**The fallacy of an ideal body image**

How #fitspiration on Instagram influences the perception of the body image from young men, a qualitative study

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**Abstract**

**Introduction:** Instagram is one of the most used social media platforms worldwide. Under the hashtag #fitspiration people showcase their fitness journey and bodies. People tend to compare themselves with the showcased ideal body image that can be found under this hashtag. Nevertheless, there is still a lack of research regarding the effect of this published content, especially on young men.

**Objective:** Therefore, this study focuses on the effect of #fitspiration on Instagram concerning the perception of the body image from young men. **Method:** Data collection was performed through qualitative semi-structured interviews. To get a deeper understanding of the researched topic participants' experiences and perceptions were gathered through 15 in-depth interviews. The sample consisted of 15 young men between the age of 20 and 24 who are all at university. Participants were selected through a stratified- and snowball sampling process. After collecting the data from the participants, a codebook was created which was based on the interviews and the theoretical framework. Then the interviews were coded using a mixture of an inductive and deductive coaching approach. Results: Results were explained based on the findings of the interview. Findings of body images, social identity, social comparison, and behavioral adjustments were described. Those chosen topics are based on the codes that were created before the analysis of the interview. The results showed that an ideal body image is characterized by a low body fat percentage and a muscular upper body. Through comparison with other bodies on Instagram, people feel less satisfied with themselves even if they are aware of a false reality that is showcased on social media.

**Conclusion:**

This study found out that even if the body characteristics of a young man are similar to what he himself has described as ideal, he is not satisfied with his body because of the ideal represented on Instagram.

**Recommendations**: It is advised that further research concentrates on examining this topic with a focus on other social media platforms like YouTube, TikTok, or Twitter in addition to conducting more qualitative studies to gain more information.

**Keywords**: self-comparison, body image, Instagram, social media, young men

# Table of Contents

## 1. Introduction

19.5 million posts. That is the number of pictures and videos that are uploaded under the hashtag #fitspirtation on Instagram. "Instagram is a free photo and video sharing app. People can upload photos and videos to their service and share them with their followers or a selected group of friends. They can view, comment, and like posts shared by their friends on Instagram" (Meta, 2022). The social media platform also makes it possible to create so-called "stories" where you can upload pictures or videos that only last for 24 hours. With those stories followers can interact with the accounts they follow through polls, questionnaires, and more. Besides this, on Instagram users are able to use hashtags fitting to their uploaded content. Consequently, after uploading a picture or video with a hashtag like #fitspiration, this post will be subordinated to this hashtag category and shown to people who search for this hashtag or follow a similar field of interest. Within the subcategory of #fitspiration on the app, people showcase their workouts, nutrition, bodies, and more content related to the topic of fitness which can be posts about weight loss tips, recipes, or new trends.

Based on what is posted within the Fitness niche on Instagram, the influence of fitness content can be examined. When uploading a picture under the hashtag #fitspiration, it often "exaggerates scientific norms of health and claim for strict gender-specific body norms" (Klapp & Klotter, 2019, p.364). People who upload pictures under this hashtag want to showcase their bodies and what they consider the perfect body image. Therefore, the similar belief of working out to build more muscles to create this perfect body brings people together and forms a community around individuals with the same interest. Moreover, since repeated information is often perceived as more truthful (Hassan & Barber, 2021, p.1) the more content is uploaded under #fitspiration it ensures that the body image that is showcased in this nice will represent what is seen as the ideal body image by society. Additionally, through the impact of social media, Instagram users can freely choose their online environment and are able to decide whom they want to follow. Nevertheless,

consumers on platforms like Instagram often chose to see the 'perfect' world that includes things they do not have or certain body types they admire. Users start to compare their lives with the ones they want to have without knowing about pictures being edited or representing a body image that is very unlikely to achieve. It is assumed that this constant comparison will make one self-feel worse about someone's own body (Oakes, 2022). Moreover, roughly 80,7% of men talk anxiously about their body type already (Aziz, 2017). Therefore, it must be taken into consideration to what extent the social media platform Instagram affects men who use Instagram and how it makes them feel towards their own body image after comparing themselves with others. Furthermore, on average a young man between the age of 22 and 23 spends 120-179 minutes on the social media platform Instagram per day (Yesilyurt & Solpuk Turhan, 2020). While scrolling through the platform, the consumers get confronted with many kinds of content. Everything the consumer sees is based on Instagram's algorithm which detects the interests and needs of the user (Agung et. al, 2019). Therefore, people who are interested in the topic of fitness and follow hashtags like #fitspiration, certain workout routines, or healthy foods get to see more pictures and videos about people who showcase this lifestyle on the platform. Within this community of people who publish content about their fitness journeys, it is common to upload pictures about their body transformations and current body shapes. Consequently, as soon as someone opens Instagram, they begin to compare themselves with others (Hwnag, 2018).

When users on Instagram search for the hashtag #fitspiration, they will find millions of pictures and videos about people showcasing their bodies. They get to see what is perceived as the ideal body for a man characterized by muscles and V-shaped torsos (Edwards et al., 2013), which is clearly displayed while looking at the pictures uploaded by men under the researched hashtag. Those pictures shown will be taken into consideration while conducting the research to find out the influence of it on the perception of men's perception of their body image. As it became very popular to modify one's body before uploading a picture on Instagram (Rose, 2022), it is an important factor that must be reflected. Through the publication of adjusted body images that differ from reality, users of the platform compare each other to certain characteristics that are difficult or impossible to achieve. Therefore, the possibility of manipulating pictures by creating a body image that is seen as "perfect" by the society which is then published on Instagram, potentially negatively influences the perception of the user's body image (Kleemans et al., 2016).

When it comes to the perception of someone's body image and the comparison to others online, research has mainly focused on the effect on mental health as well as how it influences women. Therefore, this research focuses on how young men perceive and feel about their body image after using Instagram and consuming fitness-related content. Through assumptions of today's society about men having fewer problems concerning their feelings towards themselves (McKenzie et al., 2018) this topic is not given as much attention as compared to women. Although both, men and women, are affected by problems with their own body and mental health, men are often overlooked (Chatmon, 2020). Especially a body dysmorphic disorder, which is characterized by a "preoccupation with imagined or slight physical defects in appearance" (Rief et. al., 2006, p. 877) can lead to psychiatric morbidities such as depression, anxiety, or substance use disorder, that is mainly found among young men (Blashill et. al., 2020). Therefore, it is important to gain deeper information about how young men perceive their body image, how they feel about their body image, and what they can do to pretend constant social comparison with others on Instagram. With this research, new insights to already existing knowledge can be added in addition to practical information to improve the perception of the body image from men.

Based on the mentioned research gap and the goal of getting more insights about the influence of fitness content on Instagram on the perception of the body image from young men, the following research question is proposed: "How does the #fitspiration on Instagram influence young men's perception of their body image?". Hence, there is already similar research on this topic concerning women, the novelty in this study is about finding new information concerning men and their perception of their body image. This can provide a better understanding of how men feel when they compare themselves with an 'ideal' body image on a social media platform like Instagram.

This thesis will be divided into six different parts. After the introduction, the paper consists of a theoretical framework that gets a deeper insight into already existing research concerning the hashtag #fitspiration, the ideal body image, the social identity theory, the social comparison theory, the effect of envy, and the effect of inspiration. Furthermore, the method for the research is described, followed by the results and a discussion about the findings. Lastly, conclusions from this research will be drawn.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

To get more insights into the qualitative research topic, #fitspiration on Instagram, the ideal body image, the social comparison theory, the social identity theory, the effect of envy, and the effect of inspiration will be elaborated on in the following theoretical framework.

### 2.1 #fitspiration

#fitspiration is one of the most popular used fitness-related hashtags on the social media platform Instagram with over 20 million tagged posts. After the creation of hashtags in 2007, Instagram has become one of the largest hashtag-sharing platforms worldwide (Zhang, 2019). In general, hashtags "are used to categorize content and make it more discoverable" (Newberry, 2022). Similarly, Caliandro (2018) describes them as "markers through which users develop a specific thread of conversation or self-categorize their own content" (p.18). Those markers can be subdivided into different topics. In the case of this research, the deviation is focused on fitness content shared on Instagram. Moreover, "the popular trend [of uploading fitness-related content] promotes healthy eating and exercise within a global philosophy of strength and empowerment." (Camacho-Miñano et al., 2019, p.652) Consequently, uploading pictures and videos about workouts, healthy foods, muscle gaining tips, motivational quotes, and more under #fitsporation could be seen as the normalization of regulating practices that are there for delivering knowledge about taking action to improve someone's health (Camacho-Miñano et al., 2019). Using the hashtag, 'fitspiration' users can get involved in a specific community (Thomas et al., 2020) with other like-minded individuals who share similar interests, lifestyles, and hobbies. By following this hashtag, the Instagram user gets to see more content that is related to fitness-related matters. To find out more about the content uploaded on Instagram to analyze what users consume, having a deeper look into what the fitness niche is about can provide helpful information

Nevertheless, the content that is seen on Instagram does not always showcase the true image of the creators. Through filters and other editing tools, it is common to adjust pictures with the consequence of representing a false reality. Often, showcased pictures and videos are not a true representation of the everyday life of the creator of these posts.

People rather prefer to share what they are more comfortable with and though facing adjusted pictures and videos daily most users are more comfortable adjusting their pictures and videos (Kong, 2015). Magner (2018) states that the motivation behind the adoption of this false reality is connected to avoiding disapproval, gaining advantages, or improving the status of oneself to increase self-esteem. Following the goal to excite their viewers, look better, or create the 'perfect' pictures that align with beauty standards (Baker et al., 2019), it became a common procedure to adjust and upload the edited content. Consequently, this behavior can be a reason for a change in behavior that causes "feelings of sadness, hopelessness, distress, anxiety, depression, low self-esteem" (Grossman, 2017, p.34), and more.

To summarize, #fitspiration is one of the most popular hashtags used in the fitness niche where millions of people upload pictures about their bodies, healthy foods, or workouts. Within this community, it is common to normalize a certain beauty standard that not always is a true representation of reality. Consequently, editing pictures and adjusting them to get closer to the mentioned beauty standard, can have consequences on the perception of young men's body image. Hence, this study wants to investigate the perception of male body images based on the hashtag #fitspiration since it is a good representation of what consumers who are interested in the topic of fitness get in contact with when using Instagram.

**2.2 The ideal body image**

Since the 'ideal' body image is often showcased under the described hashtag, it is helpful to get more insights into how this body image looks and by what it is characterized. Concerning the research questions, the perception of the ideal body image provides important information about how it is perceived by society.

Stereotypically, concerns about someone's body image were perceived as problems that only influence women (Fay & Price, 1994). Nevertheless, "societal notions of masculinity have changed greatly in the last two decades and males appear more interested in improving or maintaining their appearance" (Mc Neill, et. al, 2014, p.136). Therefore, a lot of men strive for a body that is seen as perfect by society. Nowadays, this perfect body image for men "is characterized by well-developed chest and arm muscles, with wide shoulders tapering down to a narrow waist. [...] Research has shown that male participants

do think that muscular images are more ideal than skinnier body images" (Barlett, et. al., 2008, p.280). While women mainly aim to appear thinner, recent studies have shown that men follow a drive for muscularity represented by a more muscular body frame. Moreover, the motivation toward the muscular look increases by women's rating of male attractiveness which is mainly determined by upper-body muscularity in addition to a waist-to-wrist ratio (Tiggemann et al., 2008). Nevertheless, this is a very conceptualized statement. The described ideal body image is hypothesized by what is seen on social media platforms. Based on how male bodies are shown on Instagram users tend to form an image of the perfect body type that they use to self-evaluate themselves (Farquhar & Wasylkiw, 2007). Consequently, the increase in the population of the described ideal body image for men can have mental and physical effects. The research found that young men's body dissatisfaction increases when they see images of attractive muscular men (Blond, 2008). Moreover, "Body dissatisfaction has been found to have important implications for adolescents' levels of self-esteem and psychological functioning" (Opshaug, 2013, p. 40).

It can be concluded that concerns about someone's body image also impact young men in today's society. Therefore, they strive to achieve the ideal body image which is framed as a muscular body with well-developed chest and arm muscles, and wide shoulders, such as a small waist. For this part, this research wants to find out how the perfect body is perceived by participants from this study and if they would describe their own perception of it differently.

**2.3 Social identity theory**

People form their identity based on the environment in which they spend their time. Consequently, if a user spends more time on Instagram in the fitness niche one will surround themselves with other people who showcase the 'ideal' body image on the platform. Therefore, the process of identity formation can occur within an online environment (Orsatti & Riemer, 2015). Based on the social identity theory, social behavior is determined both by a person's character and motives as an individual on his or her own, also known as interpersonal behavior, and by a person's identification with a certain group. In general, people rather maintain a positive image of the groups they identify themselves with. Consequently, through the social identity process, people tend to look for positively valued traits, attitudes, and behaviors that represent the characteristics of their group

(McLeod, 2019). In general, the "social identity theory suggests people make sense of whom they are by classifying themselves into actual or symbolic social groups" (Fujita et. al., 2018, p.55). Moreover, the association with a specific group can consequently increase the sense of belonging and satisfaction which is triggered by the need for higher self-esteem which can be fulfilled through the accession to a social group (Schmalz et. al., 2014). Furthermore, the more individual acts within their group, the more he or she tries to fit in this social circle to present it positively to people outside of it (Mudrick et al., 2016). Consequently, this can lead to someone changing their mental or physical characteristics of themselves to adjust themselves to the group.

Since the perception of an ideal body image can be influenced in terms of whether an Instagram user can identify themselves with certain people from the fitness niche or feels a sense of belonging, it is important to gain knowledge about the concept of the social identity theory. All in all, the social identity theory elaborates on how people feel the need of belonging to a certain social group. Consequently, to fit into a specific group and represent it as well as possible people adjust their behaviors and characteristics based on other group members' attributes.

## 2.4 Social Comparison theory

Besides the adjusting behavioral characteristics based on the social identity theory, users tend to compare themselves with whom they see online. Through the daily contact with the bodies of other people, users evaluate their body image based on what they see on Instagram (Ho et. al., 2016). Especially through social media, users of the platform get insights into other people's lives daily. Through the access to, their daily activities, life circumstances, or how they present themselves on Instagram, it is easy to compare oneself with these creators. This connection can be explained through the social comparison theory. According to Festinger (1954) "humans compare themselves to others in order to evaluate characteristics that have personal or social importance" (p. 122). Therefore, people constantly pursue a form of self-evaluation across different domains regarding a certain level of attractiveness, wealth, intelligence, or success (Li et al., 2018). Self-evaluation appears then by appraising oneself status concerning others who seem to be worse off in comparison with the assessor. Nevertheless, "personal motives, such as the desire for positive self-evaluations, as well as the need for evaluative information may influence social

comparison processes" (Mumford, 1983, p.874). The social comparison theory originally written by Festinger states that people compare themselves with others who are superior to them. However, more recent research has shown that the theory can also differ from the original. People do not only compare themselves to someone seen as superior in society, but more often they compare themselves to those who are thought to be worse off. Consequently, this can have more positive effects on their view of themselves (Buunk & Mussweiler, 2001)

Since daily content about certain body images under the hashtag #fitspiration is shared, users of social media platforms like Instagram are frequent targets of comparison. Moreover, this type of peer comparison triggers both downward and upward comparisons among young people (Chae, 2017). While the downward comparison is explained as the comparison with less fortunate others, upward comparison describes the comparison with more fortunate ones (Taylor & Lobel, 1989). Therefore, because of constant comparison with others online, people feel dissatisfied with their situation as well as their physical attractiveness through experiencing a contrast effect caused by social comparison (Haferkamp & Kramer, 2011).

In summary, the social comparison theory explains how humans compare themselves to each other to self-evaluate themselves. This comparison is therefore also triggered by the usage of social media platforms like Instagram. By following the hashtag #fitspiration, users constantly compare each other with others' physical characteristics posted under this hashtag. Hence, this study elaborates on the influence of social comparison on the perception of young men's body images.


## 2.5 The concept of envy

As a result of the constant comparison with other body images, this can consequently ensure a certain feeling of envy (Wang et. al., 2020). There are both positive and negative effects that come from using social media platforms like Instagram and consuming content based on #fitspiration. Nevertheless, the usage of social media also affects the well-being of young men by providing the base for harmful upward comparison which can lead to a feeling of envy (Meier & Johnson, 2022). The feeling of envy gets described by Smith and Kim (2007) as "an unpleasant and often painful blend of feelings [...] caused by a comparison with a person or group of persons who possess something we

desire" (p.49). This desire can include certain superior talents, abilities, or physical attributes (Smith, 1991). Consequently, Van de Ven et. al. (2009) elaborates that the effect of malicious envy evokes a negative feeling toward the envied target that has negative effects on their mental health. Nevertheless, this feeling, caused by being envious, incorporates an action tendency that motivates the person to become as 'successful' as the envied person. This effect is especially noticed in people who interact in sports and exercise environments since "these environments provide extensive opportunity for social comparison on physical attributes like body shape and appearance, as well as body function such as performance and physical skill" (Pila et. al., 2014, p.93). Even though the feeling of envy can have a positive impact of increasing motivation towards becoming more like the envied person which then has an upward effect, it is still defined as a negatively balanced self-conscious emotional experience (Foster 1972) that is "characterized by frustration and a subjective sense of injustice" (Smith et. al., 1999, p.1009).

In conclusion, the concept of envy is an important factor to take into consideration in relation to the perception of one's body image. It can determine how someone feels about themselves and influence daily behaviors to change themselves towards someone they envy.

**2.6 The concept of inspiration**

Besides social media making users feel envy towards others through a spiral of downward comparison, using Instagram can also provide motivation and inspiration based on self-improvement being a key purpose in social comparison (Vogel et. al., 2014). "Inspiration is defined as breathing in or infusion of some idea, purpose, etc. into the mind: the suggestions, awakening, or creation of some feeling or impulse, especially of an exalted kind"(Thrash & Elliot, 2004, p.962). Moreover, this conceptualized complex described as a motivational state can be knowledgeable in different aspects of someone's life. By facing a state of inspiration, one can be inspired to get more active, and healthy, take care of themselves, be more productive, or be inspired to try out new experiences (Oltra et. al., 2021). Furthermore, in the context of this study, Instagram appeals in several studies as a highly inspiring environment based on the factor of social comparison that is described as the biggest trigger for inspiration (Meier & Schafer, 2018). Therefore, inspiration can be used as a form of learning, improving, or focusing more on someone's health in general

(Latif et al., 2021).

Similar to the concept of envy, inspiration also has an important impact on someone's perception of their body image. It can determine one's feelings and actions they take to make changes to their visual appearance.

**2.7 Preview of the study & Research question**

This study is based on different literature that gives more insights into the influence of Instagram and #fitspiration on the perception of the body image of young men. To gain a further understanding of the research topic, 15 interviews with young men will be held in the process of this study.

Based on the theoretical framework and the literature that got reviewed some expectations can already be drawn. Since people who follow fitness-related content are constantly in contact with others who showcase the ideal body image it is likely that they compare themselves with the body image they see on Instagram. Hence, the mentioned comparison is connected to a negative perception of someone's own body image, therefore it is expected that someone who is not happy about their visual appearance is more likely to get negatively influenced by what they get in contact with on the social media platform. Moreover, based on insights the literature provides concerning the feeling of envy and inspiration, it is expected that they will have an influence on the behavior of the participants. Since both, the concept of inspiration and envy, provoke a motivational effect on people that are affected by it, it is assumed that they make behavioral adjustments to change their body image toward what is seen by them as 'ideal'.

Taking the theoretical framework and the expectations that were made into consideration the following research questions will be used for this study:

**RQ:** "How does the #fitspiration on Instagram influence young men's perception of their body image?"

To answer this research question, qualitative interviews will be performed with 15 young men who use the social media platform Instagram and are interested in the topic of fitness.

# 3. Method section

## 3.1 Research design

To get more insights into the topic of the influence of #fitspiration on Instagram concerning the perception of the body image of young men, a qualitative research approach was chosen. A qualitative study aims to get a deeper understanding of the social world by gathering the participants' experiences, perceptions, and behavior (Tenny, 2017). Furthermore, for collecting the data through qualitative research, semi-structured interviews were used. This approach was chosen to gain insights concerning the research question of this study. Through interviews, it is possible to gain more in-depth information about how the participant feel or what they think about certain topics. Compared to structured interviews, semi-structured interviews allow more flexibility through open-ended questions. Moreover, questions can still be prepared before performing the interview, nevertheless, the interview is not as strongly tied to the prepared structure compared the structure. In addition to this, follow-up questions, as well as new questions that come up during the interview, can be incorporated during the interview if the interviewer thinks they can contribute positively to the research. Therefore, within the two-way communication, the researcher can ask for clarification and examples.

Prior to the interviews, an interview guide (Appendix A) was created on which the interviews are based. Questions that were used in the semi-structured interviews are based on the theoretical framework and aim to give more insights into the research that is about finding out how the #fitspiration on Instagram influences young men's perception of their body image. Moreover, the prepared questions as well as follow-up questions are divided into different topics: Demographics, Instagram use, body image, social identity, social comparison, inspiration or envy, Body image after consuming fitness-related content, and behavioral adjustments. Interview questions such as the procedure were tested during pre-tests in which the prepared questions, such as: "How would you describe your own body image?" or "After using Instagram and consuming fitness-related content, how do you feel about your own body image?" were tested before collecting the actual data. Based on the pre-tests, the questions were properly adjusted. Moreover, the outcomes showed that some questions like: "Are you happy about your own body image" could be excluded since it got already answered in questions before.

### 3.2 Procedure

Before and during the data collection a clear procedure was created and made used that was applied to every participant. First, participants were invited through a short message that explained the purpose of the study, what it is about, the timeslots that are available for having the interview, and where it will be held. Two locations for having the interviews were possible to make use of. The first option was to meet up in person while the second option was about having the interview on the video conferencing platform Zoom Furthermore, the interviews that were held in an online setting were recorded with the 'record' function that zoom offers. On the other hand, interviews that were held in person were recorded with the multi-track recording and editing software Audacity. The procedure for handling the recorded interviews was the same for both options. Recordings were saved on a google drive account to which only the researcher has access. After transcribing the interviews, they were deleted without keeping a backup of them to secure the privacy of the participants.

Before the interview started, in person or on zoom, the participant has been introduced again to the procedure and topic of the study. Additionally, it was clarified that the interview can include questions that can seem very personal. Therefore, the participant was notified about not being obligated to answer the questions in case he or she feels uncomfortable in addition to having the possibility to stop the interview at any time. Moreover, the interviewee got asked for consent to record the interview. After receiving consent from the participants, they were asked to open the hashtag #fitspiration on Instagram and look through the 'Top' posts that came up when someone opens the hashtag. Then they were asked to open different posts from this hashtag and review the showcased pictures. The pictures shown under this hashtag, which the participants were asked to inspect, were representations of the 'ideal' body image. After one minute has passed, the recording started and the interview, based on the interview guide (Appendix A) began.

### 3.3 Sample method

With the goal of finding participants that fit into the target group of the research, different sampling methods were made using. The gathering of participants was based on

non-probability sampling which can be described as a method that selects units from a population through non-random approaches (Schreuder et. al., 2001). Moreover, a combination between convenience sampling and snowball sampling was applied in this research. After the approval of the ethics committee (Appendix C), the researcher chose participants who were most accessible as an easy and inexpensive way to collect initial data. After the collection of the first participants which includes three participants out of the researcher's network, the approach of snowball sampling was applied. With snowball sampling, new participants can be chosen through already existing participants. Participants who already took part in the interview were asked if they know other people who fit certain criteria and would be willing to take part in the research. Moreover, the length of the interviews differed between 17-35 minutes.

### 3.4 Participants

To participate in the study, the participants had to fulfill special criteria. Since the study is about Instagram usage and young men, participants had to identify as a male in addition to being between 18-25 years old. Additionally, they must be using the social media platform Instagram on a daily basis. Because the study elaborates on the #fitspiration on Instagram and how it affects the perception of someone's body image, participants also had to be interested in the topic of fitness and working out. To ensure that they show interest in the field of fitness, had to follow fitness-related accounts on Instagram out of their own interest before the study was conducted.

In this study about the influence of #fitspiration on Instagram concerning the perception of the body image of young men, 15 different participants were interviewed. Of the 15 participants, 2 were between the age of 18-20, eleven between the age of 21-23, and two between the age of 24-25. Moreover, 11 of the participants were coming from Germany and the rest were divided between participants from the Netherlands, Bulgaria, and Mexico. Furthermore, every participant was currently enrolled in a bachelor's program at the university.

### 3.5 Data analysis

After collecting the data, the recordings were used to analyze the data. Three steps for the analysis were done. First, the interviews were transcribed. Secondly, a codebook

fitting the data was created and the transcribed interview was coded. Lastly, an inter-reliability test was performed.

In order to transform the collected to written text which can be analyzed then in the further process, interviews were transcribed. Within the process of transcribing the data, sentences that seemed unclear because of an incomprehensible audio part were deleted from the transcript. In addition to this, private data from the participants that were mentioned in the interview as their names for example have been made unrecognizable. After finishing the transcription of the anonymous audio files, the recordings were deleted completely.

The second part of the data analysis was about coding the data. Therefore, a mixture of a deductive and inductive coding approach based on Linneberg & Korsgaard was made using. With a deductive coding approach, a pre-defined list of codes is created before the coding begins. The codes that were written down in the codebook (Appendix B) are based on already existing literature that is derived from the theoretical framework. Furthermore, this codebook got adjusted in the process of coding when interesting differences emerge, and new perspectives appeared from which the research could benefit. Different cycles of coding were performed. In this inductive approach, the first cycle of coding focuses on informant-centric terms, while the second round becomes more researcher-centric having in mind that through the process of coding new themes and dimensions based on existing theories can be found (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). The first cycle consisted of splitting the transcriptions into bigger chunks of text and ordering them into different groups. Then for every group, a new code group was created. As an example, a chunk of code that consists of the quote: "It's quite athletic, maybe. Um, but it's also because I'm. Yeah, I'm doing sports. So, I think I'm quite athletic" was put into the code-group called 'Body image'. The created codes that were used and can be found in the mentioned codebook were called: Demographics, Instagram use, body image, social identity, social comparison, body image after usage [of Instagram], and behavioral adjustments. Moreover, in the second cycle of coding single codes were created for each of the code groups in addition to sub-codes that specify each code in more detail and are based on given answers from the participants with the goal of creating a clear overview of the data that makes it easier to analyze.

Lastly, the reliability of the coding was tested through an inter-reliability process.

The inter-reliability test represents the extent to which the data collected is a good representation of the analyzed data (McHugh, 2012). After peer coding 10% of the transcriptions in the coding program atlas.ti, which means that 1.5 interviews were coded, a score of 0.82 was indicated which is seen as a perfect agreement by McHugh (Appendix D).

## 4. Results

In the following, results based on the deductive coding process will be analyzed. Therefore, the most important code group will be elaborated on, described, and the main findings are going to be discussed. The coding is based on the earlier discussed codebook that is divided into code groups, codes, and sub-codes that explain research-related statements from the participants.

### 4.3 Body image

First, to get information about the participant's perception of the ideal body image as well as their own perception of it, different codes related to the topic of body images were created. The codes are about the description of the ideal body image, how the ideal body image looks from the perspective of the participants, a description of their own body, how they feel about themselves, in addition to how satisfied they are with the current state of their own body.

The description of the ideal body image was very diverse. Mostly it got described as a muscular and big-looking body. The ideal body image got connected to someone with "a low body fat percentage", "big arms and a big chest", and "visible abs". Nevertheless, this description was often connected with negative framed comments about how "unnatural" or "unachievable" this body type looks. For some participants, this description of the ideal body image was also framed as follows: "The guys you see on Instagram just look too big for me" (Participant, 22 years old). Therefore, it can be concluded that was is showcased on Instagram as the 'ideal' body image is not always perceived as ideal. Not everyone wants to achieve a look characterized by big muscles.

In addition to this, the participants described their own perception of the ideal body image in a different way. For most of them, the ideal body image is more about having athletic-looking features. This feature should showcase that someone looks like they are

active and do sports. Those were described as having visible muscles that do not appear too big. Body images showcased under the #fitspiration appeared most of the time as too much and were not connected to the participant's perception of the ideal body image. The body image that was described as more likely by the participant was therefore different compared to what is described as the ideal one. The participants preferred an athletic build body over one that appears too muscular.

Moreover, the participants were asked to describe their own body image in addition to elaborating on if they are happy about themselves and are satisfied with their looks. Besides two participants, everyone was convinced that they did have not the earlier described ideal body image. Nevertheless, mostly they still described their own body as athletic with features that seem to be similar to how the ideal image was described and would look based on the opinion of the interviewees. Even though the majority of participants were happy about how they looked, they often described themselves as "too skinny" or mentioned that they could "go to the gym more often". In contrast to being happy about oneself, eleven out of the 15 participants were not satisfied with their body yet and wanted to change certain aspects such as the amount of muscles or their body fat percentage as one participant stated: "I'm proud of where I'm at the moment but definitely not where I want to be" (Participant, 22).

Summarized, it can be said that even though participants were not representing a body image that is described as ideal, they were still happy about their appearance. This indicates that the picture of an ideal body image does not necessarily influence how someone feels about their own body. Nevertheless, even if a young man was happy about how they look, it is likely that they are not satisfied with their body yet.


## 4.4 Social identity

In order to get more information about how much the participants feel connected to the creators they follow on Instagram, codes were created about the connection and feeling of belonging to the community of those creators.

Results were showing that even though the majority of participants feel a connection towards the people they follow on Instagram, they do not feel like they are part of the community around those creators. "I wouldn't necessarily consider myself part of the community. I never comment or anything. I just look at their posts. So, in that sense, I don't

think I'd be that much part of the community" (Participant, 22) It is stated that there is no real feeling of belonging to this community as long as a user is not actively interacting with the creator of the content that is uploaded by the creator. Moreover, analyzing aspects regarding the social identity of the participants showed that even if someone does not feel like they are part of a community from the creators they follow, the posts they see still influence someone's daily behavior. For instance, a participant who mentioned that he feels no kind of belonging towards someone he is following stated: "When I see someone who worked out in the morning and I slept in, it motivates me to also have a workout. So then I get up and do some sports" (Participant, 21). Consequently, it can be concluded that there is no need to feel part of a community online to get influenced by what is seen on Instagram.

**4.5 Social comparison**

Furthermore, it can be analyzed to what extent the participants compare themselves with other people who post fitness content on Instagram. To get more insights into this topic, the comparison of the code with others, aspects of comparison, feeling about oneself, (feeling of) inspiration / (feeling of) envy were created.

The number of people who compare themselves to others on Instagram was relatively balanced with those who do not compare themselves. When people were comparing themselves, it was mostly about "the amount of muscles" someone has in addition to some parts of the participants were not that satisfied yet. Often this was described as this participant explained: "Often it's about some flaws you have on your body that you don't really recognize. But as soon as you see those ideal bodies on Instagram, you start to recognize them on your own body as well, and then you start to compare yourself with them" (Participant, 21). In contrast to this point of view, people who do not compare themselves to others were more aware of what they are seeing on the internet and that it is often "far from the reality". Based on this it can be concluded that not everyone who gets in contact with the 'ideal' body image is also comparing themselves with it. However, in case of comparison young men tend to search for characteristics about their own bodies that they are not satisfied with, yet which get recognized easier while getting in contact with the content out of the fitness niche.

After comparing themselves to others, and especially to their bodies of them the majority also stated that this comparison makes them feel worse about themselves. The

comparison with certain body types, they want to achieve but do not have yet ensures that participants dislike their bodies more than before getting in contact with those pictures and videos. Nevertheless, even though most of the participants feel worse about themselves after comparing themselves to others, a feeling of envy or jealousy is not evoked by that. Seeing other people on Instagram sharing fitness related "motivates" to "go to the gym", "eat healthier", and is in general described as "very inspirational". Therefore, it indicates that the showcased 'ideal' body images on Instagram do influence the perception of someone's own body image. It ensures that young men feel worse about their own appearance.

**4.6 Body image after Instagram use**

The next coding group represents the feeling of the participant's own body image after they use Instagram and consume fitness-related content. In order to get a better understanding of this, the code group is split up into two codes. One is about the feeling toward the own body image after the use of Instagram, while the other one elaborates on the influence of the consumption on the daily life of the participants.

When it comes to the feeling about the own body image after comparing oneself to others, the outcome is split up equally between having a negative, good, and no influence at all. Nevertheless, close to every single participant stated that the consumption of fitness-related content has an impact on their daily life. "Then I think about, should I really put in the kidney beans and chili sauce right now, which are probably less nutritious than the normal one. That influences my product choice." (Participant, 24) Moreover, the impact is framed by either a positive or negative feeling. On the one side, it has a motivational effect that is described as "feeling more dedicated" in certain situations, e.g., when working out and pushing oneself more while exercising. On the other hand, the constant comparison is also shown to have a negative impact on someone's daily life by causing a bad feeling about oneself when "not sticking to a diet" or "skipping a day in the gym". This shows that getting in touch with images and videos of 'perfect' bodies on Instagram does not only have an impact on how someone perceives their own body image, but it also evokes the need to change something about one's looks. Seeing fitness content on Instagram, therefore, can play an important factor in the behavior of young men.

### 4.7 Behavioral adjustments

Lastly, the code group behavioral adjustments were created to gain deeper insights into how certain situations of comparison with other body images can be handled. Therefore, two codes were used. The code "strategy" elaborates on examples concerning what can be done to prevent a constant comparison with others on the social media platform Instagram. Furthermore, the code "handling negative thoughts" describes more about how negative thoughts can be reduced and avoided caused by consuming fitness-related content.

Overall, advice that can be drawn out from the interviews is generally split between three different concepts. First, it is suggested to "stop scrolling through Instagram" and search for distractions that help to forget about ideal boy images that are shown on the social media platform. Secondly, participants spoke about being "aware of the false reality", that is showcased on Instagram through "edited pictures", "using perfect lightning", or "a fake personality" that is represented online to "sell products and make money". In addition to this, it is recommended to focus more on oneself instead of the people and body images someone sees on Instagram. It was explained how different factors like someone's genetics influence the way a person looks and therefore it "makes no sense to compare you with other people on Instagram", as was stated by a participant.

When it comes to handling negative thoughts that are caused, by comparison, the results were similar to the mentioned points before. The term "distraction" was a commonly used phrase that was suggested help to make oneself feel better. Nevertheless, another point of view was made is accepting the feelings that come up: "I would say that my way of handling those feelings is […] that I do accept the way I feel. For example, if I see a video of [someone] in the gym and [… ] I see myself and I don't look like this, and I feel bad, I do accept it." In addition to this, it got stated that the focus then should be on what someone can actually do to change this feeling. In the end, the most common comment that was made about this topic was, that it is important to "not look at the content" anymore which can be done by either putting the phone away or de-following people on Instagram that make oneself feel uncomfortable.

Summarized, it can be said that there are different factors that help to stop comparing oneself to other body images on Instagram and how to handle those situations.

By acknowledging the mentioned aspects, they can help to improve the feeling of the user about themselves.

## 5. Discussion

In the following section main findings of the research are going to be presented and discussed. This research occupied the influence of #fitspiration on Instagram concerning the perception of the body image of young men in order to answer the research question: "How does the #fitspiration on Instagram influence young men's perception of their body image?" To answer this question, semi-structured interviews were performed and the results of the semi-structured were analyzed. With the goal of getting a deeper understanding of the topic, the most important findings will be elaborated on.

Starting with the main findings of someone's body image research has shown that the ideal body image is characterized by "well-developed chest and arm muscles, with wide shoulders tapering down to a narrow waist" (Barlett, et. al., 2008, p.280). However, the study shows that the ideal body image, as it is described in previous research, is often perceived as, "unnatural", or "not achievable". Instead, the goal for the participants, based on the interviews, is to reach an athletic body type that does not appear too big or too muscular. In addition to this, findings show that not having the ideal body image does not necessarily effects being happy about oneself. Even if young men do not represent the discussed ideal body type, they can still feel good about themselves. Nevertheless, connecting the ideal body image to a more muscular body frame (Tiggemann et al., 2008), influences how satisfied someone is with their own body. Even when a man appears to be happy about one's own body image, it seems as not good enough with room for improvement, aiming for a body image that comes closest to the ideal. Therefore, the study shows that there is a difference between being happy about oneself body image and being satisfied with it. Regardless of how someone looks, it appears as not good enough as long as there are others who represent the 'ideal'.

It can be concluded that there is a difference between what is found in previous research and the outcome of the performed interviews. Moreover, not having the 'ideal' body does not necessarily influence how someone is feeling about their own body image.

After all, the definition from previous research for an 'ideal' body image does not apply to everyone. There are different perceptions about what a 'perfect' body should look like.

Next to findings concerning the ideal body image itself, results about young men's social identity were analyzed. This study shows that through using Instagram and following fitness-related accounts users do not immediately identify themselves as part of the community in this online environment. Even though social identity and the social identity theory is explained as an act of social identification that is derived from the membership of a specific social group (Reicher et. al., 1995), to feel a certain amount of belonging, the user must interact more with those accounts in terms of commenting, liking, or sharing content published by the creator. Yet, the process of identity formation can occur within an online group (Orsatti & Riemer, 2015) such as on social media platforms like Instagram. If those mentioned actions are performed, the outcome of the semi-structured interviews showcases that those young men can feel part of this community. Consequently, this can lead to someone changing mental, or physical characteristics based on the group they identify themselves with. When feeling part of the community, young men tend to be more invested in the person which influences their behavior. Therefore, the likelihood of doing more workouts or eating healthier increases when there is a stronger connection with someone who posts their body online.

Inside but also outside of those communities' young men compare themselves with each other. Findings showcase that with already seeing fitness-related content and other body images online, people tend to compare themselves with them. Through actively using the platform Instagram, users of it constantly compare themselves with physical characteristics from fitness-related content, for example, with content uploaded under the hashtag #fitspiration. Still, the amount of people who compare themselves is relatively balanced. Moreover, young men who use Instagram feel better about themselves by distracting themselves, and focusing more on themselves, in addition to acknowledging the false reality that is presented on social media, which is showcased by edited pictures, and unnatural as well as nearly unreachable body images. Consequently, the amount of comparison of one's own body image with others' online decreases. Yet, people tend to compare themselves with others who are superior to them (Festinger, 1954), especially with body characteristics that seem to represent the ideal boy image. Comparison happens with the amount of muscles users on Instagram have or with body parts someone is not satisfied

with yet. Through constant comparison, certain parts of someone's body that are seen as flaws get recognized easier which consequently makes one feel worse about themselves. In case the act of social comparison evokes negative feelings, being aware of what someone can change about their body and accepting the way one is feeling helps to handle those thoughts.

Summarized, it can be concluded that the constant comparison with others, can have an influence on the perception of young men's body images. With facing pictures and videos on Instagram that represent the 'ideal' body, it makes someone feel worse about their own body image even if something is represented online that is nearly unachievable without editing pictures and creating content under the perfect conditions.

As expected, before performing and analyzing the interviews, the hashtag #fitsporation has an influence on young men. The outcome shows that young men have both, good or negative feelings about themselves after comparing them to other body images on Instagram. Moreover, this study shows that Instagram users who are interested in fitness-related content and are in contact with the ideal body image daily, are not satisfied with their own bodies yet. Nevertheless, the feeling of not being satisfied with their own body can have a motivational effect. Consequently, motivation triggers actions to change themselves that can be connected to going to the gym more often, following a certain diet, or building healthy habits. Therefore, it can be said that comparison with others, especially with other body images can serve as inspiration for the consumer. However, this constant comparison also evokes negative feelings towards oneself. The research illustrates that the impact it has on someone's daily life is not only framed positive but also negative. Besides, having an inspirational effect on the consumer, it also affects daily activities by influencing someone's thoughts negatively while eating food that seems not healthy or not going to the gym that makes someone feel worse about themselves.

After all, it can be concluded that consuming fitness-related content on Instagram as demonstrated by the hashtag #fitspiration can have positive as well as negative effects on the perception of someone's body image and daily behavior. Still, it serves as an inspiration to take action towards achieving the body image someone strives for. In general, the hashtag #fitspiration influences the perception of young men's body images. In addition to making someone feel worse about their looks, it also affects the daily behavior of the

consumer. However, the influence is not always framed negatively. Even if the user feels a form of envy towards the people they see online, this envy can also trigger motivation. Besides feeling worse about oneself, getting in contact with the 'ideal' body image also serves as motivation that ensures that young men work out more or focus on a healthier diet. After all, even if the body characteristics of a young man are similar to what he himself has described as ideal, he is not satisfied with his body because of the ideal represented on Instagram.

**5.2 Limitations & future research**

After preparing the study, conducting interviews, and analyzing the data some limitations were found that can be taken into account for future studies. First, one limitation that must be paid more attention to in the future is the criteria for participants who were invited for interviews. Criteria for the study were that participants needed to identify themselves as a male, are between the age of 18-25, and are interested in fitness which was indicated by following accounts on Instagram that post-fitness-related content. However, it turned out that not everyone who follows fitness-related accounts on the social media platform also has a greater interest in this area. It became apparent that some participants were more interested in other areas such as team or motorsports and therefore consumed less fitness-related content. This could be improved by sending potential participants a short questionnaire about the areas they are most interested in. Based on the outcome of these surveys, suitable participants could be invited for the interviews.

Furthermore, the demographics of the interviews showed that most of the participants are from Germany and currently studying at university. Consequently, the sample was not very diverse and rather one-sided.  Since the sample size was rather small (n = 15) a bigger sample size could ensure more diversity in the research which could have an influence on the outcome. For this study, two non-probability methods were used: convenience sampling and snowball sampling. For both methods, participants that were found through this sampling method will have relatively similar characteristics. Therefore, by making use of other sampling methods such as quota or stratified sampling, a more diverse group of participants could be found. Additionally, the same aspects had to be taken into account for another characteristic that was found to be very similar within the sample. The majority of the participants were happy with their body image and the way they look.

Results could differ if participants were interviewed who were not happy with their current body. As mentioned before, this could be improved by increasing the sample size in addition to the use of different sample methods to increase the possibility of the diversity of participants.

Through the process of this research, different aspects that could be useful for further research also appeared. First of all, to get deeper insights into the behavior of young men, a journal study could be added to the semi-structured interviews. Since participants were sometimes struggling with remembering how they felt in certain situations throughout the day, a journal study for three to five days could be helpful. Since journaling is a reflective process that helps to express and examine feelings, as well as structure thoughts (Trevallion, 2015) journaling, could assist in creating a clearer overview of these specific feelings and thoughts that are connected to the consumed fitness-related content.

Moreover, this study focuses fully on content that is published on the social media platform Instagram. Performing research that involves other platforms like YouTube, TikTok, or Twitter could introduce the possibility of getting a new perspective in relation to the same topic. The aspects of researching different platforms can be taken into consideration. First, the content that is published on the mentioned platforms differs from each other. With Instagram still mainly being a photo-sharing platform, TikTok focuses on short video formats, YouTube on longer video formats, and TikTok mainly on short text. The difference in this type of content could have different effects on the perception of young men's body images. Secondly, on each platform, the target group of people who consume the content differs. Therefore, different groups of consumers would ensure different characteristics that describe the user groups per social media platform.

After all, even though the research gave deep insights into the effect of #fitspiration on Instagram concerning the perception of the body image of young men, there are still limitations and recommendations that can be taken into account for further research.

## 5.3 Practical implementations

Based on the findings of this study, there are practical implementations that can be acknowledged. The first suggestion is about Instagram including an integration that measures a user's well-being. As an example, Instagram could incorporate a monthly questionnaire that involves questions about how the user is feeling, what content someone

is following, and which impact that has on them. Based upon the survey, certain content that can lead to a negative feeling about oneself can be limited. To relate this suggestion more to the research topic, through the survey Instagram could find out if users are negatively influenced by getting in contact with the 'ideal' body image and therefore could regulate the content that is showcased to the user.

Furthermore, gyms, sports clubs, and in general every place or organization where someone goes to be active could provide educational information about the 'ideal' body image. Since it is often nearly unreachable to obtain such a body image as presented on Instagram, it is important to inform the consumer about it. Additionally, the study shows that some young men are already aware of a false image that is represented on Instagram, however, they still tend to compare themselves with others. Therefore, it can be helpful to provide useful tips concerning handling situations when someone is comparing themselves to other bodies.

## 6. Conclusion

The goal of the study was to get deeper insights into the influence of #fitspiration on Instagram concerning the perception of the body image of young men. Therefore, this research tried to answer the research question: How does the #fitspiration on Instagram influence young men's perception of their body image? Based on already existing research it shows that an ideal body type which is often showcased on Instagram under the #fitspiration is characterized by a big muscular body with well-developed chest and arm muscles as well as wide shoulders. Moreover, this ideal body image and comparison with those who post fitness-related content on Instagram impact young men and their perception of their own body image. Even though, the interviews that were held in this research showcased that participants were happy about their body images, consuming fitness-related content on Instagram ensures that not to be satisfied with themselves since an ideal body image is represented which wants to be achieved by young men that, is close to unattainable. Furthermore, since humans compare themselves in order to self-evaluate themselves, young men constantly compare themselves with those who seem to have already achieved the body type they strive for as well. However, this study shows that this comparison does not only have negative effects on the consumer. Even though getting in

contact with people who showcase the ideal body image on Instagram can evoke negative feelings about oneself, it is also seen as an inspiration. This research found out that young men use the negative feelings that come up through the comparison with others as a reason to do more sports, eat healthier, or work on themselves to be happier about their body image. However, more research that takes into account other social media platforms and different target groups needs to be conducted as well as more detailed qualitative research to get a deeper understanding of the influence of fitness-related content on the perception of young men's body images.

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**Appendix:**

Appendix A.

Interview Guide

Semi-structured Interviews

Procedure:

In the beginning of the research, participants are asked to open the hashtag #fitspiration on Instagram and scroll through the 'Top' posts for 2 minutes. Afterwards, the interview starts with demographic questions about gender, age, and educational level. Furthermore, the interview is divided into different topic categories. The questions that are going to be asked are about the usage of Instagram in addition to the consumption of fitness-related content, the perception of their body image, comparison on Instagram with content creators who publish fitness related pictures and videos, and how this consumption effects their daily behaviour. The open-ended questions, as well as follow-up questions are prepared before. Nevertheless, there is a possibility that questions can deviate from the interview guide if it can be beneficial for the research.

Possible risks:

Since questions about someones own body image as well as other questions about their feelings towards their perception of themselves are very personal, people can feel uncomfortable during the interview. To prevent any discomfort, participants will be informed about the topic and procedure before the study begins. In addition, it will be acknowledged that it is possible to stop the interview at any time. Participants also will be informed about that they are not obligated to answer every asked question if they feel uncomfortable about it.

Questions:

1. Demographics?
   a. Age
   b. Nationality
   c. Educational level

2. Instagram use and hashtag #fitspiration
   a. How often do you use Instagram per day and week?
   b. Can you explain what type of content do you consume?
   c. How often do you see fitness related content on your feed?
   d. What type of fitness-related (sports-related) accounts do you follow?
      i. Why are you following fitness related content?

Connection to body image

3. Body image
   a. What comes to your mind if you hear the term ideal body image?
      i. How would you describe the ideal body image?
   b. How would describe your body image?
   c. How do you feel about your own body? (Good does not mean satisfied)
      i. Are you satisfied about it?
      ii. What are you doing to change your body image?

4. Social identity
   a. What connection do you feel towards the people you follow on Instagram?
      i. Do you feel as a part of the community you surround yourself online?
         1. If yes: What makes you feel like this?
         2. If no: What makes you feel like this?

5. Social comparison + inspiration or envy (connected to scrolling though the hashtag)

    a. Do you compare yourself with others online (with people who post fitness related content)?

        i. If yes: Who do you compare yourself with?

        ii. If yes: What aspects do you compare yourself with?

        iii. If yes: How does this make you feel about yourself?

        iv. If yes: feeling of inspiration or envy

            1. If yes: Does, this influence your daily behaviour? (e.g., motivates you to do certain things)

6. Body image after consuming fitness related content

    a. After using Instagram and consuming fitness related content and scrolling though, how do you feel about your body image (what impact does it have)?

    b. Do you think about the posted content when eating or doing sports?

        i. Do you notice it consciously or unconsciously?

            1. explanation

        ii. How does this make you feel?

7. Behavioural adjustments

    a. If participants compare themselves

        i. What do you do to prevent comparing yourself with the ideal body type on Instagram?

    b. If you feel worse about yourself, how do you handle the situation or those thoughts?

Appendix B.

Codebook

| Code groups | Codes | Sub-code | Description | Example |
|---|---|---|---|---|

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. **Demographics** | 1.1 Age | 1.1.1 18-20 1.1.2 21-23 1.1.3 24-25 | The age of the participant | "I'm 22 years old" |
| | 1.2 Nationality | 1.2.1 German 1.2.2 Dutch 1.2.3 Mexican 1.2.4 Bulgarian | The nationality of the participant | "I am German" |
| | 1.3 Educational level | 1.3.1 Bachelor student | The educational level of the participant | "I'm currently doing my bachelor's degree in the second year" |
| 2. **Instagram usage** | 2.1 Time spent | 2.1.1 1-2 hours a day 2.1.2 3-4 hours a day 2.1.3 Other | How much time the participant spends on IG | "In my honest opinion, I'm using it way too much. It's probably 2 hours a day" |
| | 2.2 Type of content | 2.2.1 Fitness 2.2.2 Sport teams 2.2.3 | What type of content the participant consumes on IG | "I would say I follow athletes and people who show their gym stud" |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Calisthenics 2.2.3 Bouldering 2.2.4 Motor sports | | |
| | 2.3 Frequency | 2.3.1 regularly 2.3.2 sometimes | How often the participant sees fitness related content on IG | "I would say quiet often" |
| | 2.4 Reason for following | 2.4.1 Entertainment 2.4.2 Education 2.4.3 other | The reason behind following this accounts | "Mainly because I like the sport myself …" |
| 3. **Body image** | 3.1 "Descr. Ideal body image "(Description ideal body image) | 3.1.1 Muscular big 3.1.2 Muscular not too big 3.1.3 Athletic 3.1.4 Other | Description of the ideal body image | "like shredded, like big arms, big chest, …" |
| | 3.2 "IB own perception" (Own perception of ideal body image) | 3.2.1 Muscular big 3.2.2 Muscular not too big 3.2.3 Athletic | How the participant perceives his or her idea of the ideal body image | "for me it's just when you're happy with yourself" |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | 3.2.4 Other | | |
| 3.3 "Descr. Own body" (Description own body image) | 3.3.1 Muscular big | Description of the participants body | "probably athletic, …" / "I would say I'm thin" |
| | 3.3.2 Muscular skinny | | |
| | 3.3.3 Not muscular big | | |
| | 3.3.4 Not muscular skinny | | |
| | 3.3.3 Athletic | | |
| | 3.3.4 Other | | |
| 3.4 "Feeling own body" (Feeling towards on body image) | 3.4.1 Good | How the participant feels about their own body | "Um, compared to like before for, let's say like five years ago. I'm pretty happy right now" |
| | 3.4.2 Bad | | |
| | 3.4.3 Other | | |
| 3.5 Body satisfaction | 3.5.1 Satisfied | If the participant is satisfied with their current body shape | "I'm proud of where I'm at at the moment but definitely not where I want to be." |
| | 3.5.2 Not satisfied | | |
| 3.6 Change own body | 3.6.1 More muscles | What the participant wants | "I want to gain weight" |
| | 3.6.2 | | |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Skinnier 3.6.3 Bigger 3.6.4 Nothing 3.6.5 Other | to change about their body | |
| 4. **Social identity** | 4.1 "Connection" (Connection towards IG creators) | 4.1.1 Connected 4.2.2 Not connected | What kind of connection the participant feel towards the creators they follow on IG | "I don't interact so much with them" |
| | 4.2" Belonging" (Belonging towards community) | 4.2.1 Belonging Yes 4.2.2 Belonging No | How strong the participants feels a belonging to the community | "No, I only consume but I', not part of it" |
| 5. **Social comparison** | 5.1 "Comp. w/ others" (Comparison with others on IG) | 5.1.1 Comp. Yes 5.1.2 Comp. No | If participants compare themselves with others on IG | "I think subconsciously you always compare yourself" |
| | 5.2 "Aspects comp." (Aspects of comparison) | / | What aspects (e.g. body parts) do the participants compare themselves with *if they compare themselves | "I would say the amount of muscle in comparison or in relation to the aesthetics of the body." |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 5.3 "Feeling about oneself" | 5.3.1 Feeling Good<br>5.3.2 Feeling Bad<br>5.3.3 Feeling Nothing | How does the comparison on IG makes them feel *if they compare themselves | "Usually I don't get too affected by it" |
| | 5.4 "insp. / envy" (Feeling of inspiration or envy) | 5.4.1 Inspired<br>5.4.2 Envy<br>5.4.3 Both | How the comparison influences the participants in relation to the feeling of inspiration or envy *if they compare themselves | "I would say it's inspirational" |
| 6. **BI (Body image) after usage** | 6.1 "Feeling own BI after use" (Feeling about own body image) | 6.1.1 Feeling Good<br>6.1.2 Feeling Bad<br>5.1.3 Feeling Nothing | How participants feel about their own body image after seeing fitness related content on IG | "Um, I still think the same way after seeing the pictures" |
| | 6.2 "Impact daily life" (Impact on daily life) | 6.2.1 Daily Impact Yes<br>6.2.3 Daily impact No | How the consumed content influences the participants daily life | "It makes me more dedicated …" |

| 7. Behavioral adjustments | 7.1 "Strategy" (Strategy to prevent comparison) | / | What can be done to prevent comparison on IG | "Maybe just realize that it's content to mainly generate money" |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 7.2 "Handling negative thoughts" | / | How can negative thoughts can be handled caused by consuming fitness content in IG | "accept the way you feel when you think bad about yourself" |

Appendix C

Ethical review / approval

## 220939 REQUEST FOR ETHICAL REVIEW

| | |
|---|---|
| Request nr: | 220939 |
| Researcher: | Gollan, J.M. |
| Supervisor: | Laar, E. van |
| Reviewer: | Galetzka, M. |
| Status: | Approved by commission |
| Version: | 2 |

### 1. START

#### A. TITLE AND CONTEXT OF THE RESEARCH PROJECT

1. What is the title of the research project? (max. 100 characters)

   The effect of #fitspiration on Instagram concerning the perception of the body image from young men

2. In which context will you conduct this research?

   Bachelor's Thesis

3. Date of the application

   30-05-2022

5. Is this research project closely connected to a research project previously assessed by the BMS Ethics Committee?

   No/Unknown

#### B. CONTACT INFORMATION

6. Contact information for the lead researcher

   6a. Initials:

   J.M.

   6b. Surname:

   Gollan

   6c. Education/Department (if applicable):

   B-COM

   6d. Staff or Student number:

   2273365

   6e. Email address:

   j.m.gollan@student.utwente.nl

   6f. Telephone number (during the research project):

```
+4917640559460
```

6g. If additional researchers (students and/or staff) will be involved in carrying out this research, please name them:

```
-
```

6h. Have you completed a PhD degree?

```
No
```

7. Contact information for the BMS Supervisor

7a. Initials:

```
E.
```

7b. Surname:

```
van Laar
```

7c. Department:

```
BMS-CS
```

7d. Email address:

```
e.vanlaar@utwente.nl
```

7e. Telephone number (during the research project):

```
+31534892292
```

8. Is one of the ethics committee reviewers involved in your research? Note: not everyone is a reviewer.

```
No
```

## C. RESEARCH PROJECT DESCRIPTION

9a. Please provide a brief description (150 words max.) of the background and aim(s) of your research project in non-expert language.

```
Instagram is one of the most used social media platforms worldwide.
Daily, users of the platform consume all different kinds of content.
Accordingly, a lot of content is consumed on the platform deals with
the topic of fitness. Moreover, the hashtag #fitspiration is one of
the most used hashtags for posting fitness-related content with nearly
20 million posts. Under this hashtag, the ideal body image
irepresented particularly, with which users of the platform tend to
compare themselves. There is already research that deals with social
comparison on social media platforms and its possible effects of it,
nevertheless specific research about the perception of young men who
consume fitness-related content daily was not found yet. Moreover,
this research deals, especially, with concepts about the ideal body
image, the social identity theory, and social comparison, in addition
to the effect of envy and inspiration. To get more insights into this
topic, it is planned to make use of qualitative research with semi-
structured interviews. The focus is on young men (aged between 18-25)
who use Instagram daily and follow the hashtag #fitspiration or
similar fitness-related content. This research aims to find out how
```

```
the perception of the body image of young men gets affected through
consuming fitness-related content, such as the content published under
#fitspiration, what possible consequences are and how it makes them
feel about themselves.
```

9b. Approximate starting date/end date of data collection:

```
Starting date: 2022-06-05
End date: 2022-06-30
```

9c. If applicable: indicate which external organization(s) has/have commissioned and/or provided funding for your research.

Commissioning organization(s):

```
Not applicable
```

Funding organization(s):

```
Not applicable
```

## 2. TYPE OF STUDY

Please select the type of study you plan to conduct:

```
I will be collecting new data from individuals acting as respondents,
interviewees, participants or informants.
```

## 4. RESEARCH INVOLVING THE COLLECTION OF NEW DATA

## A: RESEARCH POPULATION

20. Please provide a brief description of the intended research population(s):

```
The research population includes young men who are in the age between
18-25, who use the social media platform Instagram on a daily basis
and follow accounts that post fitness related content (workout videos,
training tips, nutritional tips, pictures that showcase their body
image, etc.)
```

21. How many individuals will be involved in your research?

```
I expect to include 15 participants for semi-structured interviews.
```

22. Which characteristics must participants/sources possess in order to be included in your research?

```
Criteria to participate in the research: - Age: 18-25 - Gender: Male -
Must use Instagram on a daily basis - Must follow accounts that post
fitness related content
```

23. Does this research specifically target minors (<16 years), people with cognitive impairments, people under institutional care (e.g. hospitals, nursing homes, prisons), specific ethnic groups, people in another country or any other special group that may be more vulnerable than the general population?

```
No
```

24. Are you planning to recruit participants for your research through the BMS test subject pool, SONA

```
No
```

## B. METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION

47

25. What is the best description of your research?

- Interview research

26. Please prove a brief yet sufficiently detailed overview of activities, as you would in the Procedure section of your thesis or paper. Among other things, please provide information about the information given to your research population, the manipulations (if applicable), the measures you use (at construct level), etc. in a way that is understandable for a relative lay person.

```
In the beginning of the research, participants are asked to open the
hashtag #fitspiration on Instagram and scroll through the 'Top' posts
for 2 minutes. Afterwards, the interview starts with demographic
questions about gender, age, and educational level. Furthermore, the
interview is divided into different topic categories. The questions
that are going to be asked are about the usage of Instagram in
addition to the consumption of fitness-related content, the perception
of their body image, comparison on Instagram with content creators who
publish fitness related pictures and videos, and how this consumption
effects their daily behaviour. The open-ended questions, as well as
follow-up questions are prepared before. Nevertheless, there is a
possibility that questions can deviate from the interview guide if it
can be beneficial for the research.
```

How much time will each participant spend (mention the number of sessions/meetings in which they will participate and the time per session/meeting)?

```
1 session, 30-45 min long
```

## C: BURDEN AND RISKS OF PARTICIPATION

27. Please provide a brief description of these burdens and/or risks and how you plan to minimize them:

```
Since questions about someones own body image as well as other
questions about their feelings towards their perception of themselves
are very personal, people can feel uncomfortable during the interview.
To prevent any discomfort, participants will be informed about the
topic and procedure before the study begins. In addition, it will be
acknowledged that it is possible to stop the interview at any time.
Participants also will be informed about that they are not obligated
to answer every asked question if they feel uncomfortable about it.
```

28. Can the participants benefit from the research and/or their participation in any way?

```
No
```

29. Will the study expose the researcher to any risks (e.g. when collecting data in potentially dangerous environments or through dangerous activities, when dealing with sensitive or distressing topics, or when working in a setting that may pose 'lone worker' risks)?

```
No
```

## D. INFORMED CONSENT

30. Will you inform potential research participants (and/or their legal repsentative(s), in case of non-competent participants) about the aims, activities, burdens and risks of the research before they decide

whether to take part in the research?

> Yes

Briefly clarify how:

> A few days before the interview is performed, participants will be
> informed about the aims, activities, burdens and risks of the research
> through a prepared document.

32. How will you obtain the voluntary, informed consent of the research participants (or their legal repsentatives in case of non-competent participants)?

> Oral (recorded) consent

33. Will you clearly inform research participants that they can withdraw from the research at any time without explanation/justification?

> Yes

34. Are the research participants somehow dependent on or in a subordinate position to the researcher(s) (e.g. students or relatives)?

> No

35. Will participants receive any rewards, incentives or payments for participating in the research?

- > No

36. In the interest of transparency, it is a good practice to inform participants about what will happen after their participation is completed. How will you inform participants about what will happen after their participation is concluded?

- > Participants will receive the researcher's contact details, so
  > that they can contact the researcher if they have questions/would
  > like to know more.
- > Participants will receive oral/written information about what the
  > researcher(s) will do with the collected data.

## E. CONFIDENTIALITY AND ANONYMITY

37. Does the data collected contain personal identifiable information that can be traced back to specific individuals/organizations?

> No

39. Will you make use of audio or video recording?

> Yes

• What steps have you taken to ensure safe audio/video data storage?

> Recorded data will be stored on a secured Google Drive
> account where I am the only person who has access through
> my University of Twente email address and password.

• At what point in the research will tapes/digital recordings/files be destroyed?

> After the transcription process the recordings will be
> deleted completely and can not be restored.

## 5. DATA MANAGEMENT

- I have read the UT Data policy.
- I am aware of my responsibilities for the proper handling of data, regarding working with personal data, storage of data, sharing and presentation/publication of data.

## 6. OTHER POTENTIAL ETHICAL ISSUES/CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

40. Do you anticipate any other ethical issues/conflicts of interest in your research project that have not been previously noted in this application? Please state any issues and explain how you propose to deal with them. Additionally, if known indicate the purpose your results have (i.e. the results are used for e.g. policy, management, strategic or societal purposes).

        No.

## 7. ATTACHMENTS

        –

## 8. COMMENTS

        –

## 9. CONCLUSION

Status:          Approved by commission

The BMS ethical committee / Domain Humanities & Social Sciences has assessed the ethical aspects of your research project. On the basis of the information you provided, the committee does not have any ethical concerns regarding this research project. It is your responsibility to ensure that the research is carried out in line with the information provided in the application you submitted for ethical review. If you make changes to the proposal that affect the approach to research on humans, you must resubmit the changed project or grant agreement to the ethical committee with these changes highlighted.

Moreover, novel ethical issues may emerge while carrying out your research. It is important that you re-consider and discuss the ethical aspects and implications of your research regularly, and that you proceed as a responsible scientist.

Finally, your research is subject to regulations such as the EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), the Code of Conduct for the use of personal data in Scientific Research by VSNU (the Association of Universities in the Netherlands), further codes of conduct that are applicable in your field, and the obligation to report a security incident (data breach or otherwise) at the UT.

50

Appendix E.

Cohen's Kappa

---

*Cohen's Kappa*

---

| Code | Cohen's Kappa |
|------|---------------|
| Demographics | 0.875 |
| Instagram use | 0.864 |
| Body image | 0.795 |
| Social identity | 0.723 |
| Social Comparison | 0.792 |
| Body image after use | 0.896 |

---

Appendix F.

Search log for parts of the literature search progress

| Date | Database | Search string | Total hits | Remarks |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| *27.03.2022* | *Scopus* | ALL ( "Instagram" AND ( "perception" OR "well - being" ) AND "men's body image" ) | *73* | *~ 7 relevant articles* |
| 27.03.2022 | Scopus | ( "Instagram" AND ( "body image" OR "body" OR "appearance" ) AND "feeling" ) | 21 | ~ 12 relevant articles |
| 27.03.2022 | Scopus | ( "histogram" AND "Social Comparison" AND ( "body image" OR "bodies" ) ) | 43 | -10 relevant articles |
| 27.03.2022 | Scopus | ( "Instagram" AND ( "Description" OR "definition" ) ) | 159 | ~ 35 relevant articles |
| 27.03.2022 | Scopus | ( ( "Social identity" OR "social identity theory" ) AND "definition" AND "body image" ) | 2 | 1 relevant article |
| 04.04.2022 | Scopus | (( "Social comparison" OR "social comparison theory" ) AND "definition" ) | 59 | ~10 relevant articles |
| 04.04.2022 | Scopus | ( ( "Social comparison" OR "social comparison theory" ) AND "Instagram" AND "body image" ) | 37 | ~20 relevant articles |
| 04.04.2022 | Scopus | ( ( "Social comparison" OR "social comparison theory" ) AND "inspiration" ) | 35 | ~5 relevant articles |
| 04.04.2022 | Scopus | ( ( ( "Social comparison" OR "social comparison theory" ) AND "feeling of envy" ) ) | 17 | ~ 5 relevant articles |

| 04.04.2022 | Scopus | ( "upward comparison" AND "social comparison" AND "Instagram" ) | 8 | -6 relevant articles |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 04.04.2022 | Scopus | ( ( "downward comparison" AND "social comparison" AND "Instagram" ) ) | 2 | -2 relevant articles |
| 07.04.2022 | Google scholar | "Instagram" AND ("body image" or "body comparison" or "bodies") AND "social comparison" AND "young men" | 70 | ~20 relevant articles |
| 07.04.2022 | Google scholar | "Instagram" AND ("body image" or "body comparison" or "bodies") AND "inspiration" AND "young men" | 31 | ~10 relevant articles |
| 07.04.2022 | Google scholar | "Instagram" AND ("body image" or "body comparison" or "bodies") AND "envy" AND "young men" | 5 | -2 relevant articles |