From Tracks to Texts: Gender Representation in Instagram Captions of Running Influencers

Exploring How British Amateur Athletes Construct Gendered Identities Online

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ABSTRACT

The intersection of digital media and fitness culture has positioned social media influencers as key agents in shaping gendered self-representations. Within the UK's amateur running community, Instagram micro-influencers (users with 10,000–100,000 followers) are increasingly influential in promoting narratives of health, identity, and performance. While visual content often dominates scholarly analysis of social media, the caption—an essential site for discursive self-presentation—remains underexplored, particularly in relation to gender. Moreover, existing literature has disproportionately focused on female influencers and visual aesthetics, leaving male narratives and linguistic framing comparatively overlooked.

This study investigates how British amateur female and male running influencers construct gendered identities through language in Instagram captions. The research asks: How do British amateur female and male running influencers differ in the ways they use language in Instagram captions to express and frame gendered identities in running-related content? Drawing from Social Role Theory (Eagly & Wood, 2012) and Framing Theory (Goffman, 1974), the study examines how influencers express communal traits (e.g., empathy, relationality) and agentic traits (e.g., competitiveness, self-discipline), as well as how gendered meanings are structured through narrative and emotional framing.

A thematic analysis was conducted on 500 captions from 50 UK-based micro-influencers (24 female, 26 male), using a theory-driven codebook. Data collection combined homogeneous and snowball sampling strategies, ensuring relevance and diversity within the niche of recreational running. Analysis was facilitated through ATLAS.ti software, with codes clustered into broader thematic categories reflecting both traditional and hybrid gender norms.

Findings indicate that male influencers predominantly adopt agentic frames emphasizing goal-setting, resilience, and performance metrics, closely aligning with hegemonic masculinity. Female influencers more frequently employ communal and emotionally expressive frames, emphasizing gratitude, community support, and holistic well-being. However, notable instances of hybridity emerge: some female influencers foreground competitive ambition and physical strength, while certain male influencers express vulnerability and relational values. Gender role reinforcement is significantly more prevalent in female-authored captions, often manifesting through hashtags and

self-descriptors that reaffirm traditional femininity, even within narratives of athletic competence.

The study contributes to digital media and gender scholarship by foregrounding the textual dimension of influencer self-presentation. It offers new insights into how gender is linguistically negotiated in fitness spaces and highlights the cultural work done by micro-influencers in sustaining or challenging normative ideals. These findings hold broader implications for understanding the gendered dynamics of authenticity, audience engagement, and identity performance in digital fitness culture.

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1. Introduction

Running in the United Kingdom has evolved significantly, shifting from a straightforward fitness pursuit to a socially and digitally mediated phenomenon. As a nation with a longstanding tradition in distance running, including being the birthplace of Parkrun, a weekly free 5k race attracting over 300,000 runners globally, Britain has fostered a highly participatory and community-oriented running culture (Stevinson & Hickson, 2014, p. 269). Participation in recreational running surged significantly following the COVID-19 pandemic, with a 123% increase in searches for "Couch to 5k" in 2021 and running-related searches growing another 50% by 2023 (SportsShoes, 2024, para. 1–2). This growth reflects not only renewed enthusiasm in physical activity but also a shift in how individuals document, share, and understand their identities through digital fitness practices. At the same time, the rise of digital self-presentation has transformed running from a personal activity into a socially shared and performative practice. Influencers on Instagram, in particular, have become central figures in this landscape, blending fitness with lifestyle content and fostering online communities.

This convergence of running culture and influencer media provides a critical context for examining gender representation. Gender, understood as a socially constructed identity, is not merely reflected but performed through language, imagery, and interaction (Butler, 1999, pp. 178–180; West & Zimmerman, 1987, p. 130). Influencers play an increasingly influential role in mediating gendered ideals, shaping how femininity and masculinity are expressed and consumed in the digital fitness space (Duffy & Hund, 2015, p. 6; Abidin, 2016, p. 94).

Regarding the online community, the United Kingdom hosts one of the most mature influencer markets in Europe. With over 98,000 influencers with at least 5,000 followers, the UK surpasses nations such as France and Germany (Kolsquare, 2024, para. 13). In 2023, UK influencer marketing expenditures reached £1.45 billion, underscoring the cultural and economic significance of digital self-branding and content creation (Kolsquare, 2024, para. 49). These parallel developments, both the rise of amateur running participation and the expansion of influencer culture, have fostered the emergence of British amateur running influencers, a unique subset of content creators.

This thesis explores how this group constructs gendered narratives through Instagram captions, a textual element often overshadowed by the platform's visual focus. While Instagram's reputation is built on image-sharing, captions play a critical role by shaping meaning, expressing identity and guiding audience interpretation (Highfield & Leaver, 2016, p. 55-56). Analysing captions thus provides valuable insight into the process by which gender is constructed and negotiated within online fitness communities.

1.1 Reframing gender in influencer studies

Gender plays a fundamental role in digital self-presentation, especially within influencer culture. As Simone de Beauvoir famously stated, "One is not born a woman, but rather becomes one" (De Beauvoir & Parshley, 1949, p. 301), emphasizing that gender is not biologically determined but socially constructed through learned behaviours and cultural expectations. Masculinity and femininity, in this framework, are not fixed traits but performative dimensions of gender identity (Butler, 1999, pp. 178-180). They represent sets of characteristics, behaviours, and social norms that are typically associated with being male or female, though these associations are constantly negotiated and contested. In digital spaces, these gendered performances are made visible, and often amplified, through the content that users share and the language they employ.

Social media platforms, such as Instagram, have become key spaces where such gender performances are constructed, reinforced or challenged. Influencers, as curated personas, play an increasingly influential role in shaping how femininity and masculinity are expressed and consumed online (Duffy & Hund, 2015, p. 6; Abidin, 2016, p. 94). However, despite growing scholarly interest in influencer culture, existing research tends to focus overwhelmingly on female influencers, particularly in fashion, beauty, and lifestyle domains. Duffy and Hund (2015, pp. 4-8) examined the self-branding practices of female bloggers, showing how femininity is constructed through emotional labour, aesthetic curation, and entrepreneurial hustle. Similarly, Robert (2022, pp. 3-8) analysed the emotional labour involved in women's digital self-presentation, particularly in the context of motherhood and domesticity. These studies provide valuable insights into digital femininity, but they often marginalize or overlook male influencers and the construction of masculinity altogether.

Even in fitness-oriented contexts, scholarly attention remains primarily on female subjects. Pullen et al. (2023, pp. 270-273), for instance, analysed British female Paralympians' Instagram feeds and intruded the term 'cripvertising' to describe how these athletes negotiate marketable femininity through highly curated, feminized aesthetics. Their findings illustrate how even resistance to dominant narratives (e.g., ableism) is often reabsorbed into gendered beauty norms. Similarly, Tiggemann and Zaccardo (2016, pp. 1007-1009), in their study of #fitspiration content, found that women's bodies are consistently aestheticized and sexualized, with 'strength' discourses often reinforcing rather than subverting appearance-based ideals. While these studies shed light on how femininity is performance and policed, masculinity is, again, often left unstudied or treated as an invisible default.

Research that does focus on men and masculinity in digital contexts is less common, and when it does exist, it tends to rely on visual content analysis rather than exploring how masculinity is constructed through text. Gültzow et al. (2020, pp. 284-285), for example, conducted a

quantitative content analysis of male Instagram users, revealing a dominant portrayal of hyper-muscularity, stoicism, and strength. While this work is significant in demonstrating the prevalence of hegemonic masculinity online, known as the dominant form of masculinity that is culturally idealized and associated with power, authority and physical strength (Connel, 2005, p. 77), it limits its analysis to visual imagery and neglects the role of language, particularly captions, in constructing these ideals. Parkins and Parkins (2021, p. 4) offer a more nuanced view by differentiating between traditional hegemonic masculinity and new 'metrosexual' performances marked by emotional openness and attention to grooming. Yet their work remains broad and not specific to sport or social platform. Moreover, neither study considers how male influencers, in athletic spaces like running, use language to align with or resist dominant masculine norms. Therefore, this thesis directly addresses this gap by focusing on how male running influencers perform masculinity textually, through their Instagram captions.

A second, and equally significant, gap in the literature lies in the overwhelming emphasis on imagery over textual content. Instagram's visual orientation has led scholars to focus on photos, selfies, body poses, and aesthetic performances. However, captions— despite being a central tool for narrative construction, emotional framing, and audience engagement—are often treated as supplementary or ignored altogether. Highfield and Leaver (2016, pp. 55-56) argue that captions contribute significantly to the construction of digital identities, yet few studies apply detailed textual or linguistic analysis to them. For instance, Reade (2020, p. 541) notes that female influencers use captions to express authenticity, vulnerability and emotional labour, but does not systematically analyse the language itself. Likewise, even in caption-aware studies (see for e.g., Pullen et al., 2023; Tiggemann and Zaccardo, 2016) the primary analytical lens remains visual. As a result, our understanding of how gender is constructed through text, not just image, remains limited. For that reason, the primarily unit of analysis in this study are Instagram captions.

Furthermore, the type of influencers studied tends to skew toward macro-level or professional athletes, who often operate under commercial sponsorship and media training. These public figures, such as those analysed by Krieger et al. (2022, pp. 1631-1632), represent institutional narratives of athleticism that may not reflect the everyday experiences non-professionals. In contrast, micro-influencers – defined here as users with 10,000 to 100,000 followers – offer a more middle class, personal, and potentially less curated form of gender performance. As Kim and Kim (2022, pp. 102-103) argue, micro-influencers are perceived as more authentic by their audiences and may organically reflect the cultural negotiations of identity within fitness spaces more. Yet, they remain critically underrepresented in the academic literature.

Taken together, these gaps highlight a lack of research that engages with gendered self-presentation in the textual narratives of amateur running influencers, with particular attention to

the use of Instagram captions. This study addresses these shortages by offering a comparative analysis of both male and female British amateur running influencers, with Instagram captions as the primary unit of analysis. By doing so, it contributes to ongoing conversations in digital media studies, gender theory, and sports sociology, and simultaneously advances the understanding of how gender is constructed not only through imagery but through everyday textual storytelling.

1.2 Societal Relevance

Beyond academia, this study holds broader societal significance. Influencers act as cultural intermediaries whose content shapes public understanding of gender roles, fitness ideals, and identity performance (Abidin, 2016, p. 87; Duffy & Hund, 2019, pp. 6-7). While traditional mass media has long influenced these norms, the shift toward peer-driven platforms like Instagram means that representations of gender and fitness are now curated by individuals who appear more relatable than elite athletes or celebrities (Janssen et al., 2021, p. 104). Understanding how amateur influencers present gendered identities thus offers insight into how everyday users, especially younger audiences, navigate and redefine dominant expectations around masculinity and femininity in the realm of fitness.

Focusing on micro-influencers, this research delves into content often viewed as more authentic and attainable than that produced by celebrity-level influencers (Kim & Kim, 2022, pp. 102-103). Micro-influencers, despite lacking the comprehensive support of established branding agencies, consistently foster remarkably engaged audiences. Their unique combination of aspirational content and genuine relatability enhances the persuasive impact of their messaging, particularly regarding health, performance, appearance, and broader lifestyle choice (Audrezet et al., 2018, p.565; Kim & Kim, 2022, pp. 102-103). Understanding the influencers' linguistic strategies provides insight into how gendered identities are performed and perceived in the digital fitness landscape.

The implications of these gendered narratives are profound. Research increasingly shows that exposure to idealized fitness content on social media can contribute to body dissatisfaction, disordered eating, and performance anxiety (see for e.g., Perloff, 2014). Not only does this happen among women, but also among men who feel pressure to attain hyper-muscular or hyper-fit ideals (Perloff, 2014, p. 371; Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2016, pp. 1006-1007). Conversely, narratives promoting emotional openness and self-care among male influencers can challenge rigid masculinity norms (Anderson, 2009, p. 17), fostering more inclusive understandings of male identity. Similarly, female influencers adopting competitive, performance-driven frames can disrupt stereotypes that associate women primarily with appearance or wellness rather than athletic competence (Eagly & Wood, 2012, p. 16; Kane et al., 2013, pp. 291-294?).

By analysing the language used in Instagram captions, this study contributes to discussions on the mental and social health impacts of fitness content, the visibility of diverse gender identities, and the role of influencers in shaping cultural norms. The findings can inform digital media literacy initiatives, influencer regulation policies, and inclusive health promotion practices, ultimately aiding users in navigating and critically assessing the gendered messages prevalent in social media fitness narratives.

1.3 Research aim and context

To explore how gender is articulated in these textual performances, this thesis poses the following research question: How do British amateur female and male running influencers differ in the ways they use language in Instagram captions to express and frame gendered identities in running-related content?

To answer this question, the study employs a thematic analysis of 500 captions from 50 British amateur micro-influencers (24 female, 26 male). The dataset focuses exclusively on Instagram posts explicitly related to running, published by influencers with 10,000 to 100,000 followers, a range that reflects the micro-influencer category. This group is considered particularly relevant due to their perceived authenticity and strong audience engagement compared to more commercialized celebrity influencers (Abidin, 2016, p. 87). Instagram captions are treated as discursive artefacts through which influencers frame their identities, values, and experiences. The analysis identifies thematic patterns, linguistic choices and framing devices to interpret how gendered identities are shaped in the context of amateur athleticism.

This study is guided by Social Role Theory and Framing theory, which are elaborated in the following chapter. These frameworks help interpret how gendered traits and behaviours, such as competitiveness, empathy or emotional openness, are communicated in influencer captions. While some expressions align with traditional gender associations, the analysis also identifies hybrid patterns that challenge binary norms, offering insight into how gender is performed and negotiated in the context of amateur running culture on Instagram.

1.4 Structure of the Thesis

The structure of this thesis is as follows. Chapter 2 presents the theoretical framework, which draws primarily on both Social Role Theory (Eagly & Wood, 2012) and Framing Theory (Goffman, 1974), as well as supporting literature from gender studies and influencer media scholarship. These perspectives provide the foundation for understanding how gendered presentations are constructed and interpreted in digital fitness culture.

Next, Chapter 3 outlines the methodological approach, including a thematic analysis of 500 Instagram captions by 50 British amateur running influencers. It details the sampling strategy – using both homogeneous and snowball sampling methods – as well as the inclusion criteria (e.g., micro-influencers status, running related content). The chapter also explains how captions were treated as the unit of analysis and describes the coding procedures used to identify linguistic patterns and framing strategies.

Chapter 4 presents the results, structured around four thematic categories that emerged from the analysis, with attention to gendered differences in how influencers frame their identities, achievements and bodily experiences. The most prominent themes are Traditional Masculinity and Traditional Femininity. In relation to the theoretical framework and existing literature, the findings are interpreted, highlighting how traditional and hybrid gender norms are negotiated withing digital running cultures.

Lastly, Chapter 5 concludes this study by summarizing key insights, identifying the study's limitations and proposing directions for future research.

By focusing on Instagram captions rather than visual content, this study contributes a novel perspective to the literature on gendered self-representation in digital sports media, offering insights into how influencers use language to navigate and perform gender identities within the context of amateur running.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1 Gender Narratives through Gender Performativity

Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, as outlined in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1999), provides a foundational framework for understanding how gender is socially constructed and echoed through repeated behaviours and discourses. Butler challenges the notion that gender is a fixed identity or inner essence, arguing instead that it is produced and maintained through a series of performative acts that conform to or subvert societal expectations (pp. 178-180). These performative acts are shaped by cultural norms and are not the product of free individual expression but are constrained by historical and social contexts. As Butler explains, gender identity is a 'reenactment and reexperiencing' of meanings that are already socially established and ritualized (p. 178).

Butler's concept of gender as performative rather than inherent has significantly influenced gender studies, leading scholars to explore how different social institutions reinforce gender norms. West and Zimmerman's (1987, p. 126) concept of 'doing gender' builds on Butler's performativity by emphasizing that gender is an ongoing, interactive process enacted through everyday social interactions. This emphasis on the interactional nature of gender is particularly relevant to this current study, which examines how gender is performed through social media captions, which are the digital form of repeated, socially contextualized expressions. West and Zimmerman (1987) further argue that gender is not merely an individual attribute but a routine, methodical, and recurring accomplishment embedded in social practices (p. 126). This perspective aligns with Butler's assertion that gender is constructed through repetition, but West and Zimmerman place greater emphasis on the societal structures that demand the enactment of gender norms.

Narratives are understood as structured forms of storytelling through which individuals make sense of their identities and experiences. Gendered narratives, more specifically, provide a structure through which gender identities are communicated, contested, and negotiated. These narratives are constructed through storytelling and shared social experiences, shaping public understandings of masculinity and femininity (Riessman, 2008, pp. 9-10). These narratives are central to this study, as they provide a lens for examining how running influencers present themselves on Instagram. In those digital spaces, gendered narratives are constructed through captions, hashtags and visual content, which reinforces or challenges the traditional gender norms (Garner, 2023, p. 86). For instance, Instagram captions that emphasize emotional vulnerability and community-building tend to align with traditional expectations of femininity, while captions focused on competition, endurance, and personal achievement often reflect dominant ideals of masculinity (Eagly & Wood, 2012, p. 18).

Park et al. (2016) go deeper in on the gender narratives by introducing the concept of

'gender-linked-language features' (p. 2). Aspects such as sentence length, phrases and certain words are consistently used more by one gender than the other. For example, men tend to use more articles, quantifiers, spatial words, judgmental adjectives, directives and swearwords, while women tend to use personal pronouns, intensive adverbs, longer sentences, intensive adverbs, hedging and often refer to emotions (p. 2). Besides, men are more likely to discuss topics featuring politics, sports and competition, whereas women are more likely to discuss topics featuring positive emotions and social relationships (p. 7). For women, amplifying their emotional feelings are done through adjectives such as sweet, adorable, divine, lovely and pretty. Men, on the other hand, use neutral adjectives such as simple, good and neat more often. In general, women tend to use more adjectives when expressing emotions (Ningrum et al., 2023, p. 186).

Going back to Butler's work, scholars have also critiqued Butler's performativity for its potential limitations. Nussbaum (1999) argues that Butler's approach, while effective in deconstructing gender categories, is overly focused on discourse and neglects the material realities of gender oppression (p. 35). Salih (2002) expands on this critique, suggesting that while performativity highlights the fluidity of gender, it does not fully address the power structures that regulate gender expression in different social contexts (pp. 43-46). However, these critiques are less of a concern in the context of this study, given the focus on discursive identity expression. Specifically, this study focuses on how influencers use language to perform and frame gender. Since the primary material is textual (captions), Butler's discursive focus is especially relevant and productive or analysis. Moreover, platform dynamics and audience reception, elements often seen as shaping power relations online, are indirectly accounted for through the use of Framing Theory and attention to digital visibility (Duffy & Hund, 2015, p. 5).

Furthermore, Connell's (2005) concept of hegemonic masculinity offers a complementary framework to understand the hierarchical structuring of gender performances. Hegemonic masculinity refers to the dominant form of masculinity that is culturally idealized and associated with power, authority, and physical strength (p. 77). This framework is particularly relevant for male running influencers, who may present themselves as resilient, disciplined, and goal oriented. In contrast, female influencers often navigate expectations of emphasized femininity, which prioritizes attractiveness, sociability, and emotional expressiveness over physical performance (Gill, 2007, pp. 149-155).

Building on these frameworks, Halberstam (1998) introduces the concept of female masculinity, which challenges the assumption that masculinity is an exclusively male trait (p. 9). In the context of social media, female influencers who emphasize strength, endurance, and independence may subvert traditional gender norms, creating alternative gender narratives that contest hegemonic masculinity (Eagly & Wood, 2012, p. 18). This study explores how female

influencers might draw on traditionally masculine frames, such as toughness or goal setting, to contest those boundaries of gender expression within digital fitness culture. However, these alternative identities are often still negotiated within the constraints of visual marketability and social acceptance.

A further layer to understanding digital gender performance comes from Banet-Weiser's (2018) work on empowered femininity, which critiques the way contemporary feminism has been co-opted into marketable self-presentation strategies on social media (p. 112). Influencers often engage in what Gill (2007, pp. 156-157) calls 'postfeminist self-surveillance', where their self-representations both embrace empowerment rhetoric while adhering to normative beauty and femininity standards (p. 617). This paradox is visible in fitness influencers' narratives, where women promote strength and athleticism but still conform to aesthetic ideals that align with traditional femininity (Dworkin & Wachs, 2009, p. 138). The performative dimensions of these narratives reveal the complexities of digital gender construction, as influencers navigate between empowerment, marketability, and societal expectations.

Additionally, Butler's later work in *Undoing Gender* (2004) expands on her initial theory by considering how gender performativity intersects with uncertainty and social vulnerability. This perspective is particularly relevant to the digital influencer economy, where individuals depend on algorithmic favourability and audience engagement to maintain visibility and financial stability (Abidin, 2016, p. 94). Female fitness influencers, for example, may face greater pressure to align with established gender norms due to the economic incentives associated with performing an idealized femininity (Duffy, 2017, pp. 136-184).

Together, these perspectives help this study understand Instagram captions as narrative spaces where gender is actively performed, repeated, and at times challenged, making gender performativity central to the analysis of influencer self-representation.

2.2 Gender Differences in Sports

To understand how these gender performances play out in online fitness culture, it is necessary to examine how gendered norms have historically shaped sports and athletic participation, both offline and online. To start, the perception that sports is a 'natural' domain for men is deeply rooted in historical and cultural beliefs about biological and psychological differences between the sexes. These beliefs have contributed to the construction of gendered performances in athletic contexts (Connell, 2005, p. 73). The notion that men are inherently stronger, more competitive, and better suited for physically demanding sports has historically marginalized women in this domain. From the exclusion of women in the early Olympic Games to the ongoing gender pay gap in professional sports, these distinctions have long influenced how athleticism is perceived

and performed (Messner, 2002, p. 35).

The reinforcement of traditional gender norms is not only evident in professional sports but also in amateur and digital fitness cultures. Women have historically been socialized to adhere to 'feminine-appropriate' behaviour, which often emphasizes grace, aesthetics, and passivity over strength, aggression, and endurance (Kane et al., 2013, p. 273; Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018, p. 17). This socialization extends into digital fitness spaces, where micro-influencers in fitness and running communities often mirror these broader gender norms. Moreover, research has shown that male influencers tend to frame their fitness content around themes of strength, endurance, and performance, while female influencers often emphasize aesthetics, wellness, and community engagement (Eagly & Wood, 2012, p. 18; Thorpe, 2017, p. 563).

Social Role Theory (Eagly, 1987) helps explain why these differences persist, suggesting that gender norms in sports are maintained through societal expectations that associate men with dominance and competition and women with caregiving and cooperation (Eagly & Wood, 2012, p. 16). This has direct implications for self-presentation on social media, where women in fitness spaces may feel pressure to align their content with socially accepted notions of femininity, such as body positivity and holistic well-being, rather than raw athleticism or competitiveness (Channon et al., 2020, p. 1112).

However, digital platforms also offer opportunities to challenge these traditional portrayals. Some female influencers actively resist gendered expectations by highlighting strength-based training, personal achievements, and performance-oriented narratives (Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018, p. 28). Similarly, some male influencers engage in non-traditional forms of self-presentation, incorporating fashion, grooming and trend awareness (Parkins & Parkins, 2021, p. 10). These deviations suggest that while social media often reinforces dominant gender narratives, it also provides a space for subversion and redefinition.

Despite this potential for resistance, the gendered nature of sports media remains persistent. A critical perspective suggests that digital self-presentation does not occur in a vacuum; it is shaped by broader social structures, algorithmic visibility, and audience expectations (Duffy & Hund, 2019, pp. 4985-4986). Research indicates that female influencers who adopt traditionally masculine performance narratives may receive pushback or be perceived as deviating from gender norms, while men who incorporate more emotionally expressive content may face scrutiny regarding their masculinity (Eagly & Wood, 2012, p. 18; Dworkin & Wachs, 2009, pp. 96-97). These findings highlight the limitations of digital spaces in fully dismantling gendered perceptions of sports.

Ultimately, the gendered nature of sports extends beyond physical competition to digital fitness cultures, where micro-influencers negotiate their self-presentation within existing social norms.

While there are opportunities to challenge these narratives, they remain constrained by deeply embedded gender ideologies that shape both offline and online athletic identities.

2.3 Gender Differences through Social Role Theory and Framing Theory

Understanding gender differences requires an exploration of both societal structures and mediated narratives that shape perceptions of gender roles. Therefore, this study draws on two complementary theoretical frameworks, known as Social Role Theory (SRT) and Framing Theory, to examine how gendered self-presentations are constructed through language on Instagram.

Social Role Theory, developed by Eagly and Wood (2012), posits that historical divisions of labour and biological predispositions have led to the assignment of distinct social roles to men and women. Over time, these roles become fixed as cultural expectations, shaping behaviours and self-concept (Eagly & Wood, 2012, pp. 15-16). This study draws on Social Role Theory to examine how captions reflect communal traits associated with femininity (e.g., empathy or encouragement) and agentic traits aligned with masculinity (e.g., toughness or competitiveness).

Framing theory, on the other hand, was first introduced by Goffman (1974) and further explains how media platforms select and highlight particular aspects of reality to shape public perceptions. Frames are interpretive packages that not only structure communication but also sustain dominant ideologies by subtly emphasizing specific themes over others (Goffman, 1974, pp. 21-23). Media outlets use those frames to define gender norms, reinforcing societal expectations through curated portrayals of masculinity and femininity (West & Zimmerman, 1987, pp. 129-130). In the context of this current study, influencers are understood as framing agents, constructing self-representations that emphasize certain gendered values, experiences, or aesthetics to guide how their audience understands them.

2.3.1 Social Role Theory and the Institutionalization of Gender Norms

Social Role Theory explains how societal expectations, rooted in historical divisions of labour, shape gender roles over time. Rather than stemming from biological determinism, these roles are understood as socially constructed frameworks that define acceptable behaviours, traits, and self-representation for both men and women (Eagly & Wood, 2012, p. 16). In the context of digital fitness culture, Social Role Theory provides a lens to analyse how influencers internalize and reproduce these expectations through gendered self-representations in their content.

These role expectations shape personality traits, skills, and self-concept, leading individuals to conform to social norms. For example, studies show that women score higher on communal traits such as empathy and cooperation, whereas men exhibit higher levels of agentic traits like

dominance and competitiveness (Lin & Wang, 2019, pp. 47-48). However, these differences are largely a reflection of social conditioning rather than innate predispositions.

While Social Role Theory is often applied to professional domains, where gendered occupational patterns persist (Ridgeway & Correll, 2004, p. 517), its relevance extends to informal digital environments, such as Instagram. Just as women are overrepresented in caregiving professions and men dominate leadership roles (Eagly & Karau, 2002, p. 547), similar patterns shape how influencers construct their online identities. Female influencers are more likely to emphasize aesthetics, lifestyle and community engagement, whereas male influencers tend to foreground expertise, competition, and professional achievements (Duffy & Hund, 2015, p. 6).

Additionally, Duffy and Hund (2015, p. 7) argue that sharing elements of one's personal life to appear more authentic is often associated with femininity rather than masculinity. This intimate style of communication reflects what they describe as 'confession culture', which is a media environment in which individuals openly disclose personal emotions, struggles, or vulnerabilities, often to a wide or anonymous audience. In contrast to more reserved or private norms, confession culture encourages emotional transparency as a form of connection and authenticity (Duffy & Hund, 2015, p.7).

In the context of this study, confession culture is particularly relevant to how female running influencers frame their identities. Many use Instagram captions to narrate emotional experiences, such as self-doubt, pride, or recovery, as part of their athletic journey. These disclosures not only humanize the influencer but also reinforce gendered expectations around emotional openness, care, and relationality. Such patterns align with Social Role Theory's assertion that women are culturally positioned to prioritize communal traits and relational storytelling (Eagly & Wood, 2012, p. 16).

2.3.2 Framing Theory and the Media's Role in Gender Representation

While Social Role Theory explains the origins of gender roles, Framing Theory clarifies how these roles are reinforced through media narratives. Goffman's (1974) theory suggests that individuals rely on interpretative frameworks, referred to as 'frames', to understand and engage with the world. Frames shape public perceptions by selectively emphasizing certain aspects of reality while minimizing or omitting others, thereby influencing how individuals process information (Goffman, 1974, pp. 21-23). Thus, influencers can be considered as the primary agents of framing. Through strategic choices in language and tone, they shape how their running practices, as well as their gender identities, are communicated to the audience. This performative aspect of digital identity construction aligns closely with Goffman's earlier work on self-presentation.

This concept of self-presentation, as developed by Goffman (1956), is therefore relevant to this study's understanding of gendered expression on Instagram. Goffman proposes that social life resembles a theatrical performance, where individuals act out carefully chosen roles to shape how others perceive them (p. 17). This involves controlling and managing impressions, a process he refers to as impression management (pp. 28-30). Individuals use a so-called front, consisting of expressive tools such as appearance, language and setting, to support a preferred identity in front of an audience (p. 22). Translating this to a digital context, particularly Instagram, influencers curate both visual and textual content to manage impressions and actively shape the way their gender identities are understood by followers. This notion of self-presentation complements Framing Theory, as both emphasize the strategic highlighting of particular traits or narratives. In this study, the concept of self-presentation is considered alongside framing and gender performance to analyse how influencers manage gendered identities within the particular possibilities and limitations of the platform.

While influencers actively construct their self-presentations, they do so within broader media environments that frame certain gender norms as natural, desirable and expected. With the media foregrounding those certain narratives, such as male strength, female beauty, or emotional expressiveness, they contribute to the normalization and perpetuation of gendered expectations (West & Zimmerman, 1987, p. 130). For example, sports media have historically framed female athletes through a lens of femininity rather than athletic ability, often emphasizing their appearance, emotions, or personal lives rather than their performance (Juliet, 2024, pp. 47-48). This process, known as 'keying' (Goffman, 1974, p. 45), modifies primary frames to create new layers of meaning. In the case of female athletes, keying shifts focus from their athletic competence to their physical attractiveness or relatability, reinforcing traditional gender norms.

The framing process persists and adapts within digital environments. On platforms like Instagram, the mechanisms of visibility and engagement are tightly linked to the reproduction of familiar gendered tropes. Cotter (2019, pp. 899-900) argues that Instagram's algorithmic architecture systematically rewards content that conforms to conventional aesthetic standards, including heteronormative and gendered presentations. In doing so, Instagram frames what is deemed desirable or valuable, creating a structural bias that shapes influencers' self-presentation strategies.

Recent studies on social media self-representation among marginalized groups further highlight the complexity of framing. Pullen et al. (2023) conducted an intersectional visual analysis of British female Paralympic athletes' Instagram pages and found that while athletes attempted to challenge disability stereotypes, they simultaneously adhered to gendered expectations through highly curated, feminized imagery. These performances, described as 'cripvertising', involved

leveraging traditional beauty norms and sexualized aesthetics to gain social media visibility and commercial opportunities (Pullen et al., 2023, pp. 270–273).

Such findings align with critiques by Reade (2020), who emphasizes that in fitness cultures on Instagram, performances of authenticity and relatability are themselves gendered. Female influencers are more likely to construct narratives around vulnerability, balance, and emotional openness, frames that align with socially constructed ideals of femininity (Reade, 2020, pp. 541–549). Yet, Reade's study does not systematically compare male and female influencers, nor does it distinguish between types of physical activities. By contrast, the present study takes a comparative gendered approach and isolates a specific subculture, amateur runners on Instagram, to explore whether these patterns hold in different environments.

Furthermore, frames are not only constructed through visual imagery but also through linguistic choices. Hashtags, captions, and textual narratives contribute significantly to framing processes on Instagram. Research by Pullen et al. (2023, pp. 272-274) notes that female Paralympians frequently use hashtags such as #womenempowerment, #selflove, and #disabilitypride to align themselves with broader empowerment discourses, while simultaneously reinforcing gendered aesthetics through the visual content. This highlights the multimodal nature of framing on social media, where language and imagery work together to construct coherent gendered identities.

While much research has focused on female influencers and their navigation of femininity, recent studies have begun to shed light on male influencers and the portrayal of masculinity online. Gültzow et al. (2020) conducted a quantitative content analysis of 1,000 Instagram posts featuring solely men, revealing that the majority depicted highly muscular and lean bodies. These images, emphasizing physical strength and leanness, received significantly more engagement in terms of likes and comments (p. 285). Such portrayals reinforce traditional masculine ideals, suggesting that male influencers often frame their identities around physical skill and the pursuit of an idealized body image.

Complementing this, Parkins and Parkins (2021) explored how male influencers represent masculinity through their social media content. Their study found that many male influencers perpetuate hegemonic masculinity by emphasizing traits such as dominance, stoicism, and physical strength. However, the research also identified a subset of influencers who challenge these norms by embracing a 'metrosexual' mode of masculinity, characterized by attention to grooming, fashion, and emotional openness (p. 4). This indicates a diversification in the framing of masculinity, where some influencers are redefining male identity beyond traditional stereotypes. Nevertheless, both studies are limited to body-focused male content and lack contextual detail regarding the influencer's sport, audience or captioning strategies.

In this study, captions are not merely supplementary text; they function as deliberate discursive acts through which influencers actively construct identity, communicate values and shape audience perception of experience. While this study does not adopt a full discourse analysis framework, it positions language as fundamental to the performance of gender. In this context, discourse refers to the broader cultural and social meanings embedded in language use, while narrative captures how individuals organize personal experiences into structured stories. Framing, then, operates at both levels. It is not only about how meaning is selectively emphasized within captions (Fairclough, 2003, p.8), but also how influencers curate coherent identity performances through narrative choices. Framing Theory thus highlights the discursive strategies that guide interpretations, while Social Role Theory and Gender Performativity help unpack the cultural logics underpinning these expressions.

2.3.3 Applying the Framework: Social Roles and Frames in Digital Fitness Culture

The interaction between social roles and media frames is particularly relevant in the context of digital fitness influencers. Therefore, this section applies the previously outlined theories to understand how influencers perform gender online, showing how platform dynamics, audience expectations and cultural scripts shape their self-presentations. These theoretical insights form the analytical foundation for interpreting the gendered patterns observed in the Instagram captions of running influencers.

As mentioned before, research by Pullen et al. (2023) demonstrate how female Paralympic athletes, despite challenging ableist narratives, nonetheless frame their online identities in ways that emphasize femininity, aesthetic beauty, and marketability. The study shows how social roles and media frames interact dynamically: athletes internalize societal expectations of femininity and simultaneously shape their public persona through visual and textual framings that align with platform and brand logics (Pullen et al., 2023, p. 272).

Similarly, Marshall et al. (2018) found that female fitness influencers on Instagram frame their narratives around themes like empowerment, self-love, and personal growth, but within highly gendered boundaries. Male users, on the other hand, tend to highlight physical strength, toughness, and traditional masculine attributes. Besides, Siibak (2010) found that young men on social networking sites frequently use visual cues, such as muscular displays, posing alone, and status symbols, to construct a masculine identity that aligns with societal expectations (pp. 413-417). These differences not only reflect internalized social roles but are reinforced by the engagement dynamics of digital platforms.

Moreover, algorithmic curation on Instagram amplifies content that conforms to popular frames, thereby reinforcing the visibility of traditional gender norms (Cotter, 2019, p. 900).

Consequently, influencers who adhere to normative gender scripts are more likely to gain visibility and engagement, creating a feedback loop that sustains and reproduces established frames.

These examples demonstrate how Social Role Theory and Framing Theory jointly inform this study's analysis of Instagram captions as both reflections of internalized social expectations and strategic, performative acts shaped by platform-specific affordances.

2.3.4 Expanding and Contesting Gender Frames

While traditional gender frames persist, there are increasing disruptions to established narratives. Some influencers challenge gender norms by adopting non-traditional frames that emphasize gender fluidity and inclusivity. For example, female fitness influencers emphasizing strength, discipline, and competitiveness disrupt traditional femininity that centre on appearance, nurturing roles, and emotional labour (Kane et al., 2013, pp. 291-294).

Recent research highlights how these shifts are beginning to reshape the landscape of online self-presentation. Parkins and Parkins (2021) found that while many male influencers continue to embody traditional masculine norms emphasizing strength, status, and self-reliance, a growing subset embraces 'metrosexual' ideals, focusing on grooming, vulnerability, and emotional expression (Parkins & Parkins, 2021, p. 4). This diversification suggests that constructions of masculinity online are becoming more varied, albeit unevenly.

Nevertheless, disruptions to gendered norms often encounter significant resistance. Research by Banet-Weiser (2018) emphasizes that digital platforms, through their underlying logics of visibility and engagement, tend to favour conventional gender performances. Content that deviates from hegemonic ideals may attract lower engagement or even provoke backlash (Banet-Weiser, 2018, p. 112). Algorithmic amplification, as noted by Cotter (2019), frequently privileges posts that align with established gender aesthetics, reinforcing dominant frames even when alternative narratives emerge (Cotter, 2019, p. 900).

While visible progress has been made, particularly among certain influencer niches promoting mental health advocacy and inclusive masculinities, challenges persist in normalizing these narratives. Structural factors, such as platform algorithms, commercial pressures, and ingrained audience expectations, continue to reward stereotypical portrayals over more nuanced or subversive ones. Consequently, although a more pluralistic and fluid landscape of gender representation is slowly emerging, it remains precarious, contingent, and often marginalized within broader influencer cultures.

2.4 (Micro)-Influencers and Their Role in Digital Culture

With the theoretical groundwork established, this section now focuses on the influencer

dynamic framework that shape this study's framework. Examining the role of micro-influencers in crafting and spreading gendered narratives on Instagram is crucial for understanding how gender performances are negotiated and displayed withing this digital fitness subculture.

To start, the concept of influencers has evolved significantly since its early development in the mid-2000s, shaped by the rise of social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Instagram. Initially, influencers emerged from blogging communities, where individuals built dedicated followings by sharing expertise, opinions, and personal experiences. This phenomenon aligns with Katz and Lazarsfeld's (2009, as cited in Abidin, 2016, p. 87) foundational concept of 'personal influence', which describes how opinion leaders impact attitudes and behaviours within social networks. In the contemporary digital landscape, influencers operate across multiple platforms, leveraging curated content to engage audiences and shape cultural perceptions (Abidin, 2016, p. 87).

2.4.1 Defining Influencers: A Hierarchical Perspective

Influencers are categorized based on their audience size and level of engagement, forming a hierarchical structure ranging from nano-influencers (fewer than 10,000 followers) to mega-influencers (over a million followers) (Katz, 2023, para. 6). At the higher end of the spectrum, mega- and macro-influencers (100,000+ followers) often possess celebrity-like status, collaborating with major brands and reaching a broad, yet less engaged, audience (Katz, 2023, para. 10-14). By contrast, micro-influencers (10,000–100,000 followers) cultivate stronger relationships with their followers through personalized and niche-specific content, fostering higher levels of trust and authenticity (Audrezet et al., 2018, p. 565).

Micro-influencers are particularly effective in fostering community engagement and influencing consumer behaviour because of their perceived accessibility and relatability. Unlike macro-influencers, whose content is often polished, and commercially driven, micro-influencers present themselves as everyday individuals, making their endorsements and self-representations more credible (Kim & Kim, 2022, pp. 102-103). This credibility is particularly significant in the fitness and amateur running community, where authenticity is key to influencing audience perceptions of health, athleticism, and gender identity (Hutchins & Rowe, 2012, p. 92).

2.4.2 Micro-Influencers and Gendered Self-Presentation

The rise of micro-influencers has intersected with evolving gender narratives in digital culture, particularly within fitness and lifestyle communities. Traditionally, mainstream media representations of athletes have adhered to rigid gender norms, often emphasizing masculinity as a marker of strength, competition, and dominance, while associating femininity with aesthetics,

grace, and sociability (Juliet, 2024, pp. 47-48). However, social media platforms have allowed for alternative gender performances, enabling micro-influencers to challenge or reinforce conventional narratives through their content (Duffy & Hund, 2015, p. 6).

Female fitness micro-influencers, for instance, often navigate a paradoxical space where they must balance empowerment narratives with societal expectations of femininity (Banet-Weiser, 2018, p. 112). While many promote strength, independence, and athleticism, they also face pressures to conform to beauty standards that emphasize thinness, youth, and attractiveness (Dworkin & Wachs, 2009, p. 138). This dual performance is evident in self-representations that blend aspirational fitness goals with elements of traditional femininity, such as makeup, fashion, and emotional expressiveness (Gill, 2007, pp. 149-155).

Male micro-influencers in fitness cultures often embody hegemonic masculinity, reinforcing ideals of endurance, discipline, and dominance (Connell, 2005, pp. 77-78). However, some disrupt these norms by engaging in content that emphasizes emotional vulnerability, holistic well-being, and community support (Anderson, 2009, p. 17). This shift reflects broader changes in contemporary masculinity, particularly in digital spaces where traditional gender roles are increasingly fluid and contested.

3. Method

This study examined how British female and male amateur running influencers differ in the ways they use language in Instagram captions to express and frame gendered identities in running-related content. Using qualitative content analysis, more specifically thematic analysis, it explored the thematic patterns of captions and provided insight into how gender norms are performed online (Brennen, 2017, pp. 13-16). Grounded in Social Role Theory (Eagly, 1987) and Framing Theory (Goffman, 1974), this study viewed gender as socially constructed and shaped by cultural expectations. While gender is recognized as fluid and socially constructed, this study treated it as a binary variable (male/female) for analytical clarity and consistency with prior research. Thematic analysis and systematic coding have identified patterns of gender representation, offering a nuanced understanding of how influencers reinforce or challenge traditional gender norms within the online running community.

3.1 Research design

This research adopted a thematic analysis, as part of qualitative content analysis, to examine how amateur female and male UK running influencers on Instagram construct and communicate gendered narratives through caption content. Qualitative content analysis is widely applied in media and gender studies to analyse textual and visual data within a social context. It allows for a deeper understanding of the meanings behind words, concepts and ideas (Brennen, 2017, pp. 13-16). Thus, this method is suitable for analysing how gender is represented and negotiated through social media content.

Central to this study is Judith Butler's (1990, pp. 178-180) concept of gender as performative—where gender is not seen as a fixed or innate identity, but rather as a repeated series of acts, expressions and discourses that construct the illusion of a stable gendered self. Instagram, as a platform built on curated self-presentation, provides a particularly fertile site for observing these performances. By analysing captions, this study investigated how influencers actively participate in gender construction through linguistic framing, emotional tone, and the discursive strategies they use to position themselves within gendered expectations. A qualitative approach was therefore necessary to capture the nuanced, socially situated ways in which gender is performed, reiterated, and occasionally subverted within influencer narratives.

The study's research design followed a structured, yet flexible approach to qualitative content analysis. The primary unit of analysis consisted of individual Instagram captions, posted by the selected running influencers. Captions were defined as the full body of text accompanying each Instagram post, including hashtags, line breaks, emojis and punctuation. All captions were written in English and varied in length, from brief motivational phrases to multi-sentence personal

reflections. However, no distinction was made in terms of caption length during the analysis. While visual content such as images and videos also contributes to digital self-representation, this study focused exclusively on textual content due to the centrality of language in the construction and reinforcement of gender norms (Fairclough, 2003, p. 8). Emojis were retained in the dataset to preserve the original tone and structure of the captions but were not analysed on their own as separate units of meaning.

Each caption was coded in its entirety using a thematic codebook developed from Social Role Theory and Framing Theory. Coding was inductively flexible. Meaning that individual captions could contain multiple codes, and in some cases, a single phrase could be coded under more than one theme if it carried overlapping meanings. For example, a sentence expressing determination could be coded both as Goal Orientation and Mental Toughness, depending on its framing. The full caption was considered during coding to preserve contextual meaning. A selection of 15 sample captions, including author, date and post URL, is provided in Appendix B to illustrate the structure and tone of the analysed content.

To ensure analytical clarity, gender was treated as a binary variable in this study, distinguishing between male and female influencers. Although gender is understood as a socially constructed phenomenon (West & Zimmerman, 1987, pp. 130-131), social media representations often reinforce binary norms (Gill, 2007, pp. 249-270). The decision to categorize influencers as male or female is consistent with previous research examining digital gender performance within structured identity categories (van Doorn, 2009, pp. 597-599). However, it is important to acknowledge that this classification does not capture non-binary or gender-fluid representations, which remain an area for further research. This paper does explicitly focus on the difference between men and women as both groups have different societal expectation in the context of language usage. This difference varies from sentence length and vocabulary to shared topics and vulnerability (Park et al., 2016, pp. 2-7). Therefore, making a comparison between the two genders is highly valuable. Especially since little research has been conducted on the topic of narrative gender differences for online fitness influencers.

3.2 Operationalization

Operationalization in qualitative research requires a systematic approach to translating theoretical concepts into empirical analysis (Williams, 2024, para. 5). By establishing a structured codebook that guides the analysis of Instagram captions, this study employed Social Role Theory and Framing Theory to analyse how male and female running influencers construct gendered narratives in those captions. Social Role Theory, as introduced by Eagly (1987), posits that societal expectations shape gendered behaviours through historically assigned roles that become

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internalized over time. These roles lead individuals to adopt patterns of self-presentation that align with established norms, such as men being associated with competitiveness and independence and women being linked to emotional expressiveness and community orientation (Eagly & Wood 2012, p. 15). Meanwhile, Framing Theory, developed by Goffman (1974), explains how individuals and media construct reality through interpretative frameworks. These frameworks highlight certain aspects of identity and behaviour while downplaying others, thereby influencing how gender is perceived in digital spaces (pp. 21-23).

To operationalize the construction of gendered narratives in Instagram captions, this study drew on Social Role Theory and Framing Theory to guide the development of a structured coding scheme. Following previous studies (Connell, 2005, pp. 77–78; Gill, 2007, pp. 149–155; Marshall et al., 2018, p. 97), the analysis focused on identifying gendered narratives and thematic markers. Firstly, communal traits – traditionally associated with traditional femininity – encompasses emotional expression, community engagement, social support and relation language. These features manifest through public displays of vulnerability, gratitude (e.g. "a heart full of gratitude" (Post 322)) or encouragement. Community engagement is evident in group runs, collective motivation and training alongside others.

Secondly, agentic traits – commonly linked to traditional masculinity – include competition, individual achievement, resilience, and independence. Performance-oriented language often references race times, personal bests, and training objectives, while expressions of independence emphasize self-driven perseverance and goal setting (e.g. "need to work on getting stronger up the hills" (Post 10)).

Captions have been analysed to determine whether the influencers reinforce traditional gender norms or deviate from them. For example, when male influencers highlight community and emotional well-being, they may challenge hegemonic masculinity; conversely, female influencers who foreground competition and performance may disrupt conventional femininity. The presence of both communal and agentic traits in a caption are also considered, providing insight into whether influencers adopt hybrid gender performances that challenge strict binary norms. Additionally, the study assessed the frequency and co-occurrence of these themes within male and female influencer captions, identifying patterns in how gender roles are articulated and whether deviations from traditional norms are context-dependent (e.g., during race day vs. everyday training updates).

Framing Theory have been operationalized by examining how influencers construct meaning through dominant frames, modifications of frames (keying), and instances of contrastive framing. Frames selectively highlight certain aspects of an event or identity while omitting others, thereby shaping public perception (West & Zimmerman, 1987, pp. 129-130). Goffman (1974, pp. 21-23) distinguishes between natural and social frames. Natural frames refer to biological and

psychological realities (e.g., muscle recovery, endurance capacity), while social frames involve cultural narratives that assign meaning to those realities (e.g., men as natural competitors and women as social motivators). This study analysed how influencers employ these frames to construct gendered identities. The framing of running performances have been assessed based on three aspects. First, dominant frames identified whether captions reinforce competitive, communal or hybrid gendered narratives. Second, keying (Goffman, 2974, p. 45) determined how influencers modify frames to introduce alternative meanings. For example, male influencers discussing emotional highs and lows of running rather than just race performance. Third, contrastive framing identified instances where influencers frame their self-presentation in opposition to dominant narratives. For instance, a male runner expressing vulnerability by discussing race-day anxiety or setbacks in training modifies the performance frame by incorporating emotional openness, traditionally seen as a feminine trait. Similarly, a female runner emphasizing strength and discipline over appearance and self-care shifts the wellness frame toward a performance-oriented perspective.

3.2.1 The Codebook

To facilitate a systematic and theory-driven analysis of Instagram captions, a structured codebook was developed as part of the operationalization process. This codebook served as an essential tool to translate theoretical concepts into concrete analytical categories, ensuring a consistent and transparent coding process across the dataset. It was designed to reflect the dual theoretical frameworks guiding the study: Social Role Theory (Eagly, 1987) and Framing Theory (Goffman, 1974). All codes were developed deductively based on these frameworks prior to the analysis and were formulated to capture recurring discursive elements related to gender identity, narrative construction and self-representation. While the codebook was rooted in theory, care was taken to construct the codes with enough interpretive flexibility to reflect the diverse ways in which themes appeared linguistically and contextually in the captions.

The resulting codes were grouped conceptually according to the type of discursive work they performed within the captioned. A number of codes addressed how influencers narrated their personal experiences or articulated their identities through storytelling and self-categorization. For instance, the code *Storytelling & Narrative* captured moments where influencers recounted personal journeys, reflective turning points or shared memories, as seen in phrases like "little memory lane trip" (Post 7). Similarly, *Personal Challenge* highlighted expressions of effort, struggle, or accomplishment, including statements such as "I finally did it" (Post 291) and "THE FURTHEST I'VE EVER RAN" (Post 62). The code Identity Labelling was used when captions featured self-ascribed roles or titles, such as "runner," "mother," or "athlete", to signify group belonging,

legitimacy, or aspirational identity (e.g., Post 197).

Other codes focused more explicitly on emotional tone and motivational framing. *Emotional Disclosure* encompassed captions that included personal reflections on fear, joy, vulnerability, or pride. While *Gratitude & Connection* captured thankfulness and acknowledgements of social bond, such as "forever grateful" (Post 2) or "thank you to everyone out there" (Post 31). *Empowerment Messaging* included affirming or motivational language promoting strength, confidence, or self-worth. This type of content was particularly significant because, depending on the framing, it could either reinforce or subvert traditional gender norms.

A further group of codes concentrated on performance and the athletic identity of the influencers. *Mental Toughness* referred to captions expressing resilience, endurance, or mental effort involved in pushing physical limits, such as "pushing through!" (Post 330) or "toughest race I have ever done" (Post 176). In parallel, *Goal Orientation* coded posts that emphasized achievement and progress, often in relation to future objectives or completed milestones. These included phrases like "this comeback is 📈" (Post 34) or "squeezing a 5k PB on a Saturday" (Post 114).

Several codes also addressed how gendered expectations and bodily experiences were embedded in caption content. Gender Role Reinforcement captured expressions or hashtags that invoked conventional gender norms, such as "#runnergirl" (Post 61) or "being a bigger boy" (Post 292). While gender was not explicitly coded, the use of culturally recognizable language often signalled alignment with or resistance to normative gendered identities. Bodily Changes was used to mark references to bodily transitions—such as postpartum recovery, injury, or chronic conditions—that shaped the influencer's experience of running. Examples include "postpartum" (Post 165), "post injury" (Post 116), or "#type1diabetes" (Post 113). These references, though less frequent, provided valuable insight into how physical embodiment is framed within fitness discourse.

Lastly, attention was given to how influencers positioned the body and the environment in their self-representations. Body-Centric Framing referred to captions where the physical body was the focal point, either in terms of sensation, appearance, or bodily feedback. Meanwhile, Scenic/Aesthetic Environment highlighted descriptions of the running context—such as terrain, weather, or landscape—as a key part of the narrative, framing running as both a physical and aesthetic experience.

The final codebook thus allowed for a structured yet flexible analysis of the dataset, enabling attention to linguistic detail, emotional tone, and discursive framing. It also laid the groundwork for the thematic analysis by clarifying which narrative, emotional, and gender-related patterns were systematically present in the caption texts. A full overview of the codebook, including all code names, definitions, and representative examples, is provided in Appendix C.

3.3 Data collection

This study employed a combination of homogeneous sampling and snowball sampling (Suri, 2011, p. 68) to ensure both depth and relevance in the selection of British amateur running influencers on Instagram. The implementation of homogeneous sampling allowed for a fixed examination of a specific subgroup and ensured that all selected influencers share key characteristics: British background, runner, and active on Instagram as micro-influencer. This approach will facilitate meaningful comparisons within the data set and ensures that findings remain contextually relevant (Suri, 2011, p. 68). Simultaneously, exponential discriminative snowball sampling has been used during the selection procedure of the qualified Instagram accounts with the criterium stated above. Characteristic of this type of snowball sampling is that not every referral is included in the sample, only when specific criteria are being met (Nikolopoulou, 2023, para. 23-24). For this research, snowball sampling has been conducted through the accounts of qualified influencers and its Instagram recommendations of other profiles, as well as the influencers engagement with other influencers, either by a like, reply, shared post or follow. By selecting cases that best highlight patterns of gender performance, this method allows for logical generalizations regarding how masculinity and femininity are constructed and reproduced in the online running community (Suri, 2011, pp. 68-69).

To build the dataset, a minimum of 500 Instagram posts was analysed until saturation was reached (Guest et al., 2005, p. 65). Posts have been selected from 2022 onwards, as running saw a surge in popularity following the COVID-19 pandemic, which reshaped participation trends in recreational sports (Rizzo, 2022, para. 2; Scheer et al., 2021, pp. 3-5). This ensures that the data reflects current social and digital practices. Posts must explicitly reference running—whether through captions, hashtags, or imagery—to be included in the analysis. By setting this criterion, the study isolates gendered self-presentation within the running niche, avoiding irrelevant content that could have diminished the findings. Additionally, only content posted by the influencer themselves have been analysed, as Instagram now allows joint posts with other users, which could have complicated authorship and intent. Private accounts have been excluded to maintain ethical research standards and to ensure that only publicly available content has been analysed.

Influencers were selected through assembled lists such as Feedspot's UK Running Instagram Influencers directory (Feedspot, 2025), through manual searches using relevant hashtags and engagement metrics, and through snowball sampling. The sample consisted of 50 micro-influencers (10,000–100,000 followers), with an appropriate balance between male (n = 26) and female (n = 24) runners. To maintain this balance, a limited number of male triathlete influencers were included, as British female running representations on Instagram are more prevalent. However, only those posts by triathletes that specifically focused on running were considered for this analysis. Micro-

influencers were chosen because of their perceived authenticity and close follower relationships, which often result in more genuine self-presentation compared to macro- or mega-influencers (Abidin, 2015, p. 87). By focusing on this group, this study aimed to capture nuanced gender narratives that may be less visible in highly commercialized influencer spaces. Appendix A provides a full list of all influencers used to establish the sample list, including the number of followers on the day of gathering and analysing the data.

3.4 Data analysis

Because captions serve as an important space for self-presentation, they provide valuable insights into how influencers construct gendered identities and negotiate broader cultural norms related to running. To systematically examine these representations, thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006, pp. 87-88), has been employed to identify, analyse, and report patterns in the data. A selection of the data used for this study can be found in Appendix B.

Thematic analysis is widely used in qualitative research due to its flexibility and its ability to capture both explicit and implicit meanings in text. The analysis in this study followed Braun and Clarke's (2006, p. 87) six-phase approach. In the first phase, familiarization, all 500 captions were read carefully to gain immersion in the dataset. During this stage, initial observation and analytical memos were written down to capture early patterns and noteworthy elements, such as repeated references to goal setting, emotional language or particular hashtags.

The second phase involved systematic coding of the entire dataset, using Atlas.ti. A predefined codebook, developed from Social Role Theory and Framing Theory, was implemented into the program before coding began. As mentioned before, each caption was coded in full and double coding was applied where content reflected multiple codes. Then, during the third phase, codes were grouped within Atlas.ti into broader thematic categories. This grouping was informed by the relationship between codes, patterns in the data, and their conceptual alignment with the theoretical frameworks. While the initial codes were theory-driven, the themes developed through iterative engagement with the content, making space for nuance and overlap.

In the fourth and fifth phases, the themes were refined and clearly named to ensure coherence and analytical clarity. Some codes were reclassified under different themes or split into sub-themes where necessary, especially when a single concept operated differently across gendered narratives. For example, Goal Orientation appearing in both traditional and hybrid forms. The thematic structure was refined to balance consistency with interpretive richness.

Finally, in the sixth phase, the themes were integrated into the final report, forming the basis of the results chapter. Each theme was illustrated with representative quotes from the captions to substantiate the analysis and offer insight into how gender identities are articulated

through language. An overview of the final thematic map, including themes, sub-themes and corresponding codes, is provided in Appendix D.

As mentioned, the analysis has been conducted using ATLAS.ti, a qualitative data analysis software that supports systematic coding, memo-writing, and theme development (Friese, 2014, p. 12). This software facilitates an organized and transparent analytical process, allowing for efficient retrieval and refinement of emerging themes. The coding process followed a deductive approach, meaning that the codes emerged from existing data and earlier work, such as literature reviews, models, mind maps and theories (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008, p. 111). By applying predetermined codes to the data, the analysis remains systematic and transparent, enhancing both the coherence and credibility of the findings. Additionally, using a deductive approach facilitates comparability with existing research and increases the efficiency of handling a large dataset, while still allowing room to critically engage with and refine theoretical assumptions based on the empirical material (Hecker & Kalpokas, n.d., para 8-14).

To deepen the analysis, coding focused on the relationship between identified codes and the theoretical framework. Drawing from pre-existing concepts rooted in Social Role Theory and Framing Theory, the coding process emphasized gendered contrasts in language use and thematic emphasis. For example, attention was paid to whether female influencers more frequently expressed community-oriented values, or whether male influencers emphasized performance and self-discipline. Rather than generating codes from scratch, the analysis applied a theory-informed codebook to systematically identify and group data into pre-defined codes. Throughout the process, particular attention was given to discursive strategies and the ways linguistic choices reinforce or challenge traditional gender expectations. This approach aligns with the principles of theory-driven thematic analysis, which allows researchers to explore specific concepts in empirical data while maintaining flexibility for emergent nuance (Boyatzis, 1998, pp. 4-6). Recognizing that gender is discursively constructed, the study analysed how captions reflect broader social norms through both overt messaging and implicit cues (Fairclough, 2008, p. 8).

3.5 Author reflexivity

As a researcher, I acknowledge that qualitative research is inherently interpretative and shaped by subjective experiences, perspectives, and social positions. My own positionality—as a white, middle-class woman with personal familiarity with both social media and recreational running— inevitably informs my approach to the research process. Following Berger's (2015, p. 221) argument that reflexivity must be maintained throughout all phases of the research process, from formulating the research question to the conclusion, I have remained conscious of how my own positionality has shaped the design and direction of this study. For instance, I brought what Berger (2015, p. 223)

describes as 'cultural intuition' to the research. Enabling me to recognize and engage with certain gendered narratives that may not have been visible to a researcher with a more distance relationship to the topic. This made me, for example, aware of how certain caption themes, such as emotional openness, body positivity, or performance pressure, resonate differently between male and female influencers. My insider status, that stems from shared gender identity and active engagement with the social media fitness culture being studied, allowed me to approach these themes (such as community framing, authenticity and embodiment, and narrative framing) more easily, but it also required me to actively reflect on how my assumptions could bias interpretation.

To address this, I engaged in continuous reflexive practices, including memo-writing and documenting analytical decisions in detail. As Berger (2015) notes, reflexivity can be demonstrated through first-person narration and a transparent account of methodological choices (p. 222). I have therefore sought to explicitly state my role in shaping the research, rather than presenting findings as entirely objective or detached.

This reflexive stance also contributes to the validity and transparency of the study. Influencer selection criteria were clearly defined, and a consistent coding framework was applied across the dataset to enhance analytical accuracy. Additionally, the research process was thoroughly documented to ensure transparency and reproducibility, allowing future studies to verify and build upon the findings.

4. Results

This chapter present the thematic findings of the thematic analysis, conducted on 500 Instagram captions posted by 50 UK-based running influencers, from which 48% is female (*n* = 24) and 52% is male (*n* = 26). Drawing on the final coding framework (Appendix C), the analysis explored how influencers frame their running content in relation to gender roles, personal narratives and community. The results are structured around the four overarching themes: Traditional Masculinity, Traditional Femininity, Identity Framing and Narrative Framing. These themes emerged inductively through a rigorous coding process and reflect patterns in Influencer's language usage to express and frame gendered identities on Instagram. Each theme is illustrated with representative quotes and interpreted through the lens of Social Role Theory (Eagly, 1987) and Framing Theory (Goffman, 1974). Table 1 below presents an overview of the theme distribution by gender, based on the number of captions in which each theme appeared. The full thematic map is displayed in Appendix D, providing the themes, subthemes and codes in a neat overview.

Table 1

Theme Gender division

Theme	Female captions	Male captions	Total
Traditional masculinity	315	297	612
Traditional femininity	286	147	433
Identity framing	325	236	561
Narrative framing	614	601	1,215
Total	**1,540**	**1,281**	**2,821**

4.1 Traditional Masculinity

The theme of Traditional Masculinity was primarily characterized by the presence of agentic traits such as mental toughness, competitive drive, and goal-orientation, along with captions that reinforces stereotypical gender roles through socially constructed narratives. Of the 612 total captions coded under this theme, 297 were authored by male influencers and 315 by female influencers. Although slightly more common among women in absolute terms, these traits were more dominantly framed within male-authored captions, often aligning with hegemonic ideals of resilience, control and ambition (Connel, 2005, p. 77). These patterns reflect Social Role Theory's view of masculinity as performance- and status oriented (Eagly & Wood, 2012, p. 16).

4.1.1 Agentic Traits

Agentic framing was especially dominant among male influencers. Across the dataset,

agentic traits were coded 473 times in total, with 286 of those instances found in captions authored by male influencers. Many captions reflected mental resilience, emphasizing performance, discipline and psychological endurance, as grouped under *Mental Toughness*. This was apparent in the repeated use of phrases that glorified mental suffering, such as "held it together and survived the week" (Post 59), or "the toughest race I've ever done" (Post 176), highlighting a mindset oriented towards overcoming limits, discipline, having a no-excuses mentality and rejecting weakness. Such language aligns with the dominant masculine ideal of physical and emotional fortitude, the disciplined, enduring body that resists failure or vulnerability (Connel, 2005, pp. 77-78; Anderson, 2009, p. 17).

The theme of *Goal-Orientation* was equally prominent and primarily expressed in male-authored captions (60%). Captions often served as motivational monologues, wherein influencers laid out structured plans, target times, and training milestones. One caption read: "So on Monday I'm starting a 5k training block, I am going to stop missing sessions and I'm going to find that speed again and see how close to that 20 minute mark I can get" (Post 136). Here, performance is not just an act but a disciplined journey of self-improvement, aligning with narratives of the idealized, stoic male athlete. Framing Theory (Goffman, 1974, pp. 21-23) helps unpack how these captions do not simply describe training routines but instead present broader cultural scripts: the runner as goal-setter, achiever, and tactical planner.

Among *Competitive Drive*, competition emerged as a key narrative, particularly among male influencers. Of the 64 total captions in this category, 44 were authorized by men and 20 by women. Competitive discourse was often used by male influencers to reinforce a worldview where self-worth is tied to measurable superiority. For instance, one male influencer wrote: "2:08:07, Olympic qualifying time, 6th in the race and 1st British athlete" (Post 232). This kind of language reflects the zero-sum logic of winning, not only against others but also in personal progression, reinforcing competitiveness as a core masculine value. While less common, female influencers who engaged with this frame also used competitive metaphors, but often with a slightly more relational undertone, indicating a more hybrid expression of ambition. For example: "This was 1 second off my PB half marathon time and if I'd known that while running I know I could have saved another 30 secs if needed" (Post 379).

Furthermore, women also engaged in the other traits of Agentic Framing, with 43% of the *Mental Toughness* and 40% of the *Goal Orientation* posts attributed to them. Although less frequent than in male-authored content, these instances remain significant and reflect a strategic adoption of masculine-coded traits. For example, one female influencer wrote: "3rd fastest 30km, this morning I went out to try run 30km at my PB marathon pace of 7.12 per km instead I ran it at 6.53 per km - which means one thing project PB the fook out" (Post 101). While this post reinforces

goal-orientation and mental discipline, it simultaneously demonstrates that qualities like mental discipline, competitiveness, and tactical focus are not confined to traditional male roles but can also be embraced across females, as expressed through Halberstam's (1998, p.9) notion of 'female masculinity'.

4.1.2 Social Frames

In addition to traits like discipline and competitiveness, many captions also reinforced traditional masculine norms through broader cultural narratives, what Framing Theory conceptualizes as social frames (Goffman, 1974, pp. 21-23). These frames refer to the cultural scripts that shape how behaviours and traits are interpreted, often assigning gendered meaning to otherwise neutral experiences. In the context of male influencers, these frames often emphasized toughness, emotional restraint, and bonding through banter or competition. For example, referring to training partners as "the lads" or joking about pushing limits after a session (e.g., Post 342 and Post 395) helped construct masculinity not only through effort but through socially coded group dynamics. While Social Frames appeared in both male and female captions, they captured different gendered meanings.

Gender Role Reinforcement was grouped under this theme as it reflects precisely these kinds of cultural scripts; captions where influencers use explicitly gendered language, references, or hashtags that align with traditional norms. In these instances, gender is not expressed neutrally but filtered through social meanings tied to that is considered masculine or feminine. In total, Gender Role Reinforcement was applied 139 times, of which 8% occurred in male-authored captions and 92% in female-authored ones (see chapter 4.2.2). This asymmetry suggests that female influencers were more likely to explicitly frame their achievements in gendered terms, either affirming or subtly challenging dominant femininity.

Examples of masculine gender role reinforcement include terms like "being a bigger boy" (post 292) or references to "aggression" (Post 396) and "war" (Post 333), as well as phrases that evoke dominance, toughness and aggressive energy. These word choices align with hegemonic masculine ideals that connect strength with aggression and physical superiority (Connel, 2005, pp. 77-78). Although such expressions were not abundant, they reinforced cultural scripts that frame masculinity through conquest and power. Park et al.'s (2016, p. 2) concept of 'gender-linked language' support this, as men tend to use more spatial, directive, and judgmental language, particularly in competitive contexts. The acknowledgement of battle metaphors and emotionally neutral phrasing echoes these linguistic norms and helps position the male runner as assertive, strategic, and emotionally restrained, qualities long associated with masculine-coded sports discourse (Thorpe, 2017, p. 563; Eagly & Wood, 2012, p. 16). Even in limited instances, these

linguistic choices contribute to a performance of masculinity that privileges power, control, and physical force.

4.2 Traditional Femininity

In contrast to the performance-focused and competitive discourse more frequently found in male-authored captions, many running influencers, particularly women, articulated their running experiences through emotionally expressive and relational frames. Of the 433 captions coded under this theme, 286 were authored by women and the other 147 by men. This gendered distribution aligns with Social Role Theory's conceptualization of communal traits, such as nurturance, emotional openness, and relational connections, which have historically been coded as feminine (Eagly and Wood, 2012, p. 16). While goal setting and discipline were not entirely absent, the narrative emphasis in many captions in this theme shifted towards holistic well-being, empathy and gratitude, reinforcing traditional femininity through digital storytelling and social bonding.

4.2.1 Communal traits

This sub-theme was primarily expressed through captions that emphasized *Support for Others*, capturing moments where influencers encouraged or uplifted their audience, friends or family. Of the total 161 citations across the dataset, 100 were authored by women and 61 by men, indicating a gendered pattern in how support and empathy are foregrounded. Influencers often spoke directly to their followers using affirmational and inclusive language. Rather than positioning themselves as solitary achievers, they frequently contextualized their own experiences within a larger web of mutual understanding and emotional accountability.

For example, one caption read "Whether it's running or life, the breakthrough is just past the struggle. Keep going, you're stronger than you think!" (Post 405), while another read "lizzy finished in a mega 1.34 & Sofia in 1.33 💁 💁 Huge huge well done both of you, I couldn't have been prouder running side by side 🤗" (Post 272). These captions exemplify the nurturing disposition predicted by Social Role Theory, in which femininity is performed through sympathy, solidarity, and emotional accessibility (Eagly & Wood, 2012, p. 16).

In many cases, captions framed difficult training moments not as personal triumphs but as opportunities to relate to others. One influencer wrote: "Racing can often have such a great training effect. But it can also cause burnout. So, the number 1 rule is to always listen to the body, regardless of what the schedule is" (Post 294). The use of the second person here functions not just as practical advice but as an inclusive gesture, drawing the audience into a collective emotional understanding. This kind of empathetic outreach reflects the communal dimension of traditional femininity as described in Social Role Theory (Eagly & Wood, 2012, p. 16), where caregiving and

emotional attentiveness are culturally coded as feminine traits.

Interestingly, while communal traits were most prominent among women, a substantial number of male influencers also engaged in communal framing. These captions typically took a slightly different tone, often less emotionally elaborate, but still supportive in nature, such as "Good luck to everyone in London." (Post 212). This reflects a broader shift in gender discourse within online running cultures, where male influencers are increasingly disrupting traditional masculinity by engaging in content emphasizing vulnerability and encouragement alongside traditional strength narratives (Anderson, 2009, p. 17).

4.2.2 Social Frames

The second subtheme focuses *Gender Role Reinforcement* through language, which was applied 139 times across the dataset, of which 92% appeared in female-authored captions. These posts invoked or subtly affirmed traditional gender norms and often the form of hashtags (e.g., #runnergirl), emotive aesthetic commentary, or casual references to femininity as a socially distinct and branded category. For instance, a female influencer captioned a training post with: "This barbie is getting fast" (Post 493). While the message emphasizes strength, it simultaneously reinscribes femininity through visual mental imagery (e.g., barbie) and textual cues, a dynamic that reflects what Banet-Weiser (2018, p. 112) calls 'marketable empowerment', the framing of strength and confidence in ways that remain culturally palatable and commercially viable.

Other examples involved playful or ironic references to traditional femininity yet still functioned to stabilize the gender binary. For example, one caption read: "Yes, Barbie outfit is a necessity" (Post 499). While humorous, such captions subtly reinforce the cultural conflation of femininity with appearance, even within athletic spaces. Goffman's (1974) Framing Theory is particularly useful here as these captions shift interpretive focus from physical capability to visual or emotional legibility, aligning with traditional narratives that prioritize beauty and charm within representations of femininity (Juliet, 2024, pp. 47–48).

Notably, although the *Gender Role Reinforcement* code was used predominantly in female-authored captions, male influencers occasionally referenced masculinity directly, as mentioned in chapter 4.1.2. However, these instances were far fewer and generally framed through banter or performance. In contrast, female influencers frequently drew on gendered references as both identity affirmations and aesthetic strategies, such as "#runnergirl", "#girlpower" and "#runningmom", to simultaneously engage with and subtly complicating expectations around what it means to be a feminine athlete in the digital space. Additionally, even though the female-authored captions highlight strength or ambition, femininity is often filtered through gestures of care, emotional attentiveness, or aesthetic emphasis.

4.2.3. Relational and Community Framing

This subtheme explores how influencers, particularly women, frame running not just as an individual activity but as an emotionally and socially connected experience. Of the total of 133 captioned classified in this theme, 58 were authored by women and 75 by men. Although this framing often overlapped with other codes, such as *Support for Others* (4.2.1) and *Gratitude & Connection* (4.4.2), its emphasis on co-presence and collaboration offered a distinct view on how running is made meaningful through others.

One influencer wrote: "Thanks to @emmaharris356 & @nataliebury3 for the route and company. Runs like these definitely are better with company" (Post 10). These mentions do not merely credit others but integrate them into the running narrative, positioning personal achievement within a wider social web. Female influencers frequently described running with others as an emotionally grounding experience. For example, "Sometimes all you need is a run with a friend and some banana bread & all is right in the world again." (Post 29). This reflects Social Role Theory's emphasis on relational traits as culturally feminine (Eagly & Wood, 2012, p. 16).

Male influencers also made frequent use of community framing, though their tone often leaned more playful or performance adjacent. "A spicy session with the lads. 🥊💧🏃‍♂️ ♂️" (Post 342) or "Been chewed up & spat out by the lads on a regular basis, but couldn't ask for a better set of blokes to make the miles tick by and look after me in the sessions. Cheers chaps 👳" (Post 395). These examples still foreground community but shift the emotional tone toward banter or performance rather than intimacy. Whether through gratitude, team identity or shared milestones, relational framing illustrates how running is positioned as a socially embedded experience, one often more emotionally layered in female-authored captions.

4.3 Identity Framing

The Identity Framing theme examines how running influencers on Instagram construct and claim identities through strategic language choices and value-driven messaging. Of the 561 captioned coded under this theme, 325 were authored by women and 236 by men. This framing occurs through both explicit self-labelling and implicit motivational discourse, where the influencers position themselves in relation to broader social roles and narratives of empowerment. Rather than merely describing what they do, influencers under this theme reveal who they are, not just as athletes, but as individuals navigating social meaning, belonging, and legitimacy within a digital fitness culture. This theme aligns with Framing Theory's view that meaning is shaped not only by what is shown, but how it is emphasized or downplayed (Goffman, 1974, p. 21).

The code *Identity Labelling* captured captions in which users named themselves using social, professional, or personal descriptors. These include terms such as runner, marathoner, athlete, pacer, mum or coach and were found 292 times across the dataset (192 female; 100 male). These labels serve to establish credibility, to align with specific value systems, and to situate the influencer within a community.

The practice of identity labelling was especially common among female influencers, who often used hashtags like #runninggirl, #runnergirl, or #runningmom. This echoes Pullen et al.'s (2023, pp. 272–274) findings on female Paralympic athletes, who framed their digital identities through feminized and aesthetically curated language (e.g., #womenempowerment, #selflove) to align with gendered expectations and social media visibility norms. Similarly, in this current dataset, the absence of male equivalents such as #malerunner or #runningdad suggests that women may be more inclined to situate their athletic identity within broader social roles, particularly caregiving (e.g., #runningmom). Such patterns align with Social Role Theory's assertion that women are culturally positioned to define themselves in relational terms (Eagly & Wood, 2012, p. 16). For instance, women often blended athletic identity with maternal or emotional roles, highlighting the dual labour of performance and caregiving: "Buggy run in the sun with my little man" (Post 442).

By contrast, male influencers more commonly used broader, less relational terms such as runner, athlete or marathoner. These terms signal seriousness and discipline without anchoring identity in caregiving or community roles. That said, male influencers also engaged in more assertive, personal declarations, one example being: "My name is Hercules Nicolaou and I'm just getting started." (Post 281). These types of confident, autonomous statements mirror traditional masculine values of self-reliance and achievement (Connel, 2005, p. 77).

The code *Empowerment Messaging* (*n* = 198; 100 female-authored, 98 male-authored) captured captions that promoted confidence, resilience and self-belief, often through affirmations or motivational tone. Notably, female influencers were more likely to merge empowerment with emotional nuance or societal critique. One caption read: "I love these comments because I'm getting faster and I'm still the same weight lol" (Post 110). This rhetorical structure exemplifies what Banet-Weiser (2018, p. 38) describe as 'self-branded empowerment', which frames personal strength both as story and strategy, where emotional vulnerability becomes a form of influence.

Male influencers also used empowerment language, though often framed within performance logic. Phrases such as "Big big confidence booster for Berlin, 3 weeks today" (Post 320) or "I've been training hard for 6 weeks now and my body has started to adapt and get back to some good form" (Post 374) positioned strength as the outcome of effort, consistency, and discipline. These captions reflect the ideal of the stoic, resilient male athlete, which is in line with

the gendered expectations of emotional control, and achievement (Torpe, 2017, p. 563). However, there were also moments were men disrupted these norms. For example, one caption stated, "I'm finally seeing a light at the end of the tunnel where I can achieves performances I'm proud of again." (Post 408), illustrating what Anderson (2009, p. 17) identifies as the emergence of alternative masculinities, one that permit emotional openness without undermining athletic identity.

4.3.2 Frame Downplaying

In contrast to *Frame Highlighting*, the code called *Frame Downplaying* captured instances where influencers minimized performance narratives, decentred competition, or expressed ambivalence toward discipline. In total, this code appeared 71 times across the dataset (33 female; 38 male), often functioning as a rhetorical softening of athletic identity. These captions offered a counter-discourse to the dominant narratives of control, improvement and success.

Examples include statement such as "Since then I wasn't really focusing on speed, just enjoying the races." (Post 493), or "By taking some walk breaks, chilling out and generally not caring what it said on my watch." (Post 476). These expressions reflect a shift from instrumental to experiential framing, moving away from performance and toward presence, enjoyment, or rest. For female influencers, this was often tied to emotional wellbeing, self-comparison or lifestyle balance: "Back in my running for fun era xx" (Post 456). Such captions support Duffy and Hund's (2015, p. 8) observation that women are expected to maintain both emotional authenticity and aesthetic relatability in influencer contest.

Male influencers also downplayed performance, though frequently using humour or casual irreverence to maintain distance from emotional vulnerability. One caption read "You can't kill a man who's already dead." (Post 398). Others referenced "the 12 pints of Guinness after the run" (Post 352) or admitted being "SLOW AF" (Post 377). While appearing light-hearted, such posts subtly disrupt the rigidity of hegemonic masculinity, making space for imperfection, detachment or leisure, without necessarily naming it as emotional strategic.

Importantly, Frame Downplaying should not be mistaken for a lack of identity performance. Rather, it reflects a deliberate reorientation, where failing, not caring, or opting out becomes part of the identity narrative. In this sense, downplaying serves as its own form of framing: a strategy to maintain authenticity, reject pressure, or realign values. Goffman's (1974, pp. 21-23) Framing Theory helps illuminate this as a shift in interpretive lens, from athlete as achiever to athlete as person.

4.4 Narrative Framing

The Narrative Framing theme captured how Influencers construct personal meaning through storytelling, emotional reflection, and expressions of gratitude. This was the most frequently coded theme with 1,215 total instances: 614 in female-authored captions and 601 in male-authored ones. Rather than framing running solely as an act of performance or fitness, many captions used narrative structures to portray running as an emotional symbolic, or transformative journey. These patterns reflect how social media encourages not just documentation of events, but their interpretation, turning training and racing into opportunities for narrative self-presentation.

The seven codes in this theme – *Storytelling & Narrative* (*n* = 452), *Personal Challenge* (*n* = 74), *Emotional Disclosure* (*n* = 334), *Gratitude & Connection* (*n* = 72), *Bodily changes* (*n* = 86), *Body-Centric Framing* (*n* = 27) and *Aesthetic Framing* (*n* = 170) – were grouped into three overarching subthemes and often interrelated. Many captions combined elements of personal struggle with reflective storytelling or layered emotion with gratitude. These intersections suggests that influencers do not just share running updates; they use narrative as a flexible mode to convey values, process emotions, and establish relational authenticity.

4.4.1 Storytelling

The *Storytelling & Narrative* code identified captions that unfolded as micro-narratives, typically initiating with a reference to prior experience, progressing through a moment of challenge or transformation, and concluding with a reflective insight. Rather than presenting mere factual accounts, these captions positioned personal experiences within a broader, evolving context. Take, for example: "With all my injuries over the last few years, I thought it would be best to just get back on the start line. Even though I knew there was a high chance it wouldn't go well, I still felt that it was a race I had to do." (Post 153). Such posts exemplify what Riessman (2008, p. 8) describes as the 'performative function of narrative,' in which individuals do not simply recount experiences but actively shape them to articulate identity and convey social meaning.

4.4.2 Narrative Intimacy Framing

Similarly, many captions also focused on specific *Personal Challenges*, using language like "I had to battle through a lot during this race" (Post 76), or "12 years ago I set myself the goal of making an Olympic team." (Post 128). These narratives of persistence, pain, or mental endurance framed running as a space for overcoming doubt or adversity. While both male and female influencers engaged with this code (40 female; 34 male), gender differences emerged in narrative tone. Women more frequently contextualized challenges through emotion or identity, linking setbacks to self-worth, recovery, or personal growth. One female influencer described: "This week

is already my highest mileage week since having Arthur with one run left to go and my legs actually feel gooooood." (Post 169). Such posts reinforce Social Role Theory's claim that women are more likely to communicate through relational and introspective language (Eagly & Wood, 2012, p. 16).

Male influencers, by contrast, often framed a challenge as a problem to be solved or endured, using performance-oriented language: "The toughest race I've ever done" (Post 176) or "got out harder, more aggressive throughout the race, fastest I've run since 2019(lol)" (Post 54). These stories affirmed athletic resilience, sometimes omitting the emotional labour involved. Yet moments of introspection also appeared, particularly when reflecting on long-term struggles, injury, or recovery, suggesting that men are increasingly adopting hybrid forms of narrative expression, particularly in fitness spaces that reward authenticity. As an example, one male influencer posted: "I could have never anticipated quite how long it would take to regain confidence after a major injury but it feels so liberating to be out the other side and to begin realising some potential" (Post 52).

The *Emotional Disclosure* code was applied 334 times across the dataset, capturing moments where influencers revealed emotional states such as joy, pride, anxiety, sadness or mental exhaustion. Posts ranged from light-hearted such as: "SO GASSED" (Post 301) to deeply personal: "I cried twice during this run, it was emotional AF." (Post 375). Some captions used running as a coping tool, such as "I woke up feeling off, heavy, anxious, disconnected. (…) I laced up, jumped on the @nordictrack_uk , and ran a half marathon" (Post 321). These texts transformed the Instagram caption into a space of release, not just communication.

Again, female influencers were more likely to engage in overt emotional expression, frequently using language that connected emotion to identity or social struggle. This aligns with prior research showing that women are more socially permitted and expected to perform emotional openness online (Duffy & Hund, 2015, p. 8; Reade, 2020, p. 223). Captions like "I cried 5 times today" (Post 497), or "Today was one of those days when Mother Nature decided to make her appearance, and I felt absolutely rotten last night and this morning. 🧖‍♀️ 😔" (Post 148) reflected digital femininity grounded in resilience-through-vulnerability.

Male influencers also disclosed emotional states, though their framing often relied on situational justification. Posts about loss, mental health, or burnout stood out precisely because they challenged hegemonic masculine norms. For example: "I am struggling in Uganda with food. Am extremely light and DIDN'T have enough power or strength to finish a training camp. I also wasn't happy with anything! Every time I raced I got injured or sick" (Post 38). These captions represent moments of what Goffman (1974, p. 45) calls 'keying', where emotional framing temporarily disrupts more dominant modes of identity presentation. Such disclosures also mirror Anderson's (2009, p. 17) recognition of alternative masculinities, where men can express

vulnerability without forfeiting strength or legitimacy.

The final code, *Gratitude & Connection* emphasized appreciation for people, opportunities, or community, appearing 72 times across the dataset, from which 40 are male-authored and 32 are female-authored. Examples of gratitude are "Grateful for mornings like this" (Post 403) and "Thank you to everyone who paced me round Battersea" (Post 101). Influencers often acknowledged supporters, training partners, coaches or family, positioning their accomplishments within collective frameworks of encouragement and belonging.

These captions reinforced the social dimension of running, not merely as an individual pursuit, but as an experience shaped by others. For women, gratitude was frequently extended to followers, family members, or online communities, highlighting the importance of relational support: "thank you to everyone who's been part of this wild ride so far - my coaches Nic & Collis, sponsors, therapists, family, friends and training partners as well as everyone cheering from the sidelines" (Post 128). For male influencers, gratitude was also present, though often accompanied by references to team, performance, or mentorship: "with my coach Renato Canova's marathon team, who welcomed me from the beginning!" (Post 231).

These expressions of gratitude not only humanized the influencer but also contributed to follower engagement and emotional relatability. From a Framing Theory perspective, gratitude shifts the interpretive focus from the self to the social, inviting followers to see success as a shared narrative. Besides, these posts echo Social Role Theory's division of gendered communication: while women tend to emphasize emotional ties, men often frame connection through collective action or shared goals (Eagly & Wood, 2012, p. 18).

4.4.3 Embodiment and Aesthetic Framing

This final subtheme examined the influence of bodily experience and environmental aesthetics on the emotional tone and narrative construction of Instagram captions. Although these expressions appeared less frequently than other themes (*n* = 283), they provide a notable perspective on the integration of physical sensation, appearance and sensory environment in the self-presentation of amateur runners. Among these instances, 173 were authored by female influencers, while 110 originated from male influencers.

Bodily changes (55 female, 31 male) often reflected physical transitions or disruptions, particularly those tied to gendered physiology, Female influencers references menstruation, postpartum, recovery, menopause or hormonal shifts with a transparency that disrupted idealized portrayals of athleticism. One influencer described: "my first race back after giving birth 6 months ago... a lovely way to get back to it" (Post 172), while another wrote: "on period day 1 and I woke up very angeryyy grr!" (Post 108). These moments linked bodily experience to broader narratives of

identity and resilience, aligning with Social Role Theory's view of women's social positioning in caregiving and relational roles (Eagly & Wood, 2012, p. 16). Male influencers also reflected on injury, illness, or pain, often expressing frustration or vulnerability without framing it as weakness — for instance: "I've had a recurring injury/problem… for over 10 years" (Post 408).

In addition to long-term changes, some posts foregrounded the body more generally through *Body-Centric Framing* (12 female, 15 male). These captions brought physical sensation, exertion or appearance into focus, often using humour or exaggerated language. Male influencers more frequently employed this tone, as in "Wearing shorts was a crazy idea from me, my poor legs are red raw" (Post 84) or "I literally thought I was gonna 💩 myself!!!" (Post 244). Women also used this strategy, but often with greater attention to emotional nuance or relational framing. In both cases, these captions disrupted polished self-presentation by making the body a central narrative object.

In addition to bodily expression, many influencers, especially women (62%), described the visual or sensory aspects of their running environments through *Aesthetic Framing*. Landscapes, weather and scenery were not merely backdrops but central to the emotional framing of the run. Captions like "The views were spectacular, as we made our way from Bellagio back to Lecco" (Post 177) or "nothing beats running in the sun surrounded by amazing views heheh 😇 😇" (Post 50) used aesthetic references to enhance tone, meaning, and atmosphere. Women used this type of framing more frequently and emotively, while male influencers were more likely to mention scenery in passing or with practical focus.

While not the most dominant theme, these expressions added nuance to how influencers construct identity online. Female influencers more often linked embodiment to transformation, emotions, and context, while male influencers tended to express physicality through humour or simplified realism. In both cases, attention to the body and environment offered a different lens on running, one less about speed or result and more about experience, vulnerability and presence. Additionally, such framing choices also exemplify Goffman's (1974, p. 45) notion of keying, whereby the physicality of running is subtly reinterpreted to conform to aesthetic norms linked to gendered audience expectations.

5. Conclusion

This thesis explored how British amateur female and male running influencers differ in the ways they use language in Instagram captions to express and frame gendered identities in running-related content. In doing so, it responded to the critical gap in existing literature, which has largely prioritized visual content, macro-influencers, and the performance of femininity, often neglecting male perspectives and the discursive construction of gender through textual self-presentation. Drawing on a thematic analysis of 500 captions, authored by 50 UK-based micro-influencers, and guided by Social Role Theory (Eagly & Wood, 20212) and Framing Theory (Goffman, 1974), the study revealed that gendered self-presentation on Instagram follows clear and patterned differences. Although the captions were diverse in tone and style, a clear and consistent divergence in gendered language practices emerged, reflecting both the influence of traditional gender norms and the growing complexity of digital identity performance in influencer cultures.

This divergence was not merely a matter of tone or topic but of framing, emphasis, and the types of narratives foregrounded. Men and women consistently differed in how they positioned themselves in relation to performance, emotion, community, and authenticity. Male influencers, for instance, displayed a significantly greater tendency to frame their running experiences through agentic, performance-driven lenses. This included a consistent focus on training goals, mental toughness, competitiveness, and self-discipline — traits historically aligned with hegemonic masculinity. These linguistic patterns were characterized by concise, metric-based captions and a narrative emphasis on progress, challenge, and resilience. Although moments of emotional expression or support for others did occur, they were typically embedded within an overarching frame of independence and physical achievement. These qualitative patterns were mirrored by the quantitative distribution of themes: men authored over 60% of all captions coded for Goal Orientation and over two-thirds of those coded for Competitive Drive, underlining their alignment with culturally dominant ideals of masculinity in sport (Connel, 2005, pp. 77).

In contrast, female influencers more frequently framed their running experiences through communal, relational, and emotionally expressive language. They authored nearly all Gender Role Reinforcement citations and over 65% of Identity Labelling posts, often using gender-marked language to frame their athletic identity in terms of connection, care, or aesthetic self-awareness. Emotional Disclosure and Gratitude & Connection also appeared substantially more often in female-authored captions, pointing to a narrative construction of running that emphasized personal growth, emotional resonance and social embeddedness. These patterns not only mark a divergence in linguistic strategy but also underscore deeper asymmetries in how gender must be narrated and made intelligible within digital fitness culture. Therefore, they strongly resonate with Social Role Theory, which suggests that women are socialized and culturally expected to perform traits linked

to caregiving, emotional labour and communal orientation (Eagly & Wood, 2012, p. 16). Yet, this was not simply passive reproduction. Many female influencers also adopted agentic traits, such as discussing goals, mental strength, and overcoming adversity, but these traits were typically accompanied by affective language or humour. In doing so, these women framed performance as a relational and emotionally textured process, rather than as the singular end goal.

What makes these findings particularly significant is that the differences were not limited to content but extended to framing. The ways in which captions were structured, how themes were combined, and what was emphasized or downplayed reveal that male and female influencers operate within unequal discursive fields. Hybrid gender performances were present across the dataset but not equally accessible or equally framed. Male influencers, for instance, were able to incorporate occasional emotional communal framing without jeopardizing the credibility of their athletic identity. These frames appeared as optional extensions of the dominant performance narrative. In contrast, when female influencers engaged with agentic frames (emphasizing discipline, competition or ambition) they tended to do so through linguistic hedging, humour or stylized aesthetics that reaffirmed relational or emotional authenticity. This asymmetry suggests that while both genders are able to borrow from the other's discursive repertoire, the social conditions under which this borrowing occurs are not evenly distributed.

This reveals a key insight; gendered differences in language use are not solely about which traits are expressed, but about how these traits are framed and legitimized withing a given platform and cultural context. Language in captions is not simply expressive, it is performative, strategic and situated. Drawing from Butler's (1999, pp. 178-180) concept of gender performativity, this study shows how repeated discursive acts – caption after caption – produce coherent gendered identities, but within limits. Influencers do not invent their new identities anew with each caption. Rather, they perform them iteratively in ways that are shaped by audience expectations, platform logics, and broader gender ideologies.

Framing Theory is particularly useful in illuminating how influencers structure their self-presentations to appear authentic, inspiring, and culturally legible. Influencers use narrative framing to signal what kind of runners they are, what they value, and how they want to be seen. In this context, the choice to frame a race recap through the lens of self-mastery, versus gratitude and connection is not a neutral narrative decision but a gendered one. As Goffman (1974, pp. 21-23) emphasized, framing is a process of selecting and emphasizing some aspects of experience over others to guide interpretation. In the influencer context, these frames are crafted with the knowledge of a watching, reacting, and algorithmically amplified audience.

The codebook themes developed in this thesis provide a structured lens through which these differences manifest. The higher prevalence of Mental Toughness, Goal Orientation, and

Competitive Drive in male captions underscore how athletic identity is constructed through discipline, control and progress narratives. These align closely with the traditional values of sport culture and masculinized self-presentation. Simultaneously, the relatively high frequency of Emotional Disclosure and Gratitude & Connection in female captions reflect a framing of the running self that is emotionally embedded and socially situated. Thematic areas like Gender Role Reinforcement further reveal the asymmetry in how gender is made visible: women were significantly more likely to explicitly mark gender through hashtags and labels, suggesting that femininity in sport continues to require discursive justification or explanation. Masculinity, by contrast, remains largely unmarked, functioning as the invisible default. These patterns reflect deeply entrenched cultural narratives around gender, sport, and social media, in which women's athleticism remains more contested, and us more narratively frame than men's.

Importantly, the findings do not suggest that digital fitness culture is entirely prescriptive or incapable of nuance. While hybrid identities were present across the dataset, they were rarely asymmetrical. Some male captions included vulnerability or humour, while some female influencers framed goals in straightforward, agentic ways. However, these expressions occurred under different cultural conditions and the frequency with which they were normalized, suggest that cultural scripts remain deeply influential. Thus, hybrid identities are possible, but they are negotiated within the constraints of gendered expectations and platform-based pressures for visibility, coherence and engagement.

Together, these patterns offer a clear and theoretically grounded answer to the research questions. British amateur male and female running influencers do differ in the ways they use caption language to express and frame gendered identities. These differences are not simply a matter of topic or tone but are embedded in framing strategies that reflect and reproduce traditional gender roles, while also revealing the spaces where those roles are adapted, blended, or strategically resisted. The digital caption, often considered secondary to the image, proves to be a rich site for identity performance, structured by broader norms, yet flexibly negotiated by the individual.

5.1 Theoretical implications

The findings of this thesis offer several meaningful implications for existing theories of gender performance and digital identity construction. Guided by Social Role Theory (Eagly & Wood, 2012) and Framing Theory (Goffman, 1974), this research set out to interpret how amateur influencers perform and negotiate gendered identities through Instagram captions. The results largely affirm the predictive value of both frameworks, while also revealing new complexities that challenge their explanatory boundaries and invite theoretical extension.

First, the gendered patterns observed — with male influencers favoring agentic traits such as competitiveness and discipline, and female influencers more frequently engaging with communal frames like emotional openness and relational support — are consistent with Social Role Theory's claim that historically constructed gender norms continue to shape behavioral expression. Yet, the study also reveals how these roles are not simply internalized but actively performed and reframed in digital spaces. Influencers were not merely mirroring gendered expectations but selectively curating identity narratives in ways that maintain cultural intelligibility while managing authenticity and platform visibility. This suggests that Social Role Theory remains highly relevant, but that its applicability is enriched when considered in tandem with performativity theory (Butler, 1999), which emphasizes the iterative, stylized enactment of identity.

The emergence of hybrid gender framings, women displaying performance-oriented language and men incorporating emotional or communal elements, complicates the binary predictions of traditional role theory. However, this hybridity was found to be asymmetrically distributed. While men could adopt vulnerability without destabilizing their agentic positioning, women often had to soften their performance-driven discourse through humor, aesthetic cues, or emotional balance. This suggests that the discursive flexibility granted to each gender is uneven, pointing to an enduring cultural asymmetry that Social Role Theory alone does not fully account for. It is here that Butler's (1999, p. 16) insight into the normative constraints of gender performativity becomes particularly salient: even when individuals draw from the same repertoire of traits, their performances may not be received or valued in the same way.

Framing Theory proved especially useful in explaining how influencers construct meaning through selective emphasis. Captions emerged as curated narrative acts, where influencers foregrounded certain themes, such as resilience, gratitude, identity or community, while downplaying others. This framing was not random but patterned along gender lines. Men's captions tended to frame running through self-discipline and outcome orientation, while women's narratives emphasized emotional process, social embeddedness, and reflexivity. Even when both genders used the same thematic elements (e.g., "challenge" or "success"), the framing differed significantly. These findings extend Goffman's (1974) work by demonstrating that in digital influencer culture, framing operates not only at the level of interaction but also as a premeditated act of self-branding and identity regulation.

At the intersection of these frameworks, the study also substantiates newer theoretical developments that push beyond binary role expectations. Anderson's (2009, p. 17) theory of inclusive masculinity finds some support in the presence of emotional disclosure among male influencers, suggesting a loosening of restrictions around hegemonic masculine norms, albeit within boundaries that maintain agentic framing as the default. Similarly, the strategic performance of

toughness and discipline by female influencers reflects the shifting boundaries of femininity as described in Banet-Weiser's (2018) work on gendered branding. These hybrid performances indicate that influencers are aware of the performative dimensions of their identity and manage their public persona through calculated linguistic choices, shaped by platform logic and audience expectation.

Overall, the findings of this study affirm the explanatory power of Social Role Theory and Framing Theory while also emphasizing that gendered self-presentation in influencer culture is best understood as a negotiation, one where traditional norms are neither simply reproduced nor entirely resisted. Instead, they are selectively reframed, adapted, and sometimes subverted, depending on the influencer's gender, platform pressures, and intended audience. The study thereby supports a theoretical shift toward understanding gender in digital fitness culture not as fixed categories of behavior but as fluid, strategic, and context-sensitive narrative constructions, grounded in history but responsive to the performative demands of contemporary media.

5.2 Societal and practical implications

The gendered framing patterns identified in this study also carry important societal implications, particularly in relation to how contemporary ideals of fitness, identity, and authenticity are constructed on social media. While the notion that influencers shape public discourse is well-established, this research reveals how they do so linguistically, not through overt political messaging, but through seemingly ordinary caption narratives that present running, discipline, emotion, and community in distinctly gendered ways. These narratives, repeated across posts and profiles, accumulate into subtle but powerful scripts for what it means to be a runner — and by extension, a man or a woman — in digital fitness culture.

The findings suggest that the gendered language used in Instagram captions helps stabilize different social expectations for male and female participation in sport. Men's recurring emphasis on performance, control, and self-discipline positions athletic identity as something to be proved through personal mastery. For women, the emphasis on emotional authenticity, connection, and gratitude reinforces a vision of sport that is socially embedded, emotionally expressive, and often coded as relational. These differences are not merely stylistic; they construct and constrain the cultural meanings available to different gender identities within fitness spaces.

What emerges, then, is a dynamic in which men are afforded broader discursive legitimacy when emphasizing toughness or competition, while women must often temper similar expressions with relational or aesthetic softeners. Even as female influencers increasingly articulate agentic goals, the need to anchor these within communal or affective frames underscores the persistence of gendered double standards. In this way, the study highlights a tension between the increasing

visibility of diverse performances and the slow pace at which underlying gender norms shift. While women can now be seen as competitive runners, they are not yet always culturally legible as such without additional narrative framing.

This has consequences for how social media users, particularly younger or impressionable audiences, come to understand what forms of fitness identity are valued, celebrated, or even possible. The asymmetrical flexibility observed in this study, where men can occasionally adopt emotional frames without losing credibility, but women must constantly negotiate theirs, suggests an uneven playing field in how authenticity is performed and received online. These linguistic patterns do not just mirror existing norms; they help maintain them by reinforcing the gendered expectations through which sport, emotion, and achievement are understood.

By bringing these discursive patterns to light, this research underscores the importance of linguistic framing as a key site of gender performance and norm reinforcement in digital spaces. The findings suggest a need for greater attention to how authenticity, success, and identity are not only visually constructed but textually negotiated, often in ways that reflect broader inequalities. This has clear implications for media literacy education, which must extend beyond critique of imagery to include critical engagement with the rhetorical strategies through which influencers present gendered selves.

The study also offers useful insights for practitioners and stakeholders in digital communication, fitness marketing, and health promotion. Understanding how gender is linguistically framed in influencer content can inform more inclusive campaign strategies, encourage diversity in narrative style and tone, and support critical awareness around what kinds of athletic storytelling are normalized or marginalized. Rather than replicating dominant templates of gendered self-presentation, platforms, brands, and educators might begin to support content that expands the emotional and narrative repertoires available to all users.

5.3 Limitations and future research

While this study provides valuable insight into gendered language use among British amateur running influencers, several limitations must be acknowledged. These limitations are not only methodological boundaries but also openings for future research to refine, expand, or challenge the current findings.

One primary limitation lies in the study's focus on binary gender categories. While this decision was necessary to explore contrasts grounded in Social Role Theory, it excludes non-binary, gender-fluid, and transgender influencers whose performances may operate through different discursive logics or actively subvert binary framings. Future research should prioritize inclusive sampling strategies that can account for a wider range of gender identities and explore how those

identities are linguistically constructed and culturally received within digital fitness spaces. Doing so would not only diversify the empirical base but also enable theoretical frameworks to evolve beyond binary assumptions.

Second, this study was limited to Instagram captions, excluding other modalities such as visual imagery, videos, emojis, and audience interactions. Although focusing on caption language allows a deeper linguistic and thematic analysis, identity on social media is inherently multimodal. The meaning of a caption is often shaped in relation to the accompanying image, the tone of voice in a video, or the conversational cues in comments and captions over time. Future research should adopt multimodal or discourse-analytic approaches that account for how language, image, and platform features interact to produce gendered meaning.

Third, the analysis centered on British micro-influencers within a specific athletic subculture: amateur running. While this focus ensured contextual depth and theoretical coherence, it also limits generalizability. Fitness cultures vary across national, cultural, and subcultural contexts. For example, the discursive expectations within strength training, yoga, or dance communities may differ significantly from those in endurance sport. Future research should examine whether the gendered framing strategies observed here are consistent across domains or shaped by the unique norms of different physical cultures.

Lastly, another important limitation is the lack of longitudinal analysis. The study captures a snapshot of language use, but influencer identities are dynamic and evolve in response to audience feedback, platform changes, personal milestones, and brand affiliations. Captions are part of a broader, evolving narrative strategy that may shift over time — particularly in response to life events such as injury, pregnancy, aging, or shifting algorithmic incentives. Longitudinal research could reveal how gendered language use develops across an influencer's lifecycle, providing deeper insight into the temporal dimensions of digital self-performance.

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Appendices

Appendix A. Sources for sample list

The table below shows all the accounts selected to assemble the sample list (selection shown in Appendix B). For every account, a selection of 10 captions have been used, all chosen randomly.

Table 2

Sources for sample list

Account link	Username	Followers count*	Gender
https://www.instagram.com/susie_chan_/	susie_Chan_	86.7K	Female
https://www.instagram.com/jakeswightman/	jakeswightman	67.7k	Male
https://www.instagram.com/emily_rose.runs/	emily_rose.runs	21.6k	Female
https://www.instagram.com/luellamayfitness/	luellamayfitness	22.5k	Female
https://www.instagram.com/izzyhillfit/	izzyhillfit	50.4k	Female
https://www.instagram.com/laurenoliviafitt/	laurenoliviafitt	31.1k	Female
https://www.instagram.com/jennyyyy_fit/	jennyyyy_fit	83.6k	Female
https://www.instagram.com/jakeliamsmith98/	jakeliamsmith98	27.8k	Male
https://www.instagram.com/kellogs_ontherun/	kellogs_ontherun	62.1k	Female
https://www.instagram.com/charlottepurdue/	charlottepurdue	51.6k	Female
https://www.instagram.com/tom.folan/	tom.folan	45.6k	Male
https://www.instagram.com/morningcoffeerun/	morningcoffeerun	38.4k	Male
https://www.instagram.com/kirstys_running/	kirstys_running	36k	Female
https://www.instagram.com/andybutchart/	andybutchart	30.6k	Male
https://www.instagram.com/running_with_rach/	running_with_rach	29.7k	Female
https://www.instagram.com/callumrhawkins/	callumrhawkins	28.2k	Male
https://www.instagram.com/murphyruns/	murphyruns	27k	Female
https://www.instagram.com/anna.the.runner/	anna.the.runner	26.6k	Female
https://www.instagram.com/thisgirlcanrunfar/	thisgirlcanrunfar	24.5k	Female

https://www.instagram.com/p/DFSqdV0M1cH/	__jordanfoster	23.7k	Female
https://www.instagram.com/leah_runner_girl/	leah_runner_girl	23.5k	Female
https://www.instagram.com/marcscott21/	marcscott21	22.4k	Male
https://www.instagram.com/ben.pattison/	ben.pattison	10.8k	Male
https://www.instagram.com/emilecairess/	emilecairess	19.7k	Male
https://www.instagram.com/hannahtrenches/	hannahtrenches	85k	Female
https://www.instagram.com/mo.abdinn/	mo.abdinn	17.7k	Male
https://www.instagram.com/bitbeefy/	bitbeefy	39.3k	Male
https://www.instagram.com/benparkerfitness/	benparkerfitness	27.6k	Male
https://www.instagram.com/hercuules/	hercuules	65.1k	Male
https://www.instagram.com/justalilbester/	justalilbester	82.6k	Male
https://www.instagram.com/proddyc/	proddyc	43.1k	Male
https://www.instagram.com/gibstarun/	gibstarun	31.6k	Male
https://www.instagram.com/ianrunsldn/	ianrunsldn	11.3k	Male
https://www.instagram.com/theurbanchallenger/	theurbanchallenger	17.8k	Male
https://www.instagram.com/harrypalmer.tri/	harrypalmer.tri	11.9k	Male
https://www.instagram.com/notanotheraveragejoe/	notanotheraverage joe	65.1k	Male
https://www.instagram.com/colerunning/	colerunning	12.8k	Male
https://www.instagram.com/danprettejohn/	danprettejohn	10.3k	Male
https://www.instagram.com/sweetslewis/	sweetslewis	12.2k	Male
https://www.instagram.com/the.distanceproject/	the-distanceproject	27k	Male
https://www.instagram.com/lloydkempson/	lloydkempson	16.2k	Male
https://www.instagram.com/tomevansultra/	tomevansultra	76K	Male
https://www.instagram.com/runfitmumkatie/	runfitmumkatie	22.4k	Female
https://www.instagram.com/roseharvey.run/	roseharvey.run	22.6k	Female
https://www.instagram.com/ojt_runs/	ojt_runs	21.5k	Female

https://www.instagram.com/bethanvarn/	bethanvarn	19k	Female
https://www.instagram.com/staceruns/	staceruns	16.9k	Female
https://www.instagram.com/lazygirlrunning/	lazygirlrunning	10.8k	Female
https://www.instagram.com/rhiannacrisp/	rhiannacrisp	58.7k	Female
https://www.instagram.com/andy_andrejka/	andy_andrejka	13.8k	Female

Note. K = x1000. The number of followers listed in this table are collected during the period of March 25 until March 29 of 2025. The number of followers can differentiate depending on the day this paper is being read. However, during data collection all influencers were classified as micro-influencers.

Appendix B. Selection of the sample list

The table below includes a selection of 15 captions selected for the full sample (*N* = 500). All captions have been collected through random selection from the 50 Instagram accounts as stated in Appendix A. This selection below gives an insight into the full sample list, which also includes the variable gender.

Table 3

Selection of Sample List

Caption	Username	Post Link	Upload date
No rest for the wicked 😪 Great to take the win in this iconic stadium, and come away with a fresh 1000m PB of 2:13. Monaco you were magic as per мc 📷 : @matthewquine	jakeswightman	https://www.instagram.com/p/ChGCzLQs9H5/	10/8/2022
Mum mode activated 😆 #running #run #mummode	kellogs_ontherun	https://www.instagram.com/p/Cy1IWrurQ0Q/	25/10/2023
Training well. Racing soon. Stay tuned. 🚶	marcscott21	https://www.instagram.com/p/C6I-zAJtEzp/?img_index=5	24/04/2024
Heading into this week with a more fixed focus. My first race this year is 8 weeks away, which seems like ages but I know it will suddenly be upon me. The miles are going to steadily ramp up again, hopefully warmer ones to this because I'm not cut out for the freezing cold. Roll on spring. Looking forward to getting stronger and do my best to keep up the cross training 😁 😅 📷 @the_phbalance ❄️ #runnerslife #raceready #smilesformiles #letsrun	susie_chan_	https://www.instagram.com/p/DExt823sqJr/?img_index=1	13/01/2025

Maybe my favourite run ever 🫨 🌞 There really is nothing better than a run coming together as perfectly as it did on Sunday. I was on pacing duties @brightonhalfmarathon for both my sister Izzy and my girlfriend Sofia. They both had similar pbs of 1.36 & 1.38 and have been training hard! So we set off ambitiously, aiming for a 1.36, a 4.35 pace, and kept getting faster and faster all the way until the end 😮‍💨 Sofia wanted to dial it up one more gear at 18k so we left Izzy and pushed on to the finish. Izzy finished in a mega 1.34 & Sofia in 1.33 🤴 🤴 Huge huge well done both of you, I couldn't have been prouder running side by side 🫶 #Running #HalfMarathon #Runna	benparkerfitness	https://www.instagram.com/p/DGv9Jnis2o_/	3/3/2025
"The training grind doesn't stop even when on holiday 🚉 . Huge session with the 2:06 marathon man @el_aaraby_mohamed_reda getting the legs ticking over here in #casablanca Loving training out here and will definitely have to come back 😍 📷 @w.aidem @nnrunningteam @nikelondon @nike @jdgyms"	jakeliamsmith98	https://www.instagram.com/p/ChVEwulu8mi/	16/08/2022
Run your own damn race ✌ #runningcommunity #runnersofinstagram #runchat	morningcoffeerun	https://www.instagram.com/p/DE7VTF-NynK/	17/01/2025
First 10k completed & in under an hour. Really didn't expect to be able to do this, especially after a few days of drinking and eating 🫨	laurenoliviafitt	https://www.instagram.com/p/C1U4FjfoLzv/	26/12/2023

so I surprised myself :) I'm new to running and at the moment am just getting used to the feeling & work involved. The first 5k felt good, but struggled in the last 2 due to feeling uncomfortable. I'm going to work on finding the comfort and pushing myself. The feeling afterwards is unbeatable, I'd recommend to anyone 🤓 #running #runningmotivation #mentalhealth			
Oh how the margins have become so tight! . . Current 5k PB pace: 2:55 per km Goal 5k pace: 2:54 per km. . Just 1 second per km, surely that's not too much to ask?! 🤣 . Today's session most certainly helped with that; 8 x (500m/300m) (Recovery 60s) Total track volume of 6,4kms @ 2:49 per km . It's simple, for goal 5k pace to become a reality, I need to be doing shorter reps at that pace and faster..	justalilbester	https://www.instagram.com/p/DDIJ-U3toIR/	3/12/2024

That's the not so simple part 😵 But we wouldn't have it any other way! . 4 weeks until my 5k crack at sub 14:30 🎯 . #Track #TrackTuesday #BestAthletics #Justalilbester			
South London's Forrest Gump does Berlin, mission completed with a new Marathon PB 2:43:54 🥇 … Next stop @nycmarathon 03/11/24 👀 🗽 📷 @tom.folan	sweetslewis	https://www.instagram.com/p/DAgkNgmoldy/	29/09/2024
Community 5k, absolutely over the moon with tonights run 🥳 5 weeks ago 22:43 ➡️ Tonight 20:53!!!! I have no idea where it came from after struggling to break 22 mins all year at parkrun but it was just one of those magic runs in pretty perfect conditions, absolutely chuffed 👏 #5krace #5krun #thisgirlcanrun #ukrunning #ukrunchat #rungoals #runnersofinsta #womensrunningcommunity	bethanvarn	https://www.instagram.com/p/C8IIwZItKI0/?img_index=1	12/6/2024
Barcelona sightseeing done differently 🏃 ⏱️ 🏆 No one will convince me any time soon to do another marathon, first half I actually ran my half marathon PB and the second half was one hell of a run. Almost threw up, couldn't get any gels down anymore, I did walk at times,	andy_andrejka	https://www.instagram.com/p/C4VhZxcsfH4/?img_index=1	10/3/2024

wanted to give up several times but hey, we made it to the finish line 🎉 🌀 And honestly, any time was a PB as I never ran that far before. So still happy and smiling now that I did the full fucking marathon! 😎 Will check in with you later, time to rest and recover			
A weekend of dreams 🙌🏼 . . Some of the best days of my life. 48 hours of friends, food and the fastest half marathon I'd ever ran. Unfortunately, where life gives, it also takes; Equilibrium ⚖️ . The cliché thing all content creators say, but I'm gonna say it too: I'll always share the good as well as the bad… . In the past few months I've made some bad some bad decisions around running but in life as a whole. I've learnt that as I transition to becoming an 'adult' I maybe need to alter my priorities and make better decisions. Over the last 12 weeks or so I've been training through a hamstring injury, which I regrettably made worse during the opening stages of Sundays race. Luckily I was able to run through it and achieve a huge PB, but it's time I get it sorted out and make the sensible decision. .	colerunning	https://www.instagram.com/p/CyfvteetGex/?img_index=4	17/10/2023

As mentioned, I also have my own personal demons to face which have been highlighted in the aftermath of a great weekend. Combined with the crunch time that is my final year of studying, stress is starting to get the better of me which has negatively impacted my relationships, uni work and generally taking less care of my own health. . I'm going nowhere. I'll still be posting, running (once this hammy sorts itself out), making content etc. But I guess here's my accountability for making better decisions going forward so that I enjoy more weekends like last… but more importantly taking more care of myself and that will begin with getting some mental health support. Cos therapy is cool ✌ . Peace and love, Manchester vlogs coming soon xx . . 📸 : @jerry_sun & @jenkinsrhys . . #instarunner #runningcommunity #ukrunchat #runtips #mentalhealth #runninginspiration #runningmotivation			
Hellooo Berlin DE .	justalilbester	https://www.instagram.com/p/DAbdxXQtkHM	27/09/2024

. Time to let that inner beast out 🦁 The hunger is there! . There's time for fun and games.. and then there's business time! It's business time! . Remember 👇🏼 When the going gets tough and you're hurting. The person next to you is hurting just as much! . #Berlin #BerlinMarathon #BestAthletics #Justalilbester		[/](#)	
5km PB for this training block ahhh!!! 🏃 🌏 Since injuring myself I have become a slower paced girly (8 min/km) but it was is sooo nice to see some improvement finally & run without any pain!!! 🥺 🥺 #run #runner #running #marathon #marathontraining #fitness #fitspo #gymlife #strong #weights #cardio #workoutmotivation #training #gains #fitgirl #fitnessjourney #fitnesstransformation #workout #fitnesslifestyle #fitnesslife #fitnesscommunity #fitnessblogger #fitnesswomen #getfit #bodypositivity #workout #glutes #legday #bodytransformation #healthylifestyle #stronggirl	hannahtrenches	https://www.instagram.com/p/C2mhNMvr-Wo/?img_index=1	27/01/2024

Appendix C. Fixed Codebook

Table 4

Fixed codebook

Code name	Definition	Examples/indicators
Mental Toughness	Mentions of discipline, enduring pain, pushing limits, or 'no excuses' mentality.	'Toughest race I have ever done', 'dig deep', 'Getting the work in. Day and night'. 'Pushed on', 'pushing through'', 'no rest for the wicked'
Competitive Drive	Language emphasizing competition, racing others, or striving to win.	'It's me vs the world', '1st in my age category', '2nd female', 'win it for the 3rd time', 'world champs bronze', '1 week, 2 medals'
Goal-Orientation	Captions that emphasize achieving goals, setting new records, or showing measurable progress.	'comeback', 'furthest Ive ever ran', '100k pb by two hours and 15 minutes', 'squeezing a 5k pb on a Saturday', 'got a sub 4', 'new vo2 max'
Support for Others	Captions showing encouragement, motivation, or praise for others in the community.	'Great to see @tfoleyracing take the win', 'congrats to all finishers out here', 'Happy Monday people', '#nevergiveup', 'hope you all run strong'
Gender Role Reinforcement	Caption reinforces expected gender behaviour or appearance norms.	'#runnergirl', '#womensrunning', 'this one is for the girlies', 'being a bigger boy (at 75kgs)', '#thisgirlcan', 'stopped briefly to help a woman'
Bodily Changes	References to shifts in the body that influence physical ability, performance, or experience while running	'Thanks to the hormones'', '6 months after having alexis', 'postpartum', 'menopausal body', '#type1diabetes', 'post injury', 'pain free for first time in months'
Body-centric Framing	When the body is the central object of the post, especially with aesthetic focus.	'my legs were already feeling fatigued', 'legs feel like lead weights', 'legs are nice and warm', 'downhill smashed my quads lol', 'I was in the best shape of my life'
Identity Labelling	Mentions of identity labels (e.g., runner, mom, athlete) to position self.	'#athlete', '#bride', 'fastest Brit ever', '#runner', '#halfmarathoner', '#toddlermum', 'as a mum', '#slowrunner', 'my name is Hercules Nicolaou'
Empowerment Messaging	Affirmative messages about self-worth, confidence, and personal strength.	'be feeling strong', 'I'm finally regaining a bit of confidence', 'a huge improvement in my strength training', '#strong', '#gains', 'I am hungry, motivated and ready'
Frame Downplaying	Minimizing aspects that do not fit the intended identity performance. Avoids discussing appearance or	'not racing just runniing bc we do get to wake up & choose fUN', 'so many

	downplays competitiveness in favour of "fun run vibes."	people are injured atm', 'run for run, run for joy, run for your dreams'
Storytelling & Narrative	Captions structured as personal stories, journeys, or turning points.	'Little memory lane trip', 'come on a sunny run with me', 'I went on a rare morning run before my 9-5', 'this is me fighting'
Personal Challenge	Captions about overcoming difficulty or pushing personal limits.	'the furthest ive ever ran', 'the hardest long run of my actual life', 'my dream came true', 'I finally did it', 'all I needed to was trust the process and stay consistent'
Emotional Disclosure	Open sharing of personal emotions like stress, joy, fear, or vulnerability.	'turned up in tears', 'really glad', 'I'm nervous', '#anxiety', 'makes me so happy', 'I have been sensible this week', 'many disappointing thoughts and feelings'
Gratitude & Connection	Expressions of thankfulness and highlighting connections with others; Mentioning appreciation, belonging, or shared effort	'forever grateful', 'thank you to everyone out there', 'big appreciation for @sammynicks', '#grateful', 'I just wouldn't be here without you', 'a heart full of gratitude'
Community Affiliation	References to shared belongings, support networks, or group identity.	'I met some really lovely people as well', 'I love the community', 'the crowd and support here is like nowhere else', 'amazing friends and wonderful family'
Physical Appearance	Mentions of looks, outfits, or body-focused compliments.	'whole lot of sweat', 'pink shorts and shoes', 'this outfit was a lot more coordinated & the hair has not been touched since yesterday', '3 layers', 'long sleeves'
Scenic/Aesthetic Environment	Mentions or emphasis on the physical surroundings of the run, such as natural beauty, terrain (e.g., hilly or flat), weather, or views — used to enhance the visual appeal or emotional tone of the post.	'Snowy', 'bit too hot', 'complete darkness, hills & heats', very tough, hilly course', 'unreal views', 'crossed trails, caves, tunnels, rerouted around military bases'

Appendix D. Thematic Map

Table 5

Thematic Map

Theme	Sub-theme	Code
Traditional Masculinity	Agentic Traits	Mental Toughness Competitive Drive Goal-Orientation
	Social Frames	Gender Role Reinforcement
Traditional Femininity	Communal Traits	Support for Others
	Social Frames	Gender Role Reinforcement
	Relational and Community Framing	Community Affiliation
Identity Framing	Frame Highlighting	Identity Labelling Empowerment Messaging
	Frame Downplaying	Frame Downplaying
Narrative Framing	Storytelling	Storytelling & Narrative
	Narrative Intimacy Framing	Personal Challenge Emotional Disclosure Gratitude & Connection
	Embodiment and Aesthetic Framing	Bodily Changes Body-Centric Framing Aesthetic Framing

Appendix E. Declaration Page: Use of Generative AI Tools in Thesis

Student Information
Name: Leonie Tiehuis
Student ID: 695242
Course Name: Master Thesis CM5000
Supervisor Name: Carmen Longas Luque
Date: 11/02/2025

Declaration:

Acknowledgment of Generative AI Tools
I acknowledge that I am aware of the existence and functionality of generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools, which are capable of producing content such as text, images, and other creative works autonomously.

GenAI use would include, but not limited to:
- Generated content (e.g., ChatGPT, Quillbot) limited strictly to content that is not assessed (e.g., thesis title).
- ~~Writing improvements, including~~ grammar and spelling corrections (e.g., Grammarly)
- Language translation (e.g., DeepL), without generative AI alterations/improvements.
- Research task assistance (e.g., finding survey scales, qualitative coding verification, debugging code)
- Using GenAI as a search engine tool to find academic articles or books (e.g.,

☐ I declare that I have used generative AI tools, specifically [Name of the AI Tool(s) or Framework(s) Used], in the process of creating parts or components of my thesis. The purpose of using these tools was to aid in generating content or assisting with specific aspects of thesis work.

☒ I declare that I have NOT used any generative AI tools and that the assignment concerned is my original work.

Signature:

Date of Signature: 24/06/2025

Extent of AI Usage

☐ I confirm that while I utilized generative AI tools to aid in content creation, the majority of the intellectual effort, creative input, and decision-making involved in completing the thesis were undertaken by me. <u>I have enclosed the prompts/logging of the GenAI tool use in an appendix.</u>

Ethical and Academic Integrity

☐ I understand the ethical implications and academic integrity concerns related to the use of AI tools in coursework. I assure that the AI-generated content was used responsibly, and any content derived from these tools has been appropriately cited and attributed according to the guidelines provided by the instructor and the course. I have taken necessary steps to distinguish between my original work and the AI-generated contributions. Any direct quotations, paraphrased content, or other forms of AI-generated material have been properly referenced in accordance with academic conventions.

By signing this declaration, I affirm that this declaration is accurate and truthful. I take full responsibility for the integrity of my assignment and am prepared to discuss and explain the role of generative AI tools in my creative process if required by the instructor or the Examination Board. I further affirm that I have used generative AI tools in accordance with ethical standards and academic integrity expectations.

Signature: [digital signature]

Date of Signature: [Date of Submission]