

Case study: The *Body Positivity* movement and its influence on fashion

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This article examines the influence of the Body Positivity movement on fashion trends. In the first phase, an overview of the meaning of the movement and its translation into social behavior patterns is given. Special attention will be paid to the role of the media, with a focus on the social network Instagram, and the way in which fashion trends have been shaped by the movement and on Croatian Body Positivity influencers. The frequency of the concept of Body Positivity in fashion articles on Elle Croatia's Instagram profile is analyzed to illustrate the importance of the topic in the Croatian context.

Keywords: *Body Positivity; movement; media; Instagram; influencer; fashion; Elle Croatia; body*

Izvorni znanstveni rad**

Rad istražuje ulogu pokreta *Body Positivity* (hrv. pozitivni odnos prema tijelu ili tjelesna pozitivnost) na modne trendove. U početnoj fazi pružen je osvrt na značenje pokreta i njegovu implementaciju u društvene obrasce ponašanja. Poseban naglasak stavljen je na ulogu medija, s fokusom na društvenu mrežu Instagram, zatim na načine oblikovanja modnih trendova nadahnutih pokretom te na hrvatske *Body Positivity* influencersice. Analizirana je učestalost *Body Positivity* koncepta u modnim priložima na Instagram profilu Elle Croatia, s ciljem ukazivanja na značenje navedene teme u hrvatskim okvirima.

Ključne riječi: *Body Positivity; pokret; mediji; Instagram; influencersica; moda; Elle Croatia; tijelo*

**The article is a derivative of the diploma thesis entitled 'Origin and Analysis of the Influence of the "Body Positivity" Movement on Fashion', written by Sara Ritoša, supervised by Prof. Katarina Nina Simončić, PhD and defended on September 27, 2024 at the University of Zagreb Faculty of Textile Technology.

1. Introduction

Throughout history, the dictates of female beauty have often had a detrimental effect on women's physical and mental health. However, thanks to feminist movements and the general political struggle for gender equality, socially empowered women who have freed themselves from 19th-century social conventions regarding physical appearance [1] are beginning to accept their own bodies in new ways and liberate themselves from the fashion trends that restrict them. The following authors have contributed to the theoretical understanding of the concept of *Body Positivity* and the historical retrospective of its emergence and application. Fashion historian Naomi Wolf analyzes the influence of the media and society on the formation of unrealistic standards of female beauty, which she sees as a tool to control consumers. Based on a historical analysis, she presents the development of beauty ideals as well as the mechanisms and causes of the commercialization of beauty, which has become one of the fundamental characteristics of modernity [2]. Theorist Diana Crane takes a similar approach. In addition to beauty norms, she also analyzes the role of fashion, in which she recognizes a materialized reflection of social affiliation and identity [3]. Llewellyn Negrin deals with contemporary beauty norms, which are determined by fashion trends, but also by trends in cosmetics and cosmetic surgery. Through a critical analysis of popular media, fashion trends and social expectations, she points out the instability and transience of body ideals [4]. Céline Leboeuf has researched the origins of the term *Body Positivity* and provided a deeper insight into the emotional and psychological aspects of the process of accepting one's own body in the context of societal expectations [5]. In turn, author Rachel Cohen analyzes the impact of the *Body Positivity* movement on social networks, addressing issues of algorithms and content distribution [6]. Pellizzer and Wade examine the difference between the popular concept of body neutrality and the concept of *Body Positivity* and point to new approaches in contemporary culture in relation to the image and relationship to the body [7].

The aim of this paper is to analyze the development of the concept of *Body Positivity*, its role in fashion trends and implementation mechanisms, and then to examine the development of new subtypes of this movement in the social network Instagram. It attempts to highlight commercialization and profit as reasons for the decline in popularity of the *Body Positivity* trend by examining its presence on Elle Croatia's Instagram page.

2. Origin and development of the *Body Positivity* movement

The *Body Positivity* movement, which in the Croatian version of the translation means a positive attitude towards the body or a positive attitude toward one's body, gained momentum on social networks at the end of 2010, mainly thanks to Instagram. Instagram is an American social network or photo and video sharing application founded by Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger and launched on October 6, 2010.

As individuals' lives are influenced by social norms, community expectations, but also by prevailing political and ideological beliefs, the virtual space of social networks has become an extremely powerful tool for the visual promotion and implementation of behavioral patterns and appearance criteria.

Appearance plays a particularly important role in modern society, as it shapes our relationship with our own bodies, but also with other people. The inability to conform to the ideal of beauty dictated by the media leads to feelings of shame, fear and insecurity during adolescence, as well as an aversion to one's own body. The philosopher Luna Dolezal defines the feeling of shame as an evaluation that evokes feelings of anxiety in the subject, caused by the gaze and judgment of the observer [5]. With the increase in unrealistic expectations promoted by the visual content of virtual platforms, an increase in the feeling of shame among consumers can be observed, which has led to the emergence of the *Body Positivity* movement. The movement motivates people to accept their own bodies and their imperfections, but also to accept physical differences through visual advertising and fashion. The beginnings of the movement date back to the 1960s, when the American press picked up on the problem of negative attitudes towards obese people. In the 1970s, the National Association for the Assistance of the Obese was founded in the United States, now known as the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance (NAAFA) [8]. However, in its activist work, the association also advocated for the rejection of social criticism and prejudice regarding racial issues, gender identity, adulthood, and individuals with various forms of physical disabilities. It was in this atmosphere that the movement from which the principles of *Body Positivity* in the 21st century would gradually emerge. In its early days, however, it was also criticized for focusing on appearance, neglecting health issues and thus promoting unhealthy lifestyles (the problem of anorexia). In the atmosphere of the movement and its positive and negative characteristics, a new trend in the relationship with the body emerged, known as *Body Neutrality*. It moves from the concept of

acceptance of all body shapes to a concept that is free from excessive thinking about the appearance of the body. The main goal of this movement is to view the body through the prism of what it can and does, rather than through its physical features. Jessi Kneeland defines this approach to the body as a vessel on which we travel through life, unencumbered by the dictates of contemporary body culture [7,9].

3. The role of the media, Instagram and Croatian *Body Positivity* influencers

The media plays a key role in spreading the principles of the movement among consumers. History knows various forms of media tools, from printed publications in the 17th century to digital platforms in the 20th century. However, their aim of bringing trends closer to potential consumers in order to generate financial gains has remained unchanged. Today, social networks are the predominant medium used by about 5 billion people worldwide, which is about 62% of the total population [10]. At the same time, consumers lack critical evaluation, i.e. media literacy that recognizes content and visual manipulation [11]. The body images presented enforce an esthetic of emphasized eroticism and perfection that promotes superficial values and objectification, especially of women. In the world of music and film, for example, explicit clothing is used on women's bodies to achieve greater visibility and higher ratings [12]. This type of advertising is controversial as the recurring image of a woman in inappropriate clothing becomes the norm over time and young people who are active on social networks compare themselves to her. The social network used to analyze the presence and implementation of the principles of the *Body Positivity* movement in this study is Instagram. Key activities on this platform include uploading and viewing photos and videos, as well as interacting with other users through comments, likes (a sign of approval) and private messages. In 2024, the platform had around two billion users (and rising), of which 50.6% were men and 49.4% women. The largest proportion of users belong to the 25-34 age group, which accounts for 30.6% of users, followed by the 18-24 age group with 31.7% of users [13]. Instagram offers various ways to share content. The most well-known form of posts are photos that appear on the homepage and can be viewed by scrolling down. Another important type of post is Stories, which allow users to upload photos and videos that are visible for twenty-four hours and then stored in the site's archive. These posts are displayed at the top of the home page and can be viewed by scrolling from left to right. The third type of posts are reels, a colloquial term for short marketing videos

that are popular with influencers (influencer, influential person, colloquial name and internet celebrity) and businesses. All three types of posts enable interaction, which is an important indicator of the popularity of a topic on the platform. Around 1.3 billion posts are published on the Instagram platform every day, a large proportion of which contain images of bodies and fashionable looks. Research has shown that the depiction of idealized bodies and expressed sexuality has a negative impact on some users, leading to a decline in self-esteem and the development of disorders such as body dysmorphic disorder [13,14]. Body dysmorphic disorder is a reaction to a distorted perception of propagated ideals that are actually based on the promotion (e.g. through images and/or texts) of a physically thin appearance (so-called thinspiration), an appearance achieved through excessive training (so-called fitspiration) and constant comparison with the appearance of celebrities [15]. The *Body Positivity* trend on Instagram gained momentum in 2012, with 19.5 million posts tagged #bodypositive and 12.5 million posts tagged #bodypositivity (the numbers are visible when typed into the Instagram search engine). Members of the trend post pictures of their appearance together with inspirational quotes or openly show their physical weaknesses. Third-party users analyze examples of perfect looks and refer to image editing tools and programs to achieve a flawless appearance. Studies on the aforementioned content have shown that the *Body Positivity* trend has a positive effect on users' mood, improves their attitude towards their own body and increases their self-esteem. However, research also points to negative aspects of this type of body representation [6]. The most popular Instagram profiles are favorites of the algorithm, among which members of the white population predominate, while people from other racial and ethnic groups, as well as those with physical disabilities, are markedly under-represented. Critics recommend improving the algorithm to enable inclusion on Instagram. The most important Croatian advocates of *Body Positivity* on Instagram are Pamela Perkić, Dorotea Cotting and Lucija Lugomer. All of the influencers mentioned address topics related to *Body Positivity*, although this is not their sole focus on their Instagram profiles. Nevertheless, their posts reach an audience that follows them and supports the promotion of the concept of *Body Positivity*. Pamela Perkić has almost 17 thousand followers on Instagram, and besides promoting a positive attitude towards one's body, she also focuses on supporting women [16]. She covers a wide range of topics on her profile and has also launched the Icon Retreat project, a virtual, criticism-free space where women support each other [17]. Dorotea Cotting has also dedicated herself to the

topics of nutrition and physical exercise, with content that actualizes the care of the psychological and physical aspects of the body in the context of *Body Positivity* [18]. The next Croatian *Body Positivity* influencer is Lucija Lugomer, also a plus-size model. She not only promotes a positive attitude towards her own body, which she conveys through her own experiences from childhood to her engagement as a plus-size model, but also addresses issues related to the family [19].

3.1. Fashion and the *Body Positivity* movement

According to Harper [20], each fashion brand produces clothing sizes for the consumers it wants to appeal to. This has a negative impact on consumers who do not fit into the sizes offered. Fashion brands *Brandy Melville* and *Zara* have been criticized for their smaller sizes in the market. As a result, there are a variety of fashion brands on the market today that offer clothing for all body types, such as *Universal Standard*, *Nooworks*, *Plus Bklyn* or *Summersalt*. However, these are primarily women's collections. Besides offering limited sizing, fashion houses were also criticized for only representing one or two body types through the selection of models was also criticized. As a result, fashion campaigns changed their advertising approach under the influence of the movement. Fashion campaigns began showcasing diverse female body shapes — including tall, short, thin, and fuller figures. In addition to white and black women, who were traditionally the dominant models, members of other ethnic groups and models of a more mature age are increasingly being used. Physical disabilities and deviations from harmonious body proportions are considered controversial in advertising, but rather a welcome indicator of the concept of inclusion. A striking example of the new perspective inspired by the *Body Positivity* movement is the Croatian campaign 2024, which was created in collaboration with the Association for the Promotion of Inclusion of People with Disabilities *Mogu sve* and its president Anja Mihaljević, photographer Luka Lajić and the Croatian latex clothing brand *Maskinx Latex Design* [21].

4. Experimental part: Research on the social network Instagram Elle Croatia

The concept of the fashion magazine Elle is based on the reporting of fashion trends, the development of fashion criticism, the appreciation of women's rights and the valorization of their work. Based on the above-mentioned characteristics, the Elle medium

was chosen for the analysis of contemporary content with a focus on *Body Positivity*. Although Elle magazine also offers an online version of the magazine, Instagram has become the primary source of information for readers, and they access additional content from articles if the topic is attractive and interesting enough for them. Therefore, the focus of the analysis is on the social network Elle Croatia on Instagram, where the presence of the concept of *Body Positivity* will be investigated [22].

The aim of the analysis is to determine the frequency of occurrence of the mentioned topic on the application and to investigate whether the main motive behind these posts is commercial profit or genuine promotion of body acceptance or to promote awareness and love for one's own body.

The quantitative study of Elle Croatia's Instagram profile included posts from September 2023 to September 2024. Data were collected by reviewing all posts published during this period and then the following types of content were analyzed:

- Photos/Videos: Images and videos containing the concept of *Body Positivity* and showing different body types, ethnicities, gender identities, mature models and people with disabilities were analyzed.
- Descriptive texts: Posts promoting *Body Positivity* and were analyzed, focusing on how they conveyed messages of self-esteem and body appreciation.
- Hashtags (#), which are used on social networks to categorize content. The use of hashtags related to *Body Positivity*, such as #bodypositivity, #BoPo, #selflove and similar, was analyzed to determine their frequency and the purpose of their use.
- Interactions: The number of likes, comments and shared posts related to *Body Positivity* was monitored to determine the level of engagement and audience interest in this topic.

The content was analyzed quantitatively by counting the posts on the topic of *Body Positivity* and qualitatively by evaluating the content of these posts. The number of posts is used to determine how strongly the topic is still represented on the social network Elle Croatia on Instagram and whether the focus is more on the commercial (advertising for products/services) or the educational (raising awareness of *Body Positivity* and self-acceptance) aspect of advertising.

A total 871 posts on Elle Croatia's Instagram profile were analyzed, of which only 27 were related to *Body Positivity* or contained links to it (Fig.1). Among these 27 posts, eight featured people from different ethnic backgrounds — none of them white women. However, of these eight entries, six featured the same

person, Severina Lajtman, a Roma woman. The remaining two entries featured African-American women. In terms of racial diversity, it is noticeable that Elle Croatia does not apply the concept of racial diversity to any significant extent. Seven posts featured older people, with several videos focusing on user engagement, while the remaining posts featured familiar faces from the Croatian public. Plus-size models appeared six times on the front page of the article and in advertisements during the study period. Queer people appeared twice, as did people with other bodies. The first time it was a person with albinism, the second time a keloid. Although these are not necessarily physical disabilities, in the absence of articles about people with disabilities, these differences are listed as an alternative example of bodily diversity. The remaining four entries on the concept of *Body Positivity* contained motivational messages that focused on loving one's body and were presented through videos or photos.

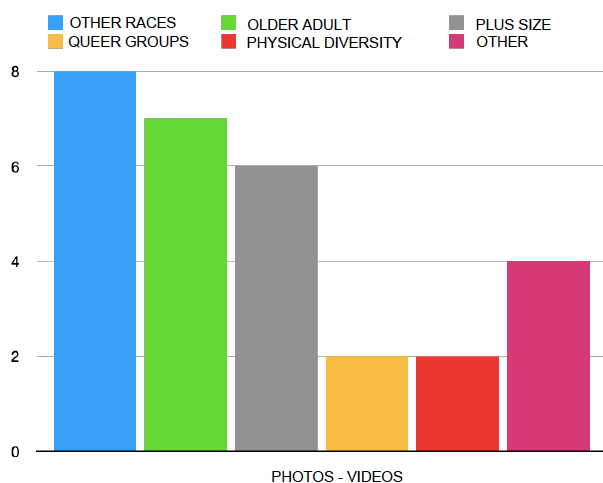


Fig.1 Graphic representation of the photos most frequently shown on Elle Croatia's Instagram page in connection with the *Body Positivity* movement

Descriptive texts were present in each of the contributions analyzed. Of the total 27 contributions with an image, 14 contained texts that supported the concept of body-friendliness and matched the corresponding captions. Three of the 27 posts with descriptive content were commercial in nature and used *Body Positivity* to promote a fashion brand or product. In nine posts, the text content differed from the headline and did not refer to the concept of *Body Positivity* but to other topics. These posts also did not include hashtags such as #bodypositivity and #selflove. The posts usually contained only descriptive text, and sometimes the people who owned the images or were involved in their creation were also mentioned, especially if it was an original production by Elle Croatia.

Regarding the interaction of users of other profiles with the profile of Elle Croatia, it was found that the interaction with such posts is significantly lower. The average number of likes is 192 per photo/video, while there are only four comments on the said posts. The photo of Filip Mrzljak, who won and was crowned at RuPaul's Drag Race (RPDR) in France in August 2024, received the most likes. The photo with the most comments was the fall cover of the Croatian edition of Elle from 2023, which featured Severina Lajtman, a member of the Roma nationality.

The results of the analysis of Elle Croatia's Instagram profile in the period from September 2023 to September 2024 show that the topic of *Body Positivity* is not particularly present in the application. Out of a total 871 posts, only 27 (less than 4%) were related to *Body Positivity* or contained links to this topic. While there are some efforts to include different body types and marginalized groups, such as people of different ethnicities, older adults, plus-size people, and queer people, the representation is limited and often repetitive. For example, six posts with different ethnicities were about the same person and the same photo shoot. User interaction on posts about *Body Positivity* was also extremely low, indicating a low level of interest. Although some posts attracted a higher number of likes or comments, they were mostly associated with famous faces or popular events, while the topic of *Body Positivity* clearly did not generate a significant response. Although Elle Croatia only used the *Body Positivity* topic for commercial purposes in three cases and sent encouraging and positive messages to each post, users remained inactive. One possible explanation for this is that Elle Croatia's followers prefer content that reflects standardized beauty ideals, which is why they engage less with posts that show different body types and concepts of *Body Positivity*.

From the example of Elle Croatia's Instagram profile it can be seen that the topic of *Body Positivity* is on the decline and is not commercial compared to other magazines in the world.

5. Conclusion

The *Body Positivity* movement is a reaction to the canon of physical beauty imposed by the media. Through its efforts, it promotes acceptance of one's body and all its imperfections. Although the basic principles of this movement have led to numerous positive changes in the world of fashion and fashion advertising, there are also two fundamental aspects on which many criticisms are based. The first is the promotion of plus-size models, which challenges

healthy lifestyle habits, while the second is the commercial aspect of *Body Positivity*, which is used by fashion houses for their own profit. The media is an important tool for spreading the movement, and social networks have played a particularly important role, especially the Instagram application, to which we have dedicated this research. The focus of the study was on the Croatian version of the Instagram application Elle Croatia, whose posts were analyzed from September 2023 to September 2024. The analysis revealed that commercial aspects related to the topic of *Body Positivity* were not found on the Elle Croatia Instagram platform. However, a very small number of posts were identified in the mentioned period, namely only 4%, which valorize the topic of *Body Positivity*.

Based on foreign and domestic publications, both in print media and on the Instagram profiles of fashion magazines and Croatian *Body Positivity* influencers, we conclude that the concept of *Body Positivity* has a positive impact on followers, helps them accept their own appearance and provides a virtual platform for sharing opinions and seeking support.

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