

“Fitspiration or fixation? A study of how fitness influencers affect self-image and exercise habits”

A quantitative analysis of how fitness influencers affect young girls' self-image

”Fitspiration eller fixering? En kvantitativ studie om hur fitness influencers påverkar självbilden och tränings vanorna”

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Abstract

In a digital age where social platforms such as Instagram and TikTok are a central part of young people's everyday lives, it is becoming increasingly important to understand how the content spread on social media affects individuals' self-image and whether it has any impact on their mental health. Particularly vulnerable to this are young women, whose self-image is often commented on and influenced by social media. A recurring feature of social media is fitness influencers, who usually convey narrow and idealised body norms linked to health, discipline and a particular lifestyle ideal. This study examines how such ideals on social media affect young women's self-image. And whether there is any connection between age, exercise habits, and the use of exercise apps, in relation to how they feel about their body ideal.

The thesis aims to deepen the understanding of the mechanisms behind the impact of social media and fitness culture on women's perceptions of their body and self-worth. Three research questions have guided the work: whether there is a relationship between age and social media use, whether active use of fitness apps can be linked to an unhealthy body image, and how exercise habits relate to the self-image of women who use social media. The results show that while technology use in the form of fitness apps per se does not show a clear association with negative self-image, other responses showed other clear patterns. In particular, interest in and exposure to content from fitness influencers influence how young women perceive their bodies and themselves. In particular, the link between actively seeking “fitspiration” content and feelings of body inadequacy, pressure and insecurity is clear. This study provides potentially valuable insights. Its findings emphasise the importance of media literacy and the need to develop digital environments that strengthen rather than undermine young women's self-image. In an age where digital inspiration often coincides with idealisation and subtle influence, further research is urgently necessary.

Keywords: Fitness influencer, fitspiration, fitness variables, fitness applications, body image, social media

Sammanfattning

I en digital ålder där sociala plattformar som Instagram och TikTok är en central del av ungdomars vardag blir det allt viktigare att förstå hur innehållet som sprids på sociala medier påverkar individens självbild och om det har någon inverkan på deras psykiska hälsa. Särskilt utsatta för detta är unga kvinnor, vars självbild ofta kommenteras och påverkas av sociala medier. Ett återkommande inslag i sociala medier är fitness influencers, som oftast förmedlar snäva och idealiserade kroppsnormer kopplade till disciplin och till en viss livsstil. Denna studie undersöker hur sådana ideal som visas på sociala medier påverkar unga kvinnors självbild samt om det finns något samband mellan ålder, träningsvanor och användning av träningsappar i relation till hur de upplever sina kroppar.

Studien syftar till att fördjupa förståelsen för mekanismerna bakom sociala medier och fitness kulturens påverkan på kvinnors uppfattning om sin kropp och sitt självvärde. Tre forskningsfrågor har styrt arbetet: om det finns ett samband mellan ålder och användning av sociala medier, om aktiv användning av träningsappar kan kopplas till en ohälsosam kroppsuppfattning, och hur träningsvanor relaterar till självbilden hos kvinnor som använder sociala medier.

Resultaten visar att medan teknikanvändning i form av fitnessappar i sig inte visar någon tydlig koppling till negativ självbild, visade andra svar andra tydliga mönster. I synnerhet påverkar intresset för och exponeringen för innehåll från fitness influencers hur unga kvinnor uppfattar sina kroppar och sig själva. Särskilt tydlig är kopplingen mellan att aktivt söka efter ”fitspiration”-innehåll och känslor av kroppslig otillräcklighet, press och osäkerhet.

Denna studie ger potentiellt värdefulla insikter. Resultaten betonar vikten av mediekompetens och behovet av att utveckla digitala miljöer som stärker snarare än undergräver unga kvinnors självbild. I en tid då digital inspiration ofta sammanfaller med idealiserande och subtila influenser är det angeläget med ytterligare forskning.

Nyckelord: Fitness influencers, fitspiration, träningsklocka, träningsappar, kroppsuppfattning, sociala medier

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1. Introduction

How are young women between the ages of 18 and 35 affected by content shared by fitness influencers? And whose responsibility is it? Is it fitness influencers or the individuals themselves?

Self-image is largely formed during adolescence, a period that can be characterised by identity searching and increased sensitivity to external validation. When young girls are constantly exposed to content that signals what is considered to be the 'right body,' the risk of comparison and low self-esteem increases (Von Spreckelsen et al., 2018). What distinguishes social media from traditional media is its interactivity and constant availability; it takes two seconds to click on an app. The ideal image is no longer something you just see, but something you are expected to emulate and be judged by.

In today's society, there is a growing trend among young adults, especially young women, to spend a large part of their daily lives scrolling through various forms of social media, such as TikTok and Instagram (*Viktigt att stödja balanserad användning av digitala medier*, 2024).

At a time when large platforms play a central role in young people's lives, it has become increasingly important to scrutinise the content shared on social media. Standardised ideals of how to look are more accessible today than they were 20 years ago; it takes two seconds to click on an app, and then you have everything in front of you. The ideal image of a slim girl with a flat stomach and narrow waist is today's ideal, but what factors are behind this look and who is responsible for the content shared on social media?

It has become increasingly important to investigate how these standardised ideals affect young girls' mental health and self-image. Several studies show that a large and influential group on these platforms are fitness influencers, whose content often promotes an idealised body image based on being slim and having well-trained muscles, as well as a certain lifestyle associated with health and discipline (Prichard et al., 2020). This is just the beginning of why it is so important to analyse how these messages are interpreted and affect young girls' self-image.

This development has meant that norms and ideals about body image and health are increasingly conveyed through visual content that often highlights extremely slim body types and fitness-focused lifestyles, which can put young girls at risk of starting unhealthy diets and

intense exercise routines to achieve the “perfect body”. This creates a problem, especially for young girls who see this type of content every day and believe that the key to a slim waist is to exercise extremely and eat little food, which can increase the risk of eating disorders and a negative body image.

Several studies and reports have shown that this type of content not only affects how young girls view their bodies but also how they value themselves in general (Prichard et al., 2020). The ideals conveyed by fitness influencers are unattainable, not only because of editing and filtering, but also because they are based on social status and a lifestyle that is not accessible to most people. Despite this, they are presented as realistic. This creates a vicious circle among young girls, who know that the ideal is unrealistic but still feel pressure to achieve it, which can lead to destructive behaviours such as eating disorders and excessive exercise. An important aspect to understand is that influence is not uniform but can have several different components that play a role in how much one is influenced. Research shows that young girls who already have low self-esteem may be more susceptible to negative influences (Von Spreckelsen et al., 2018). It is therefore important that research not only examines what influences young girls, but also who is affected and what factors can act as protection against these influences.

This creates a major problem, which is why this study will investigate and attempt to gain a deeper understanding of whether similar effects can be linked to the use of fitness apps and smartwatches, which have become increasingly popular among health-conscious individuals. These technologies are often marketed as tools to promote physical well-being and personal health, but studies have also shown that they introduce new forms of self-monitoring and performance tracking that can affect users' perceptions of their bodies (Anderberg et al. 2025). Studying this impact and gaining a deeper understanding of it is therefore relevant not only for researchers in psychology and media studies, but also for schools, healthcare professionals and parents. Furthermore, gaining a deeper understanding of how these mechanisms work can contribute to more targeted interventions in the form of media literacy education and support for young people. In a digital culture where “inspiration” often goes hand in hand with idealising and invisible influences, it is therefore crucial that further research sheds light on the link between digital body norms and young people's mental health, both to understand the extent of the problem and to bring about change.

For these reasons, the study aims to investigate whether there are potential links between the use of fitness technology and body image problems among women aged 18-35. By highlighting these links, the research can contribute to a more complex understanding of the potential psychological and social consequences of using digital health tools and determine who is responsible for how content on social media is received. Does the responsibility lie with the creators who publish fitness and health-related content or with the individuals who view this content?

Research Questions

As mentioned earlier, social media has become a central part of young people's everyday lives (*Viktig att stödja balanserad användning av digitala medier*, 2024). However, there are several reasons why it is relevant to investigate whether there is a link between a certain age group and the use of social media. Previous research has shown that intensive use of social media can have a negative impact on mental health, especially among young girls (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2023). The constant presence of social media makes it relevant to investigate whether there is a link between specific age groups and their use of social media.

Self-esteem and body image are formed at a very early age and can be influenced by how one is treated by close family and friends, but they can also be linked to what one sees and experiences online (Johnston, 2010). There is therefore a need for research on fitness influencers on social media that targets a more specific audience to find out who is actually affected by this and who is most active in this area. In this way, the study can create a clear basis for identifying what measures should be taken, either as an individual or as a responsible creator on social media.

RQ 1: Is there a correlation between age and social media use among girls aged 18-35?

The reason for the first research question is that the 18-35 age group encompasses several stages of life, from adolescence to adulthood, which is a period of several years when people develop significantly as individuals and adopt different lifestyles, but also develop an ability to prioritise what is important to them in life. It is therefore not obvious that social media use is the same for a 16-year-old as for a 30-year-old, even if they belong to the same target

group. Younger users may, for example, be more inclined to seek validation on social media, while older users mainly use social media to search for information. The variation in areas of use affects how the platform is perceived positively and negatively. Research has shown that younger teenage girls use social media more intensively (*Social Media | Swedes and the Internet, 2024*). However, it also mentions that young women are more easily negatively affected by social media than men. If this has to do with comparisons, could it highlight the need for support measures from, for example, parents or schools?

On the other hand, if older users use social media more, the problem must be identified on the platforms.

Knowledge and research on how different age groups use social media can be crucial for privacy settings and content filtering. Understanding users' needs and behaviours in relation to age can help develop better tools for a healthier digital environment. Such understanding can also contribute to developing more age-appropriate boundaries where, for example, younger users receive more guidance and clearer privacy protection. In comparison, older users are given tools to filter irrelevant or misleading content.

It is important to understand the differences between different age groups within this target group to identify the risks that exist and find measures to ensure that each individual can use social media without experiencing anxiety. It is not just a question of reducing the negative impact that social media can have, but also of maximising the positive aspects.

RQ 2: Is there a link between active use of fitness apps and achieving an unhealthy body ideal?

The background to the second research question is to understand and see if there is a pattern among young girls of using fitness apps and having a negative view of their bodies. At a time when young people's mental health is a growing social challenge, it is important to understand which digital tools influence self-image and body ideals.

Many fitness apps contain features such as calorie counters, daily reminders and social feeds where users share pictures of their progress. These features can contribute to a culture of pressure to perform, where the body is constantly measured and evaluated based on these features.

This question helps the study identify whether the use of technology itself contributes to body dissatisfaction or whether fitness influencers create pressure to achieve an unhealthy body ideal through, for example, social features in apps that affect their body image. Fitness influencers are often highly credible role models, which can reinforce unattainable ideals.

Their presence in apps or social media connections can reinforce the pressure on young girls to emulate a particular lifestyle, which can negatively affect their body image. If a link between the use of fitness-related apps and body dissatisfaction is identified, the focus should shift to the creators behind the app. Should the app have a warning system or an age restriction? Do developers have a responsibility to prevent these problems?

RQ 3: How are exercise habits related to the self-image of young women using social media?

Research question three has been chosen to understand and investigate whether young women's self-image is greatly influenced by both fitness culture and the content they are exposed to on social media. In an era of idealised body images and a constant struggle to achieve the “perfect body”, fitness-related content on social media platforms such as TikTok and Instagram is also abundant and has become normalised. Young women are then exposed to daily workout routines and “before and after” pictures. At the same time, it is important to note that fitness culture on social media not only has negative consequences but fitness content can also inspire young girls to adopt healthier habits and boost their self-esteem. That is why it is crucial to understand how this type of content is interpreted and affects young girls, not least to be able to distinguish between what is empowering and what risks causing harm.

This research question is partly based on theories such as social comparison and objectification, highlighting how repeated exposure to idealised bodies can lead individuals to evaluate themselves based on external ideals rather than internal qualities. Repeated exposure can, in turn, have a negative impact on self-image, especially during a phase of life when individuals are still developing. Research in this area can provide insights into the positive and negative aspects of how young women view themselves in relation to exercise and content on social media. The results may be significant for everything from work in health and education to the design of social media platforms. However, they may also increase awareness and communication among influencers and creators.

Contribution

This study contributes to further research on how different forms of technology use and media consumption relate to an individual's self-image in the context of body ideals. By distinguishing between the functional use of fitness apps and the more visually driven exposure to social media influencers, the study has contributed important research on the factors that are more closely linked to respondents' experiences of pressure, anxiety and insecurity.

The results provide a practical contribution to contemporary discussions on the mental health of the sample group of women aged 18-35 and the impact of social media. For example, they can be used as a basis for drawing attention to the risks of being exposed to certain types of content in social media, while highlighting that technology does not have to be negative in itself, but can function neutrally or supportively depending on how it is used. The study can thus also serve as a first step for further research or as a knowledge base in health promotion work aimed at women aged 18-35.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical starting points

2.1.1 Social media usage and TikTok

According to the Internet Foundation (2024), almost all Swedes use social media, 94 percent have done so at some point, and 84 percent use it daily. Use is particularly widespread among younger generations, but has declined among the oldest internet users. The most popular platforms are YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat and LinkedIn. TikTok, Flashback, X (formerly Twitter) and Pinterest are used by about one-fifth of the population. However, there is little practical use for newer platforms such as Threads and Bluesky. Many Swedes view social media as something positive. It helps them stay in touch with friends and family, create a sense of community and enables new acquaintances and interest groups. At the same time, a significant proportion of people experience negative effects. Four out of ten think they spend too much time on social media, and many say they often compare themselves to others in a way that negatively affects their self-esteem. Feelings of anxiety and loneliness are widespread, especially when seeing other people's seemingly perfect lives on social media (Internetstiftelsen, 2024).

However, it is important to remember that there are mental health problems linked to the type of use and the material that children and young people are exposed to. Children and young people who use social media for more than three hours a day are twice as likely to suffer from mental health problems, such as anxiety and symptoms of depression (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2023).

The report shows that social media still has a strong presence in the everyday lives of Swedes, but that its use brings both social benefits and psychological challenges. The roles of the platforms and the behaviour of users continue to change, and new players are trying to gain a foothold, albeit with varying degrees of success (Internetstiftelsen, 2024).

Platforms such as TikTok, with over 1.6 billion users, TikTok has become one of the most popular social media platforms in the world. Approximately 14% of users are under the age of 18. Given TikTok's strong influence on young audiences and its promotion of behaviour

through trendy music and comedy, it is important to investigate TikTok's potential impact on young people's eating habits (Munro et al., 2024). Teenagers aged 10 to 19 make up almost 40% of TikTok's user base, making them one of the platform's most leading demographic groups.

This underscores TikTok's strong appeal among younger audiences, who use the app for entertainment, socialising and creative self-expression (Haenlein et al., 2020).

TikTok's signature For You Page (FYP) serves as the platform's central mechanism for content discovery and user engagement. Unlike traditional social media feeds, which prioritise content from friends or specific users that are followed, the FYP is algorithmically organised and delivers a continuous stream of videos tailored to individual users' behaviour and preferences, based primarily on videos that users have liked, commented on and saved. This design allows content from a wide variety of creators, including those the user does not follow, providing a new opportunity for visibility. While this system increases content variety and virality, it also means that users have less control over what they are exposed to, increasing the likelihood that they will encounter potentially harmful or unfiltered material. These include videos that promote unrealistic beauty ideals, appearance-based comparisons, and fitness content that can reinforce narrow and often unattainable body ideals. The algorithm's emphasis on engagement metrics over content quality or well-being may inadvertently reinforce such problematic trends, making it important to consider the psychological and social consequences of TikTok's recommendation system (Raiter et al., 2023).

Because of this, it creates a problem for young girls. As mentioned earlier, young women are more negatively affected by social media because girls become more susceptible to influences on how they look and how they 'should be' than men do. It is not just something you go and scroll through occasionally, but a large part of life and everyday life, which is why the consequences should be studied.

2.1.2 Body image

Body image refers to an individual's perception of their own body, including thoughts, feelings and behaviours related to appearance, shape and weight. This self-image can be both positive and negative and is influenced by a range of factors, including social norms and the

media (Dureau et al., 2022). Body image is formed early in life and is influenced by both individual and societal factors. It is not only about how we see ourselves, but also about our desire for acceptance from those around us, including family and friends (Johnston, 2010). A negative body image can lead to a distorted perception of one's own body and contribute to feelings of shame, anxiety and self-doubt. People who are dissatisfied with their appearance are also more likely to compare themselves to others and perceive themselves as inadequate, which can increase the risk of depression, isolation and low self-esteem (Von Spreckelsen et al., 2018).

Previous research has shown that women often feel more insecure about their bodies and are more influenced by fitness influencers on social media (Dureau et al., 2022). However, the same study showed that male users did not experience this influence to the same extent. However, another study by Tiggermann and Anderberg (2020) found that men exposed to fitness content on social media reported reduced body satisfaction afterwards. In contrast, this effect was not observed when they were exposed to fashion posts. This suggests that men can also be negatively affected by fitness-related content, although research in this area is limited.

A study from Sejfer (2025) indicates that social media is increasing pressure on women's appearance. Researchers at a European university analysed data from over 10,000 women aged 18 to 35. The results showed that 33% of participants felt pressured to change something about their appearance, such as their weight, skin, or clothing, after viewing images and content on social media. Participants specifically identified filters and retouching tools as contributing to feelings of inadequacy.

According to an article published in *Aftonbladet* by Elmegård (2025), a significant majority of women in Sweden, specifically 79%, report feeling that social media contributes to increased pressure to conform to specific beauty standards and appearance ideals. This trend is also evident among younger individuals, with 71% of girls aged 10 to 17 expressing similar concerns. These findings place Sweden in third place in the global ranking of countries where social media is perceived to have the most significant influence on appearance-related pressure, following only South Africa and Brazil in this regard.

A comparison between the sexes shows that women generally experience a poorer body image and lower body satisfaction after being exposed to fashion and sexualised content from influencers. This influence can lead to a negative mood and, in some cases, increase the risk

of eating disorders (Prichard et al., 2023). However, it is important to note that there are relatively few studies on how men are affected by exposure to idealised body images on social media and how this affects their body perception (Tiggemann and Anderberg, 2020).

The article ‘What Historical Ideals of Women's Shapes Teach Us About Women's Self-Perception and Body Decisions Today’ (Ngo, 2019) discusses how body ideals have changed over time and how these changes have affected women's self-image and decisions about their bodies. The article also discusses and argues that these historical ideals continue to influence today's society, highlighting the importance of viewing the body as a source of individual strength rather than trying to conform to an idealised body image.

A timeline allows us to follow and see how women's bodies have gone through different ‘trends’ from 1910 to 2020, where we can see that the female body is constantly being given a new ideal to fit into and that major role models such as Marilyn Monroe and Kim Kardashian are an influential factor in how women view themselves. Another contributing factor to body image and self-image is how the fashion industry shapes self-image by using models who fit into the existing ideal (Ngo, 2019). The transition from traditional media such as television and advertising to social media has led to the influence of the idealised body ideal becoming more direct and constant, with social media becoming a forum for young people who are constantly fed images of ‘the perfect body,’ which becomes a direct comparison unlike in previous decades. Beauty ideals are nothing new; they have existed throughout history, but it is clear that they have changed over the decades. One difference that can be observed today that did not exist 50 years ago is that today's ideals are often heavily edited and retouched, which does not provide a fair representation of the female body (Ngo, 2019).

Although there has been some progress with the emergence of body positivity, it is clear that the dominant ideal is still to be slim and fit, and bodies like these are often rewarded with more likes and followers on social media. There is an ongoing movement towards acceptance of all bodies, but at the same time, it is clear that the ‘old’ ideal still has a negative influence on many young people.

2.1.3 Fitness Influencer & Fitspiration

Fitness Influencers create social media content that focuses on exercise, health, and an active lifestyle (Li et al., 2023). Their posts are often characterised by an idealised image of the

body, with men typically highlighting a fit and muscular physique while women usually showcase a slim and athletic figure. Research suggests that this type of portrayal can impact how followers perceive their bodies and self-esteem. Therefore, it is crucial to identify methods to mitigate the potential negative consequences of this exposure (Li et al., 2023).

On Instagram and other social media platforms, the hashtag #Fitspiration is frequently used by fitness influencers to share photos and videos of themselves exercising or offering health-related advice. Initially, the purpose of the hashtag was to inspire a healthier lifestyle, but unfortunately, these social media connections have led to a misleading image. Rather than simply promoting wellbeing and motivation, the content has contributed to many followers experiencing a deterioration in body image and an increase in dissatisfaction with their appearance (Willoughby et al., 2023).

According to Hu (2018), *fitspiration* is a combination of the words "*fitness*" and "*inspiration*," and the trend aims to motivate people to adopt a healthier lifestyle. At the same time, this type of content can have a negative impact on followers' self-image, as they often compare themselves to influencers and feel pressure to change their bodies and lifestyles. In some cases, this influence can lead to serious consequences, such as eating disorders. However, it is rarely the influencer's intention to harm their followers; their goal is rather to inspire better health (Hu, 2018).

Fioravanti and Switcher (2023) explain that the *fitspiration* trend emerged as a healthier alternative to *thinspiration*, a movement that focused on weight loss and glorified extreme thinness through unhealthy ideals. In *fitspiration* content, models are often portrayed as more muscular rather than just thin, and they represent ordinary women to a greater extent, which means that followers tend to compare themselves more with them than with traditional magazine models. Although the aim is to motivate people to be healthy, exposure to *fitspiration* is linked to adverse effects, including body dissatisfaction, lower self-perceived attractiveness, reduced self-esteem related to appearance, unhealthy eating behaviours, and negative emotional states.

It is widely recognised that media portrayals of a thin ideal, which emphasise and glorify the ultra-thin body ideal, play a significant role in the development of eating disorders and negative body image. These general media messages and visuals are frequently internalised by individuals, especially among vulnerable populations, and have garnered substantial

scholarly attention. This internalisation process is now considered a significant risk factor contributing to the onset of disordered eating behaviours. The general pressure to attain these often unrealistic body ideals has escalated dramatically, and thinness has increasingly become associated with attractiveness and social success, factors that can have harmful psychological effects on individuals (Homan, 2010).

According to Homan (2010), interventions aimed at reducing the internalisation of the thin ideal, especially for those who use technologies, such as smartwatches, have been shown to be more prone to psychological disorders. In particular, such programs have also been linked to lower feelings of body dissatisfaction, as well as more restrictive dieting behaviors and also showing symptoms associated with bulimic pathology. These findings suggest that both dieting and body dissatisfaction are closely linked to the degree of internalisation of the thinness ideal, making them important risk factors for the development of eating disorders in the future.

The “fitspiration” trend has gained significant visibility on TikTok, reflecting its growing influence within the digital fitness culture. A recent search on the platform revealed that videos tagged with the #fitspo hashtag had garnered a total of over 991.4 million views, while those with the #fitspiration hashtag had accumulated over 106 million views. These figures demonstrate the significant impact and viral nature of the trend among users, as well as its power. Given the thoroughly documented negative effects of still-image fitspiration content on platforms like Instagram, particularly its damaging impact on women's body image, it becomes increasingly important to investigate how video-based fitspiration on TikTok may shape similar or differing body image concerns. The video content's dynamic and performative nature could amplify or alter these effects. However, examining the potential role of non-appearance-related factors, such as performance goals, strength-building, or mental well-being, in reducing the harmful impact of appearance-centric content may offer meaningful insights. Such an investigation is crucial for developing holistic and health-oriented approaches to online fitness inspiration (Pryde and Prichard, 2022).

The study (Couto and Willoughby, 2023) employed a qualitative method, utilising interviews with several young women. The study aimed to gain a deeper understanding of how and why young women are influenced by social media influencers, rather than simply measuring the extent of their influence. The results showed that many participants in the study stated they were negatively affected by following influencers, specifically fitness accounts, and that this

made them feel inadequate in comparison to the ideals presented by these accounts. They compared themselves to influencers who displayed perfect bodies and appearances, and the study shows how exposure to idealised images can contribute to increased anxiety, low self-esteem and, in some cases, eating disorders and body dysmorphia. Although some participants were aware that the images had been retouched or staged, they still had a subconscious effect. The girls knew that the ideals were not realistic, but they still felt pressure to live up to them. The study showed that some girls were more affected than others, depending on their previous self-esteem. In contrast, girls with higher self-esteem were better able to distance themselves from the content and question its authenticity. However, they still felt some influence, especially on an emotional level.

2.1.4 Influencer Marketing & Micro, Macro Influencer

A social media influencer (SMI) is also sometimes referred to as an Instagram celebrity, micro-celebrity, or social media star (Massi et al., 2024).

Influencer marketing has become a popular marketing strategy for brands and companies aiming to engage with consumers through social media influencers. However, marketing researchers have recently become more interested in influencer marketing, and little is known about influencers' content and engagement strategy and how their engagements relate to their followers' behaviours (Tafesse and Wood, 2021).

Influencers are recognised for their ability to interact with their audience, their management of content production, and their enthusiasm for their brands. As part of their job, influencers often collaborate with brands on sponsored posts, creating marketing materials and engaging content that resonates with their target audience. The influencer's close relationship with their followers makes this marketing method especially successful, as it fosters authenticity and trust, which can significantly increase brand awareness and customer engagement (Leung et al., 2021).

The influencer marketing industry is expected to reach \$9.7 billion in 2020, accounting for approximately 5% of the \$250 billion internet advertising market. As a result, two-thirds of businesses intend to increase their spending on influencer marketing in the upcoming year,

and 80% anticipate allocating at least 10% of their marketing budget to it (Haenlein et al., 2020).

As mentioned in Haenlein et al. (2020), Gucci changed its marketing strategies for the launch of its new fragrance line, Gucci Bloom. They decided to use 23 influencers to create marketing materials for them on social media. With 135 pieces of content produced and approximately 750,000 followers, the campaign generated substantial awareness. Some of the generated footage was even included on Gucci's Facebook page and website.

However, it is essential to remember that Influencers, from the beginning, were once normal social media users who now have a strong connection and interactions with their followers. Nevertheless, some influencers have employed dishonest tactics, such as purchasing fake likes and followers, due to pressure to demonstrate the impact of their brands (Tafesse and Wood, 2021).

While various labels know social media influencers, it remains unclear whether an influencer's effectiveness is directly correlated with their number of followers. Researchers often categorise influencers into two primary groups based on audience size: the first one is micro-influencers, who typically have a smaller yet more engaged following, and the second one is macro-influencers, who possess a significantly larger reach but may experience lower engagement rates (Kay et al., 2020).

These contrasts raise essential questions about the nature and extent of influence each group applies. Micro-influencers are often perceived as more relatable and trustworthy, fostering closer connections with their audience, leading to higher interaction and perceived authenticity. In contrast, macro-influencers benefit from greater visibility and broader reach, allowing their content to be seen by a wider audience. Given these contrasting dynamics, higher engagement versus broader exposure, it is critical to explore which group has a more substantial impact on follower attitudes and behaviours. Understanding this balance between reach and engagement can provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of influencer marketing strategies across different contexts (Kay et al., 2020).

2.1.5 Objectification and self-objectification:

It is difficult to ignore how discussions about healthy lifestyles and social media content about exercise and nutrition have contributed to a negative body image among young girls worldwide. *Fitspiration* has become a global phenomenon, with many young people seeking inspiration on platforms like Instagram for tips on exercise, diet, and healthy living. This has led to the emergence of large fitness accounts, where many profiles claim to motivate followers to adopt a healthier lifestyle. Despite this, their content often results in followers developing a negative self-image and feeling that they are not good enough as they are.

A study by Willoughby et al. (2023) found that more than half of the health-related posts on these accounts contained elements of objectification, which had a negative rather than a positive effect on the target audience. The study was conducted through a content analysis, in which the researchers randomly reviewed posts from four popular fitness accounts over one year, targeting young women in the United States. The analysis was based on a coding system that linked the posts to different health promotion strategies. The results showed that although young women visit *fitspiration* accounts to find motivation to exercise and eat more healthily, exposure often leads to a poorer body image rather than inspiration (Willoughby et al., 2023).

2.1.6 Body positive and fitness influencer:

In today's society, *body positivity* has grown into a significant movement that advocates acceptance and appreciation of bodies of all shapes, sizes and appearances. The movement is based on the principles of diversity, equality and inclusion and strives to promote a culture of self-love, respect and self-acceptance (Griffin et al., 2022). Body positivity is both a social movement and a philosophy of life that encourages people to have a positive attitude towards their bodies, regardless of society's beauty ideals. It emphasises the importance of accepting all body types, especially those that have historically deviated from dominant norms. The main goal of the movement is to challenge unrealistic body ideals and strengthen individuals' self-confidence, self-love and acceptance, regardless of shape, size, gender or physical condition.

Although body positivity emphasises that all bodies are of equal value, a paradox arises within the fitness world. While the movement advocates acceptance, the fitness industry often focuses on performance and change. This creates an opportunity for fitness influencers to

produce more inclusive content by highlighting different body types, emphasising health over appearance and questioning narrow beauty ideals. Studies have shown that young people use social media more than older people and that women are most affected by this (*Social Media | Swedes and the Internet*, 2024), so fitness influencers should adapt their content to be more inclusive for everyone. By acknowledging the roots of the body positivity movement in the struggles of marginalised groups, influencers can contribute to a more nuanced discussion and inspire their followers to exercise for well-being rather than solely for aesthetics (Griffin et al., 2022).

2.2 Technology within fitness

2.2.1 Weight control apps and health

Viktväktarna uses the Body Mass Index (BMI) to assess an individual's health status by relating body weight to height. Although this measure is easy to use and is often used in health contexts, it has some limitations that can make it misleading. This is because BMI does not consider the composition of weight, such as muscle mass, body fat percentage or body build, meaning that people with high muscle mass may be classified as overweight despite being in good physical shape. The Swedish National Food Agency has also recognised these shortcomings and points out that BMI is unreliable or inaccurate for all population groups. Among other things, it is considered less suitable for assessing the health of children, older people or individuals who exercise a lot and thus have a different body composition than the average (Blomberg, 2022).

The article 'Hård kritik mot Viktväktarna' from Aftonbladet highlights concerns that Viktväktarna's weight loss programme may contribute to the development of eating disorders, particularly among young and normal weight individuals. Dietician Gisela van der Ster, who works for the association Anorexi/Bulimi-Kontakt, believes that the programme can act as a gateway to eating disorders by promoting a fixation on food weighing and weight control. She criticises the fact that Viktväktarna allows people with little or no excess weight to participate, which can lead to unhealthy behaviours such as binge eating (Almqvist, 2003).

Bo Mårtensson, chairman of the Swedish Obesity Federation, agrees with the criticism, claiming that the programme can cause weight gain after the diet is completed due to a

lowered metabolism. He believes that Viktväktarna, as a commercial enterprise, sometimes prioritises financial gain over the health of participants (Almqvist, 2003).

According to 1177 Vårdguiden (2022), physical activity is crucial for physical and mental health. Regular exercise has been shown to improve energy levels, physical strength, and sleep quality, and reduce the risk of serious diseases, such as cardiovascular disease, certain forms of cancer, and mental illness. Furthermore, physical activity helps strengthen muscles and bones, improves balance, and reduces the risk of falls, especially in older adults. Activity also positively impacts cognitive functions such as memory and concentration, and can facilitate stress management. It is recommended to avoid prolonged sedentary behaviour and to engage in at least 30 minutes of heart rate-increasing physical activity daily, which can be divided into shorter sessions. All forms of movement are beneficial, and it is never too late to start being physically active.

Using fitness-related applications or smartwatches presents a marketing opportunity to encourage users to adopt a more active lifestyle and incorporate more fitness and wellness into their daily lives. However, a study by Anderberg et al. (2025) discusses the effectiveness of fitness applications, noting a proven point that some users experienced a change in their weight-loss journey, although others reported a greater loss, potentially due to the exploration of eating disorders. It was also shown that users who had already experienced a negative body image were more likely to increase their unhealthy view of their body image.

Individuals with disordered eating may also engage in compulsive exercise, which is characterised by an uncontrollable urge to work out and often results in intense feelings of guilt or shame when they are unable to accomplish these goals.

Compulsive exercise, as a compensatory behaviour and form of disordered eating, has been associated with decreased quality of life, poorer mental health outcomes, and is a fundamental feature of certain eating disorders, especially Anorexia (Anderberg et al., 2025).

Moreover, Anderberg et al. (2025) found that individuals who use healthy lifestyle applications exhibit significantly higher levels of drive for thinness and are more likely to engage in excessive exercise compared to those who do not use these kinds of applications. It was also shown that women who used a greater number of weight-related self-monitoring applications reported engaging in more disordered behaviours, such as fasting, skipping

meals, using supplements, and compulsive exercise, compared to those who did not use such apps.

2.2.2 Fitness wearable devices

In 2021, over 171 million product shipments of wearable devices were made worldwide. A study by Boldi (2024) found that self-tracking devices may exacerbate pre-existing psychological conditions associated with body image. For example, users experiencing negative body image may be negatively impacted by a heavy focus on numbers and calorie visualisation.

However, it was shown that people with fitness wearables, such as Fitbit, experienced negative outcomes and positive results. A group of adolescents who wore a Fitbit for five weeks saw a reduction in body dissatisfaction, as determined by the BMI-based Silhouette Matching Test (Boldi, 2024).

A study by Blackstone and Herrmann (2020) demonstrated that motivation from wearable devices is associated with increased physical activity. Real-time monitoring with instant feedback encourages self-monitoring and goal-setting behaviours. However, concerns have arisen regarding the use of wearables for young people and their promotion in health education.

In Blackstone and Herrmann's (2020) study, it was also shown that among participants who used wearable devices, nearly 70% reported engaging in at least one compensatory behaviour to meet a step goal, while 50% did so to achieve a caloric output goal. Compensatory behaviours in response to not meeting a step goal were significantly linked to exercise dependence, particularly by increasing strong physical activity and restricting food intake the following day.

2.2.3 Summary:

To summarise and link the above theoretical starting points to the research questions, body image can be defined as each individual's perception of their own body, which encompasses everything from feelings and thoughts about the body to behaviours related to body shape and weight. It is not just about how we see ourselves, but also about wanting to be accepted by

others. Body image is formed at an early age and can be influenced by various factors, including family and close friends, as well as social norms and the media's influence (Durau et al., 2022). A negative body image can increase the risk of developing a distorted view and perception of one's own body, which can lead to feelings of shame and anxiety. People who are dissatisfied with their appearance and how their body looks are more likely to start comparing themselves to others (Von Spreckelsen et al., 2018). Research has shown that women are more likely to experience insecurity about their appearance and are more easily and strongly influenced by fitness influencers on social media (Durau et al., 2022). This problem also exists among men, but the influence is not as strong as among women, which is why it is more relevant to investigate how women are affected. Using RQ1, *'Is there a correlation between age and social media use among girls aged 18–35?'*, this study aims to identify at what age the problem arises to understand where measures need to be taken.

'Thinspiration' is a common hashtag on platforms such as TikTok and Instagram. It is a topic that glorifies an unhealthy body image on social media, a hashtag that can influence young girls to develop unhealthy relationships with food. As mentioned earlier, 'Fitspiration' is also a term that has emerged on social media, especially Instagram, aiming to inspire people to live healthier lives (Fioravanti and Switcher, 2023). Compared to 'Thinspiration,' "Fitspiration" is seen as a 'more positive' alternative to 'Thinspiration,' but what is the difference? If the user searches for the hashtag on Instagram, for example, they will see muscular bodies and slim figures in the same way that the user sees slim bodies if they search for 'Thinspiration', which can inspire people but also have an intentional negative effect by making people feel pressured to achieve the ideal presented.

The effect of #thinspiration and #fitspiration is that they create a diet culture on social media. Although fitness influencers may show health-related content, they often contribute to maintaining the diet culture. Their followers may feel pressured to adopt restrictive eating habits to fit into society's beauty ideals (Tiusanen, 2022). Diet culture can be seen as an emphasis on weight loss, and this emphasis can contribute to unhealthy behaviours such as low-calorie diets or compulsive exercise. As these hashtags have become increasingly prevalent on social media, it is essential to understand which age group is most likely to encounter this content and is most affected by it. Being constantly exposed to images and clips of slim and toned bodies on social media can lead to intense training, which was previously viewed as primarily related to health but has increasingly become a tool for

achieving these ideals. The boundaries between what is healthy and what is not are becoming increasingly blurred, which is why this study, through RQ3: *How are exercise habits related to the self-image of young women using social media*, seeks to determine whether there is still a boundary or whether it has been blurred and become more appearance-based.

Another movement that has emerged on social media is the Body Positive movement, which advocates that all body types, regardless of appearance, should be accepted. The goal is to challenge society's ideals of what one should look like in order to create a healthier view of the body. However, this movement faces an even greater challenge in the fitness world, where the ideal is currently to be slim and have well-defined muscles (Griffin et al., 2022).

For this reason, it is essential to explore this issue, while also acknowledging the responsibility that fitness influencers have to promote more inclusive content by highlighting diverse body types and prioritising health over appearance.

Micro- and macro-influencers: Micro-influencers typically have fewer but more engaged followers, while macro-influencers have a larger reach but lower engagement levels (Kay et al., 2020). Both have a significant impact on social media in the fitness world in terms of influencing and shaping their followers' exercise habits and lifestyle. Micro-influencers, who are perceived as more credible, can have a negative impact on their followers precisely because they have a closer relationship with them. However, they also have a great responsibility to share credible content. Macro-influencers, on the other hand, can quickly spread new trends, such as new forms of exercise or diets. Regardless of whether they influence each other in different ways, it is important to note that both have a great responsibility for what they choose to share on social media.

Research shows that digital training tools, such as apps and wearable devices, can have both positive and negative effects on individuals' health (Anderberg et al., 2025). They can motivate increased physical activity and better health habits, but they can also increase unhealthy behaviours. Studies by Anderberg et al. (2025) and Boldi (2024) show that the use of fitness apps and weight-related features can be linked to compulsive exercise and the pursuit of a slim body. It is also noted that women who use multiple apps tend to report more disturbed eating behaviours and fixation on their bodies. Combined with criticism of methods such as BMI and Weight Watchers and the risk of creating an unhealthy focus on weight rather than well-being, it is clear that there is a problem here. Therefore, this study was

conducted to address *RQ2: Is there a link between the active use of fitness apps and the achievement of an unhealthy body ideal*, specifically to investigate whether such a link exists.

Who is affected by this? In a broader sense, everyone is affected, but it is particularly worrying for the younger generation. Teenagers often turn to social media for validation. However, given how influencers share harmful content and how they build a culture on social media, this validation can instead lead to dissatisfaction with one's own body and appearance. Exposure to content that promotes restrictive diets or extreme exercise goals can lead to eating disorders and depression (Kay et al., 2020). There are positive benefits to fitness influencers if they share encouraging health messages, but they can also have negative consequences. It is essential to strike a balance between motivation and messages that acknowledge that all bodies are unique and different.

3. Method

3.1 Survey as a method

Surveys are a good method for conducting surveys at universities, thanks to their efficiency and accessibility, and also because they are a cost-effective alternative to collecting data. They are particularly useful when collecting data from a large number of people in a short period, especially when resources are limited. Using standardised questions for all participants minimises the risk that the collected responses will be influenced by factors such as an interview, which can be affected by the interviewer's behaviour or interpretation. Additionally, surveys facilitate quantitative analysis, making it easier to draw general conclusions and identify trends. Surveys can also be distributed relatively easily digitally by sharing them on social media to broaden the geographical sample (Berger, 2016).

Despite this, there are, of course, certain limitations. There is a risk that respondents may provide superficial answers, especially if the questions are unclear or if they are not motivated to provide accurate answers. Additionally, a low response rate can also affect the results. It is, therefore, important to choose a method based on the purpose of the survey. A questionnaire is particularly useful in this study, as it aims to obtain broad and measurable responses from a large number of people.

3.2 Participants

The research will focus on women belonging to two generational groups: millennials, born between 1980 and 1995, and iGen, also known as Generation Z, born between 1995 and 2012. This classification is based on the generational framework outlined by Twenge (2018).

A study from Sejfer (2025) indicates that social media is increasing pressure on women's appearance. Researchers at a European university analysed data from over 10,000 women aged 18 to 35. The results showed that 33% felt pressured to change something about their appearance, such as their weight, skin, or clothes, after viewing images and content on social media. Participants specifically identified filters and retouching tools as contributing to feelings of inadequacy.

According to an article in Aftonbladet by Elmegård (2025), 79% of women and 71% of girls aged 10 to 17 in Sweden confirm that social media reinforces the pressure to follow certain appearance ideals. This places Sweden in third place, after South Africa and Brazil, in this aspect.

In conclusion, these studies show that social media play a significant role in increasing pressure on women's appearance by promoting unrealistic beauty ideals, affecting both their self-image and mental health.

3.3 Sampling

The study used a non-random sample with elements of snowball sampling. The survey was disseminated via the researchers' own social media channels, including TikTok, where a humorous video was posted. The video reached over 20,000 views and over 500 likes. The video encouraged viewers to click on the link in the biography, which contained the link to the survey. The video grew organically, allowing a wide variety of participants to be reached, even outside the researchers' networks.

A total of 721 responses were collected. Participants represented only women aged 18–35. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, and participants received the necessary information regarding the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).

As the sample was not random, and the composition of the sample cannot be fully controlled, there are some limitations to generalisability. It is likely that people with a particular interest in exercise, social media or body image are more likely to have chosen to participate.

3.4 Data analysis

The survey was conducted through the kau.se platform, utilising its dedicated survey and report tool to ensure a smooth and efficient data collection process. All respondents are anonymous, and the platform adheres to correct GDPR standards. Once the responses were gathered, the dataset was exported and transferred to the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) for a complete analysis. Within SPSS, the data were analysed and visually represented through charts and graphs. In addition, three different comparison tables were created to examine the relationships and differences between the different variables.

SPSS enabled statistical analysis by offering a wide range of validated analysis methods accessible through the intuitive menu system. Through the SPSS approach, the risk of human factor errors was minimised, as users do not have to manually enter the complex formulas into individual cells. Instead, the software automates these processes, in this case directly via Kau survey and report, ensuring accuracy and reliability throughout the analytical workflow (Wahlgren, 2022).

In this survey, most of the variables were nominal and dichotomous, meaning they consisted of categories with no inherent order and only two possible response options. In practical terms, this meant that respondents were typically asked to choose between simple alternatives such as "Yes" or "No." This type of question format is common in surveys that aim to gather clear, straightforward data about attitudes, behaviours, or experiences. While easy to analyse, dichotomous variables also limit the depth of responses, as they do not allow for variation or degrees of agreement (Harrison et al., 2021).

The survey also included ordinal variables, which are characterised by response categories that have a meaningful order or ranking. In this case, respondents were asked to choose from five different categories, allowing for varying degrees of agreement, frequency, or intensity, depending on the question. Unlike nominal variables, ordinal variables provide insight not only into what category a respondent falls into but also into the relative position of that category compared to others (Bryman, 2011).

When analysing the relationship between two categorical variables in SPSS, the Chi-square test is often used in conjunction with the Phi and Cramér's V effect size measures. These measures indicate the strength of the relationship, rather than just whether it is statistically significant.

The Phi coefficient is used when both variables are dichotomous (two categories each) and acts as a correlation measure (value between 0 and 1, where 0 = no correlation and 1 = strong correlation). For larger tables (more than 2x2), Cramér's V is used, which is an adapted version of Phi and takes into account the dimensions of the table. It is also interpreted as a value between 0 and 1.

In SPSS, these measures are obtained automatically if both 'Chi²' and 'Phi and Cramer's V' are selected in the cross-tabulation window. Interpretation should always be done in

conjunction with the Chi-squared result to understand both whether an association exists and its strength (Harrison et al., 2021).

3.4.1 Data collection errors

However, in this analysis, some variables needed to be combined due to a mistake in the survey, where the respondents was supposed only to choose one of the alternatives on the multiple choice questions, however, this was not the case and the respondents could choose multiple choices, due to this, it was needed to have changes in the variables, so they were mapped into ordinal variables, and the variables were:

What age group do you belong to?

How often do you use social media?,

How often do you exercise, if at all?

To what extent do you agree with the following statement: I feel pressured to adapt my body to the ideals shown by fitness influencers.

To what extent do you agree with the following statement: When I see content from fitness influencers, I often compare my body with theirs.

3.5 Pilot test

Before distributing the survey to the wider target group, a small pilot study was conducted to ensure the clarity, relevance, and functionality of the questions in the digital survey tool. Three people from different backgrounds were asked to complete the survey and provide feedback on its content and structure.

Participants were asked to note any uncertainty in the questions, technical issues, and provide general feedback on the length and language of the survey. The feedback was collected through informal conversations after they completed the survey. This type of qualitative feedback was used to make minor adjustments before sending the survey to the actual target group.

The adjustments made after the pilot study were primarily linguistic, including rephrasing certain questions to avoid uncertainty and clarifying instructions in the questionnaire

introduction. Additionally, a technical issue was identified in the survey tool, where a multiple-choice question option did not function as intended. This issue was resolved before publication; however, it was later noticed that some of the multiple-choice questions still did not function as intended.

The purpose of the pilot study was not to statistically analyse the results, but to ensure that the survey instrument was suitable for data collection. Although the sample was very small, the pilot study helped to improve the quality and reliability of the questionnaire, which in turn strengthens the validity of the study.

3.6 Data management and GDPR

The web-based survey tool Survey and Report was used to collect data. This tool was chosen because it complies with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and has been approved by Karlstad University for research involving the processing of personal data. According to Karlstad University (2024), the GDPR is a set of rules that aims to protect people's right to have their personal data protected, especially in a time when digital information management is so common. The survey was shared through both hyperlinks and QR codes, which helped make data collection efficient and accessible. The collected material was initially exported to Excel to enable an overall review of the respondents' answers. The data was then imported into SPSS, where further statistical processing was carried out, including visualisations and analysis of correlations between different variables.

The university's tools are carefully evaluated and comply with the EU's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), which means that personal data is stored securely on university servers. Google Forms can store data outside the EU, which creates uncertainty regarding data protection and thus poses a risk of not meeting GDPR requirements.

3.7 Reliability and Validity

During the preparatory work for designing the questionnaire, a four-column table was utilised, with each question linked to a relevant scientific source, a corresponding theoretical concept, and a clear research question. This approach served two purposes: to eliminate irrelevant or superfluous questions and to ensure that each question was theoretically grounded and relevant to the study's purpose. Linking each question to previous research and

established theories increases validity and creates a basis for reliability, as the content of the questions is supported by existing literature. The target group was selected based on previous research on social media behaviour among young women. This helped to ensure that the respondents were relevant to the focus of the study, which in turn strengthens the generalisability within the target population.

The questions in the survey have been formulated using neutral language. They are free from leading questions, which reduces the risk of systematic errors such as social desirability or interpretation effects. This contributes to increased internal reliability as it ensures that variations in the responses reflect real differences between respondents rather than flaws in the construction of the questions.

A pilot test was also conducted before the actual data collection to identify any ambiguities in the wording and verify the absence of technical or linguistic errors. This is a proven method in survey research, helping to increase the reliability of the instrument by ensuring it functions as intended before being used in data collection.

Furthermore, the study confirms patterns such as the internalisation of unrealistic body ideals and increased self-criticism as a result of exposure to fitness influencers. For example, the documentary 'Smalast vinner' (SVT, 2025), in which young women testify to negative body image issues resulting from social media and the impressions it creates. This documentary enhances the external validity of the study, suggesting that the results are not random or context-specific but rather reflect a broader societal issue. The fact that these patterns also recur in other independent sources demonstrates thematic consistency, which further strengthens the reliability of the conclusions. It makes it clear that the phenomenon studied is not isolated, but rather part of a broader structural development in which social media plays a central role in shaping the self-image and perception of young girls' bodies.

4. Results

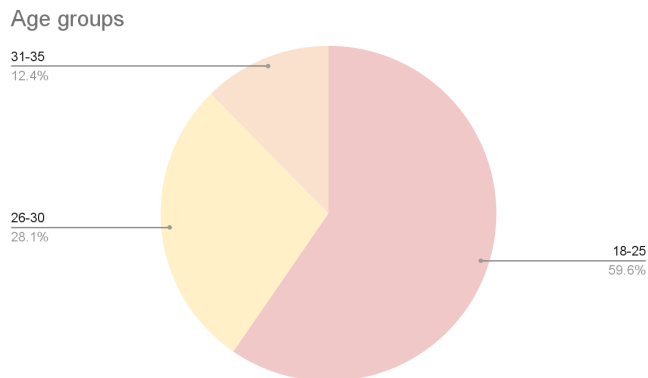


Figure 1: Age groups

For the first variable, the survey results indicated that the majority of respondents belonged to the 18-25 age group, comprising 59.6% of the total sample. In contrast, the age group with the fewest respondents was 31-35, with only 12.4%.

4.1 Research Question One: Is there a relationship between age and social media use among girls aged 18-35?

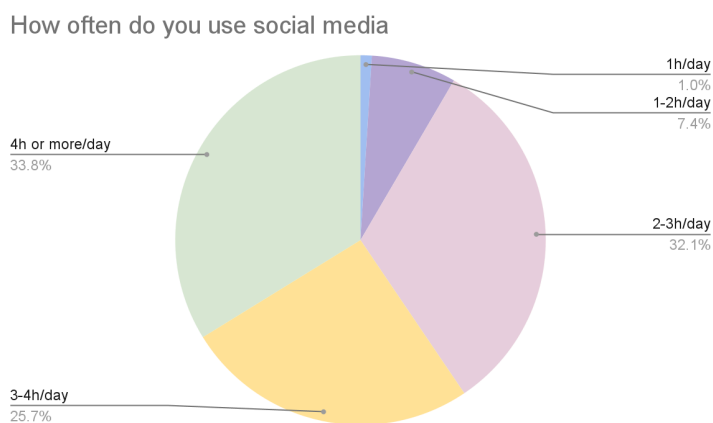


Figure 2: How often do you use social media

First and foremost, the results concerning the initial research question, “Finns det ett samband mellan ålder och användning av sociala medier hos tjejer i åldern 18-35 år?”, which translates to “Is there a relationship between age and social media use among girls aged 18-35?” The analysis revealed a statistically significant positive relationship between the variables ($\phi = .219$, $p = .003$, $N = 721$). Although the p-value indicates that the result is unlikely to be due to chance, the phi coefficient indicates that the relationship is weak. In practice, however, this

means that while the relationship exists and is statistically significant, its strength is so weak that it has limited significance for interpreting the results in a real-world context. It is also interesting to see that the majority of respondents, 33.8%, spend 4 hours or more on social media per day.

4.2 Research Question Two: Is there a link between active use of fitness apps and achieving an unhealthy body ideal?

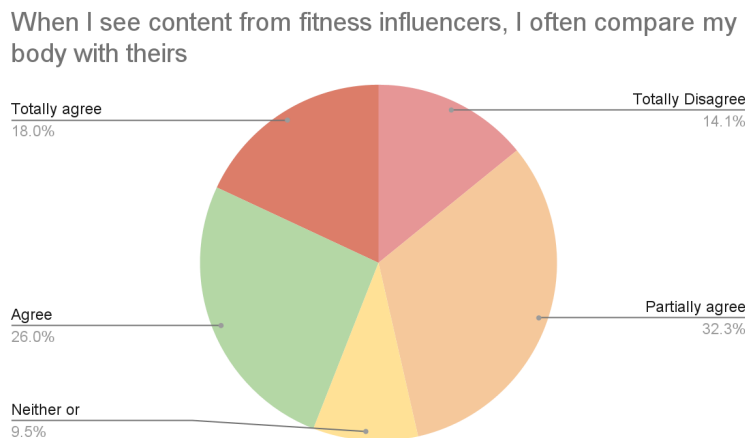


Figure 3: When I see content from fitness influencers, I often compare my body with theirs

Table 1: Research question: Is there a relationship between active use of fitness apps and self-image (level of pressure, anxiety and insecurity) in terms of striving to reach body ideals?

		Self-image/body image		
		Have you experienced anxiety or insecurity about your body because of fitness influencers?	To what extent do you agree with the following statement: I feel pressured to conform my body to the ideals shown by fitness influencers.	Have you ever felt that social media content created a sense of pressure to change your body or lifestyle?
Use of apps/technology related to training	Do you use any kind of fitness or smartwatch in your everyday life or training?	Phi = .042, $p = .263$	Cramer's V = .029, $p = .963$	Phi = .025, $p = .496$
	Do you have any fitness-related apps installed on your phone?	Phi = .028, $p = .446$	Cramer's V = .094, $p = .176$	Phi = .017, $p = .656$
	If you have a fitness app, do you actively use it?	Phi = -.007, $p = .863$	Cramer's V = .071, $p = .504$	Phi = .006, $p = .872$

The second research question investigated whether there is an association between the use of exercise-related technology (e.g., exercise apps, smartwatches) and whether their self-image, in the form of pressure, anxiety, or insecurity, can be linked to a higher pressure to conform to body ideals.

The results for research question two show no statistically significant associations between the use of technological tools for exercise and negative psychological experiences related to body ideals.

For example, the question of whether participants use any form of fitness or smartwatch in their everyday life or training showed no significant associations with experiences of anxiety about their body due to influencers ($\Phi = .042, p = .263$), nor any pressure to adapt the body to ideals (Cramér's $V = .029, p = .963$), or feeling pressure from social media ($\Phi = .025, p = .496$).

Similar results were found for the other questions about exercise apps. There was no association between having exercise apps installed on their smartphone ($\Phi = .028, p = .446$; Cramér's $V = .094, p = .176$) or active use of these apps ($\Phi = -.007, p = .863$; Cramér's $V = .071, p = .504$). The study did not show a significant association with respondents experiencing more bodily pressure, anxiety, or social media influence ($\Phi = .006, p = .872$).

As illustrated in Figure 3, the majority of respondents reported comparing their bodies to those of fitness influencers. Specifically, 32.3% partly agreed, 26% agreed, and 18% totally agreed with the statement. Instead, 14.1% indicated that they totally disagreed.

Summary of results for research question two.

The statistical analyses for research question two thus show that the use of exercise apps and related technology per se does not appear to have a clear relationship with an individual's self-image or feelings of pressure related to body ideals. The results were consistently non-significant, indicating that the use of technology for exercise, in this study's sample, is not associated with increased perceptions of anxiety, insecurity, or that respondents had increased affect around body ideals conveyed by fitness influencers.

The results of RQ1 showed no clear correlation between active use of fitness apps and the pursuit of an unhealthy body ideal among women aged 18–35. However, this result contrasts

somewhat with research from 2025, which indicates a possible correlation, suggesting that more factors should be taken into account. Anderberg et al. (2025) argue that the use of fitness apps is a marketing opportunity to encourage their audience to adopt a more active lifestyle. However, in RQ2, it was reported that users who already had a negative view of their bodies were more likely to have that image reinforced by fitness apps. The study also found that individuals who use apps for a healthy lifestyle exhibit significantly higher levels of attempts to be thin, which increases their likelihood of engaging in excessive exercise compared to those who do not use this type of app.

The differences between the results of this study and previous research underscore the need for more comprehensive research on how fitness apps impact body image, particularly given the increasing use of these apps among young women. In other words, this is a topic that warrants further research; however, it is possible that the sample in this study was not sufficiently large or varied within the 18-35 age group. Another factor that may have played a significant role is that the concept of an “unhealthy ideal” was not measured in a sufficiently nuanced manner. Although this study could not prove a link, we believe that the research question remains relevant, as it concerns a topic with a significant social impact and where previous research suggests a potentially negative effect of training technology.

4.3 Research Question Three: How are exercise habits related to the self-image of young women using social media?

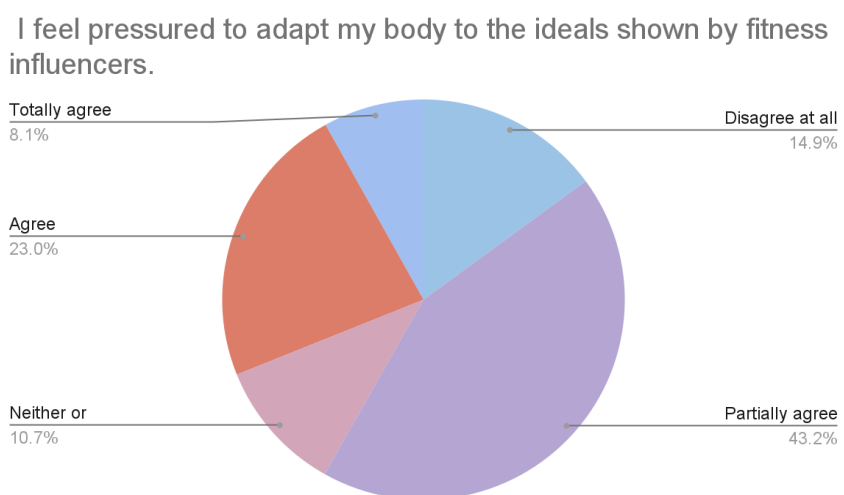


Figure 4: I feel pressured to adapt my body to the ideals shown by fitness influencers.

Table 2: Have you experienced anxiety or insecurity about your body because of fitness influencers? Yes or No, answer.

Variable	N	Percent
Have you experienced anxiety or insecurity about your body because of fitness influencers? Yes	565	78,4%
Have you experienced anxiety or insecurity about your body because of fitness influencers? No	156	21,6%
Total:	721	100%

The respondents have felt anxiety or insecurity about their bodies due to fitness influencers, as 78,4% of them answered yes. Which aligns with previous research from Hu (2018) and Willoughby et al. (2023). They explain that fitness content has a negative impact on users' body image.

Table 3: Have you ever searched for #Fitspiration or similar hashtags? Yes or No, answer

Variable	N	Percent
Have you ever searched for #Fitspiration or similar hashtags? Yes	544	75,5%
Have you ever searched for #Fitspiration or similar hashtags? No	176	24,4%
Total:	721	99,9%

In Table 3, it is shown that respondents do not frequently search for fitspiration on social media. However, as indicated in Table 4, respondents who do search for fitspiration often experience insecurity due to their body image.

Table 4: Research question: Is there a relationship between exercise habits and self-image (degree of pressure, anxiety and insecurity) in terms of striving to reach body ideals and media use of fitness influencer content on social media?

		Self-image/body image		
		Have you experienced anxiety or insecurity about your body because of fitness influencers?	To what extent do you agree with the following statement: I feel pressurised to conform my body to the ideals shown by fitness influencers.	Have you ever felt that social media content created a sense of pressure to change your body or lifestyle?
Media use and Exercise habits	How often do you use social media?	Cramer's V = .066, $p = .547$	Spearman rho = .058, $p = .122$	Cramer's V = .046, $p = .821$
	How interested are you in content from fitness influencers (e.g. on social media)	Cramer's V = .165, $p < .001$	Spearman rho = .205, $p < .001$	Cramer's V = .123, $p < .033$
	Have you ever searched for #fitspiration or similar hashtags?	Phi = .137, $p < .001$	Cramer's V = .151, $p < .003$	Phi = .078, $p < .036$
	How often do you exercise, if at all?	Cramer's V = .081, $p = .321$	Spearman rho = .048, $p = .206$	Cramer's V = .072, $p = .176$

The third research question aimed to investigate whether there is a relationship between individuals' exercise habits and their self-image (in terms of pressure, anxiety and insecurity), as well as the extent to which their media use and exposure to content from fitness influencers may exacerbate these factors.

The results indicate statistically significant associations between specific forms of media use and negative psychological experiences associated with body ideals. A clear association was found between questions about interest in content from fitness influencers and the feeling of having to adapt one's body to these ideals (Cramér's V = .165, $p < .001$; Spearman rho = -.205, $p < .001$). There was also a significant correlation between interest in fitness content and the feeling that social media created pressure to change the body or lifestyle (Cramér's V = .123, $p < .033$).

Furthermore, the results showed that individuals who actively searched for so-called 'fitspiration' content, for example via relevant hashtags, were more likely to report feeling pressure to conform to body ideals from influencers (Cramér's V = .151, $p < .003$), as well as experiencing anxiety or insecurity related to this content (Phi = .137, $p < .001$). There was also a significant association between search behaviour and the perception of pressure from social media (Cramér's V = .078, $p < .036$), although this association was relatively weak.

However, no statistically significant relationship was found between general social media use and perceived pressure, anxiety or insecurity related to body image. For example, the question of how often participants used social media showed no significant associations with any of the three variables measuring self-image (e.g. Cramér's $V = .066$, $p = .547$ for anxiety/insecurity).

It should also be taken into consideration that only 8.1% of respondents totally agreed that they felt pressured to change their body ideals due to fitness influencers. However, a larger amount, 43.2%, partly agreed, indicating that some degree of feeling pressure to change their body ideal was relatively common among the participants.

In contrast to media use, no statistically significant relationships were identified between an individual's exercise frequency and self-image or perceived pressure. Neither Cramér's V nor Spearman's ρ showed significant results concerning anxiety, ideal fit, or perceived pressure (e.g., Cramér's $V = .081$, $p = .321$; Spearman's $\rho = .048$, $p = .206$). This suggests that an individual's actual exercise habits are not directly linked to negative self-image perceptions in this sample.

Summary of research question three

Since the second research question failed to generate any new findings, these findings provided a deeper understanding of this study.

These findings align with previous research, which describes so-called 'fitspiration' content as a source of negative influence on self-image and respondents' body ideals. Although the intention of fitspiration was originally to inspire a healthier lifestyle, the increasing trend on social media has created an environment where followers often compare themselves to influencers, feeling more pressure to change their appearance, especially their body (Willoughby et al., 2023; Hu, 2018). This can, in some cases, lead to negative consequences such as body dissatisfaction, decreased self-esteem, unhealthy behaviours and in the worst case, lead to eating disorders (Fioravanti and Switcher, 2023)

Interestingly, the results showed that the exercise habits themselves, i.e. how often the respondents exercised, had no significant link to self-image or how they perceived pressure. The results show that it is not the exercise itself that seems to create the respondents' pressure or protect them from it, but rather that it is the exposure to idealised content on social media

linked to exercise and bodies that creates this pressure in the respondents. This difference emphasises how strong media content and visual ideals can influence self-image, regardless of the individual's physical habits.

4.4 Ethical consideration

Ethics has played a central role in the design of this study. It has been demonstrated that fitness influencers can influence ideals about body image and health, which in turn can impact young girls' self-image and their relationship with their bodies, both positively and negatively. This influence concerns not only mental health but also issues of self-esteem and the risk of developing an eating disorder. Researching these themes is therefore not only a socially relevant issue but also an ethical dilemma when it comes to issues such as body image and eating behaviour, without destroying harmful norms or causing psychological distress.

To address these ethical challenges, the study took into account various key principles when designing the survey questions. Respondents were informed about the purpose of the study, their rights and the confidentiality of the data collection. Furthermore, the questions were carefully formulated to address body image and the influence of influencers in a non-leading and respectful manner, aiming to avoid infringing on personal privacy and unintentionally reinforcing negative thought patterns. Asking young girls whether fitness influencers have negatively influenced them carries a risk of causing discomfort or reinforcing internalised ideals. At the same time, it is precisely by highlighting these aspects that society can understand and counteract destructive body norms. The ethical stance of this research is therefore based on the principles of respect for the individual and informed consent. We, the authors of this study, bear the responsibility of not causing harm, principles that SMER (2018) clearly emphasises as central to all ethically defensible research.

Nevertheless, according to Vetenskapsrådet (2002), there are four main principles to consider during a researcher's work. The first is that respondents should be informed that the survey is anonymous and that they can withdraw from the study at any time, as well as the purpose of the survey and the intended use of the information. This is applied in the survey conducted in this study, where respondents can read about the information at the beginning.

The second is that they should consent to the survey, which was the first step of the survey, with a yes or no answer. The third is that they are supposed to be able to end the study when they want to, and that they should not receive any negativity. The fourth rule says: “Personal data collected for research purposes may not be used for decisions or actions directly affecting the individual (care, hospitalisation, etc.) except with the specific consent of the individual concerned” (Vetenskapsrådet, 2002, s.14). This is something that the respondents did not need to feel, since it was anonymous and that they could leave the page at any time.

5. Discussion

5.1 Analysis

This study aimed to investigate how women aged 18-35, used fitness apps and how much media exposure they had and more specifically how much they were exposed to fitness content and if there could be relationships between these variables to how the individual's self-image was, in terms of how they experience pressure, anxiety and insecurity linked to body ideals. The results from RQ2 and RQ3 reveal two clear findings: while technology use in exercise, i.e., smartwatches or exercise apps, shows no significant association with negative self-image, in contrast, media exposure and an interest in fitness content exhibit a clear association with perceptions of negative self-image.

Technology use as a neutral factor (RQ2)

The consistent lack of significant associations between exercise apps, smartwatches, or similar technology and self-image-related experiences indicates that this type of use is more functional than psychologically charged. Exercise apps fulfil a practical role, such as respondents wanting to log their exercise, as well as measure their performance or to be able to create routines, rather than reinforcing comparison processes or affecting their body ideals.

It is also possible that this type of technology promotes a focus on behaviour around exercise, rather than having an appearance fixation around one's body. This could protect the individual from experiencing the kind of pressure often conveyed through social media. In contrast to passive consumption of idealised content on Instagram or TikTok, for example, fitness apps are often linked to personal goals rather than social comparison.

Media exposure and internalisation of ideals (RQ3)

However, the results from RQ3 showed clear associations between respondents' media use and a focus on fitness and their experiences of body image pressure, anxiety and insecurity. Of particular interest in these results is that the associations were stronger when the participants themselves had shown an active interest in influencers or searched for hashtags such as #fitspiration, rather than just their general social media use. This suggests that it is not just the amount of time spent on social media that plays an important role, but rather the

nature of the content and the individual's engagement with what they want to see on their social channels.

These findings align with previous research, as listed in the literature review, which has also shown that the internalisation of body ideals often occurs through repeated exposure to slim, toned, or fit bodies on social media. However, when participants seek out this content themselves or express a strong interest in fitness influencers, it may indicate that they are particularly susceptible to these ideals or that they are already in a comparative thought pattern and feel pressure to change their body ideals.

Interestingly, the respondents' exercise habits did not correlate with their self-image, despite these variables often being assumed to contribute to physical well-being. However, this could be explained by the fact that self-image is more influenced by how the body is perceived in relation to the external ideal, rather than by the physical activity itself.

Considering that a higher percentage of people feel some form of pressure linked to the ideals portrayed by fitness influencers, this shows that the subject is important to study and one where action needs to be taken. Of 721 women in Sweden, more than half feel pressured to adapt their bodies to what they see on social media, not how they see themselves in the mirror, but only what they see on social media, and this is a big problem and worth keeping in mind, as this is only in Sweden.

5.2 Discussion

The results show that the largest proportion of participants who use social media 3-4 hours per day are in the 18-25 age group. This aligns with previous research indicating that younger women use social media more frequently and that this high usage may have consequences for their mental well-being. Research from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2023) shows that using social media for more than three hours a day is linked to a doubled risk of mental health issues like anxiety and depression, especially in young people. The fact that such a large proportion of this study falls within this risk range reinforces the suspicion that intensive use among younger age groups may have a greater psychological impact. Previous studies (Sejfer, 2025) and (Elmgård, 2025) have shown that women in the 18-25 age group are particularly sensitive to pressure to look good and social comparison in connection

with social media, which reinforces the picture that this group both uses social media more and is more susceptible to its negative effects.

To address the increased psychological strain among young women who use social media to a high degree, an alternative solution is to minimise these risks through education. Had the study focused on the 14-18 age group, the question of creating filters on social media could have been raised; however, since people are considered their guardians after the age of 18, this is not an option. However, education can still bring about change. Implementing online support resources may be a step in the right direction. However, at the same time, major content creators should take greater responsibility for promoting more realistic content, thereby reducing the pressure to conform to a certain appearance. Instead of highlighting 'before and after pictures' or 'how to lose 5 kilos before summer', the focus should shift to the fact that everyone is beautiful just the way they are and that one's value does not lie in one's appearance.

Even though this study couldn't show a clear link between actively using fitness apps and developing an unhealthy body image, several studies, as mentioned earlier, suggest that such a link may exist, which means that this research question remains relevant and important to investigate further. Previous research shows, for example, that the use of weight control apps such as Weight Watchers can contribute to unhealthy eating habits and increased fixation on weight and, in some cases, even eating disorders, especially among young people (Almqvist, 2003). Anderberg et al., (2025) also found that individuals who already have a negative body image can be negatively affected by fitness apps precisely because these apps tend to reinforce body dissatisfaction and unhealthy behaviours such as compulsive exercise and skipping meals.

The same study also shows that women who use several different health and weight monitoring apps more often report engaging in a wide range of disordered eating behaviours. There is therefore a risk that these apps may reinforce existing body ideals and unhealthy habits. Studies have highlighted the positive effects of fitness apps, including increased physical activity and improved self-motivation (Blackstone and Herrmann, 2020). Still, at the same time, there are indications that these tools can trigger behaviours such as overtraining or strict dietary restrictions, which in the long run can be harmful to young users.

Given these aspects, it is important to conduct research in this area. This study contributes to a more nuanced understanding by showing that the connection is not obvious or clear-cut. It may also suggest that the effect of fitness apps depends on other factors, such as gender, mental health, or prior experiences with body ideals, and that these variables require further investigation in future research.

The purpose of the third research question was to investigate the relationship between individuals' exercise habits and their self-image, and to what extent media use and exposure to content from fitness influencers can affect self-perception, including pressure and anxiety. As mentioned above, the results indicate that it is primarily exposure to specific content related to fitness, rather than the actual frequency of exercise, that is linked to negative experiences regarding self-image and body ideals. These results support previous research indicating that content categorised under #fitspiration often has an unintended effect on followers' body image (Willoughby et al., 2023) and (Hu, 2018). Although this content intends to inspire health and exercise, both this study and previous research show that, in practice, recipients often experience increased pressure and anxiety about being inadequate. This is evident in the analysis, where a significant correlation was identified between interest in fitspiration content and perceived pressure and insecurity. This finding aligns with Fioravanti and Switcher (2023), who demonstrate that even positive health content can reinforce body dissatisfaction and low self-esteem.

The fact that certain individuals actively seek out fitspiration content may explain why the correlation between search behaviour and perceived pressure was so clear in the results, even though general social media use did not show the same effect.

An interesting aspect of the results is the absence of a correlation between exercise frequency and negative self-image. This contradicts the discourse that often assumes that physical activity leads to increased self-esteem and psychological well-being. The data collected instead suggests that exercise does not protect against or cause body pressure, but rather that media exposure to exercise on social media is the decisive factor. This highlights an important difference between actual health and the digital representation of health. One possible way forward, which has also been highlighted in previous research, is to shift the focus of fitness content from appearance to function. Griffin et al. (2022) discuss how fitness influencers, by including body-positive perspectives and the importance of showing different body types, could counteract the dominance of the narrow ideal.

There is a clear need to create more inclusive content on social media that is not based on normative body ideals but on individual health and the joy of movement.

This study thus supports the view that it is the quality and content of what is shared on social media, rather than the quantity or the individual's training habits, that determines whether a negative self-image develops.

The fact that this study received 721 responses from women is, in itself, a clear indication that the subject is topical and relevant in research. It also shows that the issue of body image and social media arouses strong feelings. It also suggests that many young women feel influenced by the type of content conveyed by fitness influencers on social media, which further emphasises the need to study the subject in more depth. The high number of participants has not only increased the reliability of the study but also made it possible to identify patterns in the target group that would otherwise have been overlooked in smaller studies. For example, the results showed a clear link between seeking out #fitspiration content and experiencing body insecurity and pressure, which suggests that this isn't just something that happens to one person, but rather should be viewed as a wider social challenge.

The number of respondents not only strengthens the validity of the study's results but also serves as a strong argument for why this type of research is both necessary and in demand. It demonstrates that young women want their voices to be heard and highlights the need to amplify their experiences in both research and public debate.

6. Conclusion and Future Research

6.1 Future research

Based on the results of this study and previous research on social media and body ideals among young women, several relevant areas for future research emerge. One of the clearest findings in this study is that it is not only the amount of social media use that correlates with a negative self-image, but to a greater extent, the active search behaviour for specific content from fitness influencers. This suggests that it is not the exposure itself that has the greatest impact, but rather the individual's level of engagement and the content they choose.

Therefore, future research should delve deeper into the psychological mechanisms behind this behaviour. For example, one could investigate which individual factors, such as low self-esteem or previous experiences of body dissatisfaction and eating disorders, contribute to certain individuals actively seeking out this type of content.

It would be interesting to investigate whether this search behaviour functions as an attempt to manage or adapt one's feelings and actions, or whether it rather reinforces already existing negative thought patterns about the body.

Another area where this study showed a certain difference from previous research is in relation to the use of fitness apps and technological aids such as fitness watches. As mentioned above, the results showed no significant correlation between use and the experience of pressure or anxiety about body ideals. One possible explanation for this result may be that the measurement tools used in this study did not sufficiently differentiate between different types of apps or between passive and active use. Future research should therefore develop more nuanced and specific measures of what constitutes an 'unhealthy body ideal' and distinguish between different app types and functions. A study comparing the use of, for example, Fitbit (focused on exercise) with MyFitnessPal (focused on calorie intake) could provide more accurate insights into which digital tools are potentially harmful, neutral, or empowering.

Furthermore, future studies should take greater account of the type of platform used. This study highlights the algorithms of TikTok and Instagram, which are driven by the 'For You Page,' meaning that users are often exposed to content they have not actively sought out, potentially increasing the risk of unintentional exposure to idealised body images. In contrast,

Instagram functions more as a platform where users themselves choose which accounts to follow. It would therefore be valuable to compare platform behaviour and the influence of algorithms in the future, especially among younger users. A focus on how automated recommendation systems can reinforce exposure to harmful content is particularly relevant from a social media perspective. The study also shows that women who actively search for hashtags such as #fitspiration also tend to experience more body pressure and insecurity. This raises important questions about the factors that can act as protection against this influence. Previous research has shown that individuals with higher self-esteem tend to be less affected by idealised body images (Couto and Willoughby, 2023). Therefore, future studies should focus on identifying protective factors such as media literacy and social support that can strengthen young women's resilience to negative influences.

A focus like this could form the basis for concrete initiatives in schools and healthcare, as well as on digital platforms, with the aim of promoting mental health.

In summary, this study shows the importance of future research focusing more on quantitative aspects of social media use, particularly about content type and individual engagement. A more detailed analysis of the role of technology is needed, examining both negative and potentially positive effects. By combining quantitative methods with in-depth interviews or complaint studies, research can gain a deeper understanding of how young women are affected and, in some cases, protected by today's digital training culture.

6.2 Limitations

This study was conducted within a limited timeframe, meaning that some aspects of the research process had to be adapted to these time and practical constraints. Although data collection was very fast, thanks to the viral TikTok video, and we received 721 responses in just one week, challenges arose in the subsequent work of processing and analysing the data. We utilised the Kau Survey and Report tool, which effectively reached our participants; however, the tool also had some limitations in terms of design and data export.

As some of the survey questions were formulated as multiple-choice options, extensive recording in SPSS was required to conduct the analyses. This proved to be more time-consuming than anticipated and required several corrective supervision sessions, which in turn led us to reduce the number of research questions in the study. Our original ambition

was to investigate more relationships and explore certain aspects in greater depth, but for practical reasons, this had to be limited to the three questions presented instead.

We were two people carrying out the work, which has been a strength when it comes to discussing and interpreting the results. However, it has also placed demands on coordination and time efficiency over a limited period. In conclusion, these varying circumstances have impacted the scope and depth of the study and should be considered when interpreting the results.

6.3 Conclusion

This study examined the impact of fitness influencers' content on women's self-image and exercise habits, as well as the relationship between the use of exercise apps and mental well-being in relation to body image. The results show that it is not the technology itself that negatively affects self-image, but rather the visual and idealised content from fitness influencers, especially when this content is actively sought out.

The clearest link was seen between interest in and searching for fitness-inspiring content and feelings of physical inadequacy and pressure.

In light of these results, the question of responsibility becomes relevant: are fitness influencers responsible for how their content affects young women, or is it the individual's responsibility to manage what they consume? The answer is not clear-cut. In one sense, individuals always have a responsibility to critically examine content and reflect on their consumption on social media.

At the same time, it is naive to ignore the considerable power fitness influencers hold over norms and body ideals, especially among young followers. They earn money from their reach and influence, which means that they must also take moral responsibility for what they publish. At the same time, digital platforms and algorithms have a systemic responsibility to disseminate and reinforce ideals and body images.

When content showing slim and fit bodies is rewarded with likes and reach, it becomes difficult to break the norm without losing visibility. Responsibility should therefore not be placed solely on individuals or influencers, but rather seen as a shared responsibility among creators, platforms, and those who use and view the content, where everyone plays a role in

how body ideals are constructed and maintained online. However, fitness influencers should understand the responsibility they have when they choose to post things on social media. Posting that you are out having lunch, for example, and only showing a very small portion of food may not be the smartest thing to do, as it can give the impression that a small portion is a reasonable amount of food and that you should not eat more because then you will not look like the people in the picture. As mentioned earlier, you are still developing as a person when you are around 18 years old, it is almost a given that you will be influenced if you see how other people with slim waists eat on social media, and as an 18-year-old, the influence of what you see around you plays a huge role, which is why content like this can be harmful to young girls who feel that they want to fit in and have 'the perfect body'. The study reveals a need for increased awareness and the development of safe digital environments where young people are not constantly exposed to body pressure. Change does not come about by pointing fingers, but by all actors taking responsibility: individuals through reflection, fitness influencers by spreading more inclusive content, and platforms by changing how their algorithms reward fixation on appearance.

In summary, this study reveals that today's fitness culture on social media is a complex ecosystem where responsibility cannot be attributed to a single party. However, with awareness and research, a safe digital environment for social media use can be created that strengthens rather than weakens young women's self-image.

7. Implications for society and working life

The results of the study show that young women aged 18-35 are strongly influenced by content from fitness influencers on social media, particularly through idealised body images conveyed via various platforms. An important conclusion is that idealised body norms on social media contribute to increased mental ill-health in the form of pressure and self-criticism. This becomes problematic during a period of life when identity and self-image are still developing. The results suggest that actively seeking out “fitspiration” content correlates with feelings of inadequacy and pressure to live up to an unattainable ideal. This highlights the need to enhance young women's media literacy, particularly in schools and youth programs. Critical reflection on the influence of social media should be integrated into teaching to counteract negative consequences and promote mental health.

Parents should also reflect on how they discuss social media with their children and help them understand that not everything on social media is genuine. If parents are unsure, resources and guides are available, such as websites, that can help them understand everything that happens on social media and how to approach it (*Påverkas Mitt Barn Av Influencers?*, n.d.).

Healthcare and organisations working with health should also take this into account in their preventive work against eating disorders and mental ill health.

At a structural level, the negative impact of social media can also have consequences for working life. Poor self-image and increased mental stress can affect social relationships in the workplace. However, they can also affect self-esteem and lead to feelings of inadequacy, which, in the long run, can result in increased absenteeism and reduced productivity. For this reason, employers should be required to develop health-promoting initiatives and support that take into account the stresses to which young women are exposed. This includes both an understanding of the role of social media in individual well-being and the need to create a work environment where mental health is prioritised. This can be achieved through internal communication and by employers reflecting on how they include and talk about realistic body ideals.

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9. Appendix

Appendix 1: Survey

1. Vilken åldersgrupp tillhör du?

- 18-25 år
- 26-30 år
- 31-35 år

2. Hur ofta använder du sociala medier?

- 1h/dag
- 1-2h/dag
- 2-3h/dag
- 3-4h/dag
- 4h eller mer/dag

3. Hur ofta brukar du träna, om alls?

- 1-2 gånger/vecka
- 2-3 gånger/vecka
- 3-4 gånger/vecka
- 4 gånger eller fler per vecka
- Jag tränar inte

4. Använder du någon form av tränings- eller smartklocka i din vardag eller träning?

- Ja
- Nej

5. Har du någon träningsrelaterad app installerad på din telefon?

- Ja
- Nej

6. Om du har en träningsapp, använder du den aktivt?

- Ja
- Nej

7. Har du upplevt ångest eller osäkerhet kring din kropp på grund av fitness influencers?

- Ja
- Nej

8. I vilken utsträckning instämmer du i följande påstående: Jag känner mig pressad att anpassa min kropp till de ideal som visas av fitness influencers

- Instämmer inte alls
- Instämmer delvis

- Varken eller
- Instämmer
- Instämmer helt

9. Har du någon gång upplevt att innehåll på sociala medier skapat en känsla av press att förändra din kropp eller livsstil?

- Ja
- Nej

10. Hur intresserad är du av innehåll från tränings- eller fitness influencers (till exempel på sociala medier)?

- Inte alls intresserad
- Lite intresserad
- Varken intresserad eller ointresserad
- Ganska intresserad
- Mycket intresserad

11. Har du någonsin sökt på #Fitspiration eller liknande hashtags?

- Ja
- Nej

12. Har du upplevt att du jämfört din kropp med fitness influencers?

- Ja
- Nej

13. I vilken utsträckning instämmer du i följande påstående: När jag ser innehåll från fitness influencers jämför jag ofta min kropp med deras

- Instämmer inte alls
- Instämmer delvis
- Varken eller
- Instämmer
- Instämmer helt

14. Upplever du att innehållet från fitness influencers speglar ett uppnåeligt kroppsideal?

- Ja
- Nej

15. Har du någon gång tränat samtidigt som du tittat på en video från en fitness influencer, till exempel för att följa med i ett träningspass?

- Ja
- Nej

16. Har du någon gång förändrat dina matvanor eller träningsrutiner efter att ha tagit del av innehåll från en fitness influencer?

- Ja
- Nej

17. Hur påverkar innehåll från fitness influencers din syn på din egen kropp?

- Mycket negativt
- Ganska negativt
- Inte alls
- Ganska positivt
- Mycket positivt

18. Har du känt dig motiverad att använda en träningsapp efter att ha sett den rekommenderas eller användas av en influencer?

- Ja
- Nej

19. Har ditt välmående påverkats av att ta del av bilder eller videor från fitness influencers på sociala medier?

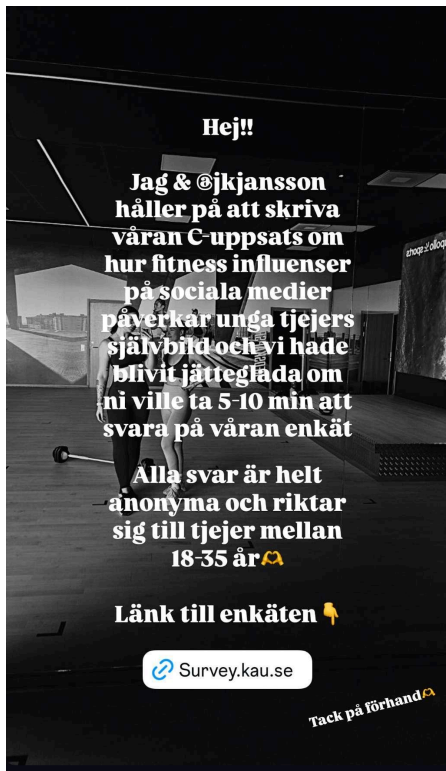
- Ja
- Nej

Appendix 2: The survey questions in chronological order, in Swedish, due to the fact that the survey was in Swedish, and an English translation for better understanding.

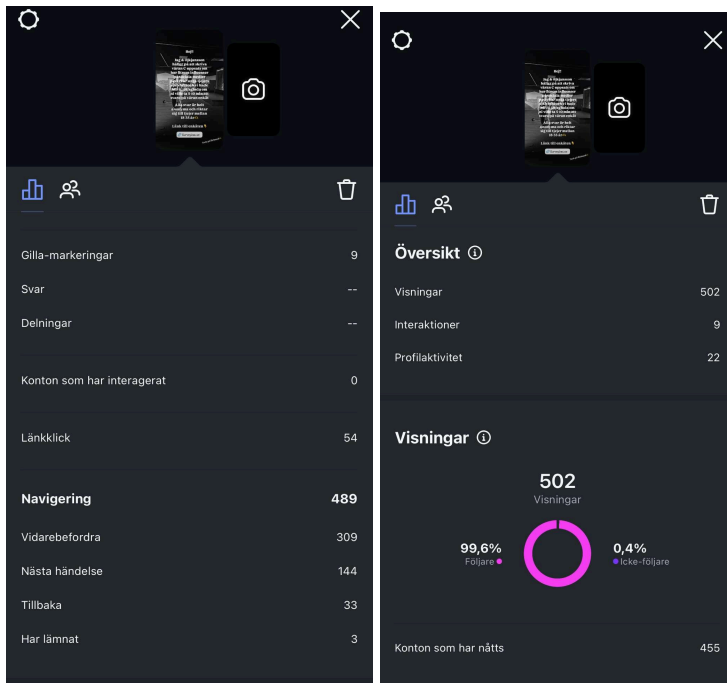
Swedish:	English:
Vilken åldersgrupp tillhör du?	What age group do you belong to?
Hur ofta använder du sociala medier?	How often do you use social media?
Hur ofta brukar du träna, om alls?	How often do you exercise, if at all?
Använder du någon form av tränings- eller smartklocka i din vardag eller träning?	Do you use any kind of fitness or smartwatch in your everyday life or training?
Har du någon träningsrelaterad app installerad på din telefon?	Do you have any fitness-related apps installed on your phone?
Om du har en träningsapp, använder du den aktivt?	If you have an exercise app, do you actively use it?
Har du upplevt ångest eller osäkerhet kring din kropp på grund av fitness influencers?	Have you experienced anxiety or insecurity about your body because of fitness influencers?
I vilken utsträckning instämmer du i följande påstående: Jag känner mig pressad att anpassa min kropp till de ideal som visas av fitness influencers.	To what extent do you agree with the following statement: I feel pressured to adapt my body to the ideals shown by fitness influencers.

Har du någon gång upplevt att innehåll på sociala medier skapat en känsla av press att förändra din kropp eller livsstil?	Have you ever felt that social media content created a sense of pressure to change your body or lifestyle?
Hur intresserad är du av innehåll från tränings- eller fitness influencers (t.ex. på sociala medier)?	How interested are you in content from fitness influencers (e.g. on social media)?
Har du någonsin sökt på #Fitspiration eller liknande hashtags?	Have you ever searched for #fitspiration or similar hashtags?
Har du upplevt att du har jämfört din kropp med fitness influencers	Have you found yourself comparing your body to fitness influencers
I vilken utsträckning instämmer du i följande påstående: När jag ser innehåll från fitness influencers jämför jag ofta min kropp med deras	To what extent do you agree with the following statement: When I see content from fitness influencers, I often compare my body with theirs
Upplever du att innehållet från fitness influencers speglar ett ouppnåeligt kroppsideal?	Do you feel that content from fitness influencers reflects an impossible body ideal?
Har du någon gång tränat samtidigt som du tittat på en video från en fitness influencer, till exempel för att följa med i ett träningspass?	Have you ever exercised while watching a video from a fitness influencer, for example, to follow a workout?
Har du någon gång förändrat dina matvanor eller träningsrutiner efter att ha tagit del av innehåll från en fitness influencer?	Have you ever changed your eating habits or workout routines after accessing content from a fitness influencer?
Hur påverkar innehåll från fitness influencers din syn på din egen kropp?	How does content from fitness influencers affect your view of your own body?
Har du känt dig motiverad att använda en träningsapp efter att ha sett den rekommenderas eller användas av en influencer	Have you felt motivated to use a fitness app after seeing it recommended or used by an influencer
Har ditt välmående påverkats av att ta del av bilder eller videor från fitness influencers på sociala medier?	Has sharing pictures or videos of fitness influencers on social media affected your well-being?

Appendix 3: Isa's story post on Instagram



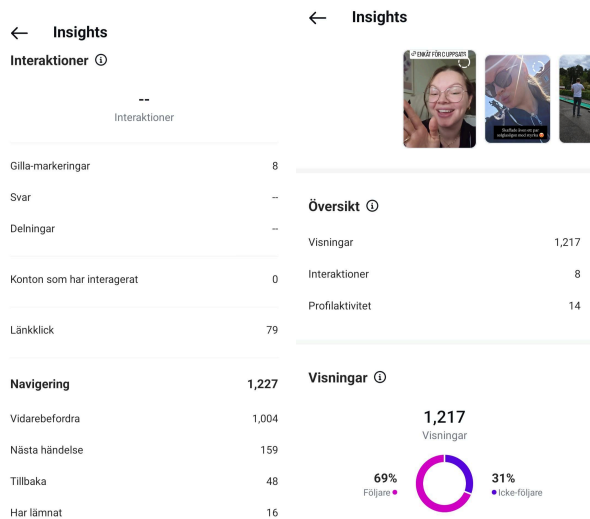
Appendix 4: The insights of Isa’s Instagram story show that it had 502 views, and 54 users clicked on the link to the survey. It was also 99,6% of Isa’s followers that the story was viewed by, and only 0,4% of non-followers.



Appendix 5: Joanna's story post on Instagram.

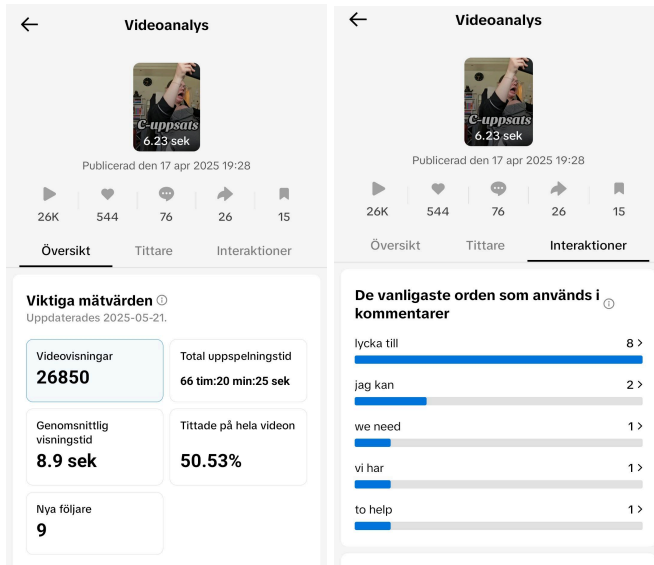


Appendix 6: The insights of Joanna’s story reached 1,217 viewers, and 79 of them clicked on the link and reached the survey. Of the 1217 viewers, 69% were followers of Joanna’s, and 31% were not.

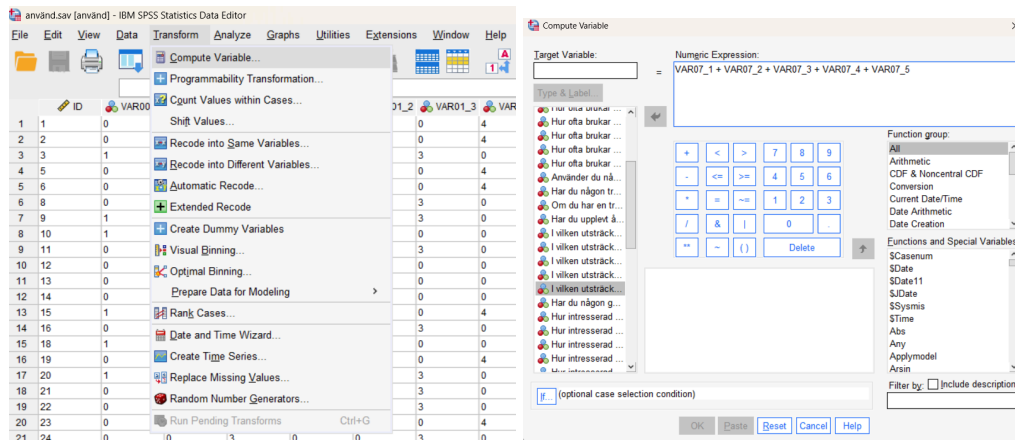


Appendix 7: These are Joanna’s TikTok video insights that went viral. The video was 6.23 seconds long. Where it shows that it reached 26850 views (insights taken the 22/5-2025), it was given 544 likes, 76 comments, 26 forwards, and 15 video saves. There were also 9 new followers after this video. The most common word in the comments was lycka till (good

luck). And the hashtags used in the video were: universitet, universitetet, uni, uppsats, examensarbete, student.



Appendix 8: Some variables needed to be transformed via compute variables, so all variables were added together; this was made with VAR00, VAR01, VAR02, VAR07, VAR09, VAR12, and VAR16.



Appendix 9: This was the merged variable.

vilkenaldersgrupp	huroftaanvander socialamedier	huroftabrukarduttrana	jagkannernipressad	hurintresseradarduvinnehallfrantraning	narijagserinnehallfranfitness	hurpaverkarinnanfranfitnessinfluencers
2.00	4.00	4.00	4.00	4.00	4.00	4.00
2.00	4.00	4.00	4.00	5.00	5.00	2.00
1.00	3.00	2.00	5.00	4.00	4.00	1.00
2.00	4.00	3.00	4.00	2.00	4.00	4.00
3.00	4.00	2.00	5.00	4.00	2.00	2.00
2.00	3.00	1.00	4.00	3.00	4.00	2.00
1.00	3.00	5.00	4.00	4.00	3.00	2.00

Appendix 10: AI Tools

In the thesis, help through AI has been used, it has only been the AI tool chatgpt.com

The use of ChatGPT have been to gain mainly news articles, and [1177.se](https://www.1177.se) page, for our study, and the collected news articles where:

<https://www.1177.se/liv--halsa/halsa-och-livsstil/traning-och-fysisk-aktivitet/varfor-sk-a-jag-rora-pa-mig/>

<https://www.sejfer.se/nyheter/nyheter/2025/01/26/studie-sociala-medier-okar-pressen-pa-kvinnors-utseende/>

<https://www.aftonbladet.se/halsa/a/218EOx/hard-kritik-mot-viktvakarna>

<https://veckorevyn.com/halsa/allt-om-viktvakarna-recept/>

<https://www.aftonbladet.se/nyheter/a/OoaOWq/var-tredje-svensk-flicka-kanner-pa-sig-att-forandra-sitt-utseende>

<https://www.su.se/forskning/nyheter-forskning/smartklockor-och-st%C3%A4ndiga-m%C3%A4tningar-kan-%C3%B6ka-s%C3%B6mnstressen-1.793513>

Why it was collected with AI was to simplify and time efficient the work of finding news articles about the relevant subject, and the question we asked AI was: *Help me find relevant articles for these keywords: Negative impact on body image, fitness apps and fitness watches*

Appendix 11: Swedish version for citation from (Vetenskapsrådet, 2002, s.14)

”Personuppgifter insamlade för forskningsändamål får inte användas för beslut eller åtgärder som direkt påverkar den enskilde (vård, tvångsintagning, etc.) utom efter särskilt medgivande av den berörda”