

## **“Love From Me and My Belly”: The Politics and Performance of Body Positivity on Instagram**

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This study shows how socially networked audiences respond to body-positive presentations of Instagram’s aspiring and professional content creators in an economy of visibility. Empirically, I draw on a long-term digital ethnography of Turkish beauty and lifestyle influencer Cansu Dengey from June 2020 to April 2021, and purposively select 5 posts from April 2021 and 500 audience comments on these posts, mostly receptive to her popular feminist discourse. Through these data, I show that even though her body is not outside the norm, Dengey portrays herself as confident in her nonskinny body and encourages her female audiences to be empowered by their physical appearance. I argue that the celebratory discourse among the audience about gendered empowerment as a form of popular cultural production about bodies functions in the service of consumer capital and largely fails to address the profound social and economic challenges that women face in Turkey.

*Keywords: influencers, body positivity, postfeminism, social media, Instagram*

Over the past decade, plus-size and body-positive bloggers have risen who document their plump bodies and show that it is possible to have content that showcases bodies outside the conventional standards of Internet beauty. This visibility on social media and the corporatized version of the concept of “body positivity” (e.g., the Dove Campaign for Real Beauty) have led to more changes within fashion and media. Performative activism and the increased visibility of larger bodies have had a positive impact on people’s body image, making them feel better about themselves. However, as the term “body positivity” became mainstream, it became divorced from its original context. Body positivity was part of a radical fat activist movement that began in the late 1960s, where proponents protested capitalism and the diet industry, which profited from antifatness (NAAFA, n.d.). Now, it has become an easy, marketable tool for brands and social media influencers. In this Instagram age, the role of social media influencers in enabling body-positive conversations is prevalent. In recent years, interest in these discussions appears to be at an all-time high, as evidenced by the significant surge in Google search interest in Turkey for terms such as “body positivity” (see Figure 1).

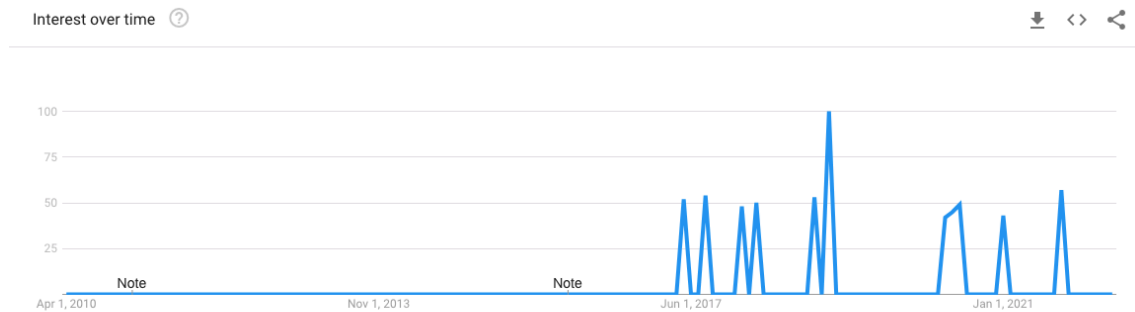
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**Figure 1. Google's search interest in Turkey. (Google Trends, n.d.)**

Cansu Dengey is a beauty, wellness, and lifestyle influencer from Turkey, with 290K followers on Instagram. Her primary audience comprises two main age groups: 25 to 34 years old (42%) and 18 to 24 years old (39%). The majority of her audience is women, comprising 82% (Influency, n.d.). She differs from other influencers in Turkey, as she is one of the few influencers whose account predominantly offers body-positive content (since June 2020). Even though her body is not outside the stereotypical standards of patriarchal femininity (Streeter, 2023) and fits well within the spectrum of normativity, Dengey portrays herself in her posts as confident in her nonskinny body, posing from every angle, even though she does not look "perfect." In some of her captions, she implies that she creates this content to encourage and empower women and to create a supportive community by addressing unrealistic ideals about beauty and promoting self-acceptance through her platform.

In April 2021, she embarked on a one-week body-positivity project on Instagram, sharing five teaser posts to create anticipation and introduce the project to her audience. In teaser posts that preceded this project, she explained that this meant a lot to her and emphasized that she would not share paid sponsorships throughout that week to show her audience how authentic the project was. Following the announcements and teasers, she shared five posts detailing her journey with body image from childhood through adulthood, including experiences in the workplace and the present day. After these five posts, she posted a video interview explaining the back story of her project. In the video, Dengey explained that during the pandemic, she had an injury that rendered her immobile for a while, making her gain weight during this period. She further explained how this caused her "pain" and decreased her self-confidence, so she wanted to "transform this pain into something else" on Instagram. Thus, as an influencer, she wanted to "take a responsibility" to share this pain with her audience to show them that they were not alone in this journey of self-love and body image issues. As I will demonstrate, the project received most of her audience's love and support, but there were still a few critiques and criticisms during and after. One of the significant forms of backlash she received was about the fact that although she highlighted that there would be no paid sponsorship posts during that week so as not to disrupt the flow of the project posts, a day after the announcement, she posted a promotional message about a product on her Instagram stories. Another criticism she received was about her pregnancy announcement post, which came three months after the project, with the caption "Friends, this time it's not my belly; it's a baby" (Dengey, 2021d). Thus, some

users expressed frustration, saying that the timing of this project was calculated and that she monetized her weight gain during pregnancy.

In the current “Ozempic age,” the concept of body positivity has become even more precarious. Dengey’s project, which took place in 2021, occurred before the rise of Ozempic, making it safer for her to explore body positivity compared with other feminist topics, both locally and globally. This fleeting nature of body positivity discourse illustrates the limitations of popular feminism on social media. Although her audience was supportive at the time, Dengey’s engagement with body positivity was short-lived and did not remain part of her influencer image. Popular feminism allowed her to experience a temporary and safe form of empowerment.

To understand Dengey’s body-positive Instagram content, we need to recognize how popular feminist trends<sup>2</sup> have become part of consumer culture. On Instagram, these trends often turn feminism and body positivity into commodities. We should examine how followers react to and interact with ideas about body image and authenticity on the platform.

This particular performance of body positivity was opportunistic and fleeting. This was inconsistent with her earlier posts celebrating traditional beauty and thinness, suggesting a narrow interpretation of “body positivity.” Her “reveal” was aestheticized and staged elaborately, failing to acknowledge the privilege that allowed her to be disproportionately celebrated for supposed fat acceptance. In the Turkish context, this serves as a distraction from the pressing issues facing girls and women. Moreover, her audience’s celebration and affirmation of this performance contributed to perpetuating these problems.

This article explores how socially networked audiences respond to body-positive presentations of Instagram’s aspiring and professional content creators. Empirically, I drew on a long-term digital ethnography of Cansu Dengey from June 2020 to April 2021 and purposively selected posts from April 2021, examining 500 comments that trailed these posts. I found that other than 15 negative comments, audiences reacted positively to Dengey’s discourse about the feminine body on Instagram. By drawing attention to the few critiques she received, I show how Dengey navigates the demands of digital visibility as a female influencer in a patriarchal society while deflecting comments at times. More broadly, I argue that although there is a celebratory discourse among the audience about gendered empowerment enabled by Instagram, this form of popular cultural production about bodies functions to service consumer capital. By engaging in theoretical and scholarly discussions on body positivity (e.g., Cwynar-Horta, 2016; Sastre, 2016), post- and popular feminism (e.g., Banet-Weiser, 2018; Gill, 2007;), and visibility (e.g., Abidin, 2016; Bishop, 2018; Duffy, 2017), this study contributes to existing influencer studies using an illustrative case in the Turkish context. It adds value to the conversation by showing how existing theories apply outside North America and Western Europe within a politically and socially challenging environment for women.

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<sup>2</sup> Current feminist movements denote a modern occurrence characterized by the broad acknowledgment and prevalence of feminist principles and advocacy throughout North America and Europe. These movements involve diverse gender equality efforts accessible via widespread media channels like broadcasting, television, advertising, and social media (Banet-Weiser, 2018).

## Literature Review

### *Body Positivity in the Social Media Age*

Body positivity is defined as any visual or written message that opposes conventional methods of viewing the physical body per traditional beauty ideals and advocates reclaiming embodiment and control over one's self-image. Body positivity champions self-love and embraces bodies in diverse forms, regardless of shape, size, or appearance. This encompassing outlook extends to bodies bearing "rolls, dimples, cellulite, acne, hairy bodies, bleeding bodies, fat bodies, thin bodies, and (dis)abled bodies," emphasizing the rejection of societal pressures and the established constructs of body norms (Cwynar-Horta, 2016, p. 38). A central pillar of mainstream body positivity is the idea that revealing the authenticity of one's body is cathartic. This concept finds expression through body-positive content across media, emphasizing that showing the realness of one's body can "liberate it from shame and disgust" (Sastre, 2016, p. 56). In theory, body positivity empowers participants to challenge an exclusionary Western beauty culture that promotes the ideals of slimness, whiteness, tallness, cisgender identity, symmetry, and able-bodiedness. Feminist and fat activists have consistently challenged this culture by examining the interplay between portrayals of gender, race, sexuality, and oppressive systems (Cwynar-Horta, 2016).

Unveiling the authentic body defies unattainable beauty standards and transforms self-perception. The performance of bodily exposure becomes the mechanism through which body positivity is both enacted and pursued as an objective. Consequently, it functions as a movement aiming to replace hyper-visible idealized bodies with ones founded on self-love. Nevertheless, this performative framework does not address the core issues of body positivity: "the gendered expectations of beauty and self-esteem, and the familiar expectations of visibility" (Sastre, 2016, p. 61).

As the body positivity movement has gained increasing visibility on social media platforms, notably Instagram, women with nonnormative bodies have embraced the platform to challenge conventional notions of feminine beauty, including the unrealistic pursuit of flawless skin and adherence to standardized body sizes. However, with the growing influence of the body positivity movement and its advocates (e.g., influencers), companies have seized the opportunity to commodify these advocates and leverage their impact to promote products, thereby profiting from the movement. Scholars contend that this commodification has resulted in body-positivity advocates inadvertently perpetuating prevailing capitalist ideals and reducing their bodies to objects (Cwynar-Horta, 2016).

As the movement has evolved primarily to feature conventionally attractive, skinny white women, it has faced criticism for its lack of inclusivity and deviation from its original purpose. Cwynar-Horta (2016) contends that "immersed within consumer capitalist culture, agency in self-presentation is limited as the construction of an individual's identity is mediated through our visually ingrained culture and the images that surround us" (p. 43). These images, products of consumer capitalist ideologies, reinforce the norms of consumer society, positioning the female body as central to influencer labor, the attention economy, and monetization. This process offers the possibility of a new commodity "self" through consumption (Kellner, 1995, p. 263).

Within gendered economies of visibility, women are often closely associated with “the body,” with their value frequently reduced to physical attractiveness. Consequently, the commercialized performative aspects of online body positivity illustrate that the expression of these contemporary forms of gendered subjectivity often comes “at the expense of a defined feminist politics” (McRobbie, 2009, p. 9).

### ***The Lens of Postfeminism and Popular Feminism***

Over the past 15 years, feminist media studies (e.g., Bordo, 1995; Marwick, 2010; Sender, 2006) have critiqued narratives that celebrate empowerment through physical and mental self-improvement, especially within Western societies characterized by conspicuous consumption. These studies highlight how framing the pursuit of gendered, racial, class-based, and ableist selfhood as an individual project diverts attention from systemic oppression. This approach has led to the co-opting and commodification of feminism. Gill (2007) describes this era as “post-feminist,” where the diverse histories of feminist struggle are reduced to a simplistic narrative of girl power. Postfeminism uses the discourse of gendered empowerment and feminism to maintain the existing status quo (Sastre, 2016).

Gill (2007) outlines postfeminism as a sensibility that influences various domains, from products to media portrayals. This sensibility primarily validates women’s individualism, expecting the ideal feminine subject to demonstrate individual achievements and exhibit specific consumer habits. Thus, the individual entrepreneur emerges as a quintessential representation of a postfeminist woman. Within the postfeminist mindset, femininity is construed as a bodily attribute. The body is depicted as both a source of power for women and inherently unruly, necessitating continual monitoring, scrutiny, control, and refinement (often through consumer spending) to conform to increasingly narrow standards of female attractiveness (Gill, 2007).

Scholars in feminist media studies and cultural studies have long been intrigued by the ways feminist concepts manifest and evolve within popular and media culture. Gill explored postfeminism, while Banet-Weiser (2018) delved into popular feminism. Although these sensibilities coexist, they have subtle distinctions. Popular feminism advocates for traditional feminist causes and acknowledges the persistence of gender inequality, yet it operates within the overarching framework of postfeminism (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2009). In today’s visibility-driven landscape, popular feminism and postfeminism are intertwined. The rise of popular feminism does not replace postfeminism but strengthens it. Today’s popular feminism, influenced by neoliberalism, emphasizes entrepreneurialism, personal resilience, and determination. However, “it does not necessarily mean that popular feminism critiques the roots of gender asymmetry; rather, popular feminism tinkers on the surface, embracing a palatable feminism, encouraging individual girls and women to just be empowered” (Banet-Weiser, 2018, p. 21). According to Banet-Weiser (2018), Gill’s concept of postfeminist sensibility has been crucial to feminism’s rise in popularity, aligning with heightened media presence and dissemination. Both rely on visibility within an economy centered on being seen.

### ***Visibility, Vulnerability, and Authenticity***

In the era of advanced capitalism and networked platforms, being an influencer involves economic principles, such as brand management strategies, self-promotion, and advertising techniques. In the gendered politics of the influencer economy, the imperative for women to “put themselves out there” operates differently compared with men (Banet-Weiser, 2012, p. 212). Consequently, mediated visibility is

a “double-edged sword” (Thompson, 2005, p. 14). The economic advantages derived from digital visibility are unequally distributed between genders (Duffy, 2017), contributing to the reinforcement of established social norms. In terms of YouTubers’ pursuit of visibility, “the algorithm privileges and rewards feminized content deeply entwined with consumption, beauty, fashion, baking, friendships and boyfriends” (Bishop, 2018, p. 70).

Studies of the last decade have demonstrated that the success of social media influencers and content creators depends on networked visibility (e.g., Duffy & Hund, 2015; Marwick, 2015; Senft, 2008). However, due to the presumed intimacy of being a “public” figure, managing this visibility mandate comes at a cost. As suggested by Banet-Weiser (2012), the act of constructing a self-brand frequently involves the process of “putting oneself out there” and embracing transparency. This entails individuals sharing their daily lives for the entertainment and engagement of others, thus giving viewers a glimpse into the “authentic” persona. Through this digital disclosure of their lives, individuals adopt an “authentic” self that is open and devoid of pretense (Banet-Weiser, 2012).

McRobbie highlights how discourses of freedom and equality paradoxically lead to gender repression. The emphasis on women’s visibility reinforces the imperative to “put themselves out there,” shaping online self-presentation. This practice, scrutinized by media and cultural industries, fosters a contradictory environment where authenticity competes with self-branding ideals (Abidin, 2016; Duffy, 2017). Terms like “calibrated amateurism” (Abidin, 2016) and “calculated authenticity” (Pooley, 2010) illustrate strategic uses of visibility. At the same time, there is a growing tendency among social media users to police authenticity and criticize influencers for seemingly deviating from the rules of authentic self-presentation (Duffy & Hund, 2019).

### ***Turkey’s Unique Political Landscape***

Celebratory audience response to the pop feminist content made by “body-positive” influencer Dengey creates a collective sense of faux neoliberal self-empowerment that focuses on the individual body and emphasizes attributes like self-esteem and confidence. However, this provides only a temporary high that does not address more profound structural challenges women face in Turkey, such as low literacy rates; low rates of participation in the labor force, politics, and education; domestic violence; and honor killings (UNICEF Turkey, n.d.). Instead, the followers unknowingly participate in the capitalistic commodification of body positivity and perpetuate the cycle of reclaiming femininity without changing patriarchal structures.

While popular feminist discourses about gender empowerment through body visibility are trending in popular culture and social media, within Turkey’s current political climate, female bodies are increasingly disciplined by law (or lack thereof), political rhetoric, and public discourse. In Turkey’s current political landscape, the anti-feminist movement is shaped by the intertwining forces of pro-Islamism, neoliberalism, authoritarianism, and conservatism (Cindoğlu & Unal, 2017). As Cindoğlu and Unal (2017) suggested, these elements together create a multifaceted framework of regulatory discourses concerning women’s sexualities. Over the past 10 years, there has been an unparalleled surge in discussions about sexuality within the political sphere in Turkey (Acar & Altunok, 2013; Cindoğlu & Unal, 2017). Specifically, the

strategic use of women's bodies and sexuality in political discourse has emerged as the primary means of reinforcing the conservative gender framework (Altunok, 2016; Cindoğlu & Unal, 2017).

Moreover, despite being the initial signatory to the Council of Europe's Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence, commonly known as the Istanbul Convention, Turkey took a significant step backward in 2021. President Erdogan publicly declared Turkey's withdrawal from the International Human Rights Convention. This decision heightened the vulnerability of countless women and girls to violence and sent a heedless and perilous message to those who committed acts of abuse, harm, and femicide: They can continue their actions without fear of consequences (Amnesty International, 2021). In 2023, 315 femicides and 248 suspicious deaths of women were recorded in Turkey (We Will Stop Femicides Platform, n.d.). As suggested by the organization, the number of unrecorded cases could be higher. Turkey's withdrawal directly attacks women, the LGBTQ+ community, and victims and survivors of domestic violence. Consequently, existing as a woman in Turkey is incredibly difficult. Instead of interrogating the broad sociopolitical context of Turkey, influencers like Dengey encourage their female audiences to be confident and empowered in their physical appearance without any articulated destination. As a result, the celebratory audience response to Dengey's popular feminist content becomes a pseudo-empowerment that focuses solely on individual attributes, such as self-esteem, without addressing the deeper structural issues women face daily in Turkey.

### Method

This article draws on a set of data collected through a digital ethnographic approach (García-Rapp, 2019; Pink et al., 2015; de Seta, 2020) to study how audiences responded to the body positivity discourse produced by a popular body-positivity influencer from Turkey. A long-term digital ethnography of Cansu Dengey was conducted from June 2020 to April 2021 to gain familiarity with her Instagram presence and content, to observe both her and users in the comment section, and to collect samples of interactions and write notes to wrap up observations (de Seta, 2020). In this article, I focused on five posts from April 2021 and 500 comments under them. Dengey employed body positivity discourse in these five posts, which influenced my selection. In addition, I gathered a sample of 500 comments for analysis. For my sample, I selected the first 100 comments from the five posts of the project, which were first compiled into an Excel sheet and then imported to NVivo. To analyze the selected posts and comments, I conducted a qualitative analysis of the textual and visual content of Dengey's posts and the comments under them (Duffy & Hund, 2015; Kuckartz, 2019). The coding sheet was guided by a preliminary review of the data and further refined inductively. The categories that emerged included expressions of authenticity/realness/relatability, body positivity, vulnerability, empowerment, self as a brand, and consumerism, among others. Using the underlying concepts based on Dengey's posts and the audience discourse, I devised themes and provided critical examples for my findings and analyses section to represent the data. I am a native Turkish speaker fluent in English and Turkish, so I translated all the posts and comments from Instagram verbatim for the article.

To account for the ethical complexities that might apply, I anonymized the data set through the removal of the followers' usernames. Although there was no immediate risk involved in this research, I was mindful of users' privacy by storing the screenshots I took from the user comments on Instagram on my password-protected computer. I also followed the ethical guidelines set forth by the Association of Internet

Researchers (Buchanan, 2012)—the primary consideration in my research would be the not-so-binary concept of public and private. As Buchanan (2012) suggested, “definitions and expectations of privacy are ambiguous, contested, and changing” (p. 6). Thus, an influencer like Dengey and the commenters on her Instagram posts “may operate in public spaces but maintain strong perceptions or expectations of privacy” (Buchanan, 2012, p. 6). Even though my research did not involve vulnerable communities or their personal information, I acknowledge that I did not anonymize the influencer in this study. The textual and visual content from Dengey’s Instagram are publicly disseminated and intentionally posted for public consumption. On this basis, the influencer herself will be identified by her Instagram handle in reference to her publicly available Instagram posts, while the followers will be anonymized.

## Findings

### *Aestheticized Belly Folds and Storytelling on Instagram*

Dengey’s posts incorporate visual aesthetics associated with Instagram visibility and storytelling that facilitate body-positive rhetoric. The exemplary photo shows Dengey with her belly rolls and folds and the following caption (see Figure 2):



**Figure 2. A screenshot of Dengey’s post with the original caption. (Dengey, 2021c)**

I came to tell you a story. I came here to start talking about what brought me here today, open up, and talk about what I have hidden, what I have been running away from, and what

I am afraid to face. Shall we start from childhood? Do you remember the first time you realized your body? . . . The things that have been said to me, all the sentences that make me feel ashamed of my body and femininity, the media, the magazines, my relatives, and my friends. I feel ashamed of my belly. I think it is abnormal and unwanted . . . I see skinny women in bikinis on the TV, pages of shocking diet recipes in newspapers and magazines, and celebrities who get lynched because they have cellulite. . . . Those around me who say I should lose some weight, men don't like it . . . those who say pull your belly in while walking. . . . Then I used to look at myself and think that if I continued to be like this, I would be incomplete and worthless. . . . It's taken me almost 20 years until I realized how I planted the seeds of this thought in my mind and decided to share my story with you.

In body-positive images, bodies are often presented partially or entirely naked (Sastre, 2016). In Dengey's case, she is never fully nude, but her clothing is lifted or moved aside to reveal specific body parts like belly folds, identified by text as those about which she is most self-conscious. Her posts include images accompanied by detailed captions that feature lengthy narrative text. The exposed, nearly nude body is an example of Dengey's realness and authenticity, illustrating a narrative of naturalness. Authenticity is implied rhetorically (through the stories she shares) and visually (through the revealed body) in Dengey's post. However, as part of her Instagram persona, these stories are performances of vulnerability. The visuals are professionally shot from an angle where we cannot see the whole body, but the aestheticized belly folds. Even though Dengey attempts to paint a picture of being authentic, vulnerable, and self-conscious, the entire post is still carefully curated, as the text is well-written, and the visual is abstract, artistic, and performative. Dengey's post contains a postfeminist expectation and empowerment, positioned as the main goal and conveyed through a rhetoric of body authenticity and visibility. Authenticity discourse helps the influencer discover the real you (Sender, 2006) and find the authentic self that was "hidden" and was something to be "afraid to face" until now.

Dengey's visual and rhetorical practices replicate the prevalent body-positivity call to improve not necessarily the body but one's relationship to it by focusing on self-love and self-acceptance. The rhetoric of empowerment and self-love found in Dengey's post mirrors the contemporary logic of postfeminism, which celebrates individual choice and personal accomplishment. There is also a rhetoric of bravery in her post, with the starting and closing of her captions referencing how she is finally able to "open up" about this issue and how it has "taken me [her] almost 20 years" to share her story with us. Because bodies that do not conform to conventional beauty ideals are often stigmatized and invisible, body positivity claims that publicizing such bodies is brave and revolutionary (Sastre, 2016). However, it is worth noting that Dengey's body is not outside the patriarchal femininity ideals; she presents as white, able-bodied, and youthful-looking (Streeter, 2023), in line with Western standards that "necessitates the alignment of sex, gender, and sexuality and the adherence to racial and able-bodied norms" (Hoskin, 2017, p. 99). If Dengey was fat, her messages and self-branding, along with her commercial appeal, would not be the same. Having an acceptable body within the body positivity movement and Instagram's visibility economy shaped her self-branding, visibility, and engagement on this platform.

Body positivity's fixation on self-love, self-care, self-discovery, and personal success resonates with the individualism of the postfeminist self. Nevertheless, as in Dengey's case, these discourses are used to challenge the gendered cultural expectations placed upon feminine bodies. There is a trope of the personal

story and its encouraging comments in digital body positivity spaces. Third-wave feminism's focus on the personal narrative has been critiqued since it does not go beyond the circulation of individual stories (Yu, 2011). Dengey facilitates body-positive rhetoric to appropriate and repackage feminist discourse for personal consumption, similar to what mainstream (Western) media and corporate campaigns attempt to do. Thus, the body-positive self continues to reflect discourses in current media and hegemonic cultural structures.

### ***Processing Body Image in a Gendered Online Community***

It is apparent from the comments that Dengey has built herself a loving fandom and an online community. The comment section was filled with appreciation and support messages for Dengey. A few of the comments included the use of emojis, which created meaning through visual representations. While emoji use, like any text, can have nuanced meanings as intended by its creator, the symbolic role emojis take in the context of Dengey is mainly pictographic, signifying exactly what they depict, such as clapping or hearts (Danesi, 2017). One user lets Dengey know that after seeing this specific post, she came to follow her, thanking Dengey for her message and sending love "from me and my belly 🍓🍓🍓" (personal communication, April 5, 2021). Another writes, "What a brave woman you are ❤️" (personal communication, April 4, 2021). They applaud her for her bravery, for not hiding her bodily imperfections, and for putting herself out there with raw honesty. They are grateful that "someone who has so many followers share this issue with honesty" (personal communication, April 4, 2021).

They believe that she instills a sense of awareness in her following (especially the younger generation) about body positivity and challenges society's standards. For example, a follower mentions her eight-year-old daughter and shows her gratitude toward Dengey's content: "My daughter is 8 years old and she is starting to be sad about her nonexistent weight issue. I will read this to her 🙌🙌" (personal communication, April 4, 2021). Dengey's followers view her as an inspiration for self-love and as a role model who sets a "great example" for the younger generation. This argument is consistent with that of Cwynar-Horta's (2016), who defines the body positivity movement as a way "to address unrealistic ideals about beauty, promote self-acceptance, and build self-esteem through improving one's self-image and learning to love oneself to the fullest" (p. 40).

Others posted: "End this societal pressure 🙌🙌" (personal communication, April 6, 2021). "These perceptions will end with such courageous women 🙌" (personal communication, April 6, 2021); "Impositions, perceptions🙌🙌 how well you explained🙌🙌" (personal communication, April 7, 2021). They expressed that they were tired of being exposed to Instagram content full of stereotypes about beauty and feminine bodies, reproducing existing societal standards and perceptions in everyday life. Her followers made sense of Dengey's personal stories about her body in such a way that there is no one ideal body; society creates this said "ideal." Thus, seeing their favorite influencer embracing real and imperfect bodies influences them to accept and love theirs. Dengey's content inspires them to let go of the social pressures on body image and gives them the courage to love their bodies: "I am in a period where I have made my life unlivable because of the boundaries I have drawn in life. I'm tired. . . . Your courage will give us all courage" (personal communication, April 8, 2021).

Through this fandom, followers supporting Dengey can identify with her in bringing light on body image issues and finding a platform to share their respective stories and struggles. They have so much love and appreciation for what Dengey is doing, and they “hope these posts will prevent such stories and inspire us to feel the self-compassion we need at every moment” (personal communication, April 5, 2021). This appreciative and loving fandom is united as an online community of women (as far as I can see from their profile pictures and usernames) who share their own stories with Dengey. From the comments, these users aim to contest patriarchy and beauty standards by sharing their stories with each other and building solidarity among themselves.

### ***Authenticity: Being the “Real” You in Your “Real” Body***

One of the most apparent and frequent reactions in Dengey’s comments was the ideals of authenticity, sincere expression, and realness. In Dengey’s comment section, followers formed this gendered socially mediated “authenticity bind” (Duffy & Hund, 2019; Pooley, 2010), where they expected to see vulnerability and expressive distinction on Dengey’s Instagram presence. For instance, Dengey received credit for being genuine in one comment: “incredibly heartfelt ❤️ immersive and enlightening reading.” Genuineness and authenticity remain resonant and meaningful ideals on social media (Duffy & Hund, 2019). The way Dengey’s audience demands authenticity is not surprising in this cultural moment. Another user posted: “The woman who brings naturalness and the most real perspective of femininity to Instagram 🙌🙌🙌” (personal communication, April 8, 2021). Concerning this authenticity ideal, social media audiences’ perceived desire for realness and naturalness significantly plays out, as one reads the comments. A user, for instance, mentioned her appreciation that Dengey distances herself from so-called fakery on social media: “I love your facial expressions and natural state; I wish I had a friend like you in my life ❤️” (personal communication, April 8, 2021). The common perception of reality among the audience is that real and healthy-looking bodies are what we need on Instagram to promote self-acceptance and to stop stereotyping beauty. They demand more “genuine” and “realistic” representations on social media and more influencers like them.

Several followers also expressed their relief after seeing a “real” and “natural” body representation on social media that inspired them to accept their flaws and humanness, making them feel good about themselves. It is visible through the comment section that authentic self-expression can function as a mechanism for social support (Duffy & Hund, 2019). Dengey’s followers also reasoned that they get to know Dengey through her personal stories and feel connected to her as if she was a friend, wishing “we could talk while drinking coffee” (personal communication, April 7, 2021). Authenticity discourses are valuable for projecting one’s distinctive brand persona (Pooley, 2010). The common perception among the audience is that Dengey invokes the ideal of relatability in her content.

In structuring her curated feed, Dengey uses Instagram’s “authenticity affordances” to inject more “realness” into her creative products. For example, in addition to Figure 2, a different photo (see Figure 3) of these posts shows only her left arm and a tiny number of her belly folds from the side angle. However, with the use of lighting, we see the silhouette of her entire body reflected on the wall—yet another “unfiltered” visual where her insecurities are exposed, but still aestheticized and feminine. Motivated by the

social media economy's demand to put oneself out there, Dengey shares intimate moments in her life with her socially networked audiences. Instagram's visibility mandate encourages her to communicate personal aspects of her life by showcasing "feminine-coded images and aesthetics" (Duffy & Hund, 2019; p. 4989), paralleling the sentiment among her fellow women cultural workers (Duffy & Pruchniewska, 2017). Dengey's dedication to sharing personal moments reinforces the notion "that the production of closeness and the public display of once-private feelings are intrinsically gendered activities" (Genz, 2015, p. 553).



**Figure 3. A screenshot of Dengey's post with the caption. (Dengey, 2021b)**

Even though Dengey tries to inject moments of sincerity and relatability into her online presence by sharing these personal and vulnerable stories, she does this by showcasing not-so-candid photos but curated poses done by a professional photographer/artist friend, Gabriel Vorbon, under professional lighting. We get a sense of the behind-the-scenes arrangement of the shoot from the video interview (Dengey, 2021), which was made by a professional filmmaker and videographer, Ezgi Yildirim. In this "backstage" video, we witness glimpses of the set and the photo shoot in action, constituting another form of authenticity performance and intimacy curation employed by Dengey. Even though Dengey acknowledges a desire to break free from the visibility demands she experiences as a woman and an influencer, she still conforms to the particular affordances and aesthetics associated with Instagram visibility in her posts. It is fair to state that, within Instagram's visibility mandate and performative dimensions, Dengey's feed remains curated. However, as apparent from the overwhelmingly positive and supportive comments, Dengey creates a cohesive Instagram presence and personal meaning by invoking storytelling rather than mere aesthetics (Duffy & Hund, 2019).

As aligned with previous research, in Dengey's case, socially mediated visibility comes with heightened vulnerability. However, in this case, the vulnerability is double-sided, as the audience is also vulnerable, sharing their own stories in the comment section. As one follower described:

Everyone can find the right to comment on our bodies. It's been a long time, and I still couldn't love myself because I have a masculine body. "Melis has a very masculine body," "are you a man," "look at those muscles" these are not compliments when you are a kid. The result is that you don't love yourself and those who comment on your body forget it in 2 seconds while you question yourself your whole life. Good luck to you, Cansu; it's so lovely to walk this road with you. (personal communication, April 5, 2021).

In this comment, the vulnerable follower shares her own story with Dengey and her 290K followers. She mentions a prevalent pattern in Turkish culture where people you know assume they have the right to comment on your body and outward appearance. The follower shared how she could not love herself because of the harsh words she had heard about her muscular body since she was little. Throughout the comment section, vulnerable stories like this demonstrate a shared experience among the followers where societal pressures and cultural perceptions of body image, beauty, and what it means to be feminine affected girls and young women throughout their lives. She ends her comment by wishing luck to Dengey with a sense of camaraderie, as she feels like they are on the same journey. Audience vulnerability coincides with a sense of relatability and fellowship in this comment section. The followers are raw and vulnerable with Dengey and her online community by sharing the hurtful memories they have carried with them since they were little kids, as written by another user: "My first schoolteacher would call me 'piggy' ☹️" (personal communication, April 7, 2021).

### ***Critique of Self-Branding and Consumerism***

Balancing one's public image while also addressing and navigating criticism and networked hate is a recurring challenge within the influencer industry. Although only 15 of the 500 comments I examined were negative<sup>3</sup>, it is essential to acknowledge the repercussions of the critiques directed at Dengey. The individuals leaving "negative" comments questioned her authenticity, contending that it amounts to nothing more than branding.

The critics argue that Dengey's attempts to explore this issue contradict her usual content. Within these comments, users who came across the post expressed disagreement with Dengey's perspective and asserted that she contributed to the problem. Most of the negative responses to the posts stemmed from

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<sup>3</sup> Recognizing the role played by the platform in this context is necessary. During the data collection and screenshot-taking process in April 2021, it was evident that Dengey had minimal unwanted comments and messages from certain groups of accounts. Instagram guidelines allow creators to take action against accounts that recently started following them or those that don't follow them but may be spam, fake, or intended for harassment. Hence, it's worth noting that the negative comments were collected during a period when comments on the posts were restricted, making it easier for Dengey to filter out specific words or phrases in the comments.

the belief that influencers, especially those like Dengey, played a role in constructing or perpetuating unrealistic standards, particularly among younger women. As a result, they perceived their posts as contradictory. These commenters questioned Dengey's and, in general, the influencers' intentions by saying things like, "Don't the perceptions of beauty that you have been a part of contradict your body positivity trend?" (personal communication, April 9, 2021). Some comments on the negative side seemed particularly upset with this contradiction—one even told her to "fuck off, bro<sup>4</sup>," and explained how she was the one who "creates this beauty ideal of having a beautiful butt and a thin body" (personal communication, April 9, 2021). These users were not happy with what Dengey had to say about this issue, claiming she was getting something out of it and that these "influencers" were the ones who set these standards in the first place.

They asserted that her motivation for doing so stems solely from her weight gain, contending that "this was the only thing she could draw attention to, but she called herself a pioneer for introducing the concept of body positivity to Turkey" by sharing these Instagram posts (personal communication, April 9, 2021). While Dengey may not explicitly declare herself a pioneer, she does position herself in a significant role within the burgeoning body positivity movement. As she conveyed in the video interview mentioned in the article's introduction, she felt a sense of responsibility to initiate this project and share her personal experiences about body image issues with her audience. This underscores the project's novelty and profound significance, according to her perspective.

However, Dengey's critics cast doubt on the authenticity and sincerity of her intentions about this matter. They argue that she overlooks the contributions of other influencers who have previously addressed this issue on social media, such as Berrak Tuna (@berraque). In certain negative comments, users acknowledged the existence of societal pressures concerning body image and cyberbullying in Turkey, affecting all influencers in some way. Nevertheless, they contend that Dengey's profession as a social media influencer has intensified societal pressure on herself and "caused [pressures] to flare up" (personal communication, April 9, 2021).

Dengey faces criticism because, like many other influencers, she has contributed to the perpetuation of conventional beauty standards by "endorsing skin-smoothing creams, promoting cellulite-removing products, and frequently using filters" until recently (personal communication, April 7, 2021). According to these users, she has now taken on the role of advocating body positivity openly, which they view as hypocritical. Comments of this nature align with the broader cultural backlash against the curated and filtered portrayals prevalent on social media platforms, which users perceive as distorted versions of reality. These comments suggest that Dengey only recently ceased posting filtered images and strategically adopted popular feminist discourses related to body positivity to enhance her self-brand. As one user articulated:

You normalized all the points you criticized; you didn't think about the psychology of young girls who followed you as you filled your pockets and lived your life. Now let's all applaud you and your self-love sessions. Then, let's like your other friends' sponsored posts where

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<sup>4</sup> This is a literal translation from Turkish word, *abi*, which is bro/brother. People use this word often, regardless of the gender of the addressee.

they spur their followers a purchase, shall we? Let the wheels turn. (personal communication, April 7, 2021).

The negative comments stem from the perception that Dengey is profit-driven and hypocritical. Critics argue that she showed a lack of consideration for the mental well-being of her young followers when she previously endorsed practices that she now condemns, notably the use of filters. Additionally, some users criticized the incorporation of post- and popular feminist discourses, such as self-love, suggesting that Dengey and her fellow influencers generate income from content centered around these themes. The commercial context of branding and advertising is recognized and called out by some users, such as: "This photo is definitely PR!" (personal communication, April 7, 2021); "This is marketing. . . . This is content creation. This is to gain profit by directing the masses to another perception. This is a service to big brands" (personal communication, April 7, 2021); "In any case, you are the one who gets something out of it" (personal communication, April 7, 2021). The criticism Dengey received from a small part of her audience aligns with my argument that this form of online media production (through popular feminist discourses about bodies) serves her self-brand.

These Instagram posts exemplify what Banet-Weiser refers to as the postfeminist self-brand. They contribute to and perpetuate a commercial postfeminist discourse in which Dengey appears to be "empowered" through public displays of her body and the creation of content of this nature on Instagram. While the majority of her audience applauds Dengey for embracing postfeminism, challenging traditional gender hierarchies, and subverting societal norms related to body and beauty standards, this narrative of "girl power" also relies heavily on commercially popular discourses and gendered imagery. Consequently, "post-feminism offers a cultural context that celebrates the production of the self but is shaped by an economic context that relies on that self to be a brand" (Banet-Weiser, 2012, p. 66). In other words, female influencers like Dengey construct identities on Instagram; however, they do so within the commercial context of branding and advertising. The issue here lies in the notion that empowerment supposedly stemming from online visibility and body positivity is logical only within an economic framework.

### Conclusion

While Dengey's celebration of diverse body types garners praise from her followers, her own body conforms to conventional standards. The issue arises when a substantial portion of her audience celebrates the limited range of body variations outside the ideal, potentially excluding those who don't fit within this narrow definition of body positivity. By emphasizing the importance of being observed and showcasing her body, she inadvertently reinforces the societal emphasis on women's bodies and beauty, albeit for a slightly broader spectrum of body types. This system, where popular feminist expressions and practices quickly circulate, has the unintended consequence of sidelining marginalized groups of women and body types. It predominantly highlights traditional femininity, heteronormativity, and upper-middle-class women who still conform to aspirational body standards like Dengey. As suggested by Banet-Weiser (2012), questioning the structural disparities that govern visibility in the first place is crucial, such as who gets visible and how visibility varies based on gender, race, and social class. In today's brand-centric culture, certain aspects are deemed "brandable," while others are considered "unbrandable." Dengey successfully brands her postfeminist self, which allows her to be visible because of her nondisabled status, cisgender identity, and privileged association with "White" femininity.

While these online performances enhance the representation and visibility of women, they do not address structural issues but offer minimal encouragement for including women. Even though Dengey's representation is perceived as "unfiltered" and her "bravery" is celebrated by her audience, no representation—especially one as carefully curated as a monetized Instagram account—can truly be "unfiltered" or "authentic," even when it avoids Photoshop. On her Instagram page, Dengey employs the popular feminist practice of promoting the "Love Your Body" discourse. While this message is seen as "empowering" by most of her audience, it does not directly confront the local structural problems of sexism, misogyny, and sexual crimes prevalent in Turkish society. Her account's discourse on bodies and authenticity primarily centers on women's inner self-discovery, personal achievements, and bodily imperfections.

While the majority of her audience embraces Dengey's discourse, I refrain from interpreting her series of body-positive posts solely as optimistic narratives about gendered empowerment in the digital media age. The implications of this cultural production are mixed. Users can derive benefits from participating in this online fandom and collectively working toward shared objectives. What Dengey does holds significant meaning for the majority of her fan base. Additionally, all forms of identity are inherently performative, and the concepts of authenticity and reality are social constructs. Dengey carefully constructs a personal brand by leveraging social media and visual culture trends and maintaining an authentic connection with her fan base. This aligns with the literature on "self-conscious commodification" (Marwick & Boyd, 2010, p. 119). Dengey strategically engages her followers by aligning with prevalent empowerment agendas and commodifying the discourse surrounding body positivity and authenticity ingrained within mainstream culture industries.

However, the celebratory reaction by Dengey's audience to the "body positive" and popular feminist content becomes a pseudo-neoliberal self-empowerment narrative that emphasizes individual bodies, highlighting qualities like self-esteem and confidence. Nonetheless, this representation remains somewhat superficial, offering gendered empowerment at the surface level without delving into the deeper structural challenges faced by women in Turkey. The audience's engagement in the commodification of body positivity and the perpetual cycle of self-objectification, all in the name of reclaiming femininity and embracing their bodies, ultimately results in neoliberal self-empowerment, and empowerment stops there.

This research on Dengey's exploration of body positivity demonstrates that this particular moment had no lasting impact on her content or her brand and that the body positivity discourse she championed was short-lived. This transient nature mirrors the broader trajectory of body positivity within popular feminism, which enjoyed a prominent "moment" but is now being seriously undermined by the rise of drugs like Ozempic. This pattern underscores a critical issue with many online movements associated with popular feminism, as they often generate positive affects and moments of empowerment that fail to translate into lasting social or political shifts. Dengey's experience serves as a case study of this phenomenon, illustrating how momentary bursts of popular feminist discourse on social media fail to create enduring transformations in the sociopolitical landscape.

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