequently posts photos of his bagless ostomy on Instagram. However, every so often, Instagram deems the content violent and therefore removes it.

Unfortunately, Instagram holds significant power in "establishing the institutional conditions of influencer's labour within platforms" (Cotter 2018, 901). When the power is placed on Instagram to choose what is deemed sensitive or not, "so much power is placed in the hands of the platform, and the decisions that they make have huge ramifications for online speech and online expression" ("Instagram Now Lets You Manage 'Sensitive Content.' Here's How to Use It." 2021). Although it is essential to protect users, disabled bodies should not be deemed violent or break any community guidelines. Although Instagram does allow users to turn off the sensitive content setting, due to the broad definitions of sensitive content, disabled bodies are unknowingly censored. While someone has their sensitive setting turned on because they want to avoid seeing violent fights or guns, they will also miss out on being educated about different bodies, as many disabled bodies are put into the same category as violence. This control by Instagram hinders activists' ability to raise awareness. Instagram needs to consider the varying degrees of what can be considered 'sensitive' to different individuals. Overall, this control idealizes certain forms of participation as more desirable than others and "establishes the rules of the game" (Cotter 2018).

2.3.4.1 Influencers and algorithms

Understanding how influencers utilize algorithms to gain viewability is essential in the context of this research project. When analysing Sophie's profile, it is important to know how algorithms may be working against them and how Sophie's choice of the content may be carefully chosen to gain viewability. Being aware of these elements may shed light on Sophie's content choices and give insight into their profile. Therefore, this last section looks at how influencers use algorithms and content regulations to their advantage and how it affects what content they post.

In the journal article "Playing the visibility game: How digital influencers and algorithms negotiate influence on Instagram," Kelly Cotter explores how influencers navigate and utilize algorithms. Through a thematic analysis of online discussion between aspiring and established influencers, Cotter finds that the "pursuit of Influencer on Instagram resembles a game constructed around "rules" embedded in algorithms that regulate visibility" (Cotter 2018, 895). She states that while algorithms have power, users, platforms, and algorithms work together to structure user behaviour. However, they do not "unilaterally determine user behaviour" (Cotter 2018, 896). This interdependent relationship depicts how users can utilize algorithms to increase visibility. Instagram's algorithm is based on the user's assumed relevance. However, Cotter explains that the algorithm cultivates a desire for visibility because of "the possibility of constantly disappearing, of not being considered important enough" (Bucher 2012, 1171). However, Instagram only makes certain algorithmic information available to the public, meaning influencers must navigate their way around optimal visibility. Through Cotter's thematic analysis of online communication among influencers, she found that influencers were posting content that followed the "rules" of Instagram and therefore was pushed upon other's timelines. For example, one user detailed that if chronological feeds were to come back, influencers could make "cool and interesting content again, as opposed to the same five unoriginal images you routinely see now because we are all so afraid of no longer being relevant and doing something the algorithm does not like" (Cotter 2018, 902). This quote depicts that some influencers sense a degree of conformity instead of creativity on Instagram. However, to gain the visibility needed to attain influencer status, content creators must work within the confines of the algorithm. Influencers research and gather information about Instagram's algorithm ranging from the best time to post, what kind of content does well, which hashtags to use, and other elements that help increase engagement. Influencers then put this information into practice to gain engagement.

Engagement is how often followers interact and engage with content, ranging from liking, commenting, sharing, and saving posts. The degree of visibility an influencer has is based on Instagram followers. However, influencers look at the ratio of engagement to followers to measure their exposure. By looking at this data, influencers can see what content their followers are being exposed to and the content they interact with most. Influencers can create content that they know will succeed based on that information. However, there is a sense of conformity in posts throughout Instagram. Established and aspiring influencers may post content they think will do well and gain the most engagement over the content they want to share genuinely. In some ways, it takes away the authenticity and "realness" that contributed to the success of influencer culture. The rhetoric of "authenticity," "realness" and "relatability" is often manifested in self-help discourse, especially among disabled content creators.

2. 4 Self-Help and Post-Feminist Discourse

When I first started to analyse Sophie's Instagram profile, it became evident that self-help language and postfeminist discourse were prevalent throughout their profile. Therefore, I delved deeper into how social media influencers adopt self-help discourse and how influencer culture has cultivated has further cultivated postfeminist sensibilities. Postfeminist and self-help discourse are associated with neoliberalist ideals, and this presentation was prevalent throughout Sophie's profile. Therefore, it was essential to understand how influencers adopt postfeminist and self-help discourse.

Over the past few years, self-help literature has experienced continued growth, with sales growing at a compound annual growth rate of 11 percent since 2013, reaching 38.6 million in 2019 ("Self Help Book Sales Are Rising Fast in the US, the NPD Group Says" 2020). Self-help literature often focuses on how individuals can take control of their lives. However, the discourse of self-help literature tends to be written through "external forms of textual authority and expert knowledge" and tends to be a source for people seeking authoritative assistance (Rimke 2000, 62). While this type of expertise can be manifested through education or the expert knowledge of a psychologist or a doctor, many modern self-help books and self-help gurus reveal their knowledge through experience. Therefore, many self-transformative narratives in self-help books are written with narrative discourse. Narration is typically used to describe the author's past experiences, past failures, and past successes. The narrative discourse is used to position the author as a reliable source of information. The use of narration also defines "those selves, as much for the speaker as for

the audience" and is a sense-making activity (Dunn 2017). In recent years, the popularity of individuals that have positioned themselves as self-help gurus through personal experiences has increased. Modern self-help gurus such as Tony Robbins and the Medical Medium do not have any formal education in medicine or psychology; however, they are some of the most famous ones today. Both individuals used their own experiences to position themselves as experts to help others in their self-improvement journey.

The main lesson behind many self-help books is that individuals can only rely on themselves to make changes. This individualistic view of the world aligns with neoliberalism. Neoliberalism is "a political-economic ideology and practice that promotes individualism, consumerism, deregulation and transferring state power and responsibility to the individuals (Leve 2013, 279). These neoliberal perspectives on individualism and success are consistent with self-help discourse. The prime discourse of self-help culture is that "individual aspiration, coupled with effort (and often with virtue) will yield success" (McGee 2012, 690). Although individuals typically buy self-help books to rely on someone else expert knowledge, "one is not explicitly coerced to engage in projects of self-help; one does so because one wants to improve" (Rimke 2000, 63). The overall discourse is self-fulfillment through own authority guided by an expert. The overall attitude and language of self-help gurus reflect the neoliberal ideals of "if I can do it, so can you." Self-help books imply that the reader will overcome adversity if you read the book and follow the directions. In some ways, it reads like a to-do list for self-improvement or a how-to guide for living.

Self-help language is often by way of positive, productive application (Rimke 2000). For example, Zonnya, author of "Stop Setting Goals: Start Choosing Results," describes that helping oneself will result in "good health, positive attitudes, friendships, love, happiness, prosperity, peace, joy, faith and a sense of inner fulfilment" (Zonnya 2004). Each of the concepts listed by Zonnya is related to happiness, joy, and positivity. Meanwhile, Susan Jeffers, author of "End the Struggle and Dance with Life: How to Build Yourself Up when the World Gets you Down," describes that to have a "healthier and more responsible path" and "to introduce more and more moments of exquisiteness in your life and more joy, peace, and abundance," one must read her self-help book (Jeffers 1997). Overall, positively associated words and phrases are used to portray the benefits of self-help literature. However, even their use of words such as exquisiteness and fulfilment create a discourse of alacrity. The language is carefully curated to create a rhetoric of joy and self-fulfillment. However, this consistent portrayal of positivity and self-fulfillment can lead to cruel optimism and toxic positivity.

The overall tone of these texts typically portrays a neoliberal gaze by focusing on individual success. More specifically, many self-help books emphasize personal power and self-control. The discourse describes our healthy selves as "the result of a magic that can be located, harnessed and exercised only once the self-changer acknowledges its 'divine' presence" (Rimke 2000, 64). The goal of the text is to express the importance of trusting yourself. They use positive and spiritual words that make the reader feel important and create a narrative in which the individual can take control of their lives. However, in recent years, self-help literature and neoliberal representation have spread to social media as a tool to gain social capital.

The past two decades have created a culture of self-help discourse through the media. Through the capitalization of the recovery movement and 12-step programs from the 1980s, talk shows and reality television capitalizing on the makeover movement, and spiritualism that forges hybrid consumerism and spiritual values, the media has profited and further cultivated self-help culture (McGee 2012). While religion and spiritual transformation shaped self-help culture, the media has "given rise to entirely new iterations of the transformational trope" (McGee 2012, 688). Television and reality series cultivated a new self-help culture focused on physical and mental transformations. Makeover shows portrayed physical transformations with before and after photos, as seen on "Biggest Loser." While shows such as "Hoarder" show before and after photos of the extreme clutter. This fascination with transformation, both mental and physical, has further developed on social media. With the rise of online communication and social media platforms, people have easier access to self-help gurus and literature.

Through social media platforms such as Instagram, self-help gurus can share their experiences and how they overcame these hardships. Transformation posts that highlight the difference in someone's appearance, whether from weight loss or the change in facial expression and mannerisms after recovering from depression, social media feeds are filled with this narrative. However, transformation posts are not always manifested through comparison photos. Instead, many self-help gurus create content that refers to their past. For example, figure 2.10 is a post from @peaceful_barb, an author, meditation teacher, and activist. They use their profile to help people find peace in their lives. In the photo below, Barb refers to their troubled past. This post exemplifies how self-help gurus situate themselves as reliable sources.

Figure 2. 10: Instagram Post by self-help guru, @peaceful_barb

By portraying their own experiences, self-help gurus can help others navigate how to take control of their lives. Social media has led to the rise of numerous self-help gurus, such as Glennon Doyle and Gabrielle Berstein, who have capitalized on 24/7 online communication. This new form of personal growth influencers, also known as "instavangelists," has cultivated a large following through Instagram and Tik Tok (Stein 2021). These personal growth influencers and online self-help gurus can utilize social media to spread their message and reach a broad audience. Meanwhile, fans and followers of these influencers have constant access to these self-help gurus. Many use the comment sections as a form of confessional (Stein 2021).

However, the rise of self-help literature and the neoliberal representation of society has problematic undertones. Neoliberalism emphasizes "the self" and creates pressure to present oneself as "happy, entertaining, or successful, no matter what happens to them" (Saraswati 2011). Social media has cultivated an environment in which people want to share their success and position themself as someone that can influence others. The overall message depicted through self-help literature has neoliberal underpinnings that reflect the message of "If I can do this, so can you." However, the constant depiction of positive messages cultivates toxic positivity and cruel optimism. Not only is it not realistic to always be happy, but in the context of disability advocacy, constantly presenting oneself as a success story may create

unrealistic idealization within users. A "success story" narrative for disability advocacy can be dangerous. The disabled community has been disabled by a society built on the able-bodied gaze. For many disabled people, induvial success is systemically more complex than for white, able-bodied people. Therefore, this representation of personal achievement and individualism completely disregards the struggles of the disabled community. Therefore, the neoliberal structure that has taken over influencer culture and disability advocacy may lead to an unrealistic representation of disabled people. In turn, neoliberalism and self-help discourse weaken the goals of disability activism.

These contemporary neoliberal ideals also have postfeminist sensibilities underpinnings. Postfeminist sensibility argues that the notion of femininity is a "bodily property, the shift from objectification to subjectification, an emphasis upon self-surveillance, monitoring and self-discipline, a focus on individualism, choices and empowerment; the dominance of a makeover paradigm, and a resurgence of ideas about natural sexual difference" (Gill 2007). Postfeminist discourse links the female body with empowerment. Media culture has emphasized self-care, makeovers, the sexualization of women, and individualism as sources of success and empowerment amongst women. Although Gill's argument about feminism and media culture does not include digital cultures, it is relevant in the context of influencer culture. Sara Riley details in the article "A critical review of postfeminist sensibility" that digital cultures are sites of postfeminist sensibilities (Riley et al. 2017). As a photo-sharing platform, Instagram has cultivated an obsession with physical appearance, ability, and the sexualization of women. Through Photoshop, editing images, filters, and the ability to selectively self-represent, influencer culture has further pushed postfeminist sensibilities. Instagram and influencer culture have created societal pressures to depict oneself as perfect, including one's physical appearance. Through fashion, beauty, and fitness influencers, physical appearance, personal success, and the sexualization of the female body are reconstructed as female empowerment. However, in disability activism and disabled representation, utilizing postfeminist sensibilities can be harmful. Presenting oneself through before-and-after rhetoric which emphasizes physical appearance is detrimental to the disabled community, as disabled people already face ableist views regarding their bodies. Overall, postfeminist sensibilities place externally imposed ideals and subjugate disabled people to the dictates of capitalism and its concomitant cruel optimism.

2.5 Conclusion

The literature review has revealed the complexities of disability representation on social media. The history of disability and the portrayal of disability in mass media reflect the stigmatization surrounding disabled people. Society has been created based on the able-bodied gaze; therefore, social media has given disabled people an opportunity to represent the disabled community accurately. However, the development of social media also comes with complex body image issues. Instagram users can selectively self-present and depict inaccurate representations of their lives. Through selective self-presentation, users, especially influencers, can present the highlights of their lives. Due to the ability to selectively self-present, neoliberal, self-help, and postfeminist discourse fills the pages of Instagram. More specifically, the visual nature of Instagram has further presented the issues of postfeminist media culture, as many influencers highlight empowerment through physical appearance and sexualization of the body. However, neoliberal and self-help representation may be undercutting disability activism. As disabled influencers adopt postfeminist discourse, they may be cultivating toxic positivity, cruel optimism, and unrealistic body standards amongst the disabled community. This neoliberal depiction and utilization of self-help discourse became prevalent through the case study on Sophie's profile. Therefore, it was imperative to delve into these topics further and statute them in the realm of influencer culture. Overall, the information gathered through the literature review gave me vital contextual information that gave me insight into the case study's findings. This allowed me to conclude how Sophie's representation and its effects on body image amongst the disabled community.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

3. 1 Case Study

To efficiently answer how the representation of disabled influencers affects body image amongst the disabled community, I used a mixed-method approach by conducting a case study rooted in constructivist grounded theory. Case studies are often used to research and understand a broader phenomenon such as a program, an event, a process, an institution, or a social group (Merriam 1989). To develop and design my case study, I closely followed Robert Yin's recommendations for case study methods in "Case Study Research: Design and Methods." Yin is an American social scientist known for his work on case study research. According to Yin, a case study should be considered when the focus of the study is to answer 'how' or 'why' questions when you cannot manipulate the behaviour of those involved in the study or if you want to cover contextual conditions because you believe they are relevant to the phenomenon under study, or the boundaries are not clear between the phenomenon and context (Yin 2014). These considerations apply to my research questions, indicating that a case study would best answer my research questions. As my research question is multifaceted and deals with a social media platform that is not static, qualitative data was necessary. Case studies are used to study complex questions within their contexts. Therefore, a cause study allowed me to deeply explore how the representation of disabled influencers affects body image amongst the disabled community (Yin 2014). Utilizing a compelling case study ensured that multiple facets of the research question were explored, revealed, and understood.

Due to the complexity of the topic and the non-static nature of Instagram, it would be too complicated to answer this question through surveys and experimental strategies. Additionally, the research questions could not be conducted without considering the context of Instagram and influencer culture. As mentioned, Yin states that case studies should be considered when the boundaries between phenomena and context are unclear. The discussion around social media and its effects on body image is prevalent today. However, the actual cause and effect relationship is debated. Although there are studies that attempt to determine a cause-and-effect relationship, the boundaries are unclear. Since my thesis is centred around social media, body image, and how these elements play a role in the lives of disabled people, a case study would best explore this relationship. Furthermore, qualitative data assumes a dynamic reality, whereas quantitative data looks at fixed realities. Therefore, an in-depth case

study of an Instagram profile was the most efficient choice as it considers the non-static nature of social media and the unclear relationship between social media and body image.

3.1.1 Determining the Case

After deciding that a case study was the most efficient way to answer my research question, I picked a case that would most dexterously answer my research questions. According to Yin, when deciding on a case study, it is essential to pick a case that does not have too many objectives. Setting boundaries within a qualitative study is like inclusion and exclusion criteria for quantitative studies (Yin 2014). As the main research question is complex and deals with a large community with different perspectives and opinions, one answer cannot be applied to all disabled people. Therefore, to delve into the question and answer it as efficiently as possible, it was vital that I concentrated on one disabled influencer and analysed how they represented themselves through the theoretical lens of self-comparison theory, intersectionality theory, and critical disability theory. Ultimately, I was led to Sophie J Butler, a queer health and wellness influencer that refers to themself as a "20-something disabled queen in the city, figuring out fashion, fitness, and feminism". Sophie is a fitness, health, and wellness influencer that happens to be disabled and spreads awareness around disability.

3.1.2 Binding the Case

Yin states the importance of binding the case to avoid a study that is too broad or has too many objections. Binding puts limits on the research regarding time, place, and sometimes physical boundaries (Creswell 2012). Therefore, I set a time boundary to narrow the scope of the study. To date, Sophie Butler has around 1,680 posts; therefore, I narrowed down the timeframe to a period that would allow me to gather the most meaningful and in-depth data. Ultimately, I decided to analyse their posts from the last three years as it included pre-pandemic, during the pandemic, and 2021 and 2022 when pandemic restrictions started to be lifted. This time frame allowed me to consider how the pandemic may have affected their posting habits.

3.1.3 Determining the Type of Case Study

Next, I needed to consider the type of case study. Yin lists explanatory, exploratory, and descriptive case studies as different approaches. Exploratory case studies are often used to answer what or who questions, while descriptive case studies aim to analyse interpersonal

events during a certain amount of time. Meanwhile, explanatory case studies are typically used to explore "how" questions that "strive to establish cause-and-effect relationships" and "determine how events occur and which ones may influence particular outcomes" (Hancock & Algozzine 2017). Based on these varieties, an explanatory case study best fits the goal of my research questions. The relationship between social media and influencer culture and its effects on body image has been highly debated. Various elements and factors can contribute to the relationship between social media and body image. However, while there are many studies on social media and body image, current research is lacking concerning the disabled community and the representation of disabled influencers. As my goal is to understand how the representation of disabled influencers affects body image amongst the disabled community, an explanatory case study was the most effective choice.

3.2 Constructivist Grounded Theory

I conducted a social media discourse analysis through constructivist grounded theory to conduct the case study. Traditional grounded theory is a continual process of collecting data, analysing data, and applying theoretical sampling. This method is regularly used to explore which theories explain the shared experiences and behaviours of groups of people. Therefore, as this research project aims to evaluate how Sophie Butler's online representation affects body image amongst the disabled community, grounded theory was an appropriate choice. It is also concerned with the generation of theories based on data that has been systematically collected and analysed. Figure 3.1 depicts the circular and continual process of grounded theory.
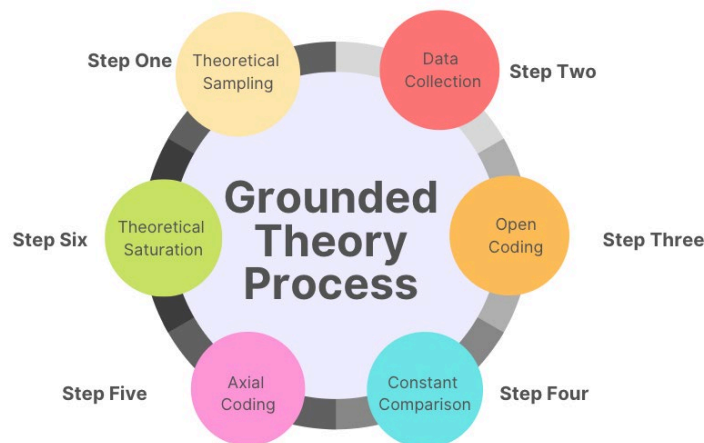
Figure 3. 1: *Illustration of the Continual Grounded Theory Process*

The first step in the continuous grounded theory process was theoretical sampling, when data and theories were gathered from the literature review. This process provided theoretical sensitivity, giving insight into developing grounded theories throughout the data collection process. The next step was the data collection process which was the social media discourse analysis. Since Grounded Theory is a continuous data collection and analysis process, the social media discourse analysis included open coding, constant comparison, axial coding, and selective coding. These coding phases also make up the analysis of the grounded theory process and lead to theoretical saturation. Theoretical saturation is the last step in which the data collection and analysis no longer lead to new data about the topic.

However, grounded theory has been criticized because "GT might not be plausible in its original sense because researchers bring their views, assumptions, and biases into the study" (Charmaz 2006). Therefore, I used the constructivist grounded theory proposed by Kathy Charmaz because it does not "attempt to be objective in their data collection or analysis, but instead seek to clarify and problematize their assumptions and make assumptions clear to others" (Edwards and Jones 2009, 212). After extensive research on social media, disability studies, and body image, theories that could potentially explain the phenomena between social media, body image, and the disabled community emerged. Therefore, I utilized self-comparison, intersectionality, and critical disability theory to guide my analysis. I aimed to collect and analyse data through the lens of these theories. Using grounded theory methods with a theoretical framework, I conducted a concentrated case study while allowing new themes to emerge. Therefore, throughout the analysis process, I applied the findings to the theoretical framework. Doing this allowed me to continuously situate the findings through theoretical assumptions. As a result, the theoretical framework validated the findings and further pushed me to understand how Sophie´s representation and discourse applied to the general population of disabled influencers. Figure 3.2 depicts the theoretical framework that emerged from my literature review and helped guide my analysis of Sophie´s profile.

Figure 3. 2: *Theoretical Framework*

Theories	Reasoning
Self-Comparison Theory	We typically compare ourselves to people within our peer groups or to individuals we are like. However, if the only comparison available is to someone vastly different from us, we cannot make correct evaluations of our body image. Based on this theory, disabled people need more representation online (disabled influencers and advocates) to create accurate comparisons and subjective evaluations of their bodies.
Intersectionality Theory	Intersectionality theory states that people are often disadvantaged when they have multiple sources of oppression. Based on this theory, disabled women and other intersectional people deal with more body image-related issues online. Therefore, to cultivate a positive body image for disabled people, there needs to be more intersectional disabled people represented through social media that highlight different issues.
Critical Disability Theory	This theory scrutinizes the social norms that define social conditions that further concentrate stigmatization. As a power source, Instagram's algorithms and rules & regulations may lead to less viewability for disabled content creators.

3.3 Social Media Discourse Analysis

Social media discourse analysis is like traditional critical discourse analysis (CDA); however, it considers online communication. CDA looks at the role of language in society and views it as "socially constitutive as well as socially conditioned," focusing on how language and communication are used to create influence or power (Wodak and Meyer 2015, 6). However, while communication has always been an essential factor in understanding social contexts, social media has changed how we communicate and understand society (Blommaert and Bulcaen 2000, 447). Online social platforms have shifted from direct producer-consumer communication to a more interactive, dynamic, and participatory form of

communication. Therefore, the usual discourse analysis methods to determine how language creates influence have adapted. For example, Instagram gives users the ability to communicate through posting photos, reels, stories, commenting on other posts, re-posting, direct messaging, and tagging. This range of new communicative tools blurs the lines of direct communication and shifts toward multifaceted communication.

Furthermore, with the emergence of influencer culture and the impact these influencers have on their followings, it is crucial to utilize social media discourse analysis, as it considers the unique aspects of social media communication. Social media discourse analysis has gained popularity in recent years and has broadened CDA to include "visual, verbal, memes, etc. and meaning-making practices regimes likes, tags, RTs, digital stance making, mentions, orthographic representations" (KhosraviNik 2017). This method acknowledges the multifaceted nature of social media and its ability to influence social identity and communities.

When conducting social media discourse analysis, Instagram's content policies must be considered. These standards and policies "refer to conduct policies and netiquette, i.e., standard of how participants ought to behave" and are "notable as they impact how users might interact –how they share content, argue and persuade" (Kopf 2019). Therefore, when analysing Sophie's Instagram profile, it is essential to understand how Instagram's algorithms, policies, rules, and regulations impact Sophie's content, engagement, and viewability. However, content policies are not typically a central component of social media discourse analysis. According to Susanne Kopf, this may be due to two factors. These factors are because "the line between conduct and content regulation is not definitive" and "many of the most well-known social media sites proclaim their open and laissez-faire approach to user content production and dissemination" (Kopf 2019). Many social media sites do not advertise their content policies and policy enforcement. Instead, social media sites such as Twitter and YouTube advertise their ability to "give everyone the power" and "give everyone a voice" however, there are terms of use policies implemented by these platforms to "condition users" (Kopf 2019). Therefore, it is vital to understand how these policies influence users and their online behaviour.

When conducting a social media discourse analysis, it is important to consider content regulations, enforcement actions, who enforces the policies, and the social media platforms' record of (content) policy enforcement (Kopf 2019). Therefore, when analysing Sophie's Instagram profile, it is important to understand Instagram's content regulations, how they enforce these regulations, and what group of people are enforcing the policies. In addition,

algorithmic bias and the discriminatory rules and regulations of Instagram can affect minority groups. Therefore, these factors were strongly considered during the social media discourse analysis.

3.3.2 Open Coding

The traditional grounded theory uses the process of coding to collect data and break down findings continuously. Coding includes open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. Open coding is the first phase in which I identified categories, and axial coding identifies relationships between the codes or categories. Finally, selective coding is when I made connections and was able to modify theory based on my research. This process "represents the operations in which data are broken down, conceptualized, and put back together in new ways," presented in figure 3.3(Corbin and Straus 1990, 57).
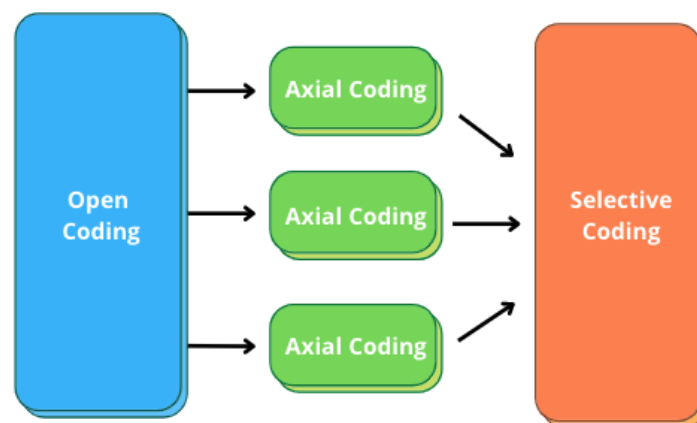
Figure 3. 3: Diagram of Coding Process

Open coding includes identifying distinct concepts and themes for categorization. Therefore, the first phase in my social media discourse analysis was open coding. I manually went through Sophie´s profile and categorized their posts from the past three years. Traditional Grounded theory comprises the three elements: concepts, categories, and propositions which I utilized to begin my social media discourse analysis (Noble and Mitchell 2016). The first step was Conceptualization, when "incidents, events, happenings are taken, or analysed as potential indicators of phenomena, thereby given conceptual labels" (Noble and Mitchell 2016). I went through the past three years of posts on Sophie´s profile and observed patterns and reoccurrences. During this process, it became clear that there were

recurring categories. Figure 3.4 shows the categories or codes that arose from the open coding phase.

Disability awarness	190
Fashion/Glam	173
Daily Life/updates	202
Fitness	307
Ads	166
career	51
Body image Related	117
LGBTQ related	8
mental health/self love	130
women empowerment/femi	38
Pandemic	24
Black lives matter	2

Figure 3. 4: Table of Sophie′s most frequently posted categories

However, based on the quantitative data gathered by manually categorizing each post, the categories were reduced to six. The final six categories were disability awareness, fashion, daily life, fitness, body image, and mental health. Figure 3.5 shows the codes that would serve as categories for axial coding.

Figure 3. 5: Diagram of Open Coding Phase

3.3.3 Axial Coding and Speech Act Theory

Axial coding was the second step in the coding process. Axial coding identifies similarities and relationships between the categories or codes identified during open coding. For the social media discourse analysis, I analysed each category's vocabulary and structure, non-verbal communication, and reactions and comments. To do this, I utilized Speech Act Theory. Speech Act Theory appeared to be appropriate given the data analysis. During the analysis, it became evident that Sophie positioned themself as a self-help guide, and understanding Speech Act "in an automated manner can be seen as an important task to reveal intentions" (Morales-Ramirez and Perini, n.d.). Therefore, Speech Act Theory allowed me to understand the function of their vocabulary on an online platform. Oxford philosopher J.L. Austin introduced act theory in *How to Do Things with Words* and is utilized to understand the function of language in human communication. Austin divided speech into three smaller acts: locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary. Locutionary words are the words uttered, illocutionary is the writer's intention, and perlocutionary is the intended effect (Austin 1962). When I analysed Sophie's vocabulary and sentence structure, I first picked out important and recurring words, then analysed how Sophie used the words to communicate a particular intent, and finally, I analysed the intended effect of Sophie's language. I utilized John Searle's Speech Act classification to analyse the illocutionary acts (Searle 1979). John Searle, an American philosopher, further developed the theory to include Speech Act Classifications. Searle classified the purpose of different speech acts under declarations, assertiveness, expressive, directives, and commissive.

Figure 3. 6: *Speech Act Classifications by John Searle*

Speech Act	Description	Examples
Declaration	Declarations uttered under proper conditions	Declare, nominate, approve, adjourn "I now pronounce you man and wife"
Assertive	Represent how things are in the world	Assert, claim, notify, remind, object "It is snowing"
Expressive	Express how the speaker	Thank, congratulate,

	feels about something	condole, deplore, welcome "I congratulate you on winning"
Directive	Direct the listener to do something	Direct, request, ask, insist "Can you close the door"
Commissive	Commit themselves to do something	Commit, promise, threaten, plan, vow "I promise to close the door"

To analyze Sophie´s vocabulary and sentence structure, I broke down their speech into illocutionary and perlocutionary acts utilizing Searle´s classifications. Using Searle´s classifications revealed the intention and effect of the language. The analysis of their vocabulary and sentence structure allowed me to comprehend their communication function. Speech Act theory revealed that Sophie used instructional and narrative discourse to depict self-fulfillment and relatability. These findings reframed my analysis to understand how Sophie presented themselves as an influencer through neoliberals and postfeminist discourse. After a constant comparative analysis of the open codes, the two most prevalent axial codes emerged: self-fulfillment and relatability, shown in figure 3.7.
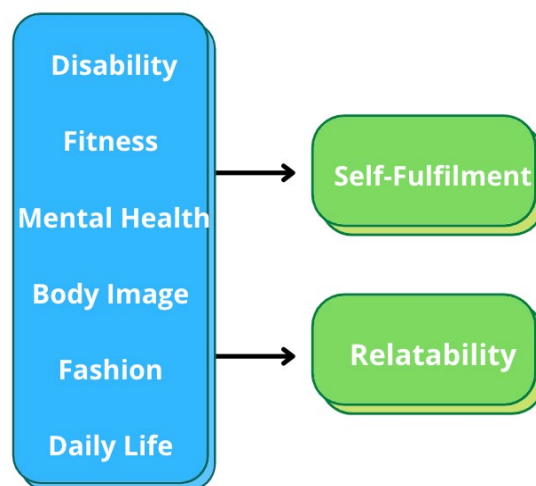
Figure 3. 7: Diagram of Axial Coding Phase

3.3.4 Selective Coding

This study aims to understand how influencer culture affects body image amongst the disabled community. Therefore, I analysed how Sophie represents themselves on Instagram. First, however, I had to apply the findings to the theoretical framework to answer my research questions. Therefore, the final stage of my analysis was to apply the findings through the context of social comparison theory, intersectionality theory, and critical disability theory.

As mentioned, self-comparison theory describes our tendency to compare ourselves to others. However, inaccurate subjective evaluations may form when we cannot compare ourselves to people like us. Therefore, to cultivate a positive body image within the disabled community, there must be frequent and accurate disabled representation online. Therefore, when I analysed the data through the lens of self-comparison theory, I had to consider how Sophie´s postfeminist and neoliberal representation contributes to self-comparison amongst their followers. Next, I applied my findings through the lens of intersectionality theory. Since Intersectionality theory suggests that disabled people are made up of many identities, I made sure to be aware of Sophie´s intersectionality. This allowed me to bring insight into Sophie´s representation and how their identities may affect their selective self-presentation. Lastly, I applied my findings through the lens of critical disability theory, which states that sources of power contribute to the disablement of disabled people. Therefore, as I collected data and analysed it, I considered how sources of power such as Instagram, influencer culture, politics, and society may have influenced Sophie´s disability activism. By analysing my data through these three theories, I generalized some of my findings to understand how Sophie´s online representation may affect body image amongst the disabled community. This is a circular process, meaning open, axial, and selective coding were systematically collected and analysed to reach theoretical saturation.

CHAPTER FOUR: DATA AND FINDINGS

4.1 Introduction

The first step in the social media discourse analysis was determining what topics, concepts, and categories filled Sophie´s Instagram page. Therefore, I manually went through the last three years of Sophie´s Instagram posts and labelled each post under a category. This open coding phase revealed that Sophie posted about twelve categories. These categories were disability awareness, fashion, daily life, fitness, advertisements, career, body image, LGBTQIA+, mental health, women empowerment, pandemic, and black lives matters. However, after manually categorizing each post, I narrowed the categories to the most frequent. The graph below shows that the prevalent topics were fitness, disability awareness, fashion, daily life, body image, and mental health.
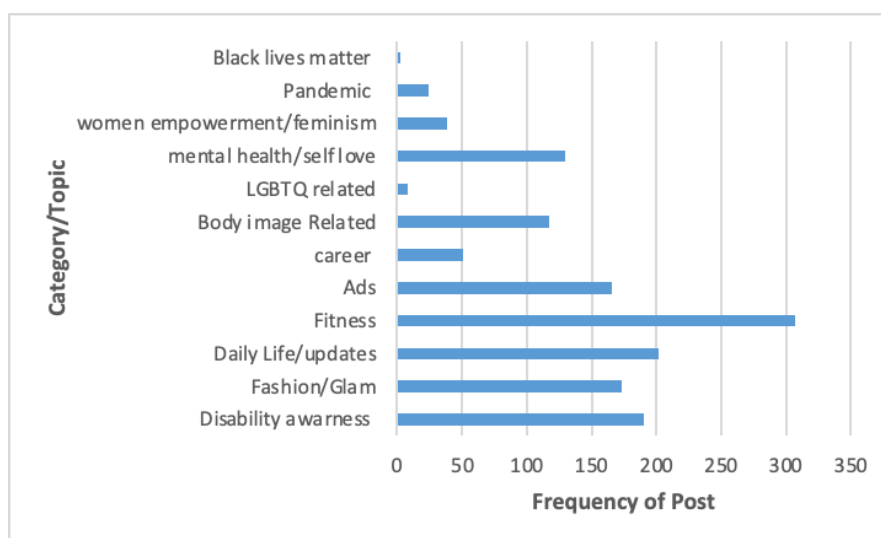
Figure 4. 1*: Graph of Frequently Posted Categories on @SophJButler Instagram*

Sophie utilizes self-help, postfeminist, and neoliberal discourse to position themselves as a success story in each category. Many of their choices link to postfeminist sensibilities of linking "women´s empowerment to their body and consumer choices" (Riley et al. 2017). However, their emphasis on neoliberal representation and postfeminist sensibilities undercut their disability activism. As the findings will reveal, while they consistently use speech acts to present themselves as self-fulfilled, they also try to depict a sense of approachability.

Overall, their content choices depict before-and-after rhetoric and the multimodal concepts of good vs. bad, able-bodied vs. disabled, happy vs. sad, and success vs. failure.

At first glance, the overarching message of Sophie's profile is to represent disabled people through a multi-dimensional lens. Sophie often posts about the need to portray disabled joy, disabled sexuality, disabled passion, and disabled success. Through a deeper analysis, it is evident that Sophie carefully curates their profile to present themself as a self-fulfilled disabled woman. However, their profile is balanced with personal stories that present Sophie as an inspiration. Furthermore, they use neoliberal and postfeminist discourse to depict themselves as a success story. Sophie seems to present themself through a neoliberal self(ie) gaze, which is "a mode of seeing and storifying the self on social media as a good neoliberal subject who is appealing, inspiring and entertaining" (Saraswati 2021). To achieve this, Sophie presents postfeminist sensibilities that link physical appearance and ability to empowerment and success. The neoliberal gaze can be achieved through "a camera angle that can best capture the self" or a "filtered vantage point" or "wittily expressed narrative perspective" (Saraswati 2021). The findings will reveal that Sophie utilizes these elements to present themselves as an empowered and successful woman.

This chapter showcases how Sophie selectively self-present themselves. The chapter is organized by the categories identified during the open coding phase, disability awareness, fitness, mental health, body image, fashion, and daily life. For each category, I analysed Sophie's lexical choices using Speech Act theory to understand the function of their language and how it was used to present themselves. I also analysed their non-verbal communication by dissecting elements such as their body language, facial expression, clothing, background, and poses. Next, I analysed the comments and reactions using Speech Act Theory to understand how Sophie's followers react to their strategic choices.

4.2 Disability Awareness

In the past three years, Sophie has posted 190 disability awareness posts. The criterion for this category was any post that specifically mentioned Sophie's Disability or spinal cord injury. These posts used the hashtags #disabilityawareness, #disabilitydiscrimination, #disabilityadvocate, #disabilityrights, #disabilityjustice, #disabledandcute, and #disabledandproud. Meanwhile, content directly related to their specific Disability, Spinal Cord Injury, had the hashtags #sci, #spinalcordinjury, #spinalcordinjuryrecovery, #spinalcordinjuryawareness, and #scirecovery. There were three sub-categories within the concept of disability: education, advice, and playful posts.

Within the concept of disability awareness, the portrayal of self-fulfillment and self-help discourse became evident through instructional language. While self-fulfillment was ubiquitous in their advice posts, Sophie capitalized on educational and informative posts to position themselves as an expert. Their advice posts portrayed a narrative that disabled people can achieve confidence and happiness by following their instructions, like self-help literature. This type of content aligns with the neoliberal ideology and the structure of self-help literature. By posting facts, statistics, and information, Sophie positions themself as an expert. Meanwhile, they include personal narratives to remain personable. However, Sophie also posts playful and silly videos, which drives the neoliberal desire to be entertained. The use of self-help discourse through inspiration and entertainment work together to present Sophie as a success story. Ultimately, Sophie chooses vocabulary, language, sentence structure, and non-verbal communication to depict a message of self-fulfillment through self-help language.

4.2.1 Vocabulary and Structure

Sophie's disability awareness content comprises educational and playful posts. However, Sophie relies on written communication to present educational information and advice. To do so, Sophie posts typography with an instructional tone. Their typography shows that Sophie is comfortable expressing themself through written language. Throughout these educational posts, Sophie uses directive language. They use blunt words such as "need" and "stop" to express the need for change within the disabled community. For example, figure 4.2 states, "*Stop* touching disabled people's wheelchairs," and figure 4.3 states that you "*need"* to start believing disabled people's experiences."

Figure 4. 2: Instagram post from @SophJButler

Figure 4. 3: *Instagram Post from @SophJButler*

Based on Searles Speech Act classification, "stop" and "need" are directives. Directives are used as a call for action. Sophie uses this language to express urgency toward able-bodied people. Their language directs the viewers to stop touching disabled people's wheelchairs and start believing disabled experiences. Their typography also uses complete sentences, facts, and statistics and uses formal words such as "accustomed" and "dehumanized" (Figure 4.4 and 4.5). This use of formal language positions Sophie as an expert in disability issues and establishes a tone that inspires respect. In the context of sexual assault, Saraswati states that neoliberalism encourages individuals, as opposed to institutions, to do the work of teaching others about sexual assault (Saraswati 2021). When applied to the context of disability awareness, it is evident that Sophie is adopting the same neoliberal mentality and, therefore, feels a responsibility to educate people on ableism. However, Sophie's directive language and instructional tone align with the self-help discourse of personal power and self-control (Rimke 2000). Self-help literature is structured by "here are the tools you need, but it is your responsibility as an individual to use these tools" (Rimke 2000). By providing instructions for the able-bodied people, Sophie sets a narrative that it is the reader's responsibility to take control and make changes. This tone is also prevalent throughout their advice posts.
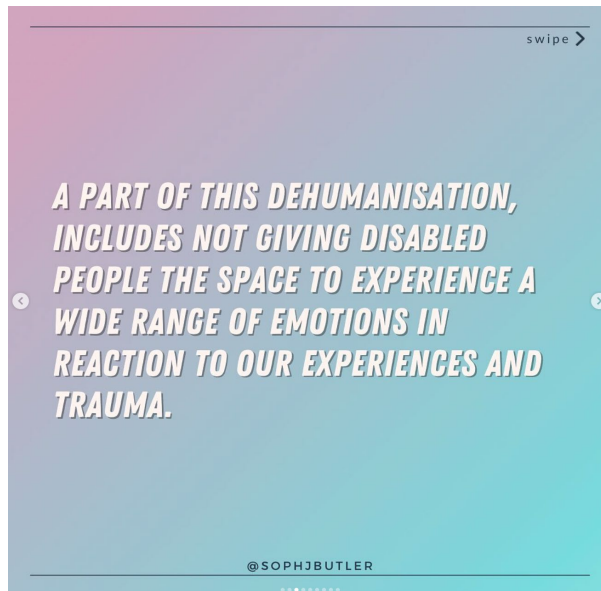
Figure 4. 4: Instagram Post from @SophJButler

Figure 4. 5: Instagram Post from @SophJButler

The neoliberal emphasis on individual responsibility to make personal changes is prevalent throughout Sophie's advice posts. Their advice posts also utilize an instructional tone with a "how-to-guide" list of tips. However, Sophie still portrays the importance of self-control and individual power. By providing a list of steps, Sophie presents the tools that can help the users with certain subjects. However, by following the discourse of self-help language, they emphasize the need for the individual to do the necessary work to make the changes. Self-help books emphasize that individuals can only rely on themselves to make

changes. The prime discourse of self-help culture is that "individual aspiration, coupled with effort (and often with virtue) will yield success" (McGee 2012, 690). Ultimately, Sophie provides the tips, but the reader must put in the effort to make changes. However, their tone is slightly different in the advice posts compared to educational ones aimed at able-bodied people. While the advice posts have an instructional tone, they also feature conversational language. By combining instructional and conversational language, Sophie situates themself as an approachable educator for the disabled community. The portrayal of relatability projects an element of appeal to the disabled community and is strategically utilized to make themselves seem more approachable and relatable. Users have appealed to influencers' authenticity since the development of influencer culture. Therefore, Sophie consistently uses personal stories and a conversational tone throughout their advice posts to depict authenticity. For example, Figure 4.6 is a post dedicated to helping disabled people become more confident with a disability aid. Sophie structures this post in a "how-to-guide" format. However, the tone is slightly different from the educational content. Rather than use formal statements, Sophie uses an instructional tone intertwined with conversational language. For example, they use "you" to engage the audience. They also structure the captions to be short to read like a conversation, which is a stark difference from the formal language used for their educational posts.

Ultimately, they combine an instructional tone with their own experiences. For example, Sophie states that "the most important thing I did for building my confidence was getting as much experience as I could." Through an instructional tone, combined with personal experience, Sophie depicts themself as a good neoliberal subject by educating people through compassion (Saraswati 2021). However, the "how-to-guide" structure presents "building confidence with a mobility aid" as a straightforward process. The issue that arises with presenting simplified solutions is that it can cultivate cruel optimism. Users may look at these tips and generate unattainable goals based on the information they are receiving from Sophie. Ultimately, gaining confidence and becoming self-assured is not a simple process that can be fixed through "how-to guides."
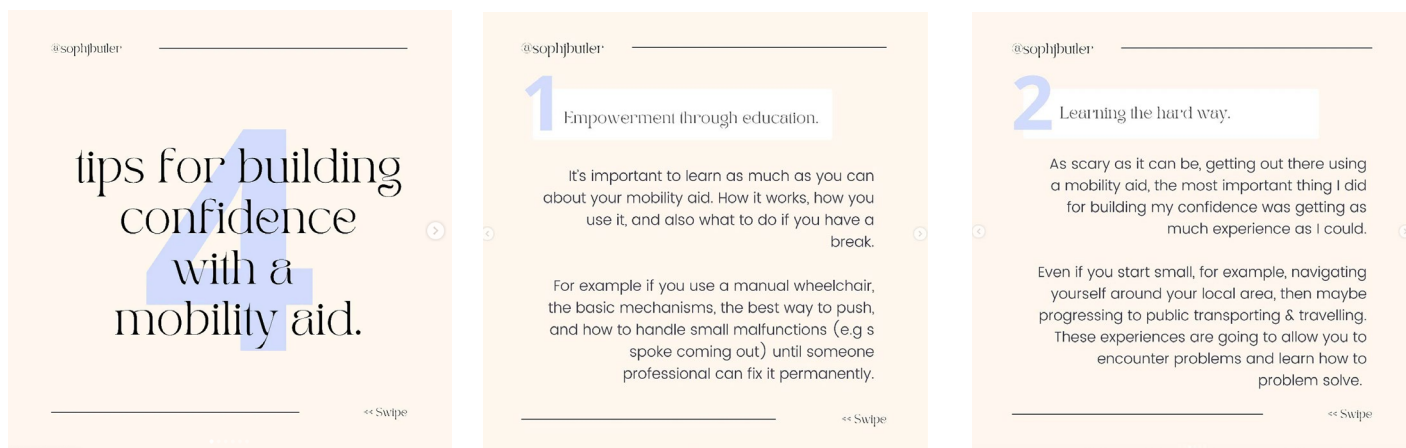
Figure 4. 6: Instagram Post from @SophJButler

The disability awareness category depicts Sophie's goal of educating able-bodied and disabled people. Sophie uses an instructional tone to create educational content directed at able-bodied people. However, they also utilize a conversational tone intertwined with personal stories throughout their advice posts to present approachability. The educational content depicts Sophie's alignment with neoliberalism and self-help discourse. They present "how-to-guides" that emphasize the need for the individual to put in the work. Their depiction of being an expert on these subjects also contributes to their goal of depicting themselves as a successful disabled woman who inspires and influences others. However, their educational and advice posts receive the lowest engagement on average. Sophie's typography posts have become less frequent in the past three years, which implies that Sophie carefully adapts their content to adhere to the audience's desires. As Instagram is a photo-sharing platform, Instagram favours visual content over typography ("The Importance of Visual Content in Social Media Today" 2021). Therefore, Sophie concentrates on using visual communication to portray self-fulfillment and relatability.

4.2.2. Non-Verbal Communication

As mentioned, Sophie's educational and advice posts get low engagement. Therefore, Sophie utilizes photos, videos, and reels to present themselves as self-fulfilled. For this section, Sophie strategically posts playful videos to present themselves as inspiring and entertaining. Through non-verbal communication such as smiling, laughing, dancing, and

speaking with intention, they set the narrative that Disability is not pitiful or sad. Based on self-comparison theory, Sophie represents disabled people more accurately than mass media by showing joy and humour. However, through this presentation, Sophie pushes the narrative that they are self-assured and happy.

For example, on March 26th, 2021, Sophie posted a reel of themselves coming down a wheelchair lift with a microphone while Beyonce music played in the background. While they exit the lift, they pretend to perform at a concert (Figure 4.7). The reel featured the caption, "The best thing about my Disabled life is that I get to make a Beyonce style entrance at breakfast every morning." This informality and silliness present a tone in which Sophie is approachable and playful, a stark contrast to the instructional tone presented through the educational posts. Their choice of clothing and intense poses also depicts a self-assured and confident disabled woman. By bringing light and humour to wheelchair lifts, Sophie shows that they are in a place in which they are comfortable with their situation. However, the silly presentation contributes to their ongoing presentation of self-fulfillment. However, by leaning into the neoliberal gaze, Sophie risks cultivating toxic positivity and cruel optimism.

Figure 4. 7: Screenshots from a Reel posted on @SophJButler Instagram

Overall, the disability awareness category portrays Sophie's alignment with the self-help discourse. Their educational content reflects the neoliberal view of individual responsibility to educate. Their use of directive language toward the able-bodied community reflects frustration and bluntness. However, their tone changes toward the disabled community. They

combine instructional discourse and personal experience to educate the disabled community and develop a sense of relatability. As mentioned, the concept of relatability is used by influencers to appeal to old and new followers. Sophie also strategically utilizes non-verbal communication to bring an element of entertainment to their profile. Posting videos where they look confident and happy portrays Sophie as self-fulfilled. However, by showcasing that they have reached a sense of confidence, Sophie begins to risk presenting toxic positivity. Overall, this category represents a layer of Sophie's profile that is used to depict a success story.

4.3 Fitness

Through the analysis of Sophie's fitness content, it became evident that Sophie has capitalized on the notion of inspiration and appeal to create social capital. To do so, Sophie strategically adopts fitness influencer strategies with narrative discourse. By combining these narratives, Sophie depicts themself as a success story. As a health, wellness, and fitness influencer, fitness content is the most frequently posted category on Sophie's profile. In the last three years, Sophie has posted 307 posts related to fitness. The criteria for this genre were any captions that mentioned the gym, workouts, and fitness-related topics. It also included photos that featured gym attire, workout routines, and any photos, reels, and videos of Sophie in the gym. Their most frequently used hashtags related to fitness were #inclusivefitness, #fitnessjourney, #fitnessinspo, #fitnessinspiration, #girlswholift, #healthandwellnessjourney, and #healthandwellbeing.

There were two subcategories within the fitness category: personal and educational posts. Much like the disability awareness content, there is a balance between instructional and personalized content. This category will show how Sophie adopts influencer strategies to situate themself in the fitness community. However, what sets this section apart from the disability category is that Sophie starts to show a vulnerable side. By presenting themself as a fitness influencer while also posting personal stories, Sophie constructs themself as a success, yet nonetheless as an approachable, fallible person. This section also reveals Sophie's emphasis on physical ability and its association with success and empowerment.

4.3.1 Vocabulary and Structure

Sophie's fitness content comprises instructional and narrative discourse. However, their stories have eloquent captions that describe their experiences with emotion and intent. These captions are personal and show the ups and downs of fitness as a disabled person. For

example, around March 2022, Sophie posted a raw and emotional Instagram story explaining that they fell out of love with fitness due to feeling alienated by the fitness industry. As the weeks have gone on, they have posted updates about trying to find their way back into fitness. On March 14th, 2022, Sophie posted to their Instagram about why they were not posting fitness-related content. The post was captioned with:

So if u didn't know, I fell out of love with fitness last year & felt alienated from the industry after constant abuse (largely from fitness bros) on IG.

It didn't happen over night. It happened slowly. Like a fine crack in a wall that grows more everyday. I tried my best to fill the ever growing cracks with self-help & quick wit. Till the autumn of last year I found myself completely paralysed at the thought of even going to the gym. The abuse was not stopping, & I felt what was once the tiny cracks in my ego become ruptured wounds.

I kept this to myself for so long. At first because I didn't connect the dots myself of why I hated fitness now. But also because I felt ashamed. I had started off my career here because I wanted to empower women & Disabled people in the gym. Now I felt bullied out of the industry. Falling out of love with something I used to live for.

In between the messages of abuse I would see questions from you guys like "why did you stop doing fitness content as much?" "Can you do more workout videos?" "Can you talk about gym confidence?" All totally normal things to ask. But I would die every-time I read them, feeling like I'd let you down. I felt like I was unsuccessfully trying to sow my own wounds up; covered in my blood & guts, screaming "I'm trying!!! This is me TRYING!!" But if you was to look in from the outside, all you would see is a girl barely getting out of bed.

That's why I made the decision this new year, that with my move to London, I would choose peace. Because if I'm being totally honest, if I didn't, I'm not sure I would've made it to the next new year.

So here I am, after choosing myself. It's only been a few weeks & it's not been easy, but it feels like a homecoming. Not just returning to my old self but like I'm creating a new one.

Figure 4. 8.: *Instagram caption by @SophJButler*

This caption depicts how Sophie structures their personal stories. The caption is long, detailed, emotional, and uses descriptive writing. Their use of intricate phrases such as "like a fine crack in a wall that grows more every day," "I felt paralyzed at the thought of going to the gym," and "the tiny cracks became ruptured wounds" paint a vivid picture of their emotions and vulnerability. In addition, they use powerful words such as "ashamed," "abuse," and "bullied" to portray the negativity that surrounds Sophie's perspective of the fitness industry. According to Searle's classifications, Sophie utilizes expressive language to express their feelings. For example, the phrase "I felt paralyzed at the thought of going to the gym" is a clear example of expressive language used to portray how they feel about the fitness industry. They also stated that they felt "bullied out of the industry," another example of their use of expressive language. The overall intent of the first half of their post is to show their vulnerability. By expressing vulnerability, Sophie depicts relatability and inspiration. However, the main goal of posting personal stories is to contribute to their success story. The neoliberal self(ie) "speaks to the desire/obsession to see the self in a success story" and often suggests, "look at me, I am doing so well" (Saraswati 2021).

Although the caption starts with an expressive tone of disappointment and sadness, the caption ends on a happy note. Sophie writes, "so here I am, after choosing myself. It's only been a few weeks, and it's not easy, but it feels like a homecoming. Not just returning to my old self but like I'm creating a new one." Sophie uses commissive language to end their story. Commissive language is used to promise or commit oneself to do something. Sophie's use of commissive language is also reflected through the statement, "That's why I made the decision this new year, that with my move to London, I would choose peace." In this caption, they are promising to concentrate on themselves. These few sentences are reflective and depict a positive tone for the future. Therefore, while they reflect vulnerability and emotion, they strategically utilize these stories to depict a "before," which leads to the "after," which shows how they have overcome. The "after" positions Sophie as an expert in fitness and is used in collaboration with their informative workout videos.

Sophie posts informative workout content with step-by-step guides. These posts feature informative captions with an instructional tone. Each caption features a list of exercises with sets and reps to be performed and features an explanation or fact about the muscle group they are training. Sophie sets a tone that they are educated and trained adequately within the fitness industry by stating facts. For example, in figure 4.9, Sophie starts the caption for the upper-body workout routine by stating, "chest is one of the hardest muscle groups to train as a wheelchair user as it's harder to activate and engage when sitting in the chair." The caption then lists each exercise and the number of sets and reps, much like a how-to-guide.

Figure 4. 9: *Dumbbell Only Chest Workout From @SophJButler*

The step-by-step captions follow the structure of many Instagram fitness influencers. Many fitness influencers include a video performing the workout with a caption listing the exercises.

Figure 4.10 depicts a post by fitness influencer Whitney Simmons. Simmons is a GymShark athlete and fitness influencer with around 3.3 million followers. Compared to Sophie´s caption, it is evident that Sophie has adopted the same structure. Fitness influencers reconstruct fitness through postfeminist discourse by emphasizing empowerment through work on the body. Therefore, their decision to present fitness content through the same construct as many fitness influencers reflect how easy it is to be drawn into postfeminist discourse. However, with an audience filled with disabled users, the link between empowerment and physical ability can be harmful.
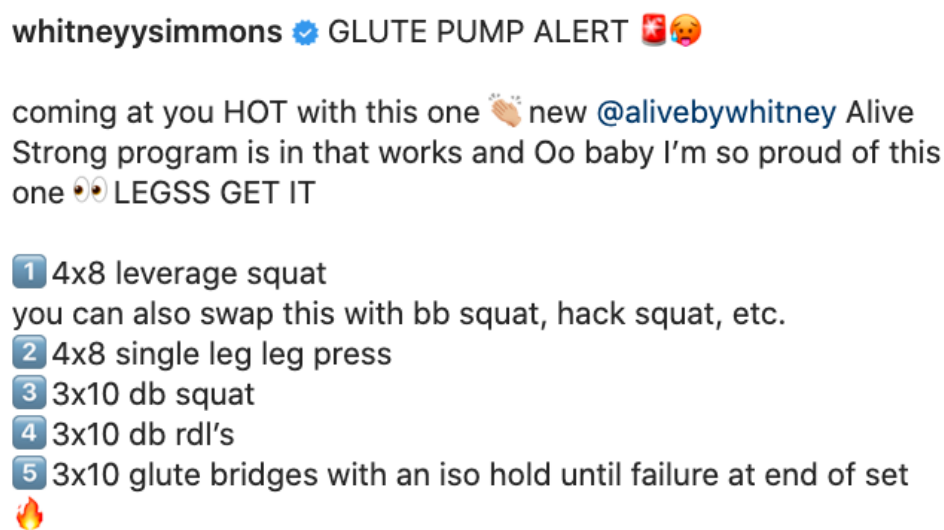
Figure 4. 10: *Glute Pump Alert caption post @WhitneySimmon*

Sophie´s implementation of academic language, fitness influencer caption structures, and self-help discourse is meticulously utilized to portray Sophie as an established fitness influencer. This presentation aligns with the neoliberal desire to present oneself as an expert that can help others. However, by mimicking fitness influencers, Sophie emphasizes physical ability. In addition, many fitness influencers can "show the articulation of postfeminist themes in posts, such as empowerment through work on the body and mind" (Riley et al. 2017). Overall, Sophie uses written speech to depict themselves as an expert in fitness yet

approachable. However, Sophie conceptualizes fitness through postfeminist sensibilities by emphasizing the body and mind.

4.3.2 Non-Verbal Communication

In the fitness category, Sophie posts workout videos that feature Sophie performing various exercises in the gym. These videos and reels do not feature any spoken words or language, so they communicate through body language, clothing, facial expressions, and background choices. Videos and reels are the most efficient way to show how exercises are performed. Therefore, physically showing that Sophie can perform these exercises proves that they are strong. However, they also use these videos to present their personality. For example, on August 25, 2021, Sophie posted a dumbbell-only chest workout. On slide three, as seen in figure 4.11, they start the video with a direct look at the camera, a silly smile, and an eyebrow raise.

Figure 4. 11: Screenshot from @SophJButler Dumbbell Only Chest Work

They further cultivate a sense of relatability by letting their personality shine through. This type of non-verbal communication makes the fitness industry, the gym, and exercise less intimidating for disabled people. Depicting silly mannerisms and body language puts the users at ease and builds trust. Essentially, Sophie uses fitness influencer captions as a

blueprint for structuring their content, but they intertwine their personality to create that sense of authenticity. Figure 4.12 is another example of Sophie´s attempt to remain personable. The video was posted on September 10, 2021, and featured Sophie performing five back exercises. Again, Sophie starts the video smiling into the camera, posing, and being silly. Their body language also depicts an association between happiness and physical fitness. Sophie's attempt to remain relatable is carefully constructed to draw in followers and cultivate a fitness community for disabled people. Their choices closely resemble neoliberalism and self-help discourse. They provide informational videos that present the discourse, "I am successful, here´s how I did it."

Figure 4. 12: Screenshot from @SophJButler Instagram video

Overall, Sophie´s fitness influencer status has cultivated a message that physical ability is equivalent to disabled empowerment. While Sophie presents themselves as an expert, their implementation of personality is strategically used to draw in the disabled community. However, the link they create between empowerment and the body does not include everyone in the disabled community. Movement and physical ability regarding disabilities vary.

Therefore Sophie´s articulation of postfeminist sensibilities leaves out parts of the disabled community.

4.4. Mental Health

In the past three years, Sophie has posted 130 Mental Health posts. The criterion for this category was any caption or photo that spoke about mental health issues such as therapy, trauma, self-love, and overall social well-being. Out of 130 mental health-related posts, 97 refer to self-love or self-care. Neoliberalism focuses on the self, and therefore "self-care" and "self-love" go hand in hand with the neoliberal self. Sophie also consistently refers to mental health concerning routine and fitness. For example, the word "routine" was used 65 times for mental health, and fitness content frequently overlapped with mental health posts. As seen in the previous section, Sophie has strategically positioned themself as a disabled fitness influencer. Therefore, it makes sense that Sophie would overlap these categories.
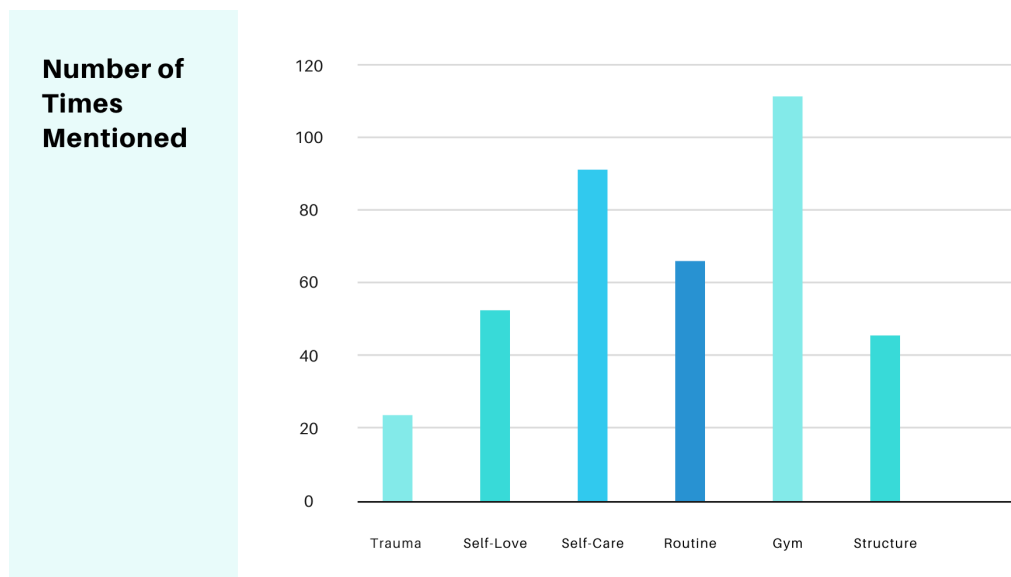
Figure 4. 13: *Sophie´s most frequently used words about Mental Health*

For this category, Sophie frequently used the hashtags #mentalhealthwellness, #mentalwellbeing, #mentalwellbeingmatters, #mentalwellnessmatters, #mentalwellness, #mentalhealthinlockdown, and #mentalhealthawareness. The coding phase revealed two subcategories: personal experience and educational posts. Throughout Sophie's profile, these subcategories are consistently used to present them as a self-fulfilled disabled woman. Through a combination of narrative and instructional discourse, Sophie presents an image of

self-fulfillment and continues to structure their profile through a neoliberal lens. At this point, there is an evident pattern of discourse, speech, and language used to adhere to the audience's desires and algorithm. Sophie strategically and carefully plans their posts to fit their overall self-fulfillment discourse to present themselves as a success story.

4.4.1 Vocabulary and Structure

Sophie continues to use narrative discourse to structure their mental health stories. The posts are long, detailed, and use captivating language to keep the reader engaged. Figure 4.14 is a screenshot of a caption they posted on January 26, 2021. In the caption, Sophie describes their journey with mental health. Sophie starts at the age of 13 and describes that it was the age they first became aware of their mental health. She states that she became "dramatically aware of the cogs that were now turning in my brain, of the chemicals that had ceased fire." Similarly, they state that "at 14 when I first became aware of the ugly implications mental health holds in our society," so they "remained silent…..Holding these thoughts, a prisoner, inside my little head". They use picturesque and poetic language to explain their journey. Using this type of language engages the reader and paints a vivid picture. According to Searle's classification, Sophie uses a mixture of illocutionary acts. For example, they use expressive language and phrases to express how they felt about their mental health growing up and assertive language to represent the stigmas around mental health. For example, they use expressive language to describe "they became aware of the ugly implications mental health holds in our society." However, they use directive language to describe their inner thoughts. For example, they state that they told themselves to "smile. Put your make up on. Do your work. Don't let them know, you're a mad, woman."

As seen in other categories, Sophie tends to end their captions on a positive. For example, Sophie states that "it's poetic justice that I, an alumni, hosted my own mental health talk as an alumnus of my university" and "unleashing the shame and stigma from private rooms to safe spaces, opening our arms instead of narrowing our eyes." Their use of commissive language at the end of their caption is used to make a promise to themself. In this example, they promise that they will not be ashamed of their mental health in the future. However, describing a significant life event such as being a speaker about mental health at a university depicts the self-fulfillment narrative.

sophjbutler ✓ I was 13 when I first became aware of mental health. Aware of MY mental health. Dramatically aware of the cogs that were now turning in my brain, of the chemicals that had ceased to fire.
.
I was 14 when I first reached out for help for the first time. In a school councillor's office, through the hushed tones and narrowed eyes. I was 14 when I first became aware of the ugly implications mental health holds in our society.
So I remained silent. Holding these thoughts, a prisoner, inside my little head.
Smile. Put your make up on. Do your work. Don't let them know, you're mad, woman.
.
I was 15 when I lost my breathe entering an exam hall.
I was 16 when I would see every 3 am.
I was 17 when I would scream and shout at people with only good intentions.
I was 18 when I found myself crying on the side of a river at 2 am.
I was 19 when I drank to say the things I couldn't quite manage.
I was 20 when I tried find the chemicals that would make me love, in people who did not love me.
I was 21 when I found myself in a psychotherapists office. A young woman, who had just been diagnosed with PTSD & depression.
I was 22 when I started to think I may deserve to be happy.
I was 23 when I caught myself at some peace.
I was 24 when I hosted a mental health talk as an alumni of my University.
.
In a decade I have seen many corners of mental health.
I been at the top, the bottom, the ugly and the painful. I have hidden my pain, through fear of risking my academic success. Its poetic justice that 10 years after those first experiences, I, an alumni, hosted my own mental health talk as an alumni of my University. Unleashing the shame and stigma from private rooms to safe spaces, opening our arms instead of narrowing our eyes. I'm not entirely sure what I'll have to say for the year of 25, but I know it will be without shame. 🤍
.

Figure 4. 14: *Caption from @SophJButler Instagram Profile*

Sophie also posts transformation content to depict their success story. On Instagram, there are thousands of hashtags related to before-and-after images. Many people are fascinated by people's transformation, which ties postfeminist sensibilities and links to neoliberalism. Although transformation posts are usually associated with bodies, Sophie posts transformations regarding mental health. This type of content creates a narrative of "if I can do it, so can you." For example, figure 4.15 was posted prior to Sophie's accident. The intent behind this transformation post is to inspire their disabled followers. Again, it creates the narrative that Sophie has been able to overcome their mental health issues, and therefore you can also achieve happiness by following Sophie's advice.

Figure 4. 15: Instagram photo and caption from @SophJButler Instagram Profile

However, while this before-and-after photo highlights Sophie´s mental health journey, their use of images to portray their transformation emphasizes externally imposed ideals. Sophie states, "not all changes are physical," however they have carefully chosen images that emphasize a physical transformation. This links to post-feminist sensibilities linking "women´s empowerment to their body" (Riley et al. 2017). Their link between mental health and physical appearance is evident throughout their profile as they consistently speak about mental health through the lens of fitness. The caption states, "the real changes began when I started lifting weight," and "if you are in between choosing to join the gym, become more active, eat healthier, whatever it is, DO IT." They use directive and assertive language to push the narrative that physical movement will help with mental health. However, this narrative can be harmful, as lifting weights and eating healthy are no quick fixes for mental health. Again, the overall narrative fits the neoliberal gaze and self-help discourse of "look how well I am doing. I can help you do this well too." Figure 4.16 is another example of Sophie´s utilization of transformation posts.

Figure 4. 16: *Transformation photo from @SophJButler Instagram Profile*

In the caption, Sophie describes that these images are not related to physical transformation. Instead, they highlight Sophie's journey to body acceptance. However, their use of images highlights external transformation. Overall, their emphasis on physical transformation concerning mental health and fitness can be dangerous and depicts a simplified solution to mental health while depicting an idealized body. However, Sophie also uses the mental health category to position themselves as an expert in the field.

Sophie's mental health content included educational posts. Like their disability awareness content, Sophie posts typography with facts and statistics. Again, this aligns with the neoliberal ideal that individuals, as opposed to institutions, have a responsibility to educate others on activist issues. Therefore, Sophie dedicates posts to educating people on mental health within the disabled community. For example, on World mental health day, October 10, 2021, Sophie posted a slide of typography speaking about mental health in the disabled community. In figures 4.17 and 4.18, Sophie explains that the stigmas attached to the disabled community can lead to poor mental health. To get this point across, they use a mix of assertive language. More specifically, within body image, intersectionality, chronic pain, and suicidal tendencies, Sophie uses assertive language to explain the disabled

community's experience with mental health. They explicitly state that "the way we experience the world has a profound effect on our mental health," this language represents how things are in the world for disabled people. However, when doing so, they use unhedged sentences and formal language such as "prominent" and "disproportionately," which are eloquent and compelling words. They also use strong language such as "resentment," "severe," "trauma," and debilitating." The combination of formal, intense, and impactful words creates a confident and authoritative tone—their formal and instructional tone further positions Sophie as an expert in mental health.
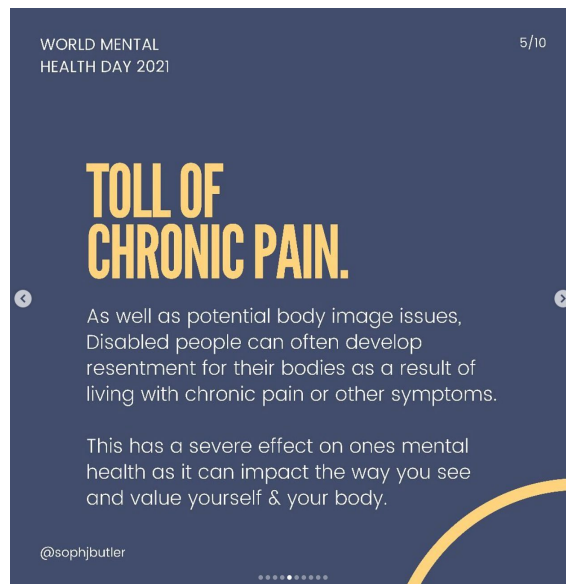
Figure 4. 17: Instagram post from @SophJButler about Mental Health
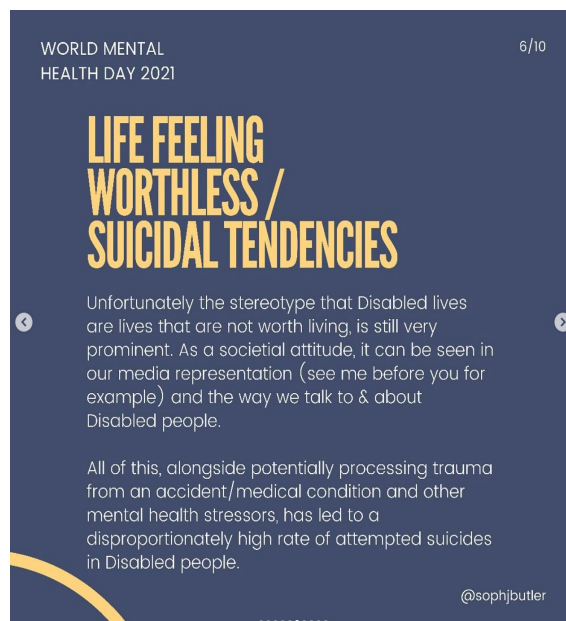
Figure 4. 18: Instagram post from @SophJButler about Mental Health

Combined with their narrative discourse, these educational posts reflect a self-help discourse. By sharing their personal stories, combined with educational content, Sophie depicts themself as a successful neoliberal subject that can help others. Through narrative discourse, Sophie shows a vulnerable and emotional side. However, their stories consistently end with a happy ending. Utilizing this narrative structure depicts that they have propitiously overcome mental health issues.

4.4.2 Non-Verbal Communication

Sophie does not typically post videos or stories to share personal stories, which is most likely due to Sophie not wanting to steer away from their neoliberal depiction of success. However, one incident led Sophie to post an emotional story. On December 17, 2021, Sophie posted a photo to their Instagram profile in a Gymshark set, smiling and looking radiant. They captioned the post with "New @gymshark set called for a new workout video, just uploaded a full AT HOME chest & Triceps workout to YouTube W voiceover detail (Link in bio)." On Sophie's profile, the photo gained 2,241 likes and 56 comments. The comment section was filled with positive messages such as "you're UNREAL," "Beaut girl," and "you are out of this world." Out of the 56 comments seen under this photo, there were no negative comments. Instead, the comment section had an affirmative tone, with followers supporting Sophie and cheering them on. However, on January 28, 2021, Gymshark's Instagram account reposted the photo to their account. The post featured the caption, "Our @SophJButler wears it so well. What's your favourite Hyper-Amplify colourway?". The post gained 45,906 likes and 1,699 comments. However, it amassed an array of body shaming and ableist messages. While many thanked Gymshark and Sophie for representing disabled women and women of different sizes, comments such as "Fatshark," "big shark," and "she clearly does not do it well" amassed the comment section. The abuse was so abundant that GymShark deleted many of the hateful comments and made the following statement in the comment section:
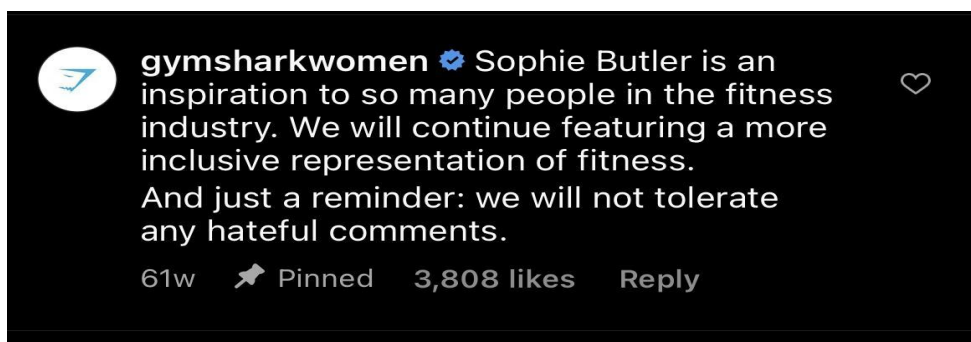
Figure 4. 19: Comment by GymShark on the Instagram re-post

After their experience with body-shaming and ableist comments on the GymShark repost, Sophie posted an emotional video describing how the incident affected their mental well-being. They referred to a "mental breakdown" to explain what they were going through. During the video, Sophie was crying and agitated. Their body language showed that Sophie was distraught. However, as seen through the findings, Sophie carefully curates their profile to present themselves as self-fulfilled. Although they write personal stories in their captions utilizing a narrative discourse, they do not typically post videos showing their raw emotional state. It is also important to note that stories are posted on people's Instagram for 24 hours. Sophie strategically decided not to post this video to their main feed. However, this is likely because these videos do not align with their self-help discourse. Stating that they had a "mental breakdown" while emotional and crying do not align with their usual depiction of success. Therefore, Sophie strategically decided not to post this video to their main feed. The decision not to post emotional videos is likely a deliberate choice. Sophie stays carefully aligned with their social media strategy by posting carefully articulated captions with narrative discourses and happy endings. However, posting emotional in-the-moment videos could steer away from their image as an inspiring success story. Instead, Sophie posts emotional stories through written language because they carefully articulate them through a narrative discourse featuring a happy ending.

Overall, Sophie utilized their mental health content to depict themselves as a self-help guru. The balance between educational content and narrative discourse positions Sophie as a role model and someone that their followers can look up to. Sophie uses narrative discourse to portray that they have overcome their mental health issues. They also consistently end their stories with open-ended, happy endings. They tend to use commissive language to state that they are committed to working on themselves. Their how-to-guides, personal stories, and

transformation posts situate Sophie as a success story. However, their transformation posts depict the postfeminist sensibilities that link empowerment with the body. Sophie depicts mental transformation through images. They create the narrative that positive mental health leads to physical changes. Again, their emphasis on empowerment through working on the body and mind is simplified. Their postfeminist and neoliberal discourse can be detrimental to parts of the disabled community.

4.5 Body Image

In the past three years, Sophie made 117 posts related to body image. The criteria for this category were any posts that spoke about the body, which included mentions of weight gain and disabled bodies. However, mentions of self-esteem and self-worth were also considered under the body image category. The top hashtags used in relation to this topic were #bodypositivity, #bodypositive, #bodypositivitymovement, #bodyposi, #selflove, #selflovejourney♡, #selflovejournal, #selfworthjourney, and #selfconfidenceboost. During open coding, I observed three frequent subcategories within the concept of body image. These subcategories were weight, disability, and femininity. Much like the rest of their content, they incorporate an instructional tone combined with the portrayal of self-fulfillment. For this category, the non-verbal communication disclosed information about how Sophie represents themselves. Throughout this section, Sophie presents themselves as sexy and confident by posting frequent lingerie photos. These images further depict an emphasis on physical appearance. Their carefully curated images depict rhetoric that places importance on physical appearance.

4.5.1 Vocabulary and Structure

Sophie uses their platform to speak up about body image and the sexualization of women. Sophie makes a point to discuss the topic of women´s sexuality and the male gaze. Figure 4.20 is an image posted by Sophie on March 20th, 2022:

sophjbutler ✓ Are we showing off our boobs...or do we just, have boobs? I started to grow my boobs quickly & suddenly at around 12 years old. And I hated them. I hated that my existence now felt even more unsafe & hyper-sexualised. In retrospect, I hate even more what this taught 12 year old me about my body, a woman's body, and what that means in a patriarchal world.

I had learnt almost overnight that my body was now something I was displaying, rather than simply living in.

Whispers of lessons that taught me I must watch what I wear & how I carry myself, all in a bid to protect myself - or more importantly, my modesty.

Because my body was not my home anymore, but an asset for the male gaze.

We all learn these lessons, ever so subtlety, on our path to adulthood. Scattered throughout our childhood, lurking behind us in our teens, till one day you're grown. And you've harvested every misogynistic thing you've learnt about your body, and those of your peers.

I guess somewhere between 12 years old and 25 years old, I said fuck this. Unlearning the lessons of patriarchy & moulding myself as something other than a muse to the male gaze.

Boobs are not sexual. You are not "showing them off" simply by existing with them. They are not anything to be ashamed of - whether that's because you feel you have too much, or too little. There is literally no such thing. Its all made up. Your body is yours to exist in as you please - to dress and carry as you like.

#bodyconfience #bodyconfidencejourney #selflovematters #selflovejournal

Figure 4. 20: Post from @SophJButler about the hyper sexualization of women

When speaking about women's sexuality, Sophie sends a powerful message through a narrative discourse. Self-help gurus tend to utilize narration to position themselves in the topic discussed. Again, Sophie strategically discusses matters through the lens of a personal story to establish self-fulfillment. Sophie starts the caption by talking about their experience with their changing body at 12 years old. They state that they hated that at 12 years old, their "existence now felt even more unsafe and hyper-sexualized," and they "hate even more what this taught a 12-year-old" and "what that means in a patriarchal world." Their use of words and phrases such as "hyper-sexualized" and "patriarchal world" creates a tone of disdain while also portraying that Sophie is knowledgeable on the subject. Using clear sentences and formal words encourages people to read and listen while captivating them through a personal story. Again, as seen throughout their profile thus far, Sophie ends the caption positively. Following the narrative discourse, Sophie ends the caption with a happy ending. Sophie states, "I guess somewhere between 12 years old and 25 years old, I said fuck this. Unlearning the lessons of patriarchy and moulding myself as something other than a muse to the male gaze." This type of narrative further follows the discourse of self-help, as Sophie situates themself as someone that has learned to cope with the hyper-sexualization of women.

The caption and image also depict postfeminist sensibilities by reclaiming their sexuality as empowerment. Sophie strategically posts an erotic image to recoup the hyper-sexualization of women. Sophie links women's empowerment to the body by posting "after" pictures and a narrative story that portrays the "before."

Overall, Sophie continues to strategically present themselves as an established influencer that has reached self-fulfillment toward their body. Through a narrative discourse, Sophie continues to position themself as a success story. Although they are passionate about these topics, they carefully curate their content to depict self-fulfillment. Their portrayal of confidence, self-fulfillment, and success are carefully portrayed through their images. However, interestingly, their emotional and vulnerable stories are constantly posted along with images that show Sophie confident, happy, sexy, and embracing their body. The combination of narrative discourse and current photos creates before-and-after rhetoric. Their utilization of images to present the "after" further associates success with physical appearance and reclaiming their sexuality.

4.5.2 Non-Verbal Communication

Sophie utilizes the topic of body image to post lingerie photos. Throughout all these photos, Sophie looks confident and vibrant. Their body language reflects a woman that is self-assured and comfortable in their body. Figure 4.21 depicts the typical lingerie content seen on Sophie's profile. The image was posted concerning body positivity. Their strategic choice in body language, posture, and facial expressions presents them as self-assured. For example, Sophie's body language and posture are strong and reflect confidence. They present self-assurance by placing their hands on their hips in a model manner with proper posture. Their fierce facial expressions illustrate an image of poise. Sophie's goal with this photo is to present themselves through a sexy, erotic, and glamourous lens. These images challenge the current stereotypes around disabled women. However, the lingerie posts depict Sophie's adoption of postfeminist discourse. Sophie presents disabled empowerment through sexual appearances. They are depicting disabled self-confidence through a depiction of sexuality. However, when applied to self-comparison theory, disabled users may look at these images and associate disabled empowerment with being comfortable in lingerie. However, disabled body confidence is a complex journey. Posing in lingerie will not automatically make someone confident in their bodies, and therefore, Sophie is presenting an idealized presentation of disabled body confidence.

Figure 4. 21: *Photo from @SophJButler Instagram profile*

The narrative of "lingerie is sexy" continues throughout their profile. For example, in figure 4.22, Sophie is laughing and grinning with a pose that depicts confidence and happiness. This portrayal of joy shows their contentment within their body. These strategically curated images present Sophie as a confident, sexy, and self-assured woman. Every element of these images is carefully decided to fit their narrative of self-empowerment. Many of their photos are taken in their bathroom, as shown in Figures 4.21 and 4.22. By posing in a bathroom, Sophie creates a discourse of intimacy. Bathrooms are often associated with privacy, so by posting these images, Sophie depicts intimacy. Overall, their images are carefully curated to depict Sophie as a body confident, self-fulfilled woman.
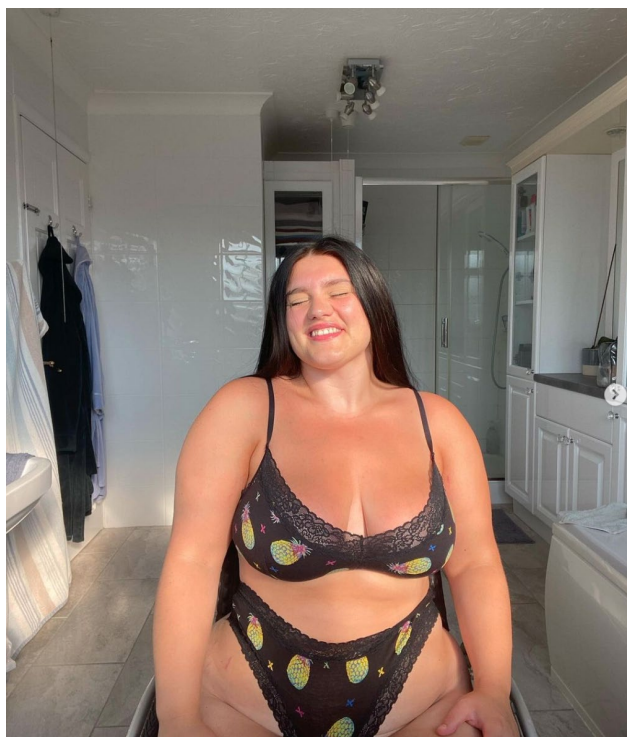
Figure 4. 22: Photo from @SophJButler Instagram profile

Sophie consistently speaks about body positivity, emphasizing physical appearance and "loving yourself." The ideology of self-love and loving yourself links to neoliberalism and self-help discourse. However, their consistent portrayal of body positivity can be problematic for disability activism as Sophie presents an idealized disabled body. Not all disabled people can easily accept their bodies, and these images can create pressure within the disabled community.

4.6 Fashion and Daily Life

Although fashion and daily life content may not seem like vital subjects for a disabled advocate to cover, both categories are vital to understanding Sophie´s adoption of postfeminist discourse. This category further pushes the rhetoric of an idealized disabled body and emphasizes external appearance. By presenting an influencer aesthetic, Sophie continues to highlight self-fulfillment and success. To be visually aesthetic is "the aesthetic style of self-presentations embedded in visual communication strategies of the present and the extent to which other users perceive these presentations to be visually appealing and

aesthetically impressive" (Yang et al. 2021). Being visually aesthetic is highly prevalent throughout Sophie´s fashion and daily life content. These photos have bright colours, carefully chosen backgrounds, and "attention-getting techniques for self-presentation and strategic communication" (Yang et al. 2021). Sophie´s photos are glamorous, ethereal, and carefully curated. However, Sophie also uses attention-grabbing captions to present themselves as funny and whimsical. Overall, Sophie uses visual and vocabulary-based tactics to present themselves as self-fulfilled and further align with postfeminist and neoliberal discourse.

4.6.1 Vocabulary and Structure

Sophie´s daily life and fashion content utilize the most casual and informal vocabulary and structure out of all categories. These posts feature a short and whimsical caption with a playful tone. The neoliberal gaze can be achieved through amusing expressed narrative perspective, and Sophie utilizes this throughout their fashion and daily life content. For example, figures 4.23 and 4.24 are typical depictions of how Sophie captions their fashion and daily life posts. Figures 4.23 has the caption, "the concept of being overdressed was invented by boring people in a bid to stop you from being sexy. Wear the ridiculous outfit." In this first caption, Sophie uses directives to tell the audience to "wear the ridiculous outfit." However, the tone of the caption alludes to the message that if Sophie can be confident in a ridiculous outfit, so should you. Although the caption is meant to be silly, based on self-comparison theory, when these subtle messages are consistently exposed to disabled followers, they may feel pressure to be confident in their bodies. Their use of innuendos subtly alludes to their self-fulfillment. For example, Figure 4.24 features the caption, "the capital B means I´m about that life, Bitch." On the surface, this caption is clever and humorous. However, their assertive language is strategically employed to reflect assurance. According to a study conducted by Elspbeth Harris and Aurore Bardey, participants stated that captions "give a better sense of what their personality is. If they say something witty, you get more of an impression than just a picture that can be easily doctored" (Harris and Bardey 2019).
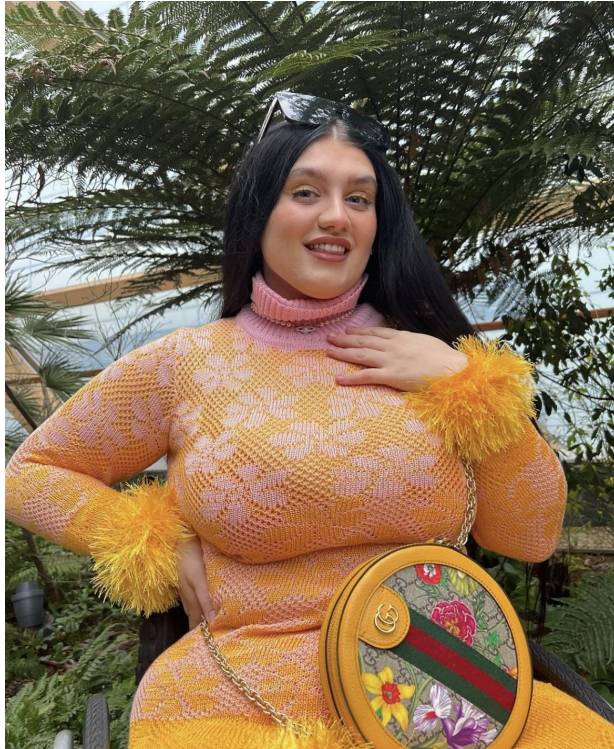
sophjbutler ✔ the concept of being overdressed was invented by boring people in a bid to stop you being sexy. wear the ridiculous outfit🧡

Figure 4. 23: Post from @SophJButler

sophjbutler ✔ the capital B means I'm bout that life, Bitch.

7 w

Figure 4. 24: Post from @SophJButler

At this point, it is clear that almost every image and caption is meticulously generated to present Sophie as self-fulfilled. By posting casual captions that highlight their personality, Sophie establishes a charismatic yet authentic tone. The combination of generating confidence yet relatability draws in disabled followers. However, the subtle messages behind these captions portray an idealized life. Their attempt to portray success through self-help discourse has led to a depiction of an idealized life. Their production of content reflects self-assurance, happiness, and body confidence. However, their self-presentation has steered away from their goal of presenting the disabled community accurately. Somewhat, Sophie has been influenced by the postfeminist discourse they were trying to dismantle.

4.6.2 Non-Verbal Communication

Photos communicate vast information, and the photos posted by Sophie in the daily life and fashion category relay a lot. When looking at Sophie´s images, their choice of colour, background, body language, posing, and clothing are strategically picked to create a visual aesthetic that fits their messaging. As discussed thus far, Sophie consistently has a push and pull relationship between the portrayal of self-fulfillment and relatability. While the captions present self-assurance and relatability, the photos play up to the elements of confidence and self-fulfillment. For example, Sophie´s non-verbal communication in Figure 4.25 represents a successful and confident woman.

Figure 4. 25: Post from @SophJButler Instagram

More specifically, Sophie´s pose, facial expression, clothing, and carefully chosen background portray a discourse of success. By holding a strong pose while holding a vogue magazine, Sophie presents themselves as a sophisticated and successful woman. Vogue has been known to represent the sophisticated woman or the "self-determined seductress," which aligns with neoliberal and postfeminist discourse (Minowa, Maclaran, and Stevens 2019). Their facial expressions also portray solemnity often associated with business and success. The blazer also further illustrates a successful, hard-working woman. This carousel of images also featured a close-up of Sophie´s dress, portrayed in figure 4.26. The image is a close-up shot of Sophie´s Versace dress. Versace is an expensive luxury brand often associated with glamour and opulence. Their choice to highlight the dress is a strategical tactic to delineate prosperity.
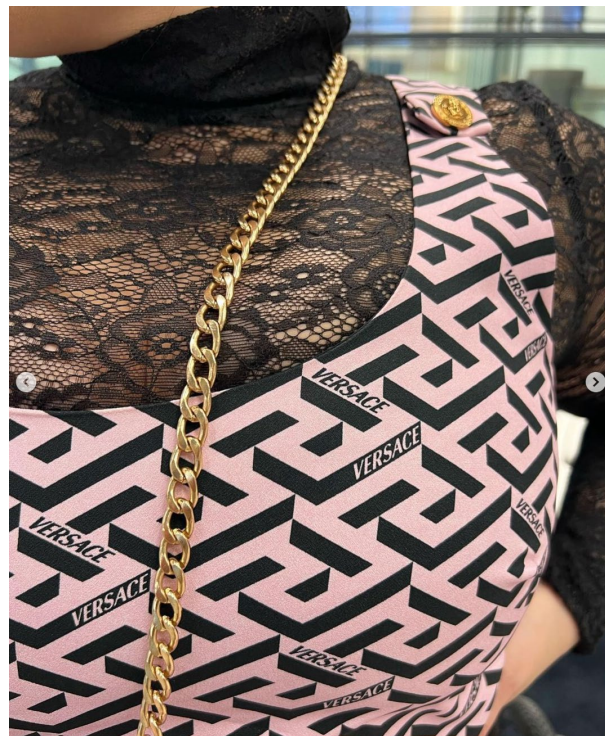
Figure 4. 26: Post from @SophJButler Instagram

The background has also been carefully chosen to align with the theme of a sophisticated and successful woman. Sophie is evidently in an office, but when you look closely, a screen says, "board room 2." This small detail further illustrates Sophie as a successful and self-fulfilled woman. In addition, Sophie depicts almost stereotypical elements of success by depicting designer brands, opulence, and presenting themselves as a businessperson.

However, much like their lingerie and body image content, Sophie risks presenting an idealization. While Sophie wants to represent disability through a more accurate lens, their binary portrayal of self-confidence may lead to toxic positivity. When persistently being exposed to images in which Sophie looks confident, booming, and confident, Sophie generates a narrow lens of disabled success and empowerment. Sophie concentrates so much on illustrating themselves as self-fulfilled that they present a biased presentation of success. Disability empowerment does not have to equal money, designer brands, and career success. Disabled success can be daily small accomplishes. However, Sophie presents success through neoliberal idealization, and it is detrimental to a community that the ideas of neoliberalism have stigmatized. Individualism and its link to personal success is a detrimental message for a community that may rely on others due to society's ableist views.

4.7 Comments and Reactions

The last step of the social media discourse analysis of Sophie's profile was to look at the comments and reactions. Before I delved into the discourse of Sophie's comment section, I noticed that based on how many followers Sophie has, the comment section only garnered around 10-30 comments per post. Sophie has around 125,000 followers; however, each photo only gained around 1,000 likes and, on average, 34 comments. In comparison, @Hanna_noellee, an able-bodied Instagram influencer with around 100,000 followers, gains about 10,000 likes and 150 comments per post. The number of comments was interesting, especially considering virtually no negative comments. This comparison indicates that there is a possibility that Sophie deletes negative comments to maintain a positive discourse throughout their profile. As mentioned, Sophie has carefully curated their Instagram profile to depict an image of positivity and self-fulfillment. Therefore, Sophie may be systematically deleting negative or toxic comments from their followers to maintain the depiction of positivity. However, deleting comments does not eliminate the problem of toxicity and ableism. Instead, Sophie is further portraying an unrealistic standard for disabled people. When users are exposed to partisan comment sections, it illustrates that once you reach Sophie's level of success, the ableist comments disappear. Sophie has meticulously deleted these comments to communicate their self-fulfillment further. By simply removing the negativity, Sophie undercuts their disability activism. Instead of bringing awareness to the ableist comments, Sophie rigorously removes the comments as if the toxicity does not exist.

Based on the comments that were not deleted, there is an overall tone and attitude of positivity and appreciation. The educational and formal posts seen in the disability awareness,

fitness, and mental health categories tend to receive comments of a thankful tone. Most of the comments are from disabled people who are grateful that Sophie is spreading awareness. For example, when Sophie posted about the fitness industry's need to do better for disabled people, the comment section was filled with messages such as "Amazing post, Sophie," and "So glad I have you and other disabled people in the industry to learn from and grow with" and "Thank you so much for creating this and highlighting how the fitness industry has a looooong way to go. Appreciate all your work/time that has gone into creating this." Out of 72 comments, every comment was filled with positive feedback, and most of the comments seemed to be from other disabled people.

The response to their workout videos is also uplifting, supportive, and appreciative. The comments are statements such as "good job!", "Amazing," and "You are always motivating me." Many also state that they are thankful that Sophie is showing them how to use equipment and how to adapt workouts for disabled people. The comment section is also filled with advice from the disabled community and questions about using different machines and equipment. One user asked, "can you do a tutorial on how to use the rope attachment with a heavyweight without smushing the life of at least one of your fingers" and "How do you reach the bar when doing the lat pulldowns? My gym has a seat in the way so probably not even possible." These questions and comments prove that Sophie has successfully situated themselves as a valuable source of information for many disabled people. Therefore, they trust Sophie to answer their questions. The comments and reactions depict that Sophie's balance between education, self-fulfillment, and relatability has successfully presented Sophie as a self-help guru.

However, the analysis of the comments revealed that there was higher engagement with body image, fashion, and daily life content. For example, body image content on Sophie's profile amassed a higher engagement rate than other topics, with photos garnering between 20,000 and 40,000 likes. However, other content typically got below 10,000 likes. In addition, the data shows that Sophie's followers engage more in body image conversations than in other categories. Meanwhile, with an average of 75 comments per post, fashion and daily life content got more likes than disability, fitness, and mental health content. Much like other categories, the comment section was filled with positive and reassuring comments such as "This is a moment," "Omg just stunning!!!" and "you're my favourite thing on my feed." However, the higher engagement within the fashion, daily life, and body image categories may explain why Sophie tends to post more influencer aesthetic content. Due to Instagram's algorithm, many influencers post content that they know will do well (Cotter 2018).

Therefore, Sophie may be posting more idealistic and ethereal content because they know it will get more engagement. Overall, Instagram's algorithm may influence Sophie to post content aligned with self-fulfillment and reliability because they know it is a valuable strategy to gain engagement.

4.8 Conclusion

On the surface, Sophie has successfully maintained a positive Instagram profile. Their dedication to presenting themself as a self-fulfilled, confident, and successful disabled woman is prevalent. Through narrative discourse and ethereal, glamorous, and sexualized images, Sophie cultivates before-and-after rhetoric highlighting disabled empowerment and success. However, their emphasis on physical appearance and ability deters from their goal of representing disability through a multidimensional lens. Instead, their narrow representation of disabled success produces unattainable goals for parts of the disabled community. Sophie's dedication to systematically sifting through their comment section to delete all signs of toxicity is further evidence of their dedication to representing themselves as a success story. Sophie's neoliberal postfeminist discourse steers away from their disability activism. First, their dedication to representing themselves through a neoliberal lens does not align with disability advocacy. Their narrative of individualism over collective struggle dismisses the struggles of the disabled community. The disabled community is disabled by a society built on the able-bodied gaze. Therefore, Sophie's emphasis on neoliberal success is detrimental to the disabled community. Instead, disability activism should stem from collective action and creating change at the source of discrimination. More specifically, making changes through power sources such as Instagram, society, and politics. Lastly, their use of postfeminist discourse links disabled empowerment and success to physicality. The before-and-after rhetoric that makes up their page highlights physical appearance and ability and is associated with disabled empowerment. Their attention to fitness, sexual attraction, and physical transformations indicates that disabled empowerment stems from physical attributes. Overall, while Sophie started their page under the premise of disability activism, they have been influenced by postfeminist and neoliberal discourse. Consequently, Sophie is depicting the same messages they sought to disrupt.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

5.1 Introduction

This chapter will discuss the case study findings and their implications on the disabled community. This research project aimed to understand how the representation of disabled influencers and influencer culture affects body image amongst the disabled community. While the findings detail how Sophie represents themself, this chapter aims to situate the findings in the context of body image and the disabled community. Utilizing the theoretical lens of self-comparison theory, intersectionality theory, and critical disability theory, I will present new insights into disability activism. More specifically, I will demonstrate how influencer culture's neoliberal obsession with physical appearance and individual success has had ramifications on body image amongst the disabled community.

5.2 The Effect on Body Image

The findings show that Sophie represents themself through a discourse of self-fulfillment. However, through their depiction of self-fulfillment, they link disabled success with physical attraction and ability. Through their portrayal of a sexualized appearance, confidence, and happiness, Sophie depicts postfeminist sensibilities by associating disabled empowerment with the stylized and styled body. The concept of postfeminist sensibility was developed by Rosalind Gill and outlines that postfeminist media culture has an "obsessive preoccupation with the body" and the "pervasive sexualization of contemporary culture" (Gill 2007). Gill's argument is exceptionally relevant in the context of influencer culture. As a photo-sharing platform, Instagram has cultivated an obsession with physical appearance, ability, and the sexualization of women. Influencer culture has further pushed postfeminist sensibilities through Photoshop editing, image filters, and the ability to selectively self-represent. Instagram and influencer culture have created societal pressures to depict oneself as perfect, including one's physical appearance. Therefore, while Gill speaks about women's sexualization and the body, it is evident that Sophie has internalized the postfeminist media culture associated with influencer culture.

As a woman-identifying individual, Sophie feels that to depict that they are comfortable in their body, they must post images in lingerie, be physically strong, and look happy and radiant in their images. Essentially, their images highlight physical appearance and ability. Sophie steers toward the portrayal of an ableist concept of ability by highlighting

physical movement and appearance as measures of success. However, Sophie's portrayal of success, sexual attractiveness, and fitness is partly due to the pervasiveness of neoliberal ideas that make up influencer culture. Sophie has adopted the neoliberal ideas of individual success, self-reinventing, and capitalistic gain. However, by linking disabled empowerment with physical appearance and ability, they deviate from their goal of accurately representing the disabled community. Instead, their depiction of an idealized disabled body and their idealized depiction of disabled success creates an environment of toxic positivity and sets unrealistic body ideals. Therefore, Sophie's disability activism and profile choices may cultivate a negative body image amongst the disabled community.

5.2.1 Toxic Positivity and Cruel Optimism

Every element of Sophie's profile is carefully curated to depict Sophie as a self-fulfilled and successful disabled woman. Each caption, image, and comment are a strategic layer to Sophie's self-presentation. Using narrative discourse shows that they have overcome issues such as mental health, discrimination in the fitness industry, disability discrimination, and negative body image. Sophie uses pain and trauma to show users that they have also struggled. However, they always conclude their stories with a positive and uplifting tone. By structuring their posts this way, they communicate that they have reached self-fulfillment. Neoliberalism depicts an obsession with success, and Sophie's eagerness to influence others is prevalent. Therefore, Sophie deliberately uses emotional stories about their past to position themself as relatable to their followers. Combined with their sexual, happy, and confident images, Sophie creates a before-and-after discourse that reiterates postfeminist dictates of having to fix oneself through the offerings of late capitalism.

However, their adoption of the neoliberal ideals of influencer culture presents a narrow lens of positivity. Their constant depiction of "look how well I am doing" and "look how I have overcome these issues" cultivates an environment of toxic positivity. Toxic positivity assumes that one should keep a positive mindset despite emotional pain or struggles, which involves dismissing and/or suppressing negative emotions (Princing 2021). As Sophie always ends their stories with a resolution, they create the discourse of "if I can do this, so can you." However, in many ways, Sophie's "happy endings" distract from the inevitable ups and downs of disability acceptance. The journey to being comfortable in one's body is not a linear process, but Sophie's narrative discourse depicts their journey as straightforward, plannable, and predictable. Furthermore, the way they meticulously present themself as a success story dampens the importance of trauma. Toxic positivity is "often a

highlight reel – where people are typically more inclined to post the positives in their lives rather than the not-so-positive realities we all experience at times" (Radin 2021). The findings show that Sophie is careful not to post "not-so-positive realities" to their profile feed. Instead, they share stories about their struggles as a strategic way to present success and systematically delete negative or toxic comments from their followers.

Toxic positivity becomes particularly problematic when it leads to cruel optimism. Cruel optimism is defined as a "relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility whose realization is discovered either to be impossible, sheer fantasy, or too possible, and toxic" (Berlant 2006). In the context of Sophie's profile, their self-help discourse sets the narrative that if you listen to their advice and follow their steps, you can achieve their level of success and confidence. Again, this reflects a linear process of body acceptance, which is misleading. Sophie's promise to help people reach confidence and success invokes cruel optimism. Self-confidence is not an easy journey for many disabled people, and being bombarded with idealized images and success stories will not make the journey easier. The illusory guarantee of "getting better" is detrimental to the disabled community. Many need therapy, doctors, and other emotional support to tackle living as a disabled person in an able-bodied world. Sophie is depicting themself as a successful self-help guru is problematic and can create false hope.

Overall, the toxic positivity that fills Sophie's profile impacts the disabled community's body image. While Sophie is trying to portray that disabled people can be happy, confident, and successful, their internalization of neoliberal and postfeminist sensibilities creates a narrow directive about disabled success. While they want to present the disabled community through a multi-dimensional lens, the binary, teleological before-and-after rhetoric that composes their profile depicts success as being confident and strong. However, through this rhetoric, they create a link between disabled empowerment and the body. Through ethereal images that aim to depict sexual attractiveness, confidence, and self-fulfillment Sophie depicts the disabled body through able-bodied ideals, and these ideals are unachievable and unrealistic for many in the disabled community.

5.2.2 Linking Success to the Body

Sophie's before-and-after rhetoric to depict success employs images that feature Sophie looking happy, confident, sexy, and self-fulfilled within their body. However, their use of images to present success creates a link between disabled empowerment and the body. As mentioned, influencer culture highlights the postfeminist sensibilities of media culture and

its importance on the female body and the over-sexualization of women. Postfeminist sensibility implies that women have reclaimed their free choice and individualism by reframing physical appearance and sexualization as female empowerment (Gill 2007). These elements have bled into influencer culture and created influencers within fashion, fitness, beauty, and self-help literature. However, the common theme between these influencers is emphasizing the sexed and sexualized female body. Therefore, as a young woman in their twenties, Sophie has internalized the emphasis that has been placed on the female body, and its reclaiming for empowerment. Therefore, Sophie has intertwined postfeminist sensibilities with their disability advocacy. To present themselves as empowered and successful disabled women, they emphasize physical appearance and ability. However, their association with disability empowerment and the body creates unrealistic standards for large parts of the disabled community. Consequently, they depict an idealized disabled body and amplify physical appearance through the able-bodied gaze.

The able-bodied gaze often associates appearance expectations "to characteristics of strength, energy, and control over body movements" (Taub, Fanflik, and McLorg 2003). Sophie's fitness videos and fitness influencer status stress body movement and strength. However, there are specific physical disabilities where physical movement is not easy or possible. Even for disabled individuals that can move their bodies, fatigue, chronic pain, and other debilitating symptoms of disabilities hinder them from being physically active or having control over their bodies. Therefore, Sophie's reiteration that disabled people can be as strong and fit as able-bodied people undercuts their disability activism. Their emphasis on physical movement highlights physical movement as a disabled success and leaves out people within the disabled community. While they intend to inspire and show that disabled people can be strong, they set unrealistic standards for some disabilities. When applied to self-comparison theory, their narrative around fitness and bodies can lead to negative body image amongst the disabled community. If a disabled person views their profile and sees Sophie's emphasis on body movement, they may start to compare their physical ability to Sophie's. Self-comparison theory states that if individuals cannot physically test their abilities, they tend to make evaluations based on subjective judgments of correct and incorrect opinions (Festinger 1954). In the context of this thesis, Sophie's link between physical movement with success, happiness, and attractiveness may lead some disabled people to feel unsuccessful or not beautiful. These messages are exacerbated through Sophie's images and videos, which depict disabled empowerment and success as being physically fit and sexually confident.

Sophie's Instagram profile is filled with glamorous, erotic, and sexy images that have been carefully curated to present that Sophie has reached body acceptance. Sophie uses personal narrative to depict relatability and vulnerability. However, their images are used in collaboration with these captions to present the "new" Sophie. The "new" Sophie is someone that has overcome mental health issues, discrimination, trauma, and body image issues and evolved into a self-assured woman. Sophie achieves this narrative through before-and-after rhetoric, which is a problematic binary. The before and after rhetoric on Sophie's profile is mapped onto an evaluative profile of good and bad, which is toxic to those who do not manage to perform the same kind of absolute switch. This binary rhetoric includes transformation posts that present before-and-after photos with a caption detailing their transformation. Although many of their posts state that their transformation is not physical, their use of side-by-side photos highlights external appearances, which continues to link external appearance to disabled empowerment. However, every post on their profile works together to perpetuate and reinforce the before-and-after rhetoric. More specifically, Sophie's narrative discourse presents Sophie's "before." Their stories paint an image of struggle, pain, and trauma. Meanwhile, every lingerie, glamour, and fashion image represents the "after." These "after" images are planned out to reflect that Sophie has conquered personal issues related to disability to become a happy and confident woman.

Sophie's emphasis on the body sets a narrative that body confidence and self-love are achieved through external elements. Sophie often highlights the body positive movement, which highlights the body. However, the body-positive rhetoric is detrimental to the disabled community and their body image. Body positivity encourages self-love and the acceptance of all bodies regardless of size, shape, skin tone, and gender. However, the movement was developed through the able-bodied gaze, which stresses the body and leaves out the disabled community. Therefore, Sophie's body positive messages are detrimental and contradict their disability activism. Sophie is clear about wanting to inspire disabled women to feel sexy. However, their multi-dimensional binary depiction of able-bodied vs. disabled, happy vs. sad, and success vs. failure reflects the rhetoric that disabled people can be just as sexy, happy, and confident as able-bodied people. Ultimately, they create the narrative that disabled people are beautiful despite their disability and not because of it. More specifically, they relate happiness and physical attractiveness to able bodies. Sophie's messaging cultivates internalized ableism by depicting an idealized disabled body. However, the disabled community needs to feel that they are beautiful because of their disability, not despite it.

While Sophie has good intentions, their internalization of postfeminist sensibilities has led them to link disabled empowerment to the body. Postfeminist media culture, epitomized by Instagram, has influenced women to believe that being sexy is equivalent to being confident and successful or that success is intrinsically linked to and indexed by external appearances. Sophie has internalized these messages and communicates that to show disabled empowerment, one must present oneself as conventionally beautiful and sexy. This further portrays the importance of intersectionality theory when discussing topics related to the disabled community.

Intersectionality theory argues that "identities such as gender, race, sexuality, and other markers of difference intersect and reflect social structures of oppression and privilege, such as sexism, racism, and heteronormativity" (Kelly et al. 2021). However, postfeminism assumes that "the law and society are not "gender-blind" in their treatment of men and women" and media culture "promotes the assumption that the women's movement has accomplished its goals, and barriers facing women have been removed" (Ferber 2012, 67). However, the systemic treatment of women and hyper-sexualization of women in media culture affect how disabled women see the world and represent themself online. Sophie's choices have been influenced by the societal pressures placed on women.

Influencer culture bombards our daily lives with unrealistic beauty ideals and an obsession with being wealthy and successful. Unfortunately, it seems Sophie has internalized these ideas and made them central to their own social media success story, where they selectively self-present in ways that directly feed into the dictates of appearance culture and toxic positivity. Unfortunately, the pervasive depiction of neoliberal ideals and postfeminist sensibilities have distracted from Sophie's goal of accurately representing the disabled community. While they intend to represent the disabled community in a multi-dimensional manner, their association of disabled empowerment and physical appearance and ability reiterates ableist standards of beauty, which categorically erase significant parts of the disabled community.

CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION

6.1 Introduction

Sophie's online presentation expresses concern about influencer culture, body image, and the disabled community. Instagram has become a daily technological factor in our lives, and therefore it is more important than ever to understand how influencer culture affects body image, particularly amongst the disabled community. The findings of this project portray how social media has cultivated a society that is obsessed with presenting oneself as successful and physically attractive. However, when the findings are applied to the theoretical lens, it shows that the idealistic lens of influencer culture may have implications for minority groups such as the disabled community. As influencer culture has become a multi-million-dollar marketing business, disability activists are being drawn to the social and financial capital of influencer status. Like Sophie, many disability activists begin their Instagram profiles to speak up for the disabled community. However, as the allure of social and financial success takes over, these influencers present themself in a way that contradicts disability activism and feeds into neoliberal discourses.

Consequently, influencer culture has intensified postfeminist sensibilities that value women's success and physical appearance. Instagram has also amplified the neoliberal desire for individual success and further emphasized the link between women's empowerment and semblance. As a result, Sophie has been drawn into the dictates of postfeminist discourse about physical appearance, physical attractiveness, and toxic positivity and ultimately has ended up following the very patterns they sought to disrupt. Ultimately, their dedication to presenting themself through postfeminist discourse depicts an optimistic and idealistic story that undercuts their disability advocacy.

On the surface, it may seem that posting images in a wheelchair looking confident or performing exercises in the gym cultivates a positive body image. However, the more Sophie presents themself as an "influencer," the more they disengage with the disabled community. Their decision to delete negative comments and amplify positive ones reduces the meaningful discussions that could and should be had. Instead, Sophie deleted the negative to depict a "perfect" life further. However, their dedication to presenting an idealistic and positive discourse around disability. Self-comparison theory highlights the importance of comparing

oneself to similar people. Therefore, Sophie's idealistic depiction of themselves may lead people within the disabled community to make inaccurate, negative judgments about their bodies.

However, without a deep analysis of Instagram discourse, it is impossible to understand these subtle and potentially harmful implications. As someone with an invisible disability, I was aware of the toxic positivity that clouds disability activism. However, when I first picked Sophie's profile for the case study, my initial thought was that their representation was nothing but positive for the disabled community. However, through a year of extensive research, carefully studying their profile page, and dissecting every profile choice, it became evident that disability activism is not as straightforward as creating a profile and posting images. On the surface, it may look like Sophie creates a space for disabled people to feel confident within their bodies. However, the semiotic reality is quite different. Sophie has around 126,000 followers exposed to their carefully curated messages. Without understanding that Sophie's link between success and the idealized body is flawed and potentially toxic, many followers will internalize their inaccurate association between success and the body. However, this thesis concentrated on Sophie's discourse and their one presentation. While I analysed comments to understand how their followers reacted to their content, I did not gather any data that could confirm the effects of Sophie's postfeminist discourse. Therefore, there were limitations to this study. Therefore, further research still needs to be conducted to fully understand the scope of influencer culture and its direct effect on body image amongst the disabled community.

6.2 Further Research and Limitations

As someone with an invisible disability who turned to social media for support and guidance, this project is personal to me. It has turned into a passion project that I would love to do further research on. The link between disability advocacy and negative body image is vital to understand and needs considerably more research. As social media develops and takes over our lives, understanding the relationship between influencer culture and activism is vital. The research undertaken for this thesis has highlighted elements on which further research would be beneficial. The literature review revealed several areas where discussion on influencer culture and body image were lacking regarding the disabled community. However, while this thesis filled in some gaps in current research, further research needs to be done. While this study portrayed that influencer culture led Sophie to represent themselves through a neoliberal and postfeminist lens, the lack of data surrounding Sophie's followers means that I

can not make absolute claims about Sophie's effect on their followers. Therefore, further research is needed to establish how Sophie's followers respond to their posts and how users' body image is or is not shaped by their rhetoric. However, the social media discourse analysis did allow me to garner an in-depth analysis of Sophie's profile and apply it to the research question. Universals can be found within the findings of one case study, and with my previous knowledge of influencer culture and being a part of the disability advocacy community, my findings can be applied to an array of disabled influencers. However, thousands of disability awareness influencers present themselves in different ways. While many adopt the influencer culture representation of neoliberalism and self-help discourse, it would be interesting to see how different online representations affect body image amongst the disabled community.

Another critical fact to consider is that the contextual elements of this thesis are constantly changing. Since Instagram, society, and culture are constantly evolving, the presentation of people online may change over time. Therefore, it is crucial to evaluate this topic as time goes on. For example, Instagram has recently re-introduced the ability for users to organize their timeline through chronological order. Although Instagram's algorithm still impacts what content is recommended on the explore page, it would be interesting to see if Instagram's update will change how people present themselves. As discussed, Instagram's algorithm has pushed influencers to post content that will gain more exposure and engagement (Cotter 2018). Therefore, many influencers have not been posting content that they are passionate about but content that is likely to attract large followership.
While the new update does not change how Instagram's algorithm works, people's timelines will be organized by chronological order of time posted rather than content the algorithm has recommended. While the change does not seem to have had any effect on influencers yet, it portrays how the contextual factors of this thesis can change the online representation of influencers.

6.3 Summary

The objective of this project was to reveal how the presentation of disabled influencers affects body image amongst the disabled community. The research and literature review revealed that the disabled community is often left out of studies and discussions regarding influencer culture and body image. However, through a deep social media discourse analysis of Sophie J Butler's Instagram, it is evident that influencer culture may have negative implications on the disabled community's body image. Sophie's adoption of

influencer culture led her to accentuate the body and link success to physical appearance. As they gained influencer status, their representation of the disabled body started to align with the able-bodied gaze, ultimately undercutting their disability activism. The findings show how easy it is for disability activist influencers to get drawn into the dictates of postfeminist discourses about appearance, physical attractiveness, and cruel optimism. Ultimately, they end up following the very patterns they sought to disrupt.

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Table of Figures

Appendix

The following screenshots are some of my notes and data from the social media discourse analysis.

Sophie J Butler		
Disability awarness	190	Education, Advice, Playful Video
Fashion/Glam	173	Very consistent, depcting wealth and sucess, fits the instagram aesthetic
Daily Life/updates	202	
Fitness	307	Very consistent, less in 2021 and 2022, mimics fitness influencers
Ads	166	
career	51	
Body image Related	117	Lots of lingerie images and images that highlight their body
LGBTQ related	8	Suprisingly low
mental health/self love	130	A lot through March - May
women empowerment/feminism	38	
Pandemic	24	
Black lives matter	2	

ADS	Message
playfulpromises	Postfeminist sensibilities
therabody	Postfeminist sensibilities
MyVegan	Fits their fitness influencer aesthetic
Voxi	
simply be uk	Postfeminist sensibilities
gymshark	Physical ability
oral bio	
emma sleep uk	
google uk	
triumph lingerie	embrce change
fandfclothing	
dove selv esteem porject	love your body
fenty	Postfeminist sensibilities
always	
georgeatasda	
this girl can UK	Postfeminist sensibilities
makeuprevolution	Self-love
the body shop	love yourself
lovehoneylingerie	diverse sizes
tangleteezer	
feelunique	
Mercedes Benz UK	