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Intragroup marginalization in social media: Self- and other-reference on a plus-size fashion brand's Instagram page

Running head: Intragroup marginalization in social media

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Abstract

This study discusses plus-size group membership in Instagram (IG) posts published by the fashion retailer Fashion Nova Curve. Moreover, we focus on the ways in which self- and other-reference are used as tools for Intragroup Marginalization (IM). By IM we mean distancing by group members that occurs when a certain individual is believed to exhibit behaviors, values and beliefs that are outside the ingroup culture's norms. Our data consist of 233 Instagram posts published in October 2021, and our critical discourse analysis focuses on those person referential terms that show ingroup membership polarization. Our results show that both the models and the customers in the IG posts are marginalized by the

commenters in several ways, including critical comments not only from the outgroup, but also from the members of the plus-size ingroup, as their bodies are constructed as e.g. ‘not plus-size enough’ or ‘the wrong kind of plus-size’.

Keywords: intragroup marginalization, ingroup membership polarization, social identity, group membership, plus-size fashion, Instagram, social media discourse

1 Introduction

In social media discussions, people are often categorized on the basis of positive and negative values, beliefs, or practices into disparate sociocultural groups (cf. Moscovici 1984; van Leeuwen 2008). Both processes of representation and marginalization can manifest in language use in various ways. The most typical way of languaging social representation and intergroup relations is in the so-called ingroup and outgroup discourse (othering; see also Wodak 2011; Limatius 2020a). Also as Van Dijk (2009) states, giving attributes to the self and others (labelling, reference) concerns

the interactional and societal context (see also Nevala 2019; Nevala and Nurmi 2020).

In this chapter, we will study how Instagram (IG) creates social circumstances for not only changing social behavior but also linguistic behavior. These changes in behavior may include rearranging group formation patterns and boundaries, as well as the way we talk about and refer to ourselves and other people. We particularly focus on Intragroup Marginalization (IM), which is defined as the interpersonal distancing that occurs when an individual is believed to exhibit behaviors, values and beliefs that are outside the ingroup culture's norms (see e.g. Castillo et al. 2007). Those behaviors or attitudes that differ from the ingroup's norms may result in, for example, the group responding with social alienation of the person threatening its consensus, or creating 'a counter-attack' by using negative terms to refer to the unadapted individual.

Our data consist of IG posts shared by an American fast fashion retail company, Fashion Nova, in October 2021. Specifically, we will focus on the IG account dedicated to Fashion Nova's plus-size clothing range, Fashion Nova Curve. The account currently has 4.1 million followers, and its content can be broadly divided into two categories: model photographs and customer photographs. Through the lens of critical discourse analysis, we explore the ways in which Fashion Nova Curve's followers talk about the models and customers featured on the page, creating and maintaining boundaries and ingroup/outgroup divisions through their use of self- and other-reference.

The analysis addresses the following research questions: 1) Which means for person reference are used in the IG posts in the data?, 2) How are both self- and other-reference used to express group membership, particularly within the plus-size fashion group?; and, more importantly, 3) how do different strategies of intragroup marginalization show in the IG comments of the plus-size group?

Our results indicate that both the models and the customers whose photos are shared by Fashion Nova Curve are marginalized by the commenters in several ways. In addition to fat-shaming comments from the outgroup (e.g. trolls), the plus-size women featured on the IG account are marginalized by members of the ingroup, as their bodies are constructed in the comments as ‘not plus-size enough’ or ‘the wrong kind of plus-size’. Questions of authenticity and representation arise frequently in the data, as the commenters (re)negotiate the boundaries of what it means to be a ‘real’ plus-size woman. Thus, women who are already marginalized by the mainstream fashion industry (Limatius 2020a; Gruys 2021) are intramarginalized within the niche of plus-size fashion.

2 Background

2.1 Intragroup marginalization and person reference

According to the Social Identity theory, people are categorized on the basis of positive and negative values into different sociocultural groups (Tajfel ed. 1982). The concept of Intragroup Marginalization (IM) is based on the Social Identity Theory in asserting that groups maintain their identity by the distinctive behaviors of its members. It is defined as the interpersonal distancing that ‘occurs when an acculturating individual is believed to exhibit behaviors, values, and beliefs that are outside the heritage culture’s group norms’ (Costello et al. 2007:232). When a person acts in a way that differs from their ingroup’s norms, the group may respond to the threat with, for example, social alienation or other negative response like physical or verbal violence.

The process of learning about and adapting to a different cultural group’s values, beliefs, and behaviors is known as acculturation (Berry 2003; Kohatsu 2005). Acculturation comprises that a dominant group builds its identity on the basis that any minority group acknowledges and supports its culture and values. If the dominant group does not accept the minority group’s maintenance of its culture or the minority group insists on maintaining their different cultural values, the main group’s values are threatened. Any mismatch in acculturation attitudes could lead to intergroup conflict and impact psychological well-being (Roccas, Horenczyk and Schwartz 2000).

Intragroup marginalization basically means a certain group's desire for a distinct social identity. According to Social Identity Theory, belonging to a social group (e.g. a 'plus-size group') provides members with a sense of social identity that entails behavior appropriate for a group membership (Tajfel ed. 1982). In general, group members wish to behave in accordance with the group norms. If a member displays behavior or attitude that differs from the group's norms, they may be seen as a threat to the group's distinctiveness. Group dynamics research suggests that ingroup members who are perceived as threatening to the distinctiveness of a group are marginalized by the group (Abrams et al. 2000; Ojala and Nesdale 2004).¹

Language can be used to reinforce or undermine categorical differences (Hogg and Abrams 1988:212). According to Van Dijk (2009:141), giving attributes to the self and others concerns the interactional and societal context. This means that defining is not only governed by macro-level norms or shared knowledge, but is also produced in micro-level interactions and situations. According to Gumperz and Cook-Gumperz (1982:3), people support or maintain different ideologies, which manifest in face-to-face interaction and discourse practices. No interaction is thus value-free, but is always assessed according to someone's norms and values. As

¹ One example of this comes from Hsiang (2005), who has reported on intragroup marginalization in the Asian American community. She has found that some Asian Americans use extremely negative language about other Asian Americans who wear clothing brands like Abercrombie and Fitch, which are considered 'White'.

Ochs (1993:289) understands it, social identity is usually something not explicitly encoded in language use, but rather a social meaning inferred in act and stance meanings. Social representation can be seen to evolve and vary in social interaction in response to the acts and stances of other interlocutors, but also according to the speaker's own attitude towards each interactional situation (Ochs 1993:298).

The most typical way of manifesting public images, identities and intergroup relations is in the so-called ingroup and outgroup discourse. Wodak (2008:61), in her study of discursive exclusion and inclusion strategies, notes that the meaning of who 'we' are varies according to prevailing ideologies and power relations: sometimes 'we' means 'all of us reasonable people' and, at other times, clearly defined and restricted groups. Often the values and norms of a particular group are also manifested in the linguistic marginalization of other groups or members of those groups. It means creating and maintaining different kinds of impressions through, for example, terms of person reference.

The main division between what could be called neutral, positive, and negative reference reflects a more prevalent, societal attitude either in favor or against particular group memberships, as e.g. in the case of people who are perceived to have excess weight vs. normative-size people. By creating and using negative terms and attributes, normative-size people place plus-size people in an outgroup. In comparison, normative-size people are often given more positive labels and reference than people who somehow deviate from the norm. Similarly, people within a certain ingroup

can, as ‘full’ members, indicate by reference those who do not, for example, have the same characteristics as the main bulk of the group. In our data, for example, a commenter in the ingroup can make it clear that they do not consider the target of their comments to be a proper member of the group by using self-reference like ‘Hire me... *I’m* a real plus size girl’ (see Example 16). Here the connotation being that the target is not a ‘real’ plus-size person, and does not thus bear the status of a proper member of the plus-size group.

2.2 The fashion industry and body positivity in social media

Social media has revolutionized the ways in which people engage with and consume fashion content (Czerniawski 2021). For example, personal fashion blogs (Limatius 2020a) and influencer culture (Abidin 2016) have had a major impact in both diversifying fashion imagery and creating new professions within the field. The rise of the body positivity movement (Brathwaite and DeAndrea 2022; Zavattaro 2021) and its visibility on social media has also challenged normative ideals of beauty in the context of fashion, with demands for representation of different body types and unedited images of models. Body positivity strives to normalize bodies that ‘do not conform to status quo beauty norms’, and to ‘diversify the qualities that society deems beautiful’ (Brathwaite and DeAndrea 2022:25). Although

body positivity has its origins in fat acceptance activism (Zavattaro 2021), some commercial fashion and beauty brands, like Dove and Aerie, have built successful marketing campaigns on the idea of representing so-called ‘real’ women (Czerniawski 2021).²

The notion of ‘real’ bodies in fashion is, however, problematic. As Czerniawski (2021:6) points out, simply eliminating image-retouching does not make fashion images ‘real’ – all models, including plus-size models, still engage in ‘bodily management practices’ in order to represent the industry’s beauty standards. While they may be closer in size to average consumers, plus-size models’ bodies are still ‘altered into idealized size and shape’ in many ways (Czerniawski 2021:7). After all, as Czerniawski (2021:4) puts it, ‘a fashion model is not an ordinary woman’ – companies hire models because they represent specific hegemonic ideas of beauty, and it is one part of a model’s job to ‘spend significant time and attention preparing her body for the performance of modelling’.

Body positivity as a concept has also been problematized in previous research. The commodification of body positivity by companies and influencers has made the focus of the movement shift from activism to ‘economic or personal gain’ (Breathwaite and DeAndrea 2022:27). For fat activists, the commercialization of body positivity dilutes the message of the

² Dove Campaign for Real Beauty was started by Unilever in 2004 as a worldwide marketing campaign, which has aimed at increasing women’s and children’s self-confidence and body positivity.

movement, and creates concerns that the movement is being ‘taken away’ from its original contributors (Limatius 2020a). Moreover, the ‘body positive’ advertising of fashion and beauty brands is often ‘not inclusive and still [pushes] the narrative of what acceptable beauty is’ (Breathwaite and DeAndrea 2022:27). Thus, the potential of body positivity as a truly radical movement that transforms the ways in which bodies are valued and accepted in society should be approached critically (Sastre 2014).

However, despite their imperfections, body positive spaces on social media still offer possibilities for plus-size people to be represented in a positive light. As Zavattaro (2021:282) puts it, ‘social media can emancipate those ostracized or othered from this oppression to live fuller lives’. Previous research has demonstrated, for example, that blogging about fashion or body positivity can empower plus-size women and to (re)construct their relationship to their bodies (Hynnä and Kyrölä 2019; Limatius 2020a). Although major fashion brands continue to favor smaller, hourglass-figured plus-size models, many of these brands also share photos and videos of customers and content creators on their social media, thus appearing more diverse in their imagery. In this chapter, we investigate the comments on the Instagram page of a brand that is well-known for such social media marketing strategies, Fashion Nova.

3 Data and method

3.1 Fashion Nova

Fashion Nova is a US-based fast fashion retail company. Founded in 2006 by the brand's CEO Richard Saghian, Fashion Nova markets itself as 'the world's leading quick-to-market apparel and lifestyle brand' (Fashion Nova 2022). The brand has built its reputation through a strong social media presence and collaborations with Instagram influencers, as well as celebrities such as Cardi B (real name Belcalis Almanzar) and Kylie Jenner. Fashion Nova encourages customers to tag their page on social media and to use hashtags such as #NovaBabe in their posts. In exchange, they may repost the photos and tag the original creator, thus driving traffic to the customers' profiles (Hughes 2018; Kitroeff 2019). Currently, Fashion Nova has 21.1 million followers on Instagram (on the brand's main Instagram page), 3.3 million followers on TikTok and 165,000 followers on Twitter. In the present study, we focus specifically on Fashion Nova's plus-size range, which is marketed under the name Fashion Nova Curve. The target audience for the Curve range are women who wear US women's dress sizes 14 to 20 – thus, the brand only caters to women at the smaller end of the plus-size fashion spectrum. The prototypical Fashion Nova Curve customer can be described as a 'small-fat' (Evans 2020), whilst larger people are excluded by

the brand.³ Fashion Nova Curve has its own Instagram page with 4.1 million followers (see Figure 1).

@@Insert Figure 1 here

Fashion Nova Curve's Instagram account was chosen as the subject of our research because of its popularity, ties to well-known influencers and celebrities, and active commenters. Moreover, the brand highlights clothing that can be considered trendy, revealing and curve-hugging, marketing them to women with 'bulbous hips, rotund butts, [and] spindlelike waists' (Hughes 2018). This makes investigating the Curve range particularly interesting from the perspective of identity construction, as plus-size people are traditionally expected to hide their bodies instead of showcasing them (Zavattaro 2021:285), and finding 'trendy, quirky and sexy [plus-size] clothes' (Hynnä and Kyrölä 2019) is often challenging, as retailers are known to offer limited options in larger sizes (Gruys 2021:3). Moreover, in

³ In this chapter, we use the term 'fat' as a neutral descriptor with no derogatory intent, following the example of activists who seek to normalize and de-stigmatize the word. The word 'plus-size', which is a common descriptor in the context of fashion in particular, is used in a similar way. On the relationship between these terms and their connotations, see Limatius 2020a.

the mainstream media, fat women are typically either portrayed as nonsexual, or overly sexualized (Braziel 2001:233). For example, popular culture stereotypes fat women as unattractive in the eyes of men, and fat people in general are ridiculed (Zavattaro 2021:283). Fashion Nova's portrayal of plus-size models and influencers as trendy, sexy, and often wearing similar clothing as their thinner models, is thus relevant in terms of plus-size women positioning themselves in relation to others they see on social media.

Despite their popularity on social media, Fashion Nova has also garnered some negative media attention in the past few years. Like many other fast fashion retailers, the brand has been criticized for unethical business practices, such as underpaying their workers (Kitroeff 2019). It is worth noting that fast fashion as an industry is problematic in several ways, and while addressing these problems is important, it is beyond the scope of the present study. In our research, we focus less on Fashion Nova's business practices, and more on the discussions that take place in the commenting sections of their Instagram posts.

3.2 Analytical approach

The data for the study consist of comments posted on the Instagram page of Fashion Nova Curve. Data collection took place in late 2021. We chose the

month of October as our starting point, saving all posts published on the Fashion Nova Curve page during that month. As our interest was particularly on the comments, we narrowed down the data to posts that had at least ten published comments at the time of collection. As a result, we were left with 233 posts published between October 1st and October 31st, 2021. Altogether, the posts included in the data contained 10,595 comments and 1,789,616 likes.

Following the data collection, both authors read through the commenting sections of the chosen posts. We determined that a saturation point had been reached, as the same themes and topics appeared repeatedly and continuously throughout the data. We then chose two case studies for a more detailed qualitative investigation of the language used in the commenting sections. These two posts were chosen because they both had commenting sections which featured a rich variety of comments that were relevant for the research questions. It should be noted that Fashion Nova likely moderates their Instagram comments, and as such we cannot be certain that the comments displayed on the posts represent the full range of comments posted. However, as the commenting sections did feature instances of, for example, spam and offensive language, the moderation on the page does not appear to be particularly strict.

In our analysis, we focus on comments that were posted in English and feature instances of self- and other-reference. It should be noted that both posts chosen for the case study also contain several comments where neither self- nor other-reference is used. Emoji comments, for example, are

worth mentioning here. Many of the more positive comments in particular can be characterized as emoji comments – that is, they feature little to none written text, focusing instead on communicating meaning through the use of emoji. The commenters express positive emotions towards the posts with a range of emoji such as the fire emoji and different variations of ‘hearts’. Negative attitudes, in turn, can be expressed with a vomiting face emoji, while motivations behind the use of some emoji – e.g. laughing face – are more difficult to interpret without more context. In addition, the data contain tags (using @ to mention another user), as well as some comments that we identified as spam, and comments written in languages other than English. These comments are not addressed in the analysis, since the focus is on self- and other-reference in English.

Since our interest is on intragroup marginalization in particular, we focus on comments that can be interpreted as coming from the ingroup, i.e. plus-size women. In some cases, this is apparent from the comment itself (see e.g. Example 8, ‘as a gordita myself’) or from the commenter’s profile. However, due to the presence of private profiles and the fact that Instagram users can choose their usernames freely, we cannot be certain that all the commenters in the examples are plus-size women. Since the posts were collected from the Instagram page of Fashion Nova’s Curve range specifically, we can, however, assume that the commenters share an interest in plus-size fashion.

Our analysis takes critical discourse analysis as its starting point, since one key aspect of CDA is examining the relationship between discourse and other social elements such as power relations, ideologies, and institutions (Fairclough 2012:9). Therefore, we use CDA in this study to discuss the social issue of intragroup marginalization, including its values and norms, by way of linguistic and discursive manifestation. The focus is, therefore, not just on ‘power in discourse’ but also ‘power behind discourse’ (Fairclough 2018:14). According to van Dijk’s CDA framework (2009:473–474), discourse structures of these dominant discourses that manipulate beliefs, ‘discursive re-production of power’, show up not only in the use of, for example, implications and presuppositions, passive sentence structures and nominalizations, but also ingroup membership polarization which is our focus area in this study.

4 Case studies: Constructing the ‘real’ plus-size woman

4.1 Case study 1: Besties

Our first case study focuses on a video posted by Fashion Nova Curve on 10 November, 2021. At the time this chapter was written, the post had 297 comments and 30,936 likes. The post itself does not have any other caption than ‘We Put The BEST In Bestie 🥰💕’, but the video also shows the text ‘SIZE XS + SIZE 1X = A PERFECT FIT’ (all caps original). The video contains two female models (size XS on the right and 1X on the left) who wear the same four outfits in changing sequences.

The purpose of using two models of different sizes is apparently to show that women of all sizes can use the same clothes in a similar way, and that there is basically no need for a separate plus-size clothing line from a standard size one. There are comments to the post that can relate to either one of the models or both of them at the same time, and in some of them the models are compared to each other, and in others they are compared to the commenters themselves. Those comments that deal with both of the models are often positive and general, and mainly use other-reference, as in (1), (2) and (3):

(1) **They both** look lovely.

(2) anyways this video made me smile, I love seeing the outfits side by side, I think **they both** look adorable 🥰

(3) The black top and the gray jeans looked so good on **both bodies**

Positive comments on both models are made regarding their looks, clothes and self-confidence (the latter particularly in reference to the plus-size model). Most comments relating only to either one of the models are, however, more negative and juxtapose the two women and the way they look in their similar outfits. There are, however, no extremely negative reference terms, and even adjectives like *skinny* and *fat* are rare.⁴

Surprisingly, there are more negative comments on the clothing company itself than on the models (4). In most of the comments directed to the models, the normative-size model is described as more good-looking and the plus-size model as less so, as in Examples (5) and (6), but there also are a few comments where the plus-size model is preferred, such as (7). All of these examples show other-reference only.

(4) Which sweatshop were **these potato sacks** made in?

(5) Bs from me. I like **the skinny one**.

(6) That is not a 1x **that girl** is huge

⁴ There are some emojis which show extreme negativity, such as 🤬 or 🤢, but even those are not very much used in the comments for the video in question.

(7) Sorry but i think **the one to the left** [the plus-size model] is prettier in all those clothes

The reason for different opinions about the models may depend on whether the commenter belongs to the plus-size ingroup or not, since it is more likely that if the person commenting is themselves plus-sized, they make more positive remarks about the model in their own size range. The same applies to people in the normative-size group.

Having said that, it is really interesting to see how plus-size intragroup marginalization works in the comments. In many cases, the validation of the model's plus-size is done by using self-reference, as in Examples (7), (8) and (9) (references to size have been underlined here).

(8) That's not 1x...**As a gordita myself, i** know. cmon now.

(9) **I** am basically 1x since consistently gaining since the beginning of the pandemic March 2020 and **I** didn't think **I** was that big...nor do **my** clothes stretch out that much.....

(10) yeah right? Women sizes are a joke because **I'm** way slimmer than her and wear an 4X or 46 (German size) in pants!

In all of the examples above, the commenter is complaining about the size marked for the plus-size model (1X), which is mainly considered too small for her. Thus, the comments to the Besties video show an overwhelming majority describing the ‘right’ (or in these cases the ‘wrong’) size for a member of the plus-size ingroup by way of comparing the commenter to the model. In a few cases, the commenter is challenged by others and has to defend their views, as in (11) (references to sizing and the clothing brand underlined here):

(11) C1: Sorry but just looks a little ridiculous in the plus size and **I’m** talking as a plus size

C2: This was such an unnecessary comment. You can think she looks “rEdIcU10Us” but you should keep those thoughts to yourself.

C1: sorry but I feel like this brand is just pretending to sell things for curvy women

C1 cont: **I** just think like for the blue dress that doesn’t fit her, and just like other posts **I’ve** seen, they try to sell something that doesn’t fit the curvy models saying it does. It’s not fair for **me**

In (11), Commenter 1 refers to herself as a plus-sized woman, using that as the right to make a (negative) judgment on how the plus-size model looks like. Commenter 2 is seemingly irritated by C1's comment and states her opinion by attacking C1 ('you should keep those thoughts to yourself'). C1 starts defending herself by explaining that her comment was about the brand and not about plus-size women. Later on in the comment chain she makes it clearer that she was criticizing the clothing company, not the models or other members of her plus-size ingroup by stating again, 'just like other posts I've seen, **they** try to sell something that doesn't fit the curvy models saying it does'. So in this case the commentator shifts the blame in lieu of herself on Fashion Nova Curve for the intragroup marginalization, since they have, in her opinion, used wrong sizing on the plus-size model's clothes. Another kind of 'explanation' for the 1X sizing, simultaneously putting the blame on the clothing brand, comes from another commenter, as she says, 'it could be vanity sizing. like it's typically a 3x but they put 1x on the tag. **a lot of companies** do that.' In general, the data for the video show that certain standards have to be met whether imposed by the fashion brand or the plus-size group itself.

4.2 Case study 2: New Sheriff in Town

Our second case study examines an Instagram post published by Fashion Nova Curve on the 17th of October, 2021. At the time of writing this chapter, the post has 343 comments and approximately 21,100 likes. The post features two images of a model dressed in a cowboy-themed outfit that consists of a cropped shirt, a thong with garters attached to it, a hat and a scarf. The post is captioned as follows:

‘Behold, New Sheriff In Town! 🤠🔥 Search: New Sheriff In
Town 4 Piece Costume Set in Yellow size 1X/2X by Fashion Nova
Tag @FashionNovaCURVE & #FashionNovaCURVE to get like
@[model’s username] and be featured on our page!
💎www.FashionNova.com💎’

The caption appears to have three functions. First, it promotes the outfit and tells Fashion Nova Curve’s followers how they can find it and purchase it. Second, it promotes the model by naming her and tagging her Instagram page. Finally, it addresses the followers and encourages them to tag the brand in their posts in order to ‘get like [the model] and be featured’ on Fashion Nova Curve’s Instagram page.

Although the post advertizes one of Fashion Nova’s many Halloween costumes, an investigation of the commenting section reveals that the

majority of the comments are concerned with the model and her body instead of the garments presented in the pictures. Most of these comments feature other-reference, as they discuss the model's appearance and her body in particular. The concept of authenticity and ideas of 'real' or 'natural' plus-size bodies come up frequently in the commenting section. Such comments can be seen to reflect the consumer demands for more diverse representation of bodies in fashion (Czerniawski 2021), but as they are targeted at a plus-size model by (presumably) other plus-size women, they work as intragroup marginalization here. In many comments, the main goal of commenting seems to be simply pointing out or presenting 'evidence' of plastic surgery. These comments reference either the model (12) or a specific part of her body (13):

(12) It's obviously [sic] **she** had a couple of surgeries to look like that.

(13) **Her** bellybutton hasn't healed yet

While these comments are more observative and not explicitly connected to demands for 'body positivity' or diverse representation, several commenters also express their disappointment in Fashion Nova Curve for featuring the model. Although the woman in the photos is the one scrutinized by the

commenters, similar to our first case study, most of the criticism is directed at Fashion Nova as a company. A contrast between the two can be observed in the use of pronouns – in (12) and (13), the model is referred to with the pronouns she/her, while Fashion Nova as a company is addressed more directly as ‘you (guys)’ in (14) and ‘ya’ll’ in (15):

(14) I wish **you guys** hired women with natural bodies

(15) so get regular models tf! **Ya’ll** love talking about body positivity but hyping surgeries up.

The commenters also utilize the model’s presumably altered body in constructing their own identity, and the identity of plus-size women as a group. In such examples, both self- and other-reference is used.

Comparisons are typical in this context – either a comparison between the model’s body and one’s own body (16), or the model’s body and an idea of what the commenter considered a ‘real’ plus-size woman’s body (17, 18).

(16) Hire **me**... **I’m** a real plus size girl

(17) Lol **plus size models** with Brazilian butt lift ...you may as well not be inclusive at all bc **no plus size girls** look like this 😂😂😂

(18) **Nobody** in real life looks like **this**.

While most of the comments regarding surgery are negative in tone, referring to the model and her body with words like ‘altered’, ‘plastic’ and ‘distorted’, some commenters acknowledge the fact that the model may have had cosmetic procedures done, but view them in a more positive light. For example, a desire to look similar to the model or to undergo the same procedures (19, 20) is expressed using self-reference.

(19) Ok **i** need some bbl money pls 😂

(20) tummy tuck. **I** really want a tummy tuck

Not all comments in the post refer to plastic surgery, as some commenters focus more on the outfit worn by the model. Typically, in the positive comments regarding the outfit the poster expresses their admiration towards the model (21) or the clothing items (22), and these comments contain both self- and other-reference:

(21) Damn! **You** Make That Outfit Yours! ❤️

(22) Cute, **I'd** wear this

However, the clothing is also criticized by the commenters:

(23) **Y'all**.... This outfit ain't it. **Gorgeous girl** but in no way is this costume a thing.

(24) **This shit** looks stupid. And **yall** can save the money and make it look cuter by just getting a flannel and some cut offs along with a hat

In such criticisms towards the outfit, the commenters are, again, careful to highlight that their complaints are directed towards Fashion Nova and not the model, even mentioning that they think the model looks beautiful (23), but the outfit does not. In this way, the commenters minimize the intragroup marginalization directed at the model. These comments also contain references to the other plus-size women following the page, for example suggesting better clothing options for them (24). Comments that criticize the outfit can also be used to construct the commenters' own identities (25), as the outfit is described as something 'real' plus-size women cannot wear.

(25) See **I'm Plus sized** cellulite, varicose veins, roll high confidence and self. Esteem, [sic] big thighs, rolls, calves. **I wouldn't DARE wear this** outside to a party. Inside for man/husband yes but not outside.

In Example (25), the commenter seems to imply that the model featured is 'breaking the rules' of dressing a plus-size body, as she is publicly wearing an outfit the commenter only deems appropriate for wearing behind closed doors for one's partner.

Finally, the topic of plastic surgery and the representation of ‘real’ plus-size bodies also causes some discussion in the commenting section, with some of the commenters defending both the model and Fashion Nova in their responses (26) to negative comments.

(26) if you follow fashion nova you'll see **they use plus size models that represent plus size women from ALL walks of life...** inclusive of “plastic” and/or “real”. And I appreciate **them** for doing so since it gave **me** the confidence to show the curves I’ve been hiding for years. 🙌 .#theydontdiscriminate

Some of these discussions feature what we refer to as ‘meta-comments’, where commenters address the tone of the commenting section and point out issues related to other comments. We will discuss this later on in the analysis (Section 4.3), as meta-comments can be viewed as their own category in the data.

Interestingly, apart from a few emoji comments (e.g. the nauseous face emoji), we could not find any fat-shaming comments directed at the model under this post (although there are some size-related insults directed towards other commenters). This is somewhat surprising on a post featuring a plus-size woman, but it may be explained by the fact that the model in question seems to represent the ‘dominant body shape in plus-size

modeling' (Czerniawski 2021:4) – she has an 'hourglass' body with a flat stomach and fuller hips and breasts. However, as we have demonstrated in our analysis, this body type was precisely what many of the commenters criticized – thus, the commenting section highlights the 'damned if you do, damned if you don't' mentality that often characterizes public discussions on women's bodies (Limatius 2020b; Tseëlon 1995). This issue of women constantly being criticized no matter what their bodies look like was also brought up in the meta-comments.

4.3 Meta-comments

In addition to specific comments made on the case study posts themselves (i.e. models, clothes, etc.), there are some remarks that we have defined as meta-comments. This includes all those cases, where commenters address the tone of the commenting section and point out issues related to other comments. Meta-comments can be observed throughout the data, but we concentrate here on those found in the two case studies in order to show typical examples of the way in which commenters convey plus-size group membership by meta-commenting.

The meta-comments for the Besties case study mostly express the commenters' interpretation about the tone in the posts, particularly the negative comments. As already pointed out in Section 4.1, the main issue in

the comments made on the Besties video revolves around the size range of the two models' clothes. Not surprisingly, the meta-comments mostly deal with the topic as well. In Example (27), the commenter is trying to defend the models ('the thinner [sic] girl' and 'the bigger girl'), when the others are blaming them for lying about their sizes. Here the parameters of what a plus-size person or a normative-size person should be like are negotiated, which shows in the commenter describing them both with 'They are likely both short and small framed people.'

(27) y'all saying **they** are both lying about their sizes but if **the thinner girl** is an xs it's totally possible for **the bigger girl** to be a 1xl. **They** are probably both really short and small framed, so proportionally and next to eachother **they** both look bigger than **they** are. **They** are likely both **short and small framed people**. Why would **they** lie about their clothing sizes????? **They** probably wouldn't :/

There are also more general meta-comments about the tone in general, as in (28) and (29), in which the reference is directed to the critical commenters.

(28) Omg **the number of people complaining** that the 'xs isn't an xs'!



(29) Just came here to say that the comment section is horrible. **Y'all**, women are not **your** competition & **some of you** really need to ask **yourself** why **you** feel the need to be so hateful to other women.
gooooooooo lordtttt

In the comments, there is also one particular comments section where the commentary starts from a meta-comment by Commenter 3 saying 'wow...i find it quite sad how other women are coming for this girl and her body', but the exchange with Commenter 4 quite quickly turns into blaming Fashion Nova and other clothing brands for misrepresenting the plus-sizes in their posts (Example 30; references to size underlined).

(30) C3: wow...i find it quite sad how **other women** are coming for **this girl and her body**. what if **she** is a 1x based off of fashion nova's measurements? **you guys** are so quick to judge people and it needs to stop. **your** words do hurt others like **you** wouldn't want someone making assumptions about **you** especially when they know nothing

about **you**. so if **you've** got nothing nice to say then move on like geez **you guys** are so mean for no reason. 😏

C4: it's not judgment. If **we** want to buy **we** would like accurate representation. **I** personally don't care about **her** actual size can **fashion nova** do better to show range?

C4 cont.: it's not giving what it was supposed to had gave. Do **they** mean a 1x can fit a 3x 4x size woman by putting this out?

C3: now that i agree with. **fashion nova**, along with **other clothing companies**, need to do better when it comes to **their** plus size modeling and remembering 1x isn't the only size. **i** just happened to see some distasteful comments on **this girl's body** and **i** didn't like it. **they** blamed **her** instead of **the company** and then went on to body shame **her**. that's so mean and unnecessary, but **i** appreciate **your** comment and for not coming at **me** in a hostile manner. 💜

The model is referred to with phrases like 'this girl and her body' and 'this girl's body', which are used to express that judging the size of the clothes equals body-shaming the model herself. This kind of attack, whether made on purpose or not, is not allowed against a member of the plus-size ingroup, and it is seen as marginalizing the model in question. The blame for

marginalization – the misrepresentation of the size – is shifted over to the clothing company instead (the references ‘fashion nova’, ‘other clothing companies’, ‘the company’).

In the meta-comments for the second case study *New Sheriff in Town* (see Section 4.2), the commenters also address other people’s comments. This is done either directly by pointing out the people making body-shaming comments (‘the women in this comment section,’ 31) or indirectly by problematizing body-shaming in more general terms, e.g. in ‘society’ (32).

(31) **The women in this comment section** tearing **this woman** down
shame on **you** all. **Yall** did not pass the vibe check

(32) **This society** is so messed up we want representation of different
bodies on all platforms but also when **someone** is insecure about
their body and get work done the same society whines and moans
for real bodies. **We all** need to change our mindsets honestly

Thus, while some of the commenters point out specific people and address them, the broader societal issue of beauty standards and the pressure they cause is also brought up. The model is also referenced in different ways in

these comments – while the commenter in (31) specifies ‘this woman’ as a victim of negative comments, in (32) the referent is a vague ‘someone’.

The different attitudes towards plastic surgery and the way it is commented on also result in conflict between the commenters. The commenters challenge those who criticize the model’s body (33), and the critics respond by justifying their stance (34).

(33) how do **you** know **she** had surgery? Did **she** come out and say so?
Don’t assume. **All** bodies are beautiful with or without surgery. Let **people** live omg

(34) that’s because **none of them** [the commenters] respect **a person** that is all plastic. Now you show me **a REAL woman** with a real booty and some cellulite that’s celebrating **herself**, then **we’ll** talk.

Both the defending and the criticizing comments contribute to a body positivity discourse, but in different ways. While the commenter in (33) views body positivity as a celebration of ‘all bodies’, the commenter in (34) constructs it as inclusive to ‘real’ women. Thus, through their discussions in the commenting section, these members of the ‘body positive community’ negotiate the meanings of their shared discursive practices.

Interestingly, although the model's body is the main topic of discussion in the commenting section of the second case study, and her Instagram username is mentioned in the post caption, the majority of the comments do not engage her in the conversation in any way. This is also reflected in the fact that only very few of the comments overall use the second person pronoun *you* when referring to the model (see Example 21). Apart from a small number of compliments directed at the model, *you* is used in reference to Fashion Nova as a brand, or the other commenters who are directly addressed. Most of the commenters thus appear to view the model and her body as a 'representative' of Fashion Nova, and not as an active party herself. Although Fashion Nova famously posts the photos of their customers and social media influencers as well as professional models, from the perspective of the commenters, the moment a photo is posted on the Fashion Nova Curve page, it becomes a reflection of the brand and its values.

5 Discussion

Overall, the Instagram posts published on the Fashion Nova Curve website between October 1st and October 31st, 2021, contain themes that are also

highlighted in our two case studies, and that will be discussed in more detail below. Throughout the data, the models and customers featured on the page are complimented on their appearance, their self-confidence and their perceived ‘realness’. Relatability is constructed as important and comparisons are made between the self and the models portrayed in the posts. As for the negative comments, the data contain some fat-shaming comments, as well as other types of negative evaluations on bodies (‘**She** looks as old as **my mom**’). Notably, some of the posts also feature types of negative comments that are absent from the case studies, such as sexist and transphobic comments. These comments are fairly rare, and based on the usernames and profiles (when available), we can observe that they are mostly posted by male commenters, not plus-size women. Thus, although worth noting, these comments do not directly contribute to intragroup marginalization.

The ways in which intragroup marginalization is constructed in the case study examples are visible in the wider dataset as well. For example, similar to Example (8), many marginalizing comments are justified with the commenter self-identifying as a plus-size woman. The central role of Fashion Nova and their responsibility in contributing to the representation of plus-size women is also present throughout the data – similar to both case studies, the overall data features several instances where the model appears to have less agency on the representation than the brand, even though the model is the one whose body is being evaluated as either acceptable or unacceptable representation. In some examples, the models are almost

reduced to ‘props’ used by Fashion Nova (e.g. ‘Couldn’t **you** have at least put **her** in a more flattering position?’).

As we saw in Sections 4.1 and 4.2, the two case studies bear similarities in how self- and other-reference are used in the discussion of certain IM-related topics, such as the physical and psychological characteristics of the models. A closer analysis of the case studies shows a few interesting phenomena in regard to the use of person reference. The first of these relates to the use of self-reference, which seems to be often used when the commenter is comparing themselves to the models. By using the personal pronoun *I*, the commenter signals that they are a plus-size person and, at the same time, describes some characteristics of an ideal member of the plus-size group. In these cases, the commenter sees themselves either as better than the models or as worse than the models (or others criticizing), i.e. they can say that they are closer to the right size or more honest than others, or then, on the other hand, less confident than the models in the photos. The second phenomenon concerns other-reference. Firstly, those who are considered a threat to the plus-size ingroup are often referred to with distancing outgroup pronouns like *they* or *y’all*. In a case like this the commenter avoids using the pronoun *we* in order not to be mixed with sharing the negative opinion towards the models. Secondly, commenters seem to use nominal phrases that include adjectives referring to the models’ appearance (e.g. *big*, *curvy*, *natural*) and their own attitude towards the models (e.g. *desirable*, *hot*, *beautiful*). By way of giving positive attributes

to the models, the commenters here refer to the characteristics of all members of the plus-size ingroup.

In terms of intragroup marginalization, one of the key features in the data is the criticism towards the models and their bodies. It appears that the commenters view themselves as members of the ingroup who are 'allowed' to evaluate the bodies of other plus-size women, since they are part of the group that is represented by the models featured on the page. This shows up in the two case studies as well, as we can see many instances of comparison between the commenter's body and the model's body, such as '**I'm** way slimmer than **her**', '**I'm** a real plus-size woman', '**nobody** looks like that' and '**That's** not 1X'. In these instances, however, the commenters do not take the blame for misrepresentation or misjudgement of the plus-sizes, but transfer it to Fashion Nova as the ultimate authority in deciding what is displayed and who displays it in their IG. In a way it seems that Fashion Nova itself is the one who marginalizes members of the plus-size group by claiming that the models' clothes are of a smaller size than they actually are. Similarly, according to the commenters, it is the clothing company that gives their followers a false image of what a 'real' plus-size person looks like in other ways as well. The commenters accusing the models for having had plastic surgery or non-invasive enhancement on their bodies are at the same time blaming Fashion Nova for accepting to display the 'fake' models' posts in the first place.

This brings us to the issue of a prototypical member of the plus-size group portrayed and used in the process of intragroup marginalization.

According to our analysis, we can draw four main features or characteristics that are in the center of being a plus-size person, or, more closely, a plus-size model. Figure 2 shows the core characteristics of a prototypical member of the plus-size group found in the data. The first core feature concerns being *real*, i.e. having had no plastic surgery and a natural body. A prototypical plus-size woman has ‘cellulite’, ‘a booty’, ‘rolls’ and ‘curves’, but she does not have a ‘Brazilian butt lift’, or a ‘flat stomach’. We can also note some slightly contradictory expectations towards models – while they are expected to have ‘natural bodies’, they cannot be ‘huge’.

Based on our first case study, people also make assumptions about the models’ height – perhaps because traditionally we think of models as tall, those of average height (c. 5’5”) are not common in fashion photos and videos (see Example 27). This also relates to the second core feature that was prominent in the data, *accurate size*. A prototypical plus-size woman is ‘curvy’ or ‘big’, and fits sizes from 1X upwards. As we saw in Section 4.1, the actual parameters of size 1X were a hot topic of discussion in the Besties case study, and commenters appear to have had a very clear idea of what different plus-sizes entail (e.g. ‘At least she is **a proper plus size**.. not just plus size hips like usual..’). Interestingly, not one of the commenters referred to actual measurements, but based their opinion on what the models looked like or what sizes fit the commenters themselves.

The third core feature, being *honest*, relates heavily on the previous two features, since in many cases, the commenters made remarks, for example, about both the accurate plus-size and being truthful about the size

the models were wearing. In the data, there were arguments for honesty in general, such as ‘All for body positivity, but even more for **honesty**. Nobody likes **a liar**...’, but as already mentioned, for honesty in relation to Fashion Nova’s actions (e.g. Example 30 above). The whole discussion about the essence of being plus-sized also brought out those commenters that connected size to being *self-confident*, the fourth core feature that we found in the data. A self-confident plus-size woman was generally described as ‘strong’, ‘independent’ and ‘proud’. Some commenters were seemingly irritated about the tit-for-tat conversation about the sizes and turned the negative into positive by pointing out how confident the models looked, as in ‘Who cares about the size! **That confident** is cool! I wish i was **that confident**’. Self-confidence is here linked with body positivity and empowerment of the ideal plus-sized group members.

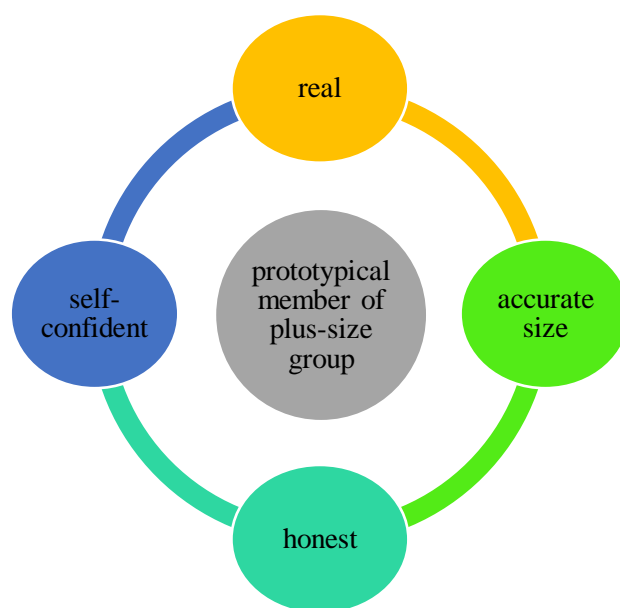


Figure 2. Characteristics of a prototypical member of the plus-size group in the data.

According to the theory of Intragroup Marginalization, group members wish to behave in accordance with the group norms. Our data show that if a member of the plus-size fashion group displays attitude or physical appearance that differs from the group's norms, they are seen as a threat to the group's distinctiveness. Those ingroup members who are perceived as threatening to this distinctiveness are then marginalized within the group by the linguistic means of self- and other-reference, which mainly works through both the comparison and the description of those values that are considered the core features of being plus-sized.

6 Conclusion

This study has shown that both self- and other-reference can be used as a tool for Intragroup Marginalization, which means the distancing and polarization of members within an ingroup. Our results comprise that both

the models and the customers in Fashion Nova Curve's Instagram photos and videos can be marginalized by the plus-size ingroup commenters. Fashion Nova itself has a central role in the representation of plus-size women, and in the comments the clothing brand is partly blamed for dishonesty in regard to the plus-size range. In many cases, the criticism towards being or not being plus-sized manifests itself in the comments on the models' bodies by way of their clothes sizes or physical appearance, and it seems that the commenters in the plus-size ingroup justify their evaluations on the basis of their group membership. The copious use of the personal pronoun *I* in the data, for one, shows that comparison between the commenters' own size and that of the models is an effective strategy for pointing out the 'wrong ingroupers'. Similarly, nominal other-reference can be used for spotting and assessing the 'real', the 'accurate sized', the 'honest' and the 'self-confident' women, i.e. the prototypical member of the plus-size ingroup.

Future studies on Intragroup Marginalization in the context of social media should consider the potential differences and similarities in constructing the ingroup on different social media platforms. Since our focus in this chapter has been on Instagram data, the practices we have observed in the linguistic and discursive representation of IM are affected by the specific affordances of Instagram. IM may be constructed in different ways on other platforms that focus on (audio)visual content, such as YouTube or TikTok. As our analysis demonstrated, the commenters frequently referenced the role that Fashion Nova as a company has when it

comes to representing plus-size women. Because of the emphasis on the responsibility of a commercial Instagram account, it would be interesting to see whether such responsibility is placed by the commenters on non-commercial actors. We intend to investigate this further in a follow-up study where we compare comments on the pages of other fashion and beauty brands, and non-commercial accounts that contribute to the representation of plus-size women in social media, such as the pages of body positivity activists. Finally, future studies are also needed to critically examine the ways in which fashion brands like Fashion Nova contribute to the marginalization of fat people by representing specific plus-size body types as more 'acceptable' than others. As Evans (2020) points out, there is a 'hierarchy of size' in the representation of plus-size people in contemporary Western media. Although the commenters in the present study can be seen to reinforce this hierarchy through IM, Fashion Nova is doing the same by limiting both their size range and social media imagery to the smaller end of the plus-size spectrum.

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