



The Impact Of Exposure To Ideal-sized vs. Average-sized Influencers On Purchase Intention and Consumer Well-being In Fitness Industry

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Declaration

I declare that this dissertation that I have submitted to Dublin Business School for the award of MBA (General) is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated, where it is clearly acknowledged by references. Furthermore, this work has not been submitted for any other degree.

Signed: Ceren Oymak

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Abstract

The present study aimed to investigate how self-esteem, body-esteem and purchase intention was influenced by the body size of the influencer that has been presented in a promotion visual in the context of the fitness industry by using two different exposure conditions. 204 participants were recruited using the convenience sampling method, then randomly assigned to two groups and after the exposure either to ideal-sized (ISE) or average-sized influencers (ASE) who were promoting sportswear products, they were given the Body Esteem Scale for Adolescents and Adults (BESAA), Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES) and survey questions indicating the purchase intention. The sampling criteria was being 18-49 years of age. Results indicated that while self-esteem was higher for the ISE group, body esteem did not change across the two groups. Additionally, purchase intention was higher for the ASE group. Findings stress the importance of body positive and inclusive marketing in the fitness industry.

Key Words: body esteem, self-esteem, purchase intention, influencer marketing, fitness industry

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Context

Internet usage, participating in social media platforms, and all other aspects of digital information technologies became a huge part of the daily lives of people. Statistics show that while the active internet users are approximately 4.66 billion people, 4.2 billion of them are active social media users (Statista, 2020; Statista, 2021). This means that while almost 53% of the world's population is actively using social media. Since this is the case, many important elements of our daily lives are rapidly being integrated with digital contexts and naturally, representation in social media platforms is becoming much more significant. Since using media is an important tool for businesses to promote their products or services, the rise of information technologies and social media usage influenced many businesses to take part in social media platforms (Michopoulou& Moisa, 2019; Naylor et al., 2012; Schultz&Petier, 2013). It is evident that these new marketing strategies can be beneficial for organizations in many respects (Abed et al., 2016; Chen & Lee, 2018; Dwivedi et al., 2015; Dwivedi et al., 2021; Naylor et al., 2012).

This success may be due to the word-of-mouth (WOM) and specifically online WOM which are presented as efficient tools for marketing that can lead to more product sales (Ajina, 2019; Duan, Gu, and Winston, 2008; King et al., 2014; Lu, Chang & Chang, 2014). In terms of building consumer trust, these discussions suggest that digital platforms are useful tools since customers are able to share their evaluations with other customers. In that sense, as studies stress that using influencers rather than using celebrities for advertisements is more efficient due to the convenience of identification with influencers and trustworthiness, using influencers can be seen as an important element of marketing(Biaudet, 2017; Schouten,

Jannsen, and Verspaget, 2019; Zietek, 2016). An influencer can be defined as a person who is an opinion leader and targetting an unknown mass audience without the mediation of an institution or a third party (Gräve, 2017). In recent years, the use of influencers for marketing became a useful tool for businesses (Gräve, 2017). As a business field, the fitness industry is also a part of these developments. Research shows that using influencers for marketing in the fitness industry may help brands to expand their reach and increase their product sales while helping gyms to increase their clientele (Mooney, 2018; Tschirpig, 2020). Although this discussion may present a positive image and suggest that fitness brands and gyms can benefit from influencer marketing, there may be some ethical problems when the issue is viewed from a different perspective.

1.2 Problem Description

Even though social media marketing can be problematic for several ethical reasons (Jacobson, Gruzd and Garcia, 2020; Kumar, 2019), this study will focus on body image and self-esteem. Self-esteem is generally referred to as a personal psychological trait related to self-judgement and also it signifies one's emotional evaluation of self-worth (Alesi et al., 2012; Schunk, 1985). On the other hand, body-esteem or body image is seen as a sub-dimension of self-esteem which relates to one's self-evaluations about his/her body (Frost, 2017). Literature on social media use and mental health problems suggests that the former one does not predict the latter (Berryman, Ferguson and Negy, 2017; Coyne et al., 2019; Gao et al., 2020) However, several studies show that using social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram may lead to negative outcomes like low self-esteem, low body-esteem, and social anxiety (Ahadzadeh, Sharif and Ong, 2017; Chang, 2019; Dumas et al., 2020; Jiang & Ngien, 2020; Meier & Gray, 2014; Paramboukis, Skues and Wise, 2016; Pepin&Endresz, 2015; Schmuck et al.,

2019; Tran, Rosales and Copes, 2020). These discussions indicate that using social media for fitness industry marketing may have a potential for customer discomfort since fitness settings are also available for these kinds of outcomes (Corazza et al., 2019).

As some studies suggested this could be related to the comparison of one's body with celebrities and influencers (Chae, 2017; Dion, 2016). These problems are more significant for the women population since the media and social media have a huge effect on the construction of the ideal female body (Bareis, 2021; Quick and Byrd-Bredbenner, 2014). For example, many studies show that the influencer movement titled "fitspiration" which include social media posts to encourage women to do more exercise, had negative influences on women's self-esteem and body image, even for female athletes (Boyd, 2019; Goldstraw & Keegan, 2016; Norton, 2017; Poh & Chung, 2021; Puente, 2020). Besides the danger of psychological discomfort on the customer side, there is also a possible risk of decreased sales for brands and businesses. As shown in the literature, similarities between the body type of the advertised model and the customer are crucial for purchase behaviour (Abzari, Ghassemi & Vosta, 2014; Heinberg&Thompson, 1995). In that sense, a negative influence on body image carries the risk of decreased sales for brands (Yu et al., 2011).

It seems not surprising for such problems to be addressed by scholars because, since the beginning of the 20th century, fitness-related issues were seemed like in relation to body image and self-esteem. A study conducted by Phillip and Drummond (2001) investigated the body image perceptions, body satisfaction and exercise habits of six male fitness leaders and their professional attitudes. The study showed that although these leaders emphasized health and body positivity, their perceptions also highlighted thinness and fitness as a normative body standard that may result in a superior or patronizing approach for customer interaction

(Phillip & Drummond, 2001). Another paper written in the same year by Pirkko Markula elaborates on a similar issue for women. The article examines fitness magazines that address women and discusses the fact that although the magazines claim to encourage women to engage in fitness activities to cope with body image distortion (BID), the models they use for covers or visuals are in accordance with the ideal female body type which in turn positively influence BID among women due to exposure to unrealistic expectations, thus, making it pointless (Markula, 2001).

A more recent study by Lewallen and Behm-Morawitz (2016) found that exposure to fit and ideal models on Pinterest predicted upward social comparison. It may not seem like a bad influence since this generally inspires people to take action, however, it is a temporary outcome, after some time it can result in failure which demotivates them again (Tiggemann et al., 2009). Besides social comparison, Stollfuss (2020) investigated the fitness-related content on social media and analysed the response from the users. He found that although exposure to fitness influencers on social media may be related to self-regulation, motivation and inspiration, there seems to be also a connection to eating disorders, problematic body idealization and body dissatisfaction (Stollfuss, 2020). These issues are very crucial for public health since they are related to depression and dysfunctionality which may cost society both financially and psychologically (Bucchianeri & Neumark-Sztainer, 2014).

Regarding the discussion above, one may infer that influencer marketing in the fitness industry may be ethically problematic for consumer well-being, however, studies also indicate that there may be a danger for brands and businesses too. The relationship between body image and purchase intention is not a new topic to investigate. A study conducted by Jose Antonio Rosa and colleagues (2006) stressed that people who have lower body image prefer

buying their clothes online rather than physically going to the market due to concerns regarding their body and the size of the clothes. Similarly, another study by Rieke et al. (2016), showed that a negative body image has a negative influence on active purchase intention among millennial females. Concerning those findings, several studies confirmed that using average-sized models rather than thin models or ideal sized models seems more appealing to the customers and influences purchase intention positively (Bethell, 2020; Diedrichs & Lee, 2011). A study that seems more related to the subject of this paper was conducted by Cho et al. (2015). In their study, perceived usefulness (PU) of the dieting/fitness apps among college students were investigated and it is found that when evaluation of fitness and appearance was taken into account the PU was decreased; indicating a negative body image discouraged participants to use those apps (Cho et al., 2015).

When looking at these findings and discussions, it is apparent that although so much is known about these problems, there is still a need for further research. To sum up, the literature points that social media may be problematic psychological issues like low body-esteem and low self-esteem, fitness-related settings are susceptible for those kinds of problems, exposure to ideal sized models or influencers related to fitness may be associated to low self-esteem and body-esteem which may result in dramatic problems like depression and dysfunctionality. Moreover, literature also shows that contributing to those problems are posing a danger for brands and businesses in terms of decreased sales since low self-esteem and body-esteem seems to have a negative influence on purchase intention. However, these discussions are scattered and there seems to be a gap in the literature. For example, while some scholars claim that there is a need for research that investigates exposure to ideal-sized images on media platforms, including social media, and psychological health issues (Norton, 2017; Poh & Chung, 2021; Sokolava & Perez, 2021, Tiggemann & Aderberg, 2020),

others emphasize that there is an urgent need for studies that elaborates on ethical considerations related with influencer marketing (Hamulic & Eskesen, 2021; Taylor, 2020; Wellman et al., 2020; Wielki, 2020). Moreover, it is also stressed that while there is need for studies which investigates the relationship between influencer marketing and purchase intention (Hem, 2017), it is demonstrated that the relationship between body image and purchase intention also should be investigated (Carnevale, 2018; Shoenberger et al., 2019).

In that context, the purpose of the current study is to contribute to the filling of this gap while elaborate on the scattered discussions in a holistic way. In that sense, the overall research aim is to firstly, investigate the impacts of exposure to fitness-related influencer marketing content on social media on self-esteem and body esteem (Research objective 1), secondly, investigate the relationship between purchase intention towards the advertised products or services and the participants' self-esteem and body-esteem in relation to exposure to ideal sized influencers on social media (Research objective 2). As it is indicated by various studies, exposure to ideal-sized images may create psychological discomfort in terms of issues related to self-esteem and body satisfaction (Groesz et al., 2001; Tiggemann et al., 2004; Tiggemann et al., 2009; Tiggemann & Aderberg, 2020; Poh & Chung, 2021) and it is also shown that the same kind of exposure can negatively influence purchase intention and customers' perception of the brand while using average-sized models can have a positive impact on consumer attitudes (Bethell, 2020; Diedrichs & Lee, 2011; Rieke et al., 2016), it is hypothesized that participants who have exposure to the fitness-related influencer marketing content which include ideal sized influencers(thin-sized regarding females and muscular size regarding males) who have a fit body type, firstly would show lower self-esteem and body-esteem and secondly, would be less likely to buy the advertised products by those influencers when compared to participants who are exposed to average-sized influencers. To investigate

these claims and test the hypotheses, it is aimed to randomly assign 150-200 participants into two groups and expose each group to either visuals which promotes a fitness-related product that includes an ideal sized fitness influencer or an average-sized fitness influencer. In the context of this study, the term "ideal sized" refers to a fit body which is thin-sized in terms of female population and muscular size in terms of male population as evidence suggests (Groesz et al., 2001; Tiggemann et al., 2004; Tiggemann et al., 2009; Tiggemann & Aderberg, 2020; Poh & Chung, 2021). After the exposure, participants would be given questionnaires on self-esteem, body-esteem and a set of survey questions that would be asking them to indicate how likely they would purchase the products that has been advertised in the visuals.

In terms of academic implications it is important to point that internet is still a relatively new phenomenon, its influences and consequences are yet to be investigated. As mentioned above, there is a growing body of research on social media, influencers and the impacts of internet usage for marketing purposes, however, there is still a lack of studies on specific subjects such as the impacts of influencer marketing on consumer well-being or the downsides of influencer marketing. Firstly, since there is a call for studies to investigate ethical implications of influencer marketing in terms of consumer well-being (Hamulic & Eskesen, 2021; Taylor, 2020; Wellman et al., 2020; Wielki, 2020), the current study can be considered valuable to dwell on this subject and answering this call. Secondly, regarding the concern about self-esteem, body-esteem and purchase intention and influencer marketing, a closer look would enable us to see that studies conducted on topics similar to these are mostly dissertations and graduation theses. For example, although there are articles on how social media may influence users' psychological well-being, how fitness environments are susceptible to problems like body dissatisfaction or how body image can influence purchase intention (e.g. Ahadzadeh, Sharif and Ong, 2017; Bethell, 2020; Diedrichs & Lee, 2011; Chang,

2019; Dumas et al., 2020; Jiang&Ngien, 2020; Kim et al., 2015; Meier&Gray, 2014; Paramboukis, Skues and Wise, 2016; Stollfuss, 2020; Pepin&Endresz, 2015; Schmuck et al., 2019; Tran, Rosales and Copes, 2020), these discussions are scattered and there is a need for studies investigating these subjects in a unified approach that stresses the impacts of influencer marketing on self-esteem, body-esteem and purchase intention in the fitness industry.

On the other hand, there are studies conducted by new scholars in the form of dissertations on these subjects in a relatively holistic approach. It is possible to come across studies investigating subjects like the impact of influencer marketing in the fitness industry on consumers' trust, the relationship between consumer's perception of attractiveness, purchase intention, and body image, the Influence of body-positive advertising on self-esteem, purchase intention and brand loyalty (Bethell, 2020; Ichسانی, 2016). Especially one significant master's thesis study conducted by Lara-Charmaine Bulka (2020) investigated impacts of exposure to images of influencers, who have a fit and thin body type, on women participants in terms of body satisfaction, mood and brand attitude in the context of "fitspiration" movement; these influencers were sponsored by Puma and Nike to advertise their products. Results indicated that exposure to those images negatively affected the body satisfaction and mood among participants, moreover, although these influences did not directly effect brand attitude, the brand attitude towards Puma influenced positively by the pictures when there were no negative effects in body satisfaction (Bulka,2020). This study proposes an important piece of evidence since while it elaborates on negative psychological outcomes of influencer marketing regarding consumer well-being while stressing investigating its impacts on sales by also investigating brand attitudes of Puma and Nike, however, the sample only contained women, therefore, there is a need for additional research that also

includes men. In that context, the current study can be useful since it aims to further contribute to the compensation of this gap and provide a base that hopefully stimulate future research.

Besides the academic implications, this research also can be considered as a potential guide for fitness-related businesses since the subject of the study is closely related to the relationship with potential customers. As Duncan Brown and Nick Hayes (2008) stress in their book, traditional marketing strategies are being outdated and the need for new marketing strategies is undeniable. In that context, digital marketing presented itself as a useful tool since the '90s (Kamal, 2016). Marketing through digital contexts enabled companies to engage in better campaign management, better marketing design and attract higher attention from individuals (Joshi & Mandal, 2017). As information technologies and digital instruments evolved and gave way to social media, these marketing strategies evolved accordingly. As a sub-division of digital marketing strategies, influencer marketing was confirmed to be a beneficial tool for companies and businesses in the last two centuries and this strategy started to dominate the field with a promising potential for the future of marketing (Kadekova & Holiencinova, 2018). Studies show that users on social media platforms such as Instagram appeal more to Instagram celebrities (influencers) when compared to traditional celebrities in relation to trustworthiness (Jin et al., 2019).

Although these discussions point that influencer marketing and social media is beneficial for companies and businesses, there is a risk for unethical marketing practices and decreased sales. Firstly, since exposure to ideal sized images of influencers are prone to favour stress among consumers in terms of low self-esteem and body dissatisfaction (Groesz et al., 2001; Tiggemann et al., 2004; Tiggemann et al., 2009; Tiggemann & Aderberg, 2020; Poh &

Chung, 2021) and these issues are risk factors for more severe issues like obesity, eating disorders, depression and dysfunctionality (Bucchianeri & Neumark-Sztainer, 2014; Wilksch et al., 2014) and since marketing ethics requires that marketing strategies should not be causing harm and decrease the quality of life (Ferrel, 2021), it is possible to conclude that influencer marketing may carry the risk of unethical marketing practice. Secondly, since advertising using ideal-sized models may have a negative influence on purchase intention, while using average sized models can positively affect brand attitude and purchase motivation, using ideal-sized influencers for marketing in fitness industry may be problematic regarding the risk of decreased sales (Bethell, 2020; Diedrichs & Lee, 2011; Rieke et al., 2016). Moreover, since it is also indicated that ethical marketing can create financial value, it is important for brands and businesses to take part in ethical marketing (Henisz et al., 2019; Mishra, 2020). Regarding these discussions, this study aims to explore further and take the risks and possible negative outcomes of these issues into account while suggesting fitness-related businesses to reconsider their marketing strategies in terms of both consumer well-being and the risk of customer loss. By doing this, the current study may prevent companies to take part in unethical marketing while re-shape their future marketing strategies and expanding their customer capacity.

1.3 Research Questions

- Does exposure to ideal-sized influencers who promotes fitness-related products have a negative impact on self-esteem and body-esteem?
- Does exposure to ideal-sized influencers who promotes fitness-related products have a negative impact on purchase intention?

1.4 Research Objectives

- Detecting a significant difference between the self-esteem and body-esteem scores of two groups of participants; ones who are exposed to ideal-sized influencers who promote a sportswear product and ones who are exposed to average-sized influencers who also promote a sportswear product.
- Detecting a significant difference in terms of purchase intention between two groups of participants; ones who are exposed to ideal-sized influencers who promote a sportswear product and ones who are exposed to average-sized influencers who also promote a sportswear product. Also looking for correlations regarding the relationship between body-esteem, self-esteem scores and purchase intention responses in order to ground the difference between groups if detected.

1.5 Hypotheses

- There will be a significant differences between self-esteem and body-esteem scores of two groups; ones who are exposed to ideal-sized influencers will have significantly lower self-esteem and body-esteem scores than the ones who are exposed to average-sized influencers.
- There will be a significant difference between two groups in terms of purchase intention; ones who are exposed to ideal-sized influencers will have significantly lower purchase intention than the ones who are exposed to average-sized influencers.

CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

This section is aimed to form a ground for further discussions and have an overview in terms of the literature about the claims of the current study. Since the purpose of the present study is to investigate how self-esteem, body-esteem and purchase intention was influenced by the body size of the influencer that has been presented in a promotion visual in the context of influencer marketing in fitness industry, it is imperative to define and elaborate on these topics to have a clearer understanding.

In that sense, first it should be stressed how digital marketing evolved throughout the years, from its early roots to present day social media and influencer marketing. Secondly, it should be defined that what self-esteem and body esteem are as psychological concepts and what they may imply in terms of customer well-being in relation to social media and influencer marketing. Then, it should be shown how fitness emerged as an industry and how it engages in influencer marketing and why the union of these two elements can result in both unethical marketing practices regarding the customer well-being and decreased sales regarding the businesses in fitness industry, by stressing the negative impacts of use of ideal-sized models on customers' self-esteem, body esteem and purchase intention.

After this process, it is expected to find important grounds and confirmations for the hypotheses of the present study and build the following discussions on this ground. Before dwelling into the subject more comprehensively, it is suitable to start with how digital contexts was formed and how social media came to be.

2.1 Internet Usage and Rise of Social Media Marketing

After the emergence of the World Wide Web in 1991, people saw that computers can exchange information via using networks and these networks can be connected with each other on a large scale that forms a basis for a cyber environment that can be used for common people from all around the world; which we call today Internet (Dijk, 2013). These developments enabled people to form online communities using Weblogs, e-mail services, list-servers and by that time it was certain that the world has changed dramatically (Dijk, 2013). Naturally, businesses tried to adapt to these new conditions and made big investments to represent themselves on the Internet and provide online services, however, there was a huge disappointment which was caused by an event in the early 2000s called "the bursting of dot-com bubble" (Edwards, 2016; O'Reilly, 2005). The hype that suggested investing on Internet will be beneficial for companies failed dramatically since companies could not compensate for their expenses and this caused big financial losses (Edwards, 2016).

According to Tim O'Reilly, this caused a paradigm shift and after a short period of time, the era of Web 2.0 began (O'Reilly, 2005). In the beginning, the Internet was seen as a platform that individuals and companies can create online content, applications that users can benefit from passively, however, something changed in the early 2000s and previous practices that can be called the era of Web 1.0 gave way to new practices (Kaplan&Haenlein, 2010). The main difference of this new era called Web 2.0 is user generated content (UGC); although personal websites were common in the Web 1.0 era, these can still be regarded as content publishing practices that were replaced by collaborative platforms like wikis and blogs that are being changed continuously and interactively by users (Albors et al., 2008; Kaplan&Haenlein, 2010). Thus, the advent of Web 2.0 changed online practices drastically by contributing to the

transformation of Internet users from passive readers or consumers to active content creators which formed the basis of what we call social media today (Gritzalis et al., 2014).

It seems like Hoffman and Novak (1997) predicted this change. They underline that traditional marketing model is one-to-many process which indicates the common features of mass media; a firm or a company transmits the content that promotes their products or services through a medium that can reach high number of potential customers (Hoffman & Novak, 1997). In that context, consumers are mere "audience" that only receives this content, however, with the implementation of the Internet, this paradigm needs to change since this new digital context enables businesses to adopt a new way of marketing practice (Hoffman & Novak, 1997). This new model is many-to-many model of marketing; in contrast with traditional style, this model enables firms to interact with each other while providing content for the medium, moreover, while this new model also enables customers to communicate with each other using the medium, it even enables them to produce commercially-oriented content for the medium (Hoffman & Novak, 1997). They stress that since this new medium makes it possible for these new marketing strategies a paradigm shift in marketing practices is necessary for the future of marketing (Hoffman & Novak, 1997).

As a term that gained popularity around the year 2005, social media can be referred to as a sum of participatory, conversational and continuously changing online communities (Tuten, 2008). To be more specific, Kaplan and Haenlein define social media as "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content."(Kaplan&Haenlein, 2010). Since the late '90s, platforms like Blogger (1999), Wikipedia (2001), Myspace (2003), Facebook (2004), Flickr (2004), YouTube (2005), Twitter

(2006) changed the conception of the Internet and introduced concepts like microblogging, video and picture sharing, chatting, videoconferencing (Dijk, 2013). Today, applications like Instagram and Snapchat are widely used and became a huge part of the daily lives of billions of people and as mentioned earlier more than half of the population of the world is actively using social media applications since participating in those platforms are even easier with the developments in information technologies such as smartphones. Therefore, social media became a beneficial context for businesses and companies to advertise their products or services since these new developments made it easy to create and distribute content (Zarella, 2009). For example, without the mediation of distributors or publishers, a YouTube video or an Instagram post can have millions of views for free which presents itself a huge opportunity for marketing and advertising (Zarella, 2009).

Since this is the case, it is important to elaborate on digital marketing and social media marketing. Related to the discussion above, according to Mandal and Joshi (2017), digital marketing is an essential part of the strategy for many businesses and companies; even small businesses are aware of its importance and the advantages like cheap and efficient marketing methods cannot be ignored. As mentioned in a literature review by Alves et al. (2016), according to eMarketer in 2013, many businesses and brands are increasingly investing in social media platforms for marketing purposes. Besides the empirical evidence that will be elaborated on, later on, benefits like mobility, advanced statistical data and decreased expenses are also may be seen as important elements regarding the reasons behind increasing investments (Kamal, 2016).

These are not surprising developments since they can be grounded in historical evaluation of digital marketing. For example, in their study, Lamberton and Stephen (2016)

analyzed the body of research that targets digital, social media and mobile marketing from 2000 to 2015 and they found three evolving themes throughout the years; the internet as a platform for individual expression, internet as search and decision support tool and internet as a marketing intelligence tool. Firstly, internet is a platform for individual expression since customers can communicate with each other as a member of a community either as audience members or content creators, secondly, it is a search and decision support tool since it enables consumers to come across a wide range of variety of products and gain insight about which one is most suitable for them and thirdly, it is a marketing intelligence tool as while it helps consumers to find the products and services that is suitable for them it also enables marketers to increase customer loyalty and satisfaction (Lamberton & Stephen, 2016). Furthermore, another study by Appel et al. (2019) predicts that social media will become a context for everyone and influencers will play an important role in near future while predicting that these developments would eventually lead to marketing in enhanced, sensory-rich cyber contexts like virtual reality in which the line between online and offline will be blurred and that the artificial intelligence would play a major role for marketing strategies in far future (Appel et al., 2019).

In the growing body of literature on social media marketing, it is frequently discussed that using social media is beneficial for businesses and companies in many respects (Dijk, 2013; Dwivedi et al., 2015; Leonardi et al., 2013; Schultz&Peltier, 2013; Zarella, 2009). For example, research conducted by Chen and Lee (2018) shows that using Snapchat for social media marketing for young consumers can be evaluated as successful because the users had positive attitudes towards the products that were advertised on that platform. Similarly, a study that investigates the relationship between social media usage and consumer decision making by Nash (2019) stresses that social media usage increased consumer motivation.

Another study by Tafesse (2019) also indicated that using transformational messages in social media posts enhances consumer engagement which implies that the usage of social media can help brands to increase their sales.

When one tries to understand the reasons behind those findings, he/she can easily realise that a major factor is consumer trust. According to a study conducted by Constantinides et al.(2010), besides the fact that social media can be useful for creating a network, it is also stressed that it is useful in terms of building consumer trust since social media users evaluate the information shared on social media reliable. Related to this topic, another study by Abed et al. (2016) also indicates that businesses can build consumer trust via using social media and decrease the feelings of uncertainty among consumers. These findings may be related to word of mouth (WOM) marketing and specifically online (WOM) since there is also evidence that people have a more positive attitude towards the products that are mentioned in sponsored blog posts which in turn may have a positive influence on purchase intention.

Regarding the discussion above, with the rise of information technologies and the advent of the Internet, the daily lives of people changed drastically and as a part of these developments, brands and companies also emphasize presenting themselves in cyber contexts and providing users online services. Moreover, the paradigm shift in the early 2000s was also marked as an important turning point since the Internet became a place for collaborative and interactive content created by all users. The emergence of social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram carried the issue to another level and all companies and businesses considered social media as an important part of their marketing strategy since it has many advantages like low expenses and distribution without the mediators. Related to

these facts, many studies empirically supports the fact that usage of social media platforms is beneficial for expanding the scope of their customers and building consumer trust.

2.2 History and Usage of Influencer Marketing

After talking about the usage of social media in marketing, it is now necessary to talk about influencer marketing as a part of these marketing strategies for the purposes of the current study. Even though the Internet and social media are relatively new concepts, influencers and influencer marketing are not. In his book called *The Tipping Point* (2000), Malcolm Gladwell investigates how an idea, social behaviour or a trend goes viral and he elaborates on a moment he calls the tipping point which turns trends into epidemics. He explains that some people can contribute to the spread of a trend which is called connectors, mavens and salesmen. While connectors have a big network of people which they can use to spread an idea, mavens are knowledgeable people who share their knowledge and influence others, lastly, salesmen are charismatic leaders that can influence crowds with their skills. Although these people are very different from our understanding of social media influencers, it is easy to detect parallels.

Inspired by Gladwell's work, Duncan Brown and Nick Hayes (2008) discuss Gladwell's ideas in the context of marketing and stress that traditional marketing strategies are broken and the importance of influencing the decision making of consumers are disregarded. In that sense, they carefully elaborate on the issue and discuss topics regarding the concept of influencer and how it can be used for marketing strategies in their book *Influencer Marketing* (2008). They stress the use of influential figures for marketing purposes and explain how this strategy can be used for businesses and companies to advertise their products or services. Even though they also do not define an influencer as we understand them today due to the

year that it was written, they predict the use of social media as an important aspect and they also make efficient predictions about important elements of influencer marketing today such as how influencers build their network and how they can be used with a credible and genuine message that would influence other people.

Today, the definition of an influencer is very specific considering the excessive use of social media. An influencer can be defined as a person who has significantly high numbers of followers on social media and is sponsored by brands and businesses to promote their products and services (as cited in Kadekova&Holiencinova, 2018). Since influencers are considered as people with authority, knowledge and popularity, they can affect their followers' and also other social media users' purchase decisions by using platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, Facebook and Snapchat (Kadekova&Holiencinova, 2018). Although Kadekova and Holiencinova include celebrities as a sub-category of influencers, according to users of social media, they are not the same and the popularity of celebrities as influencers are waning (Kadekova&Holiencinova, 2018; Schouten et al., 2019).

Consequently, there is a growing emphasis on using social media influencers as marketing tools. As mentioned before, influencer marketing is not exactly a new trend, however, with the rise of social media, as the definition of influencers change, the definition of influencer marketing also changed accordingly. In that sense, influencer marketing can be defined as the practice which involves promoting products or services through people who have the power to affect the opinions of other social media users (consumers)by uploading posts on social media platforms (Lu&Yuan, 2019; Yodel, 2017). Thus, the strategy of influencer marketing is being acknowledged by more and more companies and businesses (De Veirman et al., 2017; Lou&Yuan, 2019). According to statistics, the investments done by companies

have been increasing dramatically in recent years (Duran, 2017). Moreover, an infographic created by St. Joseph Communications (2018) predicted that a significant amount of marketers are planning to increase their influencer marketing budget in the future years ("Digital information world," 2018). Related to those discussions, a survey conducted concerning marketing professionals in 2018 illustrates that while 94% of the respondents consider this marketing strategy as a useful one, 79% of them has a plan to use their budget for influencer marketing strategies (Relatable, 2019).

When it comes to empirical evidence, one can see that the subject is a relatively new topic and although there are not many studies conducted on this topic, there are some important findings. A study conducted by Lim et al. (2017) indicated that the source of the attractiveness of the influencer has a positive effect on consumer attitude which in turn positively influences the purchase intention. Similar results were found by Lou and Yuan (2018); research stresses that influencers' trustworthiness, attractiveness, and similarity to the followers positively affect followers' trust in terms of branded content on social media. Related to this issue, several studies suggested that using influencers who have high followers on social media platforms such as Instagram rather than traditional celebrities for marketing is more useful (Jin et al., 2018; Schouten et al., 2019). Since the gap between an influencer and an average user is smaller than the gap between a celebrity and an average user, people show a positive attitude in terms of trustworthiness (Jin et al., 2018; Schouten et al., 2019). Another study also stressed that the credibility of an influencer is crucial in terms of psychological ownership of the product or the service (Pick, 2020). Most of the findings revolve around trustworthiness and credibility in terms of content, thus, as mentioned before, the effects of WOM or online WOM/eWOM easily comes to mind and it is empirically supported that these marketing strategies are beneficial tools (Ajina, 2019; Duana, Gu, and

Winston, 2008; King et al., 2014; Lu, Chang & Chang, 2014). Moreover, since social media platforms are online spaces in which consumers can communicate and share their opinions about products and services and since influencers appear to consumers in a sense of similarity, this association between influencer marketing and WOM seems to be significant as many studies suggested (Lou&Yuan; 2018; Pick, 2020; Schouten et al., 2019).

Considering these discussions and empirical evidence, it is possible to suggest that influencer marketing presents itself as a useful, contemporary tool for businesses and brands to consider for their marketing strategies. Since social media platforms provide opportunities for user generated content (UGC) and many users consider influencers as fellow social media users, this contributes to the trustworthiness and credibility of the information given by influencers in their social media posts. Thus, as future research would also indicate, there are opportunities for scholars and practitioners to dwell on this subject.

2.3 Fitness Industry and Its Marketing Strategies Including Influencer Marketing

Our understanding of modern fitness practices can be traced back to pre-historic times (Dalleck&Kravitz, 2002). Since the dawn of humanity, humans had to hunt animals and gather food from the plants around them, therefore, a healthy body was drastically important in terms of survival (Dalleck&Kravitz, 2002). Even the most influential ancient Greek philosophers saw physical training as an important part of human life (Dalleck&Kravitz, 2002). According to Hilvoorde (2008), sports and formal physical education was originated in the early nineteenth century, however, fitness as a practice is mostly can be dated back to the late nineteenth century (Hilvoorde, 2008). As most parts of the daily life of people changed after the sociological and technological developments in this period, the conceptualization of fitness and body also changed. New developments like industrialization, secularization and

urbanization seem to play a significant role in terms of increased attention for fit and healthy bodies (Hilvoorde, 2008). These political, scientific and technological developments also contributed to the globalization of sports and fitness in the nineteenth century (Hilvoorde, 2008).

Throughout the 20th century and the early 21st century, a paradigm shift occurred in terms of the conceptualization of fitness and body ideals; according to Hilvoorde (2008), this shift was from "acrobatic, distant body" to "commercialized bodies" that people were exposed through advertisements and other mediums. From that point in history, fitness and body ideals became closely related to masculinity and femininity (Stern, 2008). While especially for women fitness was both related to women empowerment and also it was related to imposing societal standards of sexual attractiveness and beauty, for men, it was related to the presentation of masculinity and strongness (Stern, 2008). As scholars indicate, this was also related to "body-capital" which is the value attached to a person body that can be exchanged with economical, cultural or other kinds of capital (Bourdieu, 2013; Hutson, 2013). Looking at these discussions, it is suitable for us to infer that the spread of fitness clubs, gyms and fitness activities is closely related to sociological factors. Besides these implications, as a result of consumer culture in the United States, fitness was also related to health in terms of problems regarding obesity (Stern, 2008). In the light of these developments, fitness became an important industry in the late 20th century and still keeps its importance in the age of social media.

The research on marketing in the fitness industry suggests that consumer loyalty and satisfaction is very important (Garcia-Fernandez et al., 2014). One of the strategies that can be followed to create this loyalty is internal marketing (Hurley, 2004). Internal marketing can

be defined as “the task of successfully hiring, training and motivating able employees to serve the customer well” (Kotler, 1991). By hiring capable employees and providing customers with a good service, gyms can present a good image to potential customers (Hurley, 2005). Related to internal marketing, it is also found that cleanliness, music selection, location of the gym, scent management and even lightning can affect customer satisfaction (Heroux, 2017). Regarding these discussions, it is easy to see that the main strategies of fitness clubs or gyms are generally revolving around customer satisfaction and loyalty, moreover, with the personal trainers and customization opportunities, these strategies can be seen effective in terms of expanding the clientele (Garcia-Fernandez et al., 2014; Maguire, 2001). However, there is also an emphasis on the importance of social media usage, making collaborations with other companies or parties and creating digital content in order to attract new customers (Nosik, 2020; "8 online fitness marketing strategies for 2021," 2020). Although social media marketing in the fitness industry seems to be a relatively new topic and the studies conducted on this subject is scarce, it is found that using social media for marketing in the fitness industry is beneficial for businesses all around the world since they increase customer engagement, moreover, the emphasis on social media is increasing in recent years (Anderson et al., 2021; Kamau, 2019; Panasenکو et al., 2018; Pataria, 2015; Yildiz et al., 2021).

Related to these developments, using influencers for marketing in the fitness industry seems to be a new trend that can help businesses to increase customer engagement. In a report that has been posted in 2021, a number of 1000 influencers who were in collaboration with over 100 fitness apparel or nutrition brands and it can be seen that the most popular platforms for those influencers are YouTube and Instagram, moreover, it appears that Tik Tok is the best platform to encourage customer engagement ("state of influencer marketing in the fitness & nutrition industry," 2021). Another report also states that using features like using

IGTV, giving influencers autonomy and providing them with gifts of samples of products can contribute to the authenticity of the relationship between brand, influencer and customers ("Influencer marketing in the health and fitness industry [Report 2020]," 2021).

As Alex Rawitz (2020) indicates there is a dramatic increase in terms of online content related to the fitness industry. Especially throughout the year 2020 due to also COVID-19 pandemic, businesses in the fitness industry formed collaborations with increasing numbers of influencers since exercising from home also became significant which in turn contributed to the development of influencer marketing (Rawitz, 2020). Although using fitness influencers to attract attention to the brand is considered a good strategy (Bastos et al., 2021), there are a low number of studies conducted on this subject, however, it can be inferred that there is a growing interest since new scholars in the field are investigating this subject (Bektas, 2021; Mooney, 2019; Kamau, 2019; Tschirpig, 2020). In his study, Bektas (2021) indicates that although using influencers for the marketing of fitness-related nutrition is profitable, it is important to determine clear terms for each party to prevent loss of credibility. Kamau (2019) also states that all fitness trainers that he included in his study evaluate posting fitness-related content on social media as an important element of their jobs and they have a positive attitude towards using influencers and social media marketing. Moreover, the empirical evidence in terms of the benefits of influencer marketing in the fitness industry suggests that while gyms can expand their clientele using influencers, it is also extremely beneficial for brands and businesses to promote their products and services using fitness influencers (Mooney, 2019; Tschirpig, 2020).

The discussion in this section indicates that fitness is not a new phenomenon, however, it changed throughout the developments in the history of human civilizations. In the late

nineteenth century, fitness started to become a part of daily life via physical education and sociological developments like urbanization, industrialization and secularization. Although in the early 20th century it was mostly related to health and well-being, commercialization of body ideals contributed to the fact that fitness' relationship with body-capital and gender roles. At the end of the 20th century, fitness appeared as an important industry that affected millions of people. Consequently, marketing in this industry also gained utter importance and with the technological developments in the 2000s, social media and social media influencers started to play an important role concerning the promotion of products and services. Empirical evidence suggests that using fitness influencers can be drastically beneficial for the industry.

2.4 Social Media Usage, Self-Esteem, Body-Esteem and Ethical Considerations for Fitness Industry

Social media and marketing can be problematic in terms of ethical considerations for several reasons. For example, Jacobson et al. (2021), stressed the importance of marketing comfort regarding the problems that may result from social media marketing. The term refers to the well being of customers concerning the personal data usage of the customers for targeted marketing (Jacobson et al., 2021). However, the current study will be focusing on the possible psychological problems that may result from social media and influencer marketing, rather than privacy. The empirical evidence on the relationship between mental health and social media usage seems to be mixed (e.g. Berryman et al., 2017; Coyne et al., 2020; Gao et al., 2020). For example, Berryman et al. (2017) investigated the relationship between time spend on social media and mental health problems among young adults and indicated that social media is a poor predictor of mental health problems, therefore, the assumption that social media can cause mental health problems seems to be problematic. Similarly, in their study which they investigated the relationship between social media and mental health

problems in the context of 8-year longitudinal research, Coyne et al. (2020) stressed that when examined individually, participants' mental health problems neither increased as they spend more time on social media nor decreased as they spend diminished time on social media throughout their adolescent period. On the other hand, Gao et al. (2020) asserted that there was a significant relationship between mental health problems and social media usage; especially anxiety. These discussions emphasize that there is a need for a more specific elaboration since the usage of social media can be related to many aspects of psychological processes. Although evidence suggests that social media does not predict mental health problems, it seems that it has a relation with self-esteem and body image as it will be discussed followingly.

The relationship between social media usage and self-esteem is a popular topic among scholars and evidence show that this relationship may be problematic. According to the study conducted by Dumas et al. (2020), young adults who lack peer approval suffer from low self-esteem which in turn contributes to the behaviour of deceptive like-seeking on social media. The study stresses that young adults present an unrealistic portrait of themselves on social media to gain likes which negatively affects self-esteem further; indicating that social media usage for people with low self-esteem may prone to psychological problems (Dumas et al., 2020). These negative outcomes seem also related to the social comparison that is favoured by social media (Jiang&Ngien, 2020; Schmuck et al., 2019). While Jiang and Ngien indicated that frequent Instagram use was associated with high levels of social comparison which was also related to increased social anxiety and decreased self-esteem, Schmuck et al. (2019) emphasized that Facebook use was prone to stimulate negative self-perceptions via upward social comparison in their longitudinal research. Ahadzadeh et al. (2017) also elaborate on the issue in relation to body satisfaction. As a result of the online survey conducted by researchers

on 273 university students which was aimed to investigate the relationship between Instagram usage and concepts like self-esteem and body satisfaction, researchers indicated that body dissatisfaction was related to Instagram usage and the results were even more apparent for participants with lower self-esteem (Ahadzadeh et al., 2017).

Regarding this issue, Perloff's (2014) transactional model of social media and body image presents a useful theoretical framework. According to Perloff (2014), individual vulnerability factors like low self-esteem, thin-ideal internalization, depression and perfectionism drives people to seek gratification on social media platforms, thus, the usage of social media platforms usually favours these problems and with the mediation of factors like social comparison, online normative influences, this results in increased body dissatisfaction and negative influences on vulnerability factors mentioned before which in turn again favours social media usage and contribution to those problems. Another theoretical framework that can explain these phenomena is grounded in Festinger's (1954) social comparison theory. This theory stresses that people determine their social worth and personal worth on the basis of a comparison between themselves and other people. While it is possible for people to find motivation to improve themselves, it is also possible that they may experience negative feelings like dissatisfaction, guilt and worthlessness due to the comparison (Festinger, 1954). In that context Vogel et al. (2014) investigated the effects of social media use using social comparison theory and emphasized that social media is a suitable platform for people to use upward social comparison to determine their self worth, accordingly, it is indicated that people whose profiles shows signs of upwards social comparison have lower self-esteem and self evaluations.

Many studies are supporting those claims and there is very little room for doubt to question the negative impact of social media on body image (Andsager, 2014). For example, a study conducted by Pepin and Endresz (2015) which aimed to explore social media's influence on the body image of young adults indicated that social media pressured participants to lose weight, look more attractive or muscular and change their appearances. Moreover, the study stressed that there is a relationship between Instagram and body image concerns, while Pinterest and body shame seems also related (Pepin&Endresz, 2015). Furthermore, a study by Haferkamp and Kramer (2011) also showed that exposure to images of a person who was evaluated as an attractive same-sex other on social media influenced body images of undergraduate students negatively, while their moods were also influenced negatively.

Even though the studies mentioned focused on both males and females, the issue is more dramatic in terms of the women population. According to the objectification theory, the fact that media is constantly sexually objectifying females, have negative impacts on women by training them to self-objectify (Friederickson&Roberts, 1997). Therefore, increased exposure to objectified women favours this self-objectification (Morry&Staska, 2001). These issues are mostly associated with body shame and eating disorders among the women population (Harrison&Frederickson, 2003). Following these discussions, Meier and Gray (2014) found that time spent on photo-related activities on Facebook is associated with body dissatisfaction, self-objectification and thin-ideal internalization. Goldshaw and Keegan (2016) also elaborate on the issue in relation to the "fitspiration" trend which is an influencer movement that includes uploading social media posts about fitness to encourage women to do more exercise. As researchers suggest, participants admitted that the images they have been exposed to altered their perspective of reality with its unrealistic content, moreover, research also shows that most of the participants reported low self-esteem concerning the

content they have been exposed to (Goldshaw&Keegan, 2016). Similarly, another study by Puente (2020) indicated that exposure to the fitness influencers in the context of digital content concerning the "fitspiration" trend, favoured reports of lower self-esteem and low body satisfaction among female athletes.

Besides the context of social media, as stressed earlier in the previous sections, fitness is closely related to appearance and body ideals (Van Hilvoorde, 2008). Therefore it is no surprise that empirical evidence shows that body dissatisfaction is closely related to motivation regarding changing appearance and losing weight (LePage&Crowther, 2010). Moreover, problems like eating disorders are also very common in fitness settings (Bratland-Sanda & Sundgot-Borgen, 2014). Although these findings seem to be stating the obvious and are not surprising, there is also strong evidence regarding fitness-related contexts and their susceptibility to unhealthy behaviour. For example, a study conducted by Engeln, Shavlik and Daly (2018) stresses that appearance-based comments of the fitness instructors significantly increased body dissatisfaction among women. Furthermore, another study by Wasilenko, Kulik and Wanic (2007) also demonstrated that exposure to fit peers favoured the decrease in body satisfaction in gym environments when compared to exposure to an unfit peer. This effect is also emphasized by Rothwell and Desmond's (2018) study in terms of exposure to imagery related to fitness. Those mentioned negative outcomes like body dissatisfaction can develop even further to body dysmorphic disorder and exercise addiction. A study conducted on this topic by Corazza et al.(2019) dwells on this topic and demonstrates that there is a dramatic risk of exercise addiction, appearance anxiety and body dysmorphia among international gym users and stresses that this issue needs supervision for the protection of vulnerable individuals.

Regarding the discussion presented in this section, we can state that although social media and mental health problems are not directly related, empirical evidence suggests that social media use, lower self-esteem and low body esteem seems to be related. Problems resulting from this issue might be related to social comparison, thin-ideal internalization and body dissatisfaction. When looking at the fitness-related contexts, it is apparent that these problems are also common in those settings. The commonalities between problems related to social media and fitness settings seem to be related to exposure to attractive, ideal sized individuals which creates discomfort among people with low self-esteem and low body satisfaction. As also stressed by Bair et al.(2012), exposure to images of thin-ideal sized models and individuals can put people in vulnerable conditions. Furthermore, since problems like body dissatisfaction and low self-esteem can even develop further resulting in depression and dysfunctionality which is a crucial problem for psychological health (Bucchianeri & Neumark-Sztainer, 2014), the use of thin-ideal sized influencers for marketing in the fitness industry may be prone to favouring psychological discomfort among customers and creating an ethical problem in terms of consumer well-being. In that context, the possible outcomes of this issue should be closely investigated.

2.5 Purchase Intention, Self-Esteem and Body Image

As mentioned earlier, purchase intention in relation to social media, body image and self-esteem is also an important topic for the current study. In the previous sections, it was mentioned that the use of social media and influencers seems to be beneficial for businesses to positively influence purchase intention (Chetioui et al., 2020; Lim et al., 2017). Some studies even showed that usage of a thin-sized model has a positive impact on the purchase intention of customers (Borges, 2011; Polonsky & Kareklas, 2011). However, this comes with a cost. For

example, the study conducted by Polonsky and Kareklas (2011) indicated that even though participants showed higher levels of purchase intention when exposed to a computer-enhanced photograph of a model, they also showed lower levels of self-esteem. Similarly, another study by Markus Rach (2021) found that while plastic surgery-related content on TikTok uploaded by physicians influenced purchase intent positively, user generated content in terms of digital content related to plastic surgery decreased users' self-perception. These findings indicate that in some cases, although, customers are negatively affected by the exposure to online content related to self-esteem and body image, their purchase intention still can be increased since they will be motivated to ease the discomfort stimulated by the exposure. However, this might not be the case for all instances.

A study conducted by Rosa, Garbarino and Malter (2006) asserted that body esteem and body-related information can influence purchase intention regarding the products that require body involvement. The study showed that people with low body esteem would less likely to engage in the shopping of clothes in a face to face environment (Rosa et al., 2006). These findings were also supported by Kim, Kang and Lee (2015); they found that body-esteem and online shopping for clothes have a negative relationship, meaning, people who have lower body-esteem would likely prefer online shopping rather than face to face engagement. The relationship between purchase intention and body image is also stressed by the study conducted by Cho, Lee, Kim and Park (2015). The study aimed to investigate the perceived usefulness (PU) of diet/fitness apps among college students. The study showed that the relationship between body image and PU of those apps were negative, indicating that participants with negative body image would more likely to evaluate those apps as useless (Cho et al., 2015).

The issue becomes more apparent when a comparison between the customer and the advertised model has been taken into account. It is not a new topic that exposure to thin-ideal sized models can stimulate stress and anxiety. In a study conducted by Heinberg and Thompson (1995), it is demonstrated that exposure to commercials that include thin models induced lower body satisfaction. Related to the issue, Yu, Damhorst and Russell's (2011) study examined how individuals' body images influenced their attitudes towards a fashion brand related to their perceptions of attractiveness and similarity thin-idealized and nonidealized sized models and found that thin models are not useful for creating a positive brand attitude when compared to average-sized models (Yu et al., 2011). This indicates that individuals perceptions of their own body influenced their attitude concerning the similarity between them and the advertised model (Yu et al., 2011). Related to these discussions, Clayton, Ridgway and Hendrickse (2017) also found that women reported higher body satisfaction when exposed to plus-sized models due to the least amount of social comparison, however, this effect decreased gradually with the exposure to an average-sized model and thin sized model accordingly. In that sense, some studies suggested that using average-sized models rather than thin-ideal sized models can be more beneficial for brands and businesses since those models can appeal more to consumers while increasing brand loyalty and purchase intention (Bethel, 2020; Diedrichs&Lee, 2011).

Those discussions stress that purchase intention seems related to self-esteem and especially body image. Since low body esteem may negatively influence purchase intention due to the psychological discomfort resulting from the comparison between the customer and the exposed advertised thin-ideal sized models, it is crucial for marketers to take these discussions into account and create better marketing strategies. In the context of the current study, it is important to mention that fitness-related issues are also prone to those problems.

As studies suggest, exposure to fitness-related commercials that use ideal sized models can create low body satisfaction and anxiety (Berry&Howe, 2004; Sabiston&Chandler, 2011). Furthermore, there is also evidence concerning individuals with low body satisfaction have a more negative purchase intention towards fitness-related products (Nam et al., 2018). In that sense, using thin-ideal sized influencers for marketing in the fitness industry also carries the risk for decreased sales and negative purchase intentions as well as ethical problems that may result from the problems mentioned in the previous section. Therefore, this issue should be investigated for the future of marketing in the fitness industry.

2.6 Ethical Considerations in Marketing and ESG

As demonstrated by Vassilikopoulou (2008), the criticisms directed towards the marketing can be summarized as follow:

“(1) It supports materialism, hedonism, and eudemonism; (2) It produces pressure on consumers for the acquisition of goods; (3) It pollutes the natural environment; (4) It contributes to the exhaustion of natural resources; (5) It makes an expansion in the products final price because of the high production cost, which should be paid by the consumer; (6) It deceives consumers by projecting imaginary or no quality differences on the products; (7) It charms consumers into buying products that they may not need; (8) Advertising is ordinarily of bad taste and offends the masses; (9) The contribution of such a large number of intercessors during product distribution raises product prices; (10) Personal deals at times become too pushy and oppressive, thereby convincing the consumer to settle on buying decisions under pressure.”

As a field that tries to prevent the issues stated above, marketing ethics can be defined as the set of values and principles that moderates the businesses which assume the duty of

promoting products and services to customers (Lacznia&Murphy, 2019). In recent years a new framework was presented in marketing ethics which seems to be able to both prevent ethical problems that may result from marketing practices and provide profitable outcomes; Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG). ESG factors are the main drivers of value. There is a strong link between the ESG practices and company performances. For a company to have a long-term sustainable image, the company must integrate ESG into its core business strategies. It has become much more important to act and to think on ESG in a proactive way. ESG elements drive consumer preferences and considerably effect the company's internal and external market growth.

According to Mishra(2020) besides ethical considerations, ESG seems to be related to financial performance. Although it can be stated that only companies that have high-profit rates can invest in those areas, it can as well be due to the fact that profitability increases as a result of the company's better management regarding the material ESG risks (Mishra, 2020.). Furthermore, Henisz et al. (2019) also stresses that ESG can create value by achieving better resources, decreased energy consumption, social credibility and sustainability, increasing employee motivation and enhancing investments.

In that context, the current study aims to point at these issues while investigating the research problem. As the topic of the study suggests, this research is interested in the "social considerations" sub-dimension of ESG and it aims to stress the importance of increasing quality of life while raising awareness in terms of unintentional maleficence. By investigating the possible ethical risks of the use of thin-ideal sized influencers for marketing in the fitness industry, it may be possible to underline problems that prevent businesses from not meeting

the requirements of ESG and it might be possible to influence them to reconsider their marketing strategies concerning consumer well-being.

2.7 Conclusion

To conclude, the discussions in the literature seems to be supporting the hypotheses of the current study. Firstly, it was hypothesized that exposure to ideal-sized images negatively influences self-esteem and body esteem. As also mentioned above, may be due to fact that both social media (Ahadzadeh, Sharif and Ong, 2017; Chang, 2019; Dumas et al., 2020; Gao et al., 2020; Jiang & Ngien, 2020; Meier & Gray, 2014; Paramboulis, Skues and Wise, 2016; Pepin&Endresz, 2015; Schmuck et al., 2019; Tran, Rosales and Copes, 2020) and fitness-related contexts (Bratland-Sanda & Sundgot-Borgen, 2014; Corazza et al., 2019; Engeln et al., 2018; Lepage & Crowther, 2010; Rothwell & Desmond, 2018; Wasilenko et al., 2007) are prone to indicate low self-esteem and body esteem in regard to sharing the quality of exposure to ideal-sized individuals, this hypothesis was supported by the empirical evidence that exposure to ideal-sized individuals can negatively impact body esteem and self-esteem (Boyd, 2019; Goldstraw & Keegan, 2016; Norton, 2017; Poh & Chung, 2021; Puente, 2020). Secondly, it was hypothesized that exposure to ideal-sized images can decrease purchase intention of the customers. This is also supported by the empirical evidence that was presented above by the studies indicating exposure to ideal-sized images can negatively influence purchase intetion and exposure to average-sized images may increase purchase intention while have a potential to result in a more positive brand attitude (Bethel, 2020; Clayton et al., 2017; Diedrichs&Lee, 2011; Yu et al., 2011). However, there is a need for a more holistic approach since it is evident in the literature that there is a need for more studies in terms of exposure to ideal-sized images on media platforms, including social

media, and psychological health issues (Norton,2017; Poh & Chung, 2021; Sokolava & Perez, 2021, Tiggemann & Aderberg, 2020, influencer marketing (Hamulic & Eskesen, 2021; Taylor, 2020; Wellman et al., 2020; Wielki, 2020) and purchase intention (Carnevale, 2018; Hem, 2017 ; Shoenberger et al., 2019).

2.8 Key Learning Points Regarding the Gap In the Literature

➤ **Social Media and Mental Health**

Literature on social media use and mental health problems suggests that the former one does not predict the latter (Berryman, Ferguson and Negy, 2017; Coyne et al., 2019; Gao et al., 2020) However, several studies show that using social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram may lead to negative outcomes like low self-esteem, low body-esteem, and social anxiety (Ahadzadeh, Sharif and Ong, 2017; Chang, 2019; Dumas et al., 2020; Jiang & Ngien, 2020; Meier & Gray, 2014; Paramboukis, Skues and Wise, 2016; Pepin&Endresz, 2015; Schmuck et al., 2019; Tran, Rosales and Copes, 2020)

➤ **Social Media, Body Esteem and Self-Esteem**

When Perloff's (2014) transactional model and Festinger's (1954) social comparison theory is considered, it is shown that social media usage can be a risk factor for low self-esteem, body dissatisfaction and depression due to irrational comparison. This is also supported by empirical evidence (Ahadzadeh, Sharif and Ong, 2017; Chang, 2019; Dumas et al., 2020; Gao et al., 2020; Jiang & Ngien, 2020; Meier & Gray, 2014; Paramboukis, Skues and Wise, 2016; Pepin&Endresz, 2015; Schmuck et al., 2019; Tran, Rosales and Copes, 2020).

➤ **Susceptibility of Fitness-Related Contexts to Problems Regarding Body-Esteem and Self-Esteem**

Since fitness is also closely related to appearance and body ideals (Van Hilvoorde, 2008), it is

not a surprise that fitness-related contexts are also susceptible to problems like decreased self-esteem, body dissatisfaction, eating disorders and depression (Bratland-Sanda & Sundgot-Borgen, 2014; Corazza et al., 2019; Engeln et al., 2018; Lepage & Crowther, 2010; Rothwell & Desmond, 2018; Wasilenko et al., 2007).

➤ **Exposure to Ideal-Sized Individuals as a Shared Risk Factor for Decreased Body-Esteem and Self-Esteem Regarding Both Fitness Settings and Social Media**

While social media is problematic in that respect due to exposure to ideal-sized images (Chae, 2017; Dion, 2016; Haferkamp & Kramer, 2011; Pepin&Endresz, 2015), fitness-related contexts are also problematic regarding the exposure to ideal sized individuals (Rothwell & Desmond, 2018; Wasilenko et al., 2007); therefore, exposure seems to be a shared problematic element for both fitness and social media. Thus, the issue is more severe when these two are combined; many studies suggest that exposure to fitness-related online content on social media that includes ideal-sized influencers can have a negative impact on body-esteem and self-esteem (Boyd, 2019; Goldstraw & Keegan, 2016; Norton, 2017; Poh & Chung, 2021; Puente, 2020). These are significant problems since they can lead to more severe issues like eating disorders, obesity, depression and dysfunctionality which are important since they carry the risk of damaging society both financially and psychologically (Bucchianeri & Neumark-Sztainer, 2014).

➤ **Exposure to Ideal-Sized Individuals as a Risk Factor for Decreased Purchase Intention**

Since exposure to ideal-sized models who promotes a product is related to low body satisfaction (Rach, 2021; Polonsky & Kareklas, 2011) and low body-esteem may lead to negative purchase intent (Cho et al., 2015; Kim et al., 2015; Rosa et al., 2006), empirical evidence that suggests exposure to average-sized images rather than ideal-sized images are more favourable in terms of increased purchase intention is not surprising (Bethel, 2020;

Clayton et al., 2017; Diedrichs&Lee, 2011; Yu et al., 2011). Therefore, using ideal sized influencers for marketing carries the risk of decreased sales.

- **Call for Research Regarding the Relationship Between Exposure to Ideal-Sized Images on Social Media, Psychological Health and Ethical Considerations of Influencer Marketing**

It is also stressed that while there is need for studies which investigates the relationship between influencer marketing and purchase intention (Hem, 2017), it is demonstrated that the relationship between body image and purchase intention also should be investigated (Carnevale, 2018; Shoenberger et al., 2019)

- **Call for Research Regarding the Relationship Between Self-Esteem, Body-Esteem, Influencer Marketing and Purchase Intention**

It is also stressed that while there is need for studies which investigates the relationship between influencer marketing and purchase intention (Hem, 2017), it is demonstrated that the relationship between body image and purchase intention also should be investigated (Carnevale, 2018; Shoenberger et al., 2019)

CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Philosophy

The current study aims to investigate the effects of exposure to influencers of a certain body type on self-esteem, body esteem and purchase intention. As psychological concepts, self-esteem and body-esteem have been investigated by scholars for many years and as a result of this effort, today it is possible to use measures like Rosenberg Self Esteem Scale (RSES) and Body Esteem Scale for Adolescents and Adults (BESAA) to gather data from high numbers of people and use quantitative analyses to infer statistically significant results.

Although it may be possible to investigate these issues in a qualitative manner using thematic analyses and focus groups, this study focuses on quantitative methods and using opportunities provided by previous research that enables the researcher to access data from a high number of people in a conveniently short period of time, while relying on numerical analyses that may provide solid empirical evidence about the issued topics. In that sense, the current study may be evaluated as a positivist study regarding the emphasis on scientific hypothesis testing that is based on numerical and statistical analyses and a large sample to provide precise, objective results (Collis and Hussey, 2014).

3.2 Research Design

The design of the current study is quantitative-based and cross-sectional. Moreover, it can be seen as a quasi-experimental design. Since the research aims to infer a cause and effect relationship between the body type of the exposed influencer in the images and self-esteem, body esteem and purchase intention scores of participants, it can be stated that it resembles an experimental design. However, there are some technical issues. Firstly, data will be

collected using convenience sampling, secondly, the questionnaire will be delivered to participants in a digital context and thirdly, there will not be a control group. Therefore, since the current study will not be using randomized sampling, not be conducted in a lab setting and there will be no control group, it is suitable to stress that this is a quasi-experimental design.

That said, the independent variable is the condition of the exposure; participants were exposed either to ideal-sized influencers or average-sized influencers. On the other hand, the dependent variables are body-esteem (BESAA), self-esteem (RSES) and purchase intention (Purchase Intention Question) scores of participants. Thus, the study divided participants into two groups regarding the independent variable. Even though a convenient sampling method was used to recruit participants, they were assigned to each group randomly.

3.3 Participants

Participants were 204 individuals (100 women, 92 men and 12 individuals who preferred not to state their gender), between 18 and 49 years of age, from 15 different countries. However, the majority of the sample consisted of Turkish individuals (N=143). Participants were recruited via sharing the link for the questionnaire on social media and WhatsApp groups using the convenience sampling method.

The population for our sample is the intersection of the individuals who were using social media and targeted by the fitness industry, therefore, the population for the sample of the current study is people aged from 18-49 as explained in the following sections. Participation in the study was completely voluntary, in other words, participants have received no payment.

In terms of group divisions, while the ideal-sized exposure group (ISE) has consisted

of 108 individuals (54 women, 52 men and 2 individuals who preferred not to state gender), the average-sized exposure group (ASE) consisted of 96 individuals (46 women, 40 men and 10 individuals who preferred not to state gender).

3.4 Sampling Strategy

The data collection method for the current study is nonprobability convenience sampling, in other words, the data was collected from a convenient group of people that were available for the researcher (Creswell, 2013; Mertens, 2014). Although it can be stated that this method has some downsides regarding external validity due to systematic bias since the convenience of participants may lead to overrepresentation of one group over other groups in the population, it has also some advantages since it is cheap, efficient, and easy to execute (Jager et al., 2017). Since similar research including studies on body image, social comparison or eating disorders also used this sampling strategy and the advantages of online data collection (e.g. Gagne et al., 2012; Kinjari & Raghavi, 2020; Koloeso et al., 2018), therefore, it seems also suitable for the present study to use convenience sampling. Moreover, it also has important benefits regarding future studies that may be targeting similar issues ("Convenience sampling," 2009). For instance, since this study investigates a relatively new topic on which there are few studies in the literature, by ignoring the complexities of randomized sampling method which requires a higher budget, extensive effort and a longer period of time, the current study may be able to posit unnoticed trends and simple relationships that may provide a basis for future researchers who can develop these methods and contribute to the literature ("Convenience sampling," 2009).

3.5 Sample Size

In terms of sample size, when looking at similar research, the sample size seems to be varying across the studies. For example, a study by Tiggemann and McGill (2004) used 126 women participants to compare their body satisfaction and mood according to the exposure condition which was either exposure to a media image that included a thin-sized model or an average-sized model. Another study by Yu et al. (2011) compared the brand attitudes of 143 women regarding the presented advertising images that include either an ideal-sized model or an average-sized model. A similar study to the current study is conducted by Bulka (2020) who investigated the impact on brand attitudes and body satisfaction regarding exposure to thin influencers who were promoting products for Puma or Nike, used 425 women to collect data.

However, all of these studies were focused only on the women population but the current study includes both males and females. In that sense, another study by Diedrichs and Lee (2011) who included both men and women can be seen as a more significant study regarding our investigation. The study aimed to detect differences in terms of body image between three conditions; exposure to an image included a thin model, an average-sized model and no models. The number of participants was 171 women and 130 men, in total 301 participants for three conditions were included. In that context, since the participant number was around 100 people that included both genders per condition, the current study aims to recruit around 100 participants for each condition, therefore, it was aimed to recruit 200 participants.

3.6 Sampling Criteria

As mentioned in the previous sections, one of the aims of this study is to provide marketers in the fitness industry information about the issues related to self-esteem, body esteem and purchase intention to reconsider their marketing strategies considering ethical issues. Therefore, our sample should be consistent with the target population of these marketers. As statistics suggest, the highest percentage (60,60) of the age group who use gyms are between 18 and 54 (Rizzo,2021). Moreover, the highest percentage of people using social media platforms like Instagram, YouTube and Snapchat are between 18-49 years of age ("Social media use in 2021," 2021). Regarding these pieces of information, it is possible to suggest that a marketer in the fitness industry, who promotes services and products on social media, may target the intersection of these groups since it designates the age group that is both interested in fitness-related subjects and using social media. Since statistics suggest that the intersection of these groups is around 18-49 years of age (Barnhart, 2021; Rizzo,2021; Statista, 2019; "Social media use in 2021," 2021; Zuckerman,2021), thus, the target sample of this study includes people from 18-49 years of age, therefore, participants under 18 years old and over 49 years old will not be included in this study. There are no other inclusion/exclusion criteria.

3.7 Materials

The data for this study will be gathered using Google forms and all of the measurement instruments can be found in the appendix. The procedure includes the following sections:

3.7.1 Framing Questions

Before presenting the stimulus, participants were first asked about their gender and age. The gender of the participant was crucial since previous studies also focused on exposing

participants to same-gendered individuals (e.g. Groesz et al., 2001; Tiggemann et al., 2004; Tiggemann et al., 2009; Tiggemann & Aderberg, 2020; Poh & Chung, 2021). Moreover, age was also crucial for the inclusion or exclusion of the participants to the study as explained in previous sections.

3.7.2 Stimulus

After the framing questions, three images including either an ideal-sized or average-sized fitness influencer who were promoting sportswear products by a fitness brand called Gymshark was shown to the participants based on their gender. For women, this section included either three images including thin-sized influencers or three images that included average-sized fitness influencers and for men, this section included either three images of muscular size influencers or three images of average-sized fitness influencers. If the participant did not want to state information about gender, then, either six images (including both female and male influencers) including ideal sized influencers or six images of average-sized influencers were presented in a mixed order. All images are taken from the Instagram page of a fitness brand called Gymshark who puts emphasis on collaborating with influencers to promote their products and in terms of advertised products, sportswear pieces that are usually suitable for fitness-related context like gyms were chosen.

3.7.3 Body Esteem Scale for Adolescents and Adults (BESAA):

The Body Esteem Scale for Adolescents and Adults (BESAA) involve a general evaluation of one's body. Even though the original version was published in 2001 by Mendelson et al., a relatively recent study shows that although further research is needed, the test is still reliable and valid (Arslan et al., 2020; Crogun et al., 2013). BESAA has 23 items, and 3 dimensions can be referenced as appearance, weight and attribution (Arslan et al., 2020)

Items according to dimensions can be seen as follows:

Appearance	Weight	Attribution
Items: 1, 6, 7, 9, 11, 13, 15, 17, 21, 23	Items: 3, 4, 8, 10, 16, 18, 19, 22	Items: 2, 20, 5, 12, 14

3.7.4 Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES):

Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale was used to measure participants' self-esteem. This scale is about one's total perception of oneself rather than an emphasis on body image. This scale was first developed for measuring self-esteem in high school children, however, it is widely used since its publication for measuring self-esteem in a variety of different groups including adults (“Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES)”, 2006). Although the first version was published in the year 1979 in a book called *Conceiving the Self* written by Rosenberg, recent studies confirm that the test is still valid and reliable for measuring self-esteem (Amahazion, 2021; Park & Park, 2019).

3.7.5 Purchase Behaviour Survey:

Following BESAA and RSES, to understand participants' likelihood to buy the product that is advertised in the images and examine their purchase behaviour, they would be given a survey which is produced by the researcher. The survey contains seven items that can be answered via a 5-point Likert scale. While two of the questions we're asking participants to indicate their likelihood and frequency of buying fitness related products on social media and digital platforms, three of the questions asked the degree that they avoid, give up and feel anxious when shopping for clothes due to the possibility that it would not fit them. Furthermore, one

question was asking participants to indicate their opinion on whether buying fitness-related products makes them a part of the fitness community or not. Lastly, a purchase intention question was presented which asked participants to indicate their likelihood of buying the products that have been advertised in the visuals that they were exposed to.

Since this survey is specifically designed for the current research and has not been tested for reliability before, an item-based comparison will be used instead of using the survey as a whole. For instance, participants' answers for a certain item would be compared and the researcher would try to find any significant difference between various groups in terms of their answers to that specific question. However, a reliability test will be conducted afterwards to decide whether this measure is suitable for research.

3.7.6 Demographics:

The last section of the questionnaire will contain demographical questions and these questions will be presented as multiple choice forced questions. This will enable the researcher to divide participants into certain groups and test hypotheses while providing an opportunity for additional analysis.

3.8 Procedure

Participants were randomly assigned into two groups and each group were exposed to a set of three images that includes either ideal sized fitness influencers that promote a sportswear product or average-sized fitness influencers who promotes a sportswear product. In the context of this study, the term "ideal sized" refers to a fit body that is thin-sized in terms of the female population and muscular size in terms of the male population as evidence

suggests (Groesz et al., 2001; Tiggemann et al., 2004; Tiggemann et al., 2009; Tiggemann & Aderberg, 2020; Poh & Chung, 2021).

Firstly, an information form and an informed consent form was presented to participants. Information form included limited information about the purpose of the study to prevent participants to alter their answers; it was said that the current study was investigating different marketing strategies in the fitness industry. Benefits and risks were explained to participants in detail regarding possible psychological discomfort that may stem from questions about self-esteem and body esteem. Moreover, in the informed consent form, it was explained that withdrawal from participation has no personal or professional penalty, therefore, they can give up participation at any moment they desire.

Following the information form and informed consent form, framing questions regarding gender and age was presented and according to information on gender, participants were exposed to either visual that include ideal sized fitness influencer or an average-sized fitness influencer. After the exposure, participants were given questionnaires on body-esteem, self-esteem, and a set of survey questions to examine their purchase intention. Lastly, demographic questions were presented for additional information. After the questionnaire, a debriefing section was included to provide participants information on the real purpose of the study and contact information of the researcher as well as Bodywhys Helpline.

For analysis purposes, some items were reversed in both BESAA and RSES. In BESAA items 4,7,9,11,13,17,18 and 21 were reversed since they were indicating lower body esteem. Similarly, items 2,5,6,8,9 were reversed in RSES because they were indicating lower self-esteem. Moreover, after that, all the RSES items were reversed since the original test was designed in a way that lower points indicate higher self-esteem, therefore, the reversal was done to enable the researcher to evaluate the results for BESAA and RSES together in terms

of direction.

3.9 Data Analysis Technique

The main strategy that was used in this study is comparative statistics due to the nature of the hypotheses. The claims of the present study require a comparison between two sets of scores in regard to several dependent variables. Since the independent variable is the exposure condition, ISE or ASE, the researcher must gather scores regarding body esteem, self-esteem and purchase intention from both groups and compare them to conclude that there is a significant difference.

There are several tests for achieving that purpose differentiating depending on the nature of the distribution of the data (Liao, 2011; Motulsky, 2017). According to statistical information, to compare two groups, a researcher can use parametric tests like one way ANOVA, T-Test or non-parametric tests like Mann Whitney-U (Liao, 2011; Motulsky, 2017). Because the data of the current study is not normally distributed, it compels the researcher to use a non-parametric test for comparison (Liao, 2011; Motulsky, 2017). Therefore, to compare the two participant groups, the Man Whitney-U test was used regarding the sample size and normality. The additional analyses included checking for significant correlations and differences between groups regarding different divisions mentioned in the demographics section.

3.10 Ethics

Since this study will be using participants and gathering human data, ethical considerations should be elaborated on. Firstly the sample does not belong to any vulnerable

groups. The target population is social media users ranging from 18-49 years of age. Thus, children under the age of 18 and adults older than 49 years of age will not be included in this research. Since the first section of the questionnaires will ask participants about their age, the exclusion of mentioned groups will be executed accordingly. Therefore, there is no danger posed for individuals from vulnerable groups and no term was violated also in terms of protection of children ("Guidelines for research ethics in the social sciences, humanities, law and theology," 2019).

Before the questionnaire, participants will be given an information form and an informed consent form. The information form will explain the aims and nature of this research and contain contact information for further questions, while the informed consent form will document their voluntary participation. Although participants will be encouraged to take part in this research, they will be clearly informed that their participation is completely voluntary and they can withdraw at any time they want. In the case of online participation, informed consent will be presented digitally and the participants will be informed that by clicking a button, they volunteer for participating in this research. Thus, it is both secured that there was no violation of principles regarding human dignity or respect for individuals, while their autonomy was not disregarded and it is emphasized that participation is completely voluntary and discretionary ("Guidelines for research ethics in the social sciences, humanities, law and theology," 2019).

The questions in the survey will be close-ended questions and the participants will be identifiable by only their numbers in the order of participation for the integrity of the collected data and online participation will be completely anonymous; once the questions are answered, participants will be unidentifiable. Responses and all the data will be treated as fully confidential, they will not be used for any other purpose except for this study. Thus, the

anonymity of the participants was secured regarding respect for privacy ("Guidelines for research ethics in the social sciences, humanities, law and theology," 2019).

Finally, since the participation in this study includes only answering closed-ended questions, there is no physical risk. However, the content of the questionnaires includes questions about body image and self-esteem which can be psychologically discomforting for the participants. Accordingly, as mentioned above, the participants will be informed that their participation is only voluntary and they can stop participating anytime they feel uncomfortable. Moreover, contact information regarding Bodywhys Helpline will be included in the debriefing section for any possible discomfort. According to Harris (1998), "The purpose of debriefing is to remove any misconceptions and anxieties that the participants have about the research and to leave them with a sense of dignity, knowledge, and a perception of time not wasted". In that sense, the debriefing section is useful for enabling the researcher to achieve that goal, while also providing useful contact information as a sign of respect for human dignity (Harris, 1998; "Guidelines for research ethics in the social sciences, humanities, law and theology," 2019; Mcleod, 2015).

CHAPTER 4 RESULTS

4.1 Introduction

This section includes a summary of the data that has been collected. First, descriptive statistics were presented to have general understanding of the data and second, the results of inferential analyses were presented to give information about tested hypotheses via comparative statistics and also include additional analyses that provide important findings about the current study.

4.2 Descriptive Statistics

To have a general understanding of the data that has been collected, it is important to look at the reliability of the measures that has been used and also report means, standard deviations and medians to elaborate on the data, while also check for normality which is crucial for applying appropriate inferential statistical tests.

The internal consistency was high for both BESAA and RSES with Cronbach's alpha values of .923 and .916 respectively. Due to these satisfactory results, no items were excluded from the tests. However, the internal consistency was dramatically low for researcher-made Purchase Intention Survey items ($\alpha=.090$), therefore, each item was separately analyzed regarding their content; for the purpose of the current research the item that asked participants the likelihood of buying the products that have been promoted in the visuals was focused on and be referred as "purchase intention question". Moreover, results for BESAA, RSES and purchase intention question were tested for normality using Shapiro-Wilk test and it is indicated that the results were not normally distributed ($W=.971$, $p<.001$;

$W=.955, p<.001; W=.904, p<.001$). Furthermore, as expected, Spearman Correlation test revealed that scores for BESAA and RSES were positively correlated ($r=.256, p<.001$)

As seen in Table 1, the descriptive statistics across two groups suggest that the group of participants who had received average-sized influencer exposure (ASE) scored numerically higher than the group who had received ideal-sized influencer exposure (ISE) for BESAA and purchase intention question, they scored numerically lower for RSES. The statistical significance of these differences will be addressed later on. Moreover, majority of our sample was consisted of people who exercise regularly (147 out of 204 participants).

Variable	Research Group	Mean	STD	Median
RSES Scores	ISE Group	29.41	7.02	30.50
	ASE Group	26.36	8.75	28.00
BESAA Scores	ISE Group	76.56	17.81	80.00
	ASE Group	80.47	15.38	81.00
Purchase Intention	ISE Group	2.99	1.29	3.00
Question Scores	ASE Group	3.49	1.20	4.00

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Measures

4.3 Inferential Statistics

Since the scores were not normally distributed, Mann-Whitney U test was used to compare scores of two groups and test the hypotheses. The comparison revealed that ISE group scored significantly higher than the ASE group in RSES ($U=4163.50, p=.015$), as seen in Figure 1, but

the difference regarding the BESAA scores was not significant ($U=4664.5$, $p=.265$). However, ASE group scored significantly higher than ISE group for the items concerning Attribute sub-dimension of BESAA ($U= 4342.50$, $p=.045$). Furthermore, ASE group also gave significantly higher answers for the purchase intention question when compared to ISE group ($U=3977$, $p=.003$), as seen in Figure 2.

When time spend on social media is concerned, again, a Mann Whitney U test was applied to investigate the differences and it is revealed that participants who daily spend 1-2 hours on social media scored significantly lower for RSES ($U=344$, $p=.024$) and purchase intention question ($U=341.5$, $p=.019$), while they scored significantly higher for BESAA ($U= 346.5$, $p=.026$) when compared to participants who daily spend more than 4 hours.

In terms of gender, considering the whole sample, Mann Whitney U test revealed that women scored significantly higher than men for RSES ($U=3769$, $p=.031$), purchase intention question ($U=3692$, $p=.016$) and Attribution sub-dimension of BESAA ($U=3426$, $p=.002$). Moreover, when individual groups concerned, women tend to score higher than men for RSES ($U=1098.5$, $p=.053$), Attribution sub-dimension of BESAA ($U=1116$, $p=.068$) and scored significantly higher than men for the purchase intention question ($U=1097$, $p=.046$) in the ISE group. Similarly, they also scored significantly higher than men for the Attribution sub-dimension of BESAA ($U=617$, $p=.008$) and tend to score higher in terms of purchase intention question ($U=717$, $p=.069$) in the ASE group.

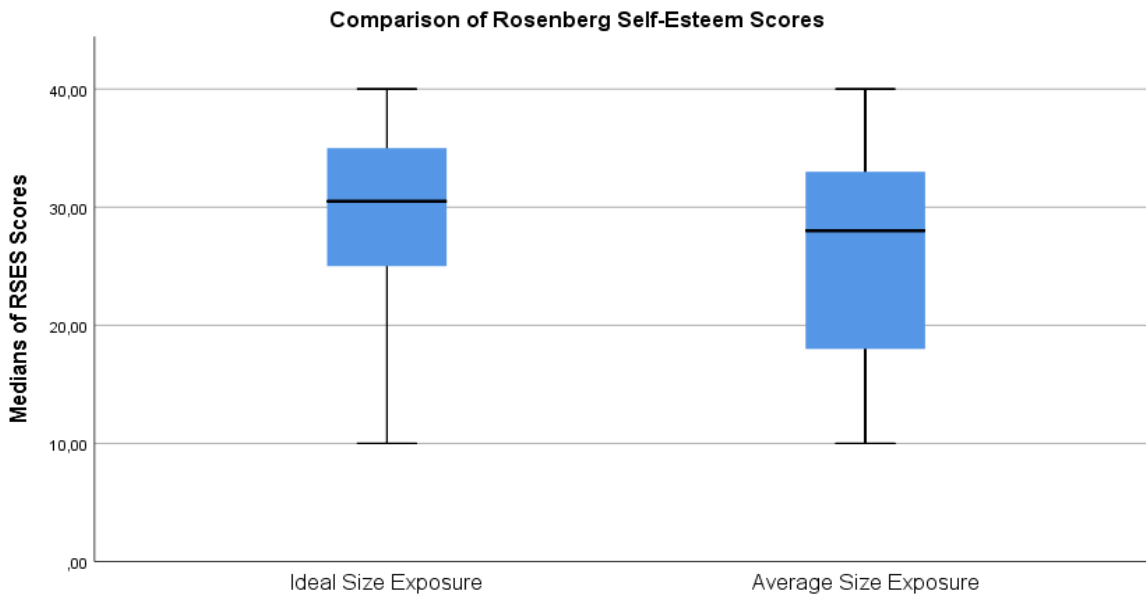


Figure 1. Comparison of RSES Scores

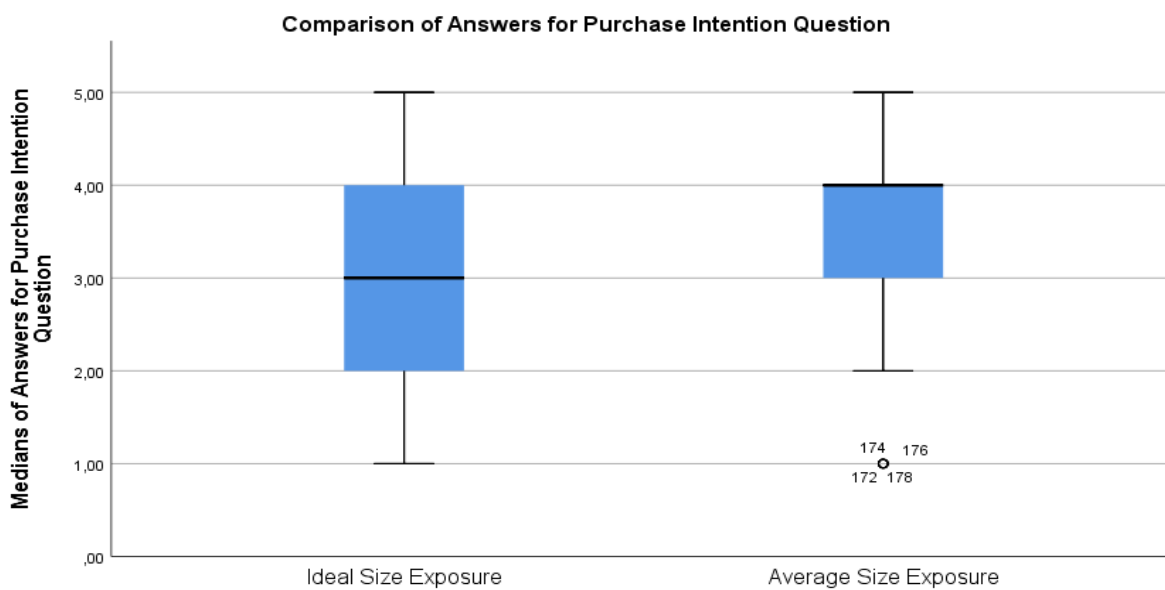


Figure 2. Comparison of answers for Purchase Intention Question

For individual survey questions that are mentioned before, besides purchase intention question, the significant differences were found for the condition that whether a participant was following a fitness influencer on social media or not. Analysis revealed that although participants who followed a fitness influencer gave significantly higher answers for likelihood ($U=2888$, $p<.001$) and frequency ($U=2504.5$, $p<.001$) of buying fitness-related products on digital platforms, they also scored significantly higher for feeling anxious ($U=3790.5$, $p=.006$) and giving up ($U=3412$, $p<.001$) when buying cloths due to possibility that it would not fit them and avoiding buying those products ($U=3907.5$, $p=.011$) when compared to participants who do not follow a fitness influencer. Furthermore, participants who follow a fitness influencer on social media scored significantly lower for RSES when compared to those who do not follow a fitness influencer ($U=3924$, $p=.015$).

Lasltly, correlations among several variables were investigated using Spearman Correlation test. The analysis revealed that while the answers to purchase intention question were negatively correlated with the age ($r= -.179$, $p=.010$), RSES scores ($r= -.225$, $p=.001$) and tend to negatively correlate with Weight sub-division of BESAA ($r= -.133$, $p=.058$). Moreover, BESAA and RSES scores were also negatively correlated with answers to the questions on giving up buying ($r= -.291$, $p=.002$; $r= -.317$, $p<.001$), avoiding buying ($r= -.287$, $p<.001$; $r= -.332$, $p<.001$) and feeling anxious ($r= -.322$, $p<.001$; $r= -.277$, $p<.001$) when shopping for clothes due to the possibility that it would not fit. BESAA scores were also negatively correlated with time spend on social media ($r= -.196$, $p=.007$). Furthermore, the scores regarding the question that asks participants whether buying a fitness-related product makes them a part of the fitness community was negatively correlated with RSES ($r= -.305$, $p<.001$) and positively correlated with the scores regarding the purchase intention question ($r= .490$, $p<.001$).

When correlations for each group is concerned, scores for BESAA and purchase intention question was positively correlated in ASE group ($r = .209, p = .042$) and tend to negatively correlate in ISE group ($r = -.185, p = .056$). Moreover, answers to purchase intention question was positively correlated with answers indicating giving up buying , avoiding buying and feeling anxious when shopping for clothes due to the possibility that it would not fit in both ISE ($r = .328, p = .001; r = .369, p < .001; r = .369, p < .001$) and ASE ($r = .452, p < .001; r = .396, p < .001; r = .332, p < .001$) group.

CHAPTER 5 DISCUSSION

5.1 Research Aims

The aim of the current study was to explore how self-esteem, body-esteem and purchase intention was influenced by the body size of the influencer that has been presented in a promotion visual by using two different exposure conditions. It was hypothesized that participants who had exposure to ideal-sized fitness influencers would score lower on RSES and BESAA, indicating lower self-esteem and body-esteem, when compared to participants who had exposure to average-sized fitness influencers. Additionally, it was also hypothesized that participants who had exposure to ideal-sized influencers would indicate lower levels of purchase intention by stressing their likelihood of buying the products that were advertised by the influencers that they have been exposed. Firstly, findings revealed that self-esteem was higher for the ISE group. Secondly, although the ASE group scored higher for the Attribution subscale of BESAA, there was no difference in terms of body esteem. Moreover, results also indicated that purchase intention for the advertised products on the visuals was higher for the ASE group. Thus, while the findings do not support the first hypothesis, they support the second one.

5.2 Research Findings

Firstly, when the first hypothesis concerned, higher self-esteem in the ISE group was surprising since it contradicts with the previous studies that indicated exposure to ideal-sized images may have a negative impact on self-esteem (Boyd, 2019; Goldstraw & Keegan, 2016; Norton, 2017; Poh & Chung, 2021; Puente, 2020). Even though some studies also suggested that

exposure to ideal images may lead to self-enhancement (Henderson-King & Henderson-King, 1997; Jerry & Kossert, 2007; Myers & Biocca, 1992; Smeesters & Mandel, 2006; Wilcox & Laird, 2000), this finding may be due to a sampling bias. Since the sample of the current study mostly consisted of participants who exercise, and exercise seems to be related to higher levels of self-esteem as supported by empirical evidence (Barton et al., 2011; Fox & Lindwall, 2014; Mousavi Gilani & Khazaei Feizabad, 2019; Park et al., 2014; Spence et al., 2005), this issue may be complicated the results. Moreover, according to some scholars, exposure to ideal-sized images may increase self-esteem for restrained eaters; this impact is explained by researchers as being due to projection of self to an idealized scenario, thus inducing hope and making participants feel thinner (Joshi et al., 2004; Mills et al., 2002). This may also be the case for the current results; although there was no questions on restrained eating, most of the participants can be referred to as people trying to be more fit since they take part in exercising, which can be seen as a similar condition.

Furthermore, additional analyses revealed that self-esteem was also higher for participants who spent more than 4 hours on social media when compared to ones who spent 1-2 hours which also contradicts previous elaborations on the relationship between self-esteem and social media (Ahadzadeh, Sharif and Ong, 2017; Chang, 2019; Dumas et al., 2020; Gao et al., 2020; Jiang & Ngien, 2020; Meier & Gray, 2014; Paramboukis, Skues and Wise, 2016; Pepin&Endresz, 2015; Schmuck et al., 2019; Tran, Rosales and Copes, 2020). This can be also explained by the previous discussion on restrained eating. However, self-esteem is a complex psychological concept that has been explained by scholars in terms of including subcategories other than appearance and body image such as social self-esteem or performance self-esteem (Heatherton & Polivy, 1991; Stets & Burke, 2014; Pazzaglia et al., 2020). Therefore, the difference in self-esteem may not be due to only appearance and body

image but also other qualities. For example, as Valkenburg et al. (2006) suggested, social interactions in digital platforms can increase social self-esteem. Additionally, according to Thorndike's reinforcement theory, if a situation creates pleasurable outcomes, which Thorndike calls a reinforcement, it is more likely to occur again (Thorndike & Bruce, 2017). Since "likes" as positive social feedbacks can be seen as a reinforcer for positive feelings and self-enhancement, it is not surprising that people who use social media more have higher self-esteem while this, in turn, encourages them to use it more (Burrow & Rainone, 2016; Morengo et al., 2021).

It was also unexpected to see that body esteem did not differ across the groups since it does not fit in the previous discussions (Boyd, 2019; Goldstraw & Keegan, 2016; Norton, 2017; Poh & Chung, 2021; Puente, 2020). Although the results were in accordance with the literature that contradicts the hypothesis and suggested exposure to ideal images does not impact body esteem (Bell & Dittmar, 2011; Tiggemann & Polivy, 2010), participants who were exposed to average-sized images scored higher for the Attribution subscale of BESAA. Since this subscale is related to positive evaluations about one's body and appearance to others and closely related to social self-esteem (Mendelson et al., 2001), it can be seen as fitting in with the body of research that indicates using average-sized models for advertising can positively impact body image and self-esteem (Diedrichs & Lee, 2010; Diedrichs & Lee 2011; Halliwell et al., 2005; Mulgrew et al., 2020; Williamson & Karazsia, 2018), although in the context of the current study it did not support the hypothesis properly. This impact is explained by a *relief effect* by the body image researchers (Ditmar & Howard, 2004; Halliwell et al. 2005; Diedrichs & Lee, 2011); the exposure to average-sized models do not only prevent negative body evaluation but also impacts it positively (Ditmar & Howard, 2004). While Halliwell et al. (2005) explain the issue by indicating participants who are exposed to average-sized models show

less body-focused anxiety, Diedrichs and Lee (2011) further explain this by stressing the internalization of cultural ideals. They indicate that participants who have higher internalization of cultural beauty standards felt more comfortable when exposed to average-sized models and perceived those models as healthy alternatives (Diedrich & Lee, 2011). This is not surprising since it may prevent upward appearance comparison, because internalization of beauty ideals makes individuals targets for such a comparison (Trampe et al., 2007).

When time spend on social media examined, results suggest that participants who spent daily more than 4 hours on social media indicated lower levels of body esteem when compared to ones who spend one to two hours on social media in a day, moreover, there was also a negative relationship between body esteem and time spend on social media. While these findings are in accordance with the studies that stress the negative impacts of social media usage on body esteem (Ahadzadeh, Sharif & Ong, 2017; Aparicio-Martinez et al., 2019; Chang, 2019; Dumas et al., 2020; Gao et al., 2020; Jiang & Ngien, 2020; Meier & Gray, 2014; Paramboukis, Skues and Wise, 2016; Pepin&Endresz, 2015; Puglia, 2017; Schmuck et al., 2019; Tran, Rosales and Copes, 2020), they have a potential to shed light upon the issue. As an alternative to the usage of Festinger's social comparison theory (1954) for explaining social media related issues (e.g. Vogel et al., 2014), Perloff's transactional model stresses that the negative impacts on body image and self-evaluations occur in a process as explained in detail in previous sections. People vulnerable to problems regarding body image and self-esteem seek gratification in social media which in turn favours these problems and leads them to take part in social media-related activities again, moreover, it is stressed that this requires a considerable amount of time to occur, reoccur and form a loop (Perloff, 2014). Therefore, the fact that although there was no difference in terms of body esteem between exposure groups, participants who spend more time on social media indicated lower body esteem can be

explained concerning frequency and time. For example, studies stressed that the frequency of social media use is an important indicator of body dissatisfaction, especially for vulnerable people (Sherlock & Wagstaff, 2018; Stice, 2001). Since the current study included an exposure condition that occurred just once, it may not be enough to detect significant differences in regard to that condition. A similar point also can be made for self-esteem, because one of the results was that participants who follow a fitness influencer on social media presented lower self-esteem levels when compared to participants who do not follow a fitness influencer. Since following a fitness influencer on social media may indicate constant exposure to an ideal-sized individual and social media use can favour the internalization of thinness ideals while encouraging people to base their self-esteem on appearance-related qualities (Perloff, 2014), this combination may lead to lower levels of self-esteem as interacting with appearance-based features of social media can distort one's self-evaluations (Mingoia et al., 2017).

Secondly, if the results regarding the second hypothesis were concerned, findings are in accordance with the discussions claiming that using average-sized models for marketing can positively impact purchase intention (Bethel, 2020; Carnevale, 2018; Diedrichs&Lee, 2011; Lou & Tse, 2020; Sohn & Youn, 2013). This finding can be explained by self-congruity theory (Sirgi et al., 1991; Sirgi, 2018). The theory is used to explain consumer behaviour; according to Sirgi (2018), it is a process of psychological comparison of a consumer's self-concept and the image presented by the brand. When the overlap is high, it can be stated that self-congruity is high and when there is a mismatch, it is stated that self-congruity is low (Sirgi, 2018). There are four types of self-congruity in relation to consumers' four types of self-concept; actual, ideal, social and ideal social (Sirgi, 2018). These correspond to four types of self-congruity effects and each of them stems from a different motivation; actual self-congruity for self-consistency, ideal self-congruity for enhancing self-esteem, social self-congruity for social

consistency and ideal social self-congruity for social approval (Sirgi, 2018). In the context of the current study, it is suitable to assume that there is actual self-congruity at play. Since participants who were exposed to average-sized influencers that have common body features indicated higher purchase intention, it might have been easier for them to match their self-concept with the image that was presented when compared to participants who are exposed to ideal-sized influencers that have exceptional body features. This overlap regarding self-consistency seems to be an important motivator for consumer behaviour as it was supported by empirical evidence across many studies (Aguirre-Rodriguez et al., 2012; Branaghan & Hildebrand, 2011; Carnevale, 2018; Ericksen, 1997; He & Muckherjee, 2008; Sirgi et al., 1991).

Additional findings can also help us have a clearer understanding of the issue. As expected, self-evaluations regarding body-esteem and self-esteem were negatively related to feeling anxious, avoiding buying and giving up purchasing products due to the possibility that it may not fit the consumer; meaning people with high self-esteem and body-esteem feel more comfortable when shopping. This aligns with the studies which asserted that body-esteem, self-esteem and purchase intention are related (Cho et al., 2015; Kang & Lee, 2015; Rosa et al., 2006; Yu et al., 2011) and again explained in regard to similarity; according to Yu et al. (2011), the body image of the consumers indirectly influences their brand attitude through the mediation of advertised images' perception and resemblance, thus, this stresses the importance of body image of the perceiver for the marketers. Therefore, it was expected that consumers' concerns about the suitability of the products may indicate decreased purchase intention, however, that was not the case for the current study. Purchase intention seemed to be positively related to mentioned concerns in both of the groups, moreover, there was also a negative relation with self-esteem and purchase intention in general. Although it may be suggested that these findings can be explained by ideal self-congruity, indicating

consumers are taking part in purchasing activities to enhance their self-esteem, self-congruity theory suggests that psychological discomfort would not be induced if there was not a mismatch between advertised image and consumers' ideal self-concept (Sirgi, 2018). On the other hand, the self-discrepancy theory seems to be promising in that regard since the findings also include concerns and negative feelings about the suitability of the advertised products. The theory proposes that there is a distinction between the actual and the ideal self (Higgins, 1987) and as social psychology researchers presented, people usually experience a conflict between these two types and it is called actual-ideal self-discrepancy (AISD) (Abelson & Rosenberg, 2017; Festinger, 1957). This conflict results in negative feelings and individuals try to deal with these impacts by resolving that conflict between the actual self and ideal self (Higgins et al., 1985; Higgins, 1987). In terms of consumer behaviour, these may lead to the purchase of products that have symbolic capital which in turn helps individuals to match their actual self to ideal self (Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998). As many studies suggested, self-discrepancy seems to be an important motivator for customer behaviour (Bessenoff, 2006; Kim & Damhorst, 2010; Li et al., 2019; Shan et al., 2021). This framework also manages to explain the positive relationship between purchase intention and the scores regarding the question that asks participants whether buying a fitness-related product makes them a part of the fitness community and the negative relationship between these scores and self-esteem scores.

5.3 Strengths and Limitations of the Research

The main strength of the study stems from its ambitious attempt to gather dispersed discussions regarding the impact of exposure to ideal-sized and average-sized models on self-esteem, body esteem and purchase intention and applying these discussions to the fitness

industry in the context of influencer marketing. While it contributes to the filling of the research gap regarding the mentioned issues and presents a detailed discussion, it manages to give important insights on motivators of customer behaviour and the impacts of different marketing strategies. However, the most important finding of the current study seems to be the empirical support for the usage of average-sized influencers for marketing fitness related products on social media. The implications of these findings will be addressed later on but it is important to first discuss the weaknesses and limitations of this study.

A major limitation of the current research is the sampling strategy. Since a convenient sampling method was used, the sample consisted of individuals that are demographically and habitually similar. For example, to be more specific, most of the participants were exercising regularly which may lead to a confounding impact on the data, since exposure to ideal-sized individuals enhances self-evaluations for people taking part in restrained eating and trying to lose weight. This was an unexpected outcome that may complicate the results because lower levels of self-esteem were expected in the ISE group when compared to the ASE group. Therefore, besides the risk of low external validity and generalizability, this issue also carries the risk of problematic results. A second limitation of this study was the exposure condition. Although previous body image research also used exposure to ideal-sized images in one instance, the current study was not able to replicate the results. Firstly, this may be due to the fact that priming impact was low since exposure contained only a series of photographs of fitness influencers. A more novel stimulus, like a video, may be helpful to achieve more substantial results. Secondly, a longitudinal approach may be more useful for examining the long-lasting effects of exposure to ideal images rather than investigating the issue using only one instance. Lastly, even though the quantitative approach is easy to use and reliable, the qualitative approach may be more useful to identify conceptual relations among complex

constructs like self-esteem, body-esteem and purchase intention using focus group interviews, which have a greater potential for rich information for future research. In that regard, future studies should focus on randomized sampling to prevent confounding impacts and have substantial external validity. Moreover, these studies also should put effort to research design to examine exposure conditions more comprehensively, namely, the frequency and longitude of the exposure should be taken into account.

5.4 Implications of the Findings

Regarding the discussion above, it is possible to state that both self-congruity and self-discrepancy can motivate customers to engage in purchase behaviour and marketers can use either of them to promote products or services. In the context of the current study, this can be done by the choice of models that have different body types. While self-discrepancy motivates customers to buy products to resolve the conflict between their actual self and ideal self, this impact stems from the negative feelings and negative self-evaluations (Higgins et al., 1985; Higgins, 1987) and can be induced by the use of ideal-sized models (Vartanian, 2012). On the other hand, self-congruity motivates customers to engage in purchase behaviour via an impact that stems from the match between advertised image and self-concept of the customers which create a sense of self-consistency while enhancing self-evaluations (Sirgi, 2018) and can be induced by the use of average-sized models, especially in the case of actual self-congruity (Carnevale, 2018). This contrast also may be seen in the findings of the current study since while body esteem was positively related with purchase intention in the exposure to average-sized influencer condition, it tended to form a negative relationship with the exposure to ideal-sized influencer condition. As supported by many studies (Aguirre-Rodriguez et al., 2012; Branaghan & Hildebrand, 2011; Carnevale, 2018; Ericksen, 1997; He &

Muckherjee, 2008; Sirgi et al., 1991), self-congruity seems to be an effective motivator as findings of the current study also imply that consumers have higher purchase intention if the advertised model was average-sized rather than ideal-sized.

In that sense, these discussions have important implications for influencer marketing in the fitness industry. To begin with, the findings challenge the claim that using ideal-sized individuals for promoting products is the best way, moreover, it is also supported that using average-sized influencers rather than ideal-sized influencers can be more effective for marketing in the fitness industry. These results are also in accordance with new marketing trends such as body positivity and inclusivity (Pascual, 2021). Therefore, the findings of this study should be taken into consideration for both businesses and marketers in the fitness industry; by doing this, they can increase their sales and expand their customer capacity and they can also take part in socially responsible marketing. The hypothesis concerning the negative impacts of exposure to ideal sized fitness influencers on self-esteem and body-esteem was not supported by the findings of the current study, however, the second hypothesis was supported by indicating exposure to average-sized fitness influencers can increase purchase intention among customers. Even though the former does not enable us to conclude, theoretical discussion of the latter issue indicates that the use of ideal-sized individuals for advertisement carries the risk of inducing negative self-evaluations like decreased body satisfaction via self-discrepancy (Vartanian, 2012). This can be a risk factor for serious issues like depression and eating disorders as many studies suggested that they favour each other (Beato-Fernandez et al., 2004; Franko & Streiegel-Moore, 2002; Stice, 2011; Uchoa, 2019), moreover, since using social media and following influencers can also lead to problems like envy, upward social comparison, social anxiety and problematic self-esteem (Chae, 2017; Jiang & Ngien, 2020; Jin & Ryu, 2020) and these problems can create a danger for both

individuals and society (Bucchianeri & Neumark-Sztainer, 2014; Wilksch et al., 2014), using average-sized models and motivating customers to purchase by using actual self-congruity seems both more ethical and profitable. In a general sense, the literature supports that ethical and socially responsible marketing also can create value and positively influence customer attitudes while also increasing the value of the brands (Bardos et al., 2020; Henisz et al., 2019; Mishra, 2020). On the other hand, when focused on the fitness industry, using average-sized fitness influencers for marketing regarding actual self-congruity seems also both ethical and profitable. Since it is possible to assume that potential customers of the fitness industry are individuals with body image problems and it is also suggested by European survey for fitness trends that the fitness industry should target specific populations like adults with risk factors for lifestyle diseases or diagnosed controlled chronic conditions, overweight children (Batrakoulis, 2020), by the use of average-sized fitness influencers, brands in the fitness industry can increase their sells and take part in socially responsible, ethical marketing.

5.5 Conclusion

To sum up, the current study provided important insights for businesses and marketers in the fitness industry. It was aimed to examine how self-esteem, body-esteem and purchase intention was influenced by the body size of the advertised model. This would enable us to draw conclusions from the findings in order to evaluate the usefulness and ethicality of using whether an ideal-sized or an average-sized influencer for promoting products and services in the fitness industry. To do this, body-esteem, self-esteem and purchase intention was measured under two separate conditions; namely, exposure to an ideal-sized fitness influencer and exposure to an average-sized fitness influencer. Findings indicated that while self-esteem was higher in the ideal-sized exposure condition, there was no difference in terms

of body esteem across the two groups. Additionally, participants in the group that received exposure to average-sized influencers asserted higher purchase intention. These results stress that the match between customers' self-perception and the advertised image is a strong motivator for purchase behaviour since it creates a sense of self-consistency. Moreover, this self-congruity effect that stems from exposure to an average-sized influencer is ethically more suitable since customer motivation does not involve negative self-evaluations when compared to the self-discrepancy effect that may stem from the use of ideal-sized influencers for marketing. In that sense, the current research can be evaluated as an important study which stresses that body positive and inclusive marketing strategies can be useful for increasing sales while forming healthier customer relationships in the fitness industry.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Information Form

Hello, I am a Masters student at Dublin Business School and I am carrying out my thesis project under the direct supervision of Ieva Masevic. This study aims to investigate the different marketing strategies in fitness industry in the context of influencer marketing. I would like to invite you to take part in a survey. As a participant in the study you would be required to answer questions about your perception of yourself and your body.

The data you provide as part of this questionnaire will be fully anonymous. I will not gather any direct personally identifying information about you or anyone close to you. You will be asked to provide optional demographic information of a broad nature about yourself. Your data will be collated into a larger dataset and analyzed at the group rather than the individual level. Your data will only be used for academic purposes and will not be shared with anyone for commercial purposes.

In addition to providing much appreciated assistance to the student researcher, the main benefit of taking part in this study will be your contribution to academic research, which aims to expand knowledge and generate new insights. There will be no physical risks posed to you as a participant in this study, however, the questions will be about your self-esteem and your perception of your own body which can be psychologically discomforting.

Remember that your participation is completely voluntary and you can stop participating at any time you want without any negative outcomes. If you are interested in taking part

please review the information provided in the consent form and if you are happy to proceed with the study then please go on to the next section.

Appendix B: Informed Consent

Information has been provided regarding the nature of this research project. With this information, and considering the anonymous nature of the questionnaire participation, if you chose to complete the questionnaire provided you are providing voluntary informed consent.

If you chose to participate, no personally identifiable information will be gathered, and your participation will remain anonymous to the research carrying out the project. By clicking in the questionnaire, answering the questions and submitting, you have subsequently given voluntary informed consent to participate. Consider this a statement as such. However, please be sure to read all information provided so that you are making an informed decision to participate.

You are free to refuse participation in this research project, or to withdraw your consent and discontinue participation at any time. You can do this by exiting the questionnaire.

Withdrawal of consent will have no penalty or loss of benefit to personal or professional relationship with the researcher, or with Dublin Business school.

By clicking the button below, you can give your consent to participate.

Appendix C: Framing Questions

1- How old are you ?

under 18

18-25

26-33

34-40

40-49

older than 49

2- Gender:

Woman

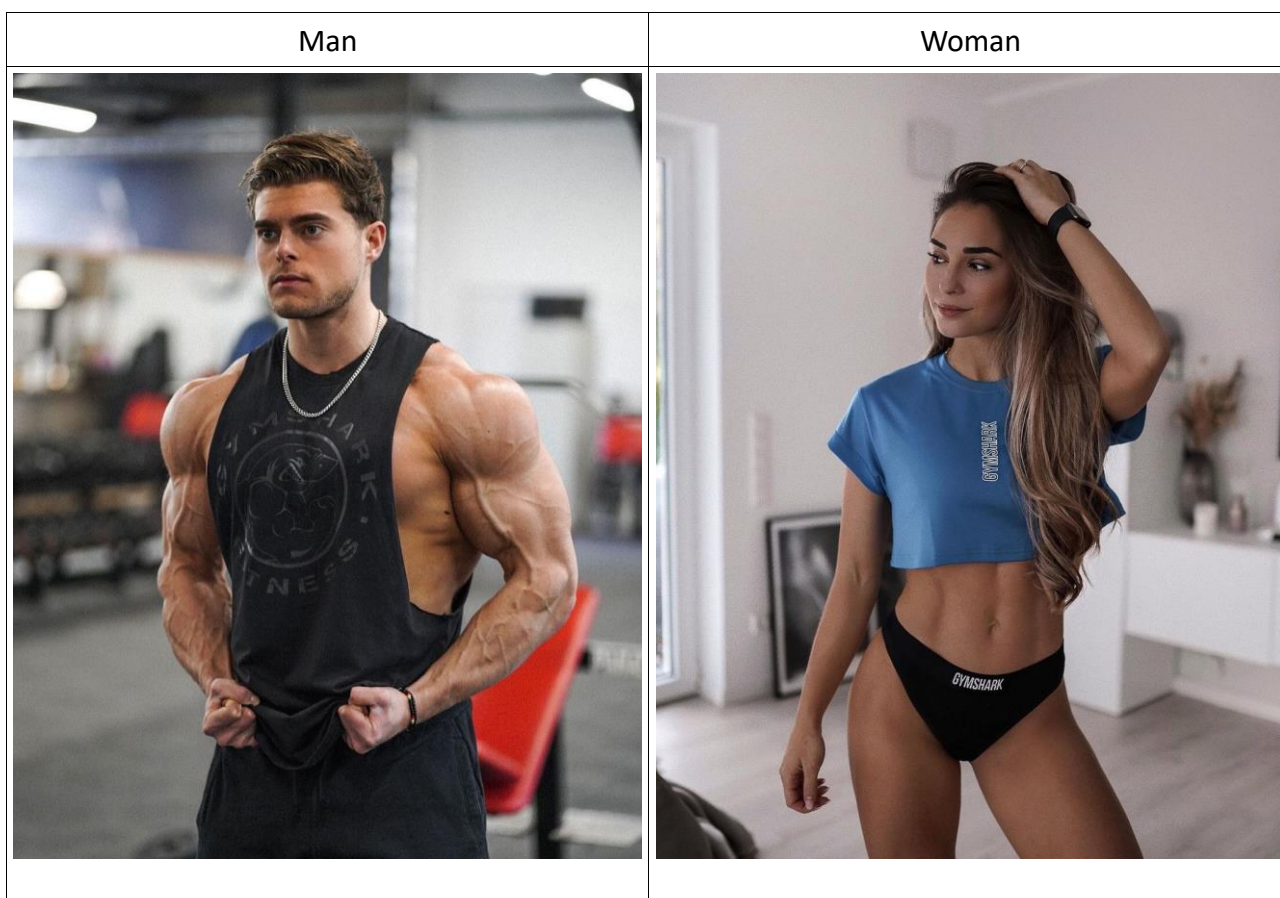
Man

Prefer not to state

Appendix D: Stimulus

Ideal-Sized Influencers (ISE):

Below are shown some pictures of influencers who are promoting sportswear products by a fitness brand called GYMSHARK. Please examine each visual carefully, this will be important later on.

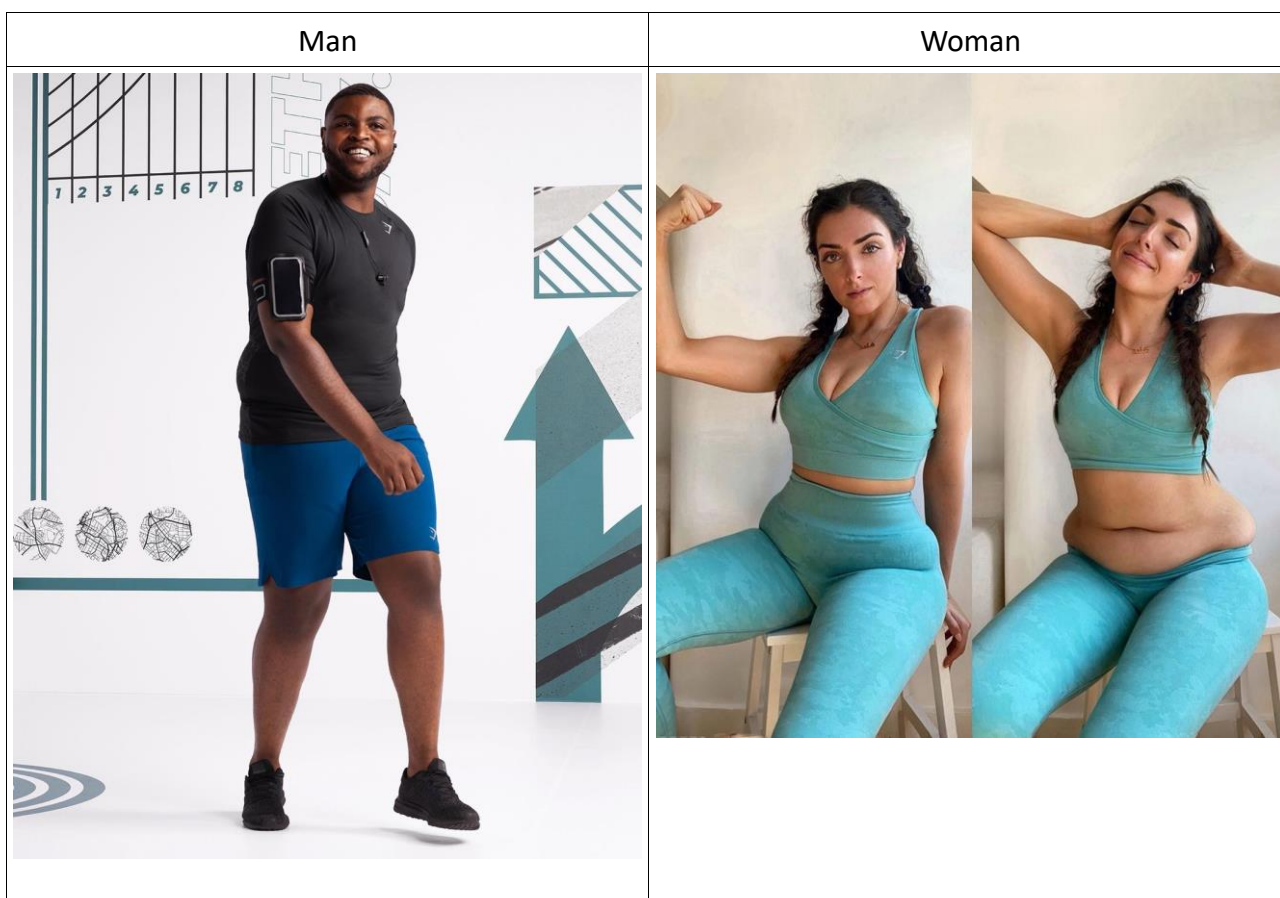




***If participant does not want to state gender, then all six images are shown in a mixed order**

Average-Sized Influencers (ASE):

Below are shown some pictures of influencers who are promoting sportswear products by a fitness brand called GYMSHARK. Please examine each visual carefully, this will be important later on.





***If participant does not want to state gender, then all six images are shown in a mixed order**

Appendix E: Body Esteem Scale for Adolescents and Adults (BESAA)

Instructions: Below are listed a number statements about body image. Please read each item and indicate in what degree you agree with those statements, using the response categories ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (always).

Number of Item	Items	Response Category				
		1	2	3	4	5
1	I like what I look like in pictures	1	2	3	4	5
2	Other people consider me good looking	1	2	3	4	5
3	I'm proud of my body	1	2	3	4	5
4	I'm preoccupied with trying to change my body weight	1	2	3	4	5
5	I think my appearance would help me get a job	1	2	3	4	5
6	I like what I see when I look in the mirror	1	2	3	4	5
7	There are lots of things I'd change about my looks if I could	1	2	3	4	5
8	I'm satisfied with my weight	1	2	3	4	5
9	I wish I looked better	1	2	3	4	5
10	I really like what I weigh	1	2	3	4	5
11	I wish I looked like someone else	1	2	3	4	5
12	People my own age like my looks	1	2	3	4	5
13	My looks upset me	1	2	3	4	5
14	I'm as nice looking as most people	1	2	3	4	5
15	I'm pretty happy about the way I look	1	2	3	4	5
16	I feel I weight the right amount for my height	1	2	3	4	5

17	I feel ashamed of how I look	1	2	3	4	5
18	Weighing myself depresses me	1	2	3	4	5
19	My weight makes me unhappy	1	2	3	4	5
20	My looks help me to get dates	1	2	3	4	5
21	I worry about the way I look	1	2	3	4	5
22	I think I have a good body	1	2	3	4	5
23	I look as nice as I'd like to	1	2	3	4	5

Appendix F: Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES)

Instructions: Please record the appropriate answer for each item, depending on whether you Strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree with it.

1 = Strongly agree

2 = Agree

3 = Disagree

4 = Strongly disagree

Number of Item	Items	Response Categories				
		1	2	3	4	
1	On the whole, I am satisfied with myself.	1	2	3	4	
2	At times I think I am no good at all.	1	2	3	4	
3	I feel that I have a number of good qualities.	1	2	3	4	

4	I am able to do things as well as most other people.	1	2	3	4	
5	I feel I do not have much to be proud of.	1	2	3	4	
6	I certainly feel useless at times.	1	2	3	4	
7	I feel that I'm a person of worth.	1	2	3	4	
8	I wish I could have more respect for myself.	1	2	3	4	
9	All in all, I am inclined to think that I am a failure.	1	2	3	4	
10	I take a positive attitude toward myself.	1	2	3	4	

Appendix G: Purchase Behaviour Survey

Please read each item carefully and indicate the answer that most suitable for you.

1: Never

2: Less likely

3: Sometimes

4: Likely

5: Always

Please remember the visuals you have seen at the beginning of the questionnaire. How likely you would buy the products that have been advertised in those visuals?	1	2	3	4	5
On what degree you buy fitness related products that are been advertised on digital platforms ?	1	2	3	4	5
How often do you give up buying clothes that you liked because of thinking that it will not fit you ?	1	2	3	4	5
How frequently do you buy fitness related outfits that are advertised on social media ?	1	2	3	4	5
How anxious do you feel when buying clothes due to the fact that it may not fit you ?	1	2	3	4	5
On what degree you feel that having fitness related products makes you part of the fitness community ?	1	2	3	4	5
How often do you avoid buying clothes that you like because you think that they are not suitable for your body type ?	1	2	3	4	5

Appendix H: Demographic Information Form

Please read each section carefully and mark the answer that is most suitable for you.

<p>1- What is your highest level of education ?</p> <p><input type="radio"/> Lower secondary education</p> <p><input type="radio"/> Highschool</p> <p><input type="radio"/> Bachelor's Degree</p> <p><input type="radio"/> Post-graduate</p>	<p>6- How often do you exercise ?</p> <p><input type="radio"/> Once a week</p> <p><input type="radio"/> Twice a week</p> <p><input type="radio"/> Thrice or above</p> <p><input type="radio"/> I exercise but not regularly</p> <p><input type="radio"/> I do not exercise</p>
<p>2- What is your nationality?</p>	<p>7- Are you following fitness related YouTube channels?</p> <p><input type="radio"/> Yes</p> <p><input type="radio"/> No</p>
<p>3- Which social media platforms do you use ?</p> <p><input type="radio"/> Instagram</p> <p><input type="radio"/> Twitter</p> <p><input type="radio"/> Facebook</p> <p><input type="radio"/> YouTube</p> <p><input type="radio"/> Other</p> <p><input type="radio"/> I do not use social media.</p>	<p>8- Are you using any fitness related apps?</p> <p><input type="radio"/> Yes</p> <p><input type="radio"/> No</p>
<p>4- Are you following any fitness influencer on social media ?</p> <p><input type="radio"/> Yes</p> <p><input type="radio"/> No</p>	<p>9- How many hours a day do you spend on social media ?</p> <p><input type="radio"/> Less than 1 hour</p> <p><input type="radio"/> Between 1-2 hours</p> <p><input type="radio"/> Between 2-3 hours</p> <p><input type="radio"/> Between 3-4 hours</p> <p><input type="radio"/> More than 4 hours</p>
<p>5- Do you exercise ?</p> <p><input type="radio"/> Yes</p> <p><input type="radio"/> No</p>	

Appendix I: Debriefing Section

Thank you for participating in this study!

The study was about the impacts of exposure to either ideal-sized or average-sized fitness influencers on self-esteem, body-esteem and purchase intention.

Below are listed contact information for further concerns and questions. The contact information of Bodywhys Helpline is also included for possible psychological discomfort favoured by the questions.

Researcher: Ceren Oymak

E-Mail: 10572213@mydbs.ie

Phone Number: +353 89 243 8477

Bodywhys Helpline: (01) 2107906