

MOTIVATION TO FOLLOW FITNESS INSTAGRAM PROFILES AND BODY SELF-IMAGE REPERCUSSIONS: QUALITATIVE STUDY

MOTIVAÇÃO PARA SEGUIR PERFIS FITNESS DO INSTAGRAM E A AUTOIMAGEM CORPORAL: ESTUDO QUALITATIVO

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Abstract: The ideal body standards outspread by social media stands out in fitness Instagram profile. Only a few qualitative analysis studies have assessed the motivation that lead young women followers to follow such profiles and the repercussions that these profiles have on the perception and satisfaction of body self-image. Therefore, the objective of the present study is to evaluate such outcomes. Interviews were conducted with female undergraduate students who are regular followers of the Brazilian fitness Instagram profile. Data were subjected to thematic content analysis. Reports have shown that, nowadays, the female ideal body should be lean, have aesthetically pleasing muscles and lack of masculine features. Such body shape is sold as easily achievable by everyone as long as followers have dedication and willpower. Reasons for following such profiles lie on the encouragement and inspiration bloggers provide to their followers. However, the followers themselves suffer and are frustrated with their inability to reproduce what fitness profiles preach. It is concluded that followers of fitness profiles on Instagram are influenced by the content of these profiles, which seem to negatively (re)construct the perception and satisfaction with body self-image.

Keywords: Social media, Self-image, Qualitative Study

Resumo: Os padrões corporais ideais difundidos pelas redes sociais se destacam nos perfis fitness do Instagram. Poucos estudos de análise qualitativa avaliaram a motivação que leva as jovens seguidoras a acompanhar tais perfis e as repercussões que esses perfis têm na percepção e na satisfação com a autoimagem corporal. Portanto, o objetivo do presente estudo é avaliar tais desfechos. As entrevistas foram realizadas com estudantes universitárias que são seguidoras regulares de perfis fitness brasileiros no Instagram. Os dados foram submetidos à análise de conteúdo temática. As narrativas mostram que, atualmente, o corpo ideal feminino deve ser esguio, ter músculos esteticamente agradáveis e carência de traços masculinos. Essa forma corporal é vendida como fácil de ser alcançada por todos, desde que se tenha dedicação e força de vontade. As razões para seguir esses perfis se ancoram no incentivo e na inspiração que os blogueiros fornecem

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a seus seguidores. No entanto, as próprias seguidoras relatam sofrimento e frustração com a incapacidade de reproduzir o que pregam os perfis fitness. Conclui-se que seguidoras de perfis fitness do Instagram são influenciados pelo conteúdo destes perfis, que parecem (re)construir negativamente a percepção e satisfação com a autoimagem corporal.

Palavras-Chave: Mídia social, Autoimagem, Estudo qualitativo

Narratives that normalize ideal body standards are surrounded by socio-historical and cultural contexts (Nechar, 2015). The relationship individuals have with beauty and with their bodies within the cultural context can change from region to region, as well as by the influence of certain factors such as climate, religious beliefs, society backgrounds, political regime and by the social insertion in which it is framed. Although these standards can change over time, nowadays ideal body standards in the fitness community are usually ubiquitous and outspread by mass media and, more recently, by social media (Silva et al., 2018). It is essential differentiating social network from social media, since they have distinct meanings, although they are in the same universe. Social media are online technologies and practices adopted by individuals to outspread information to other people. On the other hand, social networks are social structures available in the internet for people and organizations that are connected to each other based on common interests and on profiles in social media channels where people interact with each other (Madeira & Galucci, 2009).

Instagram stands out among current social networks — its users publish approximately 80 million photos every day - and has been of great help for the fitness community, which uses it to spread the ideal body image and eating routines it preaches to the public (Mingoia et al., 2017). This process is responsible for a strong interaction, as well as for constant information and experience exchange with followers. Studies have shown that the continuous exposure of "perfect" body photos on this rede social makes users compare their own appearance to the images published by fitness celebrities and bloggers. These publications make followers face body self-image dissatisfaction (Brown & Tiggemann, 2016; Hogue & Mills, 2019; Robinson et al., 2017), besides the negative mood effects (Slater et al., 2017), low self-esteem (Strubel et al., 2016). An integrative literature review pointed out that social networks have a predominantly negative impact on their users' body self-image, increasing levels of body dissatisfaction, also generating a negative impact on mood and self-esteem (Silva et al., 2020).

The number of studies on associations among social networks, body perception and satisfaction have been growing. However, as it is a relatively recent phenomenon, there is a gap in scientific knowledge, especially with regard to the motivations and feelings associated with the daily monitoring of fitness profiles. Furthermore, current research is mostly quantitative and mainly focused on identifying associations among the frequency of social network use (mainly Facebook), exposure to attractive body images in this social network, concerns about appearance and body image dissatisfaction (Eckler et al, 2017; Holland & Tiggemann, 2016; Strubel et al., 2016).

Thus, it is evident the need to expand and deepen knowledge about the repercussions of the contents published in Instagram fitness profiles so that the population can be made aware of the impacts of these contents, since dissatisfaction with body self-image is the cause of important mental and physical health problems (Souza & Alvarenga, 2016). Therefore, the aim of the present study is evaluate the motivation that leads young followers to follow fitness profiles and the repercussions that these profiles have on the perception and satisfaction with body self-image.

METHODS

Exploratory study based on a qualitative and cross-sectional design.

Participants

Fifteen female undergraduate students in the age group 18 years or older, enrolled in a Brazilian public university, who are also Brazilian fitness Instagram followers, participated in the study. Participants were between 20 and 32 years old, most of them were enrolled in the Engineering course (12), and the remaining ones were enrolled in Physical Therapy (1), Biomedicine (1) and Nursing (1). Nutrition and Physical Education students were excluded from the research, since these courses are directly linked to body and eating habits and their students are constantly pressured by society to have an ideal body and to adopt healthy eating habits (Lemos et al., 2018). Such social pressure could directly affect their body satisfaction. Only young females were evaluated, because the literature points out that they remain the most vulnerable group to media influence and body image satisfaction (Leahey et al., 2007).

The sample size was defined based on the data saturation criterion (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Prospects were dismissed after data collection, when interviews started to present redundancies and repetitions.

Material

The script of a semi-structured interview (Table 1) was developed for the present research. The interview encompassed questions about participants' perspectives about the ideal female body, the motivations to become a fitness Instagrams follower, repercussions of these Instagram profiles on body self-image satisfaction and perception. Three pilot studies were carried out with participants who had the potential to assess whether the questions fit the study or not.

Table 1. Script of the semi-structured interview.

Questions

- 1) What are your motivations to participate in the social network Instagram? How often do you access this social network?
 - 2) What are the profiles related to the 'fitness' topic that you follow in this social network?
 - 3) What was your interest/motivation to start following profiles associated with this topic? What does mostly attract you in these profiles, what does mostly call your attention in them?
 - 4) What in your opinion is more positive and less positive in following these 'fitness' profiles?
 - 5) Do contents posted in these profiles somehow interfere in your life?
 - 6) Was there any change in your perception about, and satisfaction with, your own body due to information available in these profiles?
 - 7) How do you feel about being often exposed to, or visualizing, these body types posted in these profiles? And what feeling does this exposure bring to you?
 - 8) Among fitness models you follow in Instagram, which one do you believe has a perfect body? And why do you think this body type is the ideal one?
 - 9) Do you have anything else to say?
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Procedure

Participants were recruited in the contact lists of researchers' social networks through the snowball sampling technique (Vinuto, 2014). Volunteers were informed about the aims and

procedures of the study. After signing the informed consent form (ICF), they were interviewed in private places to assure confidentiality of information and emotional stability. All interviews were recorded and later entirely and literally transcribed to compose the analytical corpus of the study. The first author conducted the interviews, she attended classes about the use of interviews in qualitative research and was prepared by the other coauthors to follow the data collection procedure. Therefore, the research team considered the first researcher prepared and competent for the task. In order to assure the quality of the collected data, the pilot interviews were heard by the other authors, who have discussed and reflected about them. Participants did not get any payment or compensation to their participation in the study.

The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of Federal University of Triangulo Mineiro (UFTM, opinion n. 2,288,882).

Data Analysis

Interview analyses were based on the content analysis by Bardin (2011) and on the thematic analysis technique, which comprised the following steps: pre-analysis, investigation of materials, data processing and interpretation. All interviews were thoroughly read ("exploratory data analysis") by the first author in order to assure her familiarization and immersion in the collected data, since it would allow the first impressions and hypotheses related to the topic to rise. After this stage, the first author manually codified the whole set of data. These codes described the common features among data. Subsequently, these codes were grouped in thematic axes that were later defined. This organization provided a simplified representation of gross data in order to enable the understanding about the speeches in the interview. The first author worked together with the last author, who is experienced in conducting, collaborating and supervising qualitative research. The authors met often to discuss about the codification of themes and sub-themes. This discussion included the references and next steps in interview transcription in order to make sure that the analysis would remain substantiated and justified by data, and that, therefore, it would be reliable and plausible (Tracy, 2010). Next, messages showing common features were grouped into categories based on the organized content. The theoretical references by Social Representations (SR) (Jodelet, 1994), as well as the scientific literature in this field, were used to substantiate the discussion and interpret the results. The theory of social representations understands body studies as relevant due to the role played by SR in elaborating collective ways to see, and experience, the body. Such process lies on spreading concepts and behavior models associated with these body experiences and on determining different ways to feel and interact with one's own body (Jodelet, 1994). It is possible greatly identifying the senses and values about the body in Instagram, since the interactions among individuals in this social network provide the means to determine a pre-coded system of reality that also sets a group of ideas and behaviors (Camargo et al., 2011). Therefore, the theoretical framework of SR allows the body to be understood as a representational object, which carries with it several effects in the way people see each other, how they see themselves and how they relate to the world around them.

RESULTS

Eight categories were identified through the analysis of the reports. The most recurrent themes among these categories were rearranged into three final thematic axes in order to systematize and enhance the main discussions about the results: (1) female body idealization; (2) motivations and

feelings for following fitness Instagram profiles; and (3) repercussions on body self-image and satisfaction. The three thematic axes approached in the present study are shown in Table 2. This table depicts the organization of these topics, their sub-topics and some excerpts of participants' speeches.

Table 2. *Thematic axes and excerpts selected from participants' testimonials.*

Thematic axes and sub-themes	Quotes
1) Female body idealization.	(1) "[...] Because it's not overdone, her body looks just right, her belly is flat...nothing...much...much...it's always balanced you know, I think that's why she doesn't look like a man"; (2) "[...] With ideal bodies like that, they're our ideal models ...Really thin with a big butt, big breasts [...]; (3) [...] I mean, I like very thin bodies with small waists... and then, like, big breasts, big butt, big thighs, but still feminine... not like...I don't know...not very gym-like...I like something that's not too far-fetched"; (4) "[...] I think her body looks very pretty, because it's not too muscular, it's not too manly... @'s body is beautiful, her legs and her arms are well-toned, her belly is flat, like zero fat... her body is feminine and absolutely beautiful [...]".
2) Motivation for following fitness Instagram profiles.	(1) "[...] I follow fitness Instagram profiles... because of their bodies, you know, I want to have their body"; (2) "[...] Well, it gives you motivation, you know, one more motivation... you're like: Wow! If she's doing it, I can do it too"; (3) "It's just because I take inspiration from it"; (4) "Well... we want our bodies to look more attractive, come on, let's face it hahaha (laughter)".
2.1) Motivation and discomforts regarding body self-image.	(1) "[...] Well I think it's a good thing because she influences you to change your routine, but at the same time it's also a bad thing because she can let you down, you know... because some people just can't lose the weight they need to lose this fast [...]"; (2) "[...] Wow! Sometimes it can be a shock, you know, like, I see it and I feel bad, like when I see a popular blogger... woah, I'm bummed out when I see her body... I'm like: ooh my God, it can't be; (3) "Well I don't feel good when I look at her body...because then I put on some clothes and they don't look good on me, you know... If I had a body like that, I would look great in them"; (4) "So... It affects my self-esteem, because we want to be like that, but it isn't that easy, you know... so it makes me upset, I want to look like that, but I can't".
2.2) Feelings of incapability, lack of commitment and dedication.	(1) "[...] Well... that's what I think. I think their bodies look wonderful, but like, you gotta have a lot of willpower [...]"; (2) "The kind of body that they show... that they seem to have, they make it look like we can have it too; (3) "[...]" I get frustrated because I could have that body, you know, I know it's all up to me [...]"; (4) "[...] like, I want to have that body, you know, I really want to... but I'm not a disciplined person".
3) Repercussions on body self-image perception and satisfaction.	(1) "[...] Because their bodies look so pretty, so I keep staring at them and comparing them to mine [...]"; (2) "It changed... I realize that I'm fat and that I can't lose weight because I'm lazy"; (3) "[...]Yes, she turns into a... you end up comparing your body to hers, you know, because you end up wishing you had her body. So I think it affects your satisfaction, you know [...]".

DISCUSSION

Thematic axes 1: "A feminine, well-defined and unmanly body": the contemporary ideal of female body shape

Besides being a natural organism, the body is also made out of social and individual portrayals (Maroun & Vieira, 2008), since body images are heavily addressed by the media; therefore, body portrayals are constantly built, rebuilt and reproduced. Transformations seem to be mostly made to one's appearance in order to achieve the desired body shape, but the search for the current ideal body shape does not change (Siqueira & Faria, 2007).

The word "standard" refers to the idea of uniformity, but it becomes a very subjective concept within the beauty context. Physical beauty standards turn out to be a set of features that a body must possess to be regarded as "beautiful" by society (Freitas et al., 2010). For that matter, women believe that by having this body shape they will be able to achieve all the qualities attached to it, even if these qualities are also a social construct (Ogden, 1999). As a result, they feel encouraged to change their appearance according to the people they admire. This body transformation consequently reflects the lookout for a sense of belonging to a certain society (Alves & Lucchese-Cheung, 2013).

Each culture has its own beauty standards, which may, or not, express themselves in a similar way. The present study points out the contemporary Brazilian ideal of female body shape: a well-toned body, with fat-free belly and bulky legs, thighs and breasts that should, nevertheless, remain delicate and feminine, and lack manly features.

It is worth mentioning that this body standard has not always been the same. In the 1920s, women who practiced demanding physical exercises - that made the body sweat and were practiced by the male gender - were not well looked upon. Instead, classical ballet was the appropriate activity for women (Nechar, 2015). Deep changes have taken place in the last century; today, women embody the role of real-life disciplined and independent "warriors", and this new standard has influenced the change from a lean body to a muscular one and helped women overcome the fragile body stigma (Nechar, 2015). However, the idea that women could "aesthetically" relate to men has caused some discomfort in society, since people shape their actions according to what their culture "dictates" as "normal" and "acceptable" within their social environment (Nechar, 2015). Women usually choose to maintain a well-defined and unmanly body, and the current body standard arose from it.

Today, the lean and delicately toned body is considered the only way to achieve beauty; therefore, every effort to maintain it is valid, and this mindset has led to the hegemony of this body standard (Paixão & Lopes, 2014). However, the restraint to the lean body's central reference does not encompass the body diversity coexisting in the contemporary world (Santos, 2008). This process can have negative effects on women's lives, given the idea that by achieving the ideal body type, one will also achieve all the attributes associated with it, such as happiness, success, power and health (Lima et al. 2013; Ogden, 1999). Accordingly, it should be noticed that even thin women are not free from feeling self-conscious about their own bodies, since the current portrayal of ideal female body includes not only thinness, but extra attributes such as visible and well-toned muscles (Silva et al., 2018).

Thematic axes 2: "It all begins with great motivation and ends up in frustration": the demotivating motivation

Human motivation comes from a psychological process closely linked to one's drive or tendency to persistently perform certain behaviors (Nakamura, 2005). The present study reveals that women seek motivation to reach the ideal body standard through the fitness Instagram profiles they follow, which stirs in them the desire to change their body. Although this motivation may seem positive at first, it eventually turns into bodily self-consciousness; followers are unable to recognize themselves when they compare their bodies to the ones on the fitness Instagram profiles. Consequently, they oftentimes feel inferior and frustrated (Brown & Tiggemann, 2016).

Nevertheless, the motivation that triggers fitness-profiles following has been losing strength, for the body type and the daily routine displayed by such profiles are very distant from the reality of most women's bodies (Carreteiro, 2005). This detachment also triggers negative feelings such as

sense of incapacity and lack of commitment and dedication. It happens because the ideal body is sold as something simple and easy to achieve, which exclusively depends on willpower and individual commitment, that can be achieved just by doing "everything right" just as fitness bloggers do. Thus, there is a built-up and widespread idea that current physical beauty standards are within the reach of every woman - a very shallow approach to such a complex issue (Lima et al., 2013).

Thematic axes 3: "You end up wishing you had her body": Impacts on body self-image perception and satisfaction

Body perception can be defined as a self-concept representation about the way people judge their own size, shape and weight, as well as the way they suffer under the influence of social and cultural aspects (Macedo et al., 2015). Changes in body perception can lead to body self-image dissatisfaction - a discomfort experienced by someone about the aspects of their appearance (Slade, 1994). Participants testimonials have revealed that the exposure to daily "dream body" photos on fitness Instagram profile have negative effects on followers' satisfaction and perception about their own body image.

People commonly distort and relativize their perception about what a normal body should look like. Due to the dissemination on social networks of bodies that are increasingly leaner, shapely and distant from real bodies. Such distorted view makes "normal" bodies to be considered overweight and deviations from normality (Silva et al., 2018). People who are often in contact with this kind of Instagram profile come to believe that this body standard is the only way to achieve acceptable beauty. The inability to achieve bodies like the ones they are exposed to is a cause for dissatisfaction, frustration and guilt (Silva et al., 2018).

The relationship between exposure to media and body dissatisfaction seems to be mediated by social comparisons, mainly by appearance comparisons. Negative body image may result from self-comparisons to other people (Festinger, 1954). Studies supporting this theory show that the tendency of comparing oneself to other people alters individuals' satisfaction and perception about their bodies, mainly when the comparison is made to the bodies of celebrities, fitness models and bloggers - the greater the appearance comparisons, the greater the body dissatisfaction (Brown & Tiggemann, 2016; Eckler et al., 2017). The reason for these impacts lies on the central evaluative dimension that physical appearance makes up for most women in our society. Even though there are discrepancies between most women's bodies and the body considered ideal, this fact does not prevent women from accepting and internalizing this ideal; therefore, this process ends up producing negative emotional and behavioral consequences (Ferreira et al., 2011).

Accordingly, fitness Instagram profiles define certain beauty models embodied by society as a standard to be followed. This beauty standardization process inevitably causes people to lose part of their identity, since the search for body re(construction) rules out diversity possibilities. In addition, the worship of beauty works as a discrimination mechanism and as a nullification of subjectivity, since it imposes that everyone should be equal and have equal bodies (Silva et al., 2018).

In conclusion, our study showed that the body is seen as something that can be molded and the subject is considered solely responsible for the presentation of his physical appearance, just effort, dedication and discipline. In this perspective, the Brazilian fitness profiles modeled a new ideal female body pattern: thin, with delicate and visible muscles, without becoming masculine. This pattern induces women to seek the perfect body as a source of motivation, although such a struggle can produce feelings of failure, lack of control and commitment, which can lead to frustration and increase body dissatisfaction. In a sense, the social representations of the body impose behaviors

that must be incorporated into and on the body, so that all its subjectivities are disregarded to the detriment of what is socially valued.

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Fernanda Penaforte: Conceptualization, data curation, formal analysis, funding acquisition, investigation, methodology, project administration, supervision, validation, visualization, writing of the original draft, writing-review and editing.

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