DIGITAL MARKETING COMMUNICATION AND ITS EFFECT ON THE YOUNG WOMEN'S SELF-ESTEEM

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THESIS
Abstract

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Abstract

The study aimed to investigate the impact of digital media communication on young women's self-esteem. Businesses and brands use digital media to communicate with their target audience and potentially convert them into loyal customers. However, some studies found that the use of models in the advertisement had a side effect on women's self-esteem and self-perception other than the initial content message.

The research was conducted by researching books, research papers, and online research. For the primary data collection, qualitative research was applied by interviewing young women. The author opted for qualitative research because self-esteem is a subjective experience that differs from one person to another; in addition, the author wanted to interview young women from different nationalities and backgrounds to explore the deep emotions of the interviewees and to learn about their personal experience.

The study found that advertisements that contain models and that represent conventional beauty standards and present perfection lower women's self-esteem. On the other hand, advertisements or content that contain different models of different sizes attract the audience's interest and increase women's self-esteem. Furthermore, it was noticeable from the interviews how influencers have more effect, either negative or positive, on women's self-esteem compared to the advertisement and direct content from brands.

In conclusion, the study suggests that businesses and brands should reconsider the content they present to their target audience. This is because false presentation and representation could lead to some potential customers being ignored.

Keywords
Digital Marketing Communication, Self-Esteem, Women, Ideal Model, Advertisement

CONTENTS

1   INTRODUCTION

Digital media was not as essential in human everyday life as it is today. It is a way where people can freely and easily access and share information and knowledge regardless of time and location. Businesses and brands are adopting technology and using digital media communication to get closer to their target and potential customers. Many studies and research have been conducted to evaluate the effect of business and brand advertisements and contents on people as individuals and/or groups. The aim of this thesis is to detect the effect of digital marketing communication and its effect on young women's self-esteem.

The author herself had a personal experience since childhood. TV advertisements (and later social media marketing) were always an interest for her. Models that are on TV, in magazines, and on posters played a big role in the author's self-esteem, as she was hoping one day, she would look like them. Over time the author realizes that is not possible to be like someone else, especially since no one has control over how they are born, rather she realizes that each person is unique. Also, usually, the advertisement does not reflect the real world, but rather a perfect world that might not be reachable. However, with the presence of social media still unconsciously the author put herself under comparison and it lowers her self-esteem.

Therefore, the author took the thesis as an opportunity to investigate how advertisements and content from businesses and brands in the digital channel can have unintended side effects beyond their initial intention, which is to market their products (e.g., promotion, brand awareness, product launches, etc.), with a specific focus on the self-esteem of young women. The primary hypothesis suggests that ads and content by brands utilizing female models have a negative impact on women's self-esteem by consistently portraying a narrow standard: typically, a white, slim woman with straight, long hair. In some cases, brands share the same content (videos or images) in different languages across various countries without considering whether the models represent the women they are targeting as customers. Even when brands create ads for each country using local models, the model choices still need to closely align with a singular definition of beauty. This issue isn't confined to a single brand but extends across tens or even hundreds of brands and ads. Consequently, women, as consumers, are consistently exposed to a singular representation, regardless of the products or services being offered, reinforcing a limited and exclusive standard of beauty.

Before outlining and writing, the author spends time reading about the topic from different perspectives and various resources, such as textbooks, online articles, research papers, and other theses. Therefore, this helped the author to initially outline what will be covered and decide which areas needed to be focused on. To continue with the research, primary data collection was conducted. Therefore, the author studied different methods of collecting primary data. After the study, the decision was made to conduct the research using the qualitative research method, because the author wants to investigate more women's emotions and experiences rather than numbers. In addition, each person has a different way to define self-esteem and beauty, therefore, the qualitative method will be a great tool to get deep and discover different aspects that the author could not be aware of. After deciding on the method, the author spent time formulating the interview questions and materials to be used during the interview. Finally, the author analyzed the data from the interviews, drew

conclusions, and established connections between the secondary research data and the results from the primary data to explore the extent to which digital marketing communications affect women's self-esteems.

The thesis structure is designed to start by defining keywords in the thesis's title, the aim of the author is to clarify these keywords to the reader and establish a foundation for the rest of the thesis. This involves starting with the definition of marketing communication and digital marketing communication and exploring their various types. Then the thesis progresses to defining self-esteem and what are the factors that are affecting self-esteem and later diving into women's self-esteem. Subsequently, the thesis presents the connection between digital marketing communication on women's self-esteem. Following this, the reader is introduced to the research methodology employed in this thesis, leading to the analysis of interviews. Finally, the thesis concludes by summarizing its findings and providing guidance on limitations, along with suggestions for future research.

2   MARKETING COMMUNICATION

For businesses to reach out to customers, they need to communicate and build relationships for the purpose of selling their products and/or services. Nowadays, businesses reach and communicate with their customers through different channels, non-digital and digital channels. Examples of non-digital channels are TV, billboard, print, and radio (Javier 2021). Here's an instance of digital channels are social media, emails, websites, etc. (Aguila 2023). This thesis will focus on advertisements that are published on social media (digital channel). This section will cover what marketing communication and digital marketing are, define social media, and explain advertisements.

2.1   Marketing Communication

Marketing communication is where the business and target audience and/or customers engage together. There are various purposes of marketing communication which are offering, informing, persuading, and increasing the relationship level with the customers. (Belmaker 2021, 3-7.) Similarly, marketing communication can be defined as a way for businesses to build up and manage a channel with their customers to obtain stable and strong relations with them. In addition, through marketing communication organizations can have the opportunity to add value to their customers (Kotler & Armstrong 2021, 25.) The two definitions express marketing communication as a way to link and connect businesses with their customers to build long-lasting relationships. For effective marketing communication, there is a process and elements that connect the brands and customers. First, the sender, which is the company or the brand that has an idea or a message wants to send to the customers. The sender encodes their ideas to an understandable and comprehensible message. At this point, the message is created and delivered through the chosen media. Subsequently, the customers, also known as receivers, obtain and process the message. Then the receiver decodes and understand the message. The way the receivers interpret the message influences their response. In turn, the company collects feedback by analyzing the reactions and responses of the receivers. However, the process may face noise, which refers to unplanned interruptions that can occur due to misunderstandings in the message. (Daniels 2021.)

2.2   Digital Marketing Communication

There are many marketing communication channels between brands and customers, depending on the business goal and strategy, they can use both non digital and digital channels. Digital marketing communications essentially represent the same concept as traditional marketing communications, but they occur within the digital sphere. Almost all businesses, whether they are business-to-consumer (b2c) or business-to-business (b2b), have multiple digital communication channels, for example: websites and/or applications, accounts in different social media such as Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, Pinterest, and email marketing (Kotler & Armstrong 2021, 41-42.). It is predicted that by the year 2030, global digital marketing and advertising will reach more than one billion dollars. Businesses are aware of the power of digital marketing communication and are investing a big amount of money in the hopes of achieving higher returns compared to non-digital communication. Professionals state that using digital marketing communication increases brand exposure by 85%, raises

traffic by 75%, and boosts loyalty by almost 60%. According to Gartner's annual CMO (Chief Marketing Officer) marketing spending report, companies allocate only around 45% of their budget to non-digital marketing communication channels, while the remaining budget is directed towards digital marketing communications (Krivec 2023). On the other hand, in October 2023, approximately 61% of the world's population is using social media platforms (Petrosyan 2023), highlighting the critical need for brands to invest in digital marketing communications.

2.2.1 Social Media

Social media is a couple of applications where people communicate and connect in different ways (writing posts, sharing videos, publishing photos, calls, messages, etc.). Almost all businesses are using social media marketing to stay connected with customers everywhere and all the time. Businesses are using numerous channels to get closer to their customers as much as possible, for example, having multiple accounts on different social media platforms - Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, YouTube, etc.- including their websites and mobile applications. The main goal of social media is to strengthen the relationship with the target customers and build brand loyalty. Yet, big organizations are working on customer brand advocacy, in which customers are satisfied with the business which leads them to share it with others verbally or online (Kotler & Armstrong 2021, 42-43.) Other than engaging with customers, businesses use social media to advertise themselves; the content can be the same media that had been used on other channels or tailored ad for a specific platform (Juska 2022, 33-39.)

Businesses are choosing to utilize social media as the average time people spend on these platforms continues to rise year after year. According to Statista's report on "Daily time spent on social networking by internet users worldwide from 2012 to 2023", individuals in the age group of 16-45 years old spent an average of 151 minutes, roughly 2.5 hours per day on social media. While 10 years ago, in 2013, the average time spent was only 1.5 hours (95 minutes) (Dixon 2023a). Furthermore, approximately 60% of the global population is using social media, with each person, on average, using six applications each month (Chaffey 2023). Therefore, social media is a powerful tool for businesses to connect with their target customers more rapidly than ever before, regardless of their location or time zone.

Social media has had a recognizable effect on people's lives; it serves as a means to eliminate barriers between individuals, easing communication and allowing connection with anyone at any time. However, social media also has negative impacts on society. Day by day, social media users can become addicted, spending hours on these platforms, which negatively affects other aspects of their personal lives. When a large number of people are addicted, it negatively impacts society by leading individuals to ignore real-life responsibilities, increasing anxiety and depression. Addiction can also reduce face-to-face connections, leading to self-isolation. Additionally, spending hours daily on social media can cause low self-esteem, as users often showcase idealized or unrealistic aspects of their lives. Cyberbullying has become easier, as individuals can engage in it behind a screen without facing direct consequences. Another unethical practice facilitated by social media is the spread of misinformation, which occurs more easily and rapidly than before, posing potential harm to individuals, groups, and institutions (Roy 2023.)

2.2.2 Advertisements

Advertising is a message a business wants to deliver to its audience. Advertainments can be informed by audio and/or visuals. It is non-personal or direct marketing. Businesses pay for the advertainment to be created and shared, as they have the choice to choose which mass media to advertise and how long it will be up for. Some examples are radio, social media, tv, billboards, etc. (Belmaker 2021, 3-7.) Organizations can advertise in purpose to inform, motivate, educate, and promote their products/services and/or the brand. However, the main goal is to send persuasive messages (Juska 2022, 33-39.). Sometimes the same advertisement (fully or partly) is shared through both digital and non-digital channels to ensure reaching the entire targeted audience. Additionally, each channel is unique, so content and its creation differ from one channel to another.

Advertisement creators don't randomly create ads that just deliver a message. Customers are exposed to tens and sometimes hundreds of ads daily; therefore, ads are designed with psychological intent to attract targeted customers. For instance, using humor in advertising triggers the release of positive hormones, like endorphins. Consequently, the audience feels positive about the ad and is more likely to remember it. Another example is using animals. Animals can be displayed in a fun and cheerful manner or in an empathetic way, both of which increase the chance of engaging the viewer's interest. Additionally, colors play a significant role in ads, representing emotions, feelings, moods, and themes. Therefore, color is another tool advertisers can utilize to attract viewers to see the ads (Montijo 2022.)

There are various types of advertisements that businesses can use to reach their customers. Brands may employ multiple methods at the same time or at different times based on the advertisement's objectives. Indeed Editorial Team wrote an article titled "14 Types of Advertising," published on the Indeed website in 2023. Here, some of the mentioned types will be highlighted, and sometimes multiple types will be combined.

- Print Advertising:

Print advertising is one of the initial ways to advertise, where companies pay for their message to be printed in magazines and/or newspapers. Additionally, brochures and flyers are considered forms of print advertising. Moreover, businesses can engage in direct mail advertising through printed materials.

- TV Advertising:

Companies pay to advertise their products or services on television. The cost of the advertisement varies based on numerous factors, including the duration of the ad, the timing of its airing during the day, the specific show during which the ad is broadcast, the number of networks, etc.

- Mobile Advertising:

Mobile devices contain various applications such as search engines leading to websites, gaming apps, social media platforms, etc. Businesses have the opportunity to advertise in multiple locations

through these devices, reaching the same customers multiples times or reaching the greatest number of customers based on the user activity. Mobile advertising can take different forms, including videos, photos, audio, and text.

- Outdoor Advertising:

Outdoor advertising targets customers outside their houses, visible on streets, malls, shops, etc. It appears on billboards, buses, business trucks, etc. Brands carefully choose locations based on their analysis and the target audience.

3   SELF-ESTEEM

Self-esteem definitions evolved through the passage of time by different schoolers. William James expresses self-esteem as the positive feeling and self-regard that individuals get when they frequently achieve significant goals. Self-esteem was defined by Rosenberg as the individual who has a positive perception of himself /herself, self-respect, and self-worthiness. (Rosenberg 1965, as cited by Abdel-Khalek 2016.) Years later, self-esteem was defined by Brown and Tafarodi & Swann as a self-knowledge measurement that leads to determining and evaluating self-worth and competence (Brown,1998 & Tafarodi & Swann 1995, as cited by Zeigler-Hill 2013). In addition, Rosenberg defined self-esteem as how individuals see themselves, they can have high self-esteem (positive) or low self-esteem (negative) (Rosenberg 1979, as cited by Stets & Burke 2014). To sum up the definitions, self-esteem is an individual self-evaluation. The accuracy of self-esteem cannot be determined as it is self-perception rather than reality (Zeigler-Hill 2013).

Stets Jan E. and Burke Peter J. (2014) address in their article Self-Esteem and Identities in the Sociological Perspectives book, there are three dimensions of self-esteem, which are self-worth, self-efficacy, and self-authenticity. Self-worth is when the person values and appreciates him/herself. Self-worth is a positive feeling that makes the individuals feel confident and have self-respect. Self-efficacy is the feeling of having the power to affect the surrounding environment at the same time having the force or the power to control their life. Last but not least, self-authenticity is discovering the real self not what the individuals see themselves.

3.1   High Self-Esteem

People experience high self-esteem when they are accepted, appreciated, and valued by their surroundings (Zeigler-Hill 2013.). High self-esteem is a natural human need and desire. Having high self-esteem makes people feel happier and more confident. Also, it makes them able to cope with difficult situations and wisely face challenges. People with high self-esteem do not always experience pleasant situations in their life, but they are more likely to be steadily facing failure and negative life situations (Abdel-Khalek 2016.)

3.2   Low Self-Esteem

On the other hand, low self-esteem can be experienced if individuals are not valued or appreciated by themselves and/or others. Low self-esteem has negative effects psychologically like anxiety, depression, and social phobia. Still found that there is a link between low self-esteem and physical health as they can affect their body negatively (Zeigler-Hill 2013). Heine, Lehman, Markus, & Kitayama (1999) addressed that collectivistic culture tends to have lower self-esteem compared to individualistic cultures (Zeigler-Hill 2013). In other words, an individual who cares about the group and is part of the group may suffer from low self-esteem as their opinion and perspectives are important to the individual; high self-esteem can be gained when the belonging group is satisfied by who you are. However, in the individualistic culture, the individuals care more about themselves and do not care about others' evaluations, as seems the uniqueness of the surroundings leads to high self-esteem (Abdel-Khalek 2016.)

3.3   Women and Self-Esteem

Self-esteem is something that is part of the inner self and is affected by the individual and the community that surrounds them. Maggie Vlazny, LCSW (2016) suggests in her article "Understanding Women & Self Esteem" on PsychCentral Website. Women's specific self-esteem is built based on their surroundings such as family, schools, media, partners, etc. As they grow their level of low self-esteem increases, which can lead to losing control of their lives to satisfy others. On the counter, Susan Nolen-Hoeksema suggests in her article "The Truth About Women and Self-Esteem" that women can experience high self-esteem at different age times. Most of the studies that had been done could be applied to old age and/or only to a minor group of females. However, the reality is different. Susan mentioned that relying on those data and studies creates a stereotype in the community and negatively affects women as the idea passes through them and to the younger generation.

4 WOMEN'S SELF-ESTEEM AND DIGITAL MARKETING COMMUNICATIONS

When digital communications started to emerge, competition between businesses increased as they sought to deliver their messages to customers with the hope of boosting sales. Women models began to be featured in various types of content, including advertainment (videos or pictures), social media posts, magazine covers, and more. The extensive exposure of women has significantly contributed to shaping society's beauty standards. Numerous research studies, referenced in this section, have been conducted to evaluate and examine how these standards affect women's mental and physical well-being and their overall quality of life.

4.1 The Effects of Digital Marketing on Women's Beauty Standards

Many studies have shown that digital marketing communications are affecting women's beauty standards. A tall, slim, white woman is the perfect beauty standard that businesses are presenting through their digital communication with their customers. Over time, that had shaped society and people's perspectives about women as a woman must always be compared with unrealistic beauty standards and models that had been modified by makeup, lighting, and photoshop tools (Mishod & Abdul Aziz & Mohamed 2022.) Based on Kori Gearhart's (2022) experiment and data collection, businesses may lose female customers and their advertisements may not get a high return on marketing investment (ROMI) when a woman appears in sexualized positions in the advertisement. Also in the same studies, Kori found that women who had been exposed to sexualized advertisements took more selfies before submitting the one they like comparing to women that had been exposed to the normal advertisement (Gearhart 2022.) On the other hand, those kinds of advertisements leave a negative reaction to the audience and decline brand recall (Pelsmacker 2021, 3-7). Usually, customers will have more positive emotional responses to body-positives advertainment compared to the transient way to advertise a woman. However, the audience will still not reduce or change their perspectives about the typical beauty standers (Selensky & Carels 2020).

Culture plays a role in a women's self-esteem, as a woman is being compared to models in the media. For example, it found that black women usually have high self-esteem compared to white and Asians of the same community and that because there is not much media pressure or big number of models to compare to comparing to white and Asian girls (Quick & Byrd-Bredbenner 2014.)

Based on Jennifer C. Selensky& Robert A. Carel's study, women tend to have low self-esteem and low body image when they experience high weight bias and fear of getting fat not matching the ideal beauty standers. Advertisements may not be the only reason that shapes and build beauty standers among society and women, still, they have a significant impact and role in shaping the social norm. When women are exposed to advertisements that contain women of different body sizes, ages, colors, etc. they tend to have more positive feelings and make them accept women's diversity. Therefore, these kinds of companies need to change the social norms and break the ideal beauty standers, as to be exposed to one occasionally is not very effective as there are hundreds of ads advertising for the opposite. This way companies now are representing and messaging their real customers (Selensky & Carels 2020.)

4.2 Marketing Ethics

Brands are doing their best efforts in their digital marketing communication channels to attract customers to their business and generate short-term and/or long-term profits. This raises questions about the ethics behind the marketing strategy, known as marketing ethics. Marketing ethics refers to the values and moral principles that companies should consider when creating their marketing communication with their customers. It's important to be aware that morality is based on individual rights and wrongs. In some situations, brands may engage in unethical advertisements that are not against the law. The aim of marketing ethics is to oblige brands to consistently consider and apply humility, honesty, and integrity while communicating with their customers (Shivani 2021.)

Although businesses might achieve faster profits by employing unethical strategies in their communication with customers, these gains are often short-term. Customers tend to turn away and seek brands with better reputations. About 80% of users believe that brands that genuinely following marketing ethics are more likely to surpass over brands that utilize unethical marketing practices. Ethical marketing has a positive impact on brands' success in many ways, such as ensuring long-term survival in the market, fostering loyal customers, and enhancing the brand's value in the market (Shivani 2021.)

There are several ways businesses unethically market their products/services. One of the main examples is misleading pricing, where businesses increase prices during high seasons or promotions so that the discounts offered are equivalent to the original price; this is known as price hiking. Another unethical practice is presenting wrong and/or hurtful stereotypes. Brands may use the same marketing content/advertisements but in different demographics. Additionally, false advertising occurs when businesses over-promise the results of their products or services, leading to disappointment among customers and a loss of credibility for the brand (Hetler 2022.)

Advertisers rely on psychology, symbolic appeals, and emotions to persuade customers to buy their goods or use their services. Advertisers are using a different method to make the customers see themselves in the advertainment situation and wish to have the same result when they purchase the goods/services (Chaffey 2021, 138-141.)

Advertisements and branding created one-dimensional customer behavior, where the products add value to the individuals; without it, the individual loses or has less value. As consumers start to be more interested in appearances than reality, as the ads create hyper-reality (Chaffey 2021, 138-141.)

For instance, women that have been displayed in ads and social media, are the women that had been chosen from thousands of candidates, they have been professionally trained and follow high and strict life habits. Photos and videos are taken by professionals with high standers and professional equipment. And after all the videos and/or images are edited and adjusted. Therefore, what had been displayed in the ads is no longer real (Chaffey 2021, 138-141.)

That raises the question of whether it is ethical to use external factors. As consumers expect the same emotions and results as what has been seen in the ad, most customers may not be aware that the models in the ads do not naturally look this way rather they had been adjusted and edited by

experts. Spurgin suggests that it is an ethical obligation for advertisers to not over aesthetic the results that is been made by technology as it considers cheating and misleading the audience about reality (Pelsmacker 2021, 3-7.)

5 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This chapter presents the research methodology used to investigate how digital communication affects young women's self-esteem. It covers the methodology that was followed and how it was implemented.

5.1 Qualitative Research

There are two methods of research: qualitative and quantitative research. Qualitative research collects and analyzes non-numerical data, expressed in words. The aim of qualitative research is to gain "in-depth insight" and to explore and investigate people's thoughts and experiences. Common ways to conduct qualitative research are observation that expresses in words and open-ended questions in interviews. Focus group studies, interviewing, and co-creative workshops are the most common methods of open-ended questions in interviews. Unlike quantitative research, which aims to test a theory, qualitative research aims to explore the theory and try to understand it.

For the writer to conduct qualitative research, the writer first needs to choose a topic and do some initial research to identify the pain/challenge. Then more in-depth research is conducted, and the theory starts to be shaped. Information organization is crucial at this stage to make good connections and links between research data. Once the writer has decided on the data collection method that matches the research topic, data is collected and analyzed using various techniques such as coding and thematic analysis (Qualitative Research Module 2023.)

The author decided to use qualitative methods for several reasons. First, most of the secondary data resources and other research on this topic are based on the quantitative research method; therefore, the author wants to explore it using the qualitative research method to get deeper into the subject. In addition, this topic is based on life experiences and emotions. numbers and surveys cannot get deep into the content. Last but not least, this method gives the freedom and flexibility for the author to ask and have deep conversations with the interviewee. Additionally, it could open up some points which the author was not aware of. For the research to be successful the author should avoid questions that have the answer of yes or no, limiting the interview answers by cutting them or forcing to guide them to specific answers that the author wishes to hear. In addition, the researcher should already have set up their objectives and/or topics he/she wants to be covered and answered by the interviewer.

5.2 Research Implemented

For approximately one month, the data was collected through face-to-face interview or online interviews conducted via Zoom. The decision to choose the interview format was made collaboratively between the interviewer (the author) and the interviewee. Due to the geographical distance between the interviewee and the interviewer, Zoom was chosen to facilitate the meeting process. In addition, the interviews were scheduled for different dates and times based on the availability of both the interviewees and the interviewer. In either case, the interviewer asked permission to record the interview for further reference, later on, with a promise that no one would have access to their recording or their personal information. Also, in the analysis section, there will not be a direct

connection or order between the information they shared and who they are, they will be mentioned as the "interviewees".

The interview method employed here is a combination of structured interviews and unstructured/in-depth interviews. The author prepares a list of questions that are divided into three sections: "individual self-esteem and personal experiences", "advertisements and social media reactions", and "the impact of digital communication on individuals and society." This approach helps the interviewer remain focused on the topic and provides guidance throughout the interview process. On at least two occasions, the interviewer decides to utilize the unstructured/in-depth interview technique to explore deeper into the topic, as it may not be easy for everyone to provide lengthy and profound answers. Additionally, the order of questions in the structured interview is sometimes adjusted based on the interviewees' responses. This was done to ensure a smooth flow of the interview in terms of both questions and answers.

5.3   Who was interviewed?

The thesis topic is about how digital communication affects young women's self-esteem; therefore, the interviewees are young women aged between 18 and 31 years old. This specific age group was chosen because they are the age group most exposed to digital media (Auxier & Anderson, 2021). The writer interviewed some people from his/her connections and received nominations from the interviewees. This study does not target a specific nationality, culture, or race but instead focuses on women in general on a global scale. However, the writer selected women who are aged between 18 and 31 with different backgrounds and lifestyles (e.g., lifestyle and marital status).

The sample comprised seven young women from diverse backgrounds, nationalities, religions, age groups, and marital statuses. Among the participants, three lived in Finland, with only one being of Finnish origin. One of the interviewees was of French descent with Turkish heritage, while the remaining three held Egyptian nationality. Since the author's mother tongue is Arabic, the interviews with the Egyptian women were conducted in Arabic, and the author translated the responses into English for analysis. The interviewer did not have a predetermined number of interviews to conduct; it was based on how the interviewees responded and data collection. The interviewer decided to stop at seven young women as almost all the answers were leading in the same direction.

5.4   Interview Materials

All the questions of the interview are generated by the author (APPENDIX 1). The author conducted research relevant to the topic, which helped in formulating questions. For instance, various scholars offered different definitions of self-esteem, indicating that the term's meaning can vary from person to person. Consequently, the author created direct questions such as "How do you define self-esteem?" to explore the diverse interpretations of self-esteem among women. This line of questioning also prompted the interviewees to describe their idea of a beautiful woman, considering that most of the media show only one ideal standard. Another objective was to understand if the interviewees' responses aligned with the typical portrayal of a tall, slim, white woman or if they held an alternative view of beauty. Additionally, other questions were inspired by the target audience of the

brands. Interviewees were asked if they felt targeted or represented when exposed to the materials prepared by these brands.

The questions are divided into three parts, but again it is not necessary that the order was followed exactly in all the interviews. For this thesis, two video advertisements of woman's bras and underwear from two international brands will be presented. The first ad is "Share your Spark!" by Aerie, 2016 (American Eagles daughter company). The advertisement contains women models who have different body sizes and shapes. Also, women were different in other physical appearances such as skin color and hair length, type, and color. The second advertisement is from Victoria's Secret, and it is called "Victoria's Secret T-Shirt Bra Commercial" 2018. The advertisement shows only three models that are different in skin and hair color, but their hairs are the same type, style, and almost the same length. The common thing they do have is body size and shape. Both advertisements are published on the brand's official YouTube channel. The two videos were chosen to have different model sizes to examine the female interviewee's reactions as females and as customers.

Furthermore, the interviewees were asked to take a quick look (around 1.5-2 minutes) at H&M and Zara's official Instagram accounts to gather their impressions and reactions toward the contents of the two brands on social media. These two brands were chosen because they are two of the most internationally affordable and well-known brands worldwide, so there is a good chance that the interviewees would be familiar with them. For instance, one of the interviewees already follows the brands on social media and has downloaded their apps.

The Instagram platform was selected because according to Statista it is widely used by young people (18-34 years old), with approximately 60.1% of this age group found on Instagram (Dixon 2023b). Moreover, Instagram relies heavily on visual elements compared to written and verbal elements. Therefore, it serves as an effective medium for brands to showcase and visualize their products.

5.5 The Purpose of Data Collection

The objective of the interview is to explore the connection between young women's self-esteem and the digital media they are exposed to. That includes their definition of self-esteem, and evaluate their self-esteem, share their personal experiences of how they feel and what they face in their life when they are exposed to different advertisements from brands. In addition, those women are also customers for thousands of brands, the author wants to examine their perspectives as customers and their reaction and customer behavior to the brand advertisement and social media account.

5.6 Ethical Considerations During the Data Collection

All the interviewees were introduced to the topic prior to the interviews, whether conducted face-to-face or on Zoom. The interviewer explicitly asked for permission to record the interviews, promising the interviewees that the recordings would remain inaccessible to anyone except the interviewer, and that no personal information would be directly mentioned in the thesis. Moreover, the interviewer did not exert any pressure on the interviewees to answer questions they felt uncomfortable with, share personal information they were unwilling to disclose, or provide specific responses, either directly or indirectly.

For the Arabic interviews, the interviewer translated answers using their personal knowledge and online translation websites such as Google Translate. To ensure that the interviewer understood the meaning correctly, additional clarifications could have been sought from the interviewees to ensure accurate understanding.

6   ANALYZING THE INTERVIEWS

The writer analyzes the interviews using thematic analysis. The analysis consists of six steps: familiarization, coding, generating themes, reviewing themes, defining, and naming themes, and writing (Caulfield 2019.)

The first step is familiarization, the writer listens to all the recording again and notes down the answers and with some notes. The writer organizes the answers and note base one of the three parts of the interview. With this step, coding was used, in this step the writer analyzes the similarity response, words, expressions, and reaction. Using different highlights

6.1   What is Self-Esteem?

All the interviewees were asked at the beginning of the interview to define self-esteem from their point of view. Self-esteem definition differs from one person to another. Most of them define self-esteem in the same way, which is the value the person gives to himself/herself. Confidence is a common word that had been repeated by most of the interviewees if the person has confidence in him/herself then that means they have good self-esteem. When a person appreciates and values themselves will have high self-esteem, verse versa is true, people experience low self-esteem when they do not feel they are not valuable or enough.

6.2   Beautiful Women

When the question "How do you feel about yourself right now?" most of them associate their feelings and self-esteem with the statutes in their life, for example, one mentions that she is enjoying her time with her family, another woman feels that no matter how hard she works still is not enough or she could have been better, another feels confidence as she just achieves a new record in her job. Almost all the answers were not related to their physical appearance. However, as the interview goes on, appearance starts to play a role.

The interviewees were asked to describe three things they like about themselves and three things they do not like about themselves. It was noticeable when women were speaking positively about themself, they would immediately describe their personal traits such as helping other people and sense of humor. On the other hand, when they start to describe negative things, they do not like it, at least one physical thing is mentioned, for instance, not liking how she looks, does not like her body, does not like her nose. Other personal traits were mentioned as well, for example, being very emotional, having a negative mindset, and being stubborn. Furthermore, when the interviewees were describing a beautiful woman most of the words were confidence, she loves and accepts herself, and she knows how to dress up and look neat. And for them to make themselves look beautiful, they dress up and choose the right style and colors that match them, put makeup on, and most importantly they should be satisfied with the result otherwise they will not feel confident about how they look like.

A couple of the women mentioned how important it is to receive compliments and positive comments from their surroundings or other people regarding their personality, appearance, or clothing choices. For instance, one of the interviewees stated, "a couple of days ago, my mom came and told

me some good qualities about me, and that really made me happy and boosted my self-esteem."
Some of them experience a negative impact on their self-esteem if they receive negative comments from people in general, whether it's from close relationships or strangers. However, for others, it only affects them if the comments come from their inner circle (family, partners, close friends); otherwise, they do not pay much attention.

6.3   Influencers

Before showing the video advertisements and the Instagram account of H&M and Zara, the interviewees were asked to describe their personal experience with digital communication on its effect on them. All agree that they experience low self-esteem when they are exposed to advertisements and to different social media channels. Earlier Some of them used to compare themselves to the models or celebrities like Sofia Vergara and Ariana Grande when they see them in advertisements or TV shows. However, nowadays, they get affected and compare themselves more to social media influencers. Influencers are defined as "mini celebrities" that have the ability to directly influence people in digital communication. influencers can be found across various themes, such as travel, education, beauty, health, and more (Barlow 2019, 198.) International celebrities, like the Kardashians, or big celebrities in the interviewees' home country do not affect them because they are aware that they do not naturally look like that and they spend a lot of money and there is a huge team behind it. Moreover, it was mentioned that influencers have a big role in affecting their self-esteem, yet people from the same age group and friends also had an effect.

Nowadays, influencers have a significant role in people and in business. There are many levels and types of influencers, however, all the interviewees agreed that most influencers show the perfect image of everything in their everyday life. Businesses and brands choose to use influencers as they have a higher level of direct engagement with their followers compared to other communication channels. In addition, customers trust the influencer more as they expect them to share their honest reviews about the brand. However, it was noticeable that the more famous the influencers are the less trust the people give as they become celebrities. Influencers share a lot of parts of their daily life; however, they only portray the positive one; the negative part only is shared if they are making money out of it. That unconsciously puts the interviewees under pressure when they compare what they see and what they have. Influencers seem to have a better lifestyle, physical appearance (body, hair, skin, etc.), finance, and more opportunities and advantage, those reduce the interviewees' self-esteem as they are wishing to have what the influencers have. One of the interviewees commented that influencers indirectly give the message to the audience that they are not happy enough as they do not have the products or services they are promoting.

6.4   Brands' Digital Contents

After watching the two ads, "Share your Spark!" by Aerie and "Victoria's Secret T-Shirt Bra Commercial" by Victoria's Secret All the interviewees had more positive reaction to the Aerie Ads compared to the Victoria secret ads, almost all agree they would be more interested and purchase from Aerie rather than Victoria's Secret just based on the advertisement ignoring other elements such as brand name, price, and quality.

6.4.1 Aerie

"Share your Spark!" is showing happy and energetic women wearing the brand bra and underwear. What makes the ads stand out is that the models in the ad are different in many ways, such as body size, skin color, and race. Interviewees' impression of the ad is it authentic, realistic, enjoyable, and confident. In addition to that, three of the female interviewees stated that they could see themselves as customers represented in the ad.

6.4.2 Victoria's Secret

The "Victoria's Secret T-Shirt Bra Commercial" ad got different reactions from the interviewees. One of the interviewees was attracted and interested in the ad because she knows the models. While another interviewee had a hard time understanding and remembering the ad. The third interviewee found this ad to be sexy. However, there are some common comments about this ad. For instance, this ad is normal or expected as the same type of model and theme has been used by most brands that advertise similar products. The ad usually contain unrealistic standards as the models are usually thin and tall and do not represent the natural body shapes of most women.

6.4.3 Aerie vs. Victoria's Secret

Of the women interviewed, 86% preferred Aerie's ad over Victoria's Secret. They clearly can see that Arie is targeting different women and is portrayed that each body is beautiful. Also, the interviewees felt that they were represented in the ad whether the body size, skin color, or race. Also, they believe that Aerie products are more functional and practical for them. On the other hand, Victoria's secret ads relays more on one size model and did not show the power of its brands and products through its ads. Also, the interviewees were not able to see themselves in the ad.

6.4.4 Instagram Accounts of H&M and Zara

All the interviewees were familiar with the two brands no matter where they are from, and there were some who are following them through other channels such as TikTok and the brand's mobile application. The interviewees were instructed to scroll through both brand accounts for a few minutes. Subsequently, they were asked to share their emotions and thoughts about the content they encountered. This process began with one brand, like H&M, where the interviewee scrolled for a few minutes. The interviewer then asked questions before allowing them to switch to the second brand and repeat the process.

It was noticeable that Zara and H&M have different skin colors and races models wearing their products. That gives them a positive impression as different women are involved and normalize different skin color and races. One of the women comments that it raises her confidence. On the other hand, both brands' models are thin and size models. The interviewer asked them whether they felt that the brands represented them or not. In this case, the interviewer decided not to explain or define the word 'represent' in order to give the interviewee full freedom to express themselves as customers. The interviewees felt that they were not represented because they cannot imagine the brand products themselves; as the products look perfect on the model, and they do not have the same body shape or size. The model size was not the only issue, also the theme and the styling of the

clothes in the photos do not represent any of their lifestyles so it is also hard for them to decide if the products will be suitable for them or not. One comment was that the brand is showing off the model using photography and models more than actually showing the products.

The women who have been interviewed are familiar with the brand in general, however, when they look closely at their Instagram accounts during the interview, they all feel that the brand is not targeting them so it lowers their interest in purchasing from the brand.

6.5 Women and Digital Communication

All of the interviewees are comparing themselves to what they see in the different digital communication which can be beauty, lifestyle, finances, and opportunities. However, based on their experiences and awareness that what they see is not always real and there are a lot of elements involved like editing and makeup to create the perfect image. Still, unconsciously they compare themselves however with less pressure because now they are having awareness. Each interviewee has different behavior and reaction to what they see on digital media. For example, some would just try new trends and techniques if they are easy to achieve or apply, and some would change their lifestyle and look online for tips to start implementing them.

Four interviewees mentioned how powerful are other people's comments on them. They mentioned that their society is affected by digital media. The media had set high and different expectations from reality when it comes to women's beauty and looks. The interviewees get a comment from other women of different ages which can be relatives or strangers, also they get it from the other gender (men), which expect to see what they see on social media in real life.

More than 50% of the interviewees agree that women had a huge influence on social media and had a powerful message and they start to break down some bad norms in some societies. Yet, they all agree that women are still presented in only one frame or picture. Most models in advertisements and influencers do not represent the natural woman in normal life. There is always perfection in the skin, hair, body shape, etc., and perfection in social media is portrayed in only one way. Despite the fact that most women on social media have perfected image such as flawless skin texture, ideal body shape, and amazing lifestyle weather, achieved through using filters, editing tools, and/or selectively sharing only the positive aspects of their lives, the interviewees mentioned that there are some noticeable improvements and changes that are happing.

Now more diverse woman types (social level, look, race, topics, etc.) can be found. One of the interviewees named a new type of influencer a "relatable influencer" which is more real influencer compared to the other influencers. She added that there are two types, one is the honest one who actually acts naturally and gives honest reviews and shows real life, and the other types are the fake relatable influencer as they still pretend and fake their content just to seek followers.

6.6 Brands vs. Women

The seven female interviewees were aware that ads and influencers are using various elements such as makeup, settings, editing and photoshop to create the best perfect and idealized image ever. Opinions about if it is ethical or not, or if would they rather change it, and most of the answers were

they want to see more realistic content as they do not trust what they see. They wished that brands take the courage to include more realistic and diverse women content in their advisements depending on their targeted audience, in other words, do not target all women in that same way. Yet some of them do not bother or get affected like before, however, they would get attracted and interested more in ads and influencers that are different and represent them.

In contrast, one of the interviewees had the experience to work in the media field and explained the reasons that brands and influencers are doing what they are doing now. She suggests that brands and influencers create the perfect and out-of-normal settings to attract customers' attention and desire what they see the feelings that had been displayed. The motive behind that is people are looking for something different and unusual, if the normal and real image had been displayed then people would not be attracted to their brands. She also added that celebrities play a role in affecting people's purchases, and business uses them to advertise their products and services and the audience are making an effort to have the same thing. That contradicts what the interviewers said that they do not get affected by celebrities.

7   DISCUSSION

After exploring the topic with the interviewees, it was noticeable that digital communication has a negative effect on women's self-esteem more than a positive one. As they get older and learn that what they see on social media is not hundred percent real; the pressure they put on themselves is reduced and raises confidence in themself. Usually, they would experience low self-esteem while spending time on social media and after. At that time, they compare themselves with what they see in digital ads and advertisements in real life. comparisons include physical appearance, lifestyles, financial situations, and life achievements.

The author's intention was to investigate how brand advertisements on digital media communication are affecting young women's self-esteem and their reaction to the beauty standers that had been set up for them. It found that brand advertisements and celebrities do have a negative effect on their self-esteem. Nonetheless, today's influencers play a greater impact on women's self-esteem compared to advertisements and celebrities. People as followers are exposed to the influencers almost in their everyday life, not just advertisements that display for a few seconds, therefore, it does leave a deeper impact on women. Brands still use original ways of advertising their products and services, still, they are aware of the power of the influences of affecting the customers' interest and purchasing power.

The research focuses in depth on how women are presented in digital communication by brands and influencers. All the interviewees agree that there are some slight changes to show diverse women (race, body size, religion) however, women are still set up in one beautiful frame. It becomes normal for women's eyes to see a thin tall white model in advertisements, or a perfect influencer with perfect life and body, in sequences, when the other woman is included, it attracts their eyes and attention as normally they would not be part of a brand image.

Moreover, it was discovered that women's self-esteem can be lowered not just from digital communication such as social media and TV shows but also from the people surrounding them, such as parents, relatives, friends, etc., and from different ages and genders. Digital communication had set standers and frames of how women should look; therefore, some comments are given when they do not see those standards on real women. Sequentially, women's self-esteem would get lower when they constantly get those comments, especially from their close people. Strong and high self-esteem can be gained if women are surrounded by people who support them and compliment and address their good qualities (physical and/or personality) despite what they face from the digital media.

8   CONCLUSION

The aim of this thesis was to discover the effect of digital marketing communication on young women's self-esteem. Based on research and interviewing young women, it was proved that digital media communication influences young women's self-esteem. Most of the research and the interviewees verify that women's self-esteem is affected negatively more than positively by digital media communication.

In the late 20th-century, digital media was born, and since then it kept growing rapidly around the world and became part of people's everyday lives (Maryville University s.a.). The goal of digital media is that message and knowledge is spread faster around the globe. The business and brands took advantage of it and use it to advertise and send messages to their customers and potential customers.

The thesis hypothesis is that advertisement of the brand on social media is one of the biggest reasons women experience low self-esteem nowadays. The research had proven that the hypothesis is true as young women tend to compare themselves and their life with what they are exposed to on digital media. Most of the advertisements and media have only presented one type of woman with perfect physical appearances in all ways. The more research conducted the more the topic has been discovered. Yes, ads and models have an impact on women's self-esteem whether it is negative or positive, however, it was discovered that society and people from similar age groups have an effect as well, in addition, influencers had a great impact above them all. Women tend to be affected mostly by the influencers as they share a lot about their everyday lives, and there is higher engagement and exposure compared to the other ways. Despite some women are still affected by advisements and celebrities, they still lose their credibility compared to the influencers as the women are aware that models and celebrities have a huge team and work behind the image to create the perfect look. Usually, nano-influencers (1000-10,000 followers) have more engagement, reliable content and followers tend to trust them more compared to other influencers with higher numbers of followers such as micro-influencers (10,000-50,000 followers) and macro influencers (500,000 - 1,000,000 followers) as that can be considered as celebrities (Barlow 2019, 197-221).

Generally, women prefer to see women like them on digital media. High self-esteem and coincidant are experienced by women when they see models or women that have similar traits to them, whether it is physical, social, financial, etc. More specifically nowadays women are more attracted to digital media that is different from the usual model, as having different model sizes or colors attract their eyes and emotions. In addition, the more relatable the content, the more women have an interest in the content, and it can get further by having trust in the brand as they have a realistic massage. For example, 90% of the interviewees choose the Aerie advertisement rather than Victoria's Secret advertisement for various reasons. To begin with, the models were different in many ways, therefore the women can see themselves in the advertisement and can determine if the products fit them or not. On the other hand, Victoria's secret advertisement had a professional thin model, as they consider their physical appearances as not realistic and relatable, therefore, the interviewees were not certain whether the products would fit them. Most of them enjoy watching the

Aerie advertisement as the message behind it strongly raises their confidence in them and normalizes that each body is unique and not forcing them to look in a certain way.

Further, the article "Framing real beauty: A framing approach to the effects of beauty advertisements on body image and advertising effectiveness" confirms that some studies have compared the effect of non-ideal models and thin models on female audiences. The studies found that different model sizes have more positive effects compared to thin or ideal models. Average or large-sized models not only increase women's self-esteem but also reduces body anxiety and pressures, which can be added by the individual themselves or by society. On the other hand, other studies address that model size in media does not have any effect, neither positive nor negative, on women (de Lenne, Vandenbosch, Smits & Eggermont 2021.)

Overall, it is time for businesses to listen to their customers' preferences. It is important to represent the brand products in the best way and creative in digital communication as a way to attract customer attention and increase their desire to purchase the product. However, women may be attracted to or trust the brand if they feel like they are not targeted or that the products would not fit them, therefore, it is important that the brand carefully analyze their targeted audience as they can miss a lot of potential customers and stronger bond just because of a small mistake. It is like a cycle, customers can frame the advertising if the business listens to them and the advertising can evolve society (Chaffey 2021, 133).

9   LIMITATION AND ADVISE FOR THE FUTURE RESEARCH

To further expand research on this topic, it is advisable to conduct more interviews with larger number of participants, considering variables such as age, marital status, and heritage background. This would strengthen the researcher's findings, allowing for a more comprehensive examination of various aspects and details within the study. While the writer interviewed seven young women who differed in various ways, considering that their responses were consistent, there is still a limitation in reaching out to more young women from diverse backgrounds, nationalities, and statuses. Conducting more interviews would enhance the study and provide a deeper understanding of how digital media communication affects young women's self-esteem.

Also, it is recommended to include a diverse range of brand examples to show to the interviewees. In this research, clothing brands were primarily used since women are directly featured in the content of these brands' digital marketing. Clothing is significant to women as it can impact their self-confidence through appearance. However, it is suggested to analyze digital content from other brands that feature women or target them in their messaging to determine its impact on women's self-esteem and the extent of that impact.

Another suggestion relates to the content the interviewees are exposed to on Instagram accounts. It is advisable for the interviewer to specifically choose the content shown to the interviewees and control the duration of time they spend viewing this content. In this research, interviews were conducted at different times, potentially leading to exposure to new content. Additionally, interviewees had the freedom to scroll and view content as they wished, resulting in varying experiences. Therefore, the interviewer should consider whether a more structured interview approach is preferable.

Furthermore, this thesis primarily focused on beauty standards created by brands on digital media and its effect on young women's self-esteem, particularly through brand advertisements. This is because advertisements that directly promote beauty or related themes often feature a specific type of model. However, during interviews, multiple interviewees mentioned other factors affecting their self-esteem, such as lifestyle, financial situations, life achievements, and more. It was also noted that celebrities and traditional brand advertisements do not have as strong impact as they once did, with influencers now playing a significant role. Young women spend a considerable amount of time on social media, where they are exposed to influencers in various sectors, including, travel, medical, beauty, fashion, sports, and more. Influencers have a greater influence on users compared to traditional brand advertisements. There is potential for new research to explore the comparison between normal brand content and influencer-advertised content and its impact on young women's self-esteem, emotions, and thought processes.

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APPENDIX 1: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Individual self-esteem and personal experience

- Age
- Where are you from?
- How do you feel about yourself right now?
    - Positive or Negative, Confidence, shy, worthy, unworthy
- How do you define self-esteem How high or low is your self-esteem right now? Scale 1-10
- Do self-esteem test: https://openpsychometrics.org/tests/RSE.php
- Three things you like about yourself (physical or personal)
- Three things you do not like about yourself (physical or personal)
- Describe a beautiful woman.
- What is your approach or methods to be beautiful?
    - use makeup, follow diets, or dress up, exercise etc.
- How ads and models in digital communication (TV, ads, social media) are affecting your self-esteem?
    - Do you remember a specific ad(s) or model(s) that affect your self-esteem or the way you see yourself?

Advertisements and social media reaction

ADs that directly related to the women body	- SHARE YOUR SPARK: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_lkMVu3OwqI vs. - Victoria's Secret T-Shirt Bra Commercial: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_y6LXOE-e4c	- What do you feel when you watch the ad? And what message do you get from the ad? (Ask the question after watching each ad) - What vibes/emotions do these ads give you? (Ask the question after watching each ad) - Do you think models in different sizes can deliver the same message as the ones in the ADs? - Which brand would you prefer to purchase after watching the ads?
Brands Instagram Page	- H&M: https://www.instagram.com/hm/?hl=en - Zara: https://www.instagram.com/zara/?hl=en	- Overall, when you check it out what impression, feelings, emotions do you get from the IG? - Do you think those photos/brand represent you? And why?

The effect of digital communication on them and society

- How do you feel about the representations of women in digital media (Ads, Posters, TV, social media, etc.)
- Self-comparing
    - Do you compare yourself to women on digital media (Ads, Posters, TV, social media, etc.)?

- How often? Never, Rarely, sometimes, usually, always
  - What feelings do you feel when you compare yourself (Positive or negative)?
  - And how does that generally affect your self-esteem and the actions you take toward yourself?
  - Does these ads and media communication put you under pressure of ideal beauty standers?
- In your opinion, in what way does digital communication affect individuals to reach certain standards, how does this impact society?
- What are your thoughts on brands choosing only one type of model?
- What is your opinion about it from an ethical perspective?
- How do you perceive the accuracy of their marketing in representing reality?
  - Do you think there might be elements of cheating or misrepresentation present?
- What would be something you want to change or see from the brands on their marketing communication channel?