

# Digital Mirrors - How Social Media Shapes Self-Understanding in the Context of Health and Fitness

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## Abstract

Social media has developed into a potent platform for the deep internalization and sharing of fitness and health ideals. This study investigates how people use digital platforms, specifically in the Indian setting, to interpret and create their self-understanding around fitness and health. With the help of focused qualitative interviews and a mostly quantitative methodology, the study investigates how users engage with carefully chosen content and how these interactions affect motivation, body image, and overall well-being.

The results show that although many people actively look for information to help them achieve health-related objectives, algorithmic trends and aspirational aesthetics frequently distort these intentions by promoting limited notions of success and beauty. Additionally, interviewees' replies demonstrate an increasing understanding of how online narratives are produced, emphasizing a move away from naive acceptance and toward critical participation.

By examining the conflict between influence and intention, this study closes a gap in the literature and provides insight into how people deal with the hazy boundary between inspiration and pressure. The study concludes that in order to promote healthier digital environments, there is a need for greater media literacy and the production of ethical content.

**Keywords:** Social Media, Self-Understanding, Health and Fitness, Body Image, Digital Literacy, Media Consumers, Self-Perception

## Introduction

### 1.1 Social Media and Fitness Content

In the digital age, few forces have been as revolutionary to the human experience as social networking. Originally created to connect friends and family across geographical boundaries, social media platforms have developed into sophisticated ecosystems that influence practically every aspect of our lives. Whether it's a teenager in Nairobi following a fitness influencer in Los Angeles or a retiree in Manila discussing their nutritional journey on Facebook, the reach and influence of platforms like Instagram, Tik Tok, YouTube, and Facebook cut across borders, cultures, age groups, and socioeconomic level.

Social media has become an integral part of human interaction, acting not only as a source for entertainment and connection, but also as a mirror through which people observe and evaluate themselves.

One of the areas most influenced by this digital transformation is health, fitness, and self-perception (Perloff, 2014).

Social media's inherent characteristics allow for the instantaneous, international distribution of visual content, which is frequently more captivating and emotionally impactful than conventional text-based communication. In addition to being extensively shared, movies and pictures of toned bodies, "What I eat in a day" reels, gym vlogs, transformation challenges, and advertisements for health products are also given algorithmic priority depending on user activity. Because of this, people are continuously exposed to a carefully chosen stream of stories and pictures that recommend how they ought to feel, look, eat, and exercise.

This type of content's ongoing existence quietly shapes consumers' ideas of success, normalcy, and self-worth. Fitness and health are becoming performative arenas where identity is socially and publically negotiated, rather than only private or medical issues (Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015).

Social media's pervasiveness has changed how people view both themselves and other people. Platforms have evolved into what some academics refer to as "digital mirrors," places where people evaluate their own looks and lives against the polished representations of others. Depending on the content ingested and the psychological fortitude of the user, this reflective function can either strengthen or weaken self-esteem. On the one hand, it can be motivating and instructive to have access to various health narratives and international fitness networks.

Conversely, internalized emotions of inadequacy, anxiety, and body dissatisfaction can result from the overrepresentation of idealized and frequently unachievable norms. Furthermore, social media's design encourages a culture of continual comparison. As measurable indicators of social value, likes, shares, comments, and followers motivate users to produce and curate their own content in ways that look for outside approval in addition to consuming it.

This feedback loop creates a homogenized ideal that might not be accessible or achievable for everyone by reinforcing certain norms, especially those related to wellness practices, body image, and fitness aesthetics. In this way, social media actively creates cultural values rather than only reflecting them (Fardouly et al., 2015). Thus, social media's widespread use presents both benefits and difficulties. It centralizes and amplifies prevailing beauty and fitness standards that might marginalize others, even as it democratizes access to information and gives voiceless people a forum.

Though it can sometimes expose users to false information, comparison fatigue, and unjustified demands, it also helps users discover support and a sense of community for their health journeys. This dichotomy lays the groundwork for a more thorough investigation of how social media functions in the twenty-first century as an active force influencing identity formation, body image, and self-understanding rather than merely serving as a background for discussions about fitness and health.

The emergence, development, and momentum of health and fitness trends are also significantly influenced by this constantly changing digital environment. Social media makes it possible for knowledge and ideas to flow quickly and dispersed widely, in contrast to traditional health education approaches, which are frequently institutional, restricted, and localized. Dietary fads, influencer-endorsed workouts, viral challenges, and wellness "hacks" can reach millions of people in a matter of hours without being subjected to scientific examination or medical verification. Users are consequently exposed to a wider variety of content as well as a faster rate of trend turnover, which may cause misunderstandings, false information, or even injury. Because this ecosystem moves quickly, users are constantly under pressure to engage, adapt, or better themselves in order to stay socially relevant.

In the end, acknowledging how ubiquitous social media is is crucial to comprehending its deep impact on our attitudes, habits, and goals—particularly in areas as intimate and sensitive as physical appearance and health. In order to investigate how the ubiquitous nature of social media platforms is changing what it means to be "fit," "healthy," and "attractive" in a society mediated by digital means, this study places itself at the nexus of media studies, health psychology, and cultural sociology.

### **1.2 Passive Consumption vs. Intentional Use Through The Uses and Gratifications Lens**

In this setting, social media has evolved beyond a passive information conduit to become a significant architect in constructing self-identity. With millions of posts depicting "ideal" bodies, flawless skin, effortless workouts, and beautifully managed lifestyles, users are continually bombarded with visual clues about how they should seem and live. However, much of this content is ingested without critical thinking. The normal user scans through endless reels and stories, frequently absorbing subtle messages about beauty, health, and prosperity without examining their veracity or relevance.

However, the widely accepted Uses and Gratifications Theory contradicts this notion of passive consumption. According to this theory, audiences are more than just passive recipients of media influence; rather, they are active participants who use media to meet specific needs, whether informational, emotional, social, or psychological (Katz, Blumler & Gurevitch, 1973). People search for fitness material to learn new routines, follow health experts to stay educated, and join body-positive communities to be understood.

Most users engage in what academics refer to as "habitual media consumption" by scrolling through this content during downtime, such as before bed, during meals, or in between chores. This type of interaction is frequently emotional, passive, and uncritical. People unconsciously take in a constant barrage of messages that link fitness to aesthetic perfection, beauty to thinness, and self-worth to approval from others via likes, comments, and shares. This practice eventually molds internalized expectations and ideas, resulting in a mirror that represents users' perceived ideal selves rather than their actual selves.

Ignoring the complex realities of user agency would mean portraying all media engagement as passive. These needs could be information seeking (e.g., looking into diets or exercise methods), emotional escape (e.g., watching stress-relieving motivational content), social integration (e.g., joining fitness challenge communities), or personal identity (e.g., aligning with wellness influencers who share one's values).

### **1.3 Emerging Digital Literacy and Critical Awareness**

As society becomes more self-conscious about health and body image, social media has arisen as both a driver and a byproduct of that transformation. It represents a cultural period in which being "fit" is frequently confused with being "attractive," and attractiveness is incorrectly supposed to imply health. A short search through any fitness hashtag yields dozens of photos of toned bodies, green smoothies, calorie counters, and transformation challenges. While some of this content actually promotes wellbeing, the majority of it adds to a rigid, commercialised aesthetic ideal.

This dual nature of social media—as both a tool for self-improvement and a possible source of harm—makes it a two-edged sword in the quest for self-understanding. Users can connect with fitness professionals, discuss accomplishments, and get real-time encouragement from a community of like-minded people. On the other hand, there is the ongoing push to comply, the risk of misinformation, and the potential loss of self-esteem (Lewallen & Behm-Morawitz, 2016).

Digital literacy entails the mental capacity to judge the veracity of content, see implicit prejudice, spot picture manipulation, and comprehend the business goals behind posts that appear harmless. A user with a high level of digital literacy, for instance, can identify if a weight-loss transformation post is a sponsored

promotion, an honest personal journey, or a deceptive representation influenced by digital editing tools, filters, or camera angles.

#### **1.4 Rise of the Counterculture**

However, in the aftermath of this new understanding, another cultural wave has emerged: the body positivity movement. Originally meant to challenge narrow beauty standards and promote acceptance for various body types, the movement has had a significant impact on popular discourse about weight and worth. However, as with many social movements, it has experienced ideological extremes (Cwynar-Horta, 2016).

The spread of this philosophy was greatly aided by social media platforms, which gave underrepresented voices a forum to oppose weight discrimination, fatphobia, and the damaging exaltation of thinness. Hashtags that celebrated the variety of body shapes and promoted self-love across identity spectrums, such as #BodyPositivity and #AllBodiesAreGoodBodies, became extremely popular. But like many well-meaning cultural changes, the body positivity movement has seen a pendulum swing impact, especially in its online forms. As a result of rejecting poisonous beauty standards, some supporters started to associate body shaming or oppression with any discussion of fitness, weight control, or health-related practices.

Sometimes, what started out as an inclusiveness movement turned into a counter-narrative that stigmatized or oppressed those with valid health concerns. In this way, the digital body positivity rhetoric started to create a culture where talking about the negative health effects of fat, like diabetes, heart disease, and joint issues, was deemed unimportant or discriminatory—even though it was empowering for many (Cohen et al., 2019).

The result of this ideological change is what some academics and medical professionals call "health-neglecting inclusivity," which prioritizes body acceptability over recognition of medical data. Algorithms on social media have been crucial in elevating these voices. Platforms encourage content that is emotionally charged and divisive, which can lead to echo chambers that support extreme viewpoints. Therefore, people who interact with body-positive content could frequently come across messages that dismiss weight loss, exercise, or diet as fundamentally harmful ideas, regardless of a person's health or objectives (Holland & Tiggemann, 2016).

The role of social media in this story is extremely conflicted. On the one hand, it has made it possible to redefine beauty and to forcefully reject the shame-based fitness culture. However, technology has also made it easier for false information to proliferate and produced settings where important health discussions are shunned out of concern that they will be viewed as politically wrong or culturally insensitive. This misrepresentation of the original goal of body positivity highlights a larger problem: how the open, democratic nature of social media makes it possible for narratives that are both uplifting and dangerously reductive to become popular.

While it is critical to reinforce that bodies of all sizes deserve to be respected, some iterations of the movement have crossed the line into praising objectively bad lifestyle choices. In other circumstances, rejecting diet culture has led to a rejection of all health advice. As a reaction to poisonous beauty standards, this resistance has occasionally gone too far, spreading narratives that, while uplifting in theory, may be detrimental in practice.

#### **1.5 Need and significance of the study**

Given these complex and frequently contradictory interactions, there has never been a greater need for research into how social media impacts self-understanding, particularly in the context of health and fitness. We must critically examine not just the content itself, but also the motivations for its consumption, the

psychological responses it elicits, and the behavioral changes it causes. This study will look into how people form their health identities in the age of social media, including what they believe, who they follow, what they mimic, and what they reject. More importantly, it aims to comprehend the distinction between beneficial inspiration and detrimental influence.

In a world where likes, shares, and followers can so readily determine self-worth, we urgently need to rethink our relationship with digital platforms. This study aims to illuminate the mechanisms by which social media influences self-perception, providing insight into how users can navigate these environments more thoughtfully. By analyzing the trends, problems, and opportunities in this world, we can begin to address a fundamental question for the digital generation: how can we use social media to better our understanding of health and self without allowing it to alter who we are?

## **2. Review Of Literature**

One of the biggest cultural revolutions of the twenty-first century is the way social media has permeated almost every aspect of modern life. Originally straightforward communication tools have evolved into complex environments that mediate social interaction, identity, information flow, and self-expression.

### **2.1 Social Media and Representation of Health and Fitness**

Social media, according to scholars like Boyd (2014) and van Dijck (2013), is not just a virtual extension of social life but rather an integral aspect of daily life that influences how people create narratives about others and themselves. These platforms increasingly function as forums for the negotiation of values, the display of lifestyles, and the questioning and reaffirming of normative standards.

In industrialized nations, approximately 95% of youth and over 70% of adults use social media on a regular basis, according to a Pew Research Center survey (Auxier & Anderson, 2023). This wide reach is not only passive; it is also becoming more ingrained and immersive.

Social media is one of the most time-consuming pastimes in the world, with users typically spending several hours a day engaging with feeds, stories, and reels (Statista, 2022). These networks' mobile-first design guarantees users stay connected at all times, enabling regular, nearly unnoticed engagement throughout the day. Because social media is so widely used, it frequently serves as an unfiltered lens through which people view relationships, prosperity, beauty, and health.

More significantly, the impact of social media is not isolated; rather, it interacts with technological, psychological, and cultural elements that influence perception and behavior. The digital self is becoming more and more important in the experience and expression of identity, according to scholars like Turkle (2011) and Castells (2009).

Within this ecosystem, health and fitness content has emerged as a major genre, with millions of users using hashtags like #Fitspo, #Wellness, #TransformationTuesday, and #BodyGoals as rallying points. The greater commodification of wellness, where health is stylized and promoted for aesthetic appeal, is reflected in these digital spaces, even though they can also provide community and support.

Additionally, Tiggemann and Slater (2014) have demonstrated that the visual and performative aspects of Instagram and other similar platforms exacerbate issues with body image and self-comparison, particularly among young women and teenagers. Because users—and influencers in particular—may choose and control content, they can create idealized lifestyle representations, which frequently cause followers to internalize irrational expectations. What was formerly limited to magazine covers and celebrity interviews is now a commonplace aspect of peer-to-peer interactions, creating the appearance that the average



individual can achieve such standards. Subtly but steadily, this normalizing of visual perfection changes consumers' perceptions of what it means to be "fit" or "healthy."

Fitness influencers are among the most potent characters influencing how people view their bodies and health in the huge digital world of social media. Their well chosen feeds, which are full with well-groomed bodies, sophisticated aesthetics, and inspirational remarks, have helped to create a new visual language related to wellness.

These people are more than just content producers; they serve as role models whose habits are imitated, whose lifestyles are modeled, and whose bodies serve as the standard by which followers frequently measure themselves (Carrotte et al., 2017; Boepple & Thompson, 2016). The influencer economy, which is fueled by visual appeal and engagement metrics, has produced a feedback loop in which the most "ideal" and attractive bodies receive sponsorships, publicity, and cultural capital.

Tiggemann and Zaccardo (2015) coined the term "fitspiration," a combination of the words "fitness" and "inspiration," to describe this phenomena. Fitspiration content frequently reinforces limited beauty standards under the pretense of wellness promotion, despite its initial goal of encouraging healthy behaviors. It usually portrays people who are slender, toned, and conventionally attractive and who frame health as essentially aesthetic and visible.

According to research by Holland and Tiggemann (2017), exposure to Instagram fitspiration photos was substantially linked to higher levels of body dissatisfaction and increased comparison of appearance, especially among young women. These postings frequently highlight discipline, restriction, and transformation as the main routes to self-worth rather than promoting true health.

Furthermore, fitness gurus have an impact that goes beyond language and images. Many employ empowerment rhetoric, such as "no excuses," "push through the pain," or "summer body loading," to encourage self-discipline and accountability. These messages can inspire some people, but they can also make others feel guilty and ashamed, especially when their physical development does not match ideals of beauty. This kind of messaging can lead to maladaptive perfectionism and internalized appearance ideals, as noted by Boepple et al. (2019), particularly when followers are unaware that influencer content is carefully chosen.

Concepts of authenticity are further complicated by influencer culture's performative and financial aspects. Although a lot of influencers post "real" events or before-and-after pictures to imply transparency, these exhibits are still part of a branding and self-promotional system. According to Abidin (2016), their success frequently hinges on upholding a particular image that conforms to sponsor expectations and algorithmic trends.

Consequently, followers could be given a skewed perception of what wellness and fitness actually mean. Although influencers may portray themselves as approachable peers, Mclean et al. (2022) warn that their content is frequently more aspirational than realistic, especially when it involves unrecognized filter use, cosmetic enhancements, or unsustainable living choices.

The influencer model also advocates for a consumerist approach to health. In addition to being passive observers, followers are often urged to buy wellness items, clothing, exercise regimens, and supplements as part of their transformational process. Critical involvement with health treatments may be undermined by this commercialization, which substitutes evidence-based methods with consumer choices motivated by aesthetics. This commodification of health, according to Lupton (2016), is a reflection of larger neoliberal ideologies that place an emphasis on individual accountability, tangible evidence of achievement, and market-based approaches to wellbeing.

## **2.2 Uses and Gratification Theory**

In the ever-changing world of media, the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) offers an essential perspective for comprehending how users actively influence their media experiences. According to UGT, audiences are active agents that seek out information to satisfy particular psychological and social demands, in contrast to previous theories that highlighted media as a one-way vehicle of impact (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974).

When analyzing how people engage with fitness and health material on social media, this theoretical paradigm is especially pertinent. Instead of passively consuming health narratives or idealized body standards, users interact with platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok to connect with like-minded communities, learn new routines, get motivation, and validate their own experiences (Sundar & Limperos, 2013).

The contrast between active participation and passive consumption becomes complex and crucial in this setting. Even though people may use social media with specific objectives in mind, such as looking for diet or exercise advice, the layout of these sites frequently encourages aimless browsing.

The visually appealing nature of health-related articles, algorithm-driven material, and infinite scrolling capabilities can all lead users into passive consumption cycles where they internalize performative wellbeing and carefully manicured aesthetics without question (Meier & Schäfer, 2018). Increased worry related to appearance, body dissatisfaction, and the normalization of unrealistic fitness standards have all been connected to this kind of careless consuming (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016).

However, not every user interaction is harmful or surface-level. Several studies have demonstrated how people actively look for information that supports their identities, values, or ambitions. Many users, for instance, participate in eating disorder treatment support groups, follow body-positive accounts, or read instructional content from certified medical professionals.

These actions demonstrate the fundamental principles of UGT, which hold that empowerment, identity reinforcement, and the quest for self-improvement are all sources of satisfaction in addition to entertainment and social interaction (Quan-Haase & Young, 2010). Actually, the emergence of customized content—like exercise regimens, self-tracking applications, and interactive fitness challenges—shows how social media can be utilized purposefully to satisfy certain, goal-oriented desires.

The shift from passive to active engagement is not always simple, though. Numerous users appear to switch between these modes based on their emotional state, degree of self-esteem, and the surroundings, according to research. Those with a high sense of agency, for example, are more likely to interact critically with content and use it constructively, whereas those with lower self-esteem are more prone to passive consuming patterns that reinforce negative self-perceptions (Perloff, 2014). This emphasizes how users' experiences with social media and its health-related messaging depend on their level of digital literacy and emotional control.

Additionally, the satisfaction consumers pursue occasionally serves to further erroneous beliefs. A user might intentionally seek for "rapid weight loss" or "six-pack abs" exercises, for instance, and come across highly watched content that encourages bad habits under the guise of fitness inspiration. In some situations, even deliberate involvement may have negative effects. According to Deighton-Smith and Bell (2018), social media content frequently combines desire and education, making it challenging for users to distinguish between content that is actually beneficial and that is created by algorithms to be appealing.

## **2.3 Digital Literacy**

A parallel phenomenon has evolved as the impact of social media on self-perception and health becomes

more apparent: users' growing critical media knowledge and digital literacy. The ability to access, assess, and critically understand digital content is known as digital literacy. This is especially important in settings where there is a lot of persuasive, styled, and frequently deceptive media (Livingstone, 2004). As people negotiate a deluge of information, most of it filtered, commodified, or dangerous, while some may be scientifically true, this skill set is becoming increasingly important in the context of health and fitness.

More recent studies indicate that users, especially younger demographics, are increasingly engaging with media content in reflexive and critical ways, contrary to earlier research that focused on the passive character of media consumption (Buckingham, 2015). Today's social media users do more than simply consume content; they also evaluate the reliability of influencers, doubt the veracity of "before-and-after" makeovers, and even expose dishonest or harmful behavior. Audiences are becoming active critics and curators of what is deemed worthwhile or acceptable, marking a dramatic change in the power dynamics of the digital fitness realm.

The increasing disapproval of performative wellness and "fitspo" culture is one of the most obvious examples of digital literacy in the fitness and health sector. #InstagramVsReality and #BodyPositivity are two movements that have acquired popularity by drawing attention to how heavily photos are staged, manipulated, and managed. Users now reveal the techniques used to create the illusion of ideal bodies, from lighting and posing to digital improvement, through viral comparison postings and deconstruction films (Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2018). In addition to demythologizing unattainable beauty standards, this public debunking makes the audience more astute and less vulnerable to aspirational deception.

Furthermore, individuals are now able to redefine their health objectives thanks to digital literacy. Critically conscious people look for evidence-based, individualized material that promotes long-term wellness rather than embracing universally applicable ideas. As a result, there is now a new generation of fitness influencers who actively combat harmful narratives, promote mental wellness, and value honesty. In order to further encourage their followers to adopt informed and conscientious digital practices, these influencers frequently offer disclaimers, reference reliable sources, and talk about the psychological effects of social media (Lupton, 2016).

Nevertheless, critical awareness develops unevenly. Users with lesser levels of critical engagement are nonetheless susceptible to persuasive information that can be detrimental to their mental and physical well-being, and not all users have the same level of media literacy. According to research by Toma and Hancock (2013), even when consumers are aware that the content is carefully chosen, they may still have their perspectives shaped by frequent exposure to idealized imagery. This creates a conundrum: immunity is not always a result of awareness. Therefore, digital literacy is not a cure-all, even though it can be a strong protective factor.

The significance of teaching media literacy as a preventative health intervention is now being acknowledged by educational institutions, public health initiatives, and digital platforms. Although their efficacy varies by demographic and cultural background, initiatives aimed at assisting users in challenging, contextualizing, and evaluating online health information are starting to take shape (Chassiakos et al., 2016). Fostering critical awareness is still a crucial tactic in equipping people to use health and fitness media in a meaningful and safe way as the digital ecosystem grows more complex.

## **2.4 Counter Culture and Body Positivity**

A critical counter-narrative to the traditionally restrictive and frequently oppressive standards of beauty promoted by the media, the body positivity movement came into being. Fundamentally, body positivity seeks to reinforce that all bodies deserve respect, dignity, and representation, regardless of size, shape,



skin tone, or ability. This movement has given underrepresented bodies a forum to be recognized and celebrated, especially on social media sites like Instagram and TikTok. This has allowed people to regain visibility and question the supremacy of the slim, Eurocentric beauty ideal (Cwynar-Horta, 2016).

The popularity of hashtags like #FatAcceptance, #AllBodiesAreGoodBodies, and #BodyPositivity has democratized the discussion of body image and encouraged a more inclusive definition of beauty. These platforms have been utilized by activists, influencers, and regular users to publicly discuss eating disorders, share unedited photos, and combat fatphobic language that is ingrained in discussions about health and wellness. According to academics, these areas provide substantial psychological advantages, such as boosted self-esteem and less internalized weight bias, particularly for those who have historically been marginalized in popular depictions of desirability (Cohen et al., 2019).

But like many viral social movements, body positivity has also been commercialized and ideologically fragmented. Influencers and corporations started appropriating the movement's language and visuals as it grew in popularity, frequently depriving the message of its radical inclusivity. Instead of being a sincere effort to eradicate systemic bias and stigma, body positivity has frequently been reduced to marketable phrases or token diversity in commercial efforts (Gurrieri & Cherrier, 2013). In addition to weakening the movement's political foundations, this commodification runs the risk of erasing the privileged voices that currently rule beauty culture.

More importantly, some variations of body positivity have crossed into contentious areas, especially when it comes to the denial of medical discourse. Some activists have taken an oppositional attitude in response to decades of body shaming under the cover of health advice, challenging not only poisonous beauty standards but even scientifically supported recommendations for physical exercise and diet.

Although opposing fatphobia is crucial, there are rising worries that some of the movement's narratives, particularly those shared on Instagram and TikTok, conflate body acceptance with the exaltation of behaviors that are demonstrably unhealthy (Meier & Gray, 2014). Posts that propagate false information about weight-related hazards or advocate for the total rejection of any health intervention, for instance, might sabotage public health initiatives and mislead susceptible audiences.

This conflict—between freedom and accountability—has sparked a complex discussion in both the public and academic domains. Although the movement was started on the tenets of empowerment, its detractors contend that it also needs to be based on a framework that acknowledges the significance of health literacy and making educated decisions. Scholars have advocated for a well-rounded strategy that respects all body types while acknowledging the intricate connection between systemic injustices, weight, and health (Paxton et al., 2006). Instead than restricting the discussion to either medicalized judgment or blind acceptance, this entails recognizing the socioeconomic, ethnic, and psychological aspects that influence health outcomes.

Crucially, there is an increasing trend toward "body neutrality," which is a related but different movement that aims to completely de-emphasize looks. Body neutrality circumvents the pressure to always adore one's body by encouraging people to concentrate on what their bodies are capable of doing rather than how they appear. For people with impairments, chronic illnesses, or persistent body image issues, in particular, this new viewpoint has been hailed as providing a more realistic and sustainable alternative (Schaefer et al., 2020).

## **2.5 Digital Literacy vs Algorithmic Exposure**

The information that appears in a user's feed is determined by algorithmic engines used by social media platforms, especially YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok. Despite the fact that these systems are frequently

promoted as neutral or user-centric, an increasing body of evidence indicates that algorithms are everything but. Since their goal is to increase user engagement, they frequently favor visually appealing, emotionally stirring, and widely shared content—elements that are frequently associated with idealized body images, quick fitness makeovers, and beautiful depictions of health (Cotter, 2022; Bishop, 2021). Because of this prioritizing, users' perceptions of fitness and health are significantly affected. Cotter (2022), for instance, explains the "algorithmic imaginary," or a user's mental image of how social media algorithms work, and discovers that many users modify their behavior to match what they think the network will reward. A self-reinforcing cycle is created as a result: individuals publish idealized content because they think it will perform better, and the algorithm amplifies it, increasing its visibility and dominance in public debate. Thus, tailored, filtered depictions of wellbeing tend to overshadow actual, complex, or non-normative images of health.

A type of "algorithmic determinism," in which users are continuously exposed to a limited selection of health content—typically focused on weight loss, body sculpting, and appearance-based validation—occurs as a result of algorithmic content curation (Eckert, 2020). The variety of narratives that users can choose from is limited by this information filtering, which also feeds the delusion that there is just one widely recognized model of health. According to research by Fardouly and Vartanian (2016), young women in particular may experience body dissatisfaction, internalized weight bias, and skewed health beliefs as a result of frequent exposure to idealized body imagery.

Furthermore, the quality and accuracy of the health information being promoted are rarely taken into consideration by these algorithmic methods. Because they are visually appealing or go viral, pseudoscientific health trends, unregulated fitness challenges, and erroneous food advice are so frequently raised. According to Swire-Thompson and Lazer (2020), engagement-based algorithms produce a "attention economy" where visibility takes precedence over the truth. An ethical conundrum is raised by this: user agency is jeopardized if platforms are built to promote whichever content engages users the most, regardless of its effects on the mind or body. Although users think they have complete control over what they eat, algorithms heavily influence their exposure.

One of the main problems is this false sense of autonomy. Users' exposure to information is gradually guided by opaque recommendation algorithms that reinforce confirmation bias and aesthetic conformity, despite the fact that they may feel in control of their digital experience (Kearney, 2019). This implies that anyone trying to educate themselves or find inspiration in the field of health and fitness may unintentionally become enmeshed in detrimental or unrealistic paradigms. In spite of creating irrational expectations and occasionally endorsing unhealthy behaviors like starvation diets or excessive exercise, transformation videos—which frequently demonstrate dramatic weight loss or muscle gain over brief periods of time—are highly favored by algorithms (Rounsefell et al., 2020).

Even though algorithmic influence is becoming more widely recognized, few consumers have the digital literacy necessary to critically navigate these dynamics. According to Eslami et al. (2015), a lot of users are not aware of how much automated systems influence their social media experiences, which further impairs their ability to exercise agency. Users are exposed to a distorted perception of health that is influenced by what receives the most clicks, likes, and shares if there is no transparency or means to diversify the exposure of their content.

Even though research on how social media affects body image, self-perception, and health-related behaviors is expanding, there are still a number of important gaps in our knowledge, especially when it

comes to the intricate and frequently conflicting relationships between user intention, platform architecture, and content influence.

Fewer studies examine the subtle differences between the deliberate use of social media for health goals and the unconscious influence that results from habitual exposure, even though the detrimental effects of idealized imagery and algorithmic reinforcement have been extensively documented in the literature (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016; Rounsefell et al., 2020). This brings up significant issues with user agency in online environments. Do users actually curate their own experiences, or are platform logics quietly influencing their perspectives without their realizing it?

Additionally, a large portion of recent research views social media networks as a single, cohesive entity. But Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and Twitter all have unique affordances, interaction mechanisms, and cultural norms that influence user behavior differently (Marwick, 2015; Bishop, 2021). For instance, Instagram promotes carefully curated, static visual identities, while TikTok mostly focuses on algorithmic virality and video looping, which may increase exposure to body-centric content. However, there aren't many comparative research that look into how these variations impact how people view themselves in fitness and health contexts. Deeper understanding of the various psychological effects of various user interfaces and content flows may be possible through a platform-specific lens.

How people critically evaluate and distinguish between performative and actual content is another undeveloped field. More empirical research is required to comprehend how users assess the relevance, authenticity, and credibility of health and fitness content, even if recent studies have touched on digital literacy and skepticism (Cotter, 2022; Eslami et al., 2015). Do consumers, for example, know when a fitness influencer is being compensated to endorse a product? Can they tell the difference between a video that merely promotes aesthetic values and one that is actually educational? In a time when influencer culture frequently conflates marketing with firsthand accounts, this disparity is especially pertinent (Abidin, 2016).

## **2.6 Research Gap**

Few studies have specifically examined how users internalize health and fitness narratives in digital spaces, despite the fact that previous research has examined the impact of social media on body image and mental health. Most of the literature that is currently available focuses on idealized beauty standards or influencer culture in isolation, without taking into account the interpretive process of the average user. Little is known about how intention (i.e., seeking health content) competes with the influence of algorithmically reinforced visual norms, and there is little research on how users actively distinguish between authentic content and performative or promotional posts. A passive audience is frequently assumed in research, ignoring the growing digital literacy that empowers people to assess the content they receive critically. Additionally, little research has been done on the effects of social media use on various age groups in a particular cultural setting, such as India.

Furthermore, not enough research has been done on the psychological toll and emotional strain of browsing health content online. Although a lot of research concentrates on quantifiable results, such as body dissatisfaction or modifications in exercise habits, qualitative insights into users' internal narratives—particularly their coping mechanisms for contradicting messages—are less prevalent. This represents a lost chance to learn how people balance the conflict between self-love and self-discipline, community and rivalry, and inspiration and insecurity in these digital contexts.

Additionally, the majority of the studies that are currently available generalize the impact of social media without taking into account platform-specific nuances, such as how Instagram's visual dominance differs from WhatsApp's interpersonal sharing.

Furthermore, little is known about how the impact of online content is mediated or influenced by real-life social circles, such as friends and peers. Research on digital health narratives has not sufficiently reflected the diversity of Indian social media users, who come from a range of socioeconomic, linguistic, and educational backgrounds. By emphasizing user perception, context, and agency in the online health and fitness discourse, this study aims to close these gaps.

Little longitudinal research has been done on how exposure to fitness and health information over time influences changing self-concepts. Understanding how digital health identities are created, contested, or changed over longer time periods is lacking because a large portion of the work currently in publication is based on cross-sectional designs or brief experimental studies (Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2016). Longitudinal research may provide important insights into how users maintain, alter, or reject these narratives as they get older, gain experience, or go through personal transformations, given the dynamic nature of social media platforms and user engagement.

In conclusion, even if the body of knowledge about how social media affects identity and health is growing, next study needs to be more nuanced, platform-specific, and time-sensitive. The development of morally sound and successful digital health communication tactics in the future will depend on considerations including user intentionality, critical literacy, and emotional reaction.

## **Methodology**

### **3.1**

The aim of this study is to investigate the ways in which social media use affects users' perceptions of their own fitness and health.

#### **Objectives :**

- To investigate the emotional response the users have upon consuming social media content related to health and fitness.
- To investigate how people decide to consume the content available on social media related to health and fitness.
- To investigate the relationship between the frequency of social media usage and users' self-perceptions related to health and physical appearance.

#### **Research Questions :**

1. What kind of emotional response do the users have upon consuming social media content related to health and fitness?
2. How do users differentiate between authentic and performative health-related content online?
3. How does health and fitness content available on social media impact individuals' perceptions of their own health and body image?

#### **Research Design :**

Using a mixed-method approach, this study combines quantitative and qualitative research approaches to give a more thorough knowledge of how social media affects self-awareness in relation to fitness and health. The quantitative component uses structured survey questionnaires to gather quantifiable information about users' self-concept, views of fitness and health, and social media usage patterns. A large sample is taken in these surveys in order to identify broad trends and patterns.

A qualitative element was added to the quantitative data in the form of open-ended opinion-based replies, which provide a better understanding of the individual experiences, emotions, and reflections of the participants. This dual approach provides a deeper, more complex knowledge of the study subject by bridging the gap between numerical data and lived experiences while also bolstering the validity of the findings.

**Sample :**

The proposed study includes a sample size of 104 adults for the quantitative survey and 15 random individuals as subset from the initial sample. From this wider group, a subset of 15 people were chosen to provide qualitative feedback using open-ended questions. These 15 participants were chosen at random from the wider sample and asked to discuss their experiences with social media, body image, fitness inspiration, and self-perception.

This subgroup was critical for gathering complex opinions that would not be adequately represented by standardised survey questions, hence increasing the depth of the study.

**Population :**

This study's target demographic consists of individuals who actively utilise social media platforms such as Instagram, WhatsApp, YouTube, TikTok, and other peer-driven digital environments. These platforms are critical to the research because they are the key settings in which health, fitness, and beauty discourses are encountered and internalised.

The study does not restrict participation to any specific geographic region, as long as individuals match the inclusion requirements and are frequent social media users. The sample is expected to represent a diverse mix of users in terms of age, gender, and background, providing a comprehensive view of how these platforms influence self-understanding.

**Inclusion Criteria:**

To ensure the relevance and validity of the acquired data, the study used the following inclusion criteria:

- Individuals that wish to freely participate in the research.
- Individuals who are literate in English, as the survey and qualitative replies are conducted in English.
- Active social media users, particularly those that share content about health, fitness, wellness, or self-improvement.

These requirements ensure that participants can comprehend the questions and respond thoughtfully based on their social media experiences.

**Sampling Method :**

To choose participants, the study uses Simple Random Sampling (SRS). This probabilistic sampling strategy assures that every individual in the target group has an equal and independent chance of being selected, reducing selection bias and increasing the generalisability of the findings.

Participants are chosen at random from social media communities, groups, and personal networks after checking that they matched the eligibility requirements. The same procedure was applied for identifying the 15 people who provided qualitative insights. This approach's unpredictability helps to ensure the sample's objectivity and representativeness.

**3.2 Procedure :**

The participants were asked to fill out a consent form to permit the researchers to use the results for research purposes. Participants were informed that the survey results would be kept confidential. The study



was conducted by circulating google forms where the instructions were clearly explained to the participants.

The first part of the form consists of their demographic details and the second part comprises questions to assess the said samples' social media usage. Third part consists of questions to understand the influence of social media on health and fitness awareness. The final part comprises questions to assess the self reflection and body image perception upon one's exposure to social media content.

After the data collection, the responses were analysed and evaluated in percentages and further interpreted. Then they were correlated to the initial research questions.

A subset of the sample were interviewed asking open ended questions to understand the logical reasoning of the quantitative results indicated. The statements stand to support the final readings of the quantified survey carried out.

## 4. Analysis and Conclusion

### 4.1 Data Analysis

The dissemination of information and ideas through media channels has significantly influenced societal perceptions and behaviours worldwide. In the context of India, a country rich in diverse cultural traditions and dietary practices, the role of media in the spread of veganism has garnered increasing attention. This chapter aims to delve into the interpretation and analysis of data collected to understand the intricate relationship between media and the proliferation of veganism in India.

For this study, a total of 104 questionnaires were distributed, eliciting pertinent responses from participants across the Indian population. Through rigorous statistical analysis and quantitative interpretation, this chapter endeavours to unravel the nuanced influences exerted by different media platforms on individuals' attitudes and behaviours towards veganism.

### 1. Demographics

**Table 1.1 : Age**

Age	Percentage
less than 18	4.0
18-29	70.3
30-49	21.8
50+	4.0

According to the survey's findings, the vast majority of participants (70.3%) are between the ages of 18 and 29. Following this are 21.8% of participants who are between the ages of 30 and 49, 4% who are under the age of 18, and 4% who are 50 years of age or over.

This distribution demonstrates that a major portion of the survey's respondents are young people, a group well-known for using social media extensively. People between the ages of 18 and 29 are generally at a stage of active change in their personal identities, body image, and health-related behaviours, which are frequently influenced by the digital environments they live in. This group is particularly pertinent to a study that examines how social media affects self-perception in relation to fitness and health. They are more prone to internalising and responding to such content because of their increased exposure to wellness trends, body ideals, and fitness influencers.

Even while older and younger age groups' viewpoints are under-represented, their inclusion nevertheless provides a useful but constrained contrast. The results will mostly represent the opinions and experiences of young adults, who are at the forefront of social media usage and its psychological impacts, due to the minimal amount of responses from respondents who were under 18 and over 50.

**Table 1.2 : Gender**

Gender	Percentage
Female	47.5
Male	52.5
Others	0.0

About 52.5% of the respondents identified as male, and 47.5% as female; none of the respondents identified as non-binary or of any other gender. This suggests a fairly balanced number of genders, enabling a more inclusive examination of how social media influences male and female perspectives on self-understanding in relation to fitness and health.

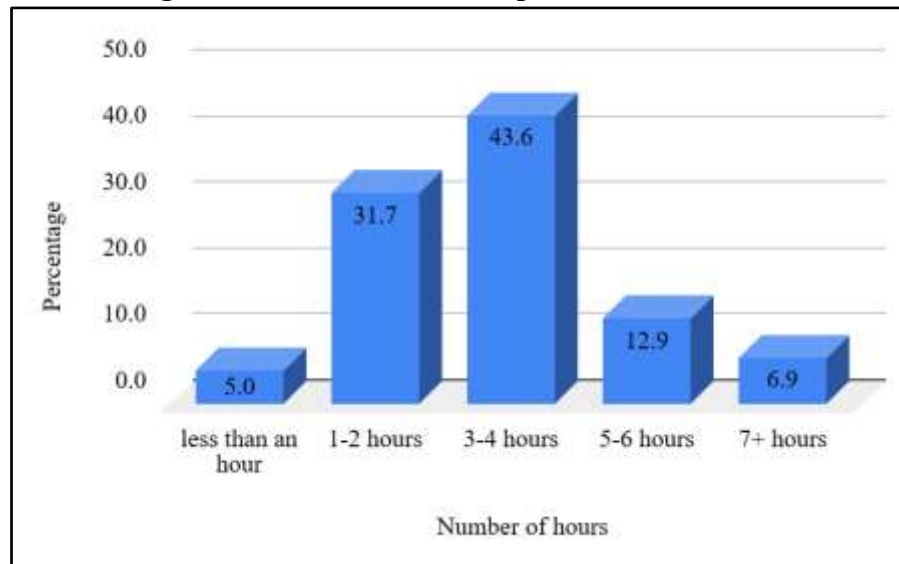
Having almost equal input from both genders promotes a more inclusive and nuanced view of self-perception in the social media sphere, as men and women are frequently influenced differently by body image and health behaviours. Although the breadth is somewhat constrained by the lack of non-binary individuals, the data nevertheless offers insightful information about gender-based trends in impact and participation.

## 2. Social Media Usage

**Table 2.1 Number of hours spent on social media**

Number of hours	Percentage	Number
less than an hour	5.0	5
1-2 hours	31.7	32
3-4 hours	43.6	44
5-6 hours	12.9	13
7+ hours	6.9	7
Total	100	101

**Figure 1. Number of hours spent on social media**



According to the survey results in Table 2.1, the vast majority of participants use social media for a sizable amount of their waking hours. In particular, the most prevalent usage category was social media, with 43.6% of individuals reporting using it for three to four hours every day. 31.7% of users use it for one to two hours every day after this.

Interestingly, 6.9% of respondents said they used the app for more than seven hours a day, and 12.9% said they used it for five to six hours.

Conversely, only 5.0% of respondents said they used social media for less than an hour every day. These numbers highlight how ubiquitous social media is in people's daily lives, especially for those who use it for many hours every day. With more than 63% of respondents utilising social media for more than three hours a day.

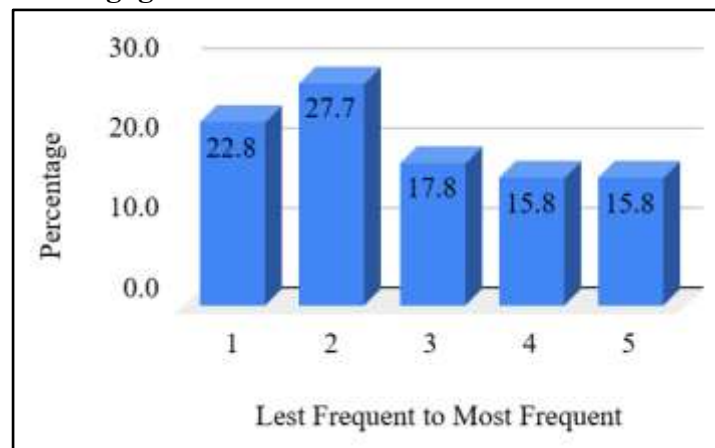
Given that more screen time is probably associated with more exposure to carefully chosen fitness content, body ideals, influencer culture, and health narratives, this usage pattern is especially noteworthy in the context of this research. These extended exchanges may influence users' perceptions of themselves, fitness incentives, and general body image—all of which are major issues in this research.

### 3. Active Engagement with Health and Fitness-Related Content

**Table 2.2 Engagement with Health and Fitness-Related Content**

	Percentage	N
1	22.8	23
2	27.7	28
3	17.8	18
4	15.8	16
5	15.8	16
Total	100	101

**Figure 2. Engagement with Health and Fitness-Related Content**



From the above figure, it can be interpreted that low to relatively low engagement was indicated by the fact that 50.5%, that is, (28.8%+27.7%) ( $n=23+28 = 51$ ) of respondents chose either Level 1 or Level 2. This implies that half of the sample may not use social media primarily for such content, or they may use it more infrequently or passively.

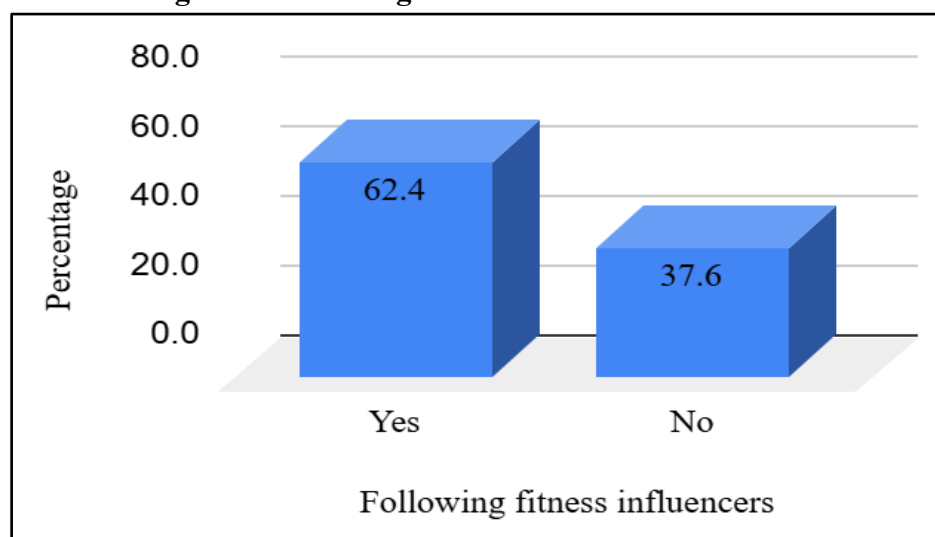
The opposite extreme, representing high to very high engagement, was reached by 31.6%, that is, (15.8%+15.8%) ( $n=16+16 = 32$ ) of respondents who chose Level 4 (15.8%,  $n=16$ ) or Level 5 (15.8%,  $n=16$ ). These individuals probably regularly read fitness and health-related content, and they might be more impacted by the wellness messaging, body ideals, and trends that are popular on social media.

In contrast, Level 3, which denotes a moderate level of engagement, was selected by 17.8% ( $n=18$ ) of respondents. They are a useful intermediate group for exposure and impact analysis since they may interact with such content selectively or balance it with other interests.

This distribution shows that although a sizable percentage of participants only occasionally interact with health and fitness content, about one-third do so regularly, underscoring the differing levels of influence that social media may have on various users. Understanding how self-perception, motivation, and health behaviours are influenced in online settings is made easier with the help of this segmentation.

#### 4. Following Fitness Influencers and Health Gurus

**Figure 3. Following Fitness Influencers or Gurus**



According to the above figure, the majority of respondents (62.4%) indicated they followed health experts and fitness influencers on social media. On the other hand, 37.6% (n=38) of participants said they do not conform to these figures.

The data gathered emphasises how prevalent and powerful fitness identities are in people's digital lives. Nearly two-thirds of the respondents follow these influencers, indicating a high level of interest in carefully chosen health and fitness material, which frequently consists of nutrition recommendations, exercise regimens, transformational stories, and ideals for body image.

This trend is especially pertinent to the study's objectives because fitness influencers frequently act as role models or inspiration, which may affect followers' opinions about their own value, fitness standards, and general health. Additionally, its content may influence self-perception and individual health objectives by promoting the internalisation of particular body standards or lifestyle choices.

The sizable minority that do not follow these influencers, on the other hand, might either completely shun fitness-related content or favour other, less personality-driven information sources. This difference between followers and non-followers is a crucial component in comprehending the impact of digital fitness culture because it provides insightful information about how social media users interact with and browse health content.

According to interviewees, those who follow fitness influencers frequently do so for inspiration, structure, and motivation.

Influencers gave "easy-to-follow routines" and "daily reminders to stay healthy," according to some, while others said that "seeing transformation posts pushes me to stay on track with my fitness goals." But tension and ambivalence were also evident in the qualitative data.

Some participants expressed how they felt "inadequate" or "pressured to look a certain way" as a result of always seeing idealised bodies. These accounts are essential for comprehending how the qualitative data, which displays both positive inspiration and negative self-comparisons, complicated the quantitative data, which indicates great involvement.

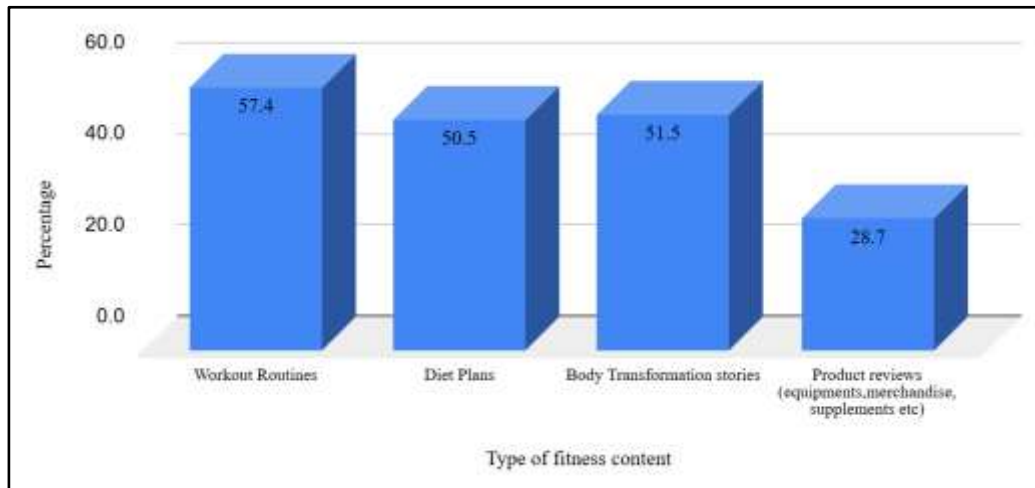
Participants who said they did not follow fitness influencers, on the other hand, explained a deliberate decision to stay away from "toxic comparisons" or "unrealistic expectations." "Instead of watching influencers, I would rather read peer-reviewed health articles or follow certified professionals," one participant said.

These answers demonstrate the variety of user experiences and provide an explanation for the 37.6% of respondents who do not interact with influencer content. When taken as a whole, these results lend credence to a more nuanced conclusion: while it is normal to follow fitness influencers, the results of this interaction vary and can shape self-understanding in intricate and perhaps contradictory ways.



## 5. Preferred Types of Health and Fitness Content

**Figure 4. Type of fitness content the respondents consume**



According to the quantitative results, 57.4% (n=58) of participants chose the category of workout routines, making them the most popular form of health and fitness content. This high level of engagement suggests that people generally prefer structured, educational content that they can use to further their fitness goals. Participants commonly characterised such routines as "easy to follow," "motivating," and "a good way to stay consistent," according to the qualitative data, indicating that consumers enjoy content that offers precise instructions and repeatable action processes.

Stories on body transformation were also very popular, as 51.5% (n=52) of respondents interacted with them. Interviewees frequently mentioned these tales as motivation, using phrases like "relatable," "proof that change is possible," and "something I aspire to." Some did, however, also recognise the emotional impact of such information, pointing out that frequent exposure to spectacular transformations could result in self-comparison and unreasonable expectations, especially when the outcomes appeared unachievable or overly idealised.

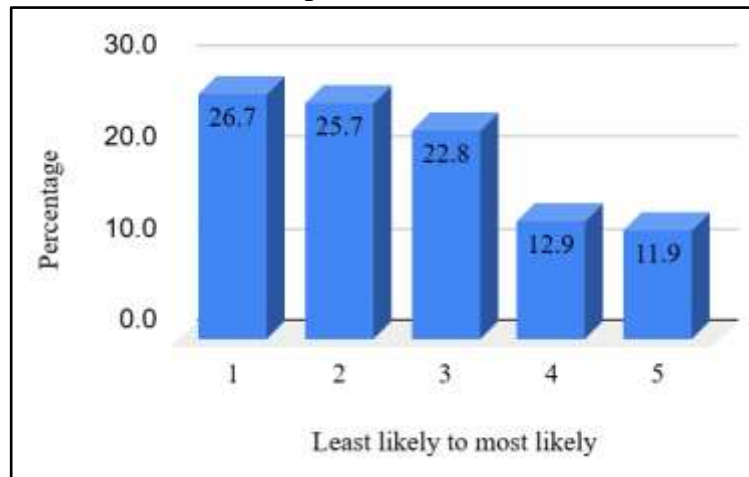
The same was true for diet programs, which were selected by 50.5% (n=51) of participants as useful instruments for enhancing health. Posts with meal planning, calorie-tracking advice, or suggestions for food substitutions were well-received by participants. Users expressed caution when following diets recommended by influencers without formal training, though, as a recurrent issue in the interviews was scepticism over authenticity.

Conversely, the least frequently engaged content type was product reviews (28.7%, n=29). According to some interviewees, these messages "felt more like ads than real advice" or were "hard to trust unless from a verified source," indicating that people found this content to be less interesting and frequently biased.

Together, these results show that consumers are drawn to information that blends usefulness and aspirational value, but they are becoming more critical of content that seems fake or commercial. What kinds of health and fitness material consumers appreciate most seems to be greatly influenced by the interaction between instructional utility (such as diet plans and exercise regimens) and emotional engagement (such as transformation stories).

## 6. Comparison of Self Health and Fitness to Social Media

**Figure 5. Likeliness to compare themselves to the content creators**



From the above figure, 52.4% of the sample (26.7% + 25.7%,  $n = 53$ ) said they are unlikely to compare their level of health and fitness to what they see on social media, according to the above statistic. This implies that over 50% of the participants don't usually utilise social media posts as a standard for fitness and health.

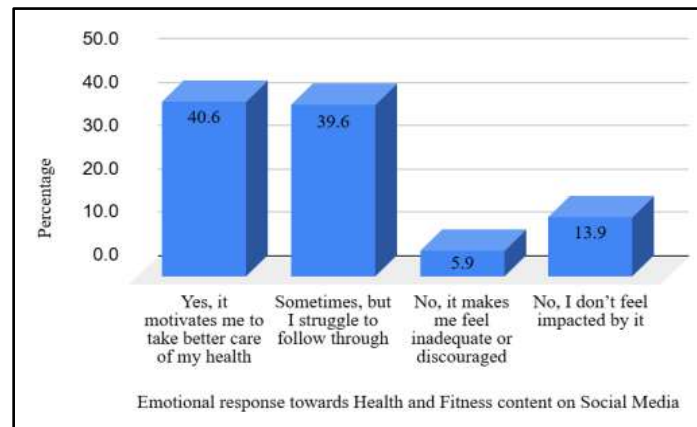
Nonetheless, 24.8% (12.9% + 11.9%,  $n = 25$ ) of those surveyed acknowledged contrasting their health and fitness with social media representations. This smaller percentage indicates a significant minority that is impacted by comparisons on social media. This argument was further supported by qualitative interviews, where one participant said, "It might be difficult to avoid comparison at times, particularly when influencers present everything as flawless. But I remind myself that they aren't presenting the entire story." This demonstrates the complexity of social comparisons, as some users are aware of the well chosen content but are ultimately affected psychologically.

Furthermore, a moderate degree of ambivalence regarding social comparisons in fitness and health was shown by the 22.8% ( $n = 23$ ) of respondents who fell into the neutral category. According to one interviewee, "I don't compare much, but I do sometimes wonder if I'm doing enough for my health when I see certain posts." This group of interviewees frequently discussed passively consuming content.

According to these results, approximately 25% of the sample actively engages in social comparisons, whereas the majority of participants do not, which may have an impact on their motivation and self-perception. Another layer is added by the neutral group, suggesting that even in the absence of direct comparisons, views may still be shaped by modest exposure effects.

## 7. Inspiration from Social Media Fitness Content

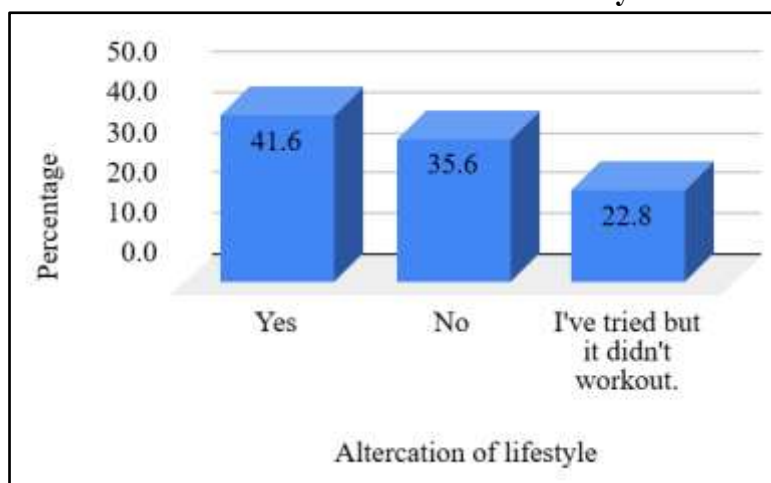
**Figure 6. Respondents emotional response upon exposure towards health and fitness content**



According to the above figure, most respondents said they were at least somewhat inspired by social media posts about health and fitness, with 40.6% (n=41) saying it inspired them to act and 39.6% (n=40) saying they were inspired but found it difficult to put the advice they read into practice. These results imply that most participants view social media information as a source of inspiration, even though some have trouble converting that inspiration into practical actions. One participant shared in a qualitative response, "I feel encouraged when I see people achieving their goals, but I often don't know how to start or if their methods would work for me." This illustrates how inspiration is both energising and sometimes overwhelming. However, 13.9% (n=14) said they felt no impression at all, and 5.9% (n=6) said that such content made them feel inadequate. One interviewee said, "It's hard to see people who look perfect all the time—it makes me feel like I'll never measure up." This suggests that the carefully chosen style of internet information can lead to feelings of inadequacy for some people. Others, on the other hand, showed apathy, with one saying, "It's just content to me." I don't let it change my self-perception."

## 8. Lifestyle change from Social Media Fitness Content

**Figure 7. Respondents towards health and fitness content by behavioural modification**



According to the above figure, 41.6% (n=42) of respondents said that they have actively changed their lifestyle in response to social media's health and fitness material, such as by altering their daily routines,

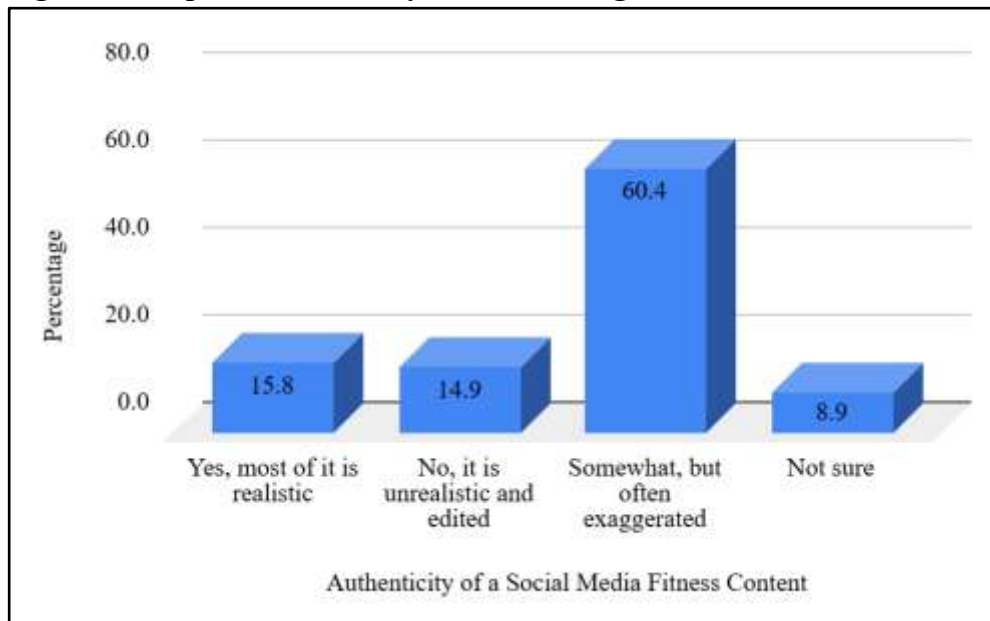
food, or exercise regimen. This noteworthy percentage demonstrates how social media can be an effective motivator for people to take concrete steps to enhance their fitness and health.

As evidence of the platforms' ability to serve as catalysts for lifestyle change, these respondents probably considered the content relatable, actionable, and in line with their own objectives. As per the interview, few of the participants mentioned adopting "intermittent fasting" and 'protein heavy meals' as a part of their daily food habits.

Furthermore, 22.8% (n=23) reported that they had made an effort to change their lifestyle but had eventually failed. This category represents a prevalent issue in the field of behaviour modification: the challenge of converting intention into sustained action. Their incapacity to sustain improvements could have been caused by a number of factors, including personal constraints, a lack of sustainable strategies, or unrealistic expectations.

## 9. Active-Passive Consumption of Fitness Content

**Figure 8. Respondents actively differentiating the content on social media**



According to the above figure, 15.8% (n=16) of respondents think that the majority of social media posts about fitness and health paint a genuine picture. This minority demonstrates how certain content producers may portray realistic, approachable, and attainable fitness and health objectives. They frequently follow influencers that emphasise "practical advice over aesthetics" or "realistic portrayals of progress," including setbacks and problems, according to interviews with this demographic.

Terms like "authentic," "grounded," and "relatable" were used by respondents to characterise the kind of content that they believe to be reliable. In contrast to highly edited or polished depictions, they appreciate postings that combine personal anecdotes with information supported by science.

However, 14.9% (n=15) of individuals said the material is inflated and unrealistic, frequently calling it "unattainable" or "heavily edited." This group's interviewees complained about perfection-driven content, like postings that highlight rigorous exercise regimens or extremely restrictive diets, which they believed were unaffordable for the typical person.

"The influencers I follow seem to be living in a completely different reality—unlimited time for workouts, chefs preparing their meals, and no signs of struggle," one participant wrote, for instance. Because many respondents believe that the standards portrayed on social media do not represent their own living conditions, this perspective adds to their feelings of discouragement and alienation.

A more nuanced opinion was voiced by the majority, 60.4% (n=61), who said that social media fitness and health information is "somewhat realistic but often exaggerated." This group's qualitative replies show a healthy mix of scepticism and inspiration. Many participants pointed out that although some posts might offer helpful advice or inspiration, they frequently include exaggerated content to increase interaction.

The ubiquity of "before-and-after" images, for example, was mentioned by a number of respondents; one person called them "inspiring but clearly filtered or staged to look more dramatic." "The advice seems good, but the visuals make me wonder if they're trying to sell a product more than genuinely help," said another participant.

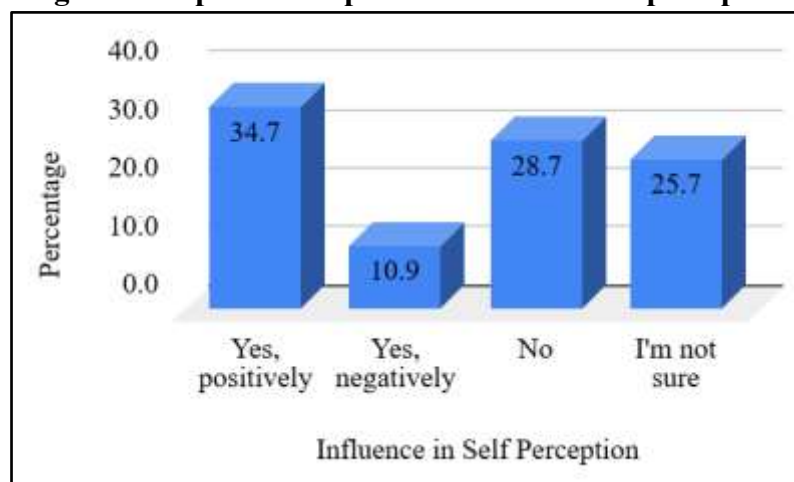
One of the participants even brought in an example "I scroll and get hooked to a seemingly pretty convincing body transformation but as I keep scrolling down, I see their caption ending with 'dm YES to get access to my secret to this transformation' which completely throws me off." These type of contents in fact breed more skeptical users in time.

Lastly, 8.9% (n=9) of respondents were uncertain if the representation of fitness and health content on social media is accurate. This ambivalence results from an inability to clearly identify what information is reliable.

This group of interviewees frequently described their experiences using terms like "confusing," "overwhelming," or "too much to sort through." "I see so many conflicting posts—one says carbs are good, another says they're the enemy," one participant commented, for instance. "I simply don't know whom to believe". This suggests that users' capacity to discern what is realistic can occasionally be hampered by the sheer number and diversity of content on social media.

## 10. Social Media Impact on Self Perception of Body Image

**Figure 9. Impact on respondents on their self perception**



It is clear from the above result that 34.7% (n=35) of respondents think social media has improved their perception of fitness and health. This suggests that more than one-third of the participants link positive outcomes like motivation, improved comprehension, or healthier lifestyle choices to their exposure to social media content.



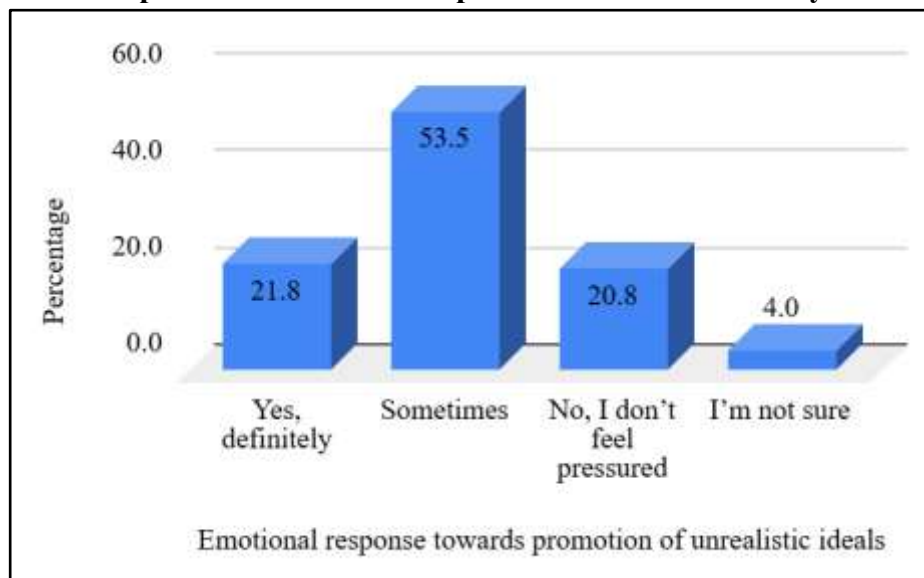
Conversely, 10.9% (n=11) of the participants believe that social media has influenced their view of fitness and health in a negative way. This minority raises concerns about the possible impact of some content categories, like inaccurate information or unrealistic portrayals, which may cause unhappiness or unhealthful comparisons.

However, according to 28.7% (n=29) of respondents, social media has had no impact whatsoever on how they see fitness and health. This suggests that over one-third of the participants are unaffected by the content they receive, which may be because they utilise social media with a critical or unconcerned attitude.

Finally, 25.7% (n=26) of interviewees said they were unsure if social media had affected their opinion. This category includes a sizable percentage of the sample that might find it difficult to identify the precise influence of social media on their opinions or who might be ambivalent about it.

## 11. Impact of Unrealistic Fitness and Health Ideals Set By Social Media

**Figure 10. Respondents emotional response towards ideals set by social media**



According to the above figure, 21.8% (n=22) of respondents strongly believe that social media encourages unattainable fitness and health goals. This sizable percentage of participants draws attention to the idea that social media content frequently presents unrealistic expectations, which can cause viewers to feel under pressure or frustrated.

This is supported by qualitative information gleaned from interviews, where a number of participants characterise such aspirations as "unrealistic and catered to perfection," frequently highlighting carefully chosen imagery and drastic changes. Comparing themselves to these representations caused some participants to feel inadequate, saying that "it feels like a constant reminder of what I am not."

According to a nuanced viewpoint, the majority, 53.5% (n=54), think that such ideas are occasionally advocated. Although not all social media content sets unrealistic expectations, these people agreed that there is a persistent pattern where some influencers or creators highlight extremes rather than inclusive and realistic fitness and health journeys.

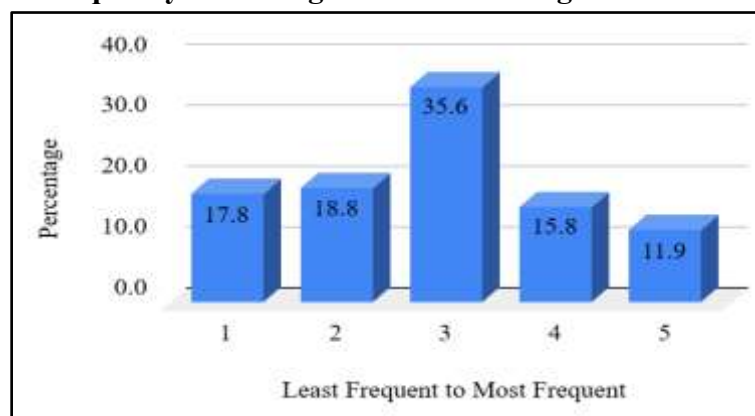
According to interview data, people in this group frequently experienced a mixture of scepticism and inspiration. Comments like "it's motivating but can also feel overwhelming when progress doesn't match what's shown online" highlight how reading such content has two sides.

However, 20.8% (n=21) of those surveyed said they don't feel under pressure to live up to certain standards on social media. These participants generally described adopting a "critical lens" towards information, emphasising verified, evidence-based advice or personal development instead. This group of interviewees revealed that they "selectively follow creators" who reflect their beliefs and practical views on fitness and health, which helps them weed out content that might seem unachievable.

Finally, 4.0% (n=4) of respondents said they were unsure if social media encourages these kinds of values. This category probably represents people who are either less interested in or have difficulty evaluating how health and fitness information affects their perceptions.

## 12. Frequency of Misleading Content related to Health and Fitness on Social Media

**Figure 11. Frequency in coming across misleading content in social media**



According to the above figure, 35.6% (n=36) of respondents said they occasionally came across fitness or health advice on social media that they later discovered to be inaccurate or deceptive. This sizable percentage illustrates how common false information is in this area and how difficult it is for people to identify trustworthy stuff.

Many respondents revealed that false material frequently masquerades as authority, using phrases like "scientifically proven" or "expert-backed" to support unsubstantiated assertions. According to one participant, they followed a fitness influencer who advertised "quick-fix detox drinks," only to discover later that the goods were not supported by scientific research or FDA approval.

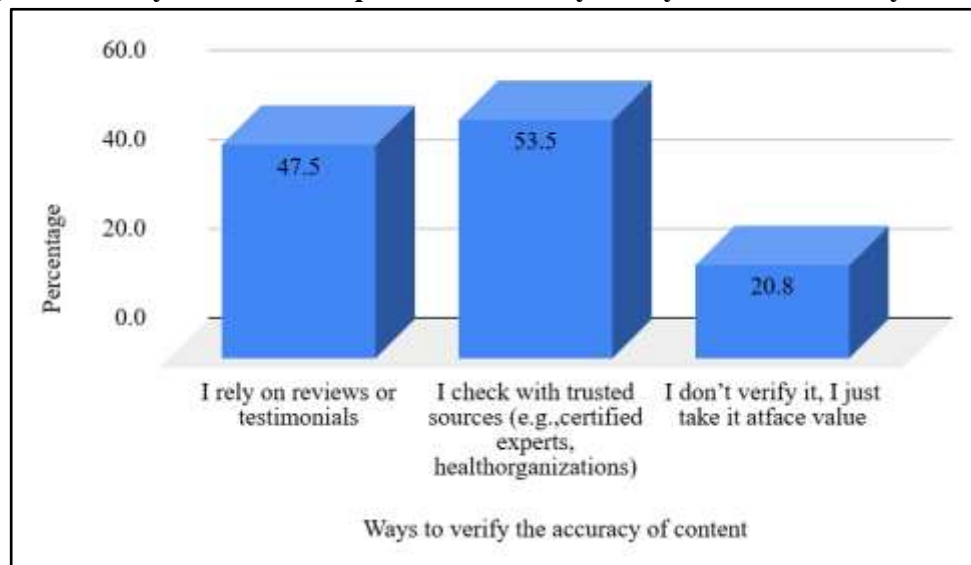
36.6% (17.8%+18.8%) (n=18 + 19 =37) of respondents said they rarely came across false content or even occasionally. These participants probably represent individuals who are either less interested in social media posts on fitness and health or who follow reliable sources. According to a participant, "I mostly rely on verified medical organisations and don't engage with influencers who promote miracle solutions."

In contrast, 27.7% (15.8%+11.9%) (n=16+12 = 28) of respondents gave their experiences a higher frequency scale rating, indicating that they regularly received inaccurate or deceptive advice.

Qualitative insights showed that these participants were frustrated and confused by claims that contradicted one another. "I tried following a ketogenic diet based on an influencer's advice, but my doctor later informed me that it wasn't suitable for my condition," one person explains. There were "fad workouts claiming to burn 1,000 calories in 20 minutes" that did not mesh with practical fitness standards, according to another participant.

## 13. Verification Norms Among Users on the Content Available

**Figure 12. Ways in which respondents actively verify the content they consume**

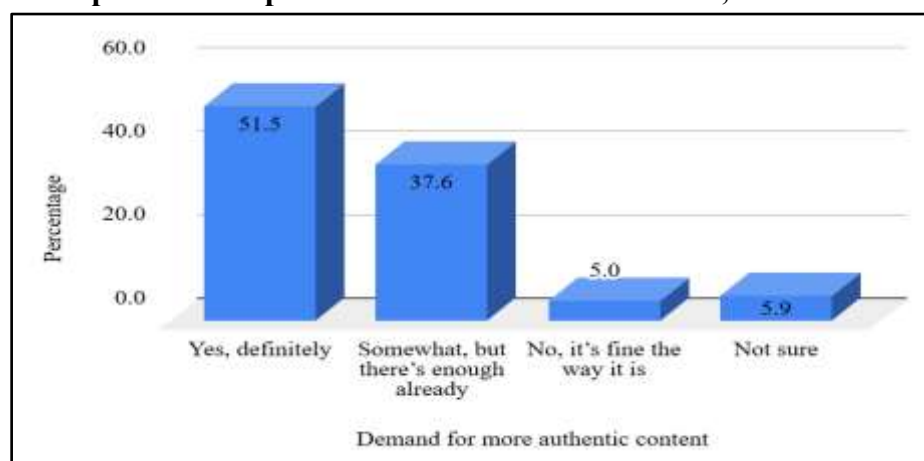


It is clear from the above data that most respondents take precautions to confirm the fitness and health-related material they come across on social media. 53.5% (n=54) of participants said they relied on reliable sources to make sure the information was accurate. This suggests a significant preference for professional judgements, evidence supported by research, or advice from respected individuals or groups in the field of health and fitness. This conduct shows a critical and circumspect approach to online assertions that may not be confirmed.

Furthermore, reviews or testimonials are used by 47.5% (n=48) of respondents to confirm the accuracy of material. This implies that when evaluating the validity of assertions or advice they encounter, many people give weight to anecdotal evidence or social proof. Although this occasionally works, it can also expose people to subjective or biased viewpoints that don't always support evidence-based procedures. Nonetheless, 20.8% (n=21) of those surveyed acknowledged that they often take information from social media at face value without checking it. This research raises serious concerns about the vulnerability to false information. These people may be vulnerable to forming habits or opinions based on false or deceptive information, which could have detrimental effects on their health and general wellbeing.

## 14. Demand for Factual, Evidence-Based Content on Social Media

**Figure 13. Respondents response towards the need of factual, evidence based content**



More real, evidence-based health and fitness content on social media is clearly in high demand, according to the research. 51.5% (n=52) of respondents strongly agree that such content is unquestionably needed. This suggests that participants clearly understand that a large portion of the content now accessible on social media platforms could not be reliable or rigorous enough to support well-informed choices on fitness and health.

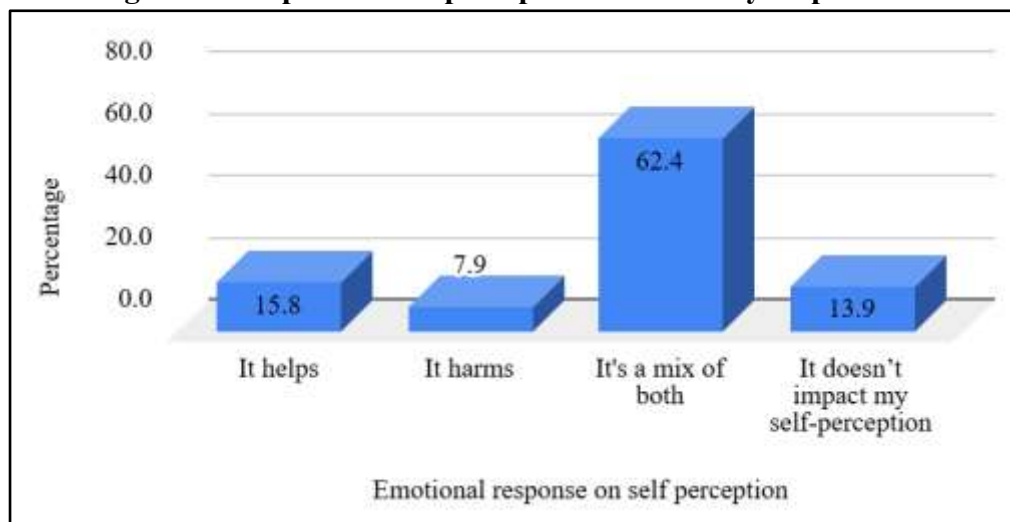
Although there is now some factual content available, 37.6% of respondents (n=38) think there is still much space for development. These categories collectively represent over 89.1% (n=90) of the participants, indicating a broad recognition of the shortcomings and possible errors of the current state of health-related social media material.

However, only 5.0% (n=5) believe that social media's existing supply of fitness and health material is enough and doesn't need to be changed. According to this minority view, a tiny percentage of users might either be satisfied with the calibre of the material they come across or possibly give less weight to the necessity of evidence-based practices in this field.

Lastly, 5.9% (n=6) of those surveyed are not sure if there is a need for more evidence-based content. This group might represent people who are either unconcerned about the calibre of the information they take in or who are unable to discriminate between information that is factual and that is not.

## 15. Impact on Self Perception

**Figure 14. Impact on self perception recorded by respondents**



The vast majority of participants, 62.4% (n=63), stated that social media influences their self-perception in both good and negative ways. This conflicting opinion emphasises the combined advantages and disadvantages of consuming fitness and health-related content online. Social media can be a source of both inspiration and feelings of inadequacy for many people.

"Seeing transformation stories motivates me to work harder, but at the same time, I feel like I'll never reach those standards," said one participant, reflecting on this contradiction. This phrase perfectly expresses the inner turmoil that many people experience when they use social media as a source of inspiration while also battling the demands of comparison and the pursuit of frequently unachievable goals.

A smaller but significant 15.8% (n=16) of respondents said social media had a favourable impact on how they see themselves. These people frequently see platforms as useful resources for getting access to workout programs, advice, and encouraging groups.

"I've been able to connect with people who share my goals, and their encouragement has been really helpful in sticking to my plans," said one participant, for example. This demonstrates how social media may promote a feeling of community and offer useful tools for enhancing one's health.

On the other hand, 7.9% (n=8) said that social media had a detrimental effect on how they saw themselves. Exposure to extremely curated or unrealistic content that puts undue pressure on people is a common cause. "Even though I know it's not realistic, the constant images of perfect bodies make me feel like I'm not doing enough," one respondent said. This illustrates how social media can reinforce unrealistic expectations, which can cause some users to become frustrated and lose confidence.

Lastly, 13.9% of respondents (n=14) said social media had no effect on how they saw their own level of fitness and health. A large number of these individuals seem to take a neutral position or interact with content selectively.

"I follow a few fitness pages, but I don't let them influence how I see myself," one person clarified. I am aware of what suits me. According to this reaction, social media's impact can be lessened by developing one's own resilience or by engaging with online content more critically.

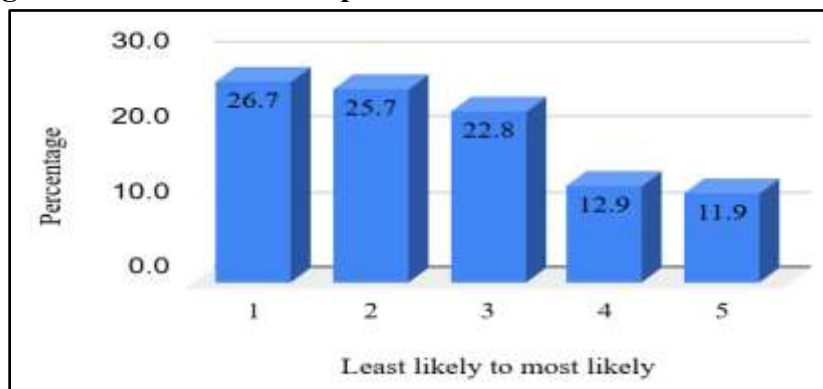
## 4.2 Findings

Digital involvement and personal well-being have a complex but largely favourable link, according to a research of the emotional reactions evoked by health and fitness-related social media material.

**Table 3. Likeliness to compare themselves to the content consumed**

Likeliness to compare self to social media	Percentage	N
1	26.7	27
2	25.7	26
3	22.8	23
4	12.9	13
5	11.9	12
Total	100	101

**Figure 5. Likeliness to compare themselves to the content creators**





A significant proportion of respondents, according to data from Table 3, are growing more dubious about contrasting their fitness and health with the profiles they come across on social media. In particular, a low propensity to make such comparisons is shown by 52.4% of participants (those who scored a 1 and 2 on the likert scale).

This implies that people are becoming more digitally literate and knowledgeable, which empowers them to interact critically with online content. Many participants appear to be able to keep a healthy emotional distance from the carefully manicured and frequently exaggerated representations of fitness and health on social media because they understand that these representations are not totally accurate.

**Table 4. Respondents emotional response upon exposure towards health and fitness content**

Social Media Content as Personal Inspiration	Percentage	N
Yes, it motivates me to take better care of my health	40.6	41
Sometimes, but I struggle to follow through	39.6	40
No, it makes me feel inadequate or discouraged	5.9	6
No, I don't feel impacted by it	13.9	14
Total	100	101

**Figure 6. Respondents emotional response upon exposure towards health and fitness content**

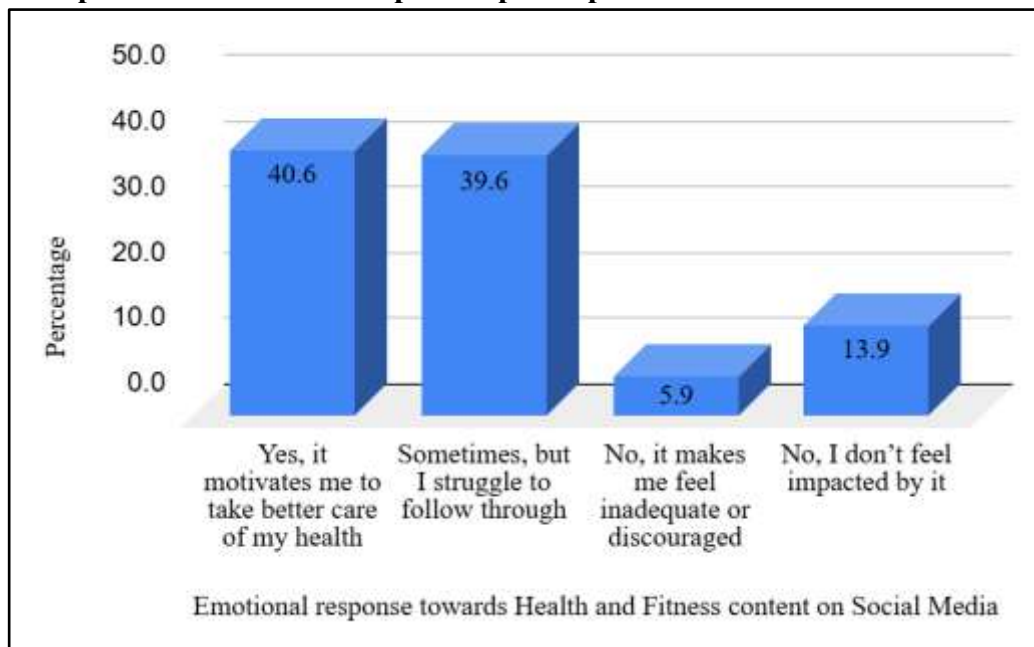


Table 4 demonstrates the motivational potential of social media material in spite of this scepticism. Significantly, 40.6% of respondents specifically expressed feeling motivated to prioritise their health, and 39.6% said they were motivated but found it difficult to maintain the pace.

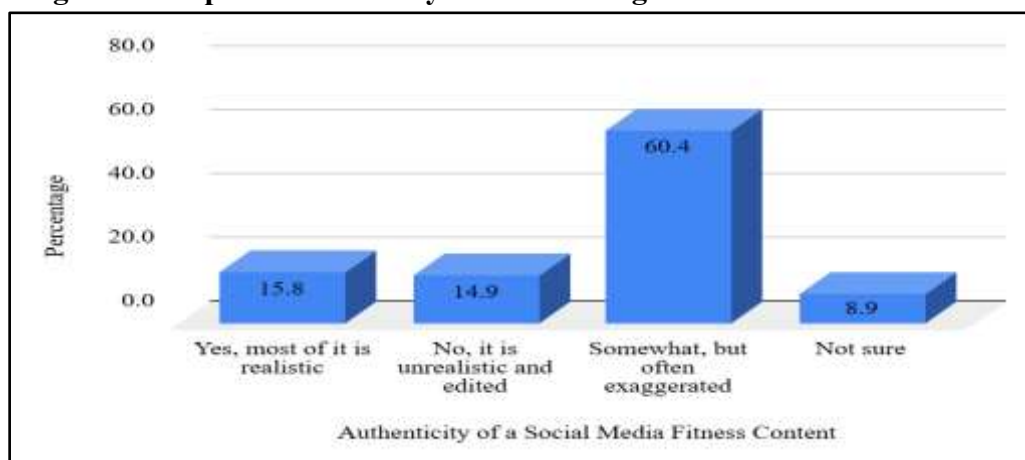
These results demonstrate how social media may serve as a source of inspiration as well as a possible obstacle to consistency. These results are corroborated by qualitative data, which show that participants felt inspired after reading inspirational fitness tales, approachable exercise plans, and relatable personal

accounts from other people. This answers the first research question on the emotional response of users upon consuming social media content related to health and fitness.

**Table 5. Respondents actively differentiating the content on social media**

<i>Authenticity of content</i>	<i>Percentage</i>	<i>N</i>
Yes, most of it is realistic	15.8	16
No, it is unrealistic and edited	14.9	15
Somewhat, but often exaggerated	60.4	61
Not sure	8.9	9
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>101</b>

**Figure 8. Respondents actively differentiating the content on social media**



- Users' nuanced approach to distinguishing between performative and actual health-related information on social media is revealed by the data analysis. With 60.4% of users admitting that a large portion of the content is "somewhat" realistic but frequently overstated, Table 5 highlights the general scepticism among users. Consumers of digital health narratives appear to be becoming more critical of the veracity of these representations, as evidenced by this data. Further demonstrating an increasing digital literacy and critical engagement with online health and fitness representations, 14.9% of respondents specifically labelled these materials as unrealistic.

Accuracy Verification	Percentage	N
I rely on reviews or testimonials	47.5	48
I check with trusted sources (e.g., certified experts, health organizations)	53.5	54
I don't verify it, I just take it at face value	20.8	21

**Table 6. Ways in which respondents actively verify the content they consume**

**Figure 12. Ways in which respondents actively verify the content they consume**

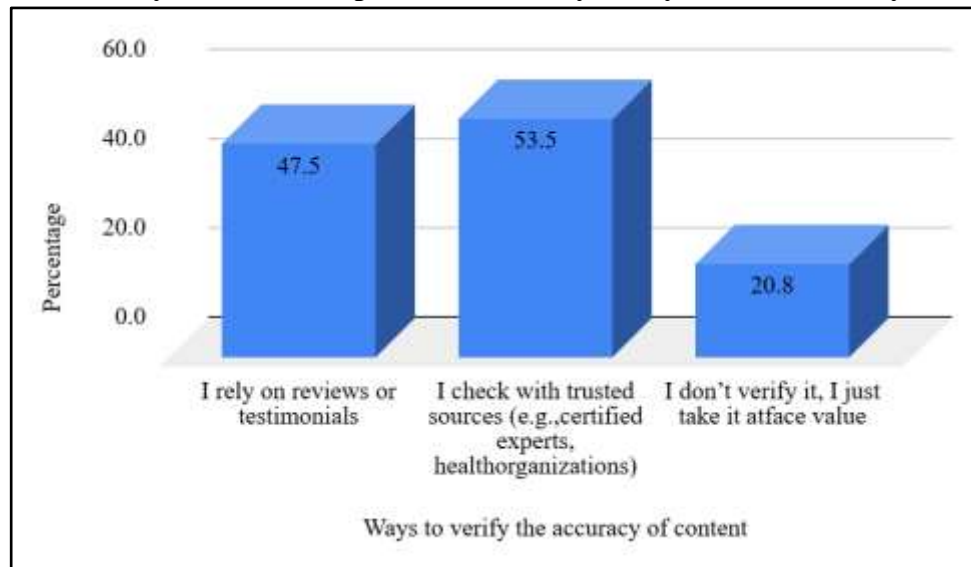


Table 6, which shows the methods consumers use to confirm the veracity of health-related content on social media, reflects this scepticism. While 47.5% of respondents depend on reviews and testimonials as supplemental evidence, more than half of the respondents (53.5%) actively examine reliable sources to support claims.

These behaviours show a move away from passive consumption and towards proactive verification, which is consistent with a larger cultural trend that values reliable and evidence-based information. However, a minority (20.8%) continue to accept such content without question, indicating that even if there has been progress, there is still a subset of users that are either less prepared or less inclined to participate in validation processes.

These findings answer the second research question that while performative content remains prevalent, users are not uncritically accepting it. Instead, they are employing a range of evaluative techniques to navigate the complexities of digital health landscapes.

- The influence of social media health and fitness material on people's conceptions of their own health and body image demonstrates a complex combination of scepticism, critical analysis, and self-reflection. Previous research findings have established an increasing trend among users to view such content with caution and critically assess its relevancy and legitimacy.

This critical posture is demonstrated by users' efforts to confirm and verify the accuracy of the information before allowing it to influence their self-image. Users indicate an awareness that not everything posted on social media is accurate, indicating an increase in digital literacy and media savvy.

**Table 7. Impact on self perception recorded by respondents**

Social Media on Self Perception	Percentage	N
It helps	15.8	16
It harms	7.9	8
It's a mix of both	62.4	63
It doesn't impact my self-perception	13.9	14
Total	100	101

**Figure 14. Impact on self perception recorded by respondents**

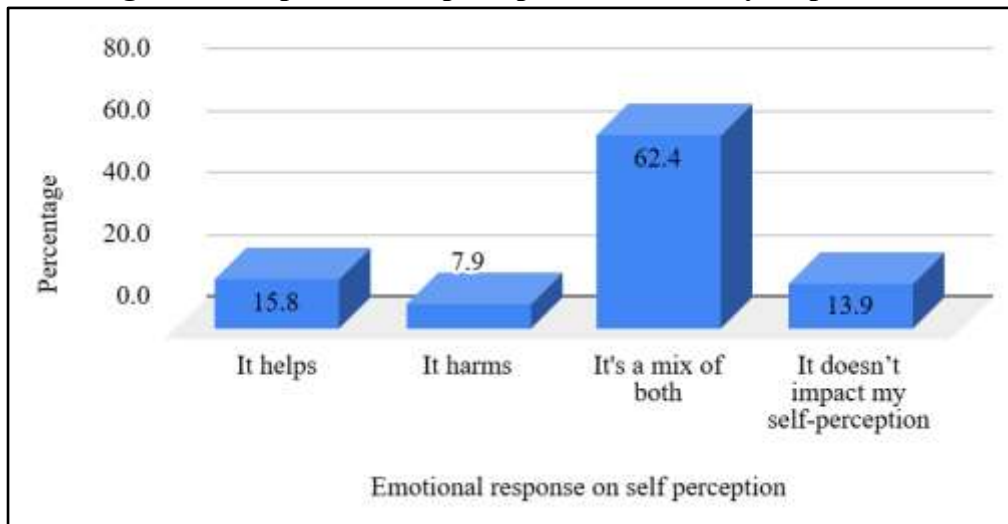
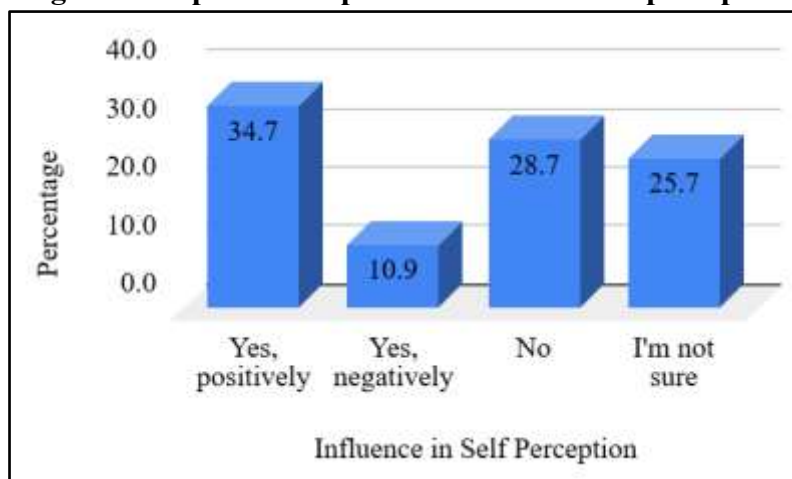


Table 7 shows that there is inherent ambiguity regarding users' reactions to whether social media content benefits or damages their self-perception of health and body image. A majority (62.4%) believe the impacts are mixed, noting that social media may both inspire and pressure individuals, depending on the situation. Smaller groups see it as either clearly useful (15.8%) or damaging (7.9%), with 13.9% reporting no impact at all. This demonstrates a complex and dynamic interaction between exposure to online health and fitness content and personal self-perception.

**Table 8. Impact on respondents on their self-perception**

Impact of fitness content	Percentage	N
Yes, positively	34.7	35
Yes, negatively	10.9	11
No	28.7	29
I'm not sure	25.7	26
Total	100	101

**Figure 9. Impact on respondents on their self-perception**



Similarly, data from Table 8 underlines this ambiguity while adding a new dimension: despite initial reservations, a sizable proportion of users (34.7%) perceive a positive influence from social media on their self-perception. This group uses the content critically to boost their self-esteem and make informed judgements regarding their health and fitness.

In contrast, 10.9% indicate a negative influence, highlighting the risks of being exposed to idealised and false images online. Meanwhile, 28.7% report no influence, while 25.7% are unsure, highlighting the complexities of individual experiences and the need for more nuanced discourse.

In conclusion, while health and fitness content on social media has the potential to positively influence users' perspectives, it is heavily dependent on the individual's capacity to critically analyse and contextualise the information. The growing scepticism and intentional seeking of validation for such content show a trend towards more informed and discriminating media consumer habits.

This research indicates that, while the user's perspective on self perception is ambiguous in the larger context of things, the majority of them actively use it to positively impact their self perception - which answers the third and last research question.

## Conclusion

The study's findings show a complex and developing relationship between social media exposure and people's perceptions of health and body image. Social media has evolved as an important venue for health and fitness content, influencing how people perceive and evaluate their own well-being. Users are increasingly viewing such content via a critical perspective, indicating increased digital knowledge and scepticism regarding the legitimacy of the material given.

While social media material is frequently seen as exaggerated or idealised, users often double-check its truth using trustworthy sources or personal experiences before allowing it to alter their self-perception. This proactive behaviour demonstrates a change from passive consumption to active engagement, in which people seek important insights while protecting themselves from potential harm.

The study's findings show a complex and changing relationship between social media exposure and people's perceptions of health and body image, which may be efficiently analysed using the Uses and Gratifications Theory. This idea holds that media users are active participants who selectively engage with content to meet specific needs and goals.

Social media has evolved as a significant platform for health and fitness information, influencing how people perceive and judge their own well-being by providing chances for cognitive, emotional, and social fulfilment. Users are increasingly viewing such content via a critical perspective, indicating increased digital knowledge and scepticism regarding the legitimacy of the material given.

Despite being sceptical about the impact of social media on their health and body image, users frequently discover beneficial ways to exploit the exposure. Many people report feeling inspired and encouraged to adopt healthier lifestyles after seeing fitness-related content, demonstrating a willingness to reap personal advantages despite the possible hazards of exposure to inaccurate portrayals.

Users, for example, report feeling driven to adopt healthier lifestyle choices after engaging with fitness-related content, suggesting the ability to use media for self-improvement despite the risks associated with false portrayals. This behaviour exemplifies the "gratifications obtained" part of the theory, in which users compare the outcomes of their media interactions to their initial goals.

The study demonstrates that people are not passive recipients of health and fitness narratives, but rather are quite selective in how they interact with such content. Social media is a forum for self-improvement,

inspiration, and goal-setting, which corresponds to the "gratifications sought" component of the Uses and Gratifications Theory.

Those with higher degrees of scepticism and digital literacy tend to be better able to extract benefit from the content while avoiding its negative features. Applying the Uses and Gratifications Theory reveals that users actively negotiate the risks and rewards of social media exposure in order to align the content with their personal health and fitness goals. This dynamic connection reflects consumers' increased understanding that not all online portrayals are authentic, allowing them to critically evaluate and engage with information that fulfils their individual requirements.

At the same time, the mixed reactions to the perceived harm or benefit provided by social media highlight the complexities of its influence. Social media serves as both a source of inspiration and a catalyst for self-comparison, implying that the ultimate impact is heavily dependent on the user's critical thinking and media literacy abilities.

In this setting, the study identifies a broader cultural shift in how health and fitness narratives are received and internalised. Media consumers today take a more deliberate and empowered approach to their involvement, exploiting the massive library of content available online while using key tools to protect their self-esteem and body image.

### **Limitations**

This study is not without limits. The participant sample, while diverse, may not be representative of the general population, especially in terms of cultural, socioeconomic, and geographic variety. The reliance on self-reported data raises the prospect of bias, as participants may have reacted in ways that they thought were socially acceptable or indicative of perceived norms.

Furthermore, the study's scope was limited to general health and fitness material, with no distinction made between different categories or platforms, which could have provided more granular insights.

Furthermore, while qualitative data from interviews is significant, it only reflects a small subset of the survey sample. This mismatch may impede the generalisability of results from thematic analysis of qualitative insights.

Finally, the study did not look into the long-term consequences of social media use on health or body image, instead focusing on immediate perceptions and behaviours.

### **Scope for Future Research**

Several enhancements to the methodology and scope of this research could be made to increase its depth and breadth. One noteworthy improvement would be to undertake in-depth interviews with a bigger, more varied sample size. The current study's dependence on a small sample size for qualitative insights may not adequately capture the nuanced experiences and diverse opinions of people from various demographics, cultural origins, and social media habits.

Expanding the sample size would allow for a more comprehensive knowledge of how social media affects health and body image perception across different demographics. Furthermore, thorough interviews focussing on specific social media platforms could provide deep insights into the distinct ways each platform impacts users' beliefs and behaviours.

For instance, exploring how Instagram's image-centric design compares to Tik Tok's video-based content could reveal platform-specific trends and impacts.



Another option would be to incorporate a longitudinal method to track changes in participants' perceptions over time. This would provide useful information about whether exposure to health and fitness content causes long-term behavioural changes or only short-term reactions.

Researchers were able to determine the long-term viability of the motivational effects shown in this study by tracking individuals over several months. Including a comparison group of people who do not connect with health-related social media content could also give light on how influential these platforms are in relation to other factors, such as offline health initiatives or peer interactions.

Researchers could expand the study's theoretical framework by incorporating other psychological and sociological theories, such as Social Comparison Theory or Media Dependency Theory, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of user behaviour.

This could allow for a more in-depth investigation of how and why people gravitate towards specific types of health content, as well as the psychological mechanisms that drive their reactions. Surveys could also be supplemented with psychometric tests that measure participants' self-esteem, media literacy, and body satisfaction before and after exposure to social media content.

Another recommendation is to investigate the impact of algorithms and content personalisation on how consumers interact with health and fitness content. By examining how platforms adjust content recommendations depending on user activity, researchers can learn whether and how algorithms encourage specific health narratives or partially harmful ideas. Furthermore, using a mixed-methods strategy that combines quantitative analysis (e.g., engagement metrics) with qualitative interviews may result in a robust and multifaceted dataset.

The potential for future research in this field is vast and appealing. Further research could look into the long-term psychological and behavioural effects of social media exposure to health and fitness content. A comparison research of several platforms, such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, could reveal how platform-specific features influence user engagement and perceptions. Similarly, research into the impact of algorithms and personalised suggestions in amplifying or moderating the effects of exposure might be beneficial.

Cross-cultural studies that look at how views of health and body image alter across different cultural and regional contexts are another potential area of research. Such research may reveal how cultural norms and values interact with social media impacts. Longitudinal research tracking changes in perceptions over time, as well as experimental designs testing interventions such as media literacy training, might help us gain a better understanding of this dynamic and developing phenomenon.

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