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When activist influencers betray the cause: The case of plus-size influencers pursuing weight loss

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Résumé

Au cours des dernières années, un nombre croissant de marques activistes se sont éloignées ou ont contredit les causes sociopolitiques autour desquelles elles avaient construit leur identité de marque (Chandrachud, 2025 ; Stewart et al., 2024). Les marques activistes sont des marques qui intègrent des causes sociopolitiques au cœur de leur identité de marque et s'engagent dans l'activisme de marque en tant que stratégie axée sur les valeurs visant à mettre en œuvre des changements sociaux (Koch, 2020 ; Vredenburg et al., 2020).

Alors que des chercheurs ont examiné les risques, les avantages et les conditions de l'activisme de marque (p. ex., Vredenburg et al., 2020; Sibai et al., 2021), on en sait moins sur ce qui se produit lorsqu'une marque activiste adopte un comportement qui va à l'encontre de sa cause. Ce phénomène a émergé au sein de la communauté taille plus, où des influenceuses prônant l'acceptation du corps et l'inclusion des grandes tailles ont entrepris de perdre du poids, suscitant des réactions du public allant du soutien aux réactions négatives (Baker, 2024).

Ce mémoire examine les facteurs qui influencent les réponses des consommateurs face aux marques activistes qui adoptent un comportement en contradiction avec leur activisme. En mobilisant la légitimité de marque comme lentille théorique (Suchman, 1995), l'étude explore quelles pratiques atténuent les réactions négatives ou, au contraire, suscitent du soutien à la suite d'un changement dans l'identité d'une marque activiste. Une netnographie est utilisée pour analyser le contenu publié sur Instagram et les réactions des abonnés liées à la perte de poids et à la positivité corporelle chez quatre influenceuses de mode taille plus. L'analyse porte sur les pratiques des influenceuses avant, pendant et après l'adoption d'un comportement qui contredit leur activisme, ainsi que sur la manière dont leurs abonnés réagissent à ces pratiques.

Les résultats mettent en évidence trois pratiques clés qui influencent les réactions des consommateurs : (1) la gestion du contenu lié à l'activisme, (2) la présentation du comportement en contradiction avec la cause activiste, et (3) la négociation ou le rejet de

la cause elle-même. Les résultats montrent que le maintien des éléments centraux à la marque tout en poursuivant l'activisme, l'adoption d'un récit narratif cohérent avec la cause pour expliquer le comportement contradictoire, ainsi que la négociation du sens de la cause afin de justifier ce comportement contribuent à préserver la légitimité et à susciter du soutien. À l'inverse, l'incohérence, l'arrêt de l'activisme, et le rejet explicite de la cause déclenchent le désengagement des abonnés et les réactions négatives.

Mots clés : activisme de marque, marque influenceur, marque humaine, légitimité de marque, body-positive, positivité corporelle

Méthodes de recherche : Netnographie

Abstract

In recent years, a growing number of activist brands have retreated from or contradicted the sociopolitical causes around which they built their brand identities (Chandrachud, 2025; Stewart et al., 2024). Activist brands are brands that integrate sociopolitical causes into their core identity and engage in brand activism as a values-driven strategy aimed at enacting social change (Koch, 2020; Vredenburg et al., 2020). While prior research has examined the risks, benefits, and conditions of brand activism (e.g., Vredenburg et al., 2020; Sibai et al., 2021), less is known about what happens when an activist brand engages in behaviour that is at odds with its cause. This phenomenon has emerged within the plus-size community, with body-positive and size-inclusive influencers pursuing intentional weight loss, prompting audience responses ranging from support to backlash (Baker, 2024).

This thesis investigates the factors shaping consumer responses to activist brands that engage in behaviour at odds with their activism. Drawing on brand legitimacy as a theoretical lens (Suchman, 1995), the study explores which practices mitigate backlash or elicit support following a change in activist brand identity. A netnography is employed to analyze Instagram content and audience reactions related to weight loss and body positivity across four plus-size fashion influencers. The analysis examines the influencers' practices before, during, and after engaging in behaviour that contradicts their activism, as well as how their audiences respond to these practices.

The findings identify three key practices that shape consumer responses: (1) the management of advocacy-related content, (2) the framing of behaviour at odds with the activist cause, and (3) the negotiation or rejection of the cause itself. Results show that maintaining core brand elements while sustaining advocacy, framing contradictory behaviour through narratives coherent with the cause, and negotiating the meaning of the cause to justify contradictory behaviour help preserve legitimacy and elicit support. Conversely, inconsistency, discontinuation of advocacy, incoherent narratives,

opportunistic decoupling, and explicit rejection of the cause trigger disengagement and backlash.

Keywords: brand activism, influencer brand, human brand, brand legitimacy, body positivity

Research methods: Netnography

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List of abbreviations and acronyms

BoPo/BOPO: Body Positivity

HAES: Health at Every Size

SBN: Shiny by Nature

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Sage Vegan Bistro is a Los Angeles restaurant that opened in 2011 and promoted veganism as an ethical and environmental choice. When its owner announced in 2024 that the restaurant would begin serving meat and dairy products, she became the target of intense backlash, ranging from critical comments to death threats (Stone, 2024). Many influencers who built a following based on their vegan activism and later announced they reintroduced animal products in their diets have faced a similar fate (Abraham, 2021). On the other hand, some have mentioned receiving more support than criticism (Abraham, 2021; de Bellefonds, 2020). For these influencers, advocacy for the vegan cause was integral to their brand identity, but their choice to include animal products in their diet was at odds with that cause. Brands that adopt a sociopolitical cause and integrate it into their identity have been described as activist brands (Koch, 2020). Thus, engaging in behaviour at odds with a brand's activist cause entails a change in brand identity, which may trigger a strong consumer response. As seen in the case of the vegan activist influencers, this response is often polarized, divided between support and backlash. However, the factors leading to a positive or negative response remain unclear. Understanding the factors associated with the backlash or support of an activist influencer engaging in behaviour at odds with its cause is thus an important topic, especially as several brands are retreating from their progressive activist stance (Chandrachud, 2025; Stewart et al., 2024).

Brand activism has been defined as a marketing strategy, driven by a brand's inherent values, in which a brand adopts a sociopolitical cause to enact social change (Vredenburg et al., 2020). Extant literature on brand activism has thus far focused on four themes. First, research has examined the ways in which brands engage in activism, highlighting that activism may range from being outspoken to more "behind-the-scenes" (Hirsch, 2016; Vredenburg et al., 2020). The more vocal the activism, the higher the expectations for the brand to be consistent in its activist practices (Hirsch, 2016). Second, research has emphasized authenticity as one of the main predictors of successful brand activism (Jain et al., 2024; Mirzaei et al., 2022; Sibai et al., 2021; Vredenburg et al., 2020). Authentic

brand activism is aligned with a brand's core values and is more likely to elicit positive consumer responses (Vredenburg et al., 2020). In contrast, inauthentic brand activism is decoupled from a brand's values and often deemed opportunistic, leading to backlash (Vredenburg et al., 2020). Third, the literature has identified brand–cause fit as a defining condition for the outcomes of brand activism. Indeed, even authentic activism may alienate consumers when there is extreme incongruence between the brand and the cause it supports (Cammarota et al., 2021; Vredenburg et al., 2020). However, studies also indicate that moderate or “optimal” incongruence may sometimes delight consumers, provided that the deviation from expectations is perceived as non-threatening and coherent with the brand's core identity (Mirzaei et al., 2022; Vredenburg et al., 2020). Finally, studies have examined the link between brand activism and legitimacy. An activist brand's activities often aim to drive cultural and institutional change to legitimate a cause (Koch, 2020; Moumade et al., 2024). Recent work grounded in institutional theory further shows that brand activism frequently emerges in response to shifts in sociocultural norms that threaten a brand's legitimacy, prompting brands to engage in institutional work to sustain it (Aboelenien & Nguyen, 2024). Furthermore, when a brand makes activism part of its identity, its own brand legitimacy is impacted by its advocacy-related practices. Brand legitimacy is based on the perception that a brand's actions are appropriate and desirable, adhering to social norms (Suchman, 1995). An activist brand may gain and maintain legitimacy by responding to its consumers' interests, adhering to its activist cause's values, and keeping its practices (both activist and otherwise) coherent with past actions (Moumade et al., 2024; Suchman, 1995). Legitimacy may also be lost due to an unexpected event or a moral transgression, resulting in the brand's activism coming across as opportunistic (Moumade et al., 2024; Suchman, 1995).

While some recent studies have identified that inconsistent brand activism negatively impacts a brand's image and consumer satisfaction (Mahmud & Guzman, 2025; Malik et al., 2025; Thomas & Fowler, 2023), less is known about the factors that mitigate or exacerbate consumer backlash after a brand falters in its activism. Consequently, this study aims to explore the factors associated with a negative or positive consumer response to an activist brand engaging in behaviour at odds with its activism. More specifically,

this research seeks to address the following question: Which practices can activist brands adopt to mitigate backlash in response to a change in their brand identity that is at odds with the cause they have espoused? Legitimacy is adopted as a theoretical lens to examine this question. Brand legitimacy as conceptualized by Suchman (1995) highlights the ways in which a brand's audience perceives its practices and assesses their propriety. This allows for a better understanding of the reasons behind a brand's actions eliciting support or backlash from its audience.

I examine this research question in the context of body-positive and size-inclusive, plus-size influencers who have pursued intentional weight loss, a phenomenon that has become increasingly common in the last three years (Baker, 2024). Like the vegan activists, these influencers built their brand identity around body positivity or size inclusivity, becoming activist influencers (Errman and Leban, 2026). By undergoing intentional weight loss and promoting it, they engage in a behaviour at odds with the body positivity movement. These influencers have been met with divided responses from the communities they built, receiving both support and backlash. Whereas some followers praise them for their authenticity when sharing their weight loss journey, others accuse them of using the body positivity movement to build their brand. This study employs netnography to analyze the case of four plus-size influencers who have lost weight. Through this method, I analyze the influencers' Instagram content related to body positivity and weight loss before, during and after they engaged in behaviours at odds with the cause. Their audience's reactions in the comment sections are also examined to understand how influencers' practices foster support or exacerbate backlash.

Findings reveal three brand practices that affect an activist brand's legitimacy after engaging in behaviour at odds with its activism, thus influencing consumer response: (1) the management of advocacy-related brand activities; (2) the framing of the behaviour at odds with the activist brand's cause; (3) and the reframing of the activist brand's cause. The study thus contributes to the literature on brand activism and legitimacy.

This thesis is structured as follows: Chapter two presents a literature review on brand activism, legitimacy and influencer brands. Chapter three describes and justifies the

methodology used for this study. The results are presented and analyzed in chapter four. Chapter five is dedicated to discussing the results, specifying the theoretical and managerial contributions, the limitations of the study, and future research avenues.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter aims to review the literature on the concepts relevant to this study. The first section defines brand activism and provides an overview of its practices and outcomes. The second section defines legitimacy, the study's theoretical lens, and describes how brands may gain, maintain, lose, and repair brand legitimacy. Finally, the third section provides a conceptual background on the study's empirical context by defining influencer brands and influencer activism.

2.1 Brand Activism

2.1.1 Defining Brand Activism

Brand activism is a rapidly growing field of interest across management, marketing, and organizational studies (Cammarota et al., 2023). However, despite the rising interest, brand activism remains an underdeveloped construct in academic literature, lacking well-defined metrics and theoretical grounding (Cammarota et al., 2023; Vredenburg et al., 2020). Much of the literature positions brand activism as an evolution of corporate social responsibility (CSR), but emphasizes that it differs from CSR due to its association with a brand's inherent values and identity (Vredenburg et al., 2020)

Beyond this distinction, researchers' definition and characterization of the concept vary. Manfredi-Sanchez (2019) defines brand activism as “a communication strategy whose aim is to influence the citizen-consumer by means of messages and campaigns created and sustained by political values.” (p. 348). This conceptualization of brand activism highlights its symbolic nature, meant to improve the brand's reputation without promoting the brand's products or services. According to this view, brand activism is characterized by its support for controversial and usually progressive causes, without associating with any political parties. Moreover, Manfredi-Sanchez (2019) underlines the ways in which

brand activism borrows from social movements' practices employed in their digital activism campaigns.

Vredenburg et al. (2020) define brand activism as “a purpose- and values-driven strategy in which a brand adopts a non-neutral stance on institutionally contested sociopolitical issues, to create social change and marketing success” (p. 446). This definition aligns with Manfredi-Sanchez's, as both studies conceive of brand activism as a brand's values-based stance on a controversial sociopolitical issue, resulting in social change and marketing success for the brand (Manfredi-Sanchez, 2019; Vredenburg et al., 2020). However, whereas Manfredi-Sanchez (2019) describes it as a communication strategy, Vredenburg et al. (2020) broaden the definition by including brand practices that go beyond messaging.

Building on this distinction, Koch's (2020) case study about the alternative milk brand Oatly distinguishes a brand with activist elements from an activist brand. Brands with activist elements use activism as a temporary, low-risk add-on, encouraging consumers to change at the individual level (Koch, 2020). In comparison, activist brands make activism a part of their core identity, aimed at enacting cultural and systemic change, and resulting in legitimacy building for both the brand and its activist cause (Koch, 2020).

Spry et al. (2021) offer a complementary perspective: identifying brand activism as a strategy to engage in transformative branding. In their view, brand activism serves to challenge the dominant social paradigm by amplifying stakeholders' voices and defending their values pertaining to sociopolitical issues in hopes of transforming society (Spry et al., 2021). This perspective is reminiscent of cultural branding (Holt, 2016), which entails a brand promoting an emerging ideology, often embraced by a subculture, to defy cultural orthodoxy (existing conventions), and ultimately enacting institutional change.

The various perspectives outlined suggest that brand activism extends beyond symbolic communication. Instead, it can be understood as a form of institutional work, whereby brands seek to influence the norms and practices governing a given field (Lawrence and

Suddaby 2006). In this sense, activist brands may be conceptualized as institutional entrepreneurs.

Institutional entrepreneurs are defined as “people or groups who attempt to act on their dissatisfaction in order to change the field” (Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013, p. 1237). They are characterized by their capacity to unsettle institutionalized practices and enact change. As is the case for activist brands (Moumade, 2024), legitimacy plays a central role in determining who is perceived as a credible institutional entrepreneur. Actors with personal experience or advocacy history are often seen as more legitimate (Maguire et al., 2004). For instance, in the AIDS treatment movement, legitimacy was attributed to those directly impacted by the disease or those with a history of advocacy, while individuals profiting from the crisis were viewed as less legitimate (Maguire et al., 2004). Even if an individual might not regard themselves as an institutional entrepreneur, if their actions are perceived by their community as influential in an institutional environment, they will be identified as “inspiring institutional entrepreneurs” (Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013). In the context of Scaraboto and Fischer’s (2013) study of plus-sized consumers, plus-sized bloggers with bigger followings were deemed institutional entrepreneurs regardless of their own self-perception.

Furthermore, institutional entrepreneurship is embedded within existing institutional logics (Demsar et al., 2023). As Leca and Naccache (2006) put it, “Institutional entrepreneurship must provide a model of change in which actors can create and change institutions without disembedding from the social world” (p. 628). Social reality is shaped by pre-established structures that actors must engage with to reproduce or change existing institutions (Leca, Naccache, 2006). This applies to activist brands, whose efforts to challenge institutions are constrained by existing norms within the fields they operate in.

2.1.2 Brand Activism Strategies

As with brand activism’s definition, the literature offers multiple ways of conceptualizing how brands may engage in activism. Research on brand activism suggests that it varies

along several dimensions, including visibility, authenticity, and congruence with the cause.

Hirsch (2016) identifies four ways through which brands may engage in activism, categorized by their visibility and degree of confrontation. Calling for radical change represents a high-risk strategy that directly challenges existing institutions, but it also exposes brands to accusations of hypocrisy if their practices are inconsistent with their claims. Vocal activism similarly involves public support for a cause through messaging or sponsorship and remains vulnerable to backlash if the support is withdrawn. In contrast, Hirsch suggests quiet engagement in the form of “consistent actions behind the scenes,” though it might lead to criticism for being inefficient (2016, p. 48). Finally, strict neutrality entails avoiding public stances altogether. However, Hirsch (2016) it has become complicated for brands to remain silent on polarizing sociopolitical issues. Read through an institutional lens, these strategies differ in the extent to which they attempt to disrupt dominant norms or work within them.

Vredenburg et al. (2020) similarly acknowledge differences in the visibility of a brand’s activism, distinguishing between overt activist messaging and more discreet forms of activism. However, they also consider authenticity, emphasizing the importance of a brand’s values and activism aligning. Authentic brand activism involves both a high degree of messaging and a high degree of engagement with a cause through the brand’s practices and framed by the brand’s inherent values. Conversely the inauthentic kind relies on a high degree of messaging but is decoupled from the brand’s practices and values; it is often opportunistic and not meant to help the cause (Vredenburg et al., 2020).

A brand’s activism may also be defined by brand-cause fit, or the degree of congruence between a brand and the cause it supports (Nan & Heo, 2007). Barone et al. (2007), identify three ways in which a brand may fit with a cause and subsequently choose to support it. First, if the function of a brand’s offering aligns with the cause’s goals; second, if the brand’s image aligns with the cause’s values; third if the brand and the cause’s target audiences overlap (Barone et al., 2007). Vredenburg et al. (2020) suggest a framework

for optimal incongruence, proposing that a moderate incongruity or “lack of fit” between a brand and a cause could delight consumers. For a brand to achieve this, its activist message should diverge from standard norms while remaining somewhat bounded by them, and the divergence should seem unthreatening to consumers (Vredenburg et al., 2020). This thesis focuses on activist brands whose identities are inseparable from their activism and whose engagement is both authentic and initially congruent with the cause they espouse.

2.1.3 Brand Activism Outcomes

Research has identified the positive outcomes that may result from a brand engaging in brand activism. The success of brand activism as a marketing strategy is largely evaluated through consumer reactions to a brand’s activist practices. When a brand’s activism is perceived as authentic and congruent with its core values, consumers are more likely to feel love, respect, and admiration for the brand (Cammarota et al., 2021; Vredenburg et al., 2020). Consumer trust and loyalty also tend to increase when consumers feel close to the cause and the brand is seen as a legitimate supporter of that cause (Moumade, 2024).

However, brand activism also entails risks and may lead to negative outcomes. A brand’s legitimacy may be too low to support a cause, resulting in negative reactions from consumers (Moumade, 2024). A brand may be considered an illegitimate supporter if its core values are misaligned with the cause, if its activist communications do not align with its practices, or if its products or services do not benefit its audience (Moumade, 2024). In such cases, activism may be interpreted as inauthentic and trigger negative emotions, especially when consumers feel close to the cause but perceive the brand’s legitimacy as low (Moumade, 2024). This could result in backlash, including boycotts and refusal to identify with the brand (Cammarota et al., 2021). Moreover, activist brands are especially vulnerable to strong negative reactions during value-related crises, especially if the brand’s transgressions are contradictory to the brand’s activist stance (Francioni et al., 2025; Mahmud & Guzman, 2025). Research has also found that inconsistent brand activism negatively influences consumers’ attitudes (Mahmud & Guzman, 2025; Malik

et al., 2025; Thomas & Fowler, 2023). When brands are inconsistent in their activism or contradict it, consumers' perception of brand hypocrisy increases (Mahmud & Guzman, 2025; Malik et al., 2025). However, knowledge of the factors and brand practices that impact audience reactions amidst inconsistent brand activism remains limited.

2.2 Legitimacy

2.2.1 Defining Legitimacy

Brand activism can create legitimacy for a cause or an emerging category by pushing for wider acceptance of the brand's practices in its field of operation (Koch, 2020). At the same time, brand activism can build the brand's own legitimacy by letting the brand communicate its values and commitment and gain pragmatic, moral, and cognitive legitimacy through consistent support for the cause (Moumade et al., 2024). Suchman (1995, p. 574) defines brand legitimacy as "a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions." According to Suchman (1995), the subjective creation of legitimacy arises from observers reacting to an organization, making it a perception or assumption. Legitimacy is thus socially constructed, as it reflects the alignment between an organization's actions and the shared beliefs of a social group.

Brand legitimacy helps explain how consumer support for a brand is contingent on the presence of a minimum level of social responsibility in its marketing activities, which impacts the effectiveness of the brand's other activities (Handelman & Arnold 1999). Therefore, it is a valuable tool for understanding the role of marketing when it comes to changing markets and gaining consumer acceptance (Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013). Extant literature has examined how brand legitimacy shapes the consumer-brand relationship, both in terms of how the consumer perceives the brand and how they interact with it (Handelman & Arnold 1999; Kates, 2004; Suchman, 1995).

Suchman (1995) outlines and defines three main types of legitimacy, each resting on a different behavioural dynamic: pragmatic legitimacy, moral legitimacy, and cognitive legitimacy. Pragmatic legitimacy often stems from direct exchanges between an organization and its audience and is based on a cost-benefit evaluation of those exchanges. Influence legitimacy is a type of pragmatic legitimacy resulting from organizations or actors actively responding to and integrating the larger interests of their constituents in their practices (Suchman, 1995). For example, advocates for AIDS treatment in Canada gained pragmatic, and more specifically, influence legitimacy by going beyond addressing immediate concerns. They promoted structured consultations that benefited both patients and businesses, and they incorporated the perspectives and priorities of affected communities into broader decision-making processes. They worked with patients to ensure their voices were heard in policy discussions (Maguire et al., 2004). In doing so, they benefited their constituents, gaining pragmatic legitimacy.

In contrast to pragmatic legitimacy's transactional nature, moral legitimacy depends on an organization's audience assessing whether it truly benefits the community and whether its activities align with "the right thing to do" (Kates, 2004; Suchman, 1995). The audience makes this assessment based on its own socially constructed value system (Suchman, 1995). Moral legitimacy can provide insights into how brands are perceived in non-brand-focused communities, such as the gay community, which has been known to hold brands morally accountable for their actions (Kates, 2004). Additionally, a lack of marketing activities aimed at sustaining moral legitimacy has been shown to lessen the effectiveness of profit-focused marketing strategies (Handelman & Arnold, 1999), underlining the importance of moral legitimacy when it comes to maintaining consumer support. According to Suchman (1995), though pragmatic and moral legitimacy differ in the way they are evaluated and perceived by audiences, they both can be achieved by organizations through participating in explicit public discussion. Audiences employ public discourse both for cost-benefit appraisals and ethical judgments, and joining the conversation often affords organizations legitimacy.

Cognitive legitimacy, on the other hand, is more difficult to obtain and manipulate (Suchman, 1995). Suchman (1995) explains that while moral legitimacy and cognitive legitimacy both involve larger cultural rules, cognitive legitimacy heavily relies on “taken-for-grantedness” and comprehensibility. Taken-for-grantedness implies that an alternative to the organization is unthinkable, imparting it with uncontested legitimacy. Comprehensibility means that an organization’s activities are plausible to its audience, linking larger belief systems with the audience’s daily reality. Although it is more difficult to achieve, cognitive legitimacy allows organizations’ activities to be perceived as predictable, meaningful, and inviting to their audience.

2.2.2 Gaining, Maintaining, and Repairing Legitimacy

Gaining Legitimacy

There are three main strategies for obtaining legitimacy: conforming, selecting a less demanding environment, and manipulating environmental structure (Suchman, 1995). Suchman (1995) suggests that organizations can gain legitimacy through different forms of conformity. They may gain pragmatic legitimacy by responding to audience needs and, in some cases, offering audiences some degree of decision-making access. They may gain moral legitimacy by aligning with principled ideals and producing outcomes that are perceived as beneficial. They may gain cognitive legitimacy by aligning with established standards of procedure. However, if an organization does not want to conform to a certain environment, it can also manipulate its structure or select a different environment within which to obtain legitimacy. For example, it may seek a more forgiving institutional environment or appeal to alternative moral criteria that better align with its goals. A comparable dynamic can be observed at the consumer level. Scaraboto and Fischer (2013) show that plus-size consumers mobilize alternative institutional logics adjacent to the dominant field to attain legitimacy on different terms, rather than accepting existing norms. Finally, an organization might seek to make an environment conform to its own values by manipulating environmental structure. Here, the organization must prime the

cultural environment by disseminating its “new explanations of social reality” and developing a base of support in accordance with its needs (Suchman, 1995, p. 591).

Maintaining and Losing Legitimacy

Legitimacy can be fragile, so once obtained, it must be carefully maintained. According to Suchman (1995), even the most stable organizations are threatened by internal missteps or external disruptions. An organization should follow the ebb and flow of the cultural environment by closely monitoring it but also be able to foresee its audience’s potential reactions and behave accordingly. New activities or unexpected events, even if they follow changes in the cultural environment, might alienate audiences and awaken scrutiny, leading to backlash (Kates, 2004; Suchman, 1995). In fact, Kates’ (2004) study about the gay men’s community found that informants quickly condemned brands that alienated them and were perceived as antigay, leading to consumer punishment such as boycotts. If scrutiny is awakened, the brand must conform to its environments’ norms. Demsar et al. (2023) show that when brands are criticized within broader macro-social movements, legitimacy maintenance often requires self-regulation that aligns the brand’s practices with the movement’s expectations.

To avoid awakening scrutiny, brands must keep exchanges predictable at a pragmatic level by consistently meeting their consumers’ needs (Suchman, 1995). Moreover, they must behave in a way that exemplifies responsibility and downplays potential concerns at a moral level (Suchman, 1995). This pacification of constituents is crucial because if concerns raised within the audience gain too much attention, the institutional environment might change, weakening the organization’s legitimacy. This is particularly present in online brand communities, where legitimacy is challenged and regularly contested (Hakala et al., 2017). Like offline communities, online communities negotiate legitimacy according to their shared values and beliefs (Hakala et al., 2017). The online community’s actions can either stabilize existing cultural codes or reshape the collective norms and judgments of the community (Hakala et al., 2017). This reshaping of the norms happens when members of the community raise concerns about a brand, often during a period of

institutional change. Some community members take advantage of instability and change to express their “deviant judgments” and challenge an organization’s legitimacy (Bitektine & Haack, 2015). In Ferreira and Chimenti’s (2020) study of social media influencer psychiatrists (SMIPs), legitimacy appears as something that is continuously negotiated by the audience in comment sections. Amongst the audience, they identify defenders who reinforce SMIPs’ legitimacy by sharing personal testimonies about the influencer’s positive impact. Conversely, they find critics who challenge legitimacy through cognitive and moral arguments, most notably by questioning credibility and ethics and by portraying SMIPs as motivated by personal gain rather than professional or public-interest concerns. Such contestations can easily destabilize an organization’s legitimacy and lead to a decline in cultural support, which, if gone unnoticed, could cause a loss of legitimacy (Suchman, 1995).

Although legitimacy is resilient to certain events (Suchman, 1995), a departure from societal norms can also render a brand illegitimate (Kates, 2004). Moral legitimacy can be lost if a brand’s social-oriented actions come across as self-interested (Suchman, 1995). For example, Kates (2004) found that Coors lost its legitimacy in the eyes of gay men due to a perception that the brand was secretly homophobic and using the gay community for profit. This is associated with the concept of decoupling, which allows organizations to maintain seemingly legitimate structures without necessarily constraining their activities to these formal structures (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Based on Meyer and Rowan’s work, Handelman and Arnold (1999, p. 34) defined decoupling as: “incorporating visible but often symbolic structures that demonstrate adherence to social norms while masking core activities that [. . .] are offensive in the institutional environment.” If a brand is known to employ decoupling, it could be seen as self-serving or uninterested in its audience’s well-being, subsequently changing the basis of its legitimacy, and fostering a desire to punish the brand (Kates, 2004).

Repairing Legitimacy

If legitimacy is lost, the same strategies of conforming and selecting or manipulating environments can be used to regain it, but only after the cause of legitimacy loss is addressed (Suchman, 1995). Suchman (1995) outlines four main response strategies that organizations may mobilize following a legitimacy-threatening crisis. First, organizations may deny the problem occurred at all. Second, they may excuse the problem by acknowledging the event while questioning moral responsibility, for instance by attributing it to constraints or external actors. Third, organizations may justify the disruption by reframing it as consistent with prevailing beliefs and, thereby presenting it as acceptable even if it departs from prior expectations. Finally, organizations may explain the event by framing it within a supportive worldview, preserving cognitive legitimacy by making the disruption coherent in the eyes of their constituents (Suchman, 1995).

2.3 Influencer Brand

2.3.1 Influencers as Human Brands

Much of the research on influencers to date has examined them as strategic collaborators for brands to work with, not unlike celebrities, in the context of influencer marketing (Aw & Agnihotri, 2024; Fowler & Thomas, 2023). However, studies have also identified them as human brands in their own right. Human brands are media persona with brand-like features that can be professionally managed through marketing efforts (Thomson, 2006). While the concept is often associated with celebrities (Centeno & Wang, 2017; Moulard et al., 2015; Thomson, 2006), Ki et al. (2020) argue that influencers are an emerging type of human brand.

Influencers distinguish themselves from other human brands in numerous ways. Firstly, whereas celebrities maintain a degree of separation with their audience, influencers purposely foster closeness and intimacy with their audience, often by sharing personal details (Baker & Rojek, 2020). This self-disclosure allows influencers' followers to identify with and relate to them, making them seem more trustworthy than traditional

celebrities (Baker & Rojek, 2020; Schouten et al., 2021). Influencers are also able to foster closeness through interactivity, such as replying to their audience's comments on social media (Kim & Kim, 2023).

Ki et al. (2020) examine the attributes that strengthen influencers' bond with their followers through the fulfillment of three needs. First, they found that if an influencer reflects what their audience wants for their ideal selves, they fulfill their ideality need and foster attachment based on inspiration. Second, if the audience identifies with the influencer and enjoys their personality, the influencer fulfills their relatedness need and strengthens their attachment based on similarity. Finally, if the influencer's content makes the audience feel they have learned something new, they fulfill their competence need and strengthen their attachment based on informativeness. The fulfillment of all three needs intensifies the followers' attachment to the influencer, increasing their intention of purchasing products shared by the influencer (Ki et al., 2020).

The attributes distinguishing influencers from traditional human brands also make it more likely for their followers to form a parasocial attachment (Baker & Rojek, 2020). Indeed, openness and interactivity have been found to increase consumers' feelings of parasocial interaction (Labrecque, 2014), as well as value-sharing and attractiveness (Kim & Kim, 2020; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020; Yuan & Lou, 2020). Labrecque (2014) describes parasocial interaction as "an illusionary experience, such that consumers interact with personas (i.e., mediated representations of presenters, celebrities, or characters) as if they are present and engaged in a reciprocal relationship" (p. 135). Parasocial relationships can entail many benefits for influencers, as they increase consumer satisfaction, trust, and loyalty (Kim & Kim, 2020; Labrecque, 2014; Thomson, 2006). Moreover, parasocial relationships make it more likely for consumers to purchase products recommended by influencers (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020; Yuan & Lou, 2020).

2.3.2 Activist influencers

The literature on brand activism in the context of human brands has been primarily focused on celebrities (Alexander, 2013; Click, Lee & Holladay, 2015; Jain et al., 2024; Park & Hoffner, 2024). However, recent research has expanded this focus to include the rise of social media influencers, who now occupy an important space in brand activism. One of the earlier explorations of influencer activism, termed “networked microcelebrity activism,” defines it as non-institutional actors using social media to present their political and personal identities, aiming to garner public attention for their causes through a blend of testimony, advocacy, and citizen journalism (Tufekci, 2013). Unlike traditional celebrities, these influencers engage with their audience not as fans but as political allies, opponents, or mediators, with attention serving as a strategic resource rather than a tool for personal fame (Marwick & Boyd, 2011; Tufekci, 2013). Recent work identifies different ways influencers intersect with activism, one being high-profile influencers who centre their personal brand on progressive politics, making activism a core and sustained component of their content (Dean, 2023). This type of influencer aligns with Errman and Leban’s (2026) definition of activist influencers as advocates for sociopolitical causes who use social media tools, such as hashtags, viral campaigns, and advocacy for organizations to drive awareness and social change.

Furthermore, research has shown that influencer activism is often better received than brand activism by consumers. In a comparative study about consumer reactions to Black Lives Matter content, Yang et al. (2021) found that influencer activism generated higher engagement, praise, and empathy compared to brand-generated content, making influencers more effective in conveying social messages. In contrast, brands faced greater criticism, largely due to consumer skepticism about their authenticity and the high expectations surrounding their financial capabilities and broader reach (Yang et al., 2021). As is the case for non-human brands, perceived authenticity is critical in shaping consumer attitudes towards influencer and celebrity activism. (Jain et al., 2024) When consumers believe that a celebrity’s activism is genuine, it positively impacts their loyalty and identification with the celebrity. Authenticity strengthens the personal connection (self-connection) that fans feel towards the celebrity, which enhances brand loyalty and identification (Jain et al., 2024). However, Thomas & Fowler (2023) found that activism

that is well received also raises consumer expectations for ongoing involvement in sociopolitical causes. If influencers fail to meet these heightened expectations, their perceived authenticity declines, as do consumer attitudes towards their brand (Thomas & Fowler, 2023). The study explains temporary or inconsistent activism not only fails to maintain positive perceptions but can lead to more negative evaluations compared to influencers who never engage in activism (Thomas & Fowler, 2023). The studies cited above use examples of influencer activism that would fit into Jonathan Dean's (2023) first category, that of mainstream influencers who may use activism to enhance their existing brand. However, less is known about the outcomes of influencer activism of the second category: influencers who make activism a core part of their content, also known as activist influencers (Errman and Leban, 2026). These influencers' activism being inextricable from their brand identity requires a different perspective when examining the implications of them engaging in behaviour at odds with their activism, beyond notions of inconsistency and subsequent consumer dissatisfaction.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This chapter describes and discusses the method used to understand the factors associated with audience reactions to an activist brand engaging in behaviour at odds with its activism. The first section outlines my empirical context. I then define my chosen methodology, netnography, and justify its use. The third and fourth sections describe the data collection process and my database organization, respectively. Finally, the data analysis process is explained.

3.1 Context

This study uses plus-size fashion influencers who pursued intentional weight loss as its empirical context. The plus-size digital space is composed of multiple overlapping movements, norms, and communities (see Figure 3.1). Although it is often broadly described as body positivity, it encompasses a spectrum of ideological positions ranging from fat acceptance to body positivity and body neutrality, each with distinct values and practices (Cohen, 2019; Darwin & Miller, 2021). Table 3.1 summarizes some of the definitions of these ideological positions and other concepts relevant to the context of the study.

As defined by Jessica Cwynar-Horta (2016) body positivity, “promotes self-love and acceptance of bodies of any shape, size, or appearance; including rolls, dimples, cellulite, acne, hair bodies, bleeding bodies, fat bodies, think bodies, and (dis)abled bodies” (p. 38). Body positivity is geared towards bodies of all sizes. The online movement is thus divided into communities identified through hashtags such as #plussize, #midsize, #curvy, amongst others (Cwynar-Horta, 2016). Body positivity is expressed on social media through the use of hashtags, captions, photos, and audios. This body-positive social media content aims to challenge conventional beauty norms, as well as encourage body love and size inclusivity, amongst other issues (Cohen, 2019; Cwynar-Horta, 2016). These themes featured in body-positive social media content are also often featured in adjacent

movements' social media content. These movements include fat acceptance and body neutrality.

Historically, the body positivity movement evolved from the fat acceptance movement, but their values do not always overlap (Cohen, 2019). Fat acceptance is focused on encouraging critical discourse surrounding size acceptance, the weight loss industry, the idea of the “obesity epidemic,” and shedding light on the systemic oppression of fat people (Cohen, 2019; Darwin & Miller, 2021; Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013). Researchers have identified a community at the intersection of fat acceptance and body positivity, naming it Fat Positivity = Body Positivity (Darwin & Miller, 2021). The defining characteristic of this community is that it often expresses that body positivity should be by and for fat women (Darwin & Miller, 2021). Influencers who are part of this community can be identified through their use of the word “fat” as a neutral descriptor (instead of plus size, mid-size or curvy), reclaiming the word and stripping it of its discriminatory power (Gordon, 2023).

Body neutrality has emerged as an alternative to body positivity, amidst criticism that body positivity places excessive emphasis on appearance and pressures individuals to love their bodies (Cohen, 2021). In contrast, body neutrality centres around a neutral acceptance of the body, rather than expressing love and adoration towards it (Darwin & Miller 2021; Pellizzer & Wade 2023). While there is significant overlap between body positivity and body neutrality content online, the latter's most featured themes and rhetoric are body appreciation (appreciation of the body's functionality), size inclusivity (body size should not dictate what one wears or does), self-care or caring for one's body and health, and not judging people based on their appearance (Aubrey et.al, 2024). Additionally, body neutrality themes are more common for “normal weight” influencers rather than those in bigger bodies (Aubrey et.al, 2024).

Across body positivity, fat acceptance, and body neutrality, size inclusivity constitutes a central shared value. Size inclusivity refers to the belief that body size should not limit access to fashion, or any other part of life (Aubrey et al., 2024). It is often promoted

through plus-size fashion content. Plus-size fashion influencers therefore occupy an important role within these movements, as they provide representation and clothing recommendations for the plus-size community (Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013). Although influencers may align with different movements or emphasize different values within them, advocacy for size inclusivity remains a defining feature of their content. As such, plus-size fashion influencers can be understood as activist influencers whose activism is core to their brand identity (Dean, 2023; Ermann & Leban, 2026). This activism includes being plus size and, often, publicly rejecting intentional weight loss, as they reject the notion that they must be thinner to be fashionable (Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013). The pursuit of intentional weight loss thus constitutes a behaviour at odds with their cause for body-positive and size-inclusive plus-size influencers.

The plus-size community has seen an increase in influencers pursuing intentional weight loss (Baker, 2024). This phenomenon has emerged in the context of the rise of GLP-1 agonists, the resurgence of thinspiration content, and many brands' quiet retreat from offering size-inclusive options (Craig, 2024; Mukhopadhyay, 2024; Mahdawi, 2024). This apparent cultural shift back towards the promotion of thinness has made members of this community more sensitive to influencers pursuing intentional weight loss, resulting in both backlash and support from audiences. This study examines how these reactions unfold by focusing on plus-size fashion influencers whose brand identities were built around size inclusivity and body positivity, and who engaged in behaviour at odds with their activism by pursuing intentional weight loss.

Table 3.1: Body Positivity Definitions

Concept	Definition
Body positivity	A movement promoting self-love and acceptance of bodies of any shape, size, or appearance; including rolls, dimples, cellulite, acne, hair bodies, bleeding bodies, fat bodies, thin bodies, and (dis)abled bodies (Cwynar-Horta, 2016).
Body neutrality	A movement serving as an alternative to body positivity, with a focus on self-acceptance rather than self-love (Darwin & Miller 2021).

Fat acceptance	A movement that predates body positivity with the mission of fighting against fatphobia (Cohen, 2019).
Fat positivity	A movement promoting self-love and acceptance specifically for fat people and believes that body positivity in general should primarily serve fat people (Darwin & Miller 2021).
Plus size	Individuals who wear sizes larger than those offered at most conventional clothing stores, typically above a size 14 in US sizing (Christel & Dunn, 2018)
Mid-size	Individuals who wear sizes ranging from the higher end of the straight-size range to the lower end of the plus-size range, considering themselves not quite plus size, but still unconventional and underrepresented (Norvill, 2021)
Straight size	Individuals who wear sizes offered at conventional clothing stores, typically from sizes 0 to 12 in US sizing (Volonté, 2019)
Health at every size	A size inclusive approach to healthcare that prioritizes wellness rather than weight loss (Cohen, 2021)
Size inclusivity	The belief that body size should not dictate what one wears or does (Aubrey et.al, 2024).
Fatphobia	Discrimination against and systemic oppression of fat people (Araújo et al., 2018).

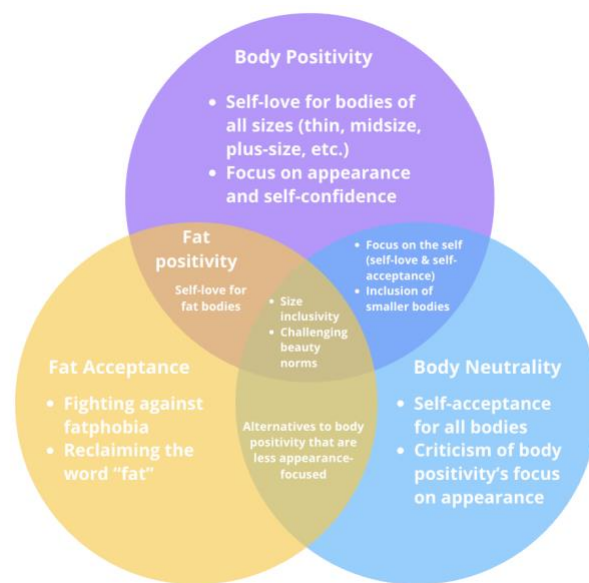


Figure 3.1: Body Positivity Movements

3.2 Netnography

To examine the factors in audience responses to activist influencers who engage in behaviour at odds with their activism, I employed a netnographic approach. According to Kozinets (2020, p. 14), “Netnography is a form of qualitative research that seeks to understand the cultural experiences that encompass and are reflected within the traces, practices, networks, and systems of social media.” Kozinets identifies the use of social media data as one of netnography’s four distinguishing elements. Research studying both social media influencers (Carson et al., 2023; Femenia-Serra et al., 2022; Rundin & Colliander, 2021) and brand activism (Carvalho & Barbosa, 2023; Gambetti & Biraghi, 2023; Kozinets & Seraj-Aksit, 2024) have successfully employed netnography as a research method. As this study focuses on how and why followers react to activist influencers’ practices, netnography allows for an in-depth analysis of these processes.

I sought to lead in-depth interviews with the influencers I observed to deepen my netnographic research but was unsuccessful. After ethical approval of the methodological approach and materials was obtained by the REB, twenty-three influencers were invited to participate in the research project in the form of semi-structured, in-depth interviews. However, three declined to participate, and twenty did not respond to the invitation. As such, the netnography conducted for this study was observational and non-participative.

Consistent with Kozinets’ (2020) ethical guidelines, the analysis focuses on publicly available content and interactions, while anonymizing all identifiable information on the audience side. An interactionist approach is adopted, focusing on the posts and interactions shared, rather than the audience members’ identities. Conversely, quotes from the influencers observed were not anonymized, as they are considered public figures, making the risks involved minimal (Kozinets, 2020).

3.3 Data collection

This netnography draws on four complementary sources of data: (1) influencer-generated Instagram content, (2) audience reactions in Instagram comment sections, (3) archival data used to situate the phenomenon beyond Instagram, and (4) reflective immersion journal entries (see Table 3.2). The data collection combined investigative and immersive phases involving scouting, selecting, recording and reflecting upon data from the sources listed (Kozinets, 2020). The entire process lasted from January 2025 to August 2025. The data site selection was conducted from January 2025 to March 2025, and the data collection was conducted from March 2025 to August 2025.

Table 3.2 Data Sources

Name	Sources	Data set	Purpose of usage
Instagram content	Instagram pages: @nicolettemason @alexochasuo @remibader @roseyseeme	231 posts	Understanding the influencers' practices and content
Netnographic data	Instagram posts' comment sections	126,534 comments extracted Around 60,000 comments retained	Understanding followers' reactions
Archival data	Press articles Reddit boards	18 articles 9 discussion posts	Culturally situating the phenomenon and providing context
Immersion journal entries	Researcher's immersion journal	46 journal entries	Tracking of researcher's immersion and observations

3.3.1 Data Site Selection

The data site selection was guided by Kozinets' five criteria for data-selection operations: relevance, activity, interactivity, diversity, and richness (Kozinets, 2020). Two groups were observed: (1) plus-size activist influencers who engaged in behaviour at odds with their cause and (2) their audiences, including contributors to online discussions about

these influencers and their weight loss (contradictory behaviour). Potential data sites were identified through searches across X, TikTok, and Reddit, using keywords related to plus-size or body positivity influencers and weight loss, alongside relevant posts and press coverage discussing the phenomenon. This produced an initial list of 31 potential influencers, which was then refined through closer review of each influencer's social media presence.

As detailed in Table 3.3, inclusion criteria for the influencers focused on individuals who were or had been mid-size or plus size, who had engaged in behaviour at odds with body positivity, namely weight loss, and who had publicly engaged with or positioned themselves in relation to body positivity or adjacent movements prior to weight loss or other contradictory behaviour. Influencers who did not meet these criteria were excluded, as were minors and individuals whose content did not publicly address body positivity and related topics. The engagement in behaviour at odds with the movement was evaluated by noting visible weight loss, shifts in the frequency of fitness and weight loss-related content, the presence of intentional weight loss promotion (e.g., GLP-1 agonists, weight loss products), and any reframing or rejection of body positivity values. In accordance with Kozinets' (2020) interactivity criterion, influencers with low activity or minimal engagement were excluded, as were those rarely mentioned in the archival data (press and Reddit posts) observed, since a significant amount of user comments were needed to examine audience reactions.

Table 3.3 Data Site Selection Criteria

Selection criteria	Explanation
Influencer is or was mid-size or plus size.	The influencer is mid-size or plus size, or was before they underwent a physical transformation.
Influencer engaged with body positivity or adjacent movements in their content.	The influencer used or still uses social media tools to include themselves in the body positivity or plus-size community (hashtags, terminology, trends), positioning themselves as an activist influencer.
Influencer engaged in behaviour at odds with their participation in body positivity or adjacent movements.	The influencer underwent a physical transformation (weight loss), stopped associating with body positivity and adjacent movement, denounced the cause, promoted intentional weight loss, etc.
Influencer is active on social media.	The influencer makes content and interacts with their audience regularly.

To ensure diversity, the refined list retained influencers with varying degrees of involvement in the body positivity movement and differing ways of engaging in behaviour at odds with body positivity, ranging from subtle shifts in their content to explicit rejection of the cause.

After compiling the list, each influencer was positioned on a four-quadrant chart capturing two dimensions of online evolution (see Figure 3.2). The horizontal axis reflects the extent to which weight loss (the behaviour at odds with the cause) is promoted in the influencers' content, ranging from low to high weight loss promotion. The vertical axis reflects the degree of involvement in the activist cause prior to the influencers losing weight, ranging from self-love (emphasis on the individual's journey) to activism (emphasis on the wider body-positive movement). Each dot represents one influencer, positioned based on their overall content.

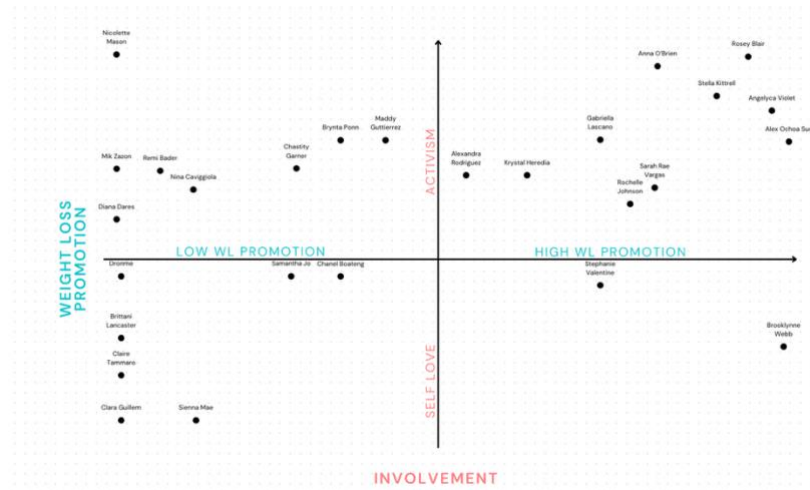


Figure 3.2: Cause Involvement/Weight Loss Promotion Chart

Four influencers were selected (see Table 3.4) from the mapped list to represent distinct profiles across the two chart axes (degree of weight loss promotion and involvement in the cause). I also prioritized cases that were central to online discourse and generated sufficient engagement for rich analysis. Nicolette Mason was selected as a high-involvement, low weight loss promotion case, as it was a rare profile. She was the only influencer at the highest point on the activism axis who did not promote weight loss whatsoever. Alex Ochoa Suo was selected as a high-involvement, high weight loss promotion case due to her prominence in discussions of the phenomenon and because her content evolution from body positivity towards weight loss was one of the most extreme observed across the influencers. Rosey Blair was selected as a high-involvement, high weight loss promotion case as a useful point of comparison with Alex Ochoa Suo, as Rosey's evolution towards weight loss promotion was far less oppositional to body positivity. She was also one of the most mentioned influencers in online discourse. Finally, Remi Bader was selected as a mid-involvement, low weight loss promotion case, as she served as a point of comparison with Nicolette, being a low weight loss promotion case who did not quietly disengage from body positivity. Her large number of followers also offered a substantial volume of audience reactions for analysis.

Table 3.4 Presentation of the Data Sites

Influencers	Age	Current number of followers	Year joining the movement on Instagram	Movement/Values	Year of behaviour at odds with the movement	Behaviour at odds with the movement
Nicolette Mason (@nicolettemason)	39	227,000	2014	- Body positivity - Size inclusivity - Fat acceptance	2023	- Weight loss - discontinued BoPo content
Alex Ochoa Suo (@alexochosuo)	26	183,000	2018	- Body positivity - Size inclusivity - Fat acceptance	2023	- Weight loss - discontinued BoPo content - Advocates against movement - Promotes intentional weight loss
Remi Bader (@remibader)	30	819,000	2020	- Size inclusivity - Body neutrality	2024	- Weight loss
Rosey Blair (@roseybeeme)	37	216,000	2018	- Body positivity - Size inclusivity - Fat acceptance	2022	- Weight loss - discontinued BoPo content - Advocates against movement - Promotes intentional weight loss

Once the influencers were selected, social media platforms were assessed for site selection. X served as a useful investigative site, but posts often avoided naming influencers, preventing the association of audience reactions with a specific influencer's practices. The influencers selected were mostly inactive on YouTube, so the platform was excluded for observation. Instagram was selected as the primary data site, as the influencers' Instagram pages offered both data on their practices (their content) and their audiences' direct reactions (the comments). Instagram was also the platform on which all the influencers were the most active.

TikTok and Reddit were used when additional context was required. TikTok was used when the influencers posted content on TikTok that was not also shared on Instagram. Reddit was used when certain audience reactions were found in Reddit discussion boards but not in the influencers' comment sections. Finally, archival data was used to contextualize the phenomenon culturally and to document how influencer weight loss and "thin is back" discourse circulated outside Instagram. This included 18 press articles and 9 Reddit discussion posts.

3.3.2 Immersion Journal

In accordance with Kozinets' (2020) guidelines, 46 field notes were recorded throughout the investigative and immersive phases through an immersion journal. The journal entries documented my observations of influencers' content and the surrounding online discussions as I identified potential data sites and immersed myself into the phenomenon (see Appendix 1). I recorded contextual information on the phenomenon and embedded links and screenshots of particularly relevant posts and comments. Finally, I took note of my immediate interpretations during data collection, and my interpretations while coding and categorizing, in my immersion journal (see Appendix 2). These notes served as references to inferences I made during the data collection phase and during the initial analysis phases and helped when comparing data and constructing theory.

3.4 Database

Once the four influencers were selected, I conducted a manual review of each influencer's Instagram feed. Using an autoscroll tool, I scrolled back to the influencers' earliest posts and reviewed their content chronologically to identify when they first became activist influencers and to outline the broad evolution of their content. Around 9,800 posts were reviewed across the four influencers during this first observation. During this review, a document was created for each influencer, in which I noted posts that could be characterized as body positivity-related or weight loss-related. Posts were considered body positivity-related when they included elements such as relevant hashtags, explicit

references to size inclusivity, or discussions of lived experience as a plus-size person. Posts were considered weight loss-related when they included any audio, visual, or textual elements that referred to weight loss, fitness, wellness, dieting, and any other related topics. Then, to build the database, I used a paid data scraping tool (<http://exportcomments.com/>) to extract all Instagram posts from each influencer's account and export them into Excel spreadsheets. For each post, the export included the posting date, caption, and URL, as well as the number of likes and number of comments. Only content that was publicly displayed on Instagram was collected. This approach allowed me to compile a large sample of relevant data and then use the scraping tool to select the most liked and most commented relevant posts for closer analysis, as these posts were more likely to provide rich content and interactions (Carson et al., 2023).

Sampling was restricted to posts that were relevant to the study's context, meaning the most liked and most commented posts that were either body positivity-related or weight loss-related. I did not select all-time top posts in order not to overrepresent later years when the influencers had larger followings. Instead, I sampled the posts year-by-year, starting from the year the influencers joined the movement on Instagram, to adjust for the smaller audiences in earlier years and to capture all phases of the influencers' evolution. Posts were filtered by year and ranked within each year by likes and comments using Excel's sort and filter functions. I identified the five most liked relevant posts and the five most commented relevant posts per year for each influencer using Excel's sort and filter functions. Because the top liked and top commented posts sometimes overlapped, fewer than ten posts were retained for some years. When selecting the most commented posts, I excluded posts with artificially inflated comment counts (e.g., birthday posts, giveaways, or posts prompting users to comment a specific word to receive a link) so that comments reflected discussion, backlash, or support.

After the posts were selected, the URL for each post was used to harvest user comments through the scraping tool. Comments were collected until thematic saturation was reached while maintaining a manageable dataset. In total, the final dataset included 231 Instagram

posts and around 60,000 user comments (half of the total number of comments across the 231 posts in the data sample) across the four selected influencers.

3.5 Data analysis

The data analysis process was conducted following Spiggle's (1994) recommendations and guidelines. It proceeded in two stages: a within-case (vertical) analysis, which allowed me to become familiar with each influencer's evolution and to analyze each case within its own context, and a cross-case (horizontal) analysis, which allowed me to identify which of the influencers' brand practices mitigated backlash in response to a change in their brand identity that is at odds with the cause they had espoused.

The within-case (vertical) analysis of each influencer relied primarily on influencer posts and their associated comment sections, complemented by archival data, such as posts made about the influencer across social media platforms and relevant press mentions. The dataset was distributed across cases as follows: Alex (64 posts; 32,977 comments), Nicolette (66 posts; 9,818 comments), Remi (39 posts; 61,765 comments), and Rosey (62 posts; 21,974 comments). The influencers' 231 selected posts were coded in their individual databases created through the paid data scraping tool. Around half of the comments of each post were coded until thematic saturation was reached, including audience reactions prior to the influencers engaging in behaviour at odds with the cause, during, and after. This made it possible to compare follower responses and to identify how they shifted as the influencer's practices evolved in a manner at odds with their activism. Each post and user comment was individually coded in their respective Excel files, allowing for close reading and preliminary coding prior to categorization and theme development (Spiggle, 1994). The first analytic operation during the within-case analysis was categorization (Spiggle, 1994). Coding was both deductive and inductive: deductive codes were informed by legitimacy (Suchman, 1995), while inductive codes emerged from repeated patterns in the data. This vertical analysis resulted in a keyword-based list of 65 codes based on the posts and comments in the dataset.

The cross-case (horizontal) analysis began only after the vertical coding of all cases was completed. In this phase, I compared the codes across the four cases to identify similarities and differences in how influencers' practices shaped follower responses when the influencer engaged in behaviour at odds with their cause. Through comparison and abstraction, the 65 codes were consolidated into nine categories and then integrated into three overarching themes, suggesting practices that may mitigate backlash in the case of a fracture from the cause (Spiggle, 1994). In accordance with Spiggle's (1994) emphasis on refutation, I also looked for disconfirming evidence by actively identifying criticism under posts where the dominant tone appeared supportive, and support under posts where the dominant tone appeared critical. Finally, the process was iterative, and codes, categories, and themes were revisited and refined as the data collection and analysis evolved.

Chapter 4: Results

This study examines what happens when activist influencers engage in a behaviour that is at odds with their activism. More specifically, it explores the factors shaping consumer responses to the phenomenon. This chapter is divided into two main sections presenting the results of the study. First, an individual case analysis offers a description of the evolution of the influencers' online presence. This section outlines the ways in which each influencer gained brand legitimacy through their activism in the plus-size fashion online community, and how each influencer eventually behaved in ways that are at odds with the cause. This descriptive analysis provides the necessary context for the cross-case analysis. Three themes emerge from the comparison and interpretation of the four cases in the cross-case analysis. The three themes are related to the brand practices that affect an activist brand's legitimacy after engaging in behaviour at odds with its activism, thus influencing consumer response: (1) the management of advocacy-related brand activities; (2) the framing of the behaviour at odds with the activist brand's cause; (3) and the reframing of the activist brand's cause.

4.1 Individual Case Analysis

The individual analyses of the four influencers outline the evolution of their online presence. They determine the practices used by the influencers to establish themselves as activist influencers in the plus-size fashion and body positivity communities, and the different ways they stepped away from these roles. This analysis provides the necessary context to understand the negotiation of the influencers' brand legitimacy following their evolution, which is at odds with their previously stated values.

4.1.1 Nicolette Mason

Who is Nicolette Mason?

Nicolette Mason (@nicolettemason) is a 39-year-old influencer and brand consultant living in New York City. She has been married to her partner, Nina Kossoff, since 2021. She studied at the Parsons School of Design and worked as a graphic designer before beginning to write for *Vogue*, *Refinery 29*, and other fashion magazines in 2010. She began blogging about fashion and lifestyle in 2009. In 2011, she became a contributing editor for *Marie Claire*, publishing the column “Big Girl in a Skinny World.” From 2014 to 2019, Nicolette worked size-inclusive clothing lines and collaborations with ModCloth, Addition Elle, 11 Honoré, and Nordstrom. She also co-founded Premme, a plus-size clothing brand, and served as its CEO from 2017 to 2019. Her content was centred around improving size inclusivity in the fashion industry, with an emphasis on making a place for plus-size women in luxury fashion, until 2023. In 2023, she lost a significant amount of weight—going from a size 2X (plus size) to a size large (straight size)—without addressing this weight loss publicly. Today, she has 227,000 followers on Instagram, where she focuses on lifestyle content, although she claims that she still embraces size inclusivity values.

The Evolution of Nicolette Mason’s Online Presence

2014–2017: Size Inclusivity

Nicolette Mason begins her social media career after already engaging in efforts to improve size inclusivity in fashion beyond social media. Her online presence includes standard outfit posts as well as the promotion of size-inclusive fashion collaborations, events, and her own journalism on size inclusivity. These actions constitute attempts to change the fashion industry, making her an institutional entrepreneur for the plus-size community (Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013).

When Nicolette begins using Instagram to share size-inclusive fashion content, she is already an established plus-size fashion blogger. Her previously lifestyle-focused feed, the blog she created in 2009, and her 3-year-old *Marie Claire* column had amassed her

30,000 followers by the time she made her first plus-size fashion post on Instagram in 2014. This pre-existing following also allows her to launch her first size-inclusive clothing line with ModCloth in 2014. From the very first year of her plus-size fashion content creation on Instagram, Nicolette showcases attempts to fight for size inclusivity in the fashion industry. Her page is also an evolution of her blog, featuring outfit posts which serve as a source of plus-size fashion inspiration (see Figure 4.1). This helps her gain pragmatic brand legitimacy, as her actions respond to and protect the interests of the plus-size community (Suchman, 1995).



Figure 4.1: Nicolette shares her outfit

Source: @nicolettemason, Instagram, 26-09-2015

From 2014 to 2017, Nicolette grows her Instagram following to 139,000 while consistently promoting her and her friends' size-inclusive brands and collaborations. The culmination of her 9-year-long career as a size-inclusive activist influencer is the launch of Premme in 2017 (see Figure 4.2). Premme is a plus-size brand created by Nicolette and her friend and fellow plus-size influencer Gabrielle Gregg (@gabifresh). The launch is met with an outpouring of support and gratitude from their followers.



Figure 4.2: Nicolette announces the Premme launch

Source: @nicolettemason, Instagram, 24-07-2017

Nicolette goes beyond promoting and selling plus-size clothing in her activism. She writes a Teen Vogue article discussing size inclusivity in the fashion industry. She also participates in Refinery29's "67%" campaign (see Figure 4.3), meant to raise awareness about most American women being plus size but being underrepresented in the fashion industry (Wang, 2016). In doing so, Nicolette shows her followers she shares their values and "has their best interest at heart," making it likely her followers will accord her dispositional legitimacy, a type of pragmatic legitimacy (Suchman, 1995, p. 578).



Figure 4.3: Nicolette participates in Refinery29's 67% project

Source: @nicolettemason, Instagram, 06-03-2017

Although Nicolette rarely mentions weight loss in her content, she occasionally expresses aligning with anti-weight loss values. In 2015, when complimented on looking slimmer by a follower, Nicolette replies: "[. . .] I've made a point of not talking about weight loss; there's enough dialogue about diets, fitness, etc in the world. " (comment on a post by @nicolettemason, 2015). Nicolette's adherence to anti-weight loss values is in alignment with the body-positive community's norms.

2018–2021: Body Positivity

By 2018, Nicolette's following has quadrupled from 43,000 to 173,000 in four years. She promotes Premme until the brand shuts down in 2019, due to Nicolette and Gabrielle deciding to pursue other opportunities (Ware, 2019). Nicolette continues sharing plus-size

fashion content, but she also starts sharing her struggles with confidence and discrimination as a plus-size person, a common topic for body positivity and plus-size influencers (Anderson et al., 2025).

Nicolette’s recounting of her personal struggles as a plus-size person encourages her followers to do the same in her comment sections. This sharing of “weaknesses” comes across as authenticity, and her followers’ willingness to share their similar experiences points to a potential parasocial bond (Kaivonen et al., 2024; Yang et al., 2021). For example, Nicolette posts a picture of herself wearing a fur coat with a caption explaining she has never worn it due to her “internalized fatphobia” and for fear it would make her look bigger (see Figure 4.4). Her followers express that they have dealt with similar struggles. Nicolette attempts to change her followers’ relationship with fashion by sharing a relatable story they can identify with and pursue to overcome their own “internalized fatphobia.” This is reminiscent of the “social symbolic work” practices performed by sustainable fashion influencers (another type of activist influencer), identified by Kaivonen et al. (2024).



Figure 4.4: Nicolette shares insecurities

Source: @nicolettemason, Instagram, 13-01-2019

In 2021, Nicolette begins promoting the well-known brand J. Crew (see Figure 4.5). Her followers see this as an achievement in terms of representation, as the brand didn’t offer plus sizes in the past. However, small but noticeable changes indicate the transition that is to come. Nicolette uses the hashtag #fatbabesinluxury for the last time in April 2021. This was one of her most used hashtags in previous years, meant to remind her audience

of her mission, which is to include plus-size women in luxury fashion. She also stops using the term “fat” to describe herself after that year.



Figure 4.5: Nicolette promotes J. Crew

Source: @nicolettemason, Instagram, 09-04-2021

2022: Transition Away from Body Positivity and Size Inclusivity

In 2022, Nicolette slowly distances herself from the online body positivity and size inclusivity communities. There is a sharp decrease in body-positive and size-inclusive content during that year, with only six posts relating to these topics, and four out of those six posts being promotional content for size-inclusive brands. It is the first time since 2015 that there is more promotional than non-promotional body positivity and size inclusivity content on her page. She no longer makes content sharing her frustrations with the fashion industry or her struggles with confidence, which her followers resonated with. Nevertheless, her followers are receptive to the few promotional size-inclusive fashion posts and the single post she makes sharing her struggle with confidence.

2023–2025: Lifestyle

Following a transition away from making body positivity and size inclusivity content, Nicolette evolves away from her role as an activist influencer. She no longer promotes size-inclusive brands and no longer features body positivity or size inclusivity at all, except for a single post in 2024. The topics are also mentioned in her Substack essays and in one of her Instagram highlights dedicated to discussing plus-size fashion. Nonetheless,

body positivity and size inclusivity content goes from making up 22% of her Instagram feed in 2021 to 2% in 2023 and 4% across 2023–2025.

Although Nicolette continues making fashion content, it is no longer size-inclusive. When promoting a clothing brand, she stops specifying the size range offered by the brand. This is a notable change in her fashion content, as she always used to share this information with her followers. While there is no backlash across Nicolette’s comment sections, the nature of her followers’ reactions and interactions with her changes drastically. Some still see her as a resource for plus-size fashion recommendations. However, these comments are rare, amounting to only one or two per post. Most of the comments on her posts are compliments on her appearance and style. Her content no longer encourages her followers to share their experiences or discuss the state of size inclusivity in fashion as it had previously. Moreover, because she no longer integrates her plus-size followers’ interests in her content, they have no reason to express gratitude towards her. For example, her promotional J. Crew content, which consistently garnered reactions from her followers’ feeling represented and discussing J. Crew’s size inclusivity, no longer receives the same response, as she herself does not mention sizing in the content.

Nicolette undergoes a physical transformation in 2023. While she is visibly thinner, she never mentions it, and neither do most of her followers, though comments mentioning weight loss may have been deleted. The only body positivity content she makes is a singular post in 2024, sharing that she used to avoid the beach due to insecurities. However, the post does not garner much attention. Nicolette is asked about her weight loss again in 2025 and responds: “Thank you. I don’t discuss WL. I was diagnosed with lupus a little over 3 years ago and it’s been a journey. I also just had a breast reduction in January.” (comment on a post by @nicolettemason, 2025). Nicolette explains her weight loss in the context of her health issues. This “health narrative” aligns with body positivity norms that encourage self-care (Aubrey et al., 2024).

Despite the distance Nicolette has taken from the body positivity movement at this point, she publicly maintains the same anti-weight loss values. When audience members ask

about weight loss, she makes it clear that she does not promote it. Size inclusivity in the fashion industry is featured in her content from time to time in Instagram stories and TikTok videos, but it does not appear on her Instagram feed. Her rate of comments per post also drops from 171 comments per post in 2022 (her transitional year) to 119 comments per post in 2023 and 86 comments per post in 2025. Overall, Nicolette's rate of comments per post suffers a 50% decrease from 2022, her last year making body-positive and size-inclusive content, to 2025.

4.1.2 Alex Ochoa Suo

Who is Alex Ochoa Suo?

Alex Ochoa Suo, 26, is an influencer who started making plus-size fashion content in July 2018 when she was an engineering student at New York University. She is also the founder and CEO of Shiny by Nature, a size-inclusive fashion brand designed for curvier bodies, which she launched in 2021. As her online presence grew, she moved to Austin, Texas in 2024. She is married to Tianshi Suo, a man she had been dating when she started creating content, and who is often featured in her posts. He is also the cofounder of Shiny by Nature. Today, Alex Ochoa Suo has 183,000 followers on Instagram and 208,000 followers on TikTok. She has gone from a size 3X (plus size) to a size medium (straight size), and her content now focuses on weight loss rather than fashion, except when she promotes her size-inclusive brand.

The evolution of Alex Ochoa Suo's Online Presence

2018–2020: Plus-Size Fashion

In 2018, Alex Ochoa Suo begins tagging her Instagram posts with #plussize and #plussizefashion (see Figure 4.6). Hashtags were the most popular feature used by members of the body positivity movement to connect to one another and to participate in

the movement at the time, as it legitimized underrepresented bodies' presence in the fashion world (Cohen, 2019; Cwynar-Horta, 2016).



Figure 4.6: Alex tags her post #plussizefashion for the first time

Source: @alexochoasuo, Instagram, 08-07-2018

Despite not getting much engagement at first, Alex continues posting pictures of herself tagged #plussizefashion, gradually forming her connection and associating with the plus-size fashion community. In 2019, she starts sewing her own clothes. She shares her creations on a new account named MadebyAlex and on her main account. This deepens her connection with the plus-size fashion community, as she emphasizes wanting to make a difference in the fashion industry. She writes in the caption of an Instagram post: “I truly am trying to make a difference in fashion (small as it may be for now) and just help other people be comfortable and cute at the same time!” (see Figure 4.7). Thus, Alex positions herself as an institutional entrepreneur, as she acts on her dissatisfaction with the fashion industry to change the field through her inclusive clothing (Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013).



Figure 4.7: Alex posts about the clothes she makes

Source: @alexochasuo, Instagram, 31-05-2019

As her following increases, Alex ventures into new types of fashion content. For example, she makes videos suggesting how to style certain clothing items, offering more fashion inspiration to her plus-size followers. As part of her fashion content, Alex also highlights size-inclusive brands. In the caption of one of her outfit posts, she informs her followers of a brand's sizing: "omg they go up to an extremely roomy size 2XL." (see Figure 4.8). Recommending fashionable size-inclusive brands and offering details on brands' sizing in general are common ways in which plus size and body-positive fashion influencers offer value to their followers.



Figure 4.8: Alex promotes a size-inclusive brand

Source: @alexochasuo, Instagram, 21-04-2020

Alex becomes a part of the plus-size fashion online community and other adjacent communities, such as the fat acceptance movement. In some of her posts, she deliberately refers to herself as fat, which is a common practice normalized by the fat acceptance movement (Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013).

2021-2022: Fitness and Shiny by Nature

In 2021, Alex begins what she terms her "personal fitness journey." However, fitness remains a rare theme on her page. Her fitness content is in line with body-positive and plus-size fitness content, such that it provides "an alternative representation of athletic bodies that are dominant throughout mass media" (Cwynar-Horta, 2016, p. 40). Her

fitness content also features body positivity themes with a focus on wellness rather than weight loss. Thus, Alex maintains a tone that respects the body positivity community's norms when it comes to conversations about fitness. She expresses a disinterest in weight loss in her captions and uses gentle language to refer to exercising, such as "joyful movement" and "daily movement." People who consider themselves anti-diet culture and anti-intentional weight loss often use the term "joyful movement" on social media. It aims to evoke a gentle and positive image of exercising as a means of feeling good in one's body, not as a punishment (Cleveland Clinic, 2024). Alex refers to exercising as joyful movement from 2021 halfway through 2023.

Alex continues growing as a body-positive and size-inclusive activist influencer as she shares her fitness journey. To that effect, Alex continues tagging most of her posts #plussize and continues making plus-size fashion inspiration content, which is still her most popular. Her rate of comments per post increases from 36 comments per post in 2020 to 221 comments per post in 2021. Her fashion content is increasingly well received, with compliments on her appearance and style being the most common across her comment sections. Moreover, the requests for details on her outfits and comments expressing they want to recreate Alex's style increase drastically, cementing her role as an inspiration for the plus-size fashion community. Additionally, her followers are very complimentary of Alex's attitude and positivity in her videos, which shows a deepening bond between the influencer and her audience beyond aesthetics and based on her enjoyable personality (Ki et al., 2020).

Following her positioning as an influencer in the plus-size fashion community, Alex launches her size-inclusive brand, Shiny by Nature, in September 2021. The brand is advertised as being designed for curvier and bigger bodies. Her audience is slow to engage with her promotion of Shiny by Nature at first, but by 2022, it is some of her most popular content. Activism is a common theme in Alex's posts promoting Shiny by Nature. She often reiterates the brand's mission and her devotion to it, which, in turn, emphasizes her role as an activist influencer to her followers.

2023: Fitness and Wellness

In 2023, there is a significant change in Alex's content. There is a sharp increase in fitness content, as she posts over 30 fitness posts in 2023, compared to 7 posts in 2021 and 5 posts in 2022. While her content still respects the norms of the body-positive approach to fitness, it leans more motivational and less gentle, with the focus remaining on exercise rather than weight loss. Her most popular fitness content still features fashion and inclusivity, such as a video of her dancing in activewear with overlaid text reading: "pov: not letting your size stop you from wearing cute outfits to workout in." (see Figure 4.9).

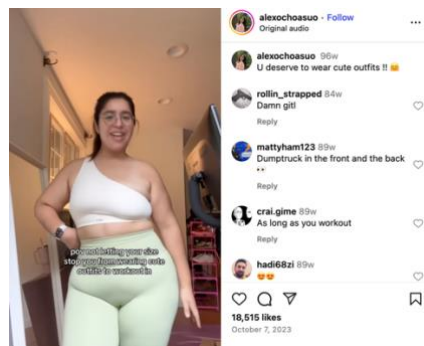


Figure 4.9: Alex makes a size-inclusive fitness post

Source: @alexochasuo, Instagram, 07-10-2023

Amidst this increase of fitness on her page, Alex uses the #plussize hashtag less often. Nevertheless, she continues making body-positive and size-inclusive content. She does so by encouraging her followers to defy norms and wear what they want while offering them fashion inspiration for underrepresented bodies. She also continues promoting Shiny by Nature, in the same format as 2022, wherein she promotes a piece from her collection and emphasizes how she contributes to the plus-size community by designing clothing for bigger and curvier people.

Alex remains highly involved in the body positivity and plus-size communities in the first half of 2023, but she eventually starts distancing herself. Towards the end of 2023, the #plussize and #fatfashion hashtags are replaced by "curvy" or "mid-size." Thus, her content no longer caters specifically to plus-size women but to thinner underrepresented

women who are part of the size-inclusive and plus-size fashion community. She also uses the term “joyful movement” less frequently and begins posting content promoting the wellness industry and alternative medicine. In this content, she refers to “healing herself” and preparing for an eventual pregnancy. Additionally, she posts her first “what I eat in a day,” a notorious diet culture online practice (Munro et al., 2024), though she does not share nutritional information or diet advice. These changes are not well received by some of her audience members, who have become increasingly critical of her new content. In response, Alex posts many controversial videos in which she confronts her followers in a taunting way. In one of those videos, the overlaid text reads, “people on the internet when I say I’m working hard to get as healthy as possible before pregnancy,” overlaid with a sound saying: “You’re an awful person.” The video shows her dancing at the end, implying a feeling of indifference to the critique (see Figure 4.10).



Figure 4.10: Alex reacts to criticism about her health and fitness content

Source: @alexochoasuo, Instagram, 22-12-2023

There are mixed reactions from her community. She receives a considerable amount of support from her followers. Some of her followers relate to being or having been on a health journey for pregnancy and celebrate this change in content. Other followers do not take issue with Alex’s weight loss content and question the validity of the criticism being leveraged against her. Nonetheless, she is heavily criticized by the plus-size community, whose members accuse her of taking advantage of plus-size women to grow her size-inclusive brand.

2024-Present: Weight Loss and Rage Bait

In 2024 and 2025, Alex's content is almost exclusively about fitness and weight loss. The rare body positivity content she makes differs from her old content in that she no longer denounces weight loss or diet culture and no longer refers to herself as fat or plus size. She makes curvy and mid-size fashion inspiration content instead. Alex's transition to weight loss content happens as she increasingly expresses traditional values, specifically about her husband being "the leader of their family." This content is very upsetting to a big part of her audience, already frustrated with her controversial weight loss content.

Alex's shift from fitness content to weight loss content remains the most controversial, featuring captions such as "what I eat in a day to lose 90 pounds naturally." The framing of this content emphasizing the weight she has lost is consistent with diet culture practices on social media (Munro et al., 2024). In comparison, similar content back in the fall of 2023 used this caption: "What I ate today as a girl on a fitness journey! This is not nutrition advice just sharing what I ate today that made ME feel good!" The content is no longer about "joyful movement" and exercise but about her intentional weight loss. Alex emphasizes exactly how much weight she has lost at the beginning of almost every video, encouraging intentional weight loss and portraying it positively. She also makes posts celebrating her weight loss milestones, such as a video with the overlaid text reading: "Does it really feel that good to become just overweight after being morbidly obese your whole adult life??" and the overlaid sound saying: "yes!" (see Figure 4.11). In the eyes of her followers, Alex is stigmatizing people in a certain BMI category by celebrating no longer belonging to that category, thus inevitably alienating a portion of her original audience.



Figure 4.11: Alex celebrates a weight loss milestone

Source: @alexchoasuo, Instagram, 21-08-2024

Alex’s discordant practices become increasingly perceived as “rage bait” for engagement, a kind of content commonly associated with conservatives (Shin et al., 2025). Rage bait is a type of content purposefully designed to upset large groups of people and elicit many arguments in the comment section. It is usually posted in hopes of garnering a great amount of engagement (even if negative in nature), allowing the content creator to profit from making people angry (Shin et al., 2025). Alex’s anti-body positivity content often features false information and mocks her audience members, both tactics associated with rage bait content (Shin et al., 2025). Many members of Alex’s audience initially support her because they see her pregnancy and desire to be healthy as priorities over her adherence to body positivity norms. However, her persistence with engaging with the community she wants to step away from undermines the justification of her weight loss journey, which she claims is about self-prioritization, health, and pregnancy. Additionally, now that she makes content perceived as deliberately harmful to members of her audience, she no longer receives compliments on her personality and positive energy.

Moreover, due to her constant conflict with the plus-size community, Alex is frequently accused of taking advantage of plus-size women through her size-inclusive brand. Nonetheless, Alex continues promoting Shiny by Nature, making many publications justifying the existence and mission of her brand despite her weight loss. In this type of content, she still portrays herself as a size-inclusive activist influencer, insisting that she

has never stopped caring about the cause despite her weight loss. However, followers are quick to poke holes through her alleged activism, as they point out the inconsistency between her Shiny by Nature messaging and her personal messaging, which regularly features anti-fat messages. This type of misalignment constitutes inauthentic brand activism and comes across as opportunistic rather than purpose-driven (Vredenburg et al., 2020; Sibai et al., 2021; Mirzaei et al., 2022). Some even claim that her sizing is less inclusive than it used to be, as she has always been the only model featured, and her designs have primarily been made with her own body in mind. In 2025, she begins posting older videos in which she appears bigger to promote Shiny by Nature, which might be an attempt at decoupling like the one used in 2023 (in which she promoted weight loss in her personal content but denounced it in Shiny by Nature content). This decoupling strategy, wherein Alex appears to align with size inclusivity through Shiny by Nature while rejecting it on her personal account, appears opportunistic and threatens her moral brand legitimacy (Kates, 2004).

Alex's rate of comments per post suffers a decrease of 86% from 2022, prior to her pivot to fitness and weight loss, to 2025.

4.1.3 Remi Bader

Who is Remi Bader?

Remi Bader (@remibader) is a 30-year-old influencer living in New York City. She graduated from the University of Delaware with a major in Interpersonal Communications and a minor in journalism. After losing her job in the music industry during the COVID-19 pandemic, she became a curve model in August 2020, started posting on TikTok in September 2020, and started using her personal Instagram account for content creation in December 2020. She quickly rose to fame when her “realistic try-on hauls” went viral. In these videos, Remi tried on clothing ordered online and humorously documented sizing inconsistencies and fit issues while calling for better size inclusivity from brands. This content garnered Remi an audience of people living in underrepresented bodies who were

frustrated with the lack of inclusivity in the fashion industry. Remi has kept her activism focused on size inclusivity, a value shared by body positivity and its adjacent movements. However, she regularly stated her detachment from body positivity, as she did not align with its norms of expressing love and adoration towards her body. Today, Remi has amassed 818,000 followers on Instagram and 2.2 million followers on TikTok. She has consulted for brands to help expand their sizing and has released multiple size-inclusive clothing lines with Revolve and Sam's club. Remi has also gone from a size 18 (plus size) in 2023 to a size 8 (straight size) in 2025.

The evolution of Remi Bader's Online Presence

2020–2021: Plus-Size Fashion

Shortly after getting signed as a curve model in New York City in August 2020 by Stetts Model Management, Remi Bader joins the plus-size fashion online community wanting to expose influencers for their lack of transparency when making “try-on hauls.” Try-on hauls are videos in which influencers show and try-on clothing they recently purchased to ask for feedback from viewers, encourage them to purchase the same items, or offer fashion inspiration. At the beginning of her career as an influencer, Remi shares what she names “realistic try-on hauls” in which she shows both what fits her and what does not, sharing plus-size people's struggle with fashion and calling for more inclusivity (see Figure 4.12). She does so with a lot of humour, mocking the clothes, the brands, and herself, while still offering fashion inspiration to her plus-size followers by sharing well-fitting plus-size options as well. By sharing sizing details and reviewing the fit of the clothing she tries on, Remi offers inspiration and recommendations to her followers with bodies like hers. This practice serves to help her audience make the most of their limited fashion options (Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013). To that effect, Remi tags her realistic try-on haul #sizedoesntmatter #plussize #size14 #size16 to signal her association with size inclusivity and the plus-size community. Remi fosters a stronger bond with them by creating a lighthearted environment for the community to relate to her and express their dissatisfaction with the issue at hand (Anderson et al., 2025).

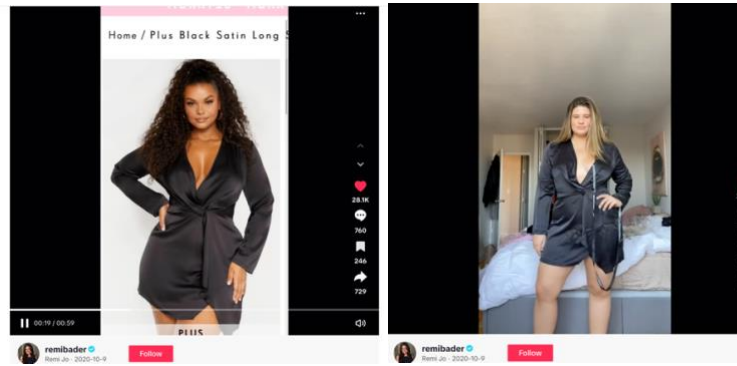


Figure 4.12: Remi's first realistic try-on haul

Source: @remibader, TikTok, 09-10-2020

Remi's realistic hauls go viral. This lets her bypass the formative phase of an influencer's career, wherein they gradually establish their page's theme, due to the rapid media attention she gains (Sporl-Wang et al., 2025). Within a few months, she appears on radio and television shows explaining her mission. On an NBC segment posted to her page (@remibader, 2021), she states:

"I'm not here to make the brand look good. I'm here to be honest and have people know what they're buying and how these items are going to fit on their body. It's completely mind-boggling to me that most brands are not size-inclusive."

While Remi's realistic hauls are humorous and always tagged #funny, she stresses the mission behind her content: having an impact on size inclusivity in fashion and helping her followers find size-inclusive offerings that will fit them. Indeed, transparency and the fight for better size inclusivity in fashion are always present in Remi's content at the time. Moreover, she also always shares her struggle with confidence and body image. In 2021, in a clip of her appearance on the Barstool podcast Tea with Piblyssity posted to her Instagram (@remibader, 2021), Remi states:

“I’m not completely happy with how I look and how I feel. I’m pretty unhappy and it’s a back and forth for me [. . .] I want to keep making it known to everyone. I feel the way they might feel too; I’m struggling just as much.”

Remi draws a line between her investment in size inclusivity and body positivity by reminding her audience that she is unhappy in her body, despite the fact she is helping them accept their own. Body positivity is almost entirely absent from Remi’s content, as she rarely makes content in which she encourages or expresses love towards her body parts (Cohen, 2019). But these candid admissions of disliking her body always elicit support and empathy from her followers, who respond by sharing their own experiences.

2022–2023: Size-Inclusive Collaborations

In 2022, Remi cements her role as an activist influencer in the plus-size fashion community with two major collaborations. Her realistic try-on hauls remain a mainstay of her content, along with a different type of video in which she asks her followers to help her decide what to wear. Both types of content still feature humour, honesty, and the ability to mock both herself and brands, all the elements most praised by her audience. But while she maintains her comedic social media presence, she is now also actively working to make well-known brands more size inclusive. Victoria’s Secret’s Pink works with Remi as a consultant to help with a size expansion (see Figure 4.13). In the caption of her Instagram post announcing the partnership, Remi writes:

“As grateful as I am for the following alone, it would be meaningless unless I used my platform to do what I’d always hoped would happen on its own, and that is to help push the world in a more inclusive direction where people like me can simply be more happy and comfortable in their own skin.”

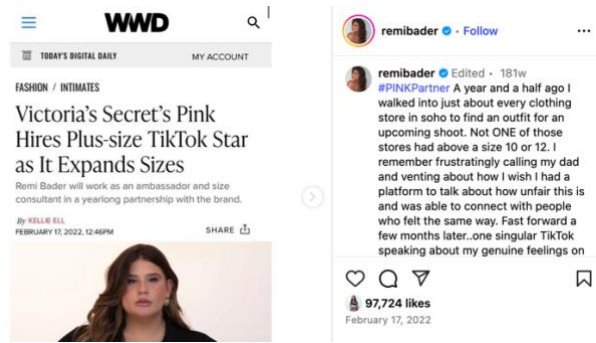


Figure 4.13: Remi announces partnership with Victoria's Secret's Pink

Source: @remibader, Instagram, 17-02-2022

About a month later, Remi also announces a collaboration with Revolve, a brand that was featured in her realistic try-on hauls many times. The announcement is a compilation of Remi's realistic Revolve hauls, and in one of the clips Remi says: "What if I came in and I created a brand for them, like Revolve by Remi, very trendy, very cool, a little bit lower in price, but for curvier women?" (@remibader, 2022). Remi pushes to expand the Revolve collaboration's size range to 4X when it was initially set to be offered in sizes XXS to 3X. Remi shows her followers she is capable and willing to take steps beyond content creation to fight for size inclusivity, acting as a liaison between her audience and the fashion industry.

At the beginning of 2023, The Cut interviews Remi in an article titled "I Never Asked to Be the Face of a Movement" (Bader & Singh-Kurtz, 2023). Remi discusses her mental and physical health struggles, consistent with the way she transparently shares the good and the bad with her audience. She shares her thoughts on her weight fluctuations and how they might affect her audience, though at the time she claims she is not interested in pursuing weight loss:

"I started all of this without having any plan or thinking it would go anywhere, and now I'm supposed to be the face of body positivity, or the face of the plus-size community, or whatever people want to say. [. . .] I'm supposed to be promoting self-love, but I'm just not going to pretend I love my body all the time, which is what I'm expected to do. I don't like being called body-positive. [. . .] As for my

weight, yes, I'm frustrated by it, but I also don't want to try to lose weight [. . .]. And I want to get better, but that's hard in the fashion world. And now, I'm also thinking about my followers—what would I do if I lost all this weight? Or if I gained more? It's about me, but it's about everyone else, too.” (Bader & Singh-Kurtz, 2023).

This candid description of what Remi had been going through behind the scenes did not change the nature of her content in any way, as she kept on sharing realistic try-on hauls regularly and championing size inclusivity throughout most of 2023. However, in September 2023, she posts a video to TikTok announcing she won't be sharing what she calls her “personal health journey” anymore. In the video she says, “My health journey is now my business. What I choose to do, whether that's gain or lose weight, medications I take, supplements I take, my workout routine, whatever it is, I'm not going to share.” (@remibader, 2023). She explains this is the result of the constant online commentary on her body negatively impacting her mental health. Serving as further evidence of the parasocial attachment they have to Remi, her community is overwhelmingly supportive and empathetic (Yang et al., 2021). This major departure from her original style of content creation, wherein she shared every aspect of her life no matter how personal, leads to a pause in realistic try-on hauls. The last one she posts in this period is in October 2023. Aside from this change, Remi continues making content about size-inclusive fashion. While she does not interrupt her activism or advocacy for size inclusivity in fashion, this remains a significant change in her content style and, eventually, her relationship with her followers. After steadily increasing from 2020 to 2023, her rate of comments per post drops slightly, from 3,361 comments per post in 2023 to 3,026 comments per post in 2024. Eventually, it drops to 1827 comments per post in 2025.

2024–2025: Weight Loss

Remi enters a transitional period in which she pauses her realistic try-on hauls but later resumes them. During this time, she gradually loses weight and only addresses it after

months of pressure from her audience. Nevertheless, Remi does not falter in her advocacy for size inclusivity in fashion.

Remi briefly replaces try-on hauls with videos in which she asks her followers to help her decide what to wear. The videos are still tagged #plussize, as Remi still wears plus sizes at the time, despite her weight loss having already begun. The videos also still feature themes of struggling with fashion as a plus-size person. Eventually, in the spring of 2024, Remi posts realistic try-on hauls again. However, the videos are slightly different, as she does not mock the brands as much and no longer compares herself to the models on the website. Remi also does not mention sizing details, neither in the realistic try-on hauls nor in the videos in which she asks followers to help her decide what to wear. The videos mostly feature Remi reviewing clothes but the themes of struggling with fashion while still offering fashion inspiration for underrepresented bodies are present, as she still tags them #plussize, #midsize, and #curvy. Despite the content changing, her audience praises the return of the hauls.

Remi gets visibly thinner over the course of 2024, but her weight loss goes unaddressed until May 2024 when she makes her first fitness post (see Figure 4.14). The post shows a comparison of her performance at the gym at two time points. The first clip shows Remi struggling at the gym and the second clip shows herself thinner and able to perform the exercise she struggled with. In the second clip, the overlaid text reads, “this is not about weight or looks or appearance, it’s about putting myself first and finding myself again.” (see Figure 4.14). Whenever Remi broaches the topic, she does not encourage intentional weight loss and keeps the focus on her health. The audience’s reaction is positive and supportive, although she is later accused of deleting negative comments. It seems, for many of her followers, her weight loss is not at odds with her size inclusivity content.

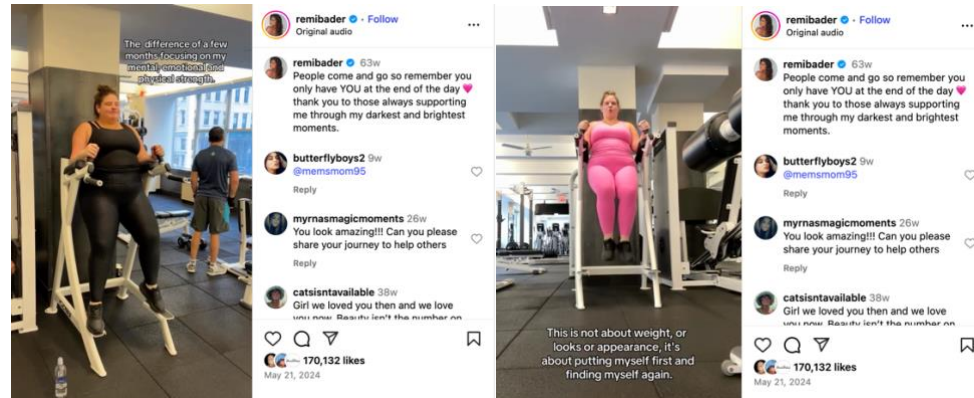


Figure 4.14: Remi's first fitness post

Source: @remibader, Instagram, 21-05-2024

Beyond the singular fitness post made in May, Remi does not disclose any details related to her weight loss. This non-disclosure complicates her relationship with her followers. In July 2024, Remi posts her second realistic try-on haul since her first and only fitness post. At the beginning of the video, she says: “I want to dedicate this try-on haul to the girlie that DMed me and told me I’m not allowed to do try-on hauls anymore. She said because my body changed, I’m no longer qualified to do try-on hauls for people.” (@remibader, 2024). This haul is in the same style as they used to be: humorous and honest. Although she’s considerably thinner than she used to be, she still shows herself from all angles, pushing out her stomach in the same way she did before (see Figure 4.15), despite no longer being plus size.



Figure 4.15: Remi shares a realistic try-on haul

Source: @remibader, Instagram, 22-07-2024

As Remi continues losing weight, her followers pressure her to share the details of her weight loss journey. She responds in the caption of an Instagram post: “All I can say is if my thoughts aren’t even caught up with my body yet, how can I speak on it? How can I say anything to make anyone feel better when I don’t even know how I feel?” (@remibader, 2024). Eventually, in the spring of 2025, Remi opens up about having weight loss surgery. She shares her journey in detail, down to the type of surgery and the surgeon who performed it but never partakes in any diet culture or weight loss promotion practices commonly found on social media (Munro et al., 2024). She never shares her diet, caloric intake, workout regimen, and the weight she has lost, or expresses any negativity towards herself when she lived in a bigger body. While the outpouring of support far outweighs the criticism in her comment section, themes of betrayal and feeling lied to remain present. Followers accuse Remi of omitting the truth and not being transparent. Additionally, people accuse Remi of deleting certain comments criticizing her, suggesting there might have been more criticism present in the comment sections when the content was first posted. However, there remains far more support, and her followers insist she can still be a size-inclusive activist influencer regardless of her weight loss.

In an article featured on Self magazine in which she shares the details of her weight loss surgery, Remi expresses she still aligns with the values of the plus-size community:

“I loved being curvy my whole life; I just did. It was who I was,” [. . .] “I will always believe that you could be a bigger size and be healthy and happy. I was for a while, that wasn’t a lie. But there was a point when it shifted, and I became really unhappy.” (Mukhopadhyay, 2025)

While discussing her weight loss, Remi constantly reiterates her commitment to size inclusivity in fashion beyond content creation. In an essay featured in Nylon magazine in May 2024, she says:

“to be clear—no matter what my body looks like, it will never change what I’ve set out to do from the start: to advocate for body inclusivity in the fashion and apparel industries.” (Bader, 2024).

By fall 2024, she has launched a size-inclusive clothing line with Sam’s Club, available in sizes 00 W to 32 W and XXS to 6X. Since then, Remi has released two other size-inclusive lines with Sam’s Club in 2025. Remi proves to her audience that, although she may no longer be affected by the lack of inclusivity in fashion, she will still advocate for people living in underrepresented bodies and not change her rhetoric for weight loss and against size inclusivity in any way. Nevertheless, Remi suffers a decrease of 46% in her rate of comments per post from 2023, before her weight loss, to 2025.

4.1.4 Rosey Blair

Who is Rosey Blair?

Rosey Blair (@RoseyBeeMe) is a 37-year-old plus-size influencer living in New York. After dropping out from Theatre and Women’s studies at the University of North Texas, she pursued acting in Los Angeles from 2011 to 2015. In 2015, she moved back to Dallas, Texas, where she worked in retail and as a photographer. Rosey and her husband, Houston Hardaway, started dating in 2017 and got married in 2021. She started using her personal Instagram page for content creation in the spring of 2017 and launched her plus-size style blog in June 2017. By April 2018, she became a full time plus-size fashion blogger. Size inclusivity, fat positivity, body positivity, and a staunch anti-weight loss stance were prominent in Rosey’s content until August 2022, when she announced she would be pursuing intentional weight loss. Today, she has 216,000 followers on Instagram and 292,000 followers on TikTok. She still creates plus-size fashion inspiration and size-inclusive fashion content but has denounced the body positivity movement and encourages intentional weight loss. She has gone from a size 24 (plus size) to a size 22 (plus size).

The evolution of Rosey Blair's Online Presence

2018–2021 Body Positivity

In her first few years as an influencer, Rosey Blair is an unabashed proponent of body positivity and fat positivity. She mainly shares size-inclusive brands and fashion inspiration for plus-size women (see Figure 4.16), but also regularly shares her struggles with confidence and size-based discrimination. Despite those struggles, Rosey constantly expresses she is happier at her heaviest. She encourages her followers to defy the expectation that they should be unhappy because they live in bigger bodies.



Figure 4.16: Rosey announces her blog's focus

Source: @roseybeeme, Instagram, 10-12-2017

Rosey uses her page to share a detailed account of her experience when selecting and styling clothes, including sharing sizing and fit, while promoting size-inclusive brands to her followers. In doing so, she honours her mission, which is to be “[a] big sister who tries things before you do, to make sure everything’s worthy of you and fits and FEELS great.” (@roseybeeme, 2017). Even when sharing a picture of her outfit without any additional information, or with a caption unrelated to her outfit, she uses hashtags to explicitly associate her content with the online plus-size fashion and body-positive communities, such as #plussizefashion, #plussize, #effyourbeautystandards, and #bodypositive.

Aside from offering her followers plus-size fashion inspiration, Rosey also often writes detailed Instagram captions confessing her struggles with internalized fatphobia and confidence, and her experience with size-based discrimination. One of her most liked

posts from 2020 and one of her most liked posts from 2021 each recounts instances of discrimination Rosey has faced. She sends the message to her followers that, while she exudes confidence and style online and has been able to make a career out of being plus size, she still faces the discrimination that most of her community faces, allowing them to see themselves in her.

Despite repeatedly sharing her struggles with confidence and body image over the years, a firm disinterest in weight loss remains a common theme in Rosey's content. She expresses this defiance of the expectation that she should be pursuing weight loss, or she should be miserable because she lives in a bigger body, inspiring her followers to do the same. Rosey writes: "The fattest you will ever be is also when you'll be the happiest" and "This is my after photo" in her Instagram captions (see Figure 4.17). The latter is written under a photo of her in a swimsuit while she is still plus size. The term "after photo," referring to the common diet culture practice of comparing one's body before and after weight loss (Munro et al., 2024). Rosey's use of this term is in direct defiance of diet culture norms, given she refuses to lose weight.



Figure 4.17: "♡ You only get one life. I chose to love mine. ♡ This is my after photo."

Source: @roseybeeme, Instagram, 29-05-2019

While categorically refusing to pursue weight loss, Rosey still features plus-size fitness and Health at Every Size (HAES) in her content occasionally. She highlights size-inclusive activewear brands and briefly mentions working with a physical trainer to

improve her mobility. In the caption of a post tagged #haes, Rosey writes: “When did physical activity stop being playful? When did it become a routine we participate in so that we fit in or look a certain way? When did it become contingent on before and after photos and the concept of being ‘better’. My daily pursuit of joy has little to do with the size of my tummy.” (@roseybeeme, 2019). Rosey encourages exercise but always in the pursuit of wellness and never in the pursuit of weight loss, remaining consistent with the HAES approach, which is the norm within the body-positive community at the time (Cohen, 2021).

2022–2023: Fitness and Size Inclusivity

The increase of HAES and plus-size fitness content marks a transitional period of Rosey’s online presence, while she continues to align herself with body positivity and fat positivity. This foreshadows her weight loss announcement and subsequent distancing from the movements. However, her plus-size fashion content remains a constant during these changes.

In the first half of 2022, Rosey continues to express values associated with body positivity, posting content encouraging her audience to enjoy life regardless of their size and expressing love towards her body. However, Rosey’s body-positive content at the time is interspersed with fitness content. Rosey posts videos of herself working out and writes about her coach helping her improve her mobility and ease her back pain (see Figure 4.18). The posts are focused on Rosey’s health and are tagged #healthateverysize. Rosey even shares in the overlaid text of one of her fitness posts that her coach has trained her without mentioning weight loss. This leaves the impression that her stance on weight loss remains unchanged despite her fitness content.

Rosey's announcement denotes compassion towards her community, as she writes that she can relate to her audience's frustration with plus-size influencers who pursue weight loss. She keeps the focus on her health and does not mention wanting to achieve a particular appearance, remaining consistent with her previously stated HAES values. While Rosey acknowledges the contradiction between her past content and her pursuit of weight loss, she still aligns with her size-inclusive ideals. She does not criticize the body-positive community but seems to draw a line between her role as a body-positive activist and her role as a size-inclusive activist. She expresses wanting to step away from her role as an advocate of the body positivity movement. Rosey does, however, express wanting to continue making content about size inclusivity and size-inclusive brands. Her community is entirely supportive of her, as they are appreciative of her respectful approach.

Following the announcement, Rosey remains consistent with her message insofar as she continues respecting the norms of the online body positivity space. She does not promote weight loss in any way and only speaks about it in relation to herself and her situation, and even then, it is a rare occurrence. She also follows through on her promise and continues sharing size-inclusive brands and plus-size fashion inspiration with her audience. Her size-inclusive content still features sizing details and hashtags such as #plussizeootd and #plussizestyle but no longer features previously used hashtags associated with body positivity such as #effyourbeautystandards #selflove #bodypositive.

2024–2025: Weight Loss and Plus-Size Fashion

Immediately after her original weight loss announcement, Rosey does not feature the topic much in her content. But a year and a half later, she begins sharing her journey more transparently. This is marked by her content beginning to feature many diet culture practices. This leads to Rosey having to justify her behaviour, which is at odds with her previously stated values amidst criticism from the body positivity community.

Rosey's weight loss content becomes more frequent and changes in nature. After admitting to taking a GLP-1 agonist, a weight management drug, Rosey mentions an aesthetic goal for her body after weight loss. Before this, she only ever mentioned weight loss in the context of improving her health, but in January 2024 she writes in an Instagram caption: "I want to amp up my cardiovascular health and work on achieving my dream aesthetic (curvy and toned!!!). [. . .] I felt like [. . .] all movement had to be in pursuit of a mental feeling and not aesthetics. IT'S OKAY TO DO BOTH!!" (@roseybeeme, 2024). Rosey used to promote HAES values encouraging wellness rather than weight loss. Her caption discussing her "dream aesthetic" achieved through weight loss is thus at odds with her previously stated values. Rosey explicitly contradicts one of the most prominent themes of her older content: that she was happier at her heaviest, and that she chose to go out and live her life to the fullest regardless of her size, a sentiment she even included in the post announcing her weight loss.

Rosey's audience seems supportive; however, Rosey herself refers to the backlash she is receiving, indicating she may be deleting negative comments. Rosey writes in an Instagram caption: "More and more people have been commenting on my choice to do what's best for my body as dictated by my own experiences in this body. I've read think pieces and articles citing that the reason myself and others like me are leaving the BOPO world is because we 'got our bag' from the backs of fat people we 'cheated out of money', and now it's time to get that skinny girl bag!!" (@roseybeeme, 2024). Additionally, under a post made announcing her future weight loss surgery, Rosey comments: "Overwhelmed by the positivity in the comments. Normally I have to delete a few but it's so wonderful here. I am proud of the community we have cultivated here " (comment on a post by @roseybeeme, 2025).

In a different post, Rosey shares the amount of protein she consumes daily (see Figure 4.19), partaking in a diet culture practice by sharing details about the specific eating patterns she is following for her weight loss (Munro et al., 2024). Rosey has not only left the body positivity movement, but she also features practices of an opposing movement in her content.



Figure 4.19: Rosey documents her weight loss journey

Source: @roseybeeme, Instagram, 01-02-2024

Whenever Rosey mentions the body positivity community and the HAES approach, it is either to share her criticism or simply to state she does not advocate for the movements anymore. For example, she writes in an Instagram caption: “I admire the people who want a more inclusive world, but the fact is—I only get one precious life and I don’t want to spend it at home.” (@roseybeeme, 2024). Rosey’s wording distances her from “the people who want a more inclusive world,” as she no longer considers herself one of them.

Three years after her weight loss announcement, Rosey’s size has decreased from 24 to 22 and is still in the plus-size category. She continues to tag her posts #plussizefitness and #plussizeoutfits and continues highlighting size-inclusive brands on her page. However, she does not make body positivity content or share her struggles with confidence and discrimination at all anymore. While plus-size fashion was the reason she became an influencer originally, her most liked and commented on posts from 2018 to 2021 were mainly ones in which she would discuss those struggles in detail. Coincidentally, her rate of comments per post has gone down from 670 comments per post in 2020–2021, to 183 comments per post in 2025, suffering a 73% decrease.

4.2 Cross-case analysis

The individual case analysis provided context about the evolution of the four influencers’ online presence. The cross-case analysis compares the ways the influencers’ brand

practices during and following their weight loss and behaviour at odds with their activist cause impact their followers' reactions. Using legitimacy as a theoretical lens, the analysis identifies the factors impacting audience reactions by identifying the relationship between the influencers' practices and their followers' support, backlash, or disengagement. Three themes emerge as practices the influencers adopt to manage audience reactions: (1) sustaining advocacy-related brand activities; (2) framing the behaviour at odds with the activist brand's cause as coherent; (3) and reframing or rejecting the activist brand's cause. The influencers continue to receive support from many audience members. However, weight loss, and any behaviour at odds with their cause as activist influencers, still constitute major disruptions, inevitably triggering backlash and contestations of their legitimacy.

4.2.1 Managing Advocacy-Related Content

Throughout the four influencers' evolutions as size-inclusive and body-positive activist influencers, they advocated for the plus-size community through two types of content. First, size-inclusive fashion content, which included sharing size-inclusive brands, plus-size fashion inspiration, and information about the sizing and fit of the clothing they shared. Second, body-positive content, which included discussing the struggles of plus-size women with size-based discrimination and self-acceptance and advocating for improved size inclusivity in society, including the fashion industry. Both kinds of content centred on and responded to the plus-size community's interests, eliciting support and granting the influencers pragmatic legitimacy (Suchman, 1995). Moreover, their body-positive content had positive consequences on their followers' body image, as seen through comments such as "I love seeing your confidence because we have the exact same square shape [. . .] I feel better in clothes because of you [. . .]" (comment on a post from @remibader, 2025) granting the influencers moral legitimacy (Suchman, 1995). Consequently, the evolution of their advocacy content (fashion-related and otherwise) during and following their weight loss impacts their followers' reactions, based on their assessment of the influencers' pragmatic and moral legitimacy. This assessment is seen

through support from the audience when advocacy is sustained and disengagement when it is discontinued.

Size-Inclusive Fashion Content

The four influencers joined the size-inclusive and body-positive movement through plus-size fashion content. They promoted the idea that the size of their bodies should not dictate what they wear, and that plus-size women have a rightful place in fashion. This was a form of resistance to size-based discrimination in the fashion industry, as it could be interpreted by their audience as evidence that change is possible (Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013). Therefore, the influencers' credibility and pragmatic brand legitimacy are impacted by their management of their inclusive fashion content. Their audiences continue to engage with this content despite the influencers' weight loss. However, audience members lose interest and disengage when the influencers stop sharing size-inclusive fashion content.

Sustaining Inclusive Fashion Content

Remi Bader and Rosey Blair continue to make both promotional and non-promotional size-inclusive fashion content during and following their weight loss. Remi briefly replaces her viral “realistic try-on hauls” with similar videos in which she asks her followers to help her decide what to wear. Nonetheless, Remi's fashion content (both try-ons and otherwise) inspires her followers, who still communicate a desire to dress like her. This aspirational attachment persists even as Remi gets thinner, evidence of her followers appreciating her fashion content regardless of her size. Rosey also remains a fashion inspiration to her followers during her weight loss journey. Because she continues to wear plus sizes, Rosey keeps sharing size-inclusive brands with her audience and offering them plus-size fashion inspiration. Remi and Rosey's followers comment about feeling inspired by the influencers' fashion content:

“a mid size 14-16 and ur still my saving grace bihhhh ily wedding in 2 weeks time to SHOP”

“Are you gonna post the ones you don’t like on Poshmark?!?!👁👁 I WANT THE BROWN!!!!”

“Seemingly unpopular opinion but I love the tulle dress. I want it.” (comments on posts from @remibader, 2024, 2025).

“I saw Rosey wearing a tiered maxi skirt, so I bought a tiered maxi skirt 🥰”

“They need to restock this skirt in my size. Love this 🥰”

“I need to buy this!! Nowwwwww” (comments on a post from @roseybeeme, 2024).

Remi and Rosey’s followers engage with their fashion content enthusiastically, by writing in all uppercase letters and using multiple exclamation points. The followers also refer to specific items of clothing they feel inspired to purchase. This signals a positive evaluation of the influencers’ pragmatic brand legitimacy, seeing that their content is valuable to their followers regardless of their weight loss.

Although Remi’s fashion content continues to inspire her audience, some followers are dissatisfied with the absence of humour, honesty, and relatability that defined her try-on hauls. These followers express nostalgia for these elements, signalling that Remi’s new content might be lacking in comparison:

“I missed these hauls so so much, so relatable.”

“Idc, I just would like to see a throwback video when she would dress up mimicking the fashion on the runway with her props. She kept me laughing at those 😂😂😂😂. I will miss the plus-size hauls [. . .]”

“Miss the old school Zara videos! I related!”

“I just wanna see you roast online shopping photos again” (comments on posts from @remibader, 2024, 2025)

The comments highlight relatability and the mocking of non-inclusive brands as the elements most appreciated by Remi's audience. The audience takes issue with the absence of these elements in her new fashion content, rather than Remi's thinner body. This is further underlined by Remi's most commented-on post of 2025 being a realistic try-on haul. In comparison, Rosey's most commented-on post in 2025 is promotional content for a plus-size brand. When she announced her weight loss journey, Rosey promised her followers to continue being inclusive: "I will continue to showcase clothing ranges outside my own, and bring up size expansion to brands I support on this platform." (@roseybeeme, 2022). Members of Rosey's audience praise the sustained inclusivity in her content:

"@roseybeeme thank you for still being inclusive! 🌟"

"Plus it's not like you've stopped sharing plus size clothes for us to buy! You're still inclusive in your offerings from what I've seen"

"I am glad you still share plus size options!" (comments on posts from @roseybeeme, 2024, 2025)

Rosey's followers express gratitude for her inclusivity. Delivering on her promise allows her to remain a credible size-inclusive influencer to her audience (Morhart et al., 2015). Suchman (1995) highlighted the importance of credibility in the evaluation of a brand's pragmatic legitimacy, noting that by keeping exchanges "consistent and predictable" and meeting their audience's needs, brands could remain credible and avoid awakening scrutiny (p. 596). Rosey's content remains consistent and predictable to her audience, as she continues making the same size-inclusive fashion content as before and fulfills her promise, in turn eliciting support from her followers.

In both Remi and Rosey's case, certain attributes of their content are fundamental to their respective brand identities. For Rosey, it is size-inclusivity and plus-size fashion itself. For Remi, it is the humour and honesty she exhibits when sharing fashion content, even if she is no longer plus size. These attributes keep exchanges with their followers

consistent regardless of their weight loss and help them maintain their pragmatic legitimacy, resulting in regular positive engagement from their audience.

Abandoning Inclusive Fashion Content

In contrast, the influencers' pragmatic legitimacy is jeopardized when they discontinue their size-inclusive fashion content, leading their followers to disengage. If the influencers' fashion content no longer offers their plus-size followers the same inspiration and information, these followers cannot benefit from and engage with the content in the same way.

Nicolette Mason continues making fashion content after her weight loss, but it is no longer as inclusive as it was before her physical transformation. Following her weight loss, Nicolette almost exclusively features luxury brands that do not always offer extended size ranges. As a result, her fashion content is less relevant to her plus-size followers, who cannot find the same clothing in their size. Her audience reacts to this change by commenting less frequently about feeling inspired to recreate her looks, especially in comparison to Remi and Rosey. Outfit posts that previously would have received comments about feeling inspired, such as “Very beautiful. I love your style. You’re a real inspiration to every girl that has self esteem problems [because] of her weight,” (comment on a post by @nicolettemason, 2014) now only receive generic compliments such as “I love that outfit ❤️” (comment on a post by @nicolettemason, 2024). Nicolette’s audience does not ask for direct links to clothing items they feel inspired to purchase in the way Remi and Rosey’s followers do. This suggests that while her followers still appreciate her style, they no longer find her fashion content accessible enough to recreate her outfits.

In comparison, Alex Ochoa Suo initially continues making size-inclusive fashion content alongside the documentation of her weight loss journey. However, she eventually discontinues the fashion content to focus on weight loss. Before Alex’s transition to weight loss content, plus-size fashion inspiration videos were her most popular content. Accordingly, comments describing Alex as a fashion inspiration and requesting

information about her clothing were the most common across her comment sections. These videos were replaced with posts recommending weight loss methods. In turn, Alex faces disengagement from her followers. This manifests through the absence of fashion-related comments, as with Nicolette. Moreover, while Nicolette continues to receive compliments on her style, Alex no longer does, as she discontinues fashion content entirely.

The absence of comments that were previously common across the influencers' comment sections suggests a negative evaluation of their pragmatic legitimacy. Before their distancing from the plus-size fashion space, Nicolette and Alex's followers frequently requested information about the sizing and fit of the clothes they wore. Elements in Nicolette and Alex's content that previously benefited their audiences, granting them pragmatic legitimacy, are no longer included by the influencers. These elements included hashtags identifying them as plus size, specifications about size ranges and sizes worn, reviewing the fit of the clothing or being plus size themselves. As a result, the nature of their followers' engagement with their content changes from active support through comments to disengagement.

Body-Positive Content

While the influencers' advocacy was centred around size-inclusive fashion content, it also included speaking up about size-based discrimination beyond fashion. As they built their online presence, all four influencers recounted personal stories of size-based discrimination, shared their struggles with their body image and finding clothes that fit them, and advocated for size inclusivity in the fashion industry and beyond. The influencers' pragmatic and moral legitimacy, and in turn, audience reactions, are impacted by the evolution of their body-positive content. Like with their fashion content, sustained advocacy is encouraged by audience members, while the opposite leads to disengagement and even backlash.

Evolution of Sharing Plus-Size Struggles

Before their weight loss, the influencers discussed personal issues tied to the context of their size-inclusive or body-positive activism, as they shared their struggles as plus-size women. In doing so, they built a relationship with their followers based on these practices. The main way influencers elicit support despite their weight loss is by continuing to be vulnerable and openly discuss their challenges, even if these evolve and become different from the issues they shared prior to losing weight.

The influencers can remain relatable to their audience by continuing to share their struggles with self-acceptance, even if those struggles are now related to weight loss. Relatable content fits with the audience's daily reality, making it easier to understand and make sense of, in turn, helping the influencers maintain cognitive legitimacy (Suchman, 1995). Remi and Rosey share their struggles with both making the decision to undergo a weight loss journey and the journey itself. Rosey writes in two Instagram captions: "I was petrified of losing weight because I had built a body positive platform online." (@roseybeeme, 2024) and "It's been hard to have a nuanced perspective when it comes to actively trying to shrink myself." (@roseybeeme, 2023). Remi explains her struggle with reconciling her weight loss and her identity in an interview for Self Magazine (Mukhopadhyay, 2025). Remi also describes her struggle with accepting her thinner body: "I never wanted to be this size. . . I'm probably the only person that's ever gone to a doctor for weight loss to be like, Okay, but can I still be curvy?" she says. "It's really confusing to be so quickly in a different body but have the exact same brain." (Mukhopadhyay, 2025). Remi and Rosey's audiences commend their vulnerability in sharing their journey:

"I am obsessed with this vulnerable share. Thank you!!!"

"Thank you for sharing your journey you have no idea how much it means to someone who is also going through the same thing"

"We're literally going through the exact same thing, it makes me feel less alone, but there's still so much pain and sadness there 😞❤️ I'm thankful I have your posts to look at every single day" (comments on a post by @remibader, 2025).

“Thank you for sharing your story. ❤️”

“I so admire your authenticity and vulnerability.”

“Thank you for being real with us. It’s refreshing.” (comments on a post by @roseybeeme, 2024).

Furthermore, when the influencers acknowledge that they struggle with the contradiction of their weight loss journey, their followers react less strongly to this behaviour at odds with their activism. This acknowledgement signals to followers that the influencers are also struggling to reconcile the contradiction of their weight loss, just like their audience, making the influencers more relatable. Remi and Rosey’s vulnerable approach serves to defuse the tension arising from the disruption of their weight loss journeys. They continue sharing their struggles with self-acceptance, which used to be content associated with their activism. As a result, their followers do not see incoherence between their physical transformation and their activism. Remi and Rosey’s respective audiences encourage and praise them for continuing to be activist influencers:

“[. . .] And it doesn’t matter what size you are, you can ALWAYS be a supporter of size inclusivity! ❤️”

“Thank you for always standing up for all body types.”

“Even as she doesn’t need the larger sizes she still advocates for them and lifts up plus size models. Even uses them in her own campaign.” (comments on posts from @remibader, 2024, 2025).

“[. . .] I don’t have any doubts that you’ll still care about and serve larger bodies no matter where your path takes you.”

“[. . .] Just because you’re on a new journey it doesn’t negate the one you’ve been on. [...]”

“[. . .] i know you will attain your goals and continue to inspire others to love themselves exactly where they’re at while you do so.” (comments on a post by @roseybeeme, 2022).

The reactions are similar to the response Remi receives for sustaining her fashion content. Furthermore, by continuing to be an advocate for size inclusivity, Remi shows she can be a size-inclusive activist influencer regardless of her size. Remi then becomes an ally to the cause, coming across as altruistic and not self-serving (Shalev et al., 2024). As for Rosey, her followers insist that her weight loss journey can coexist with her advocacy. These reactions are in response to Rosey's initial post weight loss announcement, which was both vulnerable and aligned with body positivity values. Like Remi, Rosey sharing her struggles when announcing her weight loss made it so that her audience did not see it as conflicting with her activism.

Continuing to share their struggles is an evolution of the body positivity content the influencers made prior to their weight loss. Therefore, that content is predictable and deemed appropriate. Moreover, this vulnerable content is relatable to their audience. The influencers sharing their struggles with weight loss remains relevant to the experience of the plus-size community. This helps their followers make sense of their actions. The influencers' actions being predictable and reasonable to their audience helps them maintain cognitive legitimacy (Suchman, 1995), eliciting support and empathy from their followers in response to their weight loss.

Abandoning Body-Positive Content

Despite the influencers' followers encouraging them to remain activists after their weight loss, most of the influencers gradually abandon the body-positive aspect of their content. Consequently, members of their respective audiences disengage or respond with backlash. Nicolette and Alex step away from their activism by no longer mentioning body positivity, size inclusivity, and size-based discrimination on their pages. As described in the previous section, when first announcing her weight loss, Rosey continues to align with body positivity and fat acceptance. However, she gradually evolves against the movement following her announcement and only sustains inclusivity in her fashion content, abandoning the less promotional side of size inclusivity.

Each of the three influencers steps away from their advocacy differently. When Nicolette starts losing weight in 2023, she stops mentioning body positivity and size inclusivity on her Instagram feed. Aside from a few rare mentions, the topic goes from making up 22% of her feed in 2021 to 0% of her feed in 2025. Similarly, following her weight loss announcement, Rosey no longer discusses body positivity at all, as she criticizes the movement. As for Alex, aside from Shiny by Nature's content and rare posts on her personal account stating, "Curvy girls should wear what they want," body positivity is also entirely absent from her content. All three influencers used to prompt discussions with their audiences about body positivity and size inclusivity as a broader issue, beyond sharing size-inclusive brands. During and following their weight loss, they all stopped. Rosey and Alex even started prompting conversations against body positivity during their weight loss. They criticized their bigger bodies, contradicting the content they both made before their weight loss, promoting the idea that fat people can be happy without losing weight. Their content is no longer beneficial to the plus-size community, as they are critical of it. Whereas in the past, audience members enthusiastically discussed body positivity and the fight against size-based discrimination, echoing the influencers, these reactions and comments are now absent.

While the influencers face the silent disengagement of some of their followers, they also face criticism for no longer responding to their needs and benefiting the plus-size community. Indeed, many of the influencers' followers still expect them to make advocacy content regardless of their weight loss. This is evident from Remi and Rosey's audiences praising them for remaining activist influencers. Alex is the only influencer who fully transitions to weight loss content. She abandons the size-inclusive and body-positive aspects of her previously established online presence, except for her size-inclusive brand, Shiny by Nature. This results in members of Alex's audience expressing their discontent with her new focus on intentional weight loss:

"Idk I just wanted to tell you - many people started following because of the inclusive close line she has—not because of weight loss—not saying it's bad either

like she can do what she wants obviously—but yeah - not because they wanted to be reminded constantly of weight loss which is the new direction of the page”

“Girl what is this, you used to just make cute clothes and be all about accessibility and now you’ve lost 100 pounds ~naturally~ you’ve become weirdly obsessed with your own physical appearance, including this.”

“I think two can be true at once. It is never fatphobic to lose weight for you, however since you lost weight, content has been less about body positivity and more about getting smaller. I think if you do both, then there would be less issues”

“[. . .] assuming your fat followers who followed you originally for body positivity and size inclusive clothes, need or want your ‘weight loss advice PDF of doom.’ Like theres a billion things out there telling us how to lose weight already if that’s what we wanted. clearly the audience you curated isn’t here for that??” (comments on posts from @alexochasuo, 2024, 2025).

As with Remi and Rosey’s audiences, Alex’s followers specify the elements they appreciated in her content: size inclusivity and accessibility. However, they go beyond expressing nostalgia for Alex’s advocacy content, stating they are uninterested in her weight loss. Since the beginning of her career as an influencer in 2018, Alex made size inclusivity central to her brand identity, cultivating expectations about her content. This is highlighted by the comment pointing out that size inclusivity is the reason many members of Alex’s audience follow her. One comment also mentions not wanting to be constantly reminded of weight loss, suggesting that Alex’s promotion of intentional weight loss may be detrimental or irrelevant to some of her followers. Thus, when weight loss becomes the focus of her content, some followers no longer perceive her account as meeting their needs for size-inclusive content. This signals a negative evaluation of her pragmatic legitimacy (Suchman, 1995), and leads to backlash.

Moreover, this loss in pragmatic legitimacy leads to heavy contestation when Alex continues making size-inclusive promotional content on the Shiny by Nature account while simultaneously opposing body positivity on her personal account. Many of her

audience members see the discrepancy between her personal and promotional content as a sign she never sincerely believed in body-positive values and used them for her gain. This leads to accusations of opportunism from her audience:

“Of course it’s great that your accomplishing your goals as far as weight loss, but you literally profit from people with plus/mid size bodies 🤔”

“[. . .] her body positivity went down the drain while she still tries to pander to the plus-size community 🤔🤔”

“you went from promoting body positivity and profiting off of founding your brand in the idea of making size inclusive clothing, and then when that mindset stops being trendy you turn on it and start claiming that people with the body types you were initially marketing to are ‘morbidly obese’ and a danger to themselves and their health. Watching the entire progression of this switch up happen is simply informing us you were never here to create an authentic space, you were only ever interested in whatever rhetoric would bring you the most engagement and profit.”

“[. . .] bc u, a person who makes size inclusive clothing, are not being size inclusive. you arent the only one that was that weight, so u calling yourself morbidly obese = calling us morbidly obese and if that doesnt make me jump for joy and want to give u some money for clothes.” (comments on posts from @alexchoasuo, 2024, 2025)

Alex’s audience points out the disconnect between her lack of inclusivity and Shiny by Nature’s mission. SBN no longer symbolizes the inclusive values of Alex’s followers because its founder, Alex, antagonizes the size-inclusive community. Her audience sees this decoupling (Kates, 2004) as Alex attempting to pander to and profit from the plus-size community. Despite Alex expressing a desire to continue her advocacy through her size-inclusive brand, her transgression of community norms negatively impacts her moral brand legitimacy. Because Alex’s core values do not seem to align with her Shiny by Nature advocacy, it comes across as self-interested, increasing the likelihood of backlash (Kates, 2004).

4.2.2 Framing Weight Loss

Prior to their weight loss, all four influencers expressed anti-weight loss values as part of their activism, in alignment with the body positivity movement. Consequently, the influencers' weight loss is at odds with their activism, which leads to backlash and contestations of the influencers' moral and cognitive brand legitimacy. When making content about their weight loss, the influencers frame it within three different narratives: a health narrative, a self-determination narrative, and an ideal appearance narrative. The health and self-determination narratives are coherent with the body positivity movement, whereas the ideal appearance narrative is not. The narrative adopted to frame weight loss content impacts audience reactions. Coherent narratives lead to positive evaluations of moral and cognitive legitimacy, eliciting support, while incoherent narratives lead to contestations and backlash.

Health Narrative

The influencers' weight loss is at odds with their previously stated anti-weight loss values. This contradiction threatens the influencers' cognitive legitimacy. This is because weight loss appears incoherent, both based on the influencers' past actions and on the body positivity movement's norms. To mitigate negative reactions to this incoherence, the influencers must justify and frame the disruption as aligning with the moral and cognitive values of the body-positive community (Suchman, 1995). The community promotes self-care and advises against changing one's appearance to conform to beauty standards (Cohen, 2019; Aubrey et al., 2024). Thus, the influencers justifying their weight loss as being in the pursuit of health makes the disruption more comprehensible to their audience, encouraging positive reactions.

All four influencers claim health reasons when discussing their weight loss, at least at first. Nicolette rarely mentions her weight loss, but when asked about it, she explains it is the result of a health condition.

Remi exclusively frames her weight loss as being in the pursuit of health, both mental and physical. She describes her physical transformation journey as, “binge eating, weight-loss drugs, debilitating gastrointestinal issues, more than one wellness retreat, therapy, and finally, a harrowing procedure that left her bedridden for weeks” (Mukhopadhyay, 2025). Her followers praise her for prioritizing herself:

“I just love that you are doing this for you. The most important relationship you’ll ever have is with yourself.”

“Put yourself first girl!! 🙌🙌🙌 you’ve got this”

“choosing YOU and doing things for YOU is so important. thank you for reminding me of that ☺” (comments on a post by @remibader, 2024).

When first broaching the subject of weight loss, Rosey keeps the discussion health-focused. She explains her physical transformation is her answer to “struggles with mobility as brought on by excess weight” and she is “seeking to feel more comfort in my daily life, less fear of inaccessible public spaces and some ease.” (@roseybeeme, 2022). Like Remi, Rosey’s followers encourage her self-prioritization:

“i hope you always do what’s right for you!!! ❤️”

“💜💜 I’m happy you are doing what feels the best for you.”

“no one will live your life in your body except you! admire you for making choices for yourself and your own personal relationship with your body” (comments on a post by @roseybeeme, 2022).

Alex starts her journey with a health-focused approach as well. In one of her posts, she writes: “I’m working hard to get as healthy as possible before pregnancy” (@alexchoasuo, 2023). In turn, her followers praise her for prioritizing her future children:

“I’m proud of you for ignoring the hate comments and focusing on doing what’s best for you, which is getting to a healthier weight and preparing for your future”

“also, congrats on everything you’ve done for yourself and your future family! you’ve worked hard and deserve it”

“Good for you girl! The fact that you are preparing shows you’re going to be an amazing mother.”

“[. . .] pay zero attention to the people who aren’t happy that you’re doing what’s best for your body and future baby” (comments on a post by @alexochasuo, 2023).

The comments encourage the influencers’ self-prioritization, pointing to a link between the adoption of a “health narrative” and eliciting support from the audience. Pursuing intentional weight loss for their health, and not their appearance, aligns with body positivity norms, which advise against changing one’s appearance to conform to beauty standards (Cohen, 2019; Cwynar-Horta, 2016). Here, the health narrative functions as a repair strategy for influencers to maintain legitimacy and elicit support. It works as an excuse, as the influencers present the behaviour as constrained by physical or psychological well-being (Suchman, 1995). The health narrative also serves as an explanation, as the influencers frame their behaviour at odds with the movement within a “supportive worldview,” aligned with the body positivity movement (Suchman, 1995, p. 598). Thus, framing their weight loss as a health journey allows the influencers to maintain brand legitimacy and continue to elicit support from their audience despite their weight loss.

This is further illustrated by Remi’s audience, as they respond to her fitness and weight loss content in a way that respects body-positive norms. Because Remi’s weight loss is presented as a body-positive health journey, her followers engage with the content through compliments about her strength rather than her appearance. While intentional weight loss can be seen as antithetical to the body positivity movement, framing weight loss in the context of wellness and self-care is associated with the Health at Every Size movement. From her very first weight loss-related post, Remi emphasizes improving her health and physical strength, as opposed to losing weight and becoming thinner. This alignment with Health at Every Size values is mirrored by her audience:

“That progress is incredible! Those are not easy!!! 🤞🤞🤞”

“Incredible progress of STRENGTH and finding yourself again 💪❤️”

“Strength baby, all around 🦵🧠❤️”

“Look at that STRENGTH omg so proud of you!” (comments on a post by @remibader, 2024).

These comments suggest that Remi’s followers do not see her weight loss as behaviour at odds with the body positivity movement. This may help explain why her weight loss content elicits encouragement rather than backlash and points to a positive evaluation of her moral and cognitive brand legitimacy. Remi respects body positivity norms by aligning with HAES values when sharing weight loss-related content, helping her maintain moral legitimacy (Suchman, 1995). Moreover, the health narrative makes her weight loss seem coherent with the movement’s cultural norms, helping her maintain cognitive legitimacy (Suchman, 1995). This allows her content to elicit support from followers who align with body positivity.

Self-determination Narrative

The influencers may all adopt the health narrative at the beginning of their weight loss journeys; however, some also justify the change based on their right to choose weight loss for themselves. This narrative is based on self-determination needs, one of them being an individual’s need for autonomy, a value often encouraged by body-positive content (Legault & Sago, 2022). The influencers’ followers are receptive to their emphasis on autonomy, as it is coherent with body positivity norms. Alex, Remi, and Rosey adopt a self-determination narrative in defence of their weight loss.

Remi writes in the caption of an Instagram post, referring to others constraining her autonomy, “I’ve constantly tried to figure out which box I belong in based on solely what others want me to be in and that has only been based on my appearance.” (@remibader, 2025). In response, her followers clarify that her weight loss is her own choice:

“So proud of you, this is your journey nobody else’s”

“Its your body, your choice!”

“👊❤️ Only YOU can decide what is right for YOUR body and life!” (comments on a post by @remibader, 2025).

When announcing her weight loss, Rosey writes, “As fat people we are expected to either lose 150 lbs OR never lose a pound and become role models for self love. I am interested in neither one of those identities.” (@roseybeeme, 2022). Rosey further defends her weight loss and encourages autonomy: “I was living in a world where I felt like I possessed no ownership of my body [. . .] You get one life, as long as you’re not harming yourself, or others—I say be whoever you want to be.” (@roseybeeme, 2024). Her followers highlight the importance of bodily autonomy and comfort over anything else:

“People should be comfortable in their own bodies and skin, at any size. That means they also reserve the right to modify their body, or not, any way they see fit.”

“Bodily autonomy comes first, always. Thank you for sharing ❤️”

“Your body, your choice! ❤️” (comments on a post by @roseybeeme, 2022).

As for Alex, she defends her right to choose weight loss by writing, “I don’t get upset by other people’s lifestyle choices” (@alexochasuo, 2023) and “You don’t understand ’cause you’re not me” (@alexochasuo, 2024). Alex’s followers echo her argument that people should not impede her autonomy when deciding to pursue weight loss:

“Great job👏👏 and I think no one needs a reason to lose or gain weight, I mean, it’s your body and your choice.”

“People policing your body no matter what. You’re better than them!”

“People are weird it’s your body you can manipulate it however you please to.” (comments on a post by @alexochasuo, 2025).

The audience defends the influencers' weight loss in the name of bodily autonomy. Interestingly, the phrase "your body, your choice" comes back across the three influencers' comment sections. The phrase is a slogan commonly associated with the fight for women's reproductive rights (Weiss, 2015). The association of an activist slogan with the influencers' weight loss is an indication that some audience members see this contradiction of their previously stated values as a positive change, helping them maintain moral brand legitimacy. Moreover, like the health narrative, the self-determination narrative serves to frame the influencers' weight loss as coherent with the movement, by relying on bodily autonomy, an important value in body positivity. Thus, the self-determination narrative helps the influencers elicit support from their audience when sharing weight loss-related content.

Ideal Appearance Narrative

In contrast with the health and self-determination narratives that are coherent with body positivity, an "ideal appearance narrative" emerges in contradiction with the movement. Alex and Rosey engage in behaviour at odds with the cause beyond their physical transformation, by embracing an appearance-focused approach to weight loss. This leads to backlash and contestations of their moral legitimacy, as members of the plus-size community question the impact of their promotional approach to intentional weight loss on their followers.

In February 2024, Rosey writes in an Instagram caption: "Weight loss and the pursuit of it, is not evil. For whatever reason! [. . .] if your ideal aesthetic is in a smaller body—do you." (@roseybeeme, 2024). In the caption of a different post, Rosey writes, "I am so so joyful to be in a smaller body than the one I was in a few years ago. I was afraid to leave my home" (@roseybeeme 2024). As for Alex, she shares a video of herself admiring her smaller body with overlaid text reading, "when the weight loss is weight lossing" (@alexochuasuo, 2024). She also shares numerous videos positively portraying her smaller body while disparaging her bigger one. This causes some of Alex's followers to raise concerns about her weight loss content:

“[. . .] it can be triggering for those who struggle with EDs and haven’t found a healthy relationship with exercise! [...]”

“Weight loss content is just triggering to a lot of ppl.”

“posts body checks all the time, and then gets mad when people call her out”
(comments on posts from @alexochasuo, 2023, 2024).

Rosey admits to deleting all criticism from her comment sections, but well-known members of the plus-size and body-positive community also contest her moral legitimacy. Virginia Sole-Smith, a fat acceptance activist, discusses Rosey’s weight loss content on her podcast, *Burnt Toast*:

“I do think if you are someone, especially fashion influencers, you’re going to have a lot of younger followers, people who are at very vulnerable ages for disordered eating and eating disorders and glamorizing weight loss is never helpful for that. It doesn’t serve anyone except you.” (Sole-Smith & Fay, 2024)

Alex and Rosey’s weight loss content features many practices usually found in dieting and even eating disorder online communities. These practices and communities are opposed to body positivity and Health at Every Size values. They include sharing their caloric intake, body checking (videos in which they observe and showcase their now smaller bodies), and a constant promotion of intentional weight loss. Thus, the practices employed in this “ideal appearance” narrative are incoherent with body positivity values. Alex’s followers and prominent members of the plus-size community highlight the negative consequences of Alex and Rosey’s appearance-focused promotion of intentional weight loss. This denotes a negative evaluation of their consequential legitimacy, a form of moral legitimacy (Suchman, 1995), and results in much criticism and backlash from Alex and Rosey’s communities.

4.2.3 Reframing Body Positivity

The influencers' management of their advocacy-related content and framing of their weight loss help them maintain their legitimacy and elicit support by adapting to the movement's norms. However, a third dynamic emerges as a factor in audience support and the negotiation of their brand legitimacy. This dynamic involves the influencers and their followers negotiating the meaning of body positivity and reframing the movement. Body-positive norms may be adapted to include intentional weight loss. The body positivity movement may also be reframed as detrimental to the plus-size community, as the influencers point out the movement's flaws and reject it.

Widening Body Positivity

The influencers reframe their weight loss content as being beneficial to the plus-size community, leading their followers to mimic them and reframe body positivity to align their weight loss content with the movement's norms. They redefine both the movement's values and the influencers' actions, so they no longer seem at odds with the movement.

Alex's weight loss and fitness content becomes increasingly controversial, as she posts things such as "deciding to lose weight because you love yourself" (@alexochasuo, 2023), often triggering backlash. In response to the criticism she receives, she reframes the content as being intended to help plus-size women. What's more, she positions the backlash itself as evidence that body positivity norms are overly restrictive, and she makes content to challenge these norms and widen what is considered "allowed" within the movement. For instance, she shares a video with overlaid text reading: "when other people start to realize exercise has so many real benefits & not just some evil diet culture thing" (@alexochasuo, 2023), suggesting that pursuing fitness and weight loss can be positive. This kind of content elicits support, as some followers mimic this discourse by defending her intent and repeating her distinction between exercising for broader benefits and exercising solely "to be skinny":

"She never discussed becoming skinny nor has she posted food content or anything like that. Working out is healthy and it doesnt mean being skinny. [. . .]

This is good content and her content is still mostly outfits. Keep up the post alex!
❤️”

“this is a safe space. She’s made fitness videos in the past. There’s nothing wrong with fitness and exercise especially when trying to get pregnant. She never said she was tryna be skinny or thin. She’s still a plus size baddie, she’s just getting her health in order before trying to have children”

“Exercising and being healthy ≠ being skinny, ED’s or any of the other things people think. I went to a hot yoga class once and the instructor was a big girl (like me!) and she had the MOVES. [. . .] I was inspired as hell. You can be healthy and ‘big’ you can be strong, and flexible without being the skinniest version of you.”

“there’s nothing about wanting to be healthier that makes this space no longer a safe space for plus size people coming from a plus size person. It’s actually encouraging to see health as a larger size and not a skinny runner or muscle mommy.”

“she literally has barely posted any fitness videos and they aren’t really framed in a ‘losing weight’ perspective” (comments on a post by @alexochasuo, 2023).

The comments draw a comparison between the way Alex is pursuing her weight loss and what they deem the wrong way to pursue weight loss: “she never discussed becoming skinny nor has she posted food content or anything like that” and “she never said she was tryna be skinny or thin.” In doing so, they argue Alex is pursuing weight loss the right way, in accordance with body-positivity norms, granting her procedural legitimacy (Suchman, 1995). The comments also mention representation: “it’s actually encouraging to see health as a larger size and not a skinny runner or muscle mommy” underlining how the influencers’ weight loss content could be reframed from a contradiction to activism. The followers’ emphasis on the benefits of Alex’s weight loss content denotes a positive evaluation of her consequential legitimacy (Suchman, 1995). As a result, as Alex attempts to widen body positivity norms to fit her weight loss content, her audience mirrors her, leading to a positive evaluation of her moral legitimacy and support from her followers.

Alex and Rosey denounce body positivity and openly embrace an appearance-based approach to their weight loss. Rather than reframing the contradiction with the cause, they reframe body positivity as secondary to their self-improvement through weight loss. Nonetheless, even as the influencers stop trying to repair their brand legitimacy, their followers justify their actions. Members of Alex and Rosey's audiences negotiate the meaning of body positivity to fit the influencers' new practices:

“Is her celebrating her goals that she reached not body positivity? Remember this is her personal page for her growth, she doesn't speak or need to appeal to all plus sized people”

“[. . .] And body positivity also includes celebrating a working body that is losing weight”

“Your posts about your weight loss journey have been so positive and health-focused, your store carries a really inclusive range of sizes. . . I feel like this is a part of body positivity, doing what's best for you while remaining inclusive and kind to others regardless of body size and shape. You look happy at every size and that's beautiful 💕” (comments on a post by @alexochasuo, 2024).

“I feel like you can be body positive and still want to change things too. I've been a lot of sizes and someone at times when those sizes were not acceptable, but if you have a body and you are living in it kindly isn't that positivity?”

“I think you can still strive for the healthiest version of you and be body positive. Loving yourself includes taking care of you, whatever that may look like.”

“I love that you haven't backed down from the loud minority and you are doing what's right for you by you! 🙌 Now THATS body positivity”

“I feel like body positivity has to have the meaning that you get to feel comfortable and safe in your body. The end.” (comments on a post by @roseybeeme, 2024).

Suchman (1995) describes the justification of a disruption as “redefining means and ends retrospectively, in order to make the disruptive events appear consonant with prevailing moral and cognitive beliefs” (p. 598). Indeed, these comments attempt to justify Alex and

Rosey's contradiction of the cause by redefining the influencers' actions as well as body positivity norms. One comment says "celebrating her goals" in reference to Alex sharing a "before and after" video that mocks her bigger body. Another comment says, "strive for the healthiest version of you" when Rosey has repeatedly expressed wanting to lose weight to achieve a beauty ideal. Audience members also sanitize the meaning of the body positivity movement, defining it as "celebrating a working body that is losing weight" and "feeling comfortable and safe in your body." While these definitions are not complete departures from the movement's original message, they do dilute its meaning by emphasizing the self-love and self-care aspects over the collective fight against beauty standards and size-based discrimination. The followers provide support and positive engagement through this redefinition of body positivity, allowing Rosey and Alex to maintain their moral and cognitive legitimacy, in turn mitigating backlash against them.

Rejecting Body Positivity

The influencers impact their followers' reactions by reinterpreting the body positivity movement's anti-weight loss norms. As their content shifts to promoting weight loss, some influencers make the movement's norms seem extreme, making their departure from the cause seem less morally questionable. They reevaluate the body-positive movement's positive consequences, portraying it as detrimental to health and autonomy. This allows them to gain moral legitimacy as critics of the movement and, in turn, elicit support from some of their followers.

Rosey and Alex both explicitly criticize the body positivity movement's views on intentional weight loss. For example, Rosey writes in one of her Instagram captions: "I participated in the health practices 'allowed' by the online body positive world—gentle movement, weight lifting, working with health at every size dietitians and physical coaches. But the honest to god truth of it, is that I started feeling physically better in my body when I pursued weight loss." (@roseybeeme, 2024). In another post, she writes, "people said that sharing my desire to celebrate the mobility I gained was ableist and fatphobic. That my criticism of online communities that become echo chambers is

fatphobic. I'm telling you something, no online community will feel as good as climbing a mountain." (@roseybeeme, 2024). Alex expresses a similar idea. She writes that when she was bigger, she was led to believe weight loss was "fatphobic and harmful to the fat community" (@alexochasuo, 2024). In response, many of their followers echo their criticism of the body positivity movement:

"Most of those communities—although well meaning, become the very things they fight against. They alienate everyone outside of their community and 'other' them as soon as YOUR lived experience doesn't match up with theirs."

"Same, girl. TBH, I was letting a lot of the movement make me even lazier and make excuses for my behaviour."

"All this anti-health garbage from the fat liberation sect give me the distinct stench of anti-reproductive right crazies."

"The impact of the BOPO movement and the toxicity that lays within the community is not discussed enough. That community and a handful of the influencers in that community had a huge negative impact on my physical and mental health." (comments on a post by @roseybeeme, 2024).

"The second the 'body positivity' community made people start apologizing for losing weight, I hopped tf off that train. . ."

"Because the 'plus size community' is a death cult."

"girl i lost 100 lbs, and lemme tell u the fat positivity community is actually vile"

"This is where we see that body positivity is about everything but health" (comments on posts from @alexochasuo, 2024, 2025).

Alex and Rosey's followers seem to adopt the influencers' reframing of body positivity as controlling and detrimental to health. By calling the body positivity community a "cult" and a "sect," the followers villainize the movement. This then serves as justification for the influencers speaking against the movement, as it repositions the influencers' criticism of the movement as understandable and necessary. Moreover, echoing the comments arguing for bodily autonomy, one comment refers to the fight for reproductive rights by

comparing the body positivity community to the conservative pro-life community, framing the movement as coercive: “the fat liberation sect give[s] me the distinct stench of anti-reproductive right crazies.” These followers portray the influencers’ departure from body positivity as a positive change and help them maintain their moral brand legitimacy. Therefore, the influencers’ criticism of body positivity elicits support, as their followers mimic the practice.

Chapter 5: Discussion

The final chapter of this thesis discusses the findings that emerged from the analysis presented in the previous chapter. It is divided into four sections. The first section will synthesize the findings. The second section will outline theoretical contributions, followed by managerial implications in the third section. Finally, the fourth section will describe the study's limitations and avenues for future research.

5.1 Summary of findings

For activist brands, the cause they adopt often forms a core part of their brand identity. When a brand engages in behaviour perceived as being at odds with this cause, audiences may interpret it as a change in brand identity, triggering consumer responses. This is because the brand's legitimacy relies in big part on its advocacy for the cause. Their brand legitimacy is, therefore, contingent on the brand's activism and association with the cause's values. However, the consumer response is often polarized, including both backlash and support for the brand. Consequently, the main objective of this study was to explore the factors associated with a negative or positive consumer response to this phenomenon. More specifically, the study aimed to find out which practices activist brands may adopt to mitigate backlash in response to a change in their brand identity that is at odds with the cause they have espoused.

Results reveal three practices activist influencers adopt that shape the response of their followers to a behaviour at odds with their activism: (1) managing their advocacy-related content; (2) their framing of their weight loss; (3) and their reframing of body positivity.

First, the way influencers managed their advocacy-related content played a central role in their followers' reactions. Some influencers continued to meet previously established expectations by maintaining core elements of their brand and sustaining advocacy-related content despite their weight loss. This resulted in their followers being more engaged and

supportive, positively evaluating the influencers' pragmatic legitimacy. In contrast, influencers who discontinued their advocacy-related content were seen as failing to respond to audience interests and were met with disengagement and avoidance. Moreover, in some cases, influencers' practices seemed tailored to what audiences wanted to hear while the influencers expressed contradictory values. Followers interpreted this as inauthentic and opportunistic (i.e., a decoupling between stated values and actual behaviour), which triggered backlash and contestations of the influencers' moral legitimacy.

Second, the narrative adopted by the influencers to frame their weight loss and the behaviour at odds with their activism impacted their followers' tendency to support or criticize them. The influencers adopting a health or self-determination narrative framed their behaviour in relation to the cause's values of self-care and autonomy. These narratives align with the cause's norms, allowing the influencers to maintain their moral and cognitive legitimacy and elicit support from their audience. However, when adopting a narrative incoherent with the cause, such as wanting to lose weight to achieve an ideal appearance, the influencers faced backlash from their community.

Third, the influencers' reframing of the cause they had espoused, and their attempts to negotiate its meaning or reject it, triggered both backlash and support. Reactions varied based on the degree to which the influencers rejected the cause and its values. The influencers negotiated body positivity norms to accommodate intentional weight loss, framing it as compatible with the movement's values rather than as a contradiction. In other cases, influencers went further by explicitly rejecting body positivity altogether. They reframed the movement as harmful to the plus-size community and positioned their departure from it as a morally superior choice. Some followers adopted and echoed these redefinitions of the movement, which sustained support. However, the more explicitly an influencer rejected body positivity, the more likely this rejection was to trigger backlash. This backlash was especially strong among audience members who continued to identify with body positivity. For these followers, the influencer's discourse delegitimized the movement and the communities attached to it, which they perceived as harmful.

Finally, the study finds that, despite the influencers continuing to elicit support while engaging in behaviour at odds with their cause, they ultimately all suffer a decrease in engagement following their weight loss. What's more, the way the influencers contradict their activism seems to have an impact on this disengagement. The influencers advocating against the movement, Alex and Rosey, suffered the biggest decrease in their rate of comments per post, decreases of 86% and 73% respectively. In contrast, influencers who continued to adhere to the movement's norms, Nicolette and Remi, suffered a lesser decrease: 50% and 46% respectively.

5.2 Theoretical Contributions

The current findings add to a growing body of literature on brand activism. Using legitimacy as a theoretical lens, the study enhances the understanding of the consequences an activist brand may face when engaging in behaviour at odds with its activism. This study makes four contributions to the fields of brand activism and legitimacy.

First, this study contributes to brand activism research by examining a phenomenon that has received limited attention: activist brands engaging in behaviour that is at odds with their activist cause. Extant literature has primarily focused on the benefits and risks of brand activism, the distinction between authentic and inauthentic activism, and the conditions under which activism leads to positive or negative consumer responses (e.g., Vredenburg et al., 2020; Sibai et al., 2021). Related work has examined isolated value-related transgressions, temporary inconsistencies, or brands adopting causes for their gain (Thomas & Fowler, 2023). However, little research has addressed situations in which a brand's purpose centres around a sociopolitical cause, and the brand subsequently abandons or contradicts that cause in the long term.

By focusing on activist influencers whose brand identity was built around body positivity or size inclusivity, this study extends brand activism literature beyond inauthentic or inconsistent activism. It suggests that when an activist brand engages in behaviour at odds with its activism, consumer responses are in big part driven by how the brand manages its

advocacy, frames contradictory behaviour, and negotiates the meaning of the cause. In doing so, this research addresses an important gap by identifying the practices that mitigate backlash or elicit support after an activist brand engages in behaviour at odds with its activism.

Second, this study contributes to brand activism literature by showing that behaviour at odds with an activist cause may be reframed as compatible with the cause or as a positive change. Prior research has largely examined activist inconsistency as a source of backlash or perceptions of inauthenticity (Mahmud & Guzman, 2025; Malik et al., 2025; Thomas & Fowler, 2023; Vredenburg et al., 2020). In contrast, the findings suggest that some activist brands and their audiences may reinterpret contradictory behaviour, either as aligning with the cause or as a positive departure, eliciting support. This helps explain why behaviour at odds with a cause may elicit both backlash and support simultaneously. Furthermore, in the cases studied, intentional weight loss is reframed by influencers and some followers as compatible with body positivity norms. This process is consistent with prior observations that activist brands may renegotiate the boundaries of acceptable activism by redefining what the cause stands for (Hirsch, 2016; Sibai, 2021; Vredenburg et al., 2020).

Third, this study contributes to the emerging literature on influencer activism by responding to calls for research on the outcomes of influencer activism and its discontinuation (Thomas & Fowler, 2023). While prior studies have examined influencers temporarily adopting activist causes or promoting causes alongside non-human brands (Thomas & Fowler, 2023), less is known about what happens when influencers whose brand identity is rooted in activism do not sustain their activism. Our findings highlight various conditions under which consumers may find it acceptable for an activist influencer to discontinue support of their cause. A key condition identified was how the influencer presented or framed their behaviour at odds with the cause. When the influencer used narratives were coherent with the cause's values, discontinuing activism was more likely to be seen as acceptable.

Finally, this study contributes to the literature on legitimacy by extending existing work on the audience's role in legitimacy evaluations. Prior research has shown that consumers actively negotiate brand legitimacy, particularly in moments of controversy or value misalignment (Ferreira & Chimenti, 2020; Hakala et al., 2017; Kates, 2004; Moumade et al., 2024; Suchman, 1995). This research has focused more so on audience members contesting a brand's legitimacy (Bitektine & Haack, 2015; Hakala et al., 2017; Kates, 2004). These studies emphasize that legitimacy is a socially constructed judgment shaped by a brand's audience (Suchman, 1995). Suchman's (1995) describes denials, excuses, justifications, and explanations as strategies for a brand to repair its legitimacy after a crisis. The present study finds that a brand's audience may employ these same strategies to help the brand repair its legitimacy. This dynamic is similar to the one identified by Ferreira and Chimenti (2020), wherein audience members defend influencers and positively impact their brand legitimacy.

5.3 Managerial Implications

This study has several managerial implications for activist brands. The findings suggest three strategies to mitigate consumer backlash and negative impacts on a brand's legitimacy after the brand engages in behaviour at odds with its cause. Overall, the findings indicate that engaging in behaviour perceived as being at odds with a brand's activist cause is inherently risky and is likely to trigger scrutiny, disengagement, and contestation of brand's legitimacy. This is reflected in the observed decline in engagement across all cases following the influencers' weight loss. Whenever possible, activist brands should thus avoid engaging in behaviour that contradicts their cause. Nonetheless, in the case of an activist brand engaging in behaviour at odds with its cause, the findings highlight three practices that may help mitigate backlash.

First, activist brands should maintain continuity in the elements of their brand that their audience perceives as essential. Even when engaging in behaviour at odds with their cause, brands can limit backlash by continuing to respond to their audience's interests and sustaining advocacy-related practices. Maintaining consistency in these elements helps

preserve credibility and signals that the brand has not abandoned its values altogether. However, selectively catering to audience expectations, while the brand's core values and messaging are misaligned, risks being perceived as opportunistic and inauthentic. Brands should, therefore, avoid decoupling their values and their practices, as perceived inauthenticity is likely to intensify backlash.

Second, activist brands must explain behaviour that is at odds with their activism. To do so, they can frame the contradiction through narratives coherent with the cause's values. This allows brands to present contradictory behaviour as aligning with their activist identity rather than as a departure from it. The findings suggest that audiences are more receptive when such narratives remain aligned with the cause's norms, whereas justifications that clearly contradict those norms are more likely to provoke criticism.

Finally, activist brands may reframe their cause by negotiating its meaning or rejecting it entirely, which would justify their contradictory behaviour. Rejecting the cause entirely and highlighting its failings can help justify the activist brand's behaviour against the cause and elicit support. However, the findings indicate that outright rejection of the cause is the most polarizing strategy. Brands that positioned their departure as a critique of the movement did attract some support, but they also experienced the greatest disengagement and backlash. In contrast, brands that continued to adhere to the movement's norms despite their contradiction suffered the least decline in engagement. Therefore, maintaining alignment with the cause's values appears to be the most effective strategy for limiting backlash.

5.4 Limits and Future Research

This study has several limitations. First, the study was limited by its use of secondary data. For example, the data points to evidence of the influencers deleting negative comments. This indicates that the assessment of the followers' reactions is incomplete, as some negative reactions were also inaccessible. Despite attempts to conduct interviews with the influencers to deepen the netnographic research, the interview invitations were

declined. Consequently, a future study could extend the findings by interviewing the influencers to gain further insight into their relationship with their followers, the backlash they received, and exactly how their career was impacted. This could also offer insights into how and why the influencers chose certain strategies and practices, as the current study is based on an external interpretation of the influencers' social media accounts. Interviews with followers could have also enriched the findings, pointing to their disengagement when there was an absence of comments or the nature of their attachment to the influencers.

Second, the study was limited by a lack of access to quantitative data. The evolution of the influencers' follower base was largely inaccessible, except for one case, as was the number of likes for most of the influencers' content. As a result, changes in the influencers' engagement rates calculated based on the influencers' like counts and follower bases could not be assessed. Instead, the impact of the influencers displaying behaviour at odds with their activism could only be quantified based on the rate of comments per post.

Furthermore, the current study only examines plus-size fashion influencers. Nonetheless, the findings are consistent with research on vegan influencers' disadoption of veganism (Baunay, 2019), where health narratives also served to justify behaviour at odds with the influencers' activism. Future research could extend these findings by investigating influencer activists who champion other causes. For example, in 2025, several celebrities and influencers who had built their brand identity around lesbian visibility and LGBTQ+ activism entered into public heterosexual relationships (Mac, 2025), triggering polarized audience reactions. Comparing such cases to body positivity and veganism would allow researchers to explore how expectations for sustained activism vary depending on the perceived degree of agency associated with the identity shift. Whereas sexual orientation and body size may be considered intrinsic, veganism and dietary choices may be viewed as more controllable. Examining how these differences impact audience reactions could improve understanding of the implications for activist brands who contradict their activism.

Moreover, non-human activist brands should also be considered, as they likely face different repercussions, due to the differences between human and non-human brands (Fournier & Eckhardt, 2018). The selection of a variety of brands across a variety of causes could help examine the wider phenomenon of brands evolving against their progressive values towards more conservative stances. Conversely, a future study might examine conservative activist brands becoming progressive to assess whether audience reactions are the same.

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Statement of Generative Artificial Intelligence Use

I declare that I used ChatGPT (GPT-4, OpenAI, <https://chatgpt.com>) in December 2025 to improve the clarity and flow of the writing in certain sections of the study. I also used it to translate the abstract of the study from English to French.

I used the following prompts: “Translate this abstract to French”; “Clarify the following sentence using my vocabulary and writing style”; “Synthesize this paragraph using my vocabulary and writing style”; “Improve the flow of this paragraph without changing the content and using my writing style and wording.”

The generated content was always proofread and rewritten when integrated into my work. The research question, theoretical framing, methodological decisions, data collection, and data analysis are solely my work and responsibility. ChatGPT was not used to generate ideas or produce any original content. Its use was limited to revising text I had already written.

Appendix

Appendix 1—Immersion Journal Entry, January 21st, 2025

I paused the deep dive on Alex Ochoa Suo to finish my overview table. Now continuing with Rosey Blair. Interesting: Rosey Blair acknowledges leaving the body positivity movement in a caption: “the reason myself and others like me are leaving the BOPO world” link 2/2024.

She doesn’t seem to be posting as much weight loss content (if at all) as Alex Ochoa + from her caption officially announcing her weight loss (26/08/2022). It seems she was way more seriously/politically involved in the fat liberation movement, in comparison to Alex, because Rosey refers to the fat liberation movement directly in her caption, whereas Alex only says “plus size,” “curvy,” etc. With the quick overview of Rosey, it already seems she’s had a more diplomatic approach than Alex.

Onto Remi Bader, mostly basing myself on this article from the cut for the overview. She directly claims: “I don’t like being called body positive.” She seems to care about the movement in the context of fashion, in terms of inclusivity and diversity, but not really beyond that. Very interesting ending to the article (which is from 2/2023), as it seems to be pre-weight loss, since she says: “As for my weight, yes, I’m frustrated by it, but I also don’t want to try to lose weight because that’s what started my binge-eating in the first place. And I want to get better, but that’s hard in the fashion world. And now, I’m also thinking about my followers—what would I do if I lost all this weight? Or if I gained more? It’s about me, but it’s about everyone else, too.

Appendix 2—Immersion Journal Entry, April 12th, 2025

Analyzing Nicolette Mason’s comments. A lot of comments mentioning BoPo and size inclusivity in 2014-2016. I don’t know about now, but I don’t think this pops up in her comments anymore. Her page used to be a space that hosted these kinds of conversation, but now it no longer is (aside from stories and TikToks here and there).