

"We must claim our space in the media noise"

Middle-aged and older women's views on media representation, the potential of social media, and the body-positive movement

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Abstract

While the media often portrays older people, especially women, in a stereotypical and ageist way, social media, and especially the body-positive movement, can offer a way to improve representation. Through semi-structured interviews with Swedish women in midlife and beyond, who publish body-positive content online, this study aims to examine their views on the media representation of older women, the potential of social media and the body-positive movement, and their own participation.

Two opposing perspectives were expressed: a collectivist one highlighting structural explanations, such as different conditions for women and men. The most recurrent perspective, however, was the individualist one. The interviewees saw the lack of representation as the responsibility of women, who must claim their space. They did not identify with the body-positive movement or see their activity as part of it, but as an individual commitment. Their motives for participation often had to do with self-realization and financial gain. An individualist perspective can be tied to a neoliberal ideology that emphasizes individuals' freedom and responsibility. This focus makes those who are subjected to oppression deny structural aspects, place the responsibility to solve the situation on themselves, and abstain from collective action. While the participation can result in more visibility for women in midlife and beyond, its form thus risks eroding the potential for change. The results also show how the informants experience the conditions for visibility and representation as linked to intersecting subordinate positions that are additive. The reluctance in identifying with the body-positive movement can thus also be explained as a matter of being overwhelmed by the number of subordinate categories to handle.

Keywords: *body positivity, representation, identification, ageism, neoliberalism, individualization, intersectionality*

The media image of older people has long been one-sided and misleading. Although a quarter of the Swedish population is over 60, they very rarely appear in the media, and this is especially true for women (Bergström & Edström, 2018). This "symbolic annihilation" of women starts already in midlife, as women over 40 are largely excluded from marketing and popular culture (Gurrieri, 2021; Whiteman, 2024). When women in midlife and beyond appear, the media often presents them in a stereotypical, ageist way, where aging is either portrayed as a flaw that needs to be slowed down or hidden, or linked to health problems, where especially older people are portrayed as frail and in need of help (Clarke, 2017; Edström, 2018; Levy et al., 2014; Makita et al., 2021; Winterich, 2007).

The media has an agenda-setting role in society, where issues that are given space in the media are those that we come to consider important. Media representations also help to shape our views on various phenomena. Cultural notions reflected in the media thus contribute to reproducing ideas of gender and age (Bergström & Edström, 2018; Edström, 2018). As middle-aged and older women are so underrepresented in the media at large, stereotypical images of them have an ever greater impact, affecting their own self-image as well as the general perception of older people (Richards et al., 2012).

One argument against the importance of traditional

media's news evaluation and selection processes is that social media has made it possible for anyone to create and share content, thus increasing diversity for marginalized groups (Edström, 2018). The body-positive movement is one such example, giving visibility to previously underrepresented body types (Cohen et al., 2019). In a Swedish context, the movement goes by the name "body activism" and is based on a feminist intersectional perspective. Although body activism specifically addresses the discrimination of bodies that are larger than the norm, it also encompasses trans bodies, racified, disabled, and aging bodies. Despite this, the content published is still fairly uniform, where mostly conventionally attractive, white, and younger women are visible (Johansson, 2021).

There is relatively much previous research on older people's representation in traditional media (Bergström & Edström, 2018; Edström, 2018) but less in social media (see, however, Levy et al., 2014; Makita et al., 2021) and in the body-positive movement. Here, Sveningsson et al. (2022) argue that since the body-positive movement is relatively new in Sweden, the rules of the game are still being established. It is therefore important to investigate the conditions of participation: who can participate and what they do participate in.

Some previous studies have examined the body-positive movement in a Swedish context: how it is defined and experienced (Sveningsson et al., 2022), how it is expressed

(Johansson, 2021), and how it is portrayed in the media (Wikström, 2019). However, these studies largely focus on those who are most visible within the movement, i.e., younger women. This also applies to the research field internationally (Nelson et al., 2022). In this article, we want to broaden the picture by examining middle-aged and older women's experiences with and participation in the movement.

The purpose of this study is to investigate how middle-aged and older Swedish women who publish body-positive content online perceive the body-positive movement and their participation in it. We focus on three aspects in particular: their views on the media representation of older women, the potential of social media and the body-positive movement to create a broader representation, and their own participation in the movement.

Background

From fat activism to body positivity

Body positivity has its roots in the fat activist movement that emerged in the United States in the late 1960s, which sought to spark critical debate about and protest against discrimination against fat people (Afful & Ricciardelli, 2015). As a result of a lack of consensus around the movement's core, various sub-groups were formed, where some felt that the focus should be on the rights of fat people, while others saw this as linked to other forms of oppression, based on, for example, gender or "race" (Sveningsson et al., 2022).

The rise of social media in the 2010s enabled the movement to expand and gain more followers. With its broader participation, the focus shifted to a more general message of body positivity and body acceptance, where individuals were encouraged to think positively about themselves and their bodies. Although the body-positive movement has been found to increase women's body appreciation and body satisfaction (Nelson et al., 2022), the movement's development has also been criticized. The movement's inclusion of everybody, critics say, has watered down the movement by once again making the most marginalized bodies invisible (Cwynar-Horta, 2016; Pausé, 2015), in a process that Cooper (2016) compares to gentrification. The displacement of marginalized bodies can be observed in how the movement is presented in the media, where, for example, Wikström (2019) found that a fairly specific type of woman has often been chosen to portray the entire movement: mostly white, belonging to some form of cultural elite, and having many followers on their platforms. Content analyses of body-positive content point in different directions: some have found it to be dominated by white, young cis-women with normal to low overweight (Griffin et al., 2022; Webb et al., 2017), whereas others have found it to be more inclusive with respect to body type and "race", however not to age (Cohen et al., 2019).

The body-positive movement has also been criticized for joining forces with neoliberalism. Neoliberal ideology is based on ideas about individual responsibility, free choice, competition, and meritocracy, as well as the view of competition as something positive. Success is seen as the result of the individual's own efforts, and there is a belief in social mobility where anyone is believed to be successful if they try hard enough. The social structures that create advantages for some groups and individuals and disadvantages for others are, however, often overlooked (Girerd & Bonnot, 2020). Neoliberal ideology can be found in the body-positive movement's focus on appearance and bodies, which is easy to individualize; it becomes the individual woman's business to try to achieve beauty ideals. Furthermore, body positivity's association of empowerment with individualism and personal choices largely aims at changing individuals' views of themselves (Cwynar-Horta, 2016; Johansson, 2021; Sastre, 2016). With its focus on self-acceptance, critics say, the body-positive movement ignores the norms and structures that maintain inequality; the problem is framed as a question of people with deviant bodies not accepting themselves, rather than them being systematically exposed to prejudice and discrimination by the surrounding society. Neoliberal currents also exist in the commercialization of the body-positive movement, where some argue that as body-positive accounts grow in popularity and are paid to promote commercial products, they become commodified (see, for example, Cwynar-Horta, 2016). In doing so, says Cwynar-Horta, they deviate from their original purpose, and the content instead starts to resemble the dominant, appearance-obsessed mainstream content. In other words, instead of challenging the prevailing body ideals, the content becomes part of the capitalist system that contributes to upholding the ideals.

By placing social obstacles and opportunities on an individual level, the neoliberal ideology tends to be a system-justifying one, which decreases the relevance of and likelihood of collective action. In an experimental study, Girerd and Bonnot (2020) found that women who endorsed neoliberal beliefs or were primed with meritocracy were more prone to justifying the gender system: they identified less as feminists, saw collective action as less important, and were less likely to engage in collective action in favor of women. Related to this is the question of the various body activist movements' potential for change, where the body-positive branch, through its focus on individuals, has been perceived as less likely to achieve social change than fat activism, which to a greater extent sees oppression as a consequence of prevailing norms and structures that need to be solved on a societal political level (Sveningsson et al., 2022). Thus, although the body-positivist branch has increased visibility and put the movement on the agenda, it can at the same time, through its individualized focus, be said to disarm the movement.

An intersectional view on age and beauty ideals

Our society values and rewards aesthetically appealing human bodies and attractiveness, especially in women, whose gender identity, sexual desirability, social status, self-esteem, and actual worth are based on the extent to which they live up to the prevailing sociocultural beauty standards (Gosselink et al., 2008). In Western culture, beauty is tied to youth and is therefore seen as gradually diminishing or disappearing with age (Clarke, 2017; Gurrieri, 2021; Winterich, 2007). While men are more often valued based on their social and material assets, for women, beauty is one of the most important forms of capital to achieve social status (Clarke, 2017; Gosselink et al., 2008; Winterich, 2007). Because of this, aging affects women differently, and more negatively, than men. When examining attractiveness during life, Perlini, Bertolissi and Lind (1999) found that prevailing stereotypes about attractiveness persist even in old age, meaning that women have to look young to be considered attractive. Winterich (2007) describes how advertising aimed at women is flooded with anti-aging products and services, which, combined with the media's overrepresentation of young women, contributes to creating an ageist ideal of femininity and beauty linked to youthfulness, whiteness, and thinness. A general perception is that older women should do what they can to hide their aging or slow it down (Clarke, 2017; Winterich, 2007), and there are also notions that women who "have lost their youthful beauty should withdraw from social view" (Gosselink et al., 2008, p. 314). Especially when related to sexuality, the aging female body is treated as abject and surrounded by shame. This abjection needs to be managed, either by work on the self, i.e., women embracing their abjection, or hiding from public view (Whiteman & Kerrigan, 2023).

Intersectionality is a concept that was introduced in academia in the early 1980s, but was used long before that among non-white feminists to describe their experiences of double oppression (Carastathis, 2014). An intersectional perspective draws attention to the intersections of different power structures, according to the idea that power structures or grounds of discrimination cannot be understood separately but must be seen in relation to each other. For example, "women," "elderly," or "fat people" are not homogeneous groups, but there are large variations within the groups in terms of, for example, social class, sexuality, "race," etc., which are additional dimensions of power structures that need to be included in an analysis of the individuals' living conditions. Previous research has shown how this type of double oppression has direct negative consequences for individuals' identity construction, as it forces them to try to hide or suppress the characteristics that underlie the discrimination, in order to better fit into societal norms (Corlett & Mavin, 2014; Parent et al., 2013; Sartore & Cunningham, 2006).

As the discussion above points out, gender is a dimension that intersects with age. Ageism involves prejudices and

ideas based on age, which can lead to discrimination (Bergström & Edström, 2018). Robert Butler (1969), who originally coined the term ageism, had an intersectional perspective (albeit an implicit one), noting how social class, ethnicity, and age interacted in discrimination against older people. Ageism, according to Kligman and Graham (1989), has created a cultural perspective that has equated old with ugly. However, an aging appearance does not only mean a loss of beauty. Visible aging is also associated with the prejudices attributed to older people: while youthfulness is associated with health, autonomy, sexuality, and idealized forms of femininity and masculinity, aging is associated with asexuality, senility, fragility, and dependence (Clarke, 2017).

Something worth noting in a discussion of the importance of media representation is Aniulis et al.'s (2021) study of American women's view of the ideal body. The study showed how the image of the "ideal body" is malleable; when the women were exposed to a wider range of body types, including larger bodies, they were more likely to point out a normal-sized body as ideal, while when they were exposed to a narrower range or smaller bodies, they preferred a slimmer body. Similarly, Tiggemann et al. (2020) found that women who were shown photos of normal-sized bodies showed less bodily dissatisfaction and more body appreciation than women who were shown pictures of thin bodies, something that Nelson et al. (2022) showed applies also to older women. It is likely that the results of these studies apply not only to the question of body size but also to age and other body characteristics that are not currently included in the "ideal." This underlines the importance of representative media content; if media representation is broader, women's perception of the "ideal" is more likely to be widened, and with it, their body satisfaction and self-esteem.

Method

This study investigates how middle-aged and older Swedish women who publish body-positive content online perceive the media representation of older women, the potential of social media and the body-positive movement, and their own participation. To investigate this, semi-structured interviews were conducted.

We targeted individuals who self-identified as women, were over 45 years old, active on the platform Instagram, and published some type of self-produced body-positive content. Since the study focuses on the Swedish body-positive movement, the interviewees needed to be Swedish.

The interviewees were found via Instagram, where we identified accounts that had published posts with the hashtags #kroppssaktivism, #kroppssaktivist, #kroppsspositivitet, and #kroppsspositiv¹. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 8 women between 48

¹ #body activism, #body activist, #body positivity and #body positive.

and 72 years old. They were all active on social media; the number of their published posts varied between 344 and 3067, and they had between 1007 and 105,000 followers. Several of the interviewees can be described as influencers, and some of them sometimes published content in collaboration with companies. It turned out that several of the interviewees had a background as models, or related professions, such as photographers and founders of modeling agencies.

Since age is the primary focus of this study, it was the factor that was prioritized. Setting the threshold at 45 is relatively low when discussing aging women, but it is high compared to the women typically portrayed in research and media reports about the body positivity movement, which generally focus on individuals in their twenties to thirties. Similarly, the fact that media representation of women decreases as early as the age of 30 further motivates the age threshold (Bergström & Edström, 2018; Edström, 2018). Finally, the threshold had a practical reason: as there were so few individuals who met the selection criteria, we needed to make the age range broader than we originally had planned. We paid no attention to the participants' body weight but could observe that most interviewees were relatively average in terms of size. Ethnicity was also not considered, as only one interviewee deviated from the white norm. A more diverse sample would have been desirable to get a broader perspective, but it was not possible due to how few individuals we could find that met the selection criteria.

Information about the study's purpose was given in writing, and consent was obtained orally. All interviews were conducted via Zoom or FaceTime and took between 42 and 64 minutes. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and subjected to a reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2008; Braun & Clarke, 2019). The purpose of a thematic analysis is to identify patterns in the material, both recurring and deviant. A thematic analysis can be inductive and allow the empirical data to give rise to themes but can also be based on themes inspired by theory and previous research. In our study, an inductive approach was used, where we identified themes in the material that were then put against theory and previous research.

The names of the interviewees and other information that could identify them have been changed for reasons of confidentiality. All interview quotes have been translated from Swedish by the authors.

Results

In the following section, the results are presented in three themes related to the interviewees' views on the media representation of older women, the potential of social media and the body positivist movement, and their own participation.

Media representation

Previous research has shown that older women are significantly underrepresented in the media (Edström, 2018). This was something that the interviewees had all experienced and reflected on. However, when discussing the cause, they proposed different explanations. For a gender researcher, it is quite obvious that women's lack of visibility in the media has to do with gender-based inequalities in a society where men are seen as more important and interesting than women. This perspective was not often expressed by the interviewees. When societal, structural factors were mentioned at all, these were seen as part of the bigger picture, rather than being an explanation in itself:

Fredrika: Maybe they're not so active and take that space and want to be part of it, and at the same time there's this, you know, women who are over... in the non-fertile and sort of the graying age, and generally kind of phased stage of their lives... They are not invited, either, because they are not considered so interesting. So, I think there are two parallel reasons.

A perspective that was expressed more often, however, was that the lack of representation is the older women's own fault, as they choose not to be visible. This choice can sometimes be made through an active decision (not accepting offers or not taking up space through various types of self-publishing on social media). Above all, however, the interviewees talk about women's choice not to make themselves interesting:

Cecilia: To become boring, to allow yourself to become boring... It's also somewhere up to you. (...) I don't think it's a coincidence that the category [older women] is invisible, I really don't think so. And I believe it's very, what can I say, self-chosen.

According to the reasoning in the quote above, the lack of visibility is the women's fault, who allow themselves to become boring and uninteresting. What does it mean, then, to be interesting as a woman? The fact that women's visibility in the media decreases with age suggests that women's "interestingness" is related to youth and to what extent they can satisfy a male gaze. Several of the interviewees also talked about how women have traditionally had to please men and "be a little piece of jewelry," while men are the observers who should be pleased. The idea of the importance of making oneself interesting often recurred in the material: to deserve visibility in the media, you must be good-looking, sexy, and sensual. The view of youth and beauty as conditions for visibility thus seemed to be internalized and took the form of a premise that the interviewees seldom questioned.

The fact that women's status is based on being attractive

and satisfying the male gaze often leads to competition between women (Gosselink et al., 2008). From birth, women are socialized into a sociocultural environment of beauty culture and ageism, and because of its unreasonable demands, women's inevitable failures to live up to beauty ideals lead to negative self-image and bodily dissatisfaction, especially as they age. In a study of American women's relationship to other women within a sociocultural environment of beauty culture and ageism, Gosselink et al. found that the women did not feel that the demands ceased as they got older, but that they adapted to the demands of the beauty culture. They reasoned about ways to prevent signs of aging, for example, by dyeing their hair or undergoing cosmetic surgery, while also expressing fear of being judged for doing so. The interviewees were also themselves judgmental in their attitude towards women who took such measures, which reflects the paradox of the situation and points to the existence of double punishment.

Gosselink et al.'s results are echoed in how our interviewees talked about other women. On the one hand, they spoke negatively about women who fail to make themselves interesting and who let themselves deteriorate, while at the same time, they also spoke negatively about women who try to live up to the beauty ideal - these women were seen as desperate and complicit in objectification.

Eva: Men of the same age, they are not visible at all, and they are quite happy with it. While we women, 50+ say 'we are no longer visible', but then we objectify ourselves. We put some label on us that says, "I'm supposed to be pretty and sexy and sensual until I die," while men just live their lives; they're kind of fertile; they chase and fuck around and all that, and they get gray hair, but then they're only foxy, you know, and they just accept the situation.

In the quote above, we could see a certain social criticism in the statement that men are considered handsome and sexy even when older, while women are not. But there is also the blaming of attention-hungry women, where men are said to have a better and more relaxed attitude. However, the fact that men "accept the situation" is probably because their situation is generally better than that of women. As previously described, appearance is a form of capital that is particularly important for women, and there are different expectations and requirements for men and women in terms of how they are allowed to age (Clarke, 2017; Edström, 2018). If men do not feel the need to "show their fat bellies" in body positivist activism, this can be because their value has not traditionally been based on appearance. The much narrower female beauty ideal, on the other hand, justifies a resistance or a defense of the *raison d'être* of different body types (Clarke, 2018; Richards et al., 2011).

All interviewees had experienced how women and men are valued differently for their appearance and that they are not allowed to age in the same way.

Interestingly, these double standards were also reflected in the interviewees' own way of talking. Men's signs of aging were described in a more appealing way: as "the charm of the grey temples," "silverbacks," and being "foxy," while women were referred to as "old women," "raisins," or "old hags." The interviewees' tendency to use more negatively charged words when talking about older women and positively charged words about men can, on the one hand, be seen as a sign that they have adopted society's view of gender and aging, and it also signals a distancing from and lack of solidarity with women as a group. On the other hand, it can also be seen as a form of defense; to express oneself disparagingly about oneself can sometimes be a way to disarm external criticism.

Once older women are seen in the media, how are they represented? A phrase that recurred often in the interviewees' descriptions is "boring":

Cecilia: If I look at commercials, for example, it's a structure, like, if you're having a 60-year-old woman in an advertisement, then she's going to advertise painkillers, or joint medicine, or glazed-in patios, or garden equipment.

Although many older women are interested in gardening, it is not very glamorous. The same applies to an even greater extent to medicines and aids for various ailments and physical disabilities. Previous research (Edström, 2018; Levy et al., 2014) has found that older women are often associated with negative stereotypes, such as being weak and in need of help. If older women are mainly hired to advertise these types of products, the idea of the older woman as marked by frailty and illness is further reproduced.

The interviewees described the niche available to older women as very narrow, where they are assigned only specific roles or allowed to fulfill certain functions:

Doris: And in the end, we're just going to be the grandma, or just be mom, or... You see? That's what society is pushing for - that we shouldn't be anything other than that.

Women who appear in the media and in advertising are ascribed different characteristics and roles than men, and they are often portrayed in a one-sided way (Carastathis, 2014; Edström, 2018). In media reporting, men are more often associated with "serious" topics such as politics and other matters related to the public sphere, while women are portrayed in the private sphere and with topics related to beauty and appearance (Edström, 2018; Edström & Jacobsson, 2021). In advertising, men are portrayed outdoors or at work, while women are portrayed in a home environment. Women are also portrayed primarily in roles as nurturing parents, housewives, or sex objects. When women in advertisements have professions, these are fewer and more gender-stereotyped than those of

men (Valls-Fernández & Martínez-Vicente, 2007). Longitudinal studies show that these differences persist even as society has become more equal (Verhellen et al., 2016) and that the patterns are found all over the world, regardless of national differences in culture and gender equality (Matthes et al., 2016). When age is added to the gender dimension, women's niche seems to become even narrower – the position as a sex object disappears, as do the professional roles that used to exist, leaving only the domestic and family-related roles, i.e., “the grandmother”.

When older women are seen in contexts that the interviewees perceive as more fun, such as advertisements for fashion, they stated that it is a rather distinct type of older woman who usually meets the normative beauty ideals in all respects apart from age.

Annika: I think that older women, when they get to take up space, they're often, like, generally beautiful, so to speak. They have a traditionally beautiful appearance. When they appear in, for example, ads for clothes or things like that. It's not just any old and fat lady who appears, but traditionally very beautiful women.

The observation that older women who do appear in fashion ads tend to be very beautiful finds support in previous research. As older people have become a group with purchasing power, a market has emerged for more glamorous products and services (Richards et al., 2012). These are often advertised using models that are younger than the target group, or if older models are used, they are digitally or cosmetically enhanced and/or famous. Often a “heroes of aging” rhetoric is used, showing models who look youthful, healthy, and strong. This rhetoric, Richards et al. say, can contribute to ageism because it cultivates delusions of adolescence and productive adulthood in consumers, instead of making the “third age” and beyond meaningful. As Edström (2018) similarly notes, although the more positive images of older people characterized by “agelessness” might initially seem positive, in the long run, they become demanding. The inclusion of only exceptional older women who meet traditional beauty standards means that ordinary women remain invisible. One interviewee also commented on how this is even more true for women with immigrant backgrounds. This acknowledges the intersectional dimension of visibility, where old age as a basis for discrimination and invisibility seems to be further reinforced the more discriminated categories you belong to: gender, skin color, body size, and disability.

Bodil: You also very rarely see foreign [immigrant] people in the media. In general, people with other backgrounds are not so visible, so if you're older, you're probably even less visible.

Social media and the body-positive movement

With its opportunities for self-publishing, social media provides an arena for older women to gain more visibility. The publishing of age- and body-positive content, specifically, has the potential to change the image of older women and contribute to shifting the prevailing discourse about body and appearance norms. Most of the interviewees expressed a positive attitude towards social media, which they believed gave strength to “dare to just be” and “dare to take a stand.” At the same time, they felt that social media is not fully living up to its potential and that, instead of creating more diversity, it just provides more of the same type of content.

The perception that social media shows the same type of people and conveys the same body ideals as traditional media is supported by research, where, for example, Edström (2018) states that traditional media's selection processes often continue to set the agenda for what gets attention in social media. Another aspect that relates to social media's potential for empowerment is who can, wants to, and actually uses social media. Bergström and Edström (2018) discuss so-called digital divides, where older generations (60+) are identified as a risk group. In the digital media landscape, members of society are expected to keep up to date with media developments, and those who fail in doing this risk exclusion. Bergström and Edström therefore argue that even though social media has made participation more democratic in some respects, it has also made it more difficult for certain groups. This is noted by our interviewees, as they discuss older women's digital skills and unfamiliarity with digital media as a contributing factor to them not taking advantage of the opportunity for visibility on social media:

Annika: You have a different view of social media, and you also have a different view of yourself. You're not really used to taking up space in the way that you need to, to dare to post a photo of yourself without editing or kind of fixing, or retaking it several times to make it look good. And I think maybe that's different when you're over a certain age because you don't have the same experience with social media.

As concerns the interviewees' experiences of the body-positive movement specifically, the opinions were divided. Some interviewees described body positivity as an open and inclusive movement where “all bodies” are allowed to participate, while others saw it as a radical movement with strict limits for who is allowed to participate and implicit rules to live up to. These interviewees felt that belonging within the body-positive movement is primarily about whether you deviate from prevailing beauty ideals, where body size is the most decisive.

Even though the interviewees described their content as body-positive, they distanced themselves from the label “body activist” and did not see themselves as part of a

body positivist movement. Affiliation was, however, negotiated in the interviews, as one interviewee reflected on how accepting the body's changes with age could also be seen as body positive.

Greta: I usually write that I'm an age activist, more on that level (...) But that, [body positivity] is about accepting how your body changes too. So, in that sense, I'm body positive.

The inclusion of age as part of body positivity did not seem evident for the interviewees, and most of them expressed that they had not even reflected on it before. Instead, they used other terms to describe their involvement: age activist, health positive, and oldfluencer. The fact that the interviewees used other terms than body positivity to describe their activity could be explained by the diffuse definitions and boundaries around the concepts of body activism and body positivity, but it may also be that while they identified with the identity "older," they did not see their bodies as particularly norm-breaking. Quite contrarily, descriptions of seeing oneself as "ordinary" and "normal" often recurred in the interviews. The interviewees expressed a sense of belonging to their own labels (age activist, oldfluencer, health positive). The affinity was, however, described as being on an individual level where the interviewees paid attention to and appreciated other older women who take up space on Instagram, but they did not see their "struggle" as part of their own and expressed no desire to join forces with others to mobilize.

Participation

When we asked the interviewees about their driving forces to create body-positive content, one important motivation was linked to empowerment, where the interviewees described how they want to normalize the presence of older women in the media in general and counteract ageist stereotypes. Some of them also talked about inspiring action in others and encouraging them to dare to take up space themselves.

Doris: I try to encourage my followers to let women over 40, 50, or 60 be seen. And then I can do, for example, a reel, which is just too much, where I might have a crop top or something like that, just to show and exaggerate. Because we all, we must claim our space in the media noise.

The interviewees' stories about their participation sometimes referred to its social relevance: the interviewees were aware that older women are portrayed one-sidedly and stereotypically in the media; they talked about how the media image affects older women's self-image and how it is therefore important to resist, in this case by making more women visible. However, despite the recognition of discrimination against older women as a structural societal problem, the solutions proposed

were individual-based and built on the idea discussed above: since the lack of representation is due to older women choosing not to take up space, the solution is to get more women to be active in publishing their own content.

Besides empowerment, some interviewees describe their content creation as more or less financially motivated. Here it is likely of importance that several of them were or had been professionals in advertising, fashion, marketing, or as models, which means that commercial interest can be seen as an extension of their professions. The interviewees' views on commercialization varied. Some of them referred to the commercial side of the body-positive movement to question its authenticity, arguing that the entire movement is just about marketing and selling things. These interviewees saw the purposes of making money and making a difference "for real" as incompatible. Some interviewees also discussed the balancing act between wanting to advocate a message while also making their sponsors happy, which they felt could impair one's authenticity:

Cecilia: The problem, I think, is that as soon as you get followers, you become owned. And then it's hard to keep doing your thing. So, I think that just continuing to do your thing and not adapting to the money, it's a bloody challenge. Because it's someone who pays. And to be blunt, you have to keep posting the kind of content that sells, so I think it's really easy to get trapped.

The ideas expressed in the quote above are in line with the criticism previously leveled at the movement as a result of its alleged commercialization (Cwynar-Horta, 2016). However, as Cohen et al. (2019) point out, the two purposes (advocating the movement and selling products) do not necessarily have to be in conflict with each other. This is something that other interviewees reflect on:

Interviewer: Is there a contradiction between having a commercial interest and engaging in a struggle?

Hanna: Absolutely not. How are you going to make the struggle visible without being commercial, so to speak? Because what does commercial mean? Well, commercial means that it is visible in the media in various ways. The one doesn't exclude the other. If I don't do it in a commercial way, nobody sees, hears, or reads what I'm saying, showing in photos, or whatever. It must be out there. I mean, in the past, you went out into the streets and marched, but now you march on TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram.

What is interesting is how the interviewees' stories show a picture of visibility as conditional, which applies to both traditional and social media. To be seen, you need to ally yourself with more powerful actors in society, either by meeting the norms of beauty and youth and the news

evaluation of traditional media or by allying yourself with economic interests to achieve visibility in social media. Thus, in both contexts, the price of increasing visibility is to succumb to hegemony.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to investigate how middle-aged and older Swedish women who publish body-positive content online perceive the media representation of older women, the potential of social media and the body-positive movement, and their own participation.

Our interviewees discussed how the visibility of older women in the media is conditioned, where the space is limited in scope as well as content. They also acknowledged how subordinate categories are additive so that visibility decreases with age, gender, and further, the more subordinate categories an individual belongs to. However, while the interviewees referred to structural, societal norms and ideals to explain the portrayal of older women, they also framed the lack of representation as an individual choice for older women not to take up space.

As for the interviewee's view of social media, they acknowledged its potential transformative power in bridging biases and offering space to marginalized groups and to groups with multiple intersecting subordinations. They felt, however, that this potential is currently not realized, and that social media shows roughly the same content as traditional media. The interviewees' experiences reflect previous research: while social media provides an opportunity to increase representation and change unrealistic beauty ideals, it can also lead to the reproduction of the current situation (Aniulis et al., 2021; Edström, 2018; Kasana, 2014). The informants also stressed how increasing visibility presupposes that the older women have the skills and the will to use social media to take up space.

As for the own participation, the interviewees viewed their content as body positive. Something that surprised us, however, was that they did not feel connected to the body-positive movement, nor did they see their stance to increase the visibility and acceptance of aging bodies as part of it. Instead, they used their own terms to describe their activity: age activist, health positive, and oldfluencer. They felt a sense of belonging and identification with women in these categories. However, this sense of belonging was characterized by an individual perspective, where the interviewees saw themselves as independent agents, whose content creation and body-positive activity was something done individually rather than part of a collective movement.

An intersectional perspective

The results, taken together, can be discussed through the lens of intersectionality. The intersectional perspective sees power and discrimination as part of prevailing structures, where different collective identities entail different levels of power. These power structures or grounds of discrimination cannot be understood separately but need to be addressed together; thus, the core of intersectionality consists of paying attention to the intersections of power structures and how they affect and shape people's lives in different ways. (Carastathis, 2014).

The additive nature of subordination means that the more subordinate groups you belong to, the more marginalized you become. Previous research has shown how this type of double oppression forces individuals to try to hide or suppress the characteristics that underlie the discrimination in order to better fit into societal norms (Corlett & Mavin, 2014; Parent et al., 2013; Sartore & Cunningham, 2006). As for our interviewees, they already belong to two subordinate groups related to gender and age that may be stigmatizing enough in themselves. Adding more factors on top of this, such as ethnicity, skin color, body size, or disability, could be too much to handle, especially if the characteristics cannot be hidden or diminished. This situation may be part of the explanation for the interviewees' reluctance to identify with and become part of the body-positive movement.

The additive nature of subordination can also shed light on the overall lack of activist accounts that contain several different marginalized identities. Where age-activist accounts mainly show white, normal-weight, and classically beautiful individuals, the fat activist or body-positivist accounts mainly show individuals who are white, young, and in line with the prevailing beauty ideals (apart from size). In other words, it seems like body-related activism too, like our interviewees, prefer fighting against only one or two dimensions at a time. For the activism to really make a difference, it would need to include more different marginalized identities and body types at the same time.

A collective or individual perspective

One pattern that permeated all the study's themes was the existence of two opposing perspectives that framed the problem in different ways and pointed to different solutions to it. The collectivist perspective highlighted structural explanations, such as different conditions for women and men when it comes to representation and portrayal in the media. The perspective that was most recurrent, however, was the individualist one, which was expressed in several ways: the issue of representation was seen as women's own responsibility, the informants did not see their engagement as part of a movement but as an individual commitment, and they often expressed motives that had to do with self-realization and financial gain.

An individualist perspective can be linked to a neoliberal ideology. The discourse on individual freedom and responsibility and the focus on individuals as “architects of their own fortune” cause those who are subjected to oppression to deny the structural aspect and instead place the responsibility for the situation on themselves. This, say Girerd and Bonnot (2020), creates an ideological barrier for feminist identification, as attention is not paid to the social structures that systematically favor certain groups at the expense of others. Girerd and Bonnot (2020) showed how women who endorse neoliberal beliefs are more likely to justify the gender system; they identify less as feminists, see collective action as less important, and are less likely to engage in collective action in favor of women. Our interviewees’ views on representation and participation largely coincide with a neoliberalist view, notably the view of the individual as responsible for changing their situation. This may explain their reluctance to engage in collective action or even see it as an option. Instead of joining forces with others in the marginalized group, the proposed solution was for individuals to get support from more powerful, commercial actors.

Compared to fat activism, the more inclusive body positivity has been found to more often frame the problem of disqualification of deviant bodies at an individual level, where the issue is reduced to the individual’s

responsibility to cultivate self-acceptance (Sveningsson et al., 2022). Since the interviewees did not see themselves as part of even this loosely connected movement, they took one more step towards an individualization of participation. While this type of participation can be beneficial in contributing to increasing visibility for older women, its form and its adaptation to hegemony risk eroding the potential for change.

The conclusions in this study need to be interpreted with caution since the sample group was small. Furthermore, the fact that several of the interviewees were or had been professionals in the modeling industry and used Instagram to promote themselves or the business they were part of may partly explain their views on their content and participation and their strong emphasis on individualism, commercialization, and other expressions of neoliberal ideology. A larger number of interviewees with a more varied background could have given a different result with more diverse views. It would also be interesting to compare the results of our study with studies conducted in a different cultural context. Sweden is a highly individualist country, where individuals view themselves as independent and autonomous (Heinö, 2009), and, in addition to the neoliberal ideology, this could be a reason behind our interviewees’ individualized views.

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