The Theory of Social Comparison and the Body Positive in Female Consumers of Underwear in Instagram

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Abstract. This study analyzes body positive, a movement challenging women's beauty standards to promote acceptance of the body as a whole, and the relationship with the theory of social comparison, which indicates that people are continually comparing themselves with similar ones, upward or downward. A qualitative methodology was adopted based on semi-structured interviews of 20 female university students between 18 and 24 years to analyze different Instagram posts of the Sicurezza underwear brand. It is concluded that a type of upward social comparison predominates, both positive and negative, depending on the type of digital images to which they are exposed. There is also a good acceptance of body positive, since respondents feel more identified with the most diverse body types depicted by Sicurezza in their digital communication on Instagram and their body satisfaction and self-acceptance increase, besides encourages them to feel comfortable with their bodies and what they use.

Keywords: Body Positive · Social Comparison Theory · Instagram · Underwear · Advertising

1 Introduction

In recent years, the popularity of body positive has increased thanks to digital platforms where women broadcast messages for social change [1]. This movement challenges the neoliberal paradigm of an ideal body; its objective is to rethink the unrealistic ideas about the beauty of women in society [2, 3], and to promote self-acceptance through the development of self-esteem [4]. In 2004, Dove, a personal care brand, launched its "Real Beauty" campaign in the UK, opposing women's beauty standards to rebuild women's self-esteem [5]. This generated fashion, health and beauty brands to become aware of the importance of eradicating stereotypes and changing beauty standards, which, over the years, conceptualized a women's ideal [6].

Underwear plays a very important role in the daily lives of women [7], in the construction of their identity [8] and as a means of expressing their femininity and

sexuality [9]. In addition, it provides multisensory experiences that may lead to certain appearance decisions [10]. For this reason, the underwear sector has received a greater impact from body positive, since it is the women's underwear that have been promoting, with greater emphasis, an unrealistic body ideal, extremely thin and with measures almost impossible to achieve [6, 11, 12], this causes a disconnection with consumers [6]. Women who do not comply with these measures begin to feel unsecure with their body, have feelings of body dissatisfaction, and suffer from eating disorders [6]. In 2014, #AérieReal was the first campaign that did not use digitally modified images, launched by the brand underwear Aerie that was received with great enthusiasm and success among young women [13, 14]. After much criticism, Victoria's Secret has worked hard to include larger models [6]. In December 2019, they launched their Christmas campaign with a strong body positive presence, relying on models with real bodies, with stretch marks and cellulite [15].

On social networks, Instagram depicts itself as an ideal space for more women to show their non-normative body [12], making consumers want to see ads with more diverse models [13]. In addition, Instagram presents messages and images with which people associate and compare [16]. In this sense, there is a tendency in people to self-evaluate by comparing themselves with their peers [17] or with others, whom they consider better or worse (upward or downward) [18], which is explained by Festinger [19] in his theory of social comparison.

1.1 The Theory of Social Comparison

The theory of social comparison developed by Leon Festinger [19], poses the existence of an innate human impulse to compare characteristics or attributes with their peers [20] to determine self-value [16]. There are three types of social comparison: upward, downward, and lateral [18]. In the downward or low comparison [21], people compare their characteristics with inferior ones, which generates feelings of superiority [18, 22]. In upward or high social comparison [21], people compare themselves with superior ones, producing negative feelings [17] and threatening their self-esteem [22]. In lateral comparisons, people compare themselves with others they perceive similar to them [23].

Women generally make upward social comparisons [20, 24], focusing on the physical appearance of more attractive people [23], feeling below standards of beauty [16] and generating a feeling of body dissatisfaction [24]. At this point, body positive promotes self-love and acceptance of the body [4] to confront unrealistic ideas of beauty that the media traditionally perpetuate and reinforce [3], emphasizing the inclusiveness of bodies of all shapes and sizes [2], to generate a more positive attitude in women regarding their physical appearance [1]. The exhibition of body positive contents in the media generates a greater emotional, psychological and social wellbeing [3]. On the contrary, being exposed to images of "ideal" thin bodies that, when social comparisons are made, can generate depressive effects in women [16].

In the face of this, the following research question arises: How are body positive and the theory of social comparison present in Instagram advertising according to Sicurezza underwear consumers?

2 Methodology

The study is situated in the interpretative research paradigm to understand and interpret the experiences of the participants based on their discourse [25]. Its design is a case study [26] because it analyzes body positive and the social comparison present in the consumers of underwear of Sicurezza, a brand that seeks to promote women's safety [27]. For data collection, semi-structured interviews with predetermined but flexible and open questions were used, this technique allows a greater interpretation of the data than structured interviews [28]. A guide of questions grouped into 3 topics was developed: (a) social comparison theory and body positive; (b) Instagram and body positive advertising

Table 1. Characteristics of participants

Participant	Age	Program	School
P01	21	Veterinary Medicine and Zootechnique	Biological and Veterinary Sciences
P02	24	Tourism and Business Administration	Hospitality and Tourism Administration
P03	22	Veterinary Medicine and Zootechnique	Biological and Veterinary Sciences
P04	22	Veterinary Medicine and Zootechnique	Biological and Veterinary Sciences
P05	21	Human Medicine	Health Sciences
P06	22	Architecture	Architecture
P07	20	Culinary Art	Hotel Management, Tourism, and Gastronomy
P08	23	Economics and Finance	Economics
P09	21	Law	Law
P10	21	Graphic Design	Design
P11	22	Fashion Design and Management	Design
P12	22	Medicine	Health Sciences
P13	19	Administration	Business
P14	23	Corporate Law	Law
P15	22	Gastronomy and Culinary Art	Gastronomy
P16	22	Global Business Administration	Economic and Business Sciences
P17	18	Business Engineering	Engineering
P18	20	Administration and International Business	Business
P19	22	Veterinary Medicine and Zootechnique	Biological and Veterinary Sciences
P20	24	Law and Political Sciences	Law

of underwear brands; and (c) the presence of Sicurezza in young women. The interviews lasted from 17 to 69 min and were conducted virtually through the Zoom application.

Throughout April and May 2021, 20 university students aged 18 to 24 of a A/B socioeconomic level were interviewed (see Table 1) as Sicurezza is directed to a sector with greater purchasing power [29]. An intentional sampling was carried out [30] with specific inclusion criteria: being young women who have consumed and/or know the Sicurezza brand; and exclusion, not belonging to the communications, marketing, and psychology schools, with technical knowledge on the subject. The data was analyzed using the thematic analysis technique to describe, identify, and establish links between various topics [31]. Each respondent received a fact sheet with the purpose and implications of the study [32]. At the beginning of the recordings they were asked for their verbal consent in audio and/or video [32]. To keep the confidentiality and protect their identity, each respondent was assigned an alphanumeric code (P01, P02, P03, etc.).

3   Results and Discussion

3.1   Theory of Social Comparison and Body Positive in Digital Images

Respondents were asked which influencer or celebrity they identify with. Most are identified more with behavioral aspects of the influencer than with physical ones. With the predominance of those who convey security, promote self-love, and inspire their followers to do new things. The theory of upward social comparison is demonstrated by comparisons with others in a better situation [17], generating an identification with that person who provides objective information to improve the areas that the person may consider deficient [22]. Influencers produce positive and aspirational motivations in the participants [33], in addition to generating greater emotional and psychological well-being [3].

> She promotes quite a lot of what self-love is and how we can feel safe, learning a little more about us (...) It is very hard to find an influencer who conveys that trust, that security. (P10).

Five digital images of models in underwear were also presented; two with thin bodies and three others with different frames and peculiar physical characteristics. Influencers with thin bodies generated mixed opinions among the respondents, a small group indicated that they are stereotyped and socially accepted bodies that they aspire to have. For other participants, this body type made them feel insecure, but they acknowledge the presence of aesthetic touch-ups that make models look "perfect". The models are presented as an ideal of beauty and a great pressure to reach it [24], which negatively affects women's body image [23]. Once again, the theory of social comparison is presented in upwards with negative feelings, associated with jealousy, envy and anxiety, that can generate low self-esteem in them [17, 33]. Although body positive promotes a greater variety of body appearances [3], exposure to photos of thin bodies can have adverse effects and affect the body image of young women [3].

> Somehow, these photos do promote a perfect body. In some ways, it can generate low self-esteem. (P11).

Women, more than anything, have quite a few complexes, precisely because of advertising (...) They are often models that tend to have a predefined type of body, right? (P17).

The situation changed by showing three models with varied bodies. Most of the respondents felt positively identified with the models, as they encourage them to show their body as it is, empower them and increase their self-acceptance. However, a small group find it shocking, as they are used to perfect model images. The digital publication of positive body images that encourage consumption of all bodies [34] empowers women to accept and love themselves [1]. Models with different bodies promote body positive and perpetuate the idea that every woman should feel beautiful [5]. The theory of social comparison is also presented in a lateral way, since young women perceive the models as their similar [23]. In addition to an upward social comparison with positive effects where people in better condition motivate them to the self-improve [17, 24] and contribute to their feeling better about themselves [1].

It conveys a lot of female empowerment to me. I feel that if they have decided to show themselves as they are, why not me? And, for me, it is a very important example. (P15)

3.2 Instagram and Body Positive Advertising on Underwear Brands

Some respondents use filters, retouch their imperfections such as acne or apply smoothing to their skin, but they do not modify their bodies. The great majority of young women want to look good in photos with poses and angles that favor their physical appearance. Many of the participants receive positive feedback on their photos and several likes that make them feel good about themselves. The characteristic of Instagram is the creation of photographic self-representations that allow women to explore their own bodies and create their own sense of self-esteem [12, 34]; for this purpose, several photos are taken in different poses and angles to choose the best one, to edit it and to publish it [12], influenced by the predominant appearances in the social networks [3]. Unconsciously, the approval of others is sought through likes and comments, where receiving few generates a negative self-evaluation, but receiving several generates an increase in self-esteem [35]. Body positive disrupts the idea that women should be ashamed and cover their imperfections [12] and encourages the posting of their photos because they feel good about themselves and not because of the comments or likes they receive [34].

I have tried to remove the small blemishes (...) that don't show any fat roll or try to make me look more stylized. (P05).

Suddenly you upload a picture of your body and obviously you will receive compliments and you know it (...) and want it or not, it is because you seek acceptance from others. (P11)

The first aspect that worries most respondents when viewing underwear advertising is whether the garment will fit them and whether it will be comfortable. When publications were presented with thin models wearing underwear, they felt less identified, since according to her they do not fit the reality of every woman's body. There are still

underwear brands whose models have a thin and curvy body, difficult to achieve [6, 11], producing body dissatisfaction and low self-esteem in women [3]. Women want to feel comfortable and good with themselves wearing underwear [7]. Stereotyped commercials produce a disconnection between the images projected by advertising and the way consumers actually look [11].

> There are not going to be thin girls all the time, there are not going to be overweight girls all the time; there are going to be middle points. (E09).

> I'm scared when I see underwear on Instagram because it makes me want to buy it, but I'm afraid I won't fit me. (P11).

The results were different when looking at publications with models with other body types. Most participants indicated that they felt more identified and that they could have a better idea of how the underwear would fit them. In addition, they ap-plauded brands that set aside stereotypes and contribute to increase their self-esteem and to make them feel good with themselves with more real models. The positive body arrives to present images of confident women, posing in underwear and showing stigmatized attributes [12], This is also beginning to be reflected in the advertising of women's underwear brands on Instagram [36] as brands are committed to breaking with traditional female stereotypes.

> We are used to or we have this erroneous idea of always seeing the same thin model (...) with large breasts (...) I think it's okay to see this diversity of bodies, I like it, I feel comfortable with this brand, I feel that the brand and I connect. (P10)

3.3   Presence of Sicurezza on Instagram

The responders were presented with 4 posts of Sicurezza Instagram. The first publication featured a thin and toned yoga influencer meditating and smiling with the brand garments. Most of the respondents acknowledged that as a first impression they see a stereotype in the thin body of the influencer; but that her smile, uncombed hair and lack of makeup make her look more natural. In addition, they experience comfort because the garments can be worn for any physical activity. Different body positive projects in Instagram aim to create greater diversity in women's media representations [12]. Images of women without makeup in Instagram are perceived as more natural and help promote acceptance of their own appearance [37].

> The photo does not look retouched (...) It is not a typical lingerie post in which you are retouched, I do not know, even the pore on your face; but it is a pretty natural photo (...) It looks like a happy girl (...) who feels comfortable. (P17).

The second post shows a thin body and another heavier one. The models are wearing a Sicurezza bra and a jean, but they don't show their face. The participants high-lighted the contrast of both bodies, that any girl can feel identified with the publication and that they can see, depending on her body type, how the garment will look on them. They also pointed out these bodies were more real because even the thin model does not have a flat abdomen or has curves. Models that promote and drive positive body by

proudly displaying their bodies on Instagram, have a heavier body type than traditional thin models [4, 16]. Incorporating a variety of appearances and bodies generates in women a broader conceptualization of beauty and reduces their vulnerability to body dissatisfaction [1].

> Can you see that there are two different ones, and they are both acceptable within our society (...) You must show both because the audience is made not only of thin people, but also an audience with, at least, some fat rolls. (P09).

The third publication shows a mother's abdomen after having children with stretch marks, and her description highlights the fact that you love every mark on your body. The respondents indicated that stretch marks are a characteristic of many women, so that it should be normalized in society. Today, there are body positive activist mommy bloggers on Instagram who promote self-acceptance of body marks and celebrate their ability to give life [38], which generates emotional and psycho-logical well-being [3, 38].

> All women have stretch marks (…) It's normal and natural for women. And a woman doesn't have to hide it or feel bad about having them (...) You have to feel good, safe, because it is part of your body and you have to love it as it is. (P15).

The latest publication was the launching campaign for the brand's new underwear collection showing a group of seven women with different backgrounds, skin colors, physical characteristics, and even ages. The most striking thing for the participants was seeing a 68-year-old Peruvian tiktoker modeling in underwear. Among the positive comments, they pointed out the inclusion of elderly people, the use of different types of body, that they call "real", with different physical characteristics such as hair, skin color, and tattoos. In addition, participants could identify with them better. In Instagram, there are several accounts centered on appearance, where thinness is portrayed as beauty [1, 3]. The most diverse ideals of beauty are not socially dis-carded and marginalized any more [12], thanks to body positive, which challenges the ideals of a thin bodies and appearance and conceptualize broader ones [1]. As the popularity of body positive increases, underwear fashion brands use more diverse models to generate greater identification with their consumers [4].

> I loved that they included the older lady (...) I will feel represented because, at some point, I will also reach an old age. And I'm going to feel that at that age I will be able to wear lingerie that I like and with which I can feel comfortable. (P03)

4   Conclusions

The theory of social comparison is presented throughout the study and affects young women directly. There is a tendency to compare features of their bodies with the models to whom they were exposed, with lateral and upward comparisons predominating (positive or negative). Body positive generates positive comparisons and increases participants' self-esteem and body acceptance.

Images of models with different types of body in Sicurezza advertising promote acceptance of the body as a whole, generating positive emotions in the participants and inspiring them to self-improvement, the result of an upward social comparison. However, exposure to skinny and curvy underwear models usually increases body dissatisfaction and decreases self-esteem generated by an upward social comparison with negative effects, such as envy and anxiety. This differs in Sicurezza publications, as it is perceived by respondents as a body positive brand, as its advertising on Instagram shows diversity of bodies, empowers women, encourages them to feel comfortable with their bodies and what they use and increase their self-love with various positive messages.

This study has three constraints: (a) because of the pandemic, virtual interviews had to be conducted in which the participant's behavior could not be observed, (b) in this regard, there were connection problems that prevented fluent communication with the respondents; and (c) at recruitment, interview dates needed to be rescheduled. In the future it is recommended to address the issue not only in Instagram, but in other mass media. As well as to include other socioeconomic levels involving young people of other ages and regions of the country, since they have a different concept of beauty. Finally, other brands with a greater impact on young women around the world should be chosen as a case analysis.

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