Fitness influencers and body positivity in Italy

A Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis on how body positivity is represented by fitness influencers on Instagram during the pandemic

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ABSTRACT

*In March 2020, Italy entered a long and challenging lockdown caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. Italian citizens were suddenly forced to change their habits and spend their days locked in their homes without the opportunity of going outside. Consequently, the time consumed by individuals on social media, particularly on Instagram, has increased significantly. Furthermore, isolation and social distancing had considerable repercussions on the perception of body image in women who relied on fitness influencers to be able to continue exercising in their homes. For this reason, fitness influencers were found to be among the influencers with the highest growth in followers proving to be a fundamental resource for the Italian government to spur individuals to maintain a healthy lifestyle. Thus, Covid-19 has further increased the need to spread body-positive messages. Indeed, body positivity addresses the acceptance and inclusiveness of all bodies, challenges Western beauty standards, and fights for a more diverse representation of bodies on social media. As a result, given the importance of the body positivity movement on Instagram and the negative effects of the pandemic on body image, this research investigated how fitness influencers represented body positivity on Instagram during the pandemic in Italy. To achieve the final goal, a Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis of 75 Instagram posts and 55 Instagram Reels shared by three Italian fitness influencers was conducted. The analysis was guided by the sensitizing concepts regarding the elements of body positivity, fitspiration, thinspiration, and self-presentation. These notions helped reveal the 4 main themes of the research: focus on inside well-being, heed of one's body, raising awareness of social stereotypes, and depictions of the ideal female body. Therefore, it was concluded that Italian fitness influencers represent body positivity primarily through the inner well-being given by a positive mindset, encouraging self-care activities to improve personal health, and denouncing social stereotypes in favor of accepting bodies and loving their functionality. Overall, the influencers' posts are in line with body positivity ideals. However, they do not represent different body types but conventional bodies that might have a negative impact on women's well-being since they conform to Western beauty norms. Additionally, the findings suggest that influencers mainly adopt a self-presentation strategy based on simple and natural communication to appear more authentic to users and communicate more sensitively in a controversial period. Given the importance of influencers in today's society, future research could benefit from this study by investigating how the content of fitness influencers is perceived by user*s.

KEYWORDS: *Italian fitness influencers, Body positivity, Fitspiration, Thinspiration, Self-presentation, Instagram*

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1. Introduction

In early 2020, the habits of citizens around the world changed due to the spread of the Covid-19 virus. Italy was the first Western state to adopt strict and restrictive measures to contain the virus. It initiated the immediate closure of nonessential activities, including gyms, sports fields, and playgrounds (Colella et al., 2020). Suddenly, it was no longer possible for individuals to participate in normal sports activities outside of their respective homes. Therefore, individuals began exercising at home by following digital workouts on social media, websites, or apps (*BacktoWork*, 2021). The time spent online by Italians has increased significantly, and consequently so has the popularity of social media influencers (*Covid-19 and social media*, 2020). Influencers on social media are those who manage to accumulate a large following and gain notoriety for their knowledge and experience on a given topic (Geyser, 2022). As supported by Noonan (2018), social media influencers have great persuasive power because they show themselves as knowledgeable in their field. Indeed, they become a true source of inspiration for followers who feel motivated to embrace their lifestyles. However, influencers' self-presentation practices are often controlled and studied by them to succeed in achieving fame (Stollfuß, 2020; Walet, 2020). Considering that influencer culture was already a phenomenon in society, the pandemic has further strengthened it as users have begun to interact even more with them (*Covid-19 and social media*, 2020).

The largest platform for influencers is Instagram, which has more than 2 billion monthly active users, with more than 500,000 of them categorized as influencers (Aslam, 2020). Instagram is a photo-based social media where users can post their photos and video content on their feed. For influencers, Instagram has become a real tool with which they work to gain notoriety and money. Particularly, given the closure of all sports facilities, the sector of fitness influencers on Instagram has grown exponentially during the pandemic (Bianchi, 2021). Fitness influencers are in the business of sharing fitspiration content i.e., posts that consist of promoting health and wellness through images that represent "healthy eating, exercise, self-care, strength, and empowerment" (Ratwatte & Mattacola, 2019, p.936). However, representations of women's bodies on Instagram have been considered problematic because women tend to compare themselves to the stereotypical skinny bodies that are shown (Tiggemann et al., 2020). Indeed, fitness influencers' profiles have taken different forms over the years, such as spreading disordered eating and unrealistic thinness. This could push women to excessive efforts and unbalanced diets, reproduction of dominant ideologies, and objectification of their bodies to conform to fitness influencers (Cataldo et al., 2022). As a result, the quest for the perfect body has become a significant societal concern that attempts to be mitigated by the concept and movement of body positivity (Cohen et al., 2019).

The concept of body positivity involves the celebration of diverse physical appearances through acceptance and love of the body despite the shape, skin color, and ability (Leboeuf, 2019). The main goal of body positivity is to "challenge the unrealistic standards of beauty present in the media by the promotion and acceptance of diverse body sizes and appearances" (Lazuka et al., 2020, p.1). Moreover, it wants to

promote self-love and appreciation of one's imperfections such as cellulite or stretch marks (Cohen et al., 2019; Cwynar-Horta, 2016). Prior investigation has found that posting body-positive images and statements displaying different bodies on social media, has a significant positive impact on women's mood, appearance, and body satisfaction because they can accept their bodies more easily (Cohen et al., 2019).

As mentioned above, previous studies have focused on fitspiration content (Cataldo et al., 2022; Sokolova, 2021) and analyzed body positivity on social media (Cohen et al., 2019, Cwynar-Horta, 2016; Tiggemann et al., 2020; Simpson & Mazzeo, 2016), but have mostly investigated the concepts separately, rather than focusing on the joint representation of them. Investigating the relationship between these two concepts is significant for understanding how body positivity is represented and communicated through content depicting muscular and fit women. Moreover, there has been little discussion about how body positivity is incorporated by fitness influencers on Instagram during the pandemic period. Indeed, a study reported in the International Journal of Eating Disorders showed that stress, trauma, fears, bereavement, and disruptions to normal eating and sports rhythms negatively impacted women's body image and mental health (Berger, 2022). Therefore, the pandemic has affected the positive body image and, also, the communication techniques of influencers who have been removed from the places they used to create (Breeze, 2021). That makes it interesting to explore how fitness influencers represent body positivity at a time when people are more fragile both physically and mentally and when the creativity of influencers was limited.

Another aspect that makes this research an added resource to the existing literature is the fact that studies regarding body positivity and fitspiration are dominated by quantitative studies. This type of systematic and structured approach is limiting because it does not inform the broader social context and meanings generated by fitness influencers' posts. As a result, this research investigates how fitness influencers represent the different elements belonging to body positivity and how their position as influencers intersects with the content regarding body positivity during the Covid-19 pandemic. This thesis attempts to extend and develop previous research exploring body positivity and fitspiration on social media, contributing to the field of self-documentation and literature related to influencers' self-presentation (Veum & Undrum, 2018). Therefore, the study is guided by the following research question: *how is body positivity represented by fitness influencers on Instagram in Italy during the Covid-19 pandemic?*

Instagram was specifically chosen for this research because it is the most used social network by influencers and is the fastest-growing social media platform (Fingas, 2020). To answer the research question, a Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis is conducted for the Instagram posts and Reels of three Italian fitness influencers: @traininpink, @francescafitnessfreack, @silvia.fascians. These IG profiles were selected because they represent the leading fitness influencers in Italy now in terms of followers. Moreover, they fit this research as they attempt to align with the concept and movement of body

positivity. Therefore, the study's goal is to discover how fitness influencers portray body positivity on Instagram, both visually and textually, at a time when people are psychologically more vulnerable due to the pandemic.

To answer the main research question, the elements of positive body image developed by Cohen and colleagues (2019), social media influencers' self-presentation strategies (Walet, 2020), objectification theory (Fredrickson and Roberts, 1997), and critical studies related to fitspiration (Cataldo et al., 2022; Sokolova, 2021; Dignard & Jarry, 2021; Rajan, 2018) were considered.

1.1 Academic and social relevance

In terms of academic relevance, the combination of studies on body positivity and fitspiration/thinspiration material contributes significantly to the depiction of body positivity, the fitness industry, and influencer communication strategy in Italy. Although, previous research has investigated body image and fitness (Prichard & Tiggemann, 2008; Rajan, 2018), influencer communication on social media and its impact (Taillon et al., 2020; Walet, 2020), and fitspiration content and its effects on users (Carrotte et al., 2017; Simpson & Mazzeo, 2016); by treating body positivity and fitspiration jointly, this investigation contributes to completing the field of body positivity research by adding a new perspective on body positivity to the literature. Additionally, as already mentioned, there is a lack of qualitative studies on body positivity and fitspiration that provide insight into deeper and richer meanings about content shared on social media and that consider the broad social context. Indeed, there is no research done that highlights the role of influencers in representing body positivity in complex social reality generated by Covid-19 (Neuman et al., 2008). This is interesting to analyze since the pandemic changed the influencers' ways of communicating and, also, worsened the body image of individuals (Berger, 2022). Consequently, this study is academically relevant because it takes a qualitative approach to highlight how fitness influencers represented the meaning of body positivity on Instagram in the new pandemic social context.

Furthermore, it is socially relevant to examine the phenomenon of body positivity in fitness influencers to understand how they attempt to contribute to the social mission of body positivity to broaden the definition of beauty and break down Western body ideals present on social media (Lazuka et al., 2020). Moreover, during the Covid-19 pandemic, fitness and body positivity topics became even more crucial to maintain people's health at a time when their mobility was restricted. Indeed, people still today continue to practice sports at home by following fitness influencers on social media who have amassed a large following since the beginning of the pandemic. Given their influence, it is significant for the society that fitness influencers also normalize imperfections in muscular women, embracing different body types without focusing solely on appearance. In this way, they can contribute to the growth of the movement and the concept of body positivity, reducing eating disorders and other negative consequences that the display of body image on social media has on women. As a result, the research aims to unravel the patterns

associated with oppressive and discriminatory representations of body positivity on social media, which may impact women's mental well-being.

1.2 Chapter outline

The thesis is structured as followed. In the first chapter, concepts and theories related to body positivity, objectification, influencers' self-presentation, fitspiration, and thinspiration are explored. Furthermore, the context of the Covid-19 pandemic and the role of influencers concerning this period is reviewed to provide a solid foundation for the research. The following chapter discusses the methodology, which describes the qualitative research design, sampling process, data collection, sensitizing concepts, and data analysis. The fourth chapter delves into a discussion of the four main themes that emerged from the data analysis. Finally, the last chapter includes the answer to the research question, the limitations of the research, and future directions.

2. Theoretical framework

This section reviews the main theories used in this study regarding body positivity and fitness influencers while maintaining a critical approach. Specifically, the first section discusses the historical origins and development of the movement and concept of body positivity, illustrating also the six main categories of positive body image. This is followed by a second section which is lent on the concept of social media influencers and their self-presentation strategies. Moreover, the term fitness influencer is introduced, as well as theories regarding fitspiration and thinspiration content. Finally, the third section elaborates on the role of fitness influencers' communication in Italy during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Based on the literature on body image theories, influencers' self-presentation, and fitspiration/thinspiration, the theoretical framework encompasses multiple perspectives on body positivity and fitness influencers. These concepts and explanations provide a theoretical basis for answering the research question of how fitness influencers represent body positivity in Italy during the pandemic.

2.1 Body Positivity

2.1.1 The origin of Body Positivity

The term body positive was coined in 1996 by the founders of the nonprofit organization The Body Positive which supports people in their relationship with their bodies (Jones, 2019). "Body positivity is based on the premise of beauty and the acceptance and appreciation of bodies of all types" (Ando et al., 2021, p.359). To be more specific, body positivity is understood as any personal action or movement that seeks to denounce social standards of beauty. It promotes self-love and self-appearance by normalizing fat, thin, hairy, disabused bodies, cellulite, acne, and fat rolls (Cwynar-Horta, 2016). Eventually, the term expanded from just being a theoretical concept to a full-fledged movement.

The body positivity movement stems from the intersection of several movements fighting for people excluded from society (Darwin & Miller, 2020). Specifically, it comes from the *Fat Acceptance* movement, which emerged in the 1960s, and the *Black is Beautiful* movement, which promoted positive body image and liberation for people of color. The approaches of these movements later merged with the emergence of social media and gave birth in the 2000s to the body positivity movement (Darwin & Miller, 2020). Additionally, the body positivity movement started primarily as a feminist movement (Cohen et al., 2019). Throughout history, feminists have always fought for women's rights and gender equality, criticizing media misrepresentations, and rejecting the objectification of women's bodies and bodily norms. As a result, the body positivity movement focuses primarily on women because, as research has shown, it is women who are more commonly affected by the objectification and sexualization of bodies, fat stigma, diet culture, and the ideal of thinness in Western societies than men (Darwin & Miller, 2020).

With the emergence of digital media, movement members were able to spread their message to a wider audience through large online protest campaigns to gain visibility and bring about cultural change

(Cohen et al., 2019). However, disputes within the movement have arisen because of the diversity of approaches and the movement's expansion on social media. Indeed, some academics appear to claim that many depictions of body positivity perpetuate body stereotypes, promote patriarchal ideals, and urge women to self-objectify to gain emancipation (Darwin & Miller, 2020). In this way, hegemonic power structures remain unchallenged. This may be a consequence of the dominance of thin white women using body-positive statements on social media, giving a new less inclusive structure to the movement (Darwin & Miller, 2020). According to Leboeuf (2019), the online popularity of body positivity risks fueling the idea that every woman must necessarily feel beautiful. The author proposes thinking about the relationship with the body not only by referring to the physical aspect but also to its capabilities and appreciation of it from the inside (p. 123).

Therefore, the following review of the origins and evolution of the concept of body positivity is significant for guiding the research as it provides the background knowledge to understand fitness influencers' alignment to body positivity. Furthermore, although the emergence of the Internet has altered body positivity approaches, social media has allowed for more diverse communication and encouraged individuals to engage in critiques of beauty norms (Darwin & Miller, 2020). Indeed, today body positivity is a highly utilized and advocated concept on social media and has managed to expand and achieve great popularity on the Instagram platform (Johansson, 2020; Morris, 2019). Instagram is used to challenge dominant female beauty ideals, but displaying body images does not always foster the concept of body positivity.

2.1.2 Body positivity on Instagram

Instagram is a visual-based platform that allows users to share images and videos; it has been recognized as a realistic platform that allows for more intimacy (Tiggemann et al., 2020). Thus, it has brought a new form of body positivity social activism that aims to counter socio-culturally constructed ideals of appearance, discourage social comparisons, and promote and accept bodies of any shape, size, or aspect (Ando et al., 2021; Tiggemann et al., 2020). Instagram is a more democratically structured platform than traditional media as it allows for the free publication and creation of content; while also enabling a more diverse representation of beauty (Lazuka et al., 2020). Indeed, due to the widespread use and idealized images of beauty, it is a significant platform for representing bodies (Cohen et al., 2020).

Individuals create Instagram accounts to fulfill social needs, observe others, gain popularity, and express personal identity (Chatzopoulou et al., 2020). According to a study on body positivity, images shared on Instagram to support the movement show unaltered lean and plus-size bodies (body imperfections such as acne or stretch marks are not obscured or hidden), accompanied by positive body captions (e.g., "everybody type is beautiful", "You are real, and this is perfect") and acceptance hashtags (e.g., #loveyourself) (Tiggemann et al, 2020; Vandenbosch et al., 2022).

Furthermore, as demonstrated by Cohen and colleagues (2019), exposure to positive body images is linked to higher body esteem in women. Thus, this suggests that the increased presence of content regarding body positivity on Instagram makes this platform a beneficial tool for body image (Ando et al., 2021; Vandenbosch et al., 2022). Consequently, due to the increase in body positive content, there has been widespread recognition of the detrimental nature of the ideal imagery of thinness, bringing about a shift in public opinion. Indeed, Instagram can be a powerful tool for fitness influencers who, by identifying themselves with body-positive ideals, may debunk popular misconceptions about female beauty.

Despite this, other research has shown that the display of idealized images of female bodies on Instagram and the captions have a negative correlation with young women's body image and potentially harmful effects (Cohen et al., 2020; Vandenbosch et al., 2022; Tiggemann et al., 2020). Indeed, some of the literature argues that Instagram is dominated by content regarding body dissatisfaction and disordered eating, as it exposes users more to beauty ideals and social stereotypes than other platforms (Lazuka et al., 2020). In the face of this, online representations are often untrue as users engage in positive self-presentation and highlight the good parts of their lives (Vandenbosch et al., 2022).

Additionally, an experiment with young women showed that content about body positivity on Instagram led to increased self-objectification (Vandenbosch et al., 2022). Self-objectification is a concept derived from Fredrickson and Roberts' (1997) objectification theory, which argues that society objectifies women's bodies to such an extent that they seek to confirm their appearance to internalized social beauty standards (Belinska, 2018). The ideal body stereotype is defined as a belief or combination of beliefs that promote a particular body shape as desirable (Maftei & Merlici, 2022). These beliefs are highly influenced by social media messaging, and when internalized, they have harmful repercussions. Indeed, high exposure on Instagram to objectified photos and beauty ideals can cause body shaming. To fill this feeling, women struggle to reduce weight to the extent of developing eating disorders, which are indications of trying to control their physical appearance (Maftei & Merlici, 2022; Cohen et al., 2020). Specifically, researchers have noted concerns about self-promotional, commercial, filtering, and sexually objectifying body positive content (through non-covering apparel), all of which have the potential to undermine the effects of body positivity.

In this regard, more research on the representation of body positivity on Instagram is needed to understand how it is revealed by fitness influencers' content. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to see how fitness influencers create and how they explore positive body image as well as how their communication intertwines with content related to body positivity during the Covid-19 pandemic. To achieve this goal, the six categories of positive body image enunciated by Cohen and colleagues (2019) guide the study and help interpret the results.

2.1.3 Positive body image categories

According to Cohen and colleagues (2019), a positive body image or photo contains elements such as "body appreciation, body acceptance/love, a broad conceptualization of beauty, adaptive investment in body care, inner positivity, and filtering information in a body-protective manner" (p.50). The first key component is body appreciation, i.e., the respect and admiration for each type of physique, its functionality, characteristics, strength, and health (Williamson & Karazsia, 2018). Thus, body appreciation is not just about admiring one's appearance or aligning with cultural ideals of appearance (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015). It also involves appreciating one's body for what it is and what it can do.

The second category, body acceptance and love, refer to the feeling of love and well-being for the body, freeing oneself from the obsession with one's flaws (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015). It does not refer to vanity but to gratitude for what the body can do, its connection to others, and conscious acceptance of the unique traits of one's appearance (Wood-Barcalow et al., 2010; Cohen et al., 2019; Tiggemann et al., 2020).

The third element, the broad conceptualization of beauty, argues that beauty can be conceptualized and expressed in an infinite number of ways (Junqueira et al., 2021). This helps women with unique characteristics to feel included as every female body feature is appreciated and recognized, breaking away from unrealistic narrow standards of beauty. Expanding individuals' conceptualization of beauty is significant in challenging and decreasing social prejudices about weight prevalent on social media.

Adaptive investment in appearance is the next category and it is understood as regularly engaging in self-care of one's appearance and improving one's body particularities in healthy ways that promote well-being (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015). Therefore, this category does not consist of an obsession with perfect appearance or practices that are detrimental to women's health to succeed in altering the physique and conforming to Western stereotypes but means engaging in self-care. According to Tylka and Wood-Barcalow's (2015) study, people who have a good body image are committed to their appearance and see it as an effective presentation of themselves to others. Appearance can be improved, for example, through physical activity or proper nutrition, and is seen by women as a beneficial act toward their bodies as they feel more confident externally and internally.

The fifth value of body positivity is inner positivity. It is "the connection between positive body image, positive feelings (e.g., body confidence, optimism, happiness), and adaptive behaviors (e.g., self-care, helping others)" (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015, p.123). It can also be manifested through smiles, an outward emanation of good vibes, and upward head positioning (Cohen et al., 2019). It is not concerned with the concept of narcissism but with inner happiness and self-confidence that is also conveyed externally. Inner positivity leads women to take care of themselves through regular sports practice, flexible but nutritious eating, preventive care, and so on. Indeed, some research argues that individuals exercise for personal well-being and not to control their body shape (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015). The same is true for nutrition, as consuming healthy food is a means to maintain a positive body image.

Finally, the last element of body positivity is filtering information in a body-protective manner. Thus, it means accepting only information that adheres to a positive body image and rejecting messages that might compromise it, such as unrealistic beauty images found on social media (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015; Cohen et al., 2019). Studies have shown that women have three ways of filtering body information based on positive and negative consequences, rational and irrational views, and correct and incorrect perceptions (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015). In this way, fitness influencers' posts can be perceived and filtered by people in diverse ways.

To sum up, as demonstrated by the previous research and the six categories mentioned above, body positivity today relates to physical appearance and aesthetic features as well as body skills and personal characteristics (Williamson & Karazsia, 2018). Positive body image is linked to greater psychological, social, and emotional well-being, health-promoting behaviors such as intuitive eating and physical activity and is protective against exposure to skinny ideals in the media (Cohen et al., 2020; Tiggemann et al., 2020). Consequently, in this research, the body positivity perspective does not only consider categories related to physical appearances, such as the portrayal of different types of beauty, appreciation, acceptance, and love towards each body type and its features (Cohen et al., 2019), but it also recognizes inner well-being through the conveyance of positive traits, the benefits of healthy eating, and training to improve body characteristics instead of the emphasis on weight loss and strict diets.

The six categories of body positivity serve in this research to explore the self-presentation of fitness influencers; whether they contribute to the transmission of body-positive ideals or if, as some studies argue, they reinforce and perpetuate thinspiration (Dignard & Jarry, 2021).

Table 1

Cohen and Colleagues' Six Categories of Positive Body Image (2019)

Positive body image categories	
1	Body appreciation
2	Body acceptance/love
3	Broad conceptualization of beauty
4	Adaptive investment in body care
5	Inner positivity
6	Filtering information in a body-protective manner

2.2 Fitness influencers communication

2.2.1 Social Media Influencers (SMIs) and Self-presentation

Users with a large social media following who share their lives, create content, and earn money from their following are known as social media influencers (Freberg et al., 2011). Through partnerships,

self-branding, and advertising, influencers present themselves online in a marketable manner (Stollfuß, 2020). Influencers' success is correlated with their image's authenticity, their communication style, their audience's sustained levels of engagement, and the close relationship they develop with them (Gotlieb & Sarge, 2020). They create personalized user-generated content in which they showcase their lifestyle, their concerns, and give information. They post online to meet their personal needs for autonomy, competence, and relationships. They build an online following and form a reliant relationship with their community thanks to the visibility provided by social media. Accordingly, people begin to trust, identify with, and be inspired by SMIs, making it easier for them to persuade others' opinions (Sokolova, 2021; Freberg et al., 2011).

However, influencers' self-presentation practices are often shaped to achieve visibility and attention (Stollfuß, 2020). Indeed, self-presentation refers to the attempt "to control or shape how the audience views him/her, with the aim to create a desired impression" (Walet, 2020, p. 4). It is part of impression management behaviors, i.e., those decisions made consciously to reveal some personal aspects rather than others (Walet, 2020). SMIs carefully create their impressions and, therefore, the content they share is not always true as it is studied before being posted and may be altered for self-promotion (Stollfuß, 2020). Indeed, self-presentation is manifested through images that are often modified to achieve aesthetic perfection.

Three self-presentation strategies have been recognized for SMIs (Gudmundsdottir & Chia, 2019 as cited in Walet, 2020). The first is the laypeople strategy, in which influencers show themselves as ordinary people and present the normal sides of their lives even the imperfections. The second is opinion leadership, i.e., influencers present themselves as experts on the latest trends in their field and reiterate their expertise (Walet, 2020). Moreover, they highlight the number of followers they have as well as the number of questions and answers they receive from them. Finally, there is the micro-celebrity strategy, whereby SMIs incorporate elements that tend to belong to celebrities (such as wealth and fame) into their posts. Those who present themselves as micro-celebrities display an eccentric lifestyle of luxury and glamour, social connections with famous people on social media, and finally attempt to bring out aesthetics in their photos to conform to social standards of beauty through image modifications application of filters, or hiring a professional photographer (Walet, 2020). Thus, influencers need to consider the quality of the messages they convey through their photos and captions to establish a positive shared meaning of their image and successfully represent their identity on Instagram.

In the case of fitness influencers, this study seeks to understand which of the three self-presentation strategies they employ to create content focusing on body positivity and its different forms. To be more specific, fitness influencers are those who showcase and share exercise, healthy lifestyles, online coaching, advice, motivational speeches, and personal experiences with the public (Sokolova, 2021). On the one hand, they encourage people to participate in sports and have a healthy lifestyle. On the other

hand, self-presentation allows fitness influencers greater agency and control over the image. Indeed, they can decide how to take the photo, what to edit, whether to share it, how to frame it, and what poses to take to show their bodies in a certain way and conform to beauty standards (Walet, 2020). The problem is that users often attempt to achieve their physical standards. Indeed, the social comparison theory developed by Leon Festinger (1954) argues that individuals construct their identity through comparison with others who have better qualities (Belinska, 2018). For instance, women engage with influencers on social media because they are perceived as relatable peers, and when they show off their slim and toned bodies, women try to self-regulate to achieve attractive physiques like theirs (Belinska, 2018).

Therefore, many studies argue that fitspiration content displayed by fitness influencers does not significantly differ from thinspiration content as it encourages comparisons and body dissatisfaction (Dignard & Jarry, 2021), as we will see in the next sub-section.

2.2.2 Fitspiration and Thinspiration

Fitspiration is a term that emerged in 2013 on social media, it is derived from the combination of the words fitness and inspiration and is a biased positive term that aims to encourage a fit and healthy body image through the combination of exercise and a balanced diet (Cataldo et al., 2022). It emerged to counteract thinspiration trends that promote extremely thin images of bodies, causing dangerous consequences.

Fitness influencers promote fitspiration content about the pursuit of health and strength rather than thinness in which, however, ideal toned and muscular bodies are often portrayed (Cataldo et al., 2022; Dignard & Jarry, 2021). On the one hand, some studies have shown that exposure to these fitspiration images stimulates people to engage in healthier and more athletic lifestyles (Sokolova, 2021). On the other hand, this type of content can foster appearance-related comparisons and lead people to over-exercise routines to succeed in looking like them rather than to achieve a healthy body and the pleasure and benefit of exercise (Cataldo et al., 2022). Consequently, this demonstrates how the effects of fitspiration content can cause anxiety and dissatisfaction with one's body image. This is especially the case for women who idealize how they should appear on social media and self-objectify themselves by exposing only certain parts of their bodies, using filters, or editing photos to conform to these ideals and gain more approval from other users through likes and comments (Rajan, 2018). The literature has shown that self-objectification and concerns about one's body image are connected and that prolonged exposure to fitspiration content can increase negative feelings toward one's body and self-esteem (Cataldo et al., 2022).

Consequently, some research claims that fitspiration is quite like thinspiration, which is linked to thinness and eating disorders (Dignard & Jarry, 2021). Indeed, athletic bodies simply appear as an extention of the conventional female ideal, thin, young, white, and sexualized, despite showing more muscle and strength (Rajan, 2018). Thin content normally depicts thin and toned bodies that are sexually objectified

and captioned with diet, weight, and exercise (Cohen et al., 2020). Viewing both types of content on social media reduces satisfaction with body appearance and leads to poor eating behaviors.

Although Cohen and colleagues' (2019) study demonstrated that content on major body-positive Instagram profiles is consistent with key theoretical drivers of positive body image, other scientists disagree with these claims (Rajan, 2018). Therefore, this research aims to maintain a critical view to investigate whether the messages conveyed by fitness influencers portraying muscular bodies align with body positivity values.

Furthermore, such doubts about the benefit of viewing fitness influencers' content and their communication on social media increased during the global Covid-19 epidemic that forced people to stay home by spending more time on social networks and changing work habits.

2.3 Influencers Culture and Pandemic in Italy

2.3.1 Influencer Culture in the Pandemic and Body Image

In December 2019, the first confirmed case of SARS-CoV-2 infection was reported in Wuhan, China. After spreading to the entire city of Wuhan, Covid-19 began to spread to other continents violently affecting member states and putting a strain on all health systems. As a result, the Covid-19 outbreak has quickly declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) (Palmer et al., 2020; Gabutti et al., 2021). The pandemic spread all around the world in different ways and at different times causing an unprecedented health crisis with important ramifications for societies and economies (Gabutti et al., 2021). Due to the devastating loss of life, countries went into lockdown and people lost jobs and had to drastically change their habits (Gabutti et al., 2021). Influencer culture was also hit hard by the quarantine as they lost sponsorships and contracts with brands. However, other influencers gained even more success and popularity due to more constant contact with followers (Breeze, 2021). Indeed, as mentioned earlier, the success of an influencer is given by the relationship with its community, even though these relationships based on credibility and trust can lead to social comparison (Breeze, 2021; Belinska, 2018). Therefore, there have been debates regarding the role of influencers during the pandemic and what content they should publish. It has been shown that they had to embrace new communication strategies, as during this highly stressful and controversial time, people were looking for someone to turn to for advice and reassurance (Bishop, 2020). Indeed, influencers moved away from displaying lavish lifestyles or sponsored advertisements and moved toward a more authentic and sensitive communication style (Bishop, 2020). As Bishop (2020) pointed out, product sponsorship during the epidemic harmed the culture of influencers, who resorted to more humanitarian messaging to assist people through the crisis.

Particularly, social distancing appears to have had strong repercussions on women and their perceptions of body image (Vall-Roqué et al., 2021). They began to worry more about their physique, food, binge eating, and dietary restrictions (Robertson et al., 2021; Baceviciene & Jankauskiene, 2021). This was

caused by an increase in the use of social media, specifically Instagram, and a sudden change in eating habits and lifestyles (Baceviciene & Jankauskiene, 2021). Indeed, maintaining a positive view of the body has been complicated for some users who have been exposed more frequently to thinness ideals (Vall-Roqué et al., 2021).

Additionally, some studies have reported the unhealthy nutrition of individuals during lockdown (Baceviciene & Jankauskiene, 2021). While other research has argued that exposure to high body content online, fast-food closures, and more leisure time benefited individuals who increased physical activity and adopted a healthier diet (Robertson et al., 2021). Thus, research is contradictory regarding data on pandemic period lifestyle change and whether it benefited or harmed individual physical and mental well-being.

In the case of fitness influencers, in the face of the closure of fitness clubs which was the preferred environment in which they created content, they had to start giving fitness and health advice on Instagram, which according to some, heightened Western beauty stereotypes (Godefroy, 2020). They may have adopted a positive self-presentation characterized by unrealistic and idealized representations of their bodies through edited images or studied poses, without revealing the negative body image they were experiencing solely to engage more followers (Lucibello et al., 2021). On the contrary, they may have incorporated a self-presentation aimed at messages of body solidarity and promotion of outward and inward positivity.

Therefore, this research aims to investigate how fitness influencers represent body positivity during the pandemic. Indeed, in the research about the culture of influencers during the Covid-19 pandemic, there is a gap regarding how fitness influencers portray body positivity messages through their Instagram posts during that time of mental and physical crisis for the Italian people. Italy was the second country with the highest number of confirmed cases, after China, and to limit the exponential growth of infections and to send messages to the public, the Italian government used social media and influencers' communication (Saglietto et al., 2020).

2.3.2 Covid-19 in Italy and the role of influencers

Covid-19 arrived in Italy causing a health crisis and damaging social, economic, and political well-being (Breeze, 2021). The first positive person was identified on February 19 and, soon after, the government issued the first decree-law to impose quarantine in the limited area where the disease had broken out (Trevisan et al., 2021). On February 25, the rapid growth of cases forced the government to impose in four regions of northern Italy to work from home for all public offices and the closure of schools and universities. Finally, on March 11, the *#IoRestoACasa* decree was issued, imposing a total lockdown throughout Italy. People were allowed to leave their homes only for proven necessity; common businesses, as well as restaurants, were suspended; and gatherings in public and private places were prohibited

(Trevisan et al., 2021). Accordingly, Italy entered the most restrictive phase of its history due to the harshest health crisis in years. Indeed, hospitals were overcrowded and close to collapse due to the shortage of intensive care places and the lack of personal protective equipment (Nacoti et al., 2020). Therefore, the Covid-19 epidemic, unfortunately still present today, is a real public health and humanitarian crisis that with time changes goes through several more or less intense phases. Moreover, it forced the Italian government to impose progressive mitigation measures to drastically limit social interactions and prevent the spread of the virus.

The restrictions imposed by the Italian government have limited the mobility of people and their social and working life. This has caused serious economic (job losses, business closures, and so on), health, and daily life consequences. As a result, individuals have dramatically increased their use of social media as a new way to interact, work, maintain contact with the outside world, and become informed (Trevisan et al., 2021). Specifically, influencers were of great importance in Italy during the lockdown period as the Italian government requested and collaborated with them to raise awareness about the rules to follow to limit infection and promote healthy lifestyles even if forced to stay in their homes (Ingrassia et al., 2022).

Italy is considered the home of influencers known worldwide and is, from a legal point of view, at the forefront and a fertile ground to study the phenomenon of social media influencers (Franceschelli & Mansani, n.d.). Indeed, already in 2019, researchers reported a 65% growth in the influencer phenomenon (*Influencer Marketing*, 2019) and ONIM's 2020 Brand & Marketer report showed a further maturity of it in Italy, just caused by the restrictions of Covid-19 virus (*Influencer Marketing on the rise*, 2020). Thus, influencers in Italy are becoming a fundamental means for companies to advertise products, engage old and new consumers in the brand history and philosophy but as demonstrated by the pandemic, also for government and politics to inform citizens in a quick and trusted way (Franceschelli & Mansani, n.d.). Indeed, as mentioned above, in the digital age influencers are credible sources for their followers and they build a trustworthy relationship with them not only by sponsoring products but also by taking on a social role (*Influencer Marketing on the rise*, 2020). Notably, one of the driving sectors for the increase in SMIs phenomenon has been the fitness industry, which grew both before and during the pandemic (Monks, 2021). Therefore, this demonstrates the relevance of the research focusing on the Italian context and fitness influencers.

2.4 Summary

To sum up, the concepts of body positivity, fitness influencers, self-presentation, fitspiration, and thinspiration were presented and considered relevant to this study. First, it was necessary to examine the origins and development of body positivity and connect it to the subsequent sections. It was found that social media spread the term exponentially and provided unprecedented popularity to the movement. However, different approaches also emerged that created controversy within the movement as they

seemed to perpetuate stereotypes of ideal Western bodies. Therefore, reviewing the origins and evolution of the body positivity concept and movement is crucial to understanding the alignment of fitness influencers to it. Furthermore, Instagram is the most significant platform for body positivity as it enables a new form of social activism that aims to challenge dominant female beauty ideals. Indeed, the six fundamental characteristics of body positivity shed light on the specific elements that fitness influencers might express on Instagram about body positivity. These categories also serve to explore fitness influencers' self-presentation and what strategies they employ to create content about body positivity. Therefore, the self-presentation strategies allow the researcher to understand how influencers communicate messages of body acceptance and love, inner positivity, body appreciation, and so on.

Regarding the concepts and theories of fitspiration and thinspiration, there are some disagreements as some scholars argue that fitspiration and thinspiration are two distinct concepts, while others argue that they do not differ much from each other. In this research, the distinction between thinspiration and fitspiration is examined to understand if fitness influencers emphasize the pursuit of health and strength rather than thinness. Finally, an overview of the pandemic situation in Italy allowed for an understanding of the importance of this research which is focused on body positivity and influencers. During the pandemic, fitness influencers have taken on a key role in stimulating people to exercise and maintain a healthy diet. Indeed, the Italian government has entrusted influencers with the task of raising awareness of maintaining a healthy lifestyle even within their homes.

Overall, this theoretical framework provides the fundamental basis of the analysis to identify the communication strategy of fitness influencers to represent body positivity on Instagram during the pandemic.

3. Method

This chapter provides an overview of the method and procedures used to evaluate Instagram posts and Reels. First, a justification for the use of the qualitative method is provided, followed by a description of Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis and why it is suited for this study. Second, the sampling process and data collection are explained in detail, i.e., the criteria for selecting the units of analysis, the posts and Reels to be analyzed, and the time frame. The third subsection provides an extensive explanation of the sensitizing concepts that will help answer the research question. Next, the method used for data analysis and its components is clarified, also specifying the steps conducted during the data analysis. Finally, a comprehensive summary of ethics, credibility, and reflexivity of the research is offered.

3.1 Research design

A qualitative analysis was carried out to answer the research question because it allows for the discovery of further meanings and provides more information regarding the contexts and phenomena of social behaviors (Babbie, 2017). As Braun and Clarke (2008) argue, the qualitative method allows the researcher to find patterns of meaning in both written and visual texts, revealing in-depth information that would otherwise go unnoticed. For instance, in media, the qualitative analysis attempts to understand the implicit values present in content (Brennen, 2017). As this research focused on Instagram posts, the qualitative analysis helped manifest the deeper meanings present in the posts of three fitness influencers regarding the representation of body positivity. Furthermore, qualitative research is more suitable than quantitative research in this analysis as it considers the contexts of the texts analyzed allowing for a better, more varied, understanding of the phenomenon of body positivity (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Therefore, non-numerical data was collected to explore visual representations of body positivity and to challenge existing power relations.

Specifically, to answer the research question and understand how fitness influencers represent body positivity on Instagram during Covid-19 pandemic, Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) was used (Machin, 2013). It is a mix between Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Critical Visual Analysis (CVA) (Machin, 2013). This method is appropriate to analyze content regarding the representation of body positivity since Instagram is a multimodal platform, which means that this platform involves different communication practices such as text, images, videos, effects, and so on (Serafini, 2014). Thus, considering that influencers live off their image and Instagram is photo-based, the study also relied on the visual analysis method, adopting a multimodal perspective. To be more specific, multimodality is an interdisciplinary approach that considers various modes of communication that may be present in discourse, such as visual, auditory, and gestural (Jewitt, 2013). Moreover, it investigates on a societal level how the choice to represent something through an image or writing implies different meanings (Jewitt, 2013). Multimodal discourses are becoming more common as post-modernity is defined by fragmentation,

dispersion, and the prevalence of digital communication tools (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001). Today individuals can control and combine different forms of representation in complex ways (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001). Indeed, the multimodal approach views image and text as complementary parts of a larger context. Therefore, this research paid attention to both visual communication and text which are often interconnected and can encapsulate different meanings (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001).

Additionally, MCDA is suitable for this research because body positivity is a political and social movement that fights for body inclusivity and tries to combat aesthetic standards and social biases. MCDA made it possible to expose covert messages of body positivity spread by fitness influencers, illuminating power dynamics (Machin & Mayr, 2012). To achieve the objectives, the research adopted the approaches proposed by Machin and Mayr (2012) for both critical discourse analysis (CDA) and critical visual analysis (CVA). In this way, themes of body positivity representation were generated from the analysis of the posts shared by the fitness influencers on Instagram. The codes, that led to the main themes, were created based on the sensitizing concepts of the research. However, the sensitizing concepts of the study were derived from quantitative research, whereas, in this study, a qualitative approach was used to elicit deeper meanings concerning the elements of body positivity present in the content shared by the fitness influencers during Covid-19 pandemic.

To sum up, multimodal critical discourse analysis was adopted in order to identify and investigate the implicit messages that fitness influencers convey about bodies in their Instagram posts and to bring a fresh viewpoint to the body positive representation literature. The sampling and data collection procedures for analysis are explained in detail in the next sections.

3.2 Sampling process and data collection

The sampling unit for this study was fitness influencers who were selected by applying the steps used by Cohen and colleagues (2019) to capture the sample of the top three Instagram accounts. This approach is consistent with previous content analyses concerned with predominant appearance-related messages.

First, the search term "top Italian fitness influencers on Instagram" was entered into Google in December 2021, and links were sampled from the first web page returned by Google because it features the most influential websites (Cohen et al., 2019). All ten links generated have been considered since they all listed names of fitness influencers. However, this has limitations because the links generated depend on the keywords entered and the software used. Therefore, different keywords and different search software could have produced diverse links. Although profiles that might have been relevant to the research were excluded in that manner, this combination allowed us to find the most significant names since Google is the most reliable and popular search software (Bonomelli, n.d.). Second, since the research is about women's bodies, the researcher selected only the female names that appeared in all ten links. The study focuses on

women because they have historically been under more pressure than men to meet social standards for appearance and beauty (Cortez, 2020). Indeed, in Italy in 2019, data indicated that 95.5% of people with eating disorders were female (Camilli, 2019). Next, the researcher examined the popularity and only considered influencers with more than 50.000 followers because this is the threshold at which industry insiders designate someone as an influencer (Cohen et al., 2019). Moreover, Instagram activity level during the sampling period was considered, and only profiles with a minimum of 100 published posts were selected as supported by Cohen and collogues (2019). Profiles without fitness and body-related posts were excluded. Last, because this research focused on the first part of the second year of the pandemic, only profiles that contained content about fitness during that time were considered. Thus, the final three accounts found are @traininpink, @silvia.fascians, and @francescafitnessfreak.

Furthermore, these three influencers were relevant to the present research because they reveal specific messages regarding fitness and body positivity. Indeed, all three try to align themselves with body positivity values in different ways. As for @traininpink, she defines herself as a wellness coach who insists on the issue of body acceptance and has suffered from eating disorders in the past (Dente, 2020). @silvia.fascians, one of the most prominent Italian fitness influencers, has also faced the battle against eating disorders and through her Instagram account tries to convey a healthy routine for body and mind (Gottuso, 2019). Finally, @francescafitnessfreak is a certified personal trainer who, in addition to her workouts, publishes content on healthy eating (Ferrari, 2020). Therefore, the content shared by @traininpink, @silvia.fascians, and @francescafitnessfreak allows us to identify the different values conveyed in representations of positive body image and to investigate how their role as influencers intertwined with the shared elements of body positivity.

Of the content published by these influencers, visual and textual data present in IG posts and Reels were analyzed. They are the main features used by influencers since they are quick to produce and create high engagement (Tafesse & Wood, 2021). The researcher did not consider either Instagram videos or Stories. Instagram videos can last from 15 seconds to 60 minutes, and they are only used by 16% of creators; while Reels are used by most influencers because they allow them to reach a wider audience by creating short, funny, and impactful videos (Suik, 2021; Malnik, 2019). Stories disappear after 24 hours, and not all three influencers saved stories during the sampling period, so the study would not have been able to obtain a complete picture of the content published in the selected time frame.

At a textual level, this study examined captions placed by influencers under photos (including hashtags), audio corpora in Reels, and written messages present within visual posts since, as argued by Cohen and colleagues (2019), they are necessary to determine the overall theme of the post. Since comments can be actively monitored by the account user and frequently only contain emojis or tags, they are of little use in addressing my study issue and therefore they have not been examined (Jones, 2019). While, in terms of visual analysis, the images present in the posts and Reels were analyzed, looking at

details to bring to light meanings not explicitly visible. Therefore, the final research dataset consisted of the IG posts and Instagram Reels of the three fitness influencers.

The posts and Reels were selected through purposeful sampling. The sample was chosen following specific criteria regarding the objective of the study to obtain data that could answer the research question (Babbie, 2017). Specifically, the sampling strategy upon which this research was based showed how fitness influencers represent body positivity and how they self-present during the lockdown. The criteria for sampling were: (1) posts/Reels must have been posted by the influencers (excluding reposts and tagged posts); (2) posts/Reels had to contain images of bodies, facial expressions, or food, (Jones, 2019); (3) exclusion of all posts/Reels containing only text as they are not relevant to this representation-focused study (Jones, 2019); (4) in the case of carousel posts (posts containing multiple photos/videos), only one item was processed to ensure data comparability; (5) captions had to be related to body positivity messages (Tiggemann et al., 2020); (6) content must have been posted from January 2021. The sampling period spanned from January 2021 to the end of June 2021, as it was the peak of the Covid-19 pandemic in Italy (*Covid, il confronto dei dati*, 2021). Moreover, by 2021, fitness influencers had already increased their popularity through sharing workouts to do at home, given the closure of sports centers (Miretta, 2021). Specifically, a detailed description of how posts and reels were collected from influencers' profiles to be analyzed is explained below.

As regards data collection, a total of 75 Instagram posts and 55 Instagram Reels were collected. The data collection took place via the official Instagram accounts of the 3 fitness influencers @traininpink, @silvia.fascians, and @francescafitnessfreak. The data collection process was conducted from May 1 to May 10, 2021. First, the researcher searched through their personal Instagram account for the official profiles of the three influencers. After that, the researcher scrolled through the profiles until January 2021 and meticulously chose, according to the previously mentioned selection criteria, the posts (textual and visual) and Reels to be analyzed. In this selection phase, the researcher took screenshots and saved them. Ultimately, the selection criteria and broad time frame served to collect a wide range of descriptive data for analysis and to understand what positive body values influencers aligned with in the middle of the pandemic (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

3.3 Sensitizing concepts

Data analysis was guided by the literature and by sensitizing concepts. Sensitizing concepts are background ideas that impact the whole research problem and provide a starting point for data analysis in a qualitative study (Bowen, 2019). In this way, the sensitizing concepts, which are grounded in theory, help the researcher analyze the meanings within the data. At the same time, the researcher remains open to discovering new themes outside of the sensitizing concepts (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

In this study, the first sensitizing concept concerns the self-presentation strategy of fitness influencers. As previously mentioned, there are 3 self-presentation strategies of SMIs: laypeople strategy, opinion leadership, and micro-celebrity strategy (Gudmundsdottir & Chia, 2019, cited in Walet, 2020). The laypeople strategy refers to the technique according to which influencers show themselves as ordinary people by presenting the normal sides of their lives including flaws and imperfections (Walet, 2020). Opinion leadership concerns more professional communication where influencers present themselves as experts in their field and hail the number of followers and iterations (Walet, 2020). The third and final strategy sees influencers incorporate elements belonging to famous people into their communication (Walet, 2020). For instance, they flaunt a luxurious life, connect with important people, and edit their images to bring out their aesthetic beauty, perpetuating Western social standards. Therefore, by observing the content shared by fitness influencers and their way of communicating the researcher identified what strategy they used to create content focusing on body positivity and its different forms.

The second sensitizing concept used concerns women's representation of body positivity, guided by the six categories of positive body image enunciated by Cohen and colleagues (2019). Those categories include body appreciation, body acceptance/love, a broad conceptualization of beauty, adaptive investment in body care, inner positivity, and filtering information in a body-protective manner (Cohen et al., 2019). Therefore, as argued by Cohen and colleagues (2019), an image is body positive when it contains these just-mentioned values as well as body characteristics that do not conform to beauty standards (such as cellulite, stretch marks, and fat rolls). On the other hand, images that include "unhealthy weight loss/diet-appearance, clothing/beauty-appearance, praise of thinness, stigmatization of weight/fat, and body/weight/food shame" (Cohen et al., 2019, p.50) are not considered body positivity images. In this study, the six categories were observed in the body content shared by fitness influencers, focusing on their clothing, body parts are shown and those hidden, and motivational and body appreciation messages. Furthermore, mental positivity messages (e.g., inner happiness, feeling good, and self-confidence) were also analyzed. Finally, to uncover the more hidden meanings in the representation of body positivity, deep attention was paid to the poses assumed by the influencers, their clothing, facial expressions, filters applied, gestures assumed, and physical exercises were shown to their followers.

Content analysis of fitness influencers was also guided by the concepts of fitspiration and thinspiration. In light of the concept of thinspiration, the analysis also included images containing thin bodies (i.e., a body low in body fat), body protrusions, messages regarding fat or weight loss, praise for thinness, skinny poses, weight/body guilt, objectifying messages, fat/weight stigmatization, diet/restriction messages, and food guilt messages (Boepple & Thompson, 2015). At the same time, considering the definition of fitspiration as content aimed at motivating people to get physically fit through strenuous exercise and a healthy diet (Cataldo et al., 2022); images of muscular bodies (i.e., a toned body), muscles (abdominal and other muscles), and messages encouraging dieting and exercise for both aesthetic and

health reasons were also analyzed. Appearance-related motives emphasized weight management to be thin, fit, sexy, or beautiful (Simpson & Mazzeo, 2016). Whereas health-related motives, emphasized weight management to stay healthy or improve overall health (Simpson & Mazzeo, 2016).

As a result, while coding the influencers' posts and Reels, the researcher focused on the sensitizing concepts to find the main themes and answer the research question. Below is a detailed description of the data analysis steps.

3.4 Data analysis

This subchapter discusses the data analysis process and coding procedures including initial and final coding that led to discovering how fitness influencers represent body positivity. Being that the posts contained examples of language as well as visuals, as previously mentioned, the data was analyzed using Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) (Machin, 2013). This method allowed for the use of a multimodal approach to decoding visual, textual, and auditory corpora (Wang, 2014). Because discourse communication can be conveyed through text and visual components, it is critical to gain a complete and clear comprehension of Instagram posts and their evident and hidden meaning (Machin & Mayr, 2012). This approach ensures the researcher considers all information, discourse, ideologies, and structures present (Machin, 2013). All steps of CVA and CDA were completed in the analysis, but some steps did not apply to certain posts. In this case, "not applicable" was noted. The final themes were developed inductively, meaning that they emerged directly through the research (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Existing theories on body positivity, fitspiration/thinspiration, and self-presentation served as a frame to look at the data during the initial coding phase.

The analysis of the content published by @traininpink, @silvia.fascians, and @francescafitnessfreak was divided into four parts: visual, textual, integration (relationship between textual and visual), and discourse (Machin & Mayr, 2012). The visual part focused on who the person is in the post, clothing, facial expression, body and pose, background/context, and possibly other elements that the researcher felt were relevant to this research. Whereas in the text analysis phase, the message, the terms used (for the Reels analysis also the words in the audio, captions, and within the video), and the call to action mentioned were analyzed. The call to action refers to the addition of a mention or attempt to interact with followers explicitly urging them to action or change. This is a crucial factor to consider because it adds context to the post's goal. Finally, the integration and discourse part focused on connoting the meanings that emerged from the first two phases. Particularly, the textual and visual elements of the posts were first integrated, explaining the relationship between the two. Then, the content narratives of the fitness influencers were reported.

Therefore, to ensure that texts do not impact the interpretation of the visuals, influencers' Instagram contents have been analyzed first visually and then textually. In the following sections, the steps of CVA and CDA applied during data analysis are explained extensively.

3.4.1 Critical Visual Analysis

Visual data were analyzed through Critical Visual Analysis (CVA) to extrapolate meanings outside of the images and make them explicit (Machin & Mayr, 2012). Visual analysis, compared to verbal and written methods, enhances the richness of the data by uncovering additional layers of meaning that challenge or serve existing theories and can represent messages other than those reported in text (Machin & Mayr, 2012). Applied to this research, it was used to understand and determine the image patterns that Italian fitness influencers disseminated among the Italian population during the pandemic.

Based on the sensitizing concepts of body positivity, self-presentation, fitspiration, and thinspiration, the steps proposed by Machin and Mayr (2012) were kept in mind to obtain reliable final themes. The first step is the denotation phase which involves a comprehensive and neutral description of the observed content (Machin & Mayr, 2012). During the descriptive stage, the researcher asked "Who/what is depicted here?" (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p.50). By denoting the fitness influencers' posts, all visual elements present were taken into consideration, people, things, writing, and so on.

The second step is the connotation phase. The connotation intends to find meanings of the possible messages hidden in the visual content. This phase is concerned with connoting the previously denoted data, asking the question "What ideas and values are communicated through what is represented, and through how it is represented?" (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p.50). In the connotation phase, a few specific elements were considered. First, the attributes, i.e., the different ideas and values that are represented by objects. This was important to discover the symbolic meanings portrayed by objects that are often not visible at first glance. Therefore, it allowed the researcher to understand the general ideology held by the influencers. Second, after observing the attributes, the researcher focused on the setting of the image. Settings are important in giving meaning to visuals and can imply different ideals. Finally, the third element observed was the use of salience. Salient features are the most crucial part of the image as they can highlight and make some elements of the photo stand out rather than others. According to Machin & Mayr (2012), salient features are potent cultural symbols, size, color, tone, focus foregrounding, and overlapping (p. 54-55). How the images are presented to the audience helps to understand what is significant and what is not to the author (Machin & Mayr, 2012). For instance, the placement of objects/people in the images allows for the investigation of the meaning attached to them.

To properly look at representations of body positivity, using tools to study only images would be limiting. In this regard, analysis of the language of posts and Reels was also included in the study.

3.4.2 Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) was applied to uncover the meanings conveyed through the language and discourses of fitness influencers about body positivity. The method was used to find underlying themes in the texts by revealing strategies that may seem neutral but aim to change the representation of certain events or people (Machin & Mayr, 2012). CDA aims to uncover the connections between power, ideology, and language through the dynamics present in discourse (Bucholtz, 2003).

The tools used for CDA are those proposed by Machin and Mayr (2012). The first one adopted is connotation which involves focusing on individual words, and analyzing why certain terms are used and not others. Therefore, this tool helped inspect the choices made by influencers on the use of certain words and discover the type of narrative they convey. Second, the researcher looked at overlexicalization i.e., the repeated use of certain words and their synonyms (Machin & Mayr, 2012). It is often used to push a certain ideology, persuade the reader, or make certain meanings explicit (Machin & Mayr, 2012). For example, in this research, fitness influencers represented body positivity with different language styles, and this tool allowed the researcher to inspect their viewpoint. Third, suppressed words in the posts were identified. Suppressed words are defined as those words that should be present in the text but are not (Machin & Mayr, 2012). The absence of certain words, in terms of things that were not said, provided insight into the narrative that influencers carried and still carry. The fourth element that was observed in the texts was the structural oppositions, such as good vs. bad, old vs. new, us vs. them, and so on. This means that beyond the meanings of the words themselves, they imply, even if not explicitly, other meanings (Machin & Mayr, 2012). The fifth and final tool of the CDA involves a more specific analysis of lexical choices and communication genres (Machin & Mayr, 2012). This strategy provided insight into whether the influencers themselves consciously used authoritative language to direct the audience to think in a specific way or not.

The research conducted CDA for text within posts, captions under images, and audio in Reels. Therefore, using a multimodal approach allowed for a more comprehensive view of the body positivity representations of SMIs.

3.5 Credibility, reflexivity, and ethical concern

To ensure the credibility of the study, the limitations of the research method used were investigated. The limitation of the qualitative study is that it often suffers criticism because it lacks scientific rigor and, therefore, the results are seen as a collection of personal opinions subject to the researcher's biases. This is a consequence of the fact that there is no widely accepted consensus on the standards by which qualitative research should be examined (Noble and Smith, 2015). Consequently, during MCDA, the subjective viewpoint of the researcher cannot be entirely erased because of unconscious biases and perceptions of the social world (Machin & Mayr, 2012). Hence, this limitation was addressed through the two basic elements of credibility: reflexivity and validity.

To ensure reflexivity, the researcher maintained a critical approach in all processes of the research. To avoid bias in data interpretation, a researcher must be aware of his or her position within the study (Brennen, 2017). In this case, the researcher's body shape and skin color may have influenced the data analysis and results as the researcher is a white Western woman with a slim body who, therefore, cannot relate firsthand to discriminatory representations of body positivity on social media (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Therefore, the reliability of the research was ensured by the clear and explicit description of the theoretical framework, data collection, method choice, sampling strategy, data analysis procedure, and coding process (Silverman, 2011). This provided greater transparency and objectivity in the data interpretation section.

Validity was guaranteed by inclusive treatment of data, constant data comparison, and inclusion of deviant cases (Boeije, 2010). Additionally, the researcher critically analyzed the images and texts through MCDA and generated the final themes of how fitness influencers represented body positivity on Instagram. Thus, credibility was used to assess the quality of qualitative research as it manages to connect claims and evidence, strong arguments, and knowledge (Silverman, 2011). Indeed, the findings of this study are based on solid evidence grounded in strong arguments and knowledge about body positivity. Looking more specifically at the literature, the theories used on body positivity, self-presentation, and fitspiration/thinspiration were all derived from existing academic research papers and were discussed to ensure proper interpretation of the data (Silverman, 2011).

In terms of generalizability of qualitative studies, this research is not generalizable because only a small sample of influencers and posts were analyzed. Hence, it cannot be fully representative of the social issue. Nevertheless, the sample and data analysis are considered suitable and sufficient for this qualitative research (Boeije, 2010).

Finally, the researcher attempted to maintain ethical sensitivity by staying focused on the objective of the study and not being influenced by personal goals (Babbie, 2017). Therefore, the data were analyzed, and the results were discussed to understand how fitness influencers represent body positivity during the pandemic. As the posts are all derived from the official accounts of the three fitness influencers and, therefore, are publicly accessible, the data analysis is objective. Although their profiles are public, the researcher considered ethical implications regarding privacy and ownership. Accordingly, to protect the integrity of the influencers, their identities were anonymized by covering their faces in the reported images and not revealing their real names but only the account names.

4. Results and discussion

This section discusses the results that emerged from the MCDA of 75 posts and 55 Reels. The analysis generated four main themes that are discussed extensively in the following subsections. Furthermore, these themes answer the research question of how body positivity is portrayed by fitness influencers in Italy during the Covid-19 pandemic. The first theme, "focus on inside well-being," refers to the importance of being well within oneself, turning away from physical appearance, and focusing on psychological well-being that brings happiness, serenity, and positivity. The second theme, "raise awareness of social stereotypes," concerns the influencers' intent to expose and combat socio-cultural stereotypes and misrepresentation in the media. The third category, "heed of one's body," refers to promoting the constant care of one's body (and mind) through a balanced lifestyle and healing activities. Finally, the last theme, "depictions of the ideal female body," is a controversial theme that shows how visually some influencers' content still represents the stereotype of the ideal body.

4.1 Focus on inside well-being

Data analysis shows that the most significant theme that emerged among fitness influencers is "focus on inside well-being". It was determined the importance of the fact that a woman's beauty and well-being depend not only on her outward appearances but also on what she possesses on the inside. Therefore, as the influencers argue, it is important to feel good about oneself psychologically to reach happiness, serenity, and body satisfaction. This theme resonates with the notion of body positivity, which states that having a positive mindset can play a significant role in how one views and perceives the body (Stabler, 2021). Based on the overall data, fitness influencers address positive inner characters through captions and images in Reels and posts.

Fitness influencers express concerns about the importance of achieving psychological well-being to be happy and admire the aesthetics of one's body. As @trainipink reflects, "If you do not sort out your inner mess first, you won't feel comfortable with your body either" and "Let's not focus on the scale or clothing size, but on what makes you feel good inside", demonstrating how it is necessary to prioritize one's inner well-being to succeed in achieving body appreciation. Indeed, even @silvia.fascians, through a post before and after her eating disorder, expresses the importance of taking care of one's mind to achieve inner happiness and feel good about one's body appearance. This is manifested on the outside through her smile present only in the photo depicting her recovery, accompanied by the phrase "being happy to be able to be present" (@silvia.fascians). Indeed, the inner happiness of the influencers is also represented through the smiles that convey messages of contentment, cheerfulness, and freedom as well as by the music of the Reels such as "Musica leggerissima" (Colapesce, Dimartino), "Electric" (Katy Perry), "Oh Nanana" (Bonde R300). This is in line with the inner positivity element of positive body image by Cohen and colleagues (2019), who advocate body positivity as a form of inner happiness that is automatically transmitted

externally. Indeed, feeling good on the inside enhances outward appearance, as one is more confident and radiant.

Expressions of happiness also involve the concept of optimism, which, as argued by Tylka (2018), is a component of psychological well-being. Being optimistic is a good personal characteristic as it symbolizes a positive mind (Lazuka et al., 2020). A positive and optimistic inner character influences how women view themselves and their bodies since, as mentioned earlier, beauty also projects from the inside out (Wood-Barcalow et al., 2010). Indeed, it is clear from the awareness posts on eating disorders, that fitness influencers want to encourage women to be positive since eating disorders can be cured, and they are proof of this because they have experienced them. The data reported optimistic statements that are used by influencers to spur their users to inner positivity: "Be optimistic, you can do it too if I have done it" (@francescafitnessfreak), "Do not give up" (@trainipink), "Every time I reached a low point, I used it to give me the boost and fly even higher" (@silvia.fascians). These phrases are supported by images in which their faces and poses depicted serenity and contentment through shy but sincere smiles, confident looks toward the camera, slightly raised heads, and healthier bodies. Hence, they try to motivate followers to a change of mindset since an optimistic approach to life allows one to achieve body satisfaction.

Beyond expressions of happiness and encouragement of optimism, fitness influencers also incite self-esteem, which is understood as self-appreciation and self-confidence and is considered a clear indicator of mental well-being (Clay et al., 2005). Indeed, positive self-esteem always refers to the inner positivity category of positive body image but in particular to the concepts of self-love and self-confidence (Cohen et al., 2019). Self-love is the state of self-appreciating, that is, of great respect for one's own being and happiness, and of making oneself a priority (Patrick, n.d.). Expressions related to self-love are captured in the captions of fitness influencers, using the following formulations as examples: "Love yourself first as you are" (@francescafitnessfreak), "Put yourself first" (@silvia.fascians) but also in the music used in Reels such as "Somebody to love" (Jefferson Airplane). Hence, fitness influencers stimulate followers to love themselves from within, as this would also lead to self-love, well-being, and peace in life.

Self-esteem also refers to the concept of self-confidence, which implies a positive view of oneself characterized by self-acceptance (Oney & Oksuzoglu-Guven, 2015). Influencers use statements such as "believe in yourself" (@francescafitnessfreak), "the most valuable thing you can wear? Confidence in yourself" (@trainipink), or even hashtags #believeinyourself #mindfulness to encourage people to increase self-confidence and be more satisfied with their life. Indeed, Tylka (2018) includes life satisfaction as a key component of psychological well-being. For instance, phrases reported by caption analysis such as "today I am full of dreams, plans and zest for life" (@silvia.fascians) and "A scale will never measure your personal worth" (@traininpink) demonstrate how life satisfaction allows people to achieve inner serenity and self-esteem as they are aware of their worth, which, as @trainipink argues, cannot be measured by a scale. This supports what Williamson and Karazsia (2018) said, namely, that body positivity is not only about outward

appearance but also about people's mindsets. By esteeming one's inner personality, one achieves mental positivity that can be externalized in acceptance and appreciation of the body and its unique features, even if they do not conform to cultural ideals of appearance (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015).

Moreover, the analysis unveiled how achieving inner well-being can also occur through contact with nature. This is represented by the landscapes of the posts. Places such as the sea, wheat fields, and the beach represent contexts of freedom and peace from daily stress. Indeed, as claimed by Tylka (2018), psychological well-being also consists of feelings of connection with nature. @silvia.fascians expresses this through the words "my ideal vacation allows me to play sports and connect with nature", or through the hashtags #befree #freedom #freeyourmind, demonstrating how nature, particularly when combined with sports, has therapeutic effects on the mind.

Indeed, the data displayed how fitness influencers portray the performance of sports and diet to improve their internal health and well-being. They refer to healthy nutrition and physical activity to make the mind feel good and not as an imposed obligation to improve aesthetic canons (Caddick and Smith, 2014). This is in line with the concept of fitspiration for health-related motives (Simpson & Mazzeo, 2016). Influencers in their posts promote sports and balanced nutrition to have more energy and feel good psychologically. This is clearly expressed by the captions in the influencers' content: "follow a regimen of proper nutrition and training to feel good and be stronger and healthier" (@trainipink), "do sports because it makes you feel good" (@silvia.fascians). Interestingly, this also connects to the adaptive investment in the appearance element of positive body image since, as stated by Cohen and colleagues (2019), improving one's nutrition and body characteristics in a healthy way is a beneficial act toward personal health that makes individuals more aware and positive. Both Reels and analyzed posts regarding healthy recipes or workouts contain messages of psychological well-being such as "happiness of playing sports and being healthy" (@silvia.fascians), "healthy mentally and physically" (@silvia.fascians), "I went back on my diet and have never been so positive" (@francescafitnessfreak). Indeed, by sharing workout videos and recipes, influencers advocate for the inner well-being that comes from a healthy lifestyle and provides ways and techniques to achieve it.

In sending messages that encourage inner well-being, influencers used ordinary language that allowed them to simply convey the importance of mindfulness in alleviating the mental and physical health repercussions caused by the Covid-19 pandemic (Di Gesto & Cheli, 2021; Cooper et al., 2020). This self-presentation strategy of SMIs is called the laypeople strategy and is particularly relevant since it places influencers on the same level as followers (Gudmundsdottir & Chia, 2019, cited in Walet, 2020). With this strategy, fitness influencers can send empathetic messages for the pursuit of psychological well-being by presenting the normal sides of their lives (such as posts about eating disorders) at a time when individuals are under varying degrees of mental suffering and psychological pressure (such as anxieties, worries, and high stress).

To sum up, fitness influencers want to encourage the importance of wellness from within, which they believe can be achieved through an optimistic mindset, self-awareness, contact with nature, and activities such as sports and healthy eating. Therefore, they put outward appearance in the background by highlighting the importance of mental health to gain a positive body image since inner feelings are automatically reflected on the outside.

4.2 Raise awareness of social stereotypes

The second trend discovered in the data is linked to stereotypes. Fitness influencers raise awareness of socially imposed stereotypes that lead people to develop a negative self-image. For this reason, this theme mainly refers to filtering information to avoid the assimilation of information that may impair the body's vision (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015; Cohen et al., 2019). The sub-themes discovered from this pattern are social media misrepresentation and fake news, societal pressure, normalizing imperfections, and individualism.

As stated by Gwathney (2014), social networks are the most influential media in the formation, reinforcement, and activation of body image stereotypes. In the data analysis, attempts by fitness influencers to raise awareness of stereotypes among their followers appeared frequently, urging them not to believe everything they see on social media as false myths are often reiterated. For instance, @trainipink says "Today we got a famous influencer who claims that weight training makes muscles bigger [...] Please girls get informed independently […] and think critically". She pairs this quote with a photo of her abs and toned, healthy body to prove that weight training allows her to define and strengthen her body, which gains more energy. Reels' analysis also reported some quotes such as "Localized weight loss does not exist. Girls do not believe everything you see online" (@trainipink) to spread truthful information on social media and break down existing stereotypes and false myths as they damage women's body image and health (Cohen et al., 2020; Vandenbosch et al., 2022; Tiggemann et al., 2020). Thus, fitness influencers recognize that body stereotypes are present and perpetuated on Instagram, within which lean, and not overly muscular bodies are portrayed as more advantageous because they reflect the Western ideal of beauty (Ando et al., 2021b).

Furthermore, @traininpink adopts extreme techniques and visual irony to denounce the use of filters and Photoshop by comparing edited photos with natural photos and pointing out how easy it is to post edited photos or videos on Instagram to support unrealistic beauty standards. Indeed, the captions: "Do not be fooled by the photos you see on social media" (@trainipink), and "Do not rely on what you see on social, much of it is unfortunately fake" (@francescafitnessfreak), warn their followers that what appears on social networks is not always real or true, that perfection does not exist, and that those who show themselves to be perfect online are acting. Hence, as supported by influencers' posts, social media are misleading because they distort the perception of reality. This is in line with music in Reels such as

"Save your tears" (The Weeknd) that supports the message of combating misrepresentation on social media, as it communicates to followers that there is no point crying over the perfect bodies seen on social media because they are not truthful. Fitness influencers also adopted calls to action such as "Show everyone that we are beautiful in our natural state" (@trainipink), and "Pay attention" (@silvia.fascians), to spur people to challenge the social stereotypes of bodies that circulate online. Consequently, as some scholars have already affirmed, influencers reinforce that exposure to images of idealized appearances on social media can have harmful effects on users (Vandenbosch et al., 2022; Tiggemann et al., 2020). Additionally, they attempt to prevent them by highlighting how representations on Instagram are often false because people aim to self-present only the perfect sides of themselves (Tiggemann et al., 2020). Thus, they encourage people to filter the information they encounter on social media, accepting only material regarding physical appearance that makes them feel good and rejecting negative attitudes and body standards, because not everything on social media is authentic (Cohen et al., 2019; Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015). However, this can be difficult considering the social pressures on ideal body shape.

Social pressures feed stereotypes, which is why fitness influencers in their posts denounce these pressures (Ando et al., 2021b). Indeed, society constantly pushes women to conform to expectations related to appearance. As revealed in the analysis, the fitness influencers claim that it is the unhealthy society in which we live that, steadily exposing us to stereotypical bodies, leads girls to alter their photos and to start diets and workouts that are extremely harmful, to body and mind, solely to conform to unrealistic standards of beauty. The negative consequences of societal pressures are shown and described by @traininpink in a post about her before-and-after eating disorders, writing in the caption, "We live in a society so plagiarized by toxic advertisements that many girls would probably prefer the Carlotta of the left: abs on display and super (too) skinny". The author aims to illustrate how society continually brainwashes women with messages encouraging them to conquer thinness and strive for unattainable goals, aspirations, and body sizes that can be detrimental to our health. Societal influences, including the pressure to be thin, have previously been recognized as risk factors for the development of eating disorders (Ando et al., 2021b; Maftei & Merlici, 2022; Cohen et al., 2020). The influencers reveal how these pressures are still present in today's conflicted society and they express resistance to these appearance ideals, describing them as unrealistic and harmful (Ando et al., 2021b).

Hence, fitness influencers try to push followers not to be affected by these pressures but to take part in society's change by showing themselves as they are, accepting and loving their bodies. Indeed, based on the data, @traininpink matches an image of her imperfections with the caption "The problem is not your body, but how society has taught you to look at it". In this way, she openly blames society for making people believe that aesthetic imperfections (such as cellulite) are flaws and that to be beautiful we must necessarily fit into a size 38 and have exposed thighs. Previous research has described social media as the media that hinder body satisfaction (Cataldo et al., 2022), but influencers counter this view by trying to

stimulate body satisfaction through messages of love toward imperfections. This means that fitness influencers try to persuade their followers to embrace themselves as they are, rather than succumbing to social pressures, media images, and messages, that encourage them to change their appearance. The findings corroborate Cohen and colleagues' (2019) body positivity category of body acceptance and love, demonstrating the feeling of adoration and well-being toward it through detachment from obsessions with achieving unrealistic beauty created by an overly pretentious society toward human beings (Tiggemann et al., 2020; Wood-Barcalow et al., 2010).

Society puts pressure not only on individuals' fitness but also on their productivity, that is, the ability to be able to accomplish as many things in as little time as possible (Cuneo, 2020). It is a consequence of capitalism and the current world characterized by frenzy and the dominance of performance (Brown, 2014; Gangas, 2021; Todisco, 2021). This type of fast-paced society in which we live requires individuals to be efficient every day, even at the cost of sacrificing health. It is constantly striving for progress and, therefore, it is forbidden to stop or reflect as it implies falling behind and failing. This fast-paced world puts pressure on people as it makes them believe that there are no limits to human power, action, or success and, consequently, convinces them that there are endless possibilities attainable only without stopping or slowing down. This type of society has led to the domination of performance, that is, the obsession of individuals with achieving results at any cost (Todisco, 2021). This is clearly expressed by @silvia.fascians under posts depicting her in a static, non-active pose: "We live in a world where the frenzy of having to do, the demand to produce, always be on point and always be active in the order of the day because if not, you risk falling behind", "They want us to be strong, busy, productive" (@silvia.fascians). Fitness influencers speak out against these social pressures, emphasizing the importance of rest through non-moving poses, showing up on vacation or in relaxing places (such as the park or the beach) because you must allow yourself to "Not always be on point" (@silvia.fascians). This concept is also expressed through the hashtags #productivity #slowdown #slowliving #slowlife #justbreathe, to reach a wider number of people and communicate to them to live life at their own pace, taking care of themselves and their bodies without forcing them to make unnecessary excessive efforts. The findings confirm influencers' alignment with the category that encapsulates adaptive caring behaviors to achieve positive feelings toward the body and mind (Cohen et al., 2019; Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015). But in contrast to what Tylka and Wood-Barcalow (2015) asserted, fitness influencers also incorporate rest as a form of self-care because it is a sign of self-love.

One way to counter the social pressures just mentioned is surely by seeking normalization of what society does not consider ordinary (Cwynar-Horta, 2016). Indeed, fitness influencers, through their posts, are concerned with normalizing aesthetic imperfections and inner flaws through exposure to naked body parts and supportive posts on Instagram. Specifically, the influencer showing her imperfections is @traininpink who portrays in her content body parts such as cellulite, stretch marks, hip dips, and scars.

The disclosure of these body parts emphasizes the desire to normalize women's actual physical appearance through self-love and acceptance of unique body characteristics. The same is done through language and structural oppositions. For example, @traininpink says "Do not aim to be a Barbie-like everyone else but wear proudly what makes you unique", aiming to spur people to move away from body stereotypes and not to be ashamed of their singularities but display them proudly. That is consistent with what authors recommend for the category of body acceptance and self-love, which includes encouraging people to love, embrace, and appreciate body defects to feel good about themselves (Tiggemann et al., 2020; Lazuka et al., 2020). Likewise, fitness influencers normalize inner flaws and swinging emotions by displaying various facial expressions (such as happiness, concentration, serenity) and using phrases like "Do not hide your emotions" and "I am a fantastic chaos full of contradictions" (@silvia.fascians). This reinforces Cohen and colleagues' (2019) concept of mental positivity, which consists of feeling good about oneself and appreciating oneself on the outer and inner levels.

Finally, a recurring aspect among the results is individualism, understood as focusing on oneself and one's choices. It is related to the issue of improving social stereotype awareness, as avoiding comparisons with others can prevent one from assimilating Western body ideals. That confirms the influencers' alignment with the concept of body positivity that is defined concerning the individual (Cohen et al., 2019). Indeed, all three fitness influencers are always portrayed alone in the analyzed posts. Additionally, they emphasize that women should focus on themselves and what they love to do, trying to appreciate their bodies. The present is expressed through captions such as the following: "Rule number one for being happy: do not compare yourself to others" (@francescafitnessfreak) and "Focus on your path and what makes you feel good" (@traininpink). They seek to prevent people from comparing themselves to stereotypes they see in the media and to encourage them to participate in activities for their well-being rather than imitate the physical appearance of others. These comparisons stem from social pressures that lead to fear of others' judgment of one's body image and, therefore, attempts to conform to what is conventional (Ando et al., 2021b). Interpersonal comparisons contribute to an increased risk of eating disorders because people would start adopting new extreme and rigid habits to meet beauty standards. Indeed, this subcategory is related to the concept of fitspiration, which is defined as participating in activities such as sports and diets for the sake of maintaining a healthy physique (Cataldo et al., 2022). Fitness influencers accept comparison with others only when used as an incentive for self-improvement and inspiration, but always remember that we are unique individuals and that what works on others may not work on oneself.

In disseminating this content, influencers maintain ordinary communication, in which they tell their personal experiences and stories, show their imperfections, and advice on behaviors to adopt. That again supports the use of the laypeople strategy of self-presentation, in which influencers lend normal sides to their lives and communicate naturally with followers using simple language (Walet, 2020). This strategy is

effective in raising awareness of stereotypes because it allows influencers to present themselves as authentic while condemning others who do not and unrealistic Western beauty ideals (Bishop, 2020).

Therefore, fitness influencers, in the pandemic period when individuals are exposed even more frequently to media misrepresentation, attempt to raise awareness of societal stereotypes, and spread information about body positivity by normalizing imperfections. Indeed, they bring to light the fact that perfect bodies do not exist, but that we only live in a world that insistently pushes women to conform to unattainable standards. Consequently, it is not worth comparing ourselves to others, but it is necessary to take care of our bodies by doing what makes us feel good.

4.3 Heed of one's body

Another theme identified from the data is: "heed of one's body." It includes motivating messages that inspire women to engage in self-care activities and behaviors that can enhance both their physical and mental health. The data show that influencers incentivize self-care as a form of self-love (Cohen et al., 2020). This theme is developed from the following sub-themes that emerged from the analysis: encouraging a healthy and balanced way of life, commitment, and self-regulation, promoting self-care, active pose, and delivering information.

Fitness influencers' posts on Instagram typically promote healthy living and a very balanced lifestyle. This is especially relevant considering the pandemic period in which the obligation to stay at home and the closure of all facilities, have altered the habits of citizens by damaging their ways of living. Consequently, fitness influencers attempt to motivate their followers to maintain a balanced lifestyle. This is expressed through hashtags (#balance #balancedlife #balancedlifestyle) and the following phrases, "It's a balancing act: a balance between desire and reasonableness, a balance between self-respect and acceptance" (@trainipink) and "The right balance is a slightly low-calorie diet combined with a structured workout" (@francescafitnessfreak). The expressions and hashtags just mentioned, contain messages that aim to emphasize the balanced performance of positive activities such as sports and diet to improve the body and health. This is also supported visually by posts on recipes and workouts. Indeed, on the one hand, fitness influencers share the preparation of foods with high nutritional values and rich in protein such as eggs, seeds, and so on. On the other hand, the workouts they show are characterized by breaks and different levels (from easiest to hardest) because excessive workouts have no benefits on individual well-being. These results confirm the concept of fitspiration whereby a combination of sports and diet are encouraged by fitness influencers to motivate followers to achieve a fit body but with the respect and improvement of their health (Simpson & Mazzeo, 2016; Cataldo et al., 2022). To this, fitness influencers add the perspective of "calibration," which refers to the need to balance the demands of improving one's appearance with the desire to achieve a healthy lifestyle through moderate body care activities (Ando et al., 2021b).

To achieve the goal just mentioned, this lifestyle must be pursued with consistency and commitment. This is visually demonstrated by the sportswear they wear, places such as gyms, and captions that mention the importance of self-regulation to get to lead a healthy and balanced life. For instance, in a post in which @silvia.fascians portrays herself happily in sportswear, she writes: "I continued to take care of my body which today thanked me by regaining the strength I thought I had lost". Even @traininpink, with satisfaction represented by her smile and hashtags such as #workoutroutine, expresses the relevance of knowing how to regulate one's life to achieve physical and mental stability. This corroborates the model of sports engagement expressed by Alexandris and colleagues (2020), whereby sport is something exciting that requires the investment of time consistently to achieve its benefits. Influencers support this notion by repeating it redundantly in posts as the increased pressure on individuals drives them to participate in activities in an engaging way (Alexandris et al., 2020).

Content that shows perseverance and engagement portrays influencers mostly in moving and active poses. This communication strategy allows them to motivate the viewer to stay active by practicing their workouts, replicating their recipes, or showing ideas of what to do in the moments to devote to themselves. In the content having poses in motion there are messages related to real events and programs dedicated to body care: "at 7 p.m. we are expecting a nice live on FB group" (@silvia.fascians) "if you want to train with me click the link in bio" (@francescafitnessfreak). In this way, they produce a positive body image as the data support what Cohen and colleagues (2019) argue, namely, that one must actively engage in appearance through regular self-care to improve well-being. Particularly, influencers enact this type of online practice by seeking to actively engage in the promotion of body care and giving their followers the tools to be able to adhere to their lifestyle.

Furthermore, through the representation of their bodies in motion, fitness influencers convey thankfulness and respect for one's body's ability to work properly, as they harness the physical function that plays a crucial role in people's lives (Wood-Barcalow et al., 2010). For instance, influencers said: "I am proud of my legs, where they have taken me so far and what they will allow me to do in the future" (@francescafitnessfreak), "your body can jump, run, dance, swim...this matters" (@silvia.fascians). Indeed, the element of body appreciation emphasizes the importance of gratitude, respect, and admiration for what the body can do (Williamson & Karazsia, 2018; Cohen et al., 2019; Wood-Barcalow et al., 2010). In this way, fitness influencers aim to divert attention away from the search for an ideal body to encourage women to engage in self-care activities to feel good about their bodies and appreciate them for their abilities and not just their appearance.

For this reason, taking care of one's body also means adopting the right techniques not to harm it. Influencers in their posts send out information trying to educate their followers. In pandemic times, when information is haphazard and confusing, influencers play a significant role as communicators and teachers (Franceschelli & Mansani, n.d.). They can convey their knowledge to their followers through a type of

communication that is educational and entertaining. For example, the influencers make information by showing workouts such as "the best exercises to train buttocks" (@traininpink) or "short but intense and super effective circuit for round shoulders" (@francescafitnessfreak). In addition to visually showing the correct execution of the exercises, they specify and describe them in the captions: "Keep the abdomen strong and do not fall into hyperlordosis" (@traininpink). This is a way to help followers take care of the body properly without harming it by performing the exercises incorrectly. Moreover, they provide nutrition information to raise people's awareness of eating properly and prevent possible eating disorders. For instance, @traininpink is shown eating pizza demonstrating that carbohydrates are an important element to take in for a healthy body. In this way, influencers support fitspiration principles and the body-positivity element of body care investment, ensuring that sports and diets are done correctly to support personal well-being and preserve body function (Cohen et al., 2019).

However, in contrast to what is argued by Tylka and Wood-Barcalow (2015), self-care messages conveyed by influencers also include practices other than sports and nutrition. Indeed, this is expressed by them: "take care of my body" (@francescafitnessfreak), "rest" (@silvia.fascians), "I take care of my skin" (@francescafitnessfreak). These phrases along with the hashtags #takecareofyourself #mindfulness highlight the significance of activities that make one feel good inside and out (such as rest, yoga, meditation, skincare, and so on) to keep the body and mind healthy. Indeed, @silvia.fascians says to focus on what feels good "inside and out," that is, the mind and body, as such feelings can also improve body image. These results confirm once again the body care element of body positivity categories, which entails actions that support a healthy body and way of life (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015). From this perspective, influencers reconnect with the importance of well-being from within and activities that heal our minds to be happy (Cohen et al., 2019). Therefore, research reveals that body care should be balanced by self-care through diversified activities dedicated to oneself.

Analysis of how influencers communicated body care reported alternating use of self-presentation strategies. In some content, fitness influencers use the laypeople strategy that allows them to use sensitive communication by telling the personal aspects of their lives and giving peer-to-peer advice to motivate individuals to pursue a healthy lifestyle (Walet, 2020). In other posts, they communicate with micro-celebrity strategy by tagging product brands, posting photos taken by professional photographers, or trying to interact with users to convince them to follow their workouts (Walet, 2020). Finally, in showing and describing self-care activities (such as workouts, recipes, meditation, or others) they use technical terms and, therefore, professional communication in line with the opinion leadership's self-presentation strategy that allows them to demonstrate their expertise in the field (Walet, 2020; Kirvesmäki, 2021). Diversity in self-presentation allows influencers to appear credible and trustworthy to their followers because they build relationships that are more intimate with users, placing great emphasis on their community which recognizes more expertise and knowledge in them (Kirvesmäki, 2021). Therefore, this shows that

sometimes influencers adopt all three self-presentation strategies to be more convincing and prove their trustworthiness.

Messages and visual representations about body care could inspire women to understand that loving their bodies means doing things that make them feel good, both psychologically and physically. Indeed, based on these findings, fitness influencers reinforce body love and acceptance (Cohen et al., 2019), but with a perspective that sees body care as an act of self-love and self-respect.

4.4 Depictions of the ideal female body

Despite the just-mentioned aspects of body positivity represented by fitness influencers, the analysis revealed factors present in their posts that support and perpetuate Western stereotypes of the female body. Specifically, on a visual level, the influencers positioned and photographed themselves physically in a variety of ways, some of which reproduce pre-existing discourses about the ideal of female appearance. The sub-themes included in this pattern are skinny and sexy strategic poses, thin and fit body representation, and image alteration.

In some instances, their bodies and faces (including the gaze) are posed or carefully arranged to support the stereotype of the ideal body, typically represented in the media (Maftei & Merlici, 2022). On these occasions, the image posted on Instagram shows the influencer performing appearance ideals. In both posts and Reels, fitness influencers assume, when not active, visibly staged poses to appear thinner and hide real flaws. Examples of unnatural poses taken by the influencers include holding breath, positioning sideways with one leg slightly shifted, and sticking the chest out to give the idea of a lean body. Other photographs were strategically taken from the bottom up or were cropped to include only the upper body, thus altering her actual size. The application of makeup is also seen as a practice of the conventional female appearance since in Western cultures women are expected to focus on appearance and spend time on beauty work (Maftei & Merlici, 2022). @fracenscafitnessfreak is the influencer who makes the most use of makeup. Indeed, she appears in her content always well made up, with a seductive look and marked lips. Therefore, these poses and perspectives all slip into the expected presentations of the ideal body stereotype, conforming to the demands to perform according to traditional Western ideologies of female beauty (Walet, 2020; Maftei & Merlici, 2022).

Moreover, in posts in which they show only certain parts of their bodies or cover their faces, fitness influencers fall into objectification by portraying themselves as dismembered and sexual objects that can be used for the pleasure of others (Deighton-Smith & Bell, 2018). Indeed, critical analysis has found that the poses assumed by influencers in numerous Reels and posts appear not only as skinny but also sexy. While showing themselves semi-naked is understandable, given that these are fitness influencers who want to flaunt their muscles, these kinds of images and videos they post could be viewed as hypersexualized, inviting the male gaze and objectification (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). For instance, the analysis reported

a high frequency of swimsuit or lingerie photos and videos that revealed their half-naked bodies. This content is characterized by carefully staged poses that show and imply helpfulness and accessibility. The present is evident when they foreground specific parts of their bodies such as buttocks or breasts. Consequently, when more emphasis is placed on body attributes, it further perpetuates the idea of women as pure objects, incentivizing self-objectification. This reinforces the concept of thinspiration which refers to those Instagram content that portrays sexually suggestive and objectifying thin women (Boepple & Thompson, 2015). Such a reading of images detracts from the efforts mentioned in the previous sections in which influencers seek to portray body positivity through images and messages of love, self-care, and awareness for the body as a whole.

Beyond the thin and sexy poses, none of the @silvia.fascians or @francescafitnessfreak's content shows any fat in their bodies, and bones are often visible. The two influencers show an extremely stereotypical lean and toned physique in accord with current socio-cultural ideals. Indeed, fitness influencers do not represent a broad conceptualization of beauty because they do not display body shapes that are different or marginalized by society (Cohen et al., 2019; Junqueira et al., 2021). In some of the captions, @fracescafitnessfreak writes: "Waist, chest, knee decreased," "We are on the right track, but it is still a long way: quads to be slashed, shoulders to be rounded, femoral to be accentuated" and uses the hashtags #backinshape #fatburning #bikiniprep. In this way, she fuels unhealthy beauty practices to succeed in conforming to the social appearance standards of the lean, defined, and fat-free female body. That is also shown in their postures, in which they try to highlight muscles or slim the body. For example, in some content, they position their hands in a way that highlights their biceps, abdominal muscles, or lower body muscles. In other posts, they hide imperfections with their hands, particularly trying to cover the belly area. Indeed, by critically analyzing the posts and Reels, it was found that fitness influencers rarely show their hips or belly that are hidden by posing or through clothing. The hips and belly are the areas where fat tends to accumulate the most and therefore the area where women feel the most shame (Maftei & Merlici, 2022). @francescafitnessfreak shows the hips and belly area only after claiming to be "back in shape". Hence, fitness influencers conform to cultural demands to suppress and hide natural female shapes. It can be inferred from this that muscular bodies do not differ much from skinny bodies, as argued by Rajan (2018). He argued that athletic bodies simply appear as an extension of the conventional female ideal, thin, young, white, and sexualized, despite showing more muscle and strength. Through this content, fitness influencers, perhaps unwittingly, perpetuate and reinforce prevailing discourses about Western body shape ideals that support a slim figure. They also undermine their attempts to align a positive body image described in the previous sections, by reinforcing and fueling media pressures on women's bodies.

Another aspect present in influencers' posts that supports conventional body representation is image alteration. Image alteration refers to the application of filters or edits to photos and videos posted by fitness influencers. The use of filters by @francescafitnessfreak is evident; indeed, her content has offset

colors and diverse light exposures. The use of filters as a manifestation of appearance manipulation demonstrates an attempt to present socially desirable images of herself (Rajan, 2018). In contrast, @silvia.fascians has a high number of professionally taken photos. This can be deduced both from the qualities of the photos and from the tags in the captions that bear the names of professional photographers. The use of filters or the posting of professional photos, allows us to recognize the micro-celebrity strategy of self-presentation of influencers through which they attempt to enhance their appearance to conform to social standards of beauty and to gain more approval from users (Walet, 2020). These techniques further encourage body comparison and dissatisfaction as users internalize untrue body images as they are modified or filtered (Maftei & Merlici, 2022).

In conclusion, although fitness influencers attempt to align and represent the core elements of body positivity and fitspiration, some content appears to visually replicate and reproduce the dominant discourses on the female body, thinspiration, and objectification.

5. Conclusion

The study aims to answer the research question regarding how body positivity is represented by fitness influencers during the Covid-19 pandemic in Italy. This chapter is concerned with providing an answer based on the research findings. Furthermore, the academic and social implications, limitations of the study, and possible future research are discussed.

The research analyzed 75 posts and 55 Reels collected from the Instagram profiles of three Italian fitness influencers (@traininpink, @francescafitnessfreak, @silvia.fascians). Based on the analyzed posts, this research shows that Italian fitness influencers, during the pandemic, represent body positivity by paying special attention to inner well-being. Self-care activities must be done to improve physical and mental health, and self-love and self-awareness start from the mind first. Furthermore, they attempt to break down social stereotypes by disseminating information on social media and adopting various self-presentation strategies to show themselves more competent and credible. However, their efforts to align with the concept and movement of body positivity are compromised by a representation of bodies conforming to social standards of beauty. The goal was achieved through a Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis of Instagram posts and Reels from which four main themes emerged: focus on inside well-being, heed of one's body, raise awareness of social stereotypes, and depictions of the ideal female body.

Based on the analysis of the results, the fitness influencers' content promoted the *focus on inside well-being* to succeed in achieving body love. These results agree with the idea of body positivity, according to which women should consider their relationship with the body not only in terms of physical appearance but also from within (Lazuka et al., 2020). Therefore, influencers' posts include messages that encourage users to change their mindset to achieve inner-happiness and self-esteem. On the one hand, this supports the inner positivity category of positive body image, whereby there is a connection between positive body image, positive feelings, and caring activities (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015). On the other hand, in this way, they downplay issues about the body as they spread the notion that to solve them, people only need to change their mindset by starting to love themselves. However, influencers do not consider that feelings of self-love and self-awareness can be impeded by social injustice and discrimination and, thus, are not simply attainable (Leboeuf, 2019; Johansson, 2020).

Moreover, fitness influencers educate the public about sports and dieting as activities they can do to improve their health. This is in line with the concept of fitspiration, according to which diet and sports are promoted to strengthen health and not to achieve a lean body (Simpson & Mazzeo, 2016). Indeed, influencers identified sports and diet as body-care activities, but they did not limit themselves to just these two areas. Based on the fitness influencers' posts, body-care is also about behaviors related to rest or skin care. Specifically, they emphasize the importance of a balanced lifestyle characterized by sports and diet but also relaxation and breaks. To achieve benefits for the mind and body, this lifestyle must be pursued with consistency and commitment. As described earlier, adaptive investment in appearance is one of the

key elements of positive body image and is the regular practice of self-care to improve health and increase self-confidence (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015). Therefore, *heed of one's body* is another major theme identified and fitness influencers' posts on Instagram show the activities to do for self-care and incite body appreciation for its functionality. These messages about pursuing a balanced life and constant body care are slightly at odds with the body positivity view that denounces dieting culture since the posts appear to urge bodily transformation to conform to social ideals (Cwynar-Horta, 2016; Darwin & Miller, 2020). However, by also showing relaxation and breaks as healing practices, influencers counter this criticality.

In any case, influencers' attempts to spread truthful information on social media can be seen in their posts and are explained in the theme called *raising awareness of social stereotypes*. Although Instagram is a powerful communication tool, it allows the circulation of fake news and misrepresentation. Through content that denounces social stereotypes and societal pressures on women to conform to body ideals or adopt fast-paced lifestyles, influencers represent body positivity through loving the body for its uniqueness (Cohen et al., 2019; Tiggemann et al., 2020; Lazuka et al, 2020). As noted by more critical analysis, this is the consequence of today's society that places high expectations on individuals who are constantly afraid of failure and being judged. Therefore, they are obsessed with completing goals to gain social approval (Todisco, 2021). Additionally, in their posts, influencers reproduce the post-feminist view of body positivity, according to which one should focus on oneself as an individual while avoiding comparisons with others (Darwin & Miller, 2021). These messages support the element of filtering information to spur women to accept information that adheres to the positive body image and reject information that may harm it (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015).

However, results show that influencers do not represent a broad conceptualization of beauty because they do not display diverse body types but visually align predominantly with Western ideals of body image (Junqueira et al., 2021). From this emerged the last theme, defined as *depictions of the ideal female body*. Body positivity on Instagram consists of showing a variety of bodies contrary to the stereotypical standard of thinness and slenderness (Lazuka et al., 2020). Fitness influencers' posts do not represent marginalized bodies but reproduce the ideal of lean, muscular, white, and sexualized bodies. Indeed, although body positivity arose from the Fat Acceptance movement, representations of fat are lacking in their content (Darwin & Miller, 2020). Furthermore, body positivity is also about showing truthful bodies without attempting to hide body parts. Instead, influencers publish posts in which they assume skinny, sexy poses or apply filters thereby covering up any flaws. Influencers' poses along with their semi-nude images, fuel female self-objectification as users exposed to these body types may attempt to conform to appearance ideals through unhealthy lifestyles (Vandenbosch et al., 2022). Thus, they confirm what several studies have argued: namely that fitspiration does not differ from thinspiration, but it is merely an extension of the latter as thin content display sexually objectified bodies that are thin and toned (Dignard & Jarry, 2021; Rajan, 2018). This undermines the effects of the body positivity representations described

above, as these contents are manifestations of an attempt to control one's body appearance and gain social approval (Maftei & Merlici, 2022; Cohen et al., 2020).

In terms of communication strategy, influencers have predominantly adopted the so-called laypeople strategy. Simple communication allows them to present themselves as normal people, narrating personal experiences and giving advice on behaviors to achieve body positivity (Walet, 2020; Bishop, 2020). Nevertheless, in some cases, they also displayed professional communication, characterized by technical terms or more serious tones to demonstrate their expertise in the field (Walet, 2020). They adopted the opinion leadership strategy to disseminate the correct body-care practices and prevent potential suffering from improper workout execution. Finally, they also self-presented with the micro-celebrity strategy. Influencers attempt to engage with followers through calls to action, brand tags, professionally produced photographs, and the use of filters that are elements that belong to celebrities (Walet, 2020). The use of all three self-presentation tactics can allow influencers to come across as even more trustworthy and credible to followers. Thus, body positivity is represented by influencers through diverse communication that aims to demonstrate their knowledge.

To answer the research question, the researcher concludes that Italian fitness influencers, during the pandemic, focus on body positivity with the belief that it is primarily about mental well-being. Therefore, they represent sport and diet as tools to be used moderately to achieve mental and physical well-being and not to conform to social appearance ideals. This can be attributed to increased stress and restrictions on freedoms due to the expansion of the Covid-19 virus. Indeed, they promote body-care activities to improve health, appreciation, and acceptance of the body as unique and different from others. Moreover, they advocate loving the body for what it can do and not for how it looks. Nevertheless, on a visual level, fitness influencers reproduce the dominant discourses on female beauty, increasing criticism of body representation on Instagram that body-related content can generate harmful effects on women (Cohen et al., 2020; Vandenbosch et al., 2022; Tiggemann et al., 2020). Furthermore, the lack of varied body types on Instagram is problematic because body positivity is about battling prejudice against marginalized bodies and, therefore, it is inconsistent for fitness influencers to represent body positivity without exhibiting different body types. Inevitably, sometimes the images shown are at odds with the messages related to body positivity, which automatically lose value and meaning. Hence, fitness influencers must not only portray perfect bodies in their posts but also share images of their imperfections more regularly, normalizing the fact that no one is perfect and embracing body positivity in every aspect.

5.1 Implications

This research provided valuable insights into the representation of body positivity by Italian fitness influencers on Instagram and filled a gap in the literature by specifically examining the content shared by influencers during the pandemic and how they relate to the concept of body positivity. The study showed

that fitness influencers simply communicate body positivity messages by focusing primarily on inner well-being, diverse body care activities, and the love for body function. Furthermore, the qualitative approach used highlighted the importance of social context as the focus on inner well-being revealed by the results could be given by the fact that, as some research has shown, the pandemic has harmed people's mental and physical health (Di Gesto & Cheli, 2021; Cooper et al., 2020). Therefore, the study bridged the void of qualitative investigation in the field of body positivity and fitspiration that is predominantly dominated by quantitative research.

Furthermore, the theme of *inside well-being* and *heed of one's body* contributed to the deepening of the conception of body positivity as stemming mainly from a positive mindset that if people are successful in achieving it also spills over into physical appearance, love, and appreciation of it (Williamson & Karazsia, 2018; Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015). However, body positivity on Instagram is mainly conceived as the representation of marginalized bodies (Lazuka et al., 2020), while fitness influencers portray it as a psychological feeling that starts from within. This is surprising, as talking about body positivity without representing a broad conceptualization of beauty characterized by various body types seems contradictory (Cohen et al., 2019). The assumption that just changing one's mindset is enough to solve body issues indicates that fitness influencers do not need to protect bodies that are subject to discrimination and oppression (Johansson, 2021). Therefore, further investigation is needed to understand whether the original body positivity movement and concept are being lost on social media in favor of a more simplified representation that diverts from traditional struggles for equality and acceptance.

Results of the study argue against what most researchers claim to be the role of social media in body representations; namely, that they are an obstacle to achieving body satisfaction. By often representing self-care practices, influencers stimulate body appreciation since they promote not only activities related to sports and dieting but also rest and breaks (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2019). Indeed, this study reinforces the idea that social media can be a significant tool for raising awareness of social stereotypes and encouraging body satisfaction through moderate body care practices (Cohen et al., 2020).

Moreover, the findings have practical implications for influencers who might consider representing more diverse bodies within their Instagram profiles. Adopting all elements of body positivity would help influencers effectively show their perspective on the variety and inclusiveness of female bodies in the fitness world. Results showed that fitness influencers consistently represent Cohen and colleagues' (2019) elements of body positivity and the concept of fitspiration. However, they should pay more attention to self-presentation strategies to ensure the authenticity of their Instagram posts that rely on body acceptance to make the messages credible. This is significant because their content can have a great influence on how women conceive of their beauty (Sokolova, 2021). Lastly, the implications of the findings prompt society a debate about a more inclusive and mixed representation of bodies in the fitness field since nobody is flawless.

The results reported shed new light on body positivity and fitspiration by showing that fitness influencers' posts align with most elements of body positivity and that they encourage sports and dieting as activities to be done to improve one's health. However, they still do not make a significant contribution to the original social mission of body positivity that involves extending the definition of beauty through representations of various bodies or body parts that do not conform to Western body norms (Lazuka et al., 2020).

5.2 Limitations and future research

Although this study has enriched research related to body positivity and fitspiration, it is not without limitations. First, given the breadth of the research, the sample of fitness influencers is rather small. Only three influencers had to be selected following the steps proposed by Cohen and colleagues (2019), and purposive sampling had to be applied to the posts to keep the sample as tight and varied as possible. However, this excluded posts and influencers that would have been interesting to analyze to gain more insights into how influencers represent body positivity on Instagram. Second, the researcher is aware that one way to obtain consent from influencers to publish their posts in this research would have been to have them sign an informed consent. The researcher recognized this limitation and respected this ethical aspect by removing their real faces and names to hide their identities. Finally, the researcher's position as a thin, white woman may have affected the analysis and outcomes, as her view of the body and the way body positivity is depicted on social media might be skewed. Therefore, her biases may have unconsciously occurred, compromising the validity and reliability of this study. However, by following numerous social media accounts dealing with fitness and body positivity topics, the researcher attempted to remedy validity and reliability issues by maintaining a very critical view during the data analysis process.

Despite its limitations, this study provides valuable insights for possible future research. Indeed, since MCDA focuses specifically on language and visual representation, it would be interesting to integrate other qualitative techniques, such as interviews. This method would provide understanding from the users' perspective and investigate how they perceive the content posted by fitness influencers related to body positivity and whether it affects their relationship with the body. A greater focus on the user perspective would yield valuable results in understanding the impact fitness influencers have on people. Additionally, the research included only female influencers; therefore, future studies could explore the representation of body positivity by male influencers since they also experience body discrimination (Caruso & Roberts, 2017). Overall, the research offers relevant insights into how fitness influencers represent body positivity on Instagram during the Covid-19 pandemic.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Overview of themes and sub-themes

Focus on inside well-being	Raise awareness of social stereotypes	Heed of one's body	Depictions of the ideal female body
-Expression of happiness -Positive personality -Encouraging self-esteem -Nature and mental well-being -Sport and diet for inner well-being	-Social media misrepresentation and fake news -Constant social pressure -Normalizing imperfections -Individualism	-Commitment and self-regulation -Encouraging a healthy and balanced way of life -Promoting self-care -Active pose -Deliver information	-Skinny and sexy strategic poses -Thin and fit body representation -Image alteration

Appendix B: Coding tree

Theme	Sub-themes	Open codes
Focus on inside well-being	Expression of happiness	-Smiles with teeth -Feel good inside -Hands raised -Colorful backgrounds -Half-smiles
	Positive personality	-Messages that encourage optimism -Motivational messages -Peaceful look and face -Confident looks -Shy smiles -Confident looks toward the camera -Slightly raised heads
	Encouraging self-esteem	-Believing in oneself and one's worth -Loving oneself -Be self-confident -No need to be ashamed -Life satisfaction
	Nature and mental well-being	-Natural landscape: beach, park, wheat fields, sea -Message about mental peace -#befree #freedom #freeyourmind
	Sport and diet for inner well-being	-Presence of healthy food -Smiles while doing sport and eating -Do sports because it makes you feel good -Positive messages about doing sport and healthy eating -Priority to mental health
Raise awareness of social stereotypes	Social media misrepresentation and fake news	-Comparison of edited photos with natural photos -Use of irony to show how easy it is to alter the image or distort body appearance -Do not believe what you see online -Do not trust social media and pay attention -Messages about untrue information on social media (Localized weight loss does not exist) -Messages against the use of filters and modified pictures

		Constant social pressure	-Society pretends too much from us -We must be productive and active every day -Social standards of thin and fit women -Toxic advertisements with perfect bodies - Be strong, busy, productive -Risk falling behind
		Normalizing imperfections	-Cellulite -Fat -Scars -Stretch marks -Hip dips -We are unique -Show every emotion -Different kinds of facial expressions (happy, concentrated, peaceful)
		Individualism	-Avoid comparison -Think about yourself -Focus on your choices -Focus on what makes you feel good -Influencers are always portrayed alone
Heed of one's body		Encouraging a healthy and balanced way of life	-#balance #balancedlife #balancedlifestyle -Messages that encourage calibration -Find your balance in life -Avoid excessive exercises -Avoid restrictive diets -Posts on recipes and workouts -Food with high nutritional values and rich in protein -Workouts with different levels and breaks
		Commitment and self-regulation	-sportswear -Locations such as gyms -Messages about the importance of constancy -Importance of having a routine -#workoutroutine
		Active pose	-Jumping -Running -Handstand position -Motion positions in videos -Cycling -Swimming -Influencers' IG sports event

		-Messages of pride and gratitude for the functions of the organism
	Deliver information	-Messages where influencers explain the right execution of exercises -Technical words: hyperlordosis, retroversion of the pelvis, core, pelvic floor … -Messages about proper nutrition. The importance of carbohydrates and calories. -Presence of healthy food: vegetables, fruits, protein food…
	Promoting self-care	-Cremes -Skincare -The importance of rest and breaks -Self-care investment (mind and body) -Messages and pictures about meditation and yoga -#takecareofyourself #mindfulness
Depictions of the ideal female body	Skinny and sexy strategic poses	-Semi-naked bodies: swimsuit or lingerie -Seductive gaze -Lateral position with one leg forward of the other -Holding breath -Sticking the chest out -Make-up -Foreground body attributes: bottom and breast
	Thin and fit body representation	-Muscles are visible and highlighted through the pose (toned abs, shoulder and leg muscles, biceps…) -Bones visible -No fat visible -Flat stomach -Messages that encourage thinness -Hashtags that encourage thinness #backinshape #fatburning #bikiniprep -Hips or belly covered
	Image alteration	-Use of filter: offset colors and varied light exposure -Modified picture -Tags of professional photographers

Appendix C: Examples Instagram posts with applied MCDA

1. [@traininpink]. (2021, March 28). *"["HO PERSO 12 CHILI"] Normalmente una frase così metterebbe KO per un mese qualsiasi ragazza. Roba da una tabica di* [Photograph]. Instagram.
   https://www.instagram.com/p/CM9zWO6B_fK/

Post number	Visual	Textual	Integration	Discourse/Context
18-sports and food to recover from eating disorder	**Person and facial expression** -traininpink -no face visible, it is covered by the phone -it's a collage, so in the pic on the right is visible her gaze that seems dull and sad. **Clothing** -She is wearing a swimsuit. So, her body is well visible. -pic on the left→ purple swimwear => bright color -pic on the right → dark swimwear. Symbol of sadness. **Body and pose** -pic on the left: she is standing and showing her body from the side. easier to look skinny from the side. She has a	**Message** - Gaining kilograms can save your life. -Training with weights and following a healthy (but not limiting) diet is the secret to gaining weight and staying healthy. - do not focus on the weighing scale or clothing size because it is through training and healthy eating that you achieve aesthetic results. **Words used** -57kg vs 45kg - I gained 12kg - gain weight -weight training -nutrition -non-restrictive -eating disorders - weighing scale -clothing size -proper nutrition	- focus on her body with more weight versus his body with less weight -through training and healthy eating, she has achieved a body that weighs more but is healthier and more muscular -promotes weight training, which give you the physique she has now. -Aesthetic results are important if you are feeling good with yourself.	-she is **motivating** people to healthy eating and training for both appearance and health reasons (fitspiration). That's the only way to feel good, beautiful, and in health. -she is **denouncing eating disorders,** weight loss and body **stereotypes**. -she also wants to send **metal positivity messages** of feeling good. - **objectification**, she covers her face, and she is focusing on the appearance of the body. - she is presenting herself as an ordinary person, recounting her experience with eating disorders. -The author conveys a positive message, but also seeks to **profit financially**

static pose. Toned and muscular physique. Are clearly visible: buttocks, muscular thighs, flat stomach, ribs (so she is probably holding her breath), and muscular arms. -pic on the right: she is standing and showing her body from the side. easier to look skinny from the side. She has a static pose. Very thin and not healthy body. Are clearly visible: very thin belly and back, thin arms, thin thighs, buttocks **Other elements** Pic on the right: she has black hair. Black is related to fear and the unknown, to sadness is the color of shadow, refers to the inner, dark, and mysterious aspects	-workout -stay well -aesthetic results. **Call to action** -stop focusing on clothing size or the weighing scale, focus on training and healthy eating -subscription to her program → send a positive message but also promoting her business.	

2. [@sivia.fascians]. (2021, May 10). *"First day back in palestra (all'aperto di McFit). In questi mesi mi sono abituata ad allenarmi a casa, con* [Photograph]. Instagram.
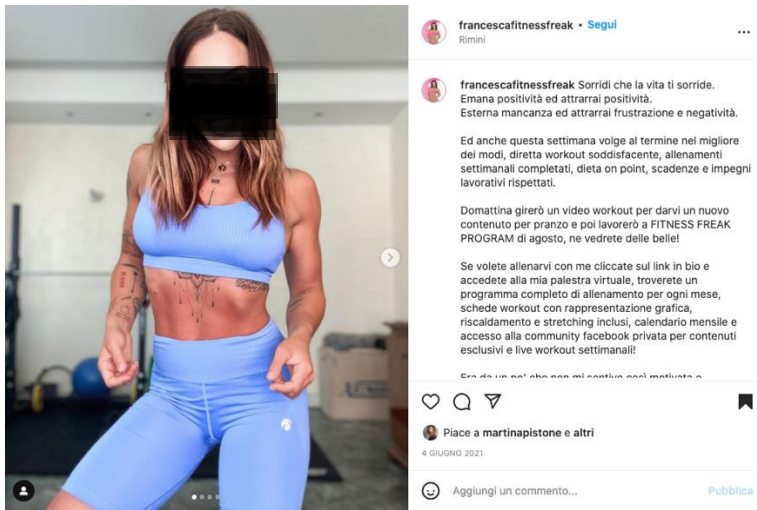
https://www.instagram.com/p/COsgqIOFBbH/

Post number	Visual	Textual	Integration	Discourse/Context
27-take-care of your body (covid)	**Person and facial expression** -silvia -smiling with a piece of tongue out– happy and playful face (with the sun in her eyes) **Clothing** sports clothes - crop top and pants **Body and pose** -clearly visible the upper part of her body: chest, shoulder, arms, abdomen. With her hands she is covering her belly. She is very thin and muscular (no fat). -Pose: static, With the buttocks sticking out, hands touching in front of the belly. **Other elements** Not applicable	**Message** -she is sending the message to don't give up and being strong, continue to take care of your body. -She sends the message of maintaining physical health. -She talks about the importance of a balanced workout including using weights. **Words used** -gym - work out at home -serenity -peace of mind -balance -weight training -love of the gym -motivational strength -thank myself -strength to train -not giving up -care for my body -strength → she repeats it a lot -maintenance -healthy mentally and physically -#fitness #fit #workoutroutine #workout #fitnessmotivation #fitnessitalia #balance #balancedlife #balancedlifestyle #fitnesslife #fitgirl #fitnessjourney #lifejourney #journey #happygirl #fitgirl #deadlift #glutes #glutesworkout	-she speaks about strength, and she shows her strong and muscular body to represent it. -She is happy and playful by representing the importance of not only physical strength and well-being but also mental strength and well-being (inner positivity). -importance of constancy and taking care of the body with training.	- **regularly engaging in self-care** of one's appearance and improving one's body with training in healthy ways that promote well-being (Adaptive investment in appearance/inner positivity) -appreciate and love your body for what it can do -the happiness of taking care of themselves through regular sports practice for personal well-being and not to control the body appearance (inner positivity). -importance of inner happiness and feeling good (mental positivity messages). -she encourages exercise to stay healthy or improve overall health (fitspiration) -she has a very stereotypical body => **thin and toned body, in accord with current sociocultural ideals.** So seems that with an adaptive and constant investment in body care (training) people can reach her body standards. -**objectification** → focus on her abs, arms, and shoulder muscles. -no belly and hips visible → **fear of belly fat and dips hips** -The author conveys a positive message, but also seeks to **profit financially**

		#legday #openair #palestra **Call to action** -it's an adv to buy the sportswear she wears		

3. [@francescafitnessfreak]. (2021, June 4). *"Sorridi che la vita ti sorride. Emana positività ed attrai positività. Esterna mancanza ed attrai frustrazione e negatività* [Photograph]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/CPtNPJ9loBY/

Post number	Visual	Textual	Integration	Discourse/Context
39 Mental positivity to attract positive things	**Person and facial expression** -Francesca - smiling with tongue out→ happy, satisfied, and playful face **Clothing** sports clothes - crop top and pants **Body and pose** -Body: upper part of the body. Very muscular body: abs, shoulders, and arms muscles. Belly is covered by pants and hips. -Pose: static. Thin pose, one leg	**Message** -flash the message of being positive to attract positivity. If you are negative, you will attract frustration and bad vibes. -be determined and stick to your goals (diet workouts, work). **Words used** -Sorry - be positive and attract positivity. -External lack and you will attract frustration and negativity. -Weekly workouts. -diet on point	-if you keep your goals and if you remain positive you attract positivity and happiness. -pushing for constant diet and workouts that will make you happy and satisfied -she is training to convince people to workouts with her.	-the importance of **constant** diet and training, and the importance of meet own **goals** → to reach inner happiness and self-confidence. -constant training and diet for personal well-being (fitspiration and inner positivity, adaptive investment in body care) -be positive in life to feel good (inner positivity/ mental positivity) -she has a very stereotypical body, she uses filters and thin pose => **thin and toned body, in accord with current sociocultural ideals + use of filters.** She particularly shows her muscles, holds his breath.

	further forward bent, butt out **Other elements** -use of filters (not natural colors) -landscape: a gym (she is training) -red air (not natural)→ symbol of confidence	-work commitments met -FITNESS FREAK PROGRAM -motivated and determined! **Call to action** -click on link in bio for her workouts		-no belly and hips visible → **fear of belly fat and dips hips** - she is speaking as an ordinary girl, presenting the normal sides of her life. -**objectification** → sexy pose and use of filters -The author conveys a positive message, but also seeks to **profit financially**

Appendix D: Examples Instagram Reels with applied MCDA

1. [@traininpink]. (2021, May 16). *Cosa pensi sia salutare vs cosa è realmente salutare. Vi ricordo che le iscrizioni ai miei programmi per il nuovo* [Reel]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/CO77Qy1B3I3/

Post number	Visual	Textual	Integration	Discourse/Context
3. informative post- what is healthy and what people think is healthy	**Character** -traininpink	**Theme of the video** -Informative/ **explanatory** video on what is healthy and what people think is healthy but it's not	-she is doing information on what is healthy and what is not -she teaching to her followers that to have a healthy body people needs constant training, balanced nutrition and good relationship with food (happy face). -stereotypes of having a healthy body by stopping eating sweets, by training every day, and by always eating vegetables is wrong (disapproving face).	-she is promoting **balance diet and constant training** to improve well-being and feel better, while she is against restrictive diet and excessive exercise (fitspiration, inner positivity, and adaptive investment in appearance) -she is doing information to fight **societal stereotypes and false myths** -muscular body -she is covering her belly and hip → **belly and hips dips fear**. -economic profit -present herself as an expert in her field.
	Characteristics -use of filters: no -color scheme: no -first part of the video disapproving, negative face! Second part of the video: smiling and approval face	**Audio** -text of the audio: music→ "peaches" Justin Bieber → references to food. On the word "shit": she shows what people think is healthy but it's not. On the word "yeah": she shows what is really healthy. -issues of tone: happy melody. -voice over: not applicable		
	Clothing -sportswear			
	Body image and Pose -Body: front part of the body visible (toned body: muscular thighs) -Pose: Standing with the arm covering the belly and moving. She	**Words used in the image**		

	moves to the beat of music. **Other elements** - landscape: outside	- What do you think is healthy: exercise every day, give up sweets, always eat clean. -What is actually healthy: workout routine, good relationship with food, eat nutritious food and also sweets **Words used in the caption** -what you think is healthy vs what is really healthy **Call to action** -sign up for her trainings		

2. [@sivia.fascians]. (2021, May 27). *4 mesi progress. Da sempre il mio Instagram è il mio diario. Il diario della mia evoluzione. Questo perché mi* [Reel]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/CPXz7bVInww/

Post number	Visual	Textual	Integration	Discourse/Context
26-do not give up and pay attention to the right execution	**Character** -silvia **Characteristics** -use of filters: no -color scheme: no	**Theme of the video** -post of the stages of how she came to do the handstand. **Audio**	-shows her path and progress of the vertical -starts from scratch and with dedication and	-she is motivating people to do not give up => **believe in yourself** (inner positivity, mental positivity)

| of the exercises | -focused face → she is training. she shows how she got to the handstand position. From her failures to goal achievement.

Clothing
Sportswear → top and long pants

Body image and Pose
-Body: full body visible. From the front, side, and back. Muscular (arms, butt, abs, …) but also thin body (no fat visible, bones visible).
-Pose: in motion. She is training. Start from the ground crouching, rest your hands on the ground and jump with your feet until you reach the handstand position.

Other elements
-not applicable | -text of the audio: "Zitti e buoni" Maneskin.
-issues of tone: rock song
-voice over: no

Words used in the image
Not applicable

Words used in the caption
-4 months progress
-sharing the path and not just the end point
-motivating
-obstacles
-dedication, tenacity
-everything comes to those who do
-dream
-trying
-handstand with control.
-demoralized
-dry your tears, grit your teeth and go further
-the important thing is to do what we enjoy
-who cares about others, I do it for myself.
-power of sports
-#dedication #sportlover #fitness #fit #fitnessjourney #fitnessprogress #handstand #sportmotivation #motivation #fitspo #fitinspiration

Call to action
- do everything for yourself. | motivation reaches her goal
-sport is perseverance and concentration to reach her goal
-sport is technique
-motivation don't get knocked down but overcome obstacles
-don't listen to other people and continue with your own path don't compare yourself with others
-shows her failures and then show that with dedication and commitment she has achieved her goal. | -follow your goals with dedication (#)
-do sports for yourself and for your personal well-being (fitspiration) → for **self-love**
-It's important the **right execution** of the exercises, start from the basis and improve every time to reach results and confidence (fitspiration)
→ Train **consistently** if you want to get results (fitspiration/aia)
-presenting herself as an ordinary girl to whom it happened to fail but doesn't give up.
-muscular and thin body → stereotypical body (fit/thin) |

3. [@francescafitnessfreak]. (2021, June 16). *Vuoi VINCERE 5 creme @cremafit_the original?*

   Commenta il post taggando 3 amiche, hai tempo fino a sabato alle 13.30. Disclaimer: [Reel].

   Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/CQLd7ftoipk/

Post number	Visual	Textual	Integration	Discourse/Context
37- informative post on body-care	**Character** -francesca **Characteristics** -use of filters: yes -color scheme: no -she shows her body and body-care routine.--> serious/neutral face **Clothing** -swimsuit **Body image and Pose** -Body: full body visible from the front, back and side. Toned (muscles visible: abs, buttocks, shoulders, legs…) and thin body (no fat visible, bones yes). -Pose: She moves to show her body and body-care with a cream → sexy poses.	**Theme of the video** - video about body-care **Audio** -text of the audio: "Because you move me" Tinlicker, Helsloot -issues of tone: relax melody -voice over: no **Words used in the image** -not applicable **Words used in the caption** - Disclaimer: if you believe that the application of cream alone has a toning, slimming and slimming effect you are wrong. -If: 1. You follow the diet 2. You work out and 3. One devotes oneself to caring for one's body with good, quality products - RESULT and BENEFITS are OPTIMIZED,	-she shows her body care for toning up -she underlines the fact that body care works if combined with diet, workout, and good products.	-she is promoting self-care → **constant body-care, diet and workout** to reach improvements in your body and see results (adaptive investment in appearance). -self-care is a moment of relax (music) - she shows her body to show people the effect of a constant diet, workout and use of good cream. -she has a toned but also thin body → stereotypical (fit/thin) -sexy pose → **objectification** -microcelebrity and professional communication → tag a brand (collab), she tries to engage with people, and use technical terms. -use of filter

	Other elements -not applicable	- water retention and swelling -lymphatic fluid in the tissues DECREASE, FALL until they disappear. -thicker skin and therefore GREATER VOLUMES **Call to action** -Comment the post by tagging 3 friends -Discount code @cremafit_theoriginal 10%. → collab		