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# Breaking barriers: Exploring female fitness influencers' empowering discourse

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## **Abstract**

This thesis investigates the strategies employed by female fitness influencers in addressing barriers to accessing the gym as a woman, and explores the responses of their followers. Combining critical discourse and multimodal analysis and netnography, the study examines the multifaceted nature of these barriers and the role of online communities in fostering support and information exchange. Building upon Turnock's (2021) work, the analysis uncovers two categories of barriers: those directly related to the gym space and social-cultural barriers entrenched in societal norms and expectations.

Through critical discourse multimodal analysis, the study highlights the discursive strategies employed by fitness influencers to challenge and address these barriers. By promoting healthy lifestyles and self-acceptance, influencers provide alternative narratives that aim at empowering women and challenge traditional gender roles within fitness contexts. Additionally, netnographic analysis of comment sections on Instagram reels reveals that they serve as online spaces where followers can exchange information, advice, and experiences related to going to the gym. These comment sections foster a sense of community among followers, creating a supportive environment for discussing and navigating barriers to gym access as well as social-cultural barriers.

While the study recognizes the positive impact of fitness influencers and the sense of community facilitated by online platforms, it emphasizes the need for further research to fully understand the significance of social-cultural barriers. Investigating the broader historical and cultural context surrounding these barriers is essential for a comprehensive analysis.

By undertaking additional research, scholars can deepen their understanding of the complexities surrounding social-cultural barriers. This knowledge can contribute to the development of effective strategies to address and overcome these barriers, promoting inclusive gym environments that cater to the needs and aspirations of all women. Ultimately, this research aims to empower women, facilitate their access to gym spaces, and challenge societal norms that perpetuate gender inequalities in the realm of fitness. The findings also highlight the role of online communities in providing support and fostering a sense of belonging among followers, emphasizing the significance of digital platforms in shaping gym experiences beyond physical spaces.

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# 1 Introduction

The health benefits of physical exercise have been known for well over the last 50 years. Not only is it good for the body, in regards to circulation, prevention of lifestyle diseases and much more, but it is also beneficial to mental health as exercise can reduce depression and anxiety (Weinberg & Gould, 2023, p. 428). The benefits of physical activity are gradually becoming more recognized to general health and quality of life, ranging from high intensity workouts to more moderate levels of activity.

In many Western countries, as the importance of exercise has been emphasized, it has also become more accessible and encouraged with outdoor gyms in parks and a vast array commercial gyms, some with 24-hour opening hours. Gyms were widely popularized in the US in the 1970's with famous bodybuilders like Arnold Schwarzenegger and Lou Ferrigno, but it was a field and place heavily dominated by men for many years, and arguably still is (Coen et al. 2018, p. 29). Besides an imbalance in the level of participation, there is also a difference in the kinds of exercise activities that men and women participate in. In later years, physical exercise has been, in many cases, marketed to women as the primary target segment for certain concepts of exercise, often choreography-centered kinds such as Zumba, Jazzercise and Aerobics. Nevertheless, women in North America are still less likely to participate in physical activity than men, who then, mainly do weightlifting as physical activity, although walking still remains the most popular form of exercise (CDC, 2013). It is not to say, that marketing specific types of exercise to women is faulty or inadvisable, as all cardiovascular exercise is salutary and helps improve the quality of life on several parameters, but it serves to point out the gender disparity in physical activity.

Although there seems to be a stark division between the kinds of exercise marketed to men and women, the health benefits of weightlifting and strength training are the same regardless of gender. There are many advantages to weightlifting, yet, as has previously been established, the number of women with gym memberships remains rather low compared to men.

The gender disparity in the gym stresses the need for uncovering the reasons for women's low rate of participation in physical activity, more specifically strength training to the same extent as men, so that countermeasures can be taken and they can enjoy the same health benefits as men. It is

evident, that with fewer women in the gyms than men, women experience barriers to accessing the gyms. When looking at the history of gyms, dating back to ancient Greece, the idea of a gym, or gymnasium was exclusive to men until as late as the 1960's when bodybuilding first came into fashion and women were allowed in the same, heavily male-dominated gyms (Heffernan, 2022). Over the years, the rate of gym memberships has grown considerably and it is estimated that 64 % of UK adults engage in some form of muscle strengthening exercise at least twice a week, and more than 10 million having a gym membership (Turnock, 2021, p. 1). These statistics involve UK adults but do not distinguish between gender, race, abilities and other differences between members.

To offer some explanation to the gender disparity in the gym, Turnock (2021) examines the barriers that women experience in accessing the gym through interviews with women who work out in different gyms in the UK. Drawing on a plethora of research on the gym as space, he establishes that gyms are constituted 'male or masculine spaces' with masculine ideals where a performance culture dominates (Turnock, 2021, p. 4). This leads women to feel alienated when entering the gym, and as if they have to navigate around the men and their training rather than the other way around. This is especially true for free-weight areas, which he points out to be isolated from other areas of the gym and highly male dominated. Turnock not only mentions how this masculine space appears unwelcoming to women but also how body ideals are reproduced in this environment meaning that anyone who does not adhere to classic ideals of the perfect body as well as masculine ideals stands out. He finds that the reproduction of certain body ideals are messaged to gym-goers through posters, monitors and product advertisement in the gym where the body ideals are depicted or through verbal messages as "strong is the new skinny". Naturally, the body is the focus for all activities in the gym, and the culture is described as performance dominated – something that is exacerbated by the amount of mirrors in the gym. Turnock argues using the work of Pirkko Markula (1995), that the layout and the mirrors result in a panopticon of surveillance and self-surveillance and brings into play the 'societal gaze' which shapes women's exercise behaviors and pressures all exercisers, regardless of gender, to conform with norms of bodily ideals, even when they contradict the independent will of the exerciser (Markula 1995, as cited in Turnock, 2021). Besides, it is argued that culturally, motivations for gym attendance have been tied to weight loss for women and enhancing muscularity for men (Coen et al., 2019 n. p.), meaning that certain types of exercises are typecasted as either masculine or feminine.

Bearing in mind all of the barriers women may experience when accessing the gym, it seems remarkable that women still go to the gym, as they are there in spite of the negative barriers – which also raises the question if some women may find the environment too hostile to even go.

Although the work of Turnock is extensive in uncovering many of the barriers and even provides suggestions to make women feel more welcome in the gyms, it does not account for the fact that the barriers that women, and perhaps other genders as well, experience, is a theme that has gained traction on social media. Needless to say, social media play a large role in many people's lives, especially among younger generations, and today there is an abundance of fitness influencers on social media like Instagram and TikTok. Many fitness influencers have made a career from sharing their workout routines, advertising for dietary supplements, posting pictures of their bodies showing the results of consistent training or sharing healthy recipes. Some of them, however, also talk about the difficulty of going to the gym and overcoming the barriers in the attempt to encourage their followers to do the same. Barriers are often referred to as 'gym anxiety' or 'gymtimidation' by these influencers and it covers all the emotions that everyone, but particularly women experience in connection with going to the gym, without necessarily going into the theoretic details, but focusing on encouragement and affirmation to the followers. Indubitably, there are male fitness influencers who also address feelings of anxiety when entering the gym, but perhaps men experience different barriers than women, constituting for a completely different field of research, whereas the female fitness influencers naturally relate more to the barriers felt by women. Knowing that social media, and especially Instagram, offers a plethora of female fitness influencers articulating these barriers raises the question of their effect. Therefore, the problem formulation that will guide this thesis is as follows: **With the barriers identified by Turnock (2021), how do female fitness influencers address these barriers, and how do their followers respond?**

Turnock bases his work on interviews of women in the UK, but fitness culture has become globalized over the last few decades with the help of the Internet and media which have made information about health and fitness easily accessible to large audiences. Online fitness is an increasingly popular leisure activity through which individuals within the global sphere of online fitness culture, gather information that contributes to forming their ideas and understanding of health, fitness, bodies and more (Andreasson & Johansson, 2017, p. 304). Through ethnographic studies conducted in Sweden, Japan, the US and Australia, Andreasson and Johansson (2017) find

that fitness gyms and culture worldwide are leaning towards a so-called *McDonaldization* of the fitness gym concept, meaning a uniform concept that lets people feel at home and know how to use the facilities and gym equipment, regardless of where on earth they are entering the fitness space (Andreasson & Johansson, 2017, p. 306). As the standardized gym and fitness concept originated in the United States and spread to most of the Western hemisphere, only few and minor adjustments were made in Western countries to adapt to the national cultures. Andreasson and Johansson conclude that the greatest variation is found in the adaptation of the fitness concept to the dominant body ideals specific to the country. For instance, the global fitness ideal for women – muscular, ‘fit’ body, is adjusted in accordance with the cuteness ideal of Japan (Andreasson & Johansson, 2017, p. 318). Following the argument that fitness culture has undergone a “*McDonaldization*” and that gyms worldwide only make minor adjustments to national cultures, it is safe to say that the gym-sphere is one that transgresses national cultures, and that the culture of gyms is uniform.

## 2 Literature Review

The subject of the body and exercise is a topic that entails many different themes, which can be addressed in a number of ways. It involves culture, gender, identity and communication and these themes often overlap. Generally, the themes related to the physical gym space can be divided into groups: Gender and culture. Parallel to how these themes exist in the gym, they are being addressed on social media, which then, becomes another theme in itself.

The literature comprised in this chapter was retrieved by searching in Aalborg University’s library database using keywords like ‘gym culture’, ‘fitness culture’, and even ‘gym’ for books, articles and other texts. From the search results, the literature with a focus on gender and issues related to gym and gender were selected for further examination. When relevant texts were discovered, the platforms hosting the articles would often suggest other articles related to or similar to the one entered. In that sense, the finding of relevant literature had the characteristics of snowball sampling in the sense that finding one article or book would lead to finding others similar. Lastly, much the work that Turnock (2021) cited was visited for a thorough reading to examine if this could lead to further insight relevant to this thesis. Concretely, that means the articles by Sassatelli (1999), Dogan

(2015) and Johansson (1996) which will be presented below. These articles were specifically chosen from Turnock's list of references because of their ability to shed light on the subject of the gym as a space for culture.

## **2.1 The gym space and gender**

As established in the introduction, the gym may be regarded as a highly gendered space which tends to promote hyper-masculine ideals and performance (Turnock, 2021). However, Johansson (1996) points out that the gym is just as focused on age as it is on gender. His ethnographic research of Swedish gyms finds that messages in the gym promote youth as ideal through the music played over the speakers which is often contemporary pop, the clothes worn by gym-goers, and the tempo. He further writes that posters or advertisements in the gym also depict young people and the gym staff, including personal trainers often embody this ideal as they are young and well-trained themselves (Johansson, 1996, p. 33). This particular point is omitted by Turnock, who, in turn, underlines a different aligning point: That public or commercial fitness gyms generally cater to a rather narrow group or audience, that to some extent 'fits in' with the ideals being promoted at the gym.

Johansson (1996) uses Goffman's concepts of front regions and back regions to describe the physical division between the different areas of the gym, branding the front region the weights section and the back region is where the gym classes are held (Johansson, 1996, p. 35). Although there are no restrictions to members' access to different areas of the gym, the weights section is predominantly frequented by men, whereas gym classes (in the case of Johansson's 1996 ethnography, aerobics classes) are almost exclusively visited by women (Johansson, 1996, p. 36). Dogan (2015) explains the masculine dominance with the contemporary history of the gym as being associated with masculinity and that, historically and culturally, men were able to re-emphasize their superiority and dominance through cultivating a muscular physical exterior (Dogan, 2015, p. 443). This article also asserts that while men are concerned with increasing the volume of certain muscle groups like arms, chest and back over their lower body, women are primarily interested in weight loss, and thus, engage in more cardiovascular activities than men (Dogan, 2015, p. 443). Johansson makes another crucial point drawing on Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990) when he mentions that people who fail to perform gender according to societal norms, are often punished by



their surroundings and brings up female bodybuilders as someone who contest ordinary conceptions regarding femininity and masculinity.

Following the arguments of Dogan and somewhat similar to Turnock's work, Salvatore and Marecek (2010) summarize three different studies that are all concerned with women's evaluation concerns in the gym. In this context, the term "evaluation concerns" refers to a person's concerns of what others think of them. The first study examines the associations between gender and exercise goals through a Google Image search results for "build muscle" and "burn fat". The images that appeared were then divided into groups of those that showed women and men for each search. In concordance with the authors' hypothesis, mainly women were shown for the "burn fat" search and mainly men were shown at the "build muscle". Salvatore and Marecek argue that the associations between gender and fitness goals constitute the cultural background for linking men and women to different types of exercise (Salvatore & Marecek, 2010, p. 557). The second study presented a scenario, including the use of a StairMaster machine and the bench press, to the participants with the aim of investigating how characteristic certain types of exercise are to respectively men and women. Furthermore, a questionnaire was developed to assess whether, and to what extent, the use of the different machines would cause evaluation concerns. They find that participants assigned the use of the StairMaster as characteristic for women, and the bench press characteristic to men, and additionally, that the use of the StairMaster would be more effective for them to achieve their fitness goals than the bench press, implying that for women, the goal is, at least to a larger extent than it is to men, weight loss and not muscle building. This correlates with Johansson's (1996) point that some equipment is highly gendered, and with the assertion from Dogan (2015) that women are preoccupied with weight loss and men with building muscle mass.

The third study aimed to evaluate the participants' comfort level in the gym and when using particular equipment. Only when using aerobic equipment such as elliptical machines, treadmills or exercise bikes, women reported a higher level of comfort than men. In terms of free weights or weight machines, their comfort level was significantly lower than that of men. The study concludes that evaluation concerns among women center around three main categories: 1) concerns about evaluation by others (feeling scrutinized and/or judged by others), 2) concerns about comparison (judging oneself against the others, comparing oneself to others, and/or feeling that one does not measure up to others), 3) concerns about ineptitude (felt lack of experience or expertise). (Salvatore & Marecek, 2010, pp. 563-564).

## **2.2 Gym-goers' motivation**

Crossley (2006) in his ethnographic work investigates gym-goers' motivations for starting at the gym and finds that motivations can generally be divided into two major groups: Joiners who identified as athletes seeking to enhance their performance, prepare for a forthcoming season or recover from injury. However, the most common reason for joining the gym had to do with weight-loss, and as a secondary consideration, to tone up and get fit (Crossley, 2006, p. 30). In connection with identifying people's motivation for joining a gym, Crossley points out that for many, it is related to control over their body. Crossley anticipates the Foucauldian arguments regarding self-policing and bodily ideals and norms and argues that those of the gym joiners who struggle with overweight do not seek to construct a particular body or narrative, but to "return to former glory". Often, the motivation for these people would stem from lived bodily experiences of discomfort or disease (Crossley, 2006, p. 32). Most importantly, Crossley introduces the concept of a 'moral career' for gym-goers who continue to frequent the gym beyond a few weeks or months. The notion of a moral career is taken from Becker and Strauss and is used to explain the various reasons offered by gym-goers to staying at the gym. He identifies some minor reasons among the gym-goers such as a sense of guilt for not going, an escape from mundane life and the price as a motivation for going, but emphasizes that community, learning experiences and a transformed sense of self as the most powerful arguments for continuing at the gym. To Crossley, the gender aspect becomes more of a sidenote than a central part of his ethnography as he concludes that women are more likely to admit to aesthetic motives for gym work, but recognizes that the remaining question of why people drop out of the gym would include an examination of gender, among other factors (Crossley, 2006, p. 47).

Sassatelli (1999) argues that the gym is, despite its individualistic nature, first and foremost a social occasion in the sense that a gym is constructed as a world in itself and a domain of action with separate rules and meanings (Sassatelli, 1999). She further argues that training in a fitness gym has the characteristics of world-building activity and draws on Goffman's 1972 book to explicate how the different actions performed in the gym become a set of meanings exclusive to the gym milieu (Sassatelli, 1999, p. 233). In simple terms, this implies that behaviors that are considered normal in the gym, would not be considered the same outside of it, but due to the context they have a specific meaning. As well as specific activities, the set of meanings may consist of certain behavior patterns,

such as a clear focus of attention and verbal and bodily cues like facial expressions or glances, or simply the clothes worn by gym-goers when working out. Clothes is a theme that is repeated by different authors in different context, as seen in Johansson's 1996 article where he finds that specific clothes become part of signaling youth. Clothes and its signal value is a topic that Turnock also mentions. He emphasizes how it is used to signal confidence and expertise. This can be seen from an excerpt from one of Turnock's interviews in which the participant states that "*you know someone's serious because they're wearing Gymshark*" ... *[because] on Instagram that's what they all wear.*" (Turnock, 2021, p. 7).

### 3 Theory

The previous chapters have presented the problem formulation and outlined the details of the problem area. In this chapter the groundwork for the analysis will be presented. The chapter delineates the details of influencers, and specifically fitness influencers. Lastly, the barriers that were introduced in the introduction are elaborated in the last section of the chapter. I present a structure for how I organize and work with the barriers in the analysis in the very last part.

#### 3.1 Social Media Influencers

According to Campbell and Farrell (2020) an influencer is defined as "*Someone who posts to social media in exchange for compensation*" (Campbell & Farrell, 2020, p. 470) whereas the Cambridge Dictionary defines it as "*Someone who affects or changes the way that other people behave*".

Although these two definitions are short and seem quite comprehensible, they are also very different from each other and share basically no similarity. Nevertheless, they both cover important aspects of what influencing entails. Campbell and Farrell primarily concern themselves with influencer marketing, which is reflected in their definition as it emphasizes the economic aspect of influencing. The Cambridge Dictionary, on the other hand, in its definition of what an influencer is, is more focused on the behavioral aspect of influencing, and perhaps less precise in the sense that influencers do not necessarily change people's behavior – this will be further elaborated later in this chapter. Merriam-Webster dates the first registered use of the word influencer back to 1662, surprisingly with a similar, yet slightly more general meaning: "*One who exerts influence*"

(Merriam-Webster, 2023, Latest update). Despite the word’s long history, the regular use of the word “Influencer” is relatively new, as well as the concept of a modern influencer. The following figure shows how many mentions of the word have been registered over time to give an idea of the emergence of the concept. It

should be noted that Google Books NGram Viewer can only go as far as to 2019, explaining why the graph does not include



Figure 1: The popularity of the word "Influencer". Source: Google Books NGram Viewer

the most recent years. The first study to

use the term Social Media Influencer defines them as “a new type of independent third-party endorser who shape audience attitudes through blogs, tweets, and the use of other social media” (Childers & Boatwright, 2021, p. 427). This definition does not warrant a change in the behavior of followers but demonstrates how influencers exert influence by shaping opinions and attitudes of followers and, in some cases, other users of the specific social media platform. One thing that is emphasized by both Childers and Boatwright (2021) and Campbell and Farrell (2020) is influencers’ ability to relate to their following on a personal level. This ability opens up for much potential in terms of influencer marketing opportunities, which seems to have become a popular field of research in recent years due to influencers’ organic reach.

There are many different types of influencers, but one way to categorize them is by followers. Campbell and Farrell (2020) identify five different types of influencers based primarily on how many followers they have. They are categorized as follows:

1. Celebrity influencers with more than one million followers. These are celebrities that had fame and notoriety before prior to gaining their social media following.
2. Mega-influencers also have more than one million followers but did not have celebrity status prior to gaining a large social media following.
3. Macro-influencers with followings ranging from 100,000 to one million.
4. Micro-influencers have from 10,000 to 100,000 followers.
5. Nano-influencers have less than 10,000 and are described by Campbell and Farrell as “newcomers”.

Apart from following, different types of influencers share different characteristics. Although Nano-influencers may not have as large a reach as Mega-influencers or celebrities, they offer a large degree of accessibility and authenticity to their followers, or, in simpler terms, they are simply closer to their followers because there are fewer of them. On the other end of the spectrum, Mega-influencers and celebrities are often perceived as experts within certain fields, for example Kylie Jenner who could be considered an expert of fashion and cosmetics as she has her own brands in both. The different attributes or characteristics of influencers will be further examined later in this chapter.

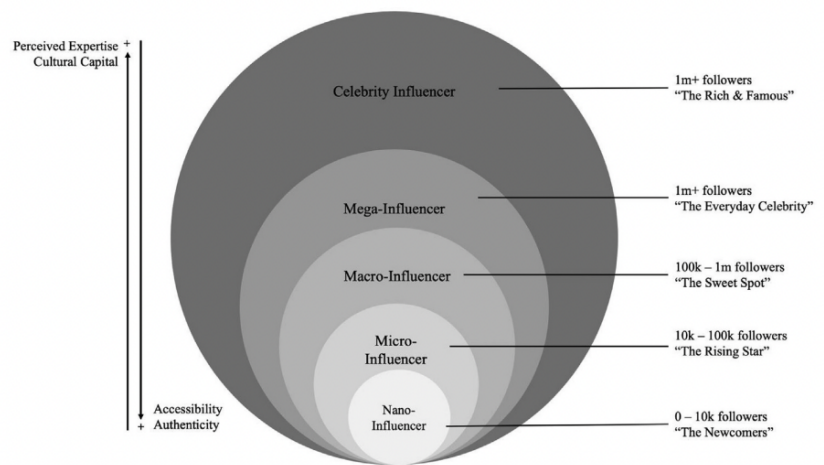


Figure 2: Campbell and Farrell's Typology of influencer types

As a comment to the idea of categorizing or organizing influencers by their following, Burke-Garcia (2019) argues that too much emphasis has been put on how large a following influencers have, and that a large following does not equate large influence. She further claims that influencer marketing has exacerbated the focus on follower size. It is then suggested that to determine how influential influencers really are they should be judged on their relatability to their followers and how they engage with them (Burke-Garcia, 2019). A sub-categorization of influencers could also be made based on the type of content they share. Naturally, many influencers share their daily lives, which may provide for great variation in their posts, whereas others have made a career of sharing specific content such as do-it-yourself crafts, cooking or fashion. Burke-Garcia suggests that influencers who post about certain topics, in the eyes of their followers, demonstrate their expertise within that field and gain credibility among the followers. In short, they become authorities on topics they are perceived to be knowledgeable about (Burke-Garcia, 2019, p. 38).

The argument could be made, that an influencers actual influence is dependent on other specific contexts as well. It is without question that some influencers are the most famous in the world – like the entire Kardashian family that have the largest overall following on Instagram. Campbell and

Farrell imply with their typology for categorizing influencers that influencers with smaller followings are less influential, but this does not account for the relationship between the social media platform and the offline environment. It is safe to say, that the profiles with the largest followings are people who are native English speakers, the *lingua franca* on platforms like Instagram and Facebook. There are countless influencers who communicate in their own native language but may never be able to reach the same following due to language barriers, but they may still be rather influential within the country or culture connected to the language.

### **3.1.1 Fitness influencers and their role**

In recent years, social media has become a vital source for health information (Durau, et al., 2022, p. 1), and much of the literature that examines the impact of social media fitness influencers centers around the COVID-19 pandemic years. This could be due to how the pandemic changed the way in which people communicate and connect and the availability of training facilities as most, if not all, fitness gyms were closed down for longer periods of time during those years. Speaking in its advantage, the fact that much of the literature on the topic stems from the pandemic years, means that it is a quite well-investigated topic. It also means that studies on the matter often clearly reflect the time from which they emerge.

Through two different interview studies, Durau et al. (2022) draw on source credibility theory to establish three criteria on which fitness influencers are evaluated by followers or viewers on their YouTube Channels. The first criterion is trustworthiness which describes the extent to which a viewer or follower believes the influencer and their messages. This is closely related to Burke-Garcia's (2019) concept of relatability. Trustworthiness does not emerge from nothing but requires for the influencer to be relatable for the followers. Furthermore, Durau et al. argue that it plays a vital role in influencer effectiveness (Durau, et al., 2022). Second criterion is expertise which is used to describe the influencer's perceived competence. *Perceived* is the key in this context because it does not really matter if the influencers are experts or not, but if they are understood as experts. This is similar to what Burke-Garcia (2019) describes as credibility. Thirdly, there is attractiveness which refers to the influencer's physical appearance (Durau, et al., 2022). For the first study Durau et al. propose four hypotheses regarding the effect of the three criteria on followers' attitude towards the influencer and, concomitantly, followers' intention to exercise. To summarize said hypotheses they claim that the higher the perceived trustworthiness, expertise and attractiveness of

the influencer is, the more favorable the attitude towards the influencer from followers as well as their motivating power. The fact that the gender of the followers plays a vital role is accounted for as they point out that there is a difference between men and women's general level of physical activity and their motivations for engaging in it. In this study they find that to the female participants, the most important factor for motivating them to exercise was the trustworthiness, whereas for male participants it was mainly the influencer's level of expertise that motivated them.

The second study investigates how variables affect trustworthiness, expertise, attractiveness and motivating power and followers' intention to exercise. Among these variables are how participants rate their own overall health and body image. Durau et al. hypothesize that the lower participants rate their own health, the higher their intention to exercise and the same applies to participants' body image. They find the latter to be true for women but not for men. As regards self-reported health assessment and its effect on intention to exercise, they find that a positive evaluation of one's own health results in a higher intention to exercise, which contradicts their hypothesis.

They finally conclude that trustworthy, expert and attractive fitness influencers may contribute to increasing physical activity by motivating followers to exercise. However, they find trustworthiness of the influencer to have the highest impact on attitude formation among followers while their motivating power had the largest impact on followers' intention to exercise (Durau et al., 2022, p. 13).

In this study, body image played an immense role for female followers. Durau et al. refer to previous research showing that exposure to fit and thin models can have both positive and negative effects on women. They emphasize that negative feelings arise from comparison with fitness models to whom a similar physique seems unattainable while positive feelings are a result of the influencer promoting healthy lifestyle behaviors.

A similar study was conducted by Sokolova and Perez (2021). They aim at investigating if following YouTube influencers or content creators and watching fitness videos affect both intentions to work out and actual behavior of working out among millennials. Their sample set consists of 306 participants self-reporting their views of fitness content on YouTube paired with a questionnaire inquiring about their attitude towards the influencers, the content and their exercise

patterns. Sokolova and Perez find that viewers or followers can be divided into two groups: Those whose behavior is affected by watching fitness content, motivating them to work out and those who do not perform any exercise regardless of consuming fitness content (Sokolova & Perez, 2021). To explain the group that is affected by watching fitness content, Sokolova and Perez draw on Social Cognitive Theory, stating that viewers observe the model – the influencer – and mimic their behavior, feeling encouraged by the videos. As regards non-exercising viewers, it is argued that they perceive fitness videos to be more entertaining than motivating and continue to make the same point as Durau et al.: That non-exercising viewers might be affected negatively by fitness content because they compare themselves to the influencers and focus on their own flaws and lack of ability to perform matching behaviors. Finally, they conclude that in terms of gender, fitness content seems to be of greater importance to female followers than to male followers. They explain this variation by outlining that men generally receive more social support from their surroundings, making virtual support less significant, while the opposite applies to women, meaning that because they receive less support from their surroundings they rely more on online content (Kubler 2023).

### **3.1.2 Fitness influencer types**

A different approach than that of Durau et al. (2022) and Sokolova and Perez (2021) to fitness influencer research is taken by Kubler (2023), who examines the roles that fitness influencers believe they hold through semi-structured interviews. Opposite to Durau et al. and Kubler's focus remains on the influencers and not on the followers as the purpose is to study how fitness influencers perceive themselves and their role. Kubler identifies a typology of four different ways in which fitness influencers perceive themselves and what initially made them invest in their social media account based on their initial beliefs which are: (1) Instagram is an effective platform for communicating fitness content (Science Communicators), (2) Instagram will improve my existing career (Sellers), (3) Instagram is necessary for transitioning careers into fitness (Shifters), and (4) Instagram is the ideal platform for documenting fitness (Sharers) (Kubler, 2023, p. 2). To help establish these four types of self-perceptions Kubler relies on Bourdieu's concept of social position. This concept assumes the existence of hierarchically distributed social fields, where one's position within the field constrains and affords beliefs about possible social action (Kubler, 2023, p. 2). He relates it to fitness influencers by explicating how they come from many different backgrounds and social positions within the fitness industry and outside of it. Examples of these include educated physical therapists, personal trainers and from outside the fitness industry, office managers or



restaurant workers. It is further suggested that the concept of social position helps make sense of why influencers risk investments in social media when the chances of success are slim.

Through semi-structured interviews with fitness influencers Kubler finds that science communicators often have a background or education in something health or fitness related and their urge to share facts often arise from annoyance with the amount of incorrect information existing on Instagram. They usually recognize a gap between their own knowledge from their education in health and fitness and what is being shared on social media. In addition, science communicators usually have access to information through their education that is not necessarily available to everyone. Similar to Science Communicators, Sellers usually see their Instagram account as an extension of their existing career in fitness. Many of the interviewees that were categorized as Sellers started out as personal trainers and showing their work online becomes a powerful tool of advertising for their personal training. In other words, their investment in social media is a form of self-branding, which is described as having low to no cost, because it would be valuable even if it did not lead to immediate success. Shifters are characterized by not having a background in the fitness but had the initial beliefs that a transition into fitness influencing would allow them to be paid to do what they love, and that social media was the most accessible entry for it. Due to their lacking background in fitness, transitioning into a fitness career required extensive effort from Shifters, often needing financial support as well as business expertise. Sharers, on the other hand, were more focused on the personal aspect of influencing. The difference between Shifters and Sharers is mainly that Sharers became influencers “accidentally” while Shifters meant to start a career within fitness influencing and therefore did it purposely. Like Shifters, Sellers did not have educational backgrounds in fitness, and their motivation for starting their social media account was often found to be a search for an online fitness community to be a part of. For others it was a way of holding themselves accountable or simply logging their training and progress.

This typology of influencer contributes to understanding how influencers perceive their own role and their motivations for starting their careers as influencers seen from the outside. Although little can be said about the type of content the different types shares, it can be concluded that Science Communicators are likely to post content of scientific character, Sellers’ motives for posting is rooted in self-branding, while Shifters and Sharers do not have the same scientific basis and therefore, perhaps, emphasize personal aspects of fitness influencing more.

### **3.2 Barriers to going to the gym**

As has been established in the introduction and literature review, women experience barriers related to going to the gym and body ideals and image, that men do not experience to the same extent.

Turnock (2021) identifies several of these barriers through interviews and suggests some explanation for them. Turnock bases his analysis on a framework developed by Sharon-David et al. in their 2020 exploration of emotional experiences of gym trainers with physical disabilities (Turnock, 2021, p. 2). This framework divides barriers into three different levels: Personal, social and environmental. These categories of barriers help conceptualize and organize barriers and demonstrate that although they are directly related to in-gym experiences, they stretch beyond the gym space itself. It can be related to negative feelings of body image (personal-level), that lead to a feeling of ‘non-belonging’ if not adhering to that image (social-level), as well as intimidation in the gym caused by the layout and use of space (environmental-level).

In a broader perspective, Turnock mentions that barriers are shaped and informed by societal cultural and structural barriers. He points to fitness being a commercial enterprise that promotes ‘healthy’ and ‘acceptable’ figures to women. About these body ideals Turnock writes: *“These representations co-opt notions of ‘good health’ and ‘empowerment’ within a representation of the ‘feminine’ more in line with (hetero-)idealized patriarchal imagery to market an “idealized” ‘fitness’ ideal to women regardless of the actual health benefits associated with such idealized representations when compared to other exercising bodies”* (Turnock, 2021, p. 3). In other words, he argues that power structures and the intersection of commercial ideals contribute to construct a ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ feminine body.

Although the barriers intersect and overlap, to provide some structure to the barriers that Turnock identifies they will be presented below as categorized according to the three levels as proposed in the above. The barriers that operated on more than one level were categorized by what they were predominantly part of.

#### **Personal-level barriers**

- Aggressive masculinity and performance culture, (yelling, grunting, dropping weights on the floor) making the gym feel intimidating

- A feeling of alienation for not fitting the stereotype of the typical weight trainer or gym-goer
- Being sexualized and/or subjected to unwanted interactions
- Pressure to conform to an ideal of appearance. Wearing certain brands of gym apparel and make-up to ‘fit in’

### **Social-level barriers**

- A feeling of having to navigate around men’s training and being ‘in the way’ when taking up space in the weight section
- Feeling monitored and judged by other gym-goers – reinforced by the use of mirrors in the gym creating a panopticon
- Messaging in the gym exacerbating women as ‘other’ and not belonging

### **Environmental-level barriers**

- The weights section is separated, for instance in a different room from the cardio machines (treadmill, elliptical etc.) making women feel like it is ‘male territory’ as it is dominated by men
- Insufficient equipment provision for women’s needs e.g. dumbbells that are too heavy or boxing gloves that are too big to fit women’s hands

This summary of the barriers identified centers around women’s experience in the gym but less on contingent barriers that may occur outside the gym milieu. Furthermore, it is possible that others would categorize them differently than what has been done in the above, as many of them intersect. Turnock exemplifies this with the feeling of being monitored, which was categorized as a social-level barrier because of the emphasis on the gaze of other gym-goers. He links this to the gym being a sexualized space and negative behaviors and perceptions of men (Turnock, 2021, p. 7), which then puts it closer to being a personal-level barrier. Categorization of the barriers depend on the context and the emphasis of the context.

## **4 Methodology**

In this chapter different methodological choices and considerations will be discussed. It is important to note that the sections regarding discourse and multimodal discourse have been deliberately placed in this section, despite its nature as theory. This is due to the fact, that the analytical aspects of discourse are emphasized in this thesis, but general ideas about discourse as theory will also be presented.

### **4.1 Discourse analysis as discipline**

The field of discourse studies encompasses several different diverging approaches and methods but one overarching characteristic shared by the different approaches, and therefore the core idea of discourse is its role in constructing representations of reality (Phillips, 2010). Discourses create knowledge, identities and social relations and shape the way in which all of these are understood and interpreted. They are structures that take on a certain form, which, at the same time, are dynamic and can be molded by contexts. They are always in contest of establishing what is true, and what is not and they all see the human as a subject that is both created in a discourse and creator of discourses (Phillips, 2010, p. 267). Furthermore, all social constructivist approaches to discourse draw on the Foucauldian notion of power, but not in the oppressive, traditional notion of power. This means that relations are built, related to each other and separated as power is distributed throughout different social practices.

The above mentioned points regarding common features in discourse approaches can be summarized as follows:

1. Discourse creates and shapes what we understand to be true.
2. Discourse is both fixed and dynamic in the sense that it contributes the way we understand knowledge and identity but that is also constantly changed by people.
3. All discourse approaches concern themselves with power to some extent, but power can be understood in a variety of ways.

#### **4.1.1 Critical discourse analysis (CDA)**

Although the three characteristics summarized in bullet points are general and apply to all forms of discourse approach, they also vary in method, epistemological views and emphasis on ideology.

The most common approaches to discourse are ascribed to Fairclough and critical discourse analysis, Laclau and Mouffe and their discourse theory, and lastly discursive psychology (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). In the following, Fairclough's critical discourse analysis method will be laid out and its applicability to analysis will be explained and discussed.

Fairclough applies the concept of discourse in three different ways. The first is *language as a social practice*. This refers to the view at discourse as both constitutive and constituted. Secondly, discourse can be understood as a *kind of language used within a specific field*, which is highly relevant, as different fields employ different discourses.

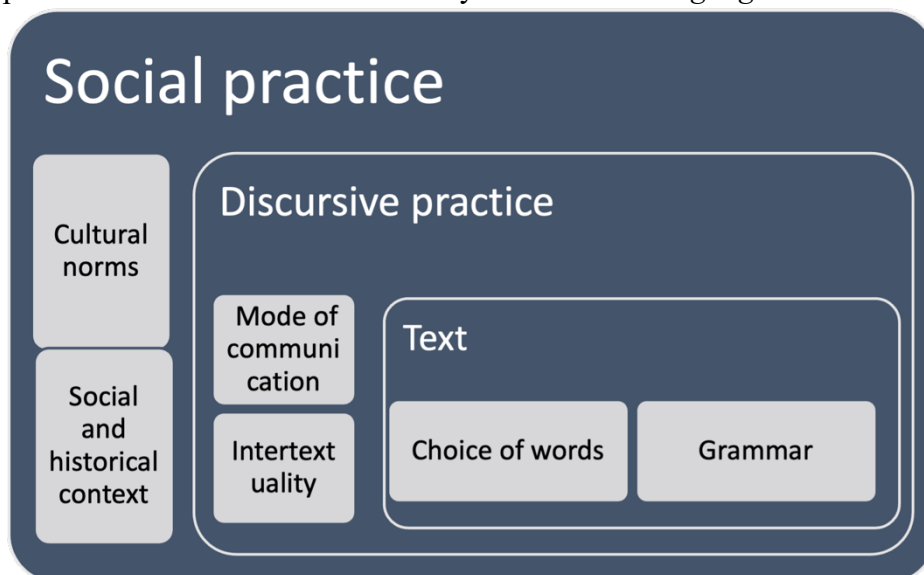


Figure 3: Fairclough's three-dimensional framework. Own figure

Thirdly, discourse is described as a *way of speaking which gives meaning to experiences from a particular perspective*. The last refers to how discourses can be distinguished from each other (Fairclough 1995 as cited in Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 8). Discourses are therefore also, to a certain extent, defined by what they are not. Fairclough proposes a three-dimensional framework for analyzing texts. It is suggested that all communicative events consist of, or can be characterized as the three dimensions: 1) They are texts – this term also covers image and sound, in the case of this research, the posts can be referred to as texts. 2) They are a discursive practice. When analyzing the discursive practice, the mode of communication, including processes related to the production and consumption of the text should be taken into account. 3) They are a social practice. This is the constitutive and constituted element of all discourse. As well as they exist within a social practice, they also constitute the social practice.

The figure intends to summarize the dimensions of Fairclough's framework, somewhat simplified, for the sake of clarity. To provide some insight on the three dimensions, Jørgensen and Phillips

(2002) start by elaborating the difference between text and the discursive practice. They stress that analysis of linguistic features – text – will eventually involve analysis of the discursive practice and vice versa (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 10). It could be argued that the division of the two allows for tailoring the level of detail to the specific research as in some texts either may appear more relevant compared to other texts. In simpler terms, it means that in the case of some texts, the linguistic traits may be emphasized more than in others if relevant. The discursive practice involves multiple facets of text production and text consumption. Firstly, there is the genre of the text in which the author or sender draws on existing genres and discourses. Secondly, consumers of the text also draw on existing discourses and texts in the process of understanding and interpreting said text. These are described in the figure as intertextuality – the ability to draw on other texts (or discourses) to understand and interpret text, and the mode of communication – the genre. Similar to the relationship between text and the discursive practice, the relationship between text and social practice is mediated through the discursive practice. Jørgensen and Phillips state about the relationship between the two that *“it is only through discursive practice – whereby people use language to produce and consume texts – that texts shape and are shaped by social practice”* (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 11).

#### **4.1.2 Multimodality in discourse analysis (MDA)**

In terms of images and visual literacy in general, it has been argued by van Leeuwen (2005) that Critical Discourse Analysis, albeit it possesses the tools to include imagery, it has the tendency to read images as if they are “frozen text” (van Leeuwen, 2005). Van Leeuwen argues that this approach fails to recognize the dynamic nature of visual communication and the ways in which images interact with other modes of communication such as language and sound. He advocates for a more integrated approach to analysis that considers the different modes of communication. O’Halloran (2004) supports this argument as he states that *“the majority of research endeavors in linguistics have tended to concentrate on solely on language while ignoring, or at least downplaying the contributions of other meaning-making resources.”* (O’Halloran, 2004).

Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) distinguish between two different kinds of visual literacy: one in which visual communication has been made subservient to language and in which images have come to be regarded as unstructured replicas of reality – this is what Kress and van Leeuwen refer to as the ‘old’ visual literacy. In the other, the ‘new’ kind of visual literacy, (spoken) language exists side by side with, and independent of, forms of visual representations which are openly

structured, rather than viewed as more or less duplicates of reality (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 23). It is this 'new' visual literacy or approach to viewing visual or auditory components that forms the basis of how those components were viewed and understood in the analysis. As important component for conveying meaning through reels.

#### **4.1.3 Digital ethnographies**

Digital ethnography as a method of data collection could be considered an umbrella term for different kinds of ethnographic research conducted online, the most famous being Robert V. Kozinets' "netnography". Kozinets first coined the term "netnography" in the 1990's and has since written countless articles and a book on the methodology, resulting in a dynamic revision of the method alongside the development of the internet throughout the 1990s and 2000's (Krieger, 2019). Kozinets himself explains netnography as an adaptation of the ethnographical research method to unique characteristics of online communities (Kozinets, *The Field Behind the Screen: Using Netnography for Marketing Research in Online Communities*, 2002, p. 62). The principles behind netnography stem from the anthropological research method, ethnography but can be considered desk research as opposed to ethnography, that is characterized by the researcher physically immersing themselves in the culture of a foreign place or situation. Furthermore, Kozinets argues that ethnographic research, and specifically when conducted online is much less obtrusive as it is based on participant observation rather than interviews or focus groups that are fabricated by the researcher (Kozinets, 2002, p. 62).

Ethnography is traditionally a discipline known from anthropology in which an investigator gains access to a group in order to uncover its culture (Bryman, *Ethnography and participant observation*, 2012, p. 431). Ethnography, in its original form, is a time-consuming method, as it often requires months of investigation, observation and participation. But apart from its time-consuming nature, it is a method that offers a large degree of flexibility to the researcher as research questions in ethnography are often open ended, and without hypotheses (Bryman, *Ethnography and participant observation*, 2012, p. 452).

#### **4.1.4 Netnography**

Since the initial development of netnography, the Internet and how it is used has developed substantially. From being hardly accessible to everyone and, in some cases, a costly leisure activity in the 1990's where Kozinets first presented netnography to now being an essential part of the daily

lives of most people in the Western hemisphere. The use of the Internet applies to almost anything imaginable today spanning from work activities and monetary transactions, such as paying for groceries in the supermarket, to different types of entertainment.

The dynamic nature of the Internet and the way it is used means that since Kozinets developed an ethnography applicable to Internet society, some of the terminology has become unrecognizable as nobody uses “Multi-User Dungeons” or Google boards anymore. Those particular platforms seem to have become irrelevant or obsolete with the emergence of – in particular – social media platforms. Although the platforms of today are different and differ in structure from the 1990s and 2000s boards and groups, the idea of an ethnography conducted online might be more pertinent than ever. The online space is such an innate part of many peoples’ lives that the line between online and offline is now tenuously defined and cannot be separated from one another (Hine, 2016, pp. 24-25). In other words, the field in which netnography was originally conducted, has changed its form but the method does not have to. With some minor modifications to the understanding of Kozinets’ terminology, or contextualizing, the method proves itself as useful as when it was first introduced. Kozinets writes in his 2020 book “*Netnography Unlimited: Understanding Technoculture using Qualitative Social Media Research*” that every netnographer must accommodate their research to new devices, new rules, new platforms and new types of data (Kozinets & Gambetti, 2020, p. 7).

With his many years of experience as a starting point, Kozinets (2020) presents two principles that are valid regardless of platform, time and context: Netnography is *always* focused on social media and technoculture, mainly relying on data collected on social media platforms, and they *always* involve some degree of researcher immersion. He further explicates how the researcher is the instrument to form a cultural understanding of power, gender, identity, etc. through a technocultural lens (Kozinets & Gambetti, 2020, pp. 7-8). The term technoculture should in this context be understood as the interactions between technology and culture, as suggested by Constance Penley and Andrew Ross in the book with the same title (Penley & Ross, 1991).

Kozinets suggests a five-step guidelines to conducting netnography, consisting of (1) making cultural entrée, (2) gathering and analyzing data, (3) ensuring trustworthy interpretation, (4) conducting ethical research and (5) providing opportunities for culture member feedback (Kozinets, 2002, p. 63). Kozinets argues that the five steps serve as a guide for researchers who want to apply



the method to their own research in a rigorous manner that is still in concordance with scholarly depictions of traditional ethnographic methodology.

The first step, making cultural entrée, can be divided into two subcategories. He suggests that the researcher has relevant research questions, which, in this case is the problem formulation and its implications. Second, is obtaining general knowledge about the group or culture in subject. This should be done with the research questions or problem formulation in mind to ensure the relevance of knowledge. As the research topic usually springs from an existing interest and curiosity within the researcher it, gaining knowledge about and identifying the cultural group may have been done beforehand. Nevertheless, learning more about the culture is never to any harm. Kozinets discerns between five different online communities that include websites, google boards or groups and chatrooms, and this is where the change in how the Internet works and how it is used becomes apparent: Some of these still exist, but are nowhere near as popular as social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and TikTok. The largest social media platforms did not exist until a few years after the article was published (Facebook 2004, Twitter 2006, Instagram 2010). These are the platforms that have probably had the most influence on technoculture of today as referred by Kozinets (2020). Although the design of platforms is so different now than that of the early 2000's, there are still groups centered around certain lifestyles, hobbies and interests that are reflected in both the online and offline world, where people connect, share their experiences, debate or ask questions related to the topic of the group. The exchange of these mainly take place in comment fields below posts concerning a specific topic.

The third step in Kozinets' guide to conducting netnography involves narrowing down and selecting communities that are suitable for the investigation. The details of which influencers and what type of posts that were selected for this research and the criteria used to select them will be laid out in the data collection section below. He points out that at this step, the researcher should be familiar with the characteristics of the groups such as language, behavior and interests of the group or community (Kozinets, 2002, p. 63).

When the preliminary steps to netnography have been taken and the community or communities have been carefully selected the data collection and analysis can commence. Kozinets distinguishes between two different types of data, without omitting the fact that there might be more than two types. Essentially, there is the data copied directly from the computer-mediated communication of

group members and there is data inscribed by the researcher regarding observations of how members interact and the meanings. In a traditional ethnography, the second type of data would translate to the researcher's own fieldnotes (Bryman, *Ethnography and participant observation*, 2012, p. 450). Contrary to the traditional ethnography, it is possible to make comprehensive notes because netnography does not necessarily take place in real time. Due to how easily data is collected, Kozinets argues that researchers should be wary of information overload, and develop a framework to sort and distinguish between which posts or comments are relevant to the research and the research questions or problem formulation and what is not.

There is no single suggestion to analyzing the data, but Kozinets emphasizes how netnography draws on textual discourse and behavior. Scholars argue that the relationship between online and offline identity can become a problematic factor in netnography as online behavior may not represent offline identity, and may be carefully curated and controlled by the person behind the screen as opposed to offline identity (Turkle 1995 as cited in Kozinets, 2002, p. 64). This seems to indicate that, at this point in time when the method was developed, offline was still considered real and online more of a leisure activity with less significance for the lives lived by people. Today, this debate is more nuanced, and online participation in social network sites has become a natural practice that is closely intertwined with offline social bonding (Bös et al., 2018, p. 2). On the other hand, the act of posting online can also be considered the subject of analysis rather than the person according to Kozinets' interpretation of Wittgenstein's (1968) concept "the linguistic turn". Despite not offering a specific model for analyzing netnographic data, Kozinets suggests that analysis should be conducted concomitantly to collecting data which provides a hermeneutic approach to data processing.

## **4.2 Ethical considerations and researcher role**

As regards research conducted online, there are specific guidelines that apply. These can be accessed through the Association of Online Internet Researchers' website, [aoir.org/ethics/](http://aoir.org/ethics/). The Association of Online Internet Researchers publish a report with the most recent guidelines. The latest report published is from 2019 One of the points the newest report, *Internet Research: Ethical Guidelines 3.0 (IRE 3.0)* makes, is that social media platforms offer extraordinary research possibilities, but their design and day-to-day functioning may impose constraints that are out of the researcher's control (Association of Internet Researchers, 2019). Presumably, what the report refers to is how updates often change the design of social media platforms drastically, making it hard to

navigate or pinpoint where certain data was encountered. Furthermore, the social media platforms employ algorithms tailored to show or enhance specific posts that are of interest to the viewer. Arguably this is, at least to a small extent, within the researcher's control. The algorithms work in such a way that they will suggest content to users that it might find relevant based on content similar to what the user previously watched, searched for, or interacted with in other ways such as comments or reactions. When aware of this fact, users can curate the algorithms and their social media to show content that is of interest, and therefore relevant to the users (Krylov, 2022, p. 261).

The data that serves as the basis of analysis was retrieved from three different Instagram accounts. The influencers in question were notified of their posts being used for research with a standardized message through Instagram's direct message service (DM). Since the posts are publicly available and none of the accounts are private, the warrant of research was sufficient for this research. The message sent to the influencers was composed in accordance with the rules and regulations as described by Kontraktenheden at Aalborg University (<https://www.kontraktenheden.aau.dk/om/>). The message was written in a somewhat casual manner, as is custom on Instagram to signal accessibility and kindness and can be found below. As none of the influencers have private profiles and are accessible to anyone, even users without Instagram profiles, the influencers have not been anonymized. Comments left by followers will, however, not feature any names and they will be referred to as 'them' or 'they'.

Direct message example: "Hi Syd!

*I'm currently writing my master's thesis at Aalborg University, Denmark on how female fitness influencers talk about gym anxiety and help women and girls overcome it through online communities. I'm using some of your reels as examples of that because I think they are a helpful tool for understanding that!*

*If you have any inquiries don't hesitate to reach out and I'll be happy to answer any question you might have!"*

### **4.3 Method of data collection**

It is safe to say, that Instagram has a vast array of female fitness influencers from all around the world. For the same reason it is necessary to establish certain criteria to select influencers with

content relevant to this research. Firstly, to ensure that the influencers in question have a certain amount of traction, a minimum amount of followers was set to at least 50,000, categorizing them as at least micro-influencers according to Campbell and Farrell's (2020) classification of influencers (between 10,000 and 100,000). (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). It is debatable how much reach micro-influencers have compared with macro-influencers or celebrities but with at least 50,000 within a field as specific as fitness, the argument could be made that their content is still able to reach a large group of people interested in that specific topic. It should be noted that other scholars may have other definitions of influencers based on their amount of followers. For instance Quesenberry (2018) labels influencers with 25,000 to 100,000 followers as mid-level influencers (Quesenberry 2018, as cited in Childers & Boatwright, 2021). The second criterion was that the influencers should post diverse and relevant content. Most influencers do not only post one type of content, but many. Posts relating about food recipes or workout routines are a big part of typical fitness influencer content but is not considered relevant for this research. Nor is it every fitness influencer who addresses the barriers to gym-going in their posts, but for those who do, it is a vital part of their content. Some of them post it in regular posts with pictures and a caption, but perhaps the most popular form is short videos which on Instagram are called reels. To ensure the topicality of the post, I decided that the sample set should be the latest 50 reels and that, among them, they should either address gender or relate clearly to at least one barrier. The six-months span of time also allows for followers to have commented on the post. Establishing the previous criteria for selection and articulating them clearly contribute to the transparency of this thesis which is an essential criterion in qualitative research.

Finding influencers that meet the above-mentioned criteria was relatively easy as there is an abundance of them, and when visiting one profile, Instagram immediately suggests other similar profiles. When a potential and rather large sample size was compiled, I started sorting them using the criteria to assess their relevance. Influencers who solely shared photos of their progress, recipes or workout routines were eliminated until three with a clear focus on personal aspects were chosen for the analysis.

#### 4.4 Method of data analysis

Two different approaches helpful in analyzing Instagram reels have been presented in this chapter, Fairclough's three dimensions of discourse and multimodal discourse analysis as suggested by Kress and van Leeuwen.

To provide a meaningful summary of the combination of multimodal discourse analysis and Fairclough's three-dimensional framework, the method of data analysis can be presented as a five-step guide:

1. Identify the social and cultural context in which the social media post was created including the audience and the purpose of the post.
2. Conduct a multimodal analysis of the post, paying attention to the different modes of communication used, including images, text and audio. Identify how these modes interact with one another to convey meaning.
3. Analyze relevant linguistic features of the post, meaning the choice of words, grammar and syntax and reflect on patterns and/or topics that emerge and consider how they relate to the social and cultural context and norms in which the post was created.
4. Consider social (and political) implications of the post, including how it might reinforce or challenge dominant ideologies or power structures. Identify barriers addressed and consider how they are articulated.
5. Evaluate the overall effectiveness of the post in achieving its intended purpose. Consider how multimodal elements and linguistic features work together to influence the audience.

MDA, as well as CDA, can be rigorous and thorough, each in their own respect. In the case of CDA, what provides the most detail-oriented dimension is the analysis of text. For MDA, Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) argue that objects or components in visual communication can be analyzed separately in order to describe the relationship between objects. An analysis of this sort provides for a high level of detail but is also rather extensive. For the opportunity to investigate in-depth the aspects and posts that may uncover previously unmentioned barriers or challenges, the analysis will take on a holistic approach to reels, where the role and relationship between language and multimodal components will be in focus rather than the specific components. In the cases it is relevant, and there is a certain level of conversation in the comment field, responses that relate to the topic of the reel will also be outlined to uncover the effect of the reel on followers. The

approach to the comments resembles the one taken to analyze the posts in terms of choice of words, and the message followers try to convey. Naturally, as comments only feature text, the multimodal dimension of the analysis of comments is absent. Emojis are not considered important for the message of the comments. The above list serves as a guide for the steps of the analysis, but not all the bullet points will be equally emphasized in every post, as for some, specific aspects or perspectives may be more important than others.

The process of both data collection and data analysis is illustrated below. I have employed both deductive and inductive approaches in different stages of the process. Turnock's framework is the deductive element in the sense that I set out to test the barriers through the analysis, but it has also served me in finding the reels that became the subjects of analysis through the criteria that they should mention at least one barrier or gender-related challenges. Furthermore, it was clear to me, that the three influencers, although sharing some vital characteristics, were not exactly the same, and the typology proposed by Kubler (2023) helped provide an overview of their differences. The analysis itself was also characterized by an inductive approach. Apart from the already established criteria for the selection of reels, the analysis was guided by the research questions to uncover and explore other contingent barriers. The inductive element consists in the results of the analysis and the relationship to the framework. The importance and weight of the social-cultural barriers is accentuated in how big a role they play in what the influencers address.

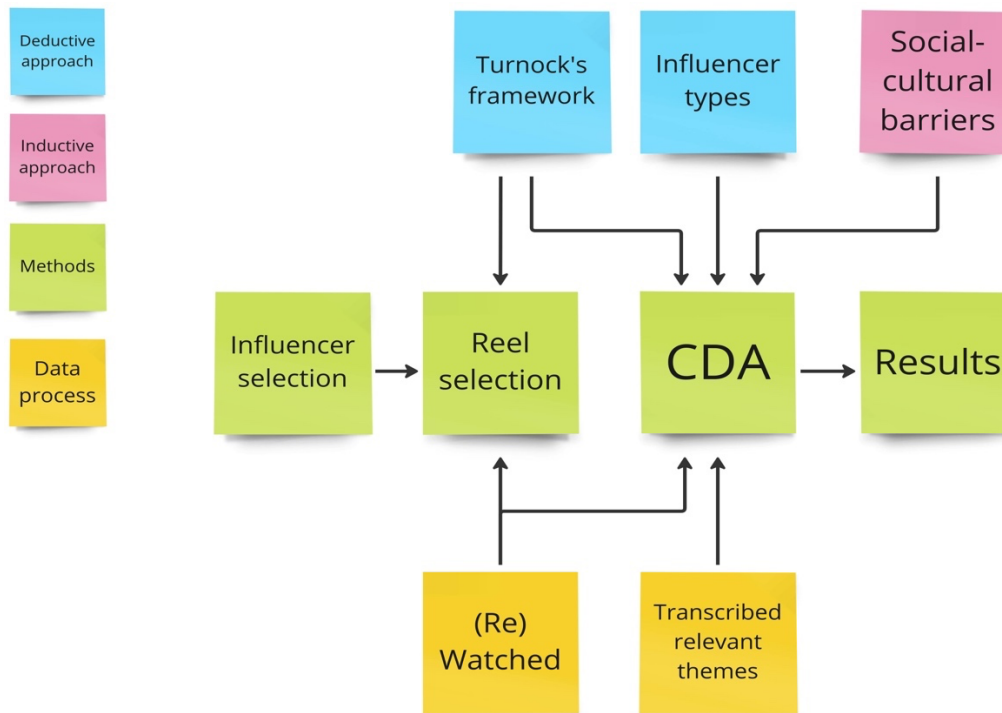


Figure 4: Methods flow chart. Own figure

#### 4.5 Ontological and epistemological considerations

Bryman (2012) suggests two ontological positions: Objectivism and constructionism, or constructivism. While objectivism implies that social phenomena exist beyond our reach or influence, constructivism is defined as *“an ontological position that asserts that social phenomena and their meanings are continually being accomplished by social actors”* (Bryman, 2012, p. 33). He further explicates the essential assumption of constructivism that social phenomena and categories are produced through social interaction and are in a constant state of revision, that is, they are dynamic as opposed to fixed. This statement aligns with the with the essence of all discourse approaches, which often repeats that discourse is both constituted and constitutive by nature. Furthermore, language and texts, as they are defined in CDA, can be understood as social phenomena. Thus, as discourse, by nature, is constructivist, the analysis is characterized by the same.

If ontology can be considered the question of the existence of a real and objective world, epistemology is more related to how knowledge is produced and understood (Porta & Keating,

2008). When employing CDA, MDA and netnography as tools for analysis, it is possible to view the production of data and analysis thereof from more than one angle, and epistemologies are not mutually exclusive. Specifically two epistemological stances are relevant to this research.

Employing an interpretivist epistemological stance entails acknowledging one's own understanding and interpretation of social phenomena. Arguably, the ability to, and the fact that one will assign meaning to messages conveyed through reels is not only something that needs to be acknowledged and taken into account, but also an important tool in empathic identification – the act of getting inside the head of an actor to understand what they are up to in terms of motives, beliefs and desires (Schwandt, 2000, p. 192). But interpretation alone does not quite suffice in CDA. To fully uncover the ideas of CDA, I turn to a social constructivist epistemological stance, which believes that we invent models, concept and schemes to make sense of our experiences combined with the historical and sociocultural context we are situated in. As Schwandt (2000) argues: *“We do not construct our interpretations in isolation but against a backdrop of shared understandings, practices, language and so forth.”* In sum, neither interpretivism or social constructivism can stand alone in an analysis as the one conducted in the previous chapter. Although they share some characteristics and are not mutually exclusive, social constructivism places emphasis on the role of social and cultural factors, which is important when discussing the barriers and their background. Interpretivism focuses on the subjective interpretations, which is helpful when seeking to understand the reactions to reels of the followers.

## **5 Analysis**

In this chapter the central findings will be presented. Because many of the posts convey several different topics, the analysis is structured in such a way that each post will be analyzed separately in sections dedicated to the particular influencer. As reels are difficult to capture in their entire form, screenshots from the reels will appear as the examples of moments worthy of analysis, but every reel is analyzed as a whole. The analysis is guided by the problem formulation meaning that it aims at investigating how influencers address women's barriers to accessing the gym, and how followers respond to it. Furthermore, it aims at uncovering barriers that may not be articulated or as detailed by Turnock (2021).



## 5.1 Sydgrows



The above pictures stem from a reel from British fitness influencer Sydgrows, in which the central topic is what she refers to as “gym anxiety”. This can be seen from the text in the upper part of the picture frame, which remains throughout the entire reel, while the text in quotation-marks changes and functions as subtitles to her speaking. The reel is a mix of her speaking and short clips from her training in the gym together with other women, and it constantly changes between the two settings. It should be noted that this reel is pinned to her profile, meaning that regardless of new reels she posts, this remains in the top so that it is the first for people who visit her profile see. The fact that this is the pinned reel indicates that this topic is of great importance to her. The caption reads: “you’re never taking up too much space” and then a disclaimer of the brand of clothes she is wearing. This post aims at giving viewers a motivational speech to overcoming negative feelings towards accessing the gym. The subtitles ensure that anyone watching the reel without sound, which may occur for various reasons, such as being in an environment that does not allow for noise, still receive the verbal message. There is a low-volume piano piece of music playing in the

background throughout the video which contributes to a certain upbeat and “lightweight” pace and sense of the reel, while not getting too much attention. In the reel, Sydgrows says the following:

*“This is a really hard thing to learn, but just realizing and understanding that everybody has started off in the same place, everyone has been where you are, no matter where you are in your journey. And everybody pays the same membership to be here. We are all on the same level. Realize that you are not holding up any space, you are right where you’re supposed to be. You are most welcome in any fitness space, regardless of where you are in your journey.”*

It seems the term “gym anxiety” in this context can be understood as an umbrella term that encompasses several feelings of anxiety towards the gym. The umbrella term is influenced by discursive practices surrounding body image, expectations about oneself, expertise and many more. The use of the word “journey” to describe fitness training as linear from one point to another (A → B), assuming that A is the beginning, and B entails some form of goal, which is not further elaborated. This indicates that the understanding of “journey” as describing fitness is implicit. A term that viewers understand and relate to. In the last part of the reel as she says *“Realize that you are not holding up any space, you are right where you’re supposed to be”* she speaks to people who may feel like they do not belong in the gym, but are already members. This means that the reel aims at people who have already been confronted with feelings of gym anxiety. In this, she also indirectly mentions several of the barriers identified by Turnock (2021). On a personal-level it could be argued that gym anxiety arises from not fitting the stereotype, not looking like other gym-goers, but perhaps more precise, on the social-level she addresses the feeling of being ‘in the way’ when taking up space in the gym. She intends to counteract these negative feelings, and the short clips in-between her talking to the camera can be interpreted as an encouragement to overcome said feelings by showing herself feeling confident and happy in the gym while both training alone and interacting with other women. The fact that the short in-between clips shows her only with other women should also be given some emphasis when trying to understand her audience. Although gender is not mentioned in the reel, the barriers are specifically related to being a woman in the gym, and by showing other women in the gym and them having cheerful interaction with each other, Sydgrows intends to reframe the gym as a place of enjoyment instead of anxiety and insecurity.

This post has over 180 comments and many of the comments have at least one answer. One follower wrote: *“I signed up two months ago, not been once. I work out at home with the gym app trying to build confidence a[nd] probably trying to look a bit decent before I go into what I feel might be a lion’s den, where I’ll feel shame and discomfort and like I’m not good enough to be there. But then again, I’m so desperate to feel good in my body..”* What immediately comes to mind is how this follower confirms another of Turnock’s personal-level barriers: Not fitting a certain body ideal in the gym. Furthermore, this follower seems to believe that to feel confident in the gym, conforming to the body ideal is a prerequisite for going. This can be seen as they write *“...trying to build confidence a[nd] probably trying to look a bit decent before I go...”* They also address negative feelings when referring to the gym as a “lion’s den”, which gives the impression that this follower perceived the gym as a hostile environment. Although this particular follower appears disheartened, they are encouraged by another follower responding to the comment by saying *“Go IN!!! I get terrible gym anxiety and I started by just going in, walk on the treadmill for 5 minutes (take some anxious looks around) and then leave. Keep showing up. Try walking the stairs. Try a couple machines. Keep walking. Keep showing up for YOURSELF. It’s been a few months for me now and I’m trying new stuff!!! I feel great. You just need to go IN. We grow when we are uncomfortable”* The responding comment demonstrates that the page is a place of encouragement and by using themselves as a point of departure, this follower relates to the initial comment and recognizes the feelings and barriers that one might experience when accessing the gym.



2.

The above screenshots are from a reel that differs substantially from the first. Whereas the first could be categorized as a form of motivational speak, the second has some rather different elements and thus, a different gender-focused message. The reel starts by showing black and white footage of women training in a gym. Focus is on a woman bench pressing two dumbbells while a male trainer is helping or “spotting” her. The audio is a male narrator saying: “*At a Paddington, London gymnasium we pay a visit to... the weaker sex.*” The speaking of the narrator is accompanied by orchestral background music. The reel then cuts to short clips of Sydgrows in different situations: Her deadlifting, doing pistol squats, leg pressing two large men, and as can be seen from above, posing and flexing with other female lifters. Rock music sets the audile scene while the reels shifts between the short clips and the text throughout the rest of the reel reads “*Yeah about that...*” As a reference to the remark from the beginning of women being weaker. There is no way to verify that the clip from the beginning is real just from watching the reel, but the viewer gets the impression that it is from a documentary or feature story from the 1950’s or 1960’s both from the fact that the footage is in black and white combined with the clothing of the people appearing in the clip. As they can both be considered texts, it is an example of intertextuality, which is described as referring

to “the influence of history on a text and to a text’s influence on history, in that the text draws on earlier texts and thereby contributes to historical development and change” (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 15). Sydgrows draws on one text to construct a new one. Parallel to being an example of intertextuality, it can be argued that it is also an example of interdiscursivity or manifest intertextuality, as it draws on a discourse to establish a new one. The discourse that is identified and then contested is that of the old clip regarding women as the weaker sex. She then challenges that discourse by demonstrating herself as both woman and strong. This is an example of how discourses are in constant competition and challenge dominant positions. The discourse of women being the weaker sex, has historically been hegemonic, meaning that it has been widely accepted as true. Sydgrows does not directly contradict that idea but only implies her disagreeing by writing “*yeah about that...*” and then showing that she is not weak. The tool for conveying the message then becomes ‘show it, don’t tell it’ as she proves herself to be physically strong. The social aspect of training is not as strongly emphasized in this post as in the previous which featured many clips of her together with other women. This also indicates that community is not the focus of this post but rather female strength, and the point of this post is to demonstrate that muscular strength. Although it does not address the barriers that Turnock identified it still addresses gender as an important personal aspect of being a woman who lifts weights, and therefore perhaps belongs in the social-cultural category of barriers as societal expectations of women play a role here.

The comment field on this post is a reflection of female strength being a rather controversial topic given the amount of comments, which is no less than 669. Many of the comment center on how the narrator in the beginning refers to women as the weaker sex, but as they point out, he did not say “weak”. One, for instance writes: “*Obv [iously] men are stronger. But we are not weak. Not all of us.*” In this situation, where strength is discussed “strength” is understood only as physical strength by some, which is then what is measured in the comment section. But something suggests that this understanding of “strength” is not as clearly defined as some of the followers believe as it is so widely discussed and so many repeating the exact same comment “*Weaker not weak*” as reference to the narrator’s words. In other words, there is no common understanding of what “strong” and “weak” actually entails in this comment section, which is why it is so heavily debated. However, an interesting point is that referring to women as “the weaker sex” contributes to ‘othering’ women, because the physical strength of men becomes the standard to which women’s strength is measured. This is exemplified by one follower who states: “*For all the people saying they’re not wrong well*

scientifically men are stronger than women they can easily gain muscle mass because of higher levels of testosterone but again that doesn't make women any lesser because it takes more effort for us to put on muscle mass. Women referred to as the 'weaker sex' is sort of disrespectful imo [In my opinion]. Men are strong in certain areas and so are women. Were made to survive together". This comment's top reply writes: "Well it is maybe inappropriate but he is still right. Compared to men woman are definitely weaker, not weak but weaker" The othering of women is something that Turnock mentions in connection with how performances of aggressive masculinity reinforces men's belonging and excludes those who do not embody these ideals, which leads to women having to navigate around men's training (p. 5).



This reel shares an important characteristic with the first one, as the overall topic relates to gym anxiety. An umbrella term that has already been established as an overarching term for barriers both related to being in the gym, but also outside. With that established, it also differs substantially from the first reel. It shows Sydgröws in the gym talking to another woman. They are sitting on the floor in the gym and the camera clips between the two, so that only one is focused in the picture frame at

a time, which gives the reel an organic atmosphere combined with the dialogue. Like in the first reel in this chapter, the text in the upper part stays throughout the video and serves as a headline that informs the viewer about the topic. The dialogue is central for this reel as the only multimodal tool relating that this is focused on a gym-centered topic is the setting in which it takes place. The dialogue starts 'in medias res' by the girl Syd grows is talking to while Syd grows is racking weights on a barbell.

Girl: *"I want to start going to the gym, I want to figure out how to work out... I don't know, I feel like it can be intimidating and..."*

Syd grows: *"Yeah! I know."*

Girl: *"Some people are just kind of scary."*

Syd grows: *"I think the whole thing is just very... It is very intimidating, I get it completely."*

Girl: *"Being the least knowledgeable person at anything is hard, especially in our society... I think being out of shape or essentially not being more in shape is kind of seen somehow as some kind of moral failing. So there's a lot of pressure to just start."*

Syd grows: *"Yeah but you know I say the start is the most exciting, magnetic, beautiful place. But yeah, like, it is just a whole thing, especially I feel like as a woman in the space as well... it's hard, it's intimidating."*

The dialogue touches upon several topics related to gym anxiety, but in especially two cases, the choice of words can be highlighted as interesting. Firstly, the friend mentions being the "least knowledgeable", and it must be assumed to be about working out, and thereby relating to the previous statement about wanting to start going to the gym. This relates to the idea that, in order to be in the gym, there are certain qualifications that one must have prior to going to the gym, and not something that is acquired by going. In other words, it indicates that barriers arise outside the gym environment and maybe long before joining, constructing the gym as an exclusionary environment. Secondly, she mentions that being out of shape can be seen by others as "moral failing". It insinuates that she believes that there is a "right" shape to be in, presumably lean and toned, and that those who do not embody those ideals are failing in some respect. Essentially what she says here belongs in the discursive practice, as it draws on other discourses about body ideals. This relates to a social practice in which the body becomes the symbol of moral, and where a controlled body is, thus, the symbol of a controlled moral. In short, people whose bodies adhere to the norms

and ideals of being skinny and toned signal that they are in control, that they have not “let themselves go” and those who do not, signal that they are out of control with themselves. Sydgrows goes on to mention that being a woman in the gym space is challenging. This does not point to a specific barrier, but it does stress the idea that gym, for women, is connected with challenges that men do not face to the same extent.

The comment section belonging to this post has only few comments, and no conversation between followers, but what is interesting about them is how many of them offer suggestions to overcome feelings of anxiety when going to the gym. Among those suggestions are reminding oneself that people are, in fact, not looking and judging, putting on headphones and ignoring other people there completely. There are also a few comments applauding Sydgrows for addressing gym anxiety, saying that it is not being talked about enough. As one follower writes: *“Love that we are starting to talk about social and gym anxiety more. It helps me not feel so lonely in this.”* This is important as it shows that people find consolation in this kind of online content, and they see that they are not alone in experiencing gym anxiety. In other words, Sydgrows is building community around these feelings, signaling that she genuinely cares about how others experience gym-going and acknowledges that she plays an important role in changing that due to her power as an influencer.



## 5.2 Loisbanksfitness



The above post is from an American influencer, with the account name Loisbanksfitness. The reel features her walking up to a squat rack and squatting while the sound of her voice is the only sound in the video, but it is accompanied by the text on the screen reiterating her words. The voice recording is separated from the video, meaning that it has been recorded at a different time from the video. In the reel she says:

*“Sis! Are you eating your carbs? Are you fuelling your body? We need to grow these glutes! We can’t do that without the carbs... M’kay? Have a great day!”*

The verbal message of the reel and its correlation to the video is indirect and should be interpreted in the way that squat is an effective exercise for growing glute muscles, which requires for the viewer to make that connection on their own. Therefore, the combination of eating right – in this case enough carbs – combined with glute exercises is the means to achieve certain fitness goals. The caption serves as an elaboration of what is being said in the reel as it is an explanation of why

eating the right food is important for muscle growth. It is clear that the audience for this post is other women. This can be seen from how she addresses the audience in the beginning, saying “Sis!”, short for sister creating an atmosphere of familiarity. She goes on to speak about carbs, short for carbohydrates, which indicates that this is a discussion about macro-nutrients (protein, fat, carbohydrates) and emphasizes the importance of the latter for achieving muscle growth. This is not a barrier as they are identified by Turnock, but she still makes an important point that accentuates a different aspect of women’s challenges towards training: Myths about healthy foods and eating habits. She draws on existing discourses that label carbohydrates as unhealthy and challenges the view on carbohydrates. Lastly, her “M’kay?” Is a colloquial question for acceptance, which relates that the previous statement is something that the viewer should be understanding. It also encourages and aims at persuading viewers to adopt the conviction that is her message.

The idea that the message of this post is to challenge dominant views on what is considered healthy food is supported by the caption that, among other things, reads: *“I used to be scared of eating carbs! Mostly because diet culture demonised them and I was scared if I ate them I’d “gain weight”.”* Here, the choice of the words “diet culture” plays a key role in terms of discursive practice. The concept of “diet culture” reveals that there is a set of discourses that subsist and become “culture”, dedicated to diet and weight loss. It entails that within this set of discourses there are rules that dictate what is right and wrong, and as Loisbanksfitness emphasizes, carbohydrates have been constructed as unhealthy despite them being an important macro-nutrient for muscle growth and energy. One possible explanation is that diet culture does not concern itself with growing muscle and mainly focuses on weight loss. Following that logic, the argument could be made that Loisbanksfitness with this reel challenges the “diet culture discourse” to one she believes is healthier for the goal of growing muscle and having a healthy relationship to one’s body.



5.

This reel features Loisbanksfitness standing in her kitchen. The first frame is of her presenting the text that functions as a headline, as can be seen from the first screenshot “*Effective ways to fend off cr33ps [creeps] at the gym*”. In the next frames she demonstrates several things women can do to scare off men who they find intimidating in the gym. She suggests staring back at men under the headline of “the loving stare”, “the crab intimidator” followed by her jumping in front of the camera to imitate a crab’s walk, “the barbell pad deluxe” where she uses a barbell pad as a form of bludgeon or sword and looks threatening into the camera, “the hissing hooligan” in which she stares aggressively into the camera and hisses, and lastly “the “I’ve picked you a winner”” as she labels it. In this she imitates picking her nose and reaches her hand forward, showing off an imaginary booger. This reel is a highly humorous way of addressing a serious barrier to accessing the gym as a woman, namely the one Turnock identifies as being sexualized and/or subjected to unwanted interactions which operates under the personal-level barriers. It also recognizes that some women feel monitored by other gym-goers, in this case, men in the gym, which then sorts under social-level barriers, while being subjected to unwanted interactions and attention is on the personal-level. The use of the word “creep” carries some implications to it. It can be assumed that it is a term used to

refer to men who intimidate women either by staring or subjecting women to unwanted interactions. Furthermore, using “fend off” articulates an antagonistic relationship to “creeps”, and constructs the idea that they are seen as an enemy to women. This is supported by the “the barbell pad deluxe” where she holds the barbell pad and stands like she is about to fence constructing a battle-discourse. These “ways of fending off creeps” can be characterized as weird and inappropriate in the gym but also in most settings outside the gym, and that seems to be an intentional choice by Loisbanksfitness. In demonstrating a set of inappropriate behaviors for the gym, she implies that there are appropriate behaviors in the gym as well. This becomes the link between the discursive practice and the social practice in the sense that In short, there is an appropriate versus inappropriate behaviors dichotomy. Secondly, the argument could be made that there are behaviors that are gender-appropriate and inappropriate in a broader context, and Loisbanksfitness are demonstrating the inappropriate behaviors to challenge that exact idea. As Turnock points out in his study, men can be found to perform aggressive masculinity by grunting, yelling and throwing weights on the floor, and this behavior is accepted in the gym (p. 5). It is not with the aim to normalize for example picking your nose in the gym that she uses a set of weird behaviors to convey her message but to stress that gender-inappropriate behaviors for women intimidate men in the same way men intimidate women.

The comment track to this contains some mixed reactions. Some find it amusing, and respond by saying which of the suggestions is their favorite. This aligns well with the caption that reads: “Survival kit against cr33ps in the gym. Turns out that quite of you aren’t prepared to change your behaviour... and stop blaming women so we’ve had to take matters into our own hands. Which move will you be using?” The last sentence serves to encourage viewers and followers to comment with their favorite and thereby engage with the post. Others have a more negative approach to the post. For instance, one viewer writes: “*She doesn’t want stares at the gym yet posts all of her ass on IG hahah*”. The comment has one response stating: “*What’s the correlation?*” indicating that this viewer does not understand how that attention can be wanted in specific situations but unwanted in others. It is likely that the follower asking about the correlation knows this well and the question is rhetorical. Out of the total 118 comments, only two share the characteristics of the comment laid out above, articulating attention as a zero-sum game, without discerning between when it is wanted and unwanted.



6.

This reel shares some similarities with the first reel in the section dedicated to Loisbanksfitness as it features her performing an exercise. The difference is, that this one shows her together with a friend, giving the reel a natural and organic feel, as if it is just two friends working out, unaware of the camera. However, it is safe to assume that it is intentional. Moreover, the audio from this reel features a song that can best be characterized as rock music, and interestingly it is the same as was in Sydgrow's reel that had the feature story from the 1950's or 60's. It suggests that this specific song is a useful tool for the influencers to signal strength and power. The only verbal message in this reel is that of the textbox in the top part of the screen which changes halfway through the reel. The first one reads: "2000's: Women should only do cardio in the gym, cut out all carbs and exercise just to burn off calories". The reference to the 2000's is interesting in this part. She is not referring to a specific text, but rather to a decade. What is implied is the culture of that decade – the diet culture – as has previously been explained in this chapter. It is not explicitly explained that diet culture is characteristic of the 2000's but the text following the colon supports that idea. It also positions diet culture in a time period that she marks as over in the following frame, which states: "2023: Women are NOT afraid to take up space, getting strong AF in the gym and learning to

nourish their bodies” . The first part can be understood in at least two different ways. Firstly, it could relate to the social-level barrier of being ‘in the way’ and having to navigate around men’s training, as Turnock describes it. Secondly, it could be interpreted as defiance to the diet culture, which is preoccupied with weight and weight loss, and taking up space means not being bothered by questions of weight and body image but focusing on putting on muscle. This interpretation can also be supported by the following “getting strong AF [as fuck]...and nourishing their bodies”. It cannot be said for certain that diet culture and ideals of a skinny have been eradicated and replaced by more health-focused ideas yet, neither is it the message Loibanksfitness tries to convey. It is, however, her intention to change the discourse in the field to be more focused on health than appearance. It highly relates to ideas of the constitutive power of discourse, which prescribes that discourse is both constituted and constitutive. In other words, she draws on the existing discourses in order to change the focus and constitute a new discourse. She also adds the aspect of time by creating a ‘then’ versus ‘now’ to emphasize that there is a difference and that is what she wishes to stress.

The post has quite the amount of engagement with 119 comments total, of which many have longer conversations between followers in the threads appertaining and Loibanksfitness also gets involved in the debate. For example one conversation among followers starts off by one writing: *“Depending on the movement cardio and lifting weights burns calories. Neither will have an impact if you eat shit. Doing any kind of workout is better than none why you do it. Should be entirely down to what you want. Not the internet/social media or some random in the gym. Do what ya wanna do if that makes you happy and never mind the anyone else. To anyone that’s listening.”* Loibanksfitness agrees with this follower but also states that: *“What I’m pointing out in this post is misinformation that was spread to women (myself included) in the 2000s and how things have changed. It’s great to see more women doing what they want in the gym.”* Here, the choice of the word “misinformation” arouses some interest, as what she writes in the reel is not as much information as it is a set of norms shaped by a set of discourses. It could be argued that the misinformation she is referring to, is the basis of said norms. She further explicates that the motivation for sharing the reel is founded on her personal experience and includes herself in parenthesis, and thereby positions herself in the group of women who has been exposed to misinformation or useless norms about health and strength training throughout the 2000’s.

### 5.3 Lucydavis\_fit



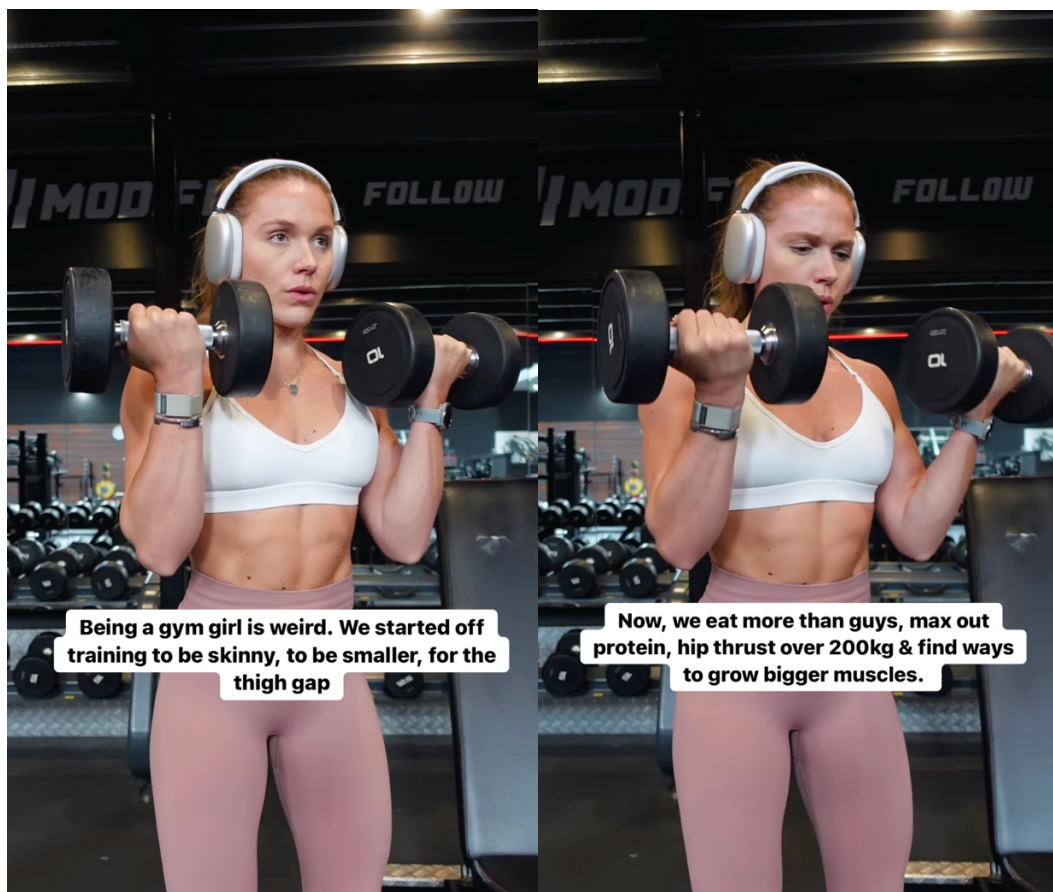
7.

The above reel starts off with Lucydavis\_fit sitting down on a bench holding two dumbbells while a pop song, in which the sound has been manipulated to sound muffled, plays in the background. She then lays down and performs chest press, and as she sits back up the music changes so it no longer sounds muffled and she stares thoughtfully forwards. Meanwhile, the text box in the bottom part of the screen stays the same throughout the whole reel stating: *“When you realise the big a\$\$ [ass] gym weights were not made for tiny hands”*. This is the first clear example of an influencer addressing the environmental-level barrier of insufficient equipment provision for women’s needs. Lucydavis\_fit refers to the girth of the handles on dumbbells that are too big for smaller hands than what the average man has. This results in extra labor for women whose grip strength is challenged as the dumbbells are not designed with the size of women’s hands in mind. The purpose of the post can be interpreted as being to raise awareness about the extra labor that women put in training and spark some debate in the comment section. The fact that Lucydavis\_fit is able to claim that weights are not made for small hands derives from her existing knowledge about how equipment is designed to fit men’s

needs better than women's, but also her own experience with that equipment. This means that had she not had that particular knowledge and experience beforehand, she would not know that the equipment fits men better than it does women. Hence, this can be argued to be an example of interdiscursivity, pointing to discourses that enhance how things in society are designed to accommodate men better than women. The post has little text, but the message is still clear and it mainly relates to the social practice as it tells the story of a society in which women's needs are not catered to.

Although this post has fewer comments than other comment sections that have been laid out in this chapter, it deserves to be mentioned as it seems to gain some hearing among followers. Many followers recognize the problem with grip on dumbbells, which is expressed by several: *"Nah this is so true, once you get past 20kg if you're a woman with small hands it's almost hard enough trying to hold onto the Dumbbell than it is actually pressing it"* writes one, and articulates that training will be limited by grip strength despite having the muscular strength to use the particular weight. Another follower sees it in a wider context, relating the problem with dumbbells to other things from everyday life: *"it sucks! The same goes for power tools, lawnmowers, etc. Where are the all the smaller grips for women????!???"* It demonstrates that these followers relate to this problem and have even considered it in other situations as well as in the gym. One points out that the machines are also often too big for women, which supports Turnock's argument about extra labor or inaccessibility of equipment. Lastly, one states: *"There's a whole market for weights to fit women's hands!"* which is responded by a follower saying: *"as long as they aren't pink"*. A statement to which another agrees. The interaction speaks of experiences of equipment marketed to women is unnecessarily gendered or feminized. Something that this follower seems to despise.





8.

This reel shares one important characteristic with a previous reel from influencer Loisbanksfitness. It uses the exact same piece of rock music as used in the reel where Loisbanksfitness shows ways to “fend off creeps”. It is not uncommon for the same audio clips and songs to be used in multiple reels posted by different influencers and content creators as is the case here. Apart from the sound-component, the form shares some resemblance with other reels as it shows Lucydavis\_fit performing an exercise while the text message is conveyed through a text box. The text message is divided into two clips that go: *“Being a gym girl is weird. We started off training to be skinny, to be smaller, for the thigh gap”* and it continues on to: *“Now we eat more than guys, max out protein, hip thrust over 200 kg and find ways to grow bigger muscles”*. Firstly, the word “gym girl” is interesting as it implies that, in the discursive dimension, there is a group with certain traits that characterize them as “gym girls”. Supposedly those traits may be a woman who works out in the gym, but also being able to recognize the story Lucydavis\_fit is telling and feeling reflected in it. This also reveals that the intended audience is other women who would identify as “gym girls”. The following part of the first text presents another important topic. *“Training to be skinny, to be smaller, for the thigh gap”* presents an ideal of the “right” body and body image. It cannot be

understood as a barrier but rather the opposite, as Lucydavis\_fit mentions it as a motivating factor for starting to work out and going to the gym. However, it is based on something that Turnock mentions as a social-cultural barrier and which he argues are tied to structural forces that shape personal, social and environment-level barriers. He further explicates that contemporary fitness culture is a commercial ideals that promote and market the ‘fit body’ ideals within a representation of the feminine – regardless of the actual health benefits associated with the idealized representations (Turnock, 2021, pp. 2-3) – or lack thereof. Concretely, in the case of Lucydavis\_fit’s reel it means that what she presents in the first text box is the idealized body and what she initially strived for. In sum, what she mentions as a motivating factor for going to the gym in the first place is still based on barriers or restrictions that are imposed on ideals of the female body outside the gym. – in the social practice. The second text box serves to challenge those ideals of the ‘fit body’ by creating a new ideal, much like a reel from Loisbanksfitness again. Similar to that reel, this one also uses the ‘then’ versus ‘now’ to discern between the two combating ideas of a healthy body. In this case, the distinction is seen in the words “*we started off...*” which becomes the ‘then’, and “*Now, we eat more than guys...*”

The reel has approximately 37,000 likes, which says something about the amount of viewers who recognize the message and relate to it. The comments vary quite substantially, but one common feature is women who contest the idea of ever having trained to become smaller. For instance one writes: “*I get the video but personally I’ve never trained to be small. Lifting heavy has always been the goal*”. This follower shows sympathy and understanding with the message Lucydavis\_fit presents, which means that this follower is aware of those social-cultural barriers and societal structures that promote the ‘fit body’ ideals, but disagreed with them even before starting in the gym. The follower is encouraged by three other followers and praised for having a healthy mindset towards training. It is likely that followers like the aforementioned, who do not agree with the message of the post, are more likely to comment than those who agree with and relate to the message. It is possible that many more agree than disagree, especially taking into account the number of likes, which leads to the question of what purpose followers who contest the message have. It is likely that it is simply to provide some nuance to the debate.



9.

In the above reel, the verbal message is what stands out. It solely features Lucydavis\_fit standing in the corner of the room and talking in the form of a monologue:

*“Guys, stop doing this! Now that I’ve got your attention. This is not, at all, in any sense, every guy. It’s a small minority of people. Similar situation in the gym, same when we’re running. Just got back from running if you can’t tell. Fucking guy honking, catcalling me out the window: Nice ass, don’t do that! Do not do that. This is why a lot of women will not go on a run because they’re fearful of getting catcalled, getting honked at, getting shouted at out the window. We’re gonna run in leggings, we’re gonna run in shorts. We’re not gonna run in fricking baggy joggers or a bin bag. This is a massive issue. I’m pro-women, I’m pro-men. However, in both groups, there’s small minorities that do things that really stand out. This is a small minority for guys to do what they do. Similar situations in the gym. It’s such a small minority. This is a situation where it then becomes guys versus girls rather than working as a collective...”*

The actual quote is longer but as the monologue already addresses some important aspects, the first part will suffice for this analysis, as in the second part she goes on to talk about the run from which she has just returned. Contrary to the other posts, the intended audience for this post, is men. This can be interpreted from the amount of imperative form of so many verbs in her monologue: *“Don’t do that, guys, stop doing this”*, and the fact that she addresses men in the beginning by calling them ‘guys’. The reason for making this post is well-explained in the reel as asking men to stop catcalling women, and the post is motivated by an experience she has just had on her run. The above quote can be divided into three different parts, the first one being directed towards men and telling them not to catcall. The second part offers an explanation as to why men should refrain from catcalling and honking at women, and the last part stresses attempts to establish it as something that is not gender-specific by stressing that there are also women who behave in a manner that might intimidate men or make them uncomfortable. The last part offers some level of mitigation when she once again emphasizes that it is a small group of men who catcalls women, the “small minority”. It is important for her to stress that she does not mean to criticize men in general, but just those individuals that catcall women. Another linguistic tool she uses to emphasize this point is “pro-women” and “pro-men” which is used to also position Lucydavis\_fit. The message reveals that in the larger social context, men who do catcall women exert power over them by intimidating them as they move around in society and the entitlement of some men to do so. She finally advocates for collective action as she emphasizes the need for working together *“as a collective”* in order to avoid turning it into a battle between genders. This mainly takes place outside of the gym in the case of Lucydavis\_fit as she uses her run as an example, but she says that it is similar in the gym, meaning that these situations might just as well occur in the gym. It relates to the personal-level barrier of being sexualized and subjected to unwanted interactions or attention.

This barrier is explicitly mentioned by a follower in the thread under a comment stating: *“Actually blows my mind people do this. What are they ever going to get out of doing it? Everyone should feel safe and relaxed running or exercising and getting out the door!”* This follower uses disbelief as a tool to emphasize their questions towards men’s motivation to catcall. It is likely, that the question is of rhetorical nature, as acquiring an answer to what they get out of it, is difficult. The comment is followed up by Lucydavis\_fit who responds: *“mate I absolutely agree. It’s really common and a lot of the time I just [flip them] at them but I’m used to it now so it doesn’t bother me. But it bugs me so much for people who won’t run for this reason!”* She demonstrates annoyance in this comment but

also frustration because it hinders women in participating in physical activities. Most importantly perhaps, a third follower identifies it as a barrier towards exercise by stating: “*so many barriers to people getting fit or moving and this just shouldn’t be one!*”. This comment omits the gender aspect by saying “people” and not “women” which aligns with the original message of the post – that it is not necessarily gender-specific, meaning something that exclusively happens to women, but may also be experienced by men. Opposed to the post, this comment does not relate the same power imbalance between genders, but generally agrees with the frustration over the issue.

### 5.4 Findings summary

Throughout this chapter the barriers have been identified in posts and their relevance has been discussed. Reels were selected based on the immediate appearance of at least one barrier or a gender-specific barrier but in the process of analyzing I found that some reels indirectly mention more than one barrier. To provide an overview of how many barriers I found they each address I have structured them in a table below. Apart from personal-, social- and environmental-level barriers, I found that many of the posts talk about barriers that are experienced by many, but are not directly related to the gym space *per se*. These appear in the column on the right and refer to different aspects. For instance, Loisbanksfitness talks about diet culture, outlining that it promotes a certain body ideal that controls the way in which women would be working out, to be skinny and not to become stronger or muscular. It definitely shows that social-cultural barriers are less tangible than the other types of barriers, but excluding them from the analysis would omit their importance.

<b>INFLUENCER</b>	<b>PERSONAL- LEVEL</b>	<b>SOCIAL- LEVEL</b>	<b>ENVIRONMENTAL- LEVEL</b>	<b>SOCIAL- CULTURAL</b>
<b>SYDGROWS</b>	1	1		1
<b>LOISBANKSFITNESS</b>	1	2		3
<b>LUCYDAVIS_FIT</b>	1		1	2

## 6 Discussion

The analysis chapter has delineated important facets of what kind of content female fitness influencers post and how followers respond to it. In this section, interesting aspects will be considered in a larger context to shed light on how research of this character can contribute in different fields. Moreover, the applicability of theory will be discussed to elucidate its relevance and contributions to gyms and people.

### 6.1 Influencers' content

Although the framework for evaluating influencer types as proposed by Kubler (2023) focuses on influencers' initial motivation for becoming influencers, that motivation is also reflected in the kind of content they post. For instance, out of Sydgrow's 50 latest reels dating back to mid-February 2023, 17 of them can be said to focus on at least one of the barriers described by Turnock. As proven the former chapter, the term "gym anxiety" is often used to describe different negative feelings towards going to the gym. It covers barriers that are directly related to going to the gym, but it also sparks debate about body image, body ideals and gender. These – the social-cultural barriers also have an influence on women's access to the gym but they are not directly related to being in the gym space the same way as personal-, social- and environmental-level barriers are. The three influencers whose content has been analyzed in the previous chapter, generally include a wide variety of content on their profile, which contributes to their diversity. Nevertheless, it is safe to say that an extensive part of their content centers around being a woman in the gym and the challenges they experience in that context.

There is no mention of it on the Instagram profile, but there is nothing to indicate that Sydgrow has an educational background in fitness. Nevertheless, the profile has quite an organic reach, so although the three criteria for assessing influencers – trustworthiness, expertise and attractiveness, are difficult to measure, the nature of her content is what makes her a rather trustworthy and a relatable influencer, which is the case for all three influencers, explaining their success. The focus for Sydgrow is not to demonstrate fitness expertise or communicate the science behind it, but rather the personal aspects of training and being honest with the followers. For instance one of the reels features her crying, which shows vulnerability and contributes to promoting honesty and making her a trustworthy and relatable influencer. This is important for the kind of people that

follow her, as Durau et al. conclude that for women, a trustworthy influencer has the greatest impact on their attitude towards the influencer as well as their intention to exercise (Durau et al., 2022, p. 15). Loisbanksfitness' profile differs from Sydgrows as she works as an online fitness coach for women. As Kubler (2023) described, some influencers use their platform to self-brand their offline business. It should be noted that for Loisbanksfitness the amount of posts that directly promote her business as an online coach is very limited indicating that her Instagram profile serves not only as an extension of her business as a coach, but is a business in itself. However, the link between the two, and the fact that she draws attention to her coach business in her profile biography puts her in the category of a Seller. Lucydavis\_fit differs from both Loisbanksfitness and Sydgrows in terms of the kind of content she posts. Apart from content that addresses gender-related barriers, Lucydavis\_fit posts content addressing myths about weight loss and tutorials to getting the right form for different exercises. She clearly wishes to disseminate correct information about health and training, and counterbalance false information which categorizes her as a Science Communicator.

To summarize, based on the content these three influencers share on their Instagram profiles, Sydgrows would be categorized as a Sharer. I conclude that from the amount of personal posts she features on her profile and her biography. Looking at Loisbanksfitness, the profile serves more as an extension of her job as an online fitness coach. Her profile becomes a platform on which she can advertise for her business, making her a Seller. Lastly, Lucydavis\_fit is closer to being a Science Communicator. Her content is often centered around female anatomy, fitness myths or correct form when performing certain exercises, content types that are characteristic to Science Communicators. This aligns well with her biography in which she refers to herself as *“Your fave no BS [bullshit] fitness gal”*.

Analyzing content from three different types of influencers has ensured variation in the analysis, but using Kubler's categorization also raises questions about its application and interpretation in identifying the type of influencer based purely on their content. For instance, it is difficult to identify a Shifter unless the influencer's story of shifting from one career into fitness influencing is an apparent and explicit part of their content, which is rarely the case. Moreover, it is impossible to determine if Lucydavis\_fit's motivation for starting her Instagram account springs from frustration over the amount of false information on the platform or if she has an educational background in fitness – something that Kubler argues to be characteristic for Science Communicators. Kubler's

framework inspires the idea that a framework for categorizing fitness influencers based on the type of content they post, rather than their initial motivation, could be proposed. Lastly, the application of this framework also raises the question if the fact that Loisbankfitness refers very little to her offline business, indicates that being a coach is secondary to her influencing career, but because she has access to an audience, it is an easy way to acquire customers.

## **6.2 Contribution to theory and future research**

As Turnock writes, emotional barriers to accessing the gym spaces are inherently tied to broader social-cultural and structural barriers, which means that they take their form outside of the gym space. The previous chapter has demonstrated that influencers address the social-cultural barriers to the same extent as they do personal- social- and environmental-level barriers. While Turnock's framework works well in analyzing the barriers directly related to being a woman in the gym space, it offers little suggestion to analyzing the social-cultural barriers. Granted, social-cultural barriers are more difficult to grasp because they are rooted in societal structures and culture, but articulating them explicitly would provide a fuller, more elaborate framework. Such a framework would also be the "missing piece" in this field where fitness culture and studies of gender intersect.

As regards the barriers as they are presented by Turnock, they are specific to the gym space and accessing it as a woman but it is not unimaginable that with slight modification and adjustment, they would apply to other situations as well. For example, there are more situations in which women's needs are not catered to, just like women are subjected to unwanted attention or sexualization in other public spaces.

In a broader context, it is also possible to expand the framework to investigate how barriers affect both men and women. Admittedly, Turnock relates how women and others who do not adhere to classic masculine ideals are othered in the gym space, but certain barriers, including social-cultural barriers could also apply to men to the same extent as women.

## **6.3 Contribution to fitness gyms**

With the personal-, social- and especially the environmental-level barriers in mind, this research has proven that there is useful information for gyms to gather. Gyms in the Western hemisphere, where



the culture is so similar with only minor differences can benefit from being mindful of messaging in the gym space such as the use of mirrors or the way machines turn to face each other (or away from each other), and not separating the cardio machines too much from the weights to make it less intimidating to enter the space. These initiatives are on the lesser extensive scale for creating an environment that feels welcoming for women. Furthermore, they can incorporate an inclusive approach. This means providing equipment that fits women's needs like free weights with an appropriate grip size for women or boxing gloves in all sizes. Changing or expanding the selection of equipment may be more costly to begin with but can result profitable in the long run as it limits women's extra labor and thereby makes going to the gym more effortless for women.

#### **6.4 The power of influencers**

Based on how followers or viewers respond to reels, it is clear that the influencers above are popular among their followers. As demonstrated in the analysis, followers do not always agree with the message of the influencers, and other times they add nuance to the debate. Nonetheless, influencers have the ability to engage their crowd in a debate, contributing to enlightening people about certain problems by articulating them. And for those who are already aware of barriers – both those who relate directly to the gym and to society as a whole – and experience them on their own, there is encouragement to be found in these posts. The comment fields create a sense of community, where followers can talk about negative feelings they experience in relation to going to the gym. The fact that influencers talk about those feelings from a personal perspective reinforces that community and stresses that they are universal feelings that can arise regardless of status, appearance, etc.

## **7 Conclusion**

This thesis aimed at investigating how female fitness influencers address barriers to accessing the gym as a woman and how their followers respond to that way of addressing them. Through a critical and multimodal discourse analysis I have found that although Turnock's framework explicates and organizes many of the barriers related to being in the gym space as a woman, the

influencers address and emphasize the importance of the social-cultural barriers in the same extent as they do personal-, social- and environmental-level barriers – environmental-level barriers were, however, addressed the least times. Social-cultural barriers are tied to the broader social and historical context and involves gender politics and culture, making it less tangible than barriers that relate directly to the gym space. Nevertheless, the articulation of social-cultural barriers by influencers contributes to raising awareness about them in a manner that is accessible to all.

As a framework for analyzing barriers addressed in Instagram reels, Turnock's work came up short in terms of identifying the concrete nature of social-cultural barriers. The framework does, however organize and provide structure to concepts like gym anxiety by explicating what that may entail, making it more tangible. To comprehensively analyze social-cultural barriers, it is essential to conduct further research on the broader historical and cultural context to understand the roots of social-cultural norms and values and power structures that shape those beliefs and behaviors. In terms of critical discourse analysis, that places social-cultural barriers in the social practice. This topic generally affords multiple directions for future research such as barriers' applicability to other social contexts and their relevance to men's experiences of the gym.

Employing Kozinets' concept of netnography I have observed and analyzed the relationship between reels and their comments to understand followers' reactions to the messages conveyed by the influencers. The reels create an online space, in which the barriers that they address, can be discussed and debated by followers. This creates an opportunity for followers to feel that they are part of an online community of like-minded people, who understands the challenges connected to being a woman in the gym, or the gym anxiety. Contributing to the sense of community, the comment sections also render it possible for followers to exchange advice and information that relates to the topic of the reels.

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