A PICTURE SAYS A THOUSAND WORDS…OR DOES IT? AN INVESTIGATION OF
BODY CAPITAL AND EMBODIED UNDERSTANDINGS OF HEALTH AND FITNESS ON
INSTAGRAM

by

Meaghan Toll

B.Sc. H. Kinesiology, McMaster University, 2016

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF

THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS

in

THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE AND POSTDOCTORAL STUDIES

(School of Kinesiology)

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

(Vancouver)

October 2019

© Meaghan Toll, 2019
The following individuals certify that they have read and recommended to the Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies for acceptance, the thesis entitled:

A picture says a thousand words…or does it? An investigation of body capital and embodied understandings of health and fitness on Instagram

Submitted by Meaghan Toll in partial fulfillment of the requirements for:
the degree of Master of Arts
in Kinesiology

Examining committee:

Dr. Moss Norman, UBC Kinesiology
Supervisor

Dr. Brian Wilson, UBC Kinesiology
Supervisory Committee Member

Dr. Jillianne Code, UBC Curriculum & Pedagogy
Supervisory Committee Member
Abstract

This research investigated the relationship between the processes of producing and consuming Instagram media and how these practices shape young women’s embodied understandings of fitness and health. There has been widespread anxiety within popular discourse about how young women use Instagram, especially in relation to health and fitness ideals, and this anxiety is often uncritically reflected in research. There have been relatively few studies that examine how people actually use social media in relation to health and fitness practices and even fewer that explore how young women use social media to make sense of their embodied health identities. This research goes some way towards filling this gap.

This study filled those gaps by providing insight into how women produce, read, and experience Instagram content in relation to their own bodies, identities, and experiences across a myriad of social settings. Hence, this research examined meaning making at the intersection where young women simultaneously produce their own Instagram content, while also consuming the content of other users. Nine women who were aged 20-24 years and currently enrolled in kinesiology degrees at various Canadian universities were individually interviewed using semi-structured auto-driven photo elicitation techniques.

The results of this research found that there is no simple explanation, rather the notion that Instagram use is complex, paradoxical and multi-layered serves as the most straightforward finding. This research moves Instagram use beyond moral panic discourse by highlighting that Instagram does not exist as only ‘good’ or ‘bad’, rather it is a rich, layered, and nuanced space, whereby the outcomes of user experiences are influenced by unique engagements that depend upon a myriad of factors (lived experiences, mood, fitness level, and so on). The outcome of this study inspires critical thought about social media and its relationship to health behaviors, body
image, and exercise habits. Furthermore, this research contributes to a range of literatures including critical media studies, physical cultural studies, and the sociology of health and illness and has several practical applications including informing media literacy and physical and health education curricula.
Lay Summary

Young women enrolled in kinesiology programs at Canadian Universities were interviewed to explore how they garner body capital on Instagram and how these practices influence their understandings of health and fitness. This research suggests that experiences on Instagram are intricately networked to the user’s lived experience and affective emotions. More specifically, this study highlights four informal rules that govern the acquisition of body capital on Instagram and explains how these rules are simultaneously followed and navigated by users. Additionally, this research explores how Instagram practices reveal, amplify, and incubate users’ understandings of health and fitness and influence day to day health and fitness habits. I conclude this research by suggesting that interactions with Instagram play an influential role in the learning process and highlight how social media can be used in health education and promotion.
Preface

This research was approved by the University of British Columbia’s Behavioural Research Ethics Board (H18-03606). A version of this work will be submitted for publication. I conceptualized, designed and carried out this research with the support of my supervisor, Dr. Moss Norman. I was responsible for developing the research questions, participant recruitment, data collection/interviews, transcription, analysis, and thesis preparation. Dr. Moss Norman, Dr. Brian Wilson, and Dr. Jillianne Code are co-authors on this thesis. The co-authors provided guidance, comments, and feedback on the study design, literature review, data interpretation, and final thesis preparation.
# Table of Contents

Abstract ........................................................................................................................................... iii  
Lay Summary ....................................................................................................................................... v  
Preface ................................................................................................................................................... vi  
Table of Contents .............................................................................................................................. vii  
Acknowledgements ........................................................................................................................... viii  
Dedication .............................................................................................................................................. ix  

## Chapter 1: Introduction ................................................................................................................. 1  
Research Purpose .............................................................................................................................. 1  
Research Questions ........................................................................................................................... 5  
Theoretical Lens ..................................................................................................................................... 6  
  - Bourdieu: cultural capital, habitus, and fields of practice .............................................................. 7  
  - Wacquant: body capital .................................................................................................................. 10  
  - Gender hegemony and social constructivism ................................................................................ 11  
Organization of Thesis ....................................................................................................................... 15  
Conclusion ........................................................................................................................................... 16  

## Chapter 2: Review of Literature .................................................................................................... 16  
Healthism ........................................................................................................................................... 16  
The Body, Femininities and Media ........................................................................................................ 18  
Young Women, Body Image, Disordered Eating/Exercise Habits, Media Consumption from a Psychological Perspective .............................................................................................................. 22  
Young Women, Embodiment, and Social Media ............................................................................... 25  
Research Justification and Conclusion .............................................................................................. 30  

## Chapter 3: Methodology ................................................................................................................ 30  
Methodology ...................................................................................................................................... 31  
Methods .............................................................................................................................................. 34  
Participant Recruitment and Selection Criterion .............................................................................. 35  
Data Collection .................................................................................................................................... 37  
Researcher Reflexivity .......................................................................................................................... 38  
Data Analysis ....................................................................................................................................... 39  
Conclusion ........................................................................................................................................... 42  

## Chapter 4: Results ........................................................................................................................ 42  
How do Young Women Cultivate Body Capital Within the Field of Instagram? ........................... 43  
  - Rules and Regulations: Instagram is a space for self-expression, albeit self-expression that is governed by rules and regulations ......................................................................................... 43  
    - Rule 1: Making the most of yourself(i.e.): post content that showcases the shape and size of your body .......................................................................................................................... 44  
    - Rule 2: The Instagram paradox: be vainglorious without being vainglorious ......................... 50
Rule 3: The camera does not lie, but the photos do: enhance but do not edit your pictures. .................................................................56
Rule 4: Blue Chip Investments: show that you live a healthy and active lifestyle ........................................................................................................65
Validations from ‘likes’ and comments ............................................................70
Conclusion ..........................................................................................................71
How do Instagram practices influence understandings of health and fitness? ........72
Speaking figuratively… literally: Instagram as an incubator of pre-conceived notions about health and fitness ................................................................................72
There is more to it than meets the eye: the complexities of seeing ourselves on Instagram ........................................................................................................84
Instagram as a digital scrapbook ......................................................................84
The effects of sharing our digital scrapbooks ..................................................90
Engaging with public media on Instagram cuts both ways: the influences of consuming public Instagram media .................................................................98
Conclusion ........................................................................................................105

Chapter 5: Conclusion .......................................................................................106
Overview of Research Findings ........................................................................106
Theoretical Summary ........................................................................................107
Discussion of Key Findings ...............................................................................109
The writing of four informal rules that regulate the acquisition of body capital on
Instagram ........................................................................................................110
The process of navigating the aforementioned informal rules .......................111
Instagram can act as a digital incubator of habitus and taste ..........................112
Instagram can influence day-to-day habits ......................................................113
Methodological Reflections ............................................................................115
Conclusion ..........................................................................................................117

Works Cited ........................................................................................................120
Appendix A: Interview prompts .............................................................................136
Appendix B: Interview length ............................................................................137
Appendix C: Participant demographics .............................................................138
Appendix D: Recruitment post ...........................................................................139
Appendix E: Letter of initial contact .................................................................140
Appendix F: Information sheet and consent form ............................................141
Appendix G: Pre-interview e-mail ....................................................................144
Appendix H: Journal questions .......................................................................145
Appendix I: Representation of the body in Instagram posts .........................146
Appendix J: Types of activity captured in Instagram post ................................147
Acknowledgments

Many great minds inspired this project! Thank you to everyone who brainstormed, provided insight, participated in, read, re-read, edited, and re-edited this thesis.

My sincerest thanks go to my supervisor, Dr. Moss Norman, without whom this project would not have been possible. Moss, thank you for your endless support and for teaching me all about the intricacies of nuance.

Thank you to my committee members, Dr. Brian Wilson and Dr. Jillianne Code, for their support, guidance, and insightful feedback on this project.

Thank you to Dr. Andrea Bundon, whose early insights became an integral component of this project.

Thank you to Dr. Phil White, the professor who introduced me to my ‘sociological antenna’ and started all of ‘this’.

Finally, I give a whole-hearted thank you to my family and friends. Mum, Dad, Thomas, Cleo, Bailey, Kristen, Syd, and Ben, thank you for your never-ending support, encouragement, motivation, laughter, and love. I am so grateful.
Dedication

To my parents,
the duo that empowers me to chase my dreams,
you inspire me.
Chapter 1: Introduction

This chapter is divided into five sections. The first section describes important background information and outlines the purpose of this research project. In the second section, I state and explain the research questions and in the third section I highlight theoretical perspectives and key concepts that are central to the conceptualization of this research. Following this, I briefly overview the thesis before concluding the chapter.

Research Purpose

Search #health on Instagram. I dare you. If you accepted my challenge you would have noticed that most posts are edited photographs depicting physically active, thin, toned, and fit bodies. On April 18, 2018, seventeen of the twenty-five most recent #health posts met these criteria. This is concerning because it reinforces the notion that one’s health may be reflected by body size. These representations are of concern because they create meanings that influence cultural understandings of health, fitness, eating, and the body (Bordo, 1993; Evans & Rich, 2005). This has been shown to lead to the construction of a society that is constantly chasing an unachievable body type under the false pretense of health (Engeln–Maddox, 2005; Mulgrew, Stalley, Tiggemann, 2017).

Instagram is a popular social media platform that engages over 1,000 million monthly active users (Statista, 2019a). This platform operates as a user generated content (UGC) application by allowing users to share personal photographs with their followers and consume images from individuals that they follow. UGC platforms, like Instagram, tend to succeed based on their ability to attract users that are invested in contributing content that distinguishes themselves from others (Levina & Arriaga, 2014). Since, Instagram is known as a UGC platform that is densely populated with appearance focused images that conform to and maintain societal
beauty ideals (Fardouly, Willburger & Vartanian, 2017), its popularity is invested in user’s engagement with body ideals. This is of concern because researchers have identified that image-based social medias have stronger links to body image concerns than non-image based platforms (Tiggeman & Zaccardo, 2015). Although there is no concrete data on the gender identity of Instagram users, a study from Ontario suggested that girls are significantly more likely to spend time on social media than are boys (Moving Girls into Confidence, 2017, p3). Thus, Instagram is the perfect space to explore how the content young women produce and consume influences embodied understandings of health and fitness.

Not only is Instagram another media that promotes and circulates socially idealized bodies, but it allows users to share and compare their own images (which can be edited, filtered, and perfected on the app) to their peers. Some evidence suggests that socially mediated engagements like these result in increased body image issues (Tiggeman & Zaccardo, 2015). Some suggest that this can result in lowered state and trait body satisfaction and esteem, as well as increased anxiety, depression, and disordered eating (Moradi & Huang, 2008; Bordo, 1993; Holland & Tiggeman, 2017; Evans, Rich, & Holroyd, 2004). Turner and LeFevre (2016), for example, “suggest that social media use may contribute to an ‘echo-chamber’ effect, where users perceive their values and world-views to be more common than they are, due to selectively viewing contributions of other, similarly minded people” (p. 1). Thus, groups on Instagram that promote idealized healthy lifestyles, objectify images of muscular men and toned women, and encourage dieting and exercise for appearance may normalize harmful behaviours, like compulsive exercise (Boepple & Thompson, 2016).

Although it is not the focus of this research, it is important to note that the entire Instagram experience is rooted in capitalism. This is because the content that is posted and
viewed on Instagram is transformed into data, sold as a commodity and used by Instagram to ‘enhance’, personalize and commodify users’ experiences (Instagram Help Center, 2018). Hence, Instagram is capitalising on the content shared on and engaged with on Instagram. By transforming content into data and commodifying it, what people post, and look at influences the type of advertisements that will be created and marketed towards them and may function to enhance ‘echo-chamber’ effects.

Even though Instagram is a popular UGC application (Levina & Arriaga, 2014), most studies involving youth and social media have focused only on the consumption of public media, with relatively few studies investigating the implications of engaging with private content that users produce. Since individuals regularly engage with Instagram by posting and subscribing to content related to their lived experience and interests, this engagement becomes a part of regular life. This constant connection with social media complicates relationships with media images as these images become more than a picture on a screen used for the purpose of advertising. These images now become fluid as they are reproduced, shared, commented on and ranked in popularity through social media. In return, the content users post is ranked and compared against the most popular (‘liked’) content on social media. Thus, interactions with media images have become an increasingly complex process and are contingent upon how individuals engage with and use social media (Vivienne & Burgess, 2013). These engagements are important to investigate because they can influence how individuals understand, learn and embody certain practices (Hochman & Manovich, 2013). Without understanding how individuals learn with and through technology, research is limited (Petrina, Feng, & Kim, 2008) in its ability to learn about the culture, practices, communities, benefits and implications of social media usage (Vivienne & Burgess, 2013). The lack of literature exploring how individuals engage with Instagram
emphasizes the need for sociological research to investigate relationships with social media as individual, multifaceted and context dependent.

Since technology plays a central role in the learning process (Petrina et al., 2008), understanding how individuals engage with technology is critical in investigating embodied understandings of health and fitness on Instagram. However, the Instagram application itself is not the focus of this project. Instead, the focus is on the basic and central functions that the Instagram app facilitates (i.e. taking, editing, and sharing of photographs and videos online) and the social meanings attached to these functions. This is because social media platforms rapidly change in popularity, but the popularity of digital photo and video sharing has not diminished. Therefore, this research is applicable across a range of photo-sharing social media.

In this project, the definition of media consumption refers to the processes and influences of viewing public social media (from publicly accessed accounts), or private social media created by private accounts (where the account holder must grant access to the consumer). Media production refers to the processes of creating one’s own content for distribution on a social media platform. This can be the creation of public media shared by a large company, or from an individual’s private and personal social media account. These definitions are left broad to include all possible types of media, including but not limited to pictures, videos, captions on posts, comments, and ‘likes’. The distinction between public and private media is somewhat arbitrary given that private social media content often reproduces and re-circulates ideals from public social media on private social media accounts. Thus, private media production is often a form of media reproduction influenced by consumption. Fiske (2010) suggests that it is important for researchers to understand that even though content of posts may reproduce dominant ideals the meaning of the posts may challenge the very same ideal. Often posts may appear to be
contradictory, as meanings and visual expression do not appear to align, however, these posts may be reflective of both domination and subordination (or both power and resistance) to dominant ideals (Fiske, 2010). Therefore, justifying why this project focused on how the production of private personal media on Instagram has polysemic and rich semiotic meanings that influence understandings of health and fitness.

This research builds and expands upon feminist and critical media scholarship that examines media representations of the idealized body. More specifically, this study investigated how young women, aged 20-24 years, cultivate body capital on Instagram through processes of production and consumption and how these engagements shape their embodied understandings of health and fitness. This study contributes to a range of literatures including critical media studies, physical cultural studies, and the sociology of health and illness and has several practical applications including informing health policy, media literacy, and physical and health education curricula. Most importantly, by executing a nuanced, complex and multi-layered analysis this research overcomes the shortfalls of previous research that takes a reductive investigative approach to social medias (Jackson, 2016; See Fardouly et al., 2015; Mulgrew, Stalley, Tiggemann, 2017; Feltman & Szymanski, 2017), which often perpetuates a ‘moral panic’ regarding social media, body image and girls (see Simmons, 2016; Enayati, 2012). In summary, this research explored how young women actually use Instagram to better inform initiatives that seek to help young women deal with health and fitness related issues that are of most concern to them (Wilson, 2006).

**Research Questions**

Semi-structured interviews using auto-driven photo elicitation of participants’ personal Instagram media examined: how young women cultivate body capital within the ‘field’ of
Instagram and how these practices shape their embodied understandings of health and fitness. Informing these overarching questions are two inter-related sub-questions:

1) How do young women interpret, construct and embody Instagram representations of health and fitness?

2) How do young women entrench, subvert, or resist dominant health and fitness constructions seen on Instagram?

To determine this, this research also investigated: 1) how producing media influences the meanings or values young women privilege and or omit (Millington & Wilson, 2010), 2) the intertextual significance of being both a producer and consumer of this type of media, and 3) the influence of learning about health and fitness through visual constructions. This research is vital because understandings of health and fitness and how young women use social media may assume new or different meanings given the contexts in which it is embedded, interpreted and embodied (Millington & Wilson, 2010).

Theoretical Lens

In this section, I will discuss theoretical conceptualizations that will provide structure to this research. A Marxist feminist intersectional lens will be used to understand Bourdieu’s (1977, 1986, 1992) interrelated concepts of cultural capital, habitus, and fields of practice as well as Wacquant’s (1995) notion of body capital. These concepts will facilitate the investigation into how young women embody, share and understand health and fitness as constructed through Instagram. Firstly, I discuss how the theorizations of Bourdieu and Wacquant can be applied to Instagram and the embodiment of Instagram content. Following this, I explain how I apply feminist sensibilities through the concepts of hegemony, social constructivism, and intersectionality.
Sociologists and social scholars have long recognized the influence media has upon society, as it has been shown to shape the construction and regulation of social norms (see Goffman, 1976; Bordo, 1993; Kilbourne, 1999; McRobbie 1978, 1994, 2008, 2015; Markula, 1995; Fardouly, Diedrichs, Vartanian, Halliwell, 2015; Gill, 2007; Retallack, Ringrose, & Lawrence, 2016; Rich, Evans & De Pain, 2011). However, much of the research regarding the influence of media on the regulation of body image is rooted in a psychological framework (see Holland & Tiggeman, 2017; Fardouly et al., 2015; Mulgrew et al., 2017; Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015, 2016; Feltman & Szymanski, 2017). While there are advantages to psychological research, much of this work reduces the body to a singular object and undermines the complexity of the relationship between how people understand and embody media (Jackson, 2016). Research that does investigate embodiment in relation to media typically explores either mass or public media and fails to investigate the implications of private and or personal social media. To overcome the gaps in psychological and previous embodiment research, this study uses Pierre Bourdieu’s theorization of capital (particularly cultural capital), habitus, and fields of practice to investigate taken-for-granted cultural and social dynamics regarding the projections of femininity within health, fitness and the body on social media.

Bourdieu: cultural capital, habitus, and fields of practice.

This study uses Bourdieu’s (1986) notion of capital as a lens, with a particular focus on cultural capital. Bourdieu defines capital as usable resources and theorizes that the accumulation of capital is paramount in determining one’s position within society. He contends that greater accumulation of capital equates to greater power, which results in a higher social status. Bourdieu also theorized that capital can be accumulated by more than monetary or economical outcomes of labour, and that it can be accumulated through social engagements which result in
the acquisition of cultural capital. He explains cultural capital can exist in three forms, including: 1) embodied state (posture, mannerisms), 2) objectified state (material objects), and 3) institutionalized state (educational achievements, credentials). In its embodied state, Bourdieu theorizes that cultural capital is physically embodied in behaviours (like mannerisms, habits, and tastes) that arise from various ideologies and dictate how individuals behave and navigate social situations. He calls this habitus and uses this theory to explain how individuals acquire their social identities. The type of cultural capital acquired has a direct influence on one’s social status and dictates how individuals are positioned in social spaces (Bourdieu, 1977). For example, aspects of culture associated with the upper class carry power (language skills and style of dress) and therefore, individuals with similar amounts of cultural capital are positioned within similar a habitus.

To that end, Bourdieu & Wacquant (1992) explain that various aspects of culture are interrelated and entangled through ‘fields of practice’. Fields of practice are social spaces bound by power relations and shared interests of inhabitants in which social hierarchies are created and maintained through the acquisition of various types of capital. In effort to gain the most capital, inhabitants of a particular field compete to gain personal distinction to distinguish themselves from others. Fields are governed independently and have their own specific set of rules, but do not exist independently of each other. Inhabitants of each field can accumulate, transform, and reinvest capital into other fields to gain distinctions. For example, the field of religion is distinct from education, but they can intersect and capital can cross-over (i.e. religious schools) (Ignatow & Robinson, 2017). Hence, individuals build their own habitus within the boundaries of fields of practice (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Bourdieu’s theorizations represent the structure-agency
divide, whereby individuals have agency and independence albeit within a structured and regulated environment.

Levina & Arriaga (2014) contend that the digital world is created of individual fields. Here social media, populated largely by UCG platforms like Instagram, operate as their own distinct online fields. According to Bourdieusian theory, within these fields markers of status are acquired through acts of distinction, for example, on Instagram a greater number of ‘likes’ or ‘comments’ on a post distinguishes its significance and hence becomes digital capital. This accumulation of digital capital can be converted into other forms of capital which help create individual habitus and influence social status (Levina & Arraga, 2014; Ignatow & Robinson, 2017). On Instagram users can gain distinctions, denoted by the application, that translate into gains in social, economic and cultural capital. For example, having a verified badge attached to your account means that “Instagram has confirmed that an account is the authentic presence of the public figure, celebrity or global brand it represents” (Instagram Help Center, n.d.b, para. 5). Hence, Instagram determines which accounts are significant enough to be labelled publicly relevant. Owning a verified account is highly coveted, some people even seek alternative ways to verify their account, for example, through purchase on the black market (Ward, 2018). This is because having a verified account releases a domino effect: beginning with the acquisition of a noteworthy number of followers, followed by co-branding deals and sponsorships which translate into gains in social and economic capital. Individuals with verified accounts have been able to create successful and lucrative careers out of posting content on their Instagram account (Barker, 2018; see On Instagram @kayla_itsines; @marniethedog; @paperfashion). Therefore, it is critical to understand the unique power relations that play out on the Instagram platform since one’s activity can be converted into social, cultural and economic capital. Thus, this project uses
Bourdieu's framework to understand how producers and consumers of UGC acquire capital and contribute to habitus within the online field of Instagram. Ignatow & Robinson (2017) suggest that Instagram is based on the regulation and promotion of idealized bodies, meaning that images which conform to the idealized body will likely receive greater social distinction, based on body capital (Wacquant, 1995), a theme which was examined greater detail below.

**Wacquant: Body capital.**

Building from Bourdieu’s conceptualizations, Wacquant (1995) contends that one’s physical body contains capital. Through an analysis of men who were boxers, he theorizes that the appearance and abilities of a body are a symbolic representation of status. He explains that through sacrifices in diet, training, and rest, boxers can use their bodies as a display to leave lasting impressions on their opponents. Wacquant brings “attention to the diverse ways in which specific social worlds invest, shape and deploy human bodies and to the concrete incorporating practices whereby their social structures are effectively embodied by the agents who partake of them” (1995, p.1). Wacquant uses this theory to explain how boxers use the display of their bodies to impact their economic, cultural and social capitals. In this way, a physical body possesses capital. Body capital can be converted into social capital through gains in recognition, positive attention and admiration. Therefore, the process of constructing an idealized body is influenced by the embodiment of one’s habitus and is directly related to the building up of body capital (Pedersen & Tjørnhøj-Thomsen, 2017). Others have used body capital in the examination of social implications of body work practices in fitness gyms (Pedersen & Tjørnhøj-Thomsen, 2017), client acquisition and retention in personal trainers (Hutson, 2013), and health club environments (Frew & McGillivray, 2005). In this research project, I intend to extend this concept to investigate the role of body capital on Instagram. In western culture, body size is a
corporeal marker of social status, where thin and toned bodies are held in high regard as they are perceived as healthy and thus inhabited by morally responsible citizens and fat bodies are perceived to be inherently inferior (Loy, Andrews, & Rinehart, 1993; White, Young & Gillett, 1995). Men are expected to grow into broad, lean and muscular bodies, and women to shrink into thin, lean, and toned bodies (Bordo, 1993; Kilbourne, 1999). This heavily gendered corporeal marker of status is a critical component of body capital and will be examined in the following section.

**Gender hegemony and social constructivism.**

The works of both Bourdieu and Wacquant have been critiqued for their lack of attention to the influence of gender (Butler, 1997; McLeod, 2005; Brown, 2004; Lovell, 2000). In response to this critique, this work uses a Marxist feminist lens that understands gender through hegemony. Hegemony understands culture as a site of struggle that “serves the interests and ascendancy of ruling classes, legitimate[s] their ascendancy and dominance and encourage[s] all to consent to and go along with social relations of [the] ruling [class]” (Schippers, 2007, p. 90). This idea fits perfectly into the puzzle of investigating body ideals as the constant representation and circulation of idealized bodies (e.g. thin, toned, and muscular bodies) has led to construction of a society with a constant desire to achieve these ideals (Engeln-Maddox, 2005). This desire fuels the commodification of health, which has resulted in the explosion of the billion-dollar fitness and health industries (Mulgrew et al, 2017; Millington, 2016).

Hegemony will be explored through Connell’s (1995) application of the concept to gender. Hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity are social positions that individuals, irrespective of biological sex, can achieve and produce by engaging in certain practices and characteristics understood to be either masculine or feminine (Connell, 1995). Recent writing in
feminist and physical cultural studies has described how mass media is a domain in which hegemonic gender ideals are shaped and reshaped. Scholars contend that mass media idealizes strength, aggression, and heterosexuality as the gold-standard of masculinity, and is paired in opposition with depictions of passive, weak, or highly sexualized femininities (Messner, 2002; White & Gillett, 1994, Kane & Lenskyj, 1998, Messner, Cooky & Hextum, 2010; Cooky, Messner & Musto, 2015, Knijnik, Horton, & Cruz, 2010; Kane and Maxwell, 2011, Engeln-Maddox, 2005). These representations can disconnect women from their bodily functionality by centralizing focus on the body as a passive and aesthetic site (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). This has potential to increase incidences of disordered eating, depression, and anxiety while decreasing body esteem and self-confidence (Moradi & Huang, 2008; Strelan et al., 2003). Hence, the representation of polarizing gender ideals has the potential to constrain girls and women. Despite the well-known oppressive influences of hegemonic gender ideals, conformity to these ideals appears to continue to facilitate greater acquisition of body capital.

Conforming to hegemonic norms can simultaneously lead to empowerment and disempowerment. In Retallack and colleagues’ (2016) school-based study, the participants of a high-school feminist club performed a self-led exercise where members (of which were all girls) spent five minutes writing down things that they liked about their body. However, the participants were unable to come up with any answers. This meant that the girls conformed to a common gendered assumption that women are their worst body critic and as a result, they felt disempowered. In response to this, participants used social media to compliment the bodies of their peers, albeit their compliments were rooted in hegemonic ideals. The act of complimenting their peers in a public manner was empowering for the participants, even though their compliments were situated within hegemonic ideals, the root cause of initial feeling of
disempowerment. Thus, research cannot assume that conformity to the physical reductionism of gender hegemony is without its own agency, even if there are disempowering aspects to the experience.

Understanding gender through hegemony is often critiqued in feminist research because it explains femininity in relation to masculinity, which configures femininity as a product of the male gaze and naturalizes heteronormativity (Paechter, 2018; Connell, 1987). Thus, the constant performance, regulation and celebration of these gendered norms may facilitate male dominance and perpetuate the polarization of gender (Paechter, 2018). With this in mind, this research does not view women’s bodies as objects of male desire, instead it celebrates the embodied agency that women have in the creation of their femininities. Fiske (2010) explains that “resistance to domination can take many forms, only some of which lie in the production of oppositional meanings” whereby “what is to be resisted is necessarily present in the resistance to it” (p. 56). This means that engagements that appear to conform and perpetuate norms might actually be acts of opposition. For example, the participants in Retallack and colleagues (2016) study actively opposed and even protested neo-liberal body standards. Yet, online they complimented each other based on the ways their bodies conformed to hegemonic norms, “[s]o even when they are resisting pressures, their compliments still rely on notion that their worth lies in body appeal/attractiveness” (Retallack et al., 2016, p. 16). Rather than disrupting norms, participants resisted body ideals using the very conditions of their oppression. Thus, engagements with social media can appear to be contradictory, but are complex and rich in semiotic meaning. This highlights the importance of investigating the context and nuanced meanings attached to Instagram activity (Fiske, 2010).
Since, hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity are central constructs from which gendered notions of the body are built, conformity to hegemonic gender ideals facilitates greater acquisition of body capital (Schippers, 2007; Connell, 1995, 1987). This overarching concept creates a central point of understanding regarding body ideals that facilitates a mutual understanding of how individuals negotiate their own understandings of the portrayal of bodies. It is important to note that people are positioned differently in relation to gender, meaning individual ideals of femininity depend greatly on the social location of the individual (Connell, 1987). As a result, meanings ascribed to femininity can differ between individuals and co-exist at the same time (Carty, 2005). Gender discourses do not operate in isolation but intersect and converge with other identity categories including race, social class, and sexuality all of which give rise to a range of diverse and fluid identities (Norman, 2013). Thus, in aligning with a feminist Marxist lens, this project does not rigidly categorize gender, but recognizes it as relationally materialized (Norman, 2013; Connell, 2005). In addition, this research recognizes that embodied social practices and the meanings attached to them vary based on social ideals, judgments, culture, space, place, time, and socio-economic status (Lorber & Yancey-Martin, 2001; Norman, 2013; Weinberg, 2014). Since different meanings can be acquired across a range of contexts, this research will use an intersectional lens.

An intersectional lens, in an open-minded manner, understands that certain biological, cultural, economic and social categories interact, often simultaneously, on various levels and can lead to varying degrees of oppression and inequality (or power and privilege) that influence individuals differently (Crenshaw, 1989). This research recognizes difference and understands that people can be affected by multiple levels of social injustice and by more than one oppression at a time. To that end, this research also understands that these oppressions are not additive but
that they are multi-layered and might combine to create something new that would not exist independently (Crenshaw, 2016; Lorde, 1984). Without this awareness there is potential for the research to perpetuate marginalization, as opposed to disrupting it. Thus, an intersectional lens facilitates a feminist investigation regarding how underlying ideas, assumptions, conceptualizations and ideologies regarding gender norms and body ideals shape or inform embodied understandings of health and fitness (Bordo, 1993).

In summary, this research uses a Marxist feminist take on Bourdieu’s seminal work on social class. This theoretical framework structures this investigation regarding how young women gain social distinction through their bodies on Instagram, “while also ‘importing’ and ‘exporting’ their online status to other online and offline settings” (Levina & Arriaga, 2014, p. 470). In turn, this distinction facilitates understandings regarding how young women cultivate body capital within the field of Instagram and how these practices shape their embodied understandings of health and fitness.

**Organization of Thesis**

This thesis is organized into five chapters. Chapter 1 introduced the research inquiry, relevant background information, research questions, key concepts, and theoretical and conceptual frameworks. Chapter 2 provides a review of literature regarding the relationships between media, gender, body ideals and health and fitness. Chapter 3 outlines the research methodology, participant selection and recruitment criteria, and mode of data collection, researcher reflexivity and analysis. Chapter 4 states and discuss the findings and Chapter 5 consists of a discussion of key findings, theoretical and methodological reflections, suggestions for future research, and final thoughts on this project.
Conclusion

This chapter covered key background information, theoretical perspectives, and key concepts related to the dominant constructions of health and fitness, femininities, and the acquisition of body capital and situated them within the context of the idealization of bodies in media. Additionally, this chapter explicitly stated the overarching research question as well as two subsequent questions and the outline of this research proposal. Chapter 2 provides an in-depth review of literature regarding to the relationship between media consumption, gender, health and body ideals.

Chapter 2: Review of Literature

In this chapter I will describe research that explores the relationship between media consumption, gender, health and body ideals. This chapter is divided into five sections. The first section explores theories and concepts regarding the evolution of health as a personal obligation and the advertising of idealized bodies. The second section highlights the relationship between the body, femininities, and media representations of the body. The third section describes research regarding young women, body image and disordered eating and exercise habits, and media consumption from a psychological perspective. The fourth section highlights sociological literature concerning feminist interpretations of how young women engage with mass and social media. The final section provides justification for my research and concludes this chapter.

Healthism

In 1980, Crawford used the term healthism to define a political shift from a public responsibility for the health of citizens to an increasingly individual responsibility. Healthism, Crawford argued, is representative of the post war economic, political and cultural climate where issues that were previously thought to be of public concern were promoted as personal troubles. This
societal trend created the illusion that individuals are the primary stake holders in their health outcomes. The inevitability of some disease through genetic, structural, or institutional means was ignored and responsibility and culpability for health and disease was situated upon the individual. Since Crawford’s early writing many critical health scholars have taken up and developed the concept of healthism (see Lupton, 2013; Gard & Wright, 2005; Petherick, 2013; Cheek, 2008; Johnson, Fray & Horrell, 2013; Clark, 2018; Rich, 2011; Ingham, 1985).

With the rise of consumerism, individuals increasingly imagined ideals through media images, like Hollywood movies and advertisements, which resulted in a pre-occupation with the body (Ingham, 1985). Beginning in the 1970’s (Young, White & Gillett, 1995; Rader, 1991), there was an increase in the production of print magazines, newspapers and advertisements about health-related ideas and as a result there was an increase in the popularity of exercise, dieting and intense anti-smoking campaigns (Ingham, 1985). Within this context, the media portrayed individuals who conformed to gendered beauty ideals as healthy, which led to the conflation of health and beauty. This, amongst other political and economic pressures, enticed people to alter their lifestyles by quitting smoking and reducing sedentary time, whilst simultaneously pathologizing those that did not conform to such practices. Individuals became concerned with how they could prevent potential disease and illness, respond to potential risks and avoid death (Crawford, 1980). While minimizing potentially harmful lifestyle choices may benefit one’s health, the reduction of health to personal lifestyle habits and decision-making processes creates the notion that individuals can control their health. Within this context, one’s health was evidenced by body shape and size, where individuals with more fat were deemed less healthy and thus labelled as irresponsible citizens unable to make the ‘right’ decisions for their health (Gard & Wright, 2005; Murray, 2012; Wright, 2012; Jeppsson, 2015). In this way, healthy
lifestyle choices and the bodies that were assumed to be the outcome of those choices, were re-
imagined as moral responsibilities.

The construction of health as a moral responsibility has a significant impact upon the
collection of identities, as it contributes to the development of a society where disordered
eating and fat shaming are prevalent (Evans et al., 2008; Rich, 2005). Within this context, fat has
become a marker of inferior social status, lack of self-discipline, efficacy and control, whereas, a
thin, toned and fit body has become the image of health and moral responsibility (Wright, 2012;
Jeppsson, 2015; Stice & Shaw, 1994). The normalization of the association of these
characteristic traits to body sizes has been perpetuated through mass and social media which has
resulted in socially constructed ‘appropriate’ standards of appearance and health (Gard &
Wright, 2005; Crawford, 1980; Loy, Andrews, & Rinehart, 1993; White et al., 1995; Homan et
al., 2012; Mulgrew et al., 2017). These representations not only inform the public of false
pretenses of health but, create harmful meanings that influence cultural understandings of health,
fitness, eating, and the body. These understandings result in the shaming, stigmatization and
oppression of deviant bodies (Evans & Rich, 2005) and encourages individuals to focus on
achieving a thin and toned body for health (Gard & Wright, 2005; Murray, 2012; Engeln–
Maddox, 2005; Mulgrew et al., 2017). The media plays a key role in perpetuating these ideals
and has been the subject of extensive scholarly research, as outlined in the following section.

The Body, Femininities, and Media

Critical literature examining media representation of the ideal feminine form widely agrees that
it can be described by three intersecting themes: 1) the ideal body is thin, young, athletic and
appropriately muscled; 2) the body is depicted as a vessel of health; and 3) women are primarily
responsible for the construction and maintenance of their figure. These three themes have been
identified by critical media scholars (see Millington, 2016; Messner, Cooky & Hextrum, 2010; Bissell & Zhou, 2004; Kilbourne, 1999), psychologists (see Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015; Mulgrew et al., 2017; Thompson, van den Berg, Roehrig, Guarda, & Heinberg, 2004; Homan, McHugh, Wells, Watson, & King, 2012; Engeln-Maddox, 2005) and feminist sociologists (see McGannon, Johnson & Spence, 2011; Bordo, 1993; Choi, 2000; Duncan 1994; Markula 1995, 2003; Dworkin & Wachs, 2009). Not only do these ideals have the ability to de-emphasize individual athleticism, which may work to disempower women from participation in sport and physical activity (Mikosza & Phillips, 1999), they also contribute to the alarming number of women who are chasing unachievable body standards (as reflected in the media) under the illusion that these are healthy bodies (Gimlin, 2007; Wright, 2012). Aziz (2017) argues that this pattern results in increased body image dissatisfaction, where “media outlets, be it traditional or new, share a large amount of unrealistic images of idealized bodies which might trigger upward social comparison in many people thus resulting in an increase in body image dissatisfaction” (p.5). The research suggests that individuals are simultaneously pressured and empowered to partake in physical fitness, under moral obligations for health, but that the standards for physical fitness are often hazardous to one’s health. The trend towards body dissatisfaction is commonly identified in the public health literature and suggests that girls and women are especially vulnerable to its effects (see Theberge, 1985; Homan, McHugh, Wells, Watson & King, 2012; Thompson et al, 2004; Allender, Cowburn & Foster, 2006; Moradi & Huang, 2008; Strelan et al., 2003).

Women are ten times more likely to be diagnosed with an eating disorder than males (Statistics Canada, 2012). In British Columbia, Canada, 60% of girls who are underweight think that they are too fat (The McCreary Centre Society, 2003) and Allender and colleagues (2006)
contend that young women’s participation in physical activity is motivated around maintaining a slim body shape. Instagram itself recognizes the dangers its users face, as evidenced in the ‘help’ section of the official Instagram webpage where there is an entire page dedicated to identification and treatment of eating disorders (See Instagram Help Center, n.d.a). This is not exactly the type of help one would expect to find within the help section of a social media application as it stands alien amongst the other functions, like how to customize your nametag, or information regarding privacy settings. These are only a few, of many, examples that illustrate the persistent desire for thinness that chases women and girls. This desire, most concerningly, can create lasting adverse psychological, social, and physical effects, and also generate a heavy economic burden upon the individual and our healthcare system (Stice & Shaw, 1994).

In 1976, Goffman published Gender Advertisements where he notes that power dynamics between genders are visible though body language and poses seen in advertising, where women are portrayed as submissive to men. Bordo (1993), Kilbourne (1999), McRobbie (1978, 1994, 2008, 2015), Markula (1995), and other feminist scholars extend Goffman’s observation to explain how advertisements have caused the “emergence of such rigid and highly moralized restrictions on female appetite and eating” (Bordo, 1993, p. 114). These restrictions perpetuate gendered notions that reinforce the experience that women are constantly under gaze and thus must evaluate themselves based on appearance and presentation of the self as an object (Dworkin & Wachs, 2009). Therefore, these advertisements have created appropriate standards of appearance that inhibit women’s ability to challenge male dominance (Bordo, 1993).

Susan Bordo (1993) is one of the more prominent early feminist scholars to investigate trends with media advertisements that perpetuate a ‘pressure of thinness’ and disordered eating onto women. She challenged medical research that claimed that those who suffer from
disordered eating mis-perceive their own bodies. She suggests that the social process of our culture has taught citizens “how to see bodies” and that women are taught “to be insecure bodies, constantly monitoring themselves for signs of imperfection, constantly engaged in physical ‘improvement’” (Bordo, 1993, p. 57). Thus, Bordo (1993) contends that those suffering from disordered eating have “learned all too well the dominant cultural standards of how to perceive” their bodies (p. 57).

McRobbie (1978), who is known for her extensive feminist media analysis of women’s magazines, critiqued research that branded women as consumers who are submissive to patriarchal power relations. She acknowledges that though magazine readers may unconsciously follow trends, they may also actively reject them (McRobbie, 1978). Similar to McRobbie, Bordo (1993) also problematized the previously widely accepted notion that women were passive consumers. Bordo demands that “fear that fat on stomachs and breasts has gender associations that demand interpretation and is not merely indicative of compulsive slaver to the latest fashion trend” (1993, p. 48). In this regard, Bordo understands power as more than a repressive force, but as influenced by Foucault, understands power as a positive force that can provoke desires and practices that may discipline and regulate feminine embodiments. Bordo contends that focusing on conforming to beauty trends can have positive meanings that create and reproduce, not supress, desire and conceptions of normalcy and deviancy (Bordo, 1993). She also extends active consumerism to recognize that women exist in different environments and situations that influence how they engage with and are affected by culture.

Understanding women as active consumers allows for relationships with media to be understood as complex and sometimes even contradictory processes that evoke different meanings in various contexts. Interestingly, Kilbourne’s (1999) research blames advertisers for
the exploitation of women’s sense of how they should be. Kilbourne contends that women are new and inexperienced consumers who are sensitive to peer pressures and cultural messages reinforced and perpetuated by media (1999). This contention is problematic because it does not recognize women as active consumers. Characterizing women as a group of homogenous consumers not only fails to acknowledge agency, but overlooks influential factors of difference (e.g. culture, social class, race etc.) thereby simplifying a complex issue. Tellingly, assuming that women engage with media in only pathological ways is consistent in recent psychological literature that will be discussed in the section below.

**Young Women, Body Image, Disordered Eating/Exercise Habits, and Media Consumption from a Psychological Perspective**

Often research related to media consumption, body image and women problematizes the relationship that women have with their bodies due to the prevailing effect of media representations. Psychological research is of value as it provides measurable and quantifiable data that can be used to benefit programs that seek to abolish issues concerning body image. Unfortunately, the sole use of psychological frameworks and quantitative analysis results in the treatment of all bodies as homogenous objects with little consideration of unique lived experiences. This notion obscures the complexity of the relationship between women’s embodied identities, media images and engagements with social media (Jackson, 2016). Nonetheless, there is a large body of relevant psychological research that has been dedicated to the study of women and media that warrants attention. In this section, I will describe three recent and influential psychological studies that investigate the influences of exposure to media that promotes the idealized body.
Firstly, Mulgrew and colleagues (2017) discovered, through a quantitative online survey that viewing media that emphasizes the physical functionality of models who conform to the thin ideal and are posed in active positions (as opposed to more traditional passive positions) results in women experiencing decreased satisfaction with their own body’s physical functionality. Additionally, exposure to models that are depicted in an active manner (e.g. running) that emphasizes constantly working on your body to achieve a certain aesthetic, produces worse body satisfaction outcomes than exposure to passively posed (e.g. sitting on the floor) and objectified images (Mulgrew et al., 2017). On the assumption that women may not be accustomed to viewing their body in a positive light, Mulgrew et al. (2017) suggest that women may be increasingly unable to disentangle a well-functioning body from one that reflects cultural ideals that equate thinness with health. The researchers link these concerns to the effects of mass media. These findings are problematic because they ignore the intersectionalities that women face and in doing so fail to consider how diverse positionalities influence how they feel being in their body.

Using a quantitative survey based correlational study, Fardouly et al. (2017), investigated the effects of Instagram use on 280 women aged 18-25. Fardouly et al. determined that Instagram usage in general was not associated with young women’s body dissatisfaction or drive for thinness (2017). However, “greater overall Instagram use was associated with greater self objectification” which was determined by the degree to which socially idealised body standards were internalized and by appearance comparisons to celebrities (Fardouly et al., 2017, p. 1380). Additionally, it was determined that more frequent interactions with ‘#fitspiration’ (a term that combines the words fitness and inspiration and is associated with pictures of individuals who reflect the thin ideal) images are correlated with greater body image dissatisfaction. Fardouly and
colleagues (2017) concluded that Instagram usage may negatively influence women’s appearance-related concerns and beliefs. Furthermore, Holland and Tiggeman (2017) used an online survey to investigate habits of disordered eating and exercise of women who post ‘#fitspiration’ images on Instagram. Holland and Tiggeman determined that women who post ‘#fitspiration’ images have a higher drive for thinness, bulimia, muscularity, and compulsive exercise than women who post travel related pictures, albeit a remarkably strange choice of comparison. Without investigating the meaning behind ‘fitspiration’ posts, Holland and Tiggeman (2017) and Fardouly et al.’s (2017) research problematized Instagram use amongst young women. These studies have led to the belief that Instagram use perpetuates the emphasis on physical attributes being central to a woman’s identity (Engeln-Maddox, 2005).

Much of the psychological related literature concludes that women use media and are affected by media in pathological ways. However, these studies fail to consider that “women’s bodies are often both subjects and objects of images and do not exist as an entity that is secure and bounded from images” (Coleman, 2008, p. 164). McRobbie (2008) argues that lifestyle consumer culture offers a perceived span of choice that is a constraining factor for women and girls in disguise. Even though women appear to have a wide range of choices, there is an expectation for women to consume in the correct manner. That is to the regime of personal obligation to ‘look good’, conform to bodily ideals, and aversion of the deviant (fat) body (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2008). Scholars view this form of self and body policing, as one that presents sexual self-objectification as a matter of individual ‘choice’; although, ‘choice’ that is structured within fields of power relations as choice is never ‘totally free choice’ (Retallack et al., 2016). Given that psychological research largely ignores the multi-layered and complex processes of navigating media climates, we know very little about how “women are reading and experiencing
these discourses in relation to their own bodies, identities and experiences across myriad social settings” (Rich et al., 2011).

Additionally, when youth are not consulted in research regarding the appraisal and impact of media and media literacy, researchers run the risk of perpetuating exaggerated concern and moral panic about youth (Wilson, 2006). Though these body image studies may be well intentioned, given the above mentioned concerns, this research may create more problems than they solve. This gap in the literature emphasizes the need for sociological research with women to investigate their relationships with images as a complex and layered process that evokes different meanings in various contexts.

Young Women, Embodiment, and Social Media

Social media are increasingly recognised as an integral component in understanding how young women create, take up and embody meanings about health and fitness. Often, research concludes that the use of social media perpetuates the antiquated notion that physical attributes are a woman’s most important features (Engeln–Maddox, 2005). However, how individuals interact with Instagram, appears to influence one’s body image satisfaction (Fardouly et al., 2016). Thus, the circumstances by which individuals comply, adapt and/or tailor to health endeavours relies on their unique engagement with social media, sense of self, and life circumstances (Kwan, 2012). Not all women engage with social media in the same way, nor are all women affected by body ideals in a similar manner and therefore, research should consider individual differences among women. This is significant because “we don’t simply have health, we experience it, we feel it, we live it” (Edgley & Brissett, 1990, p. 271) in our everyday experiences and relations (Kwan, 2012). Thus, to reduce the relationship that women have with their bodies to the sole effect of media takes away from individual critical capacities, agency and diverse circumstances
within which such agencies are enacted. This section will discuss five research studies that highlight how women and girls understand popular representations of bodies in media in relation to their embodied selves.

Rich and colleagues (2011) researched girls aged 9-15 as active consumers to determine how girls constitute their health subjectivities in relation to their embodied experience. Rich and colleagues (2011) used surveys and semi-structured interviews to examine how dominant understandings of health, gender and the body are interpreted by young women and how they come to understand exercise as a bodily practice. Regardless of their socio-economic context all participants reiterated dominant western ideals of health, specifically by contrasting good health with fatness. The participants understood health through references to weight, body size, and shape, and eating and exercise habits.

Rich and colleagues (2011) also determined that their participants engaged in exercise as a “practice through which to address negative body image” (p. 145). The girls used exercise as a means to construct themselves as ‘healthy’, because it facilitated the acquisition a socially acceptable body (Rich et al., 2011). This is a significant finding as it conceptualizes health as a visual and embodied practice. Thus, health is no longer something that you can just see, but it is something that you must actively engage in. Rich and colleagues (2011) explain, for the participants “a ‘healthy’ looking body became an important form of social capital and that those without such a body were positioned as ‘other’” (p. 147). Thus, having an ideal body is a way to show ‘good’ health. Considering this, it becomes even more important to investigate what images of bodies women are posting online and sharing as their own personal media.

Jackson (2016) used focus groups and individual video diary entries to investigate the relationships girls have with their bodies and bodies represented in popular culture (Jackson,
2016). Whilst the participants were critical of idealized body standards, they also desired to conform to them. This finding adds nuance to body image research as it illustrates that girls’ embodied self-understandings of media representations are “multi-layered and irreducible to linear ‘media effects’” (Jackson, 2016, p.1). Thus, embodied understandings of health should be conceptualized as encounters between bodies and practices that are produced through a range of networks and relations, including social and cultural location, interactions with other people, and social contexts (e.g., school, the gym, the family home) (Duff, 2014; Coffey, 2016). Hence, images are not consumed or produced in isolation from social or structural influence and therefore research must consider that experience differs based on location, time, environment, mood, feelings, and company that the user is experiencing at any given moment.

By conceptualizing the relationship between media images of bodies, health, and fitness (as well as the embodiment of these images) as a network of relations, the complex and contradictory ways health and fitness are lived can be highlighted (Coffey, 2016) and used to help us create more healthful outcomes (Kwan, 2012). Duff (2014) and Coffey (2016) contend that health can be understood as assemblages that are embodied and constructed through an array of networks, relations, spaces and places that can evoke different feelings of embodiment. Therefore, research must understand health and experiences that create or deny health as an assemblage that is inclusive of relations between, but not limited to, the self, technology (i.e. Instagram), environment, and social location of the user.

Understanding health and fitness as assemblages allows scholars to navigate experiences of health in complex and contradictory ways. For example, participants in Coffey’s (2016) study describe the experience of health as multifaceted and more than the “result of undertaking ‘healthy’ practices and these practices require negotiation so as not to slip over and become
‘dangerous’ such as through under-eating or over-exercising” (p. 191). Thus, the concept of assemblages facilitates the description of complex factors that impact conceptualizations of health and fitness and removes simplistic links between health, fitness and appearance.

Whilst investigating the relationship between one’s body appearance and body work practices with one’s identity formation, Pedersen & Tjørnhøj-Thomsen (2017) determined, through semi-structured interviews of men and women aged 15-20 years old, that sharing images through social media communities was an important social determinant for converting bodywork into social capital. Social media communities like blogs, Facebook, and Instagram, allow individuals to share their own body online, receive positive and negative feedback on their body, and view and compare their bodies to others. Social media sites were also spaces where users learned and shared fitness related knowledge and created friendships (Pedersen & Tjørnhøj-Thomsen, 2017). This research is significant because it moves beyond moral panic discourse and frames social media as a site of multiple meanings and practices. For example, participants describe using social media as a tool for learning as well as creating friendships.

Retallack et al. (2016) investigated teen feminist activism on social media about health and body ideals. Through an ethnographic school-based study, Retallack and colleagues determined social media sites were used to “make visible marginalised voices and bodies” and create places for feminist discussions and resistance of gender norms (2016, p.3). The participants in Retallack and colleagues (2016) study used social media to both resist and celebrate hegemonic norms. For example, in one meeting participants had difficulty expressing love for their bodies. Following this meeting and upon their own initiative participants posted positive comments on their peers’ social media which praised their friends’ bodies in manners that conform to hegemonic norms. This highlights the importance of understanding the context
behind social media engagements in research. Without knowing that these girls were posting positive, although hegemonic comments, for the purpose of fostering bodily love amongst their peers, one may have made the wrong assertion. Thus, when investigating media, both the media under investigation, as well as the meanings ascribed to such media must be analyzed. The act of complimenting their peers in a public manner was empowering for the participants, even though their compliments were situated within hegemonic ideals, the root cause of initial feeling of disempowerment. Thus, research cannot assume that conformity to the physical reductionism of gender hegemony is without its own resistances and internal logic, even if there are disempowering aspects to the experience.

In 2008, Coleman investigated the relationship that thirteen girls aged 13-14 years had with their bodies. Coleman used focus groups and photo elicitation to determine that bodies become through their relations with images. It was determined that though mass media images were major players in the construction of “knowledges, understandings and experiences of their bodies”, other kinds of images “for example mirror images, photographic images, glimpses in shop or car windows” were also of importance, thus highlighting the assemblage of processes through which one’s body image is constructed. Thus, we must consider that images are not only taken by cameras and that they exist in experiences; hence, we must consider how Instagram users are situated within networks of assemblages to understand how they experience the embodiment of their health (Duff, 2014). Coleman (2008) concluded that “experiences produced through one kind of image might complement or contradict experiences produced through other kinds of images” (p. 16). This finding is extremely important given the prominence of Instagram in young women’s lives because women are participating in experiences for and through images.
Research Justification and Conclusion

As demonstrated in the above review of literature, “millennials, …are becoming increasingly invested in the virtual world and forming an idealized online persona which they can present to the world as an extension of themselves” (Aziz, 2017, p.5). Within this context, young women users are situated within an assemblage of relations where they are consuming images posted by other users while producing and posting their own images. This assemblage of relations is shaped and reshaped by one’s habitus and ability to translate and reinvest forms of capital between various fields. Additionally, these women are situated in relation to diverse identity categories (race, sexuality, social class, body shape and size), environments, circumstances and engagements with technology that shape how they understand and experience their embodied health and fitness. It is within this assemblage of relations that they are producing and consuming images. This research expands scholarship by gaining insight into how young women produce and consume Instagram posts and how these practices shape their embodied understandings of health and fitness. This chapter highlighted the importance of understanding meanings attached to the social media practices of young women, the next chapter outlines the methodology and techniques that will be used to gather data and facilitate analysis of these meanings.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This chapter explains the research methodology and techniques that are used in this study. This study used auto-driven photo-elicitation with semi-structured interviews to collect data that provided insight regarding how young women construct and embody Instagram representations of health and fitness through their everyday Instagram practices. In this chapter, I overview photo-elicitation and semi-structured interviewing. After this, I describe the population under investigation, selection criteria, data collection methods and a detailed account the data analysis.
Methodology

This study used auto-driven photo elicitation (ADPE) with semi-structured interviews as a method. First I explain and justify the use of ADPE within this study and will conclude with an explanation and justification of semi-structured interviewing. ADPE is an inductive research method that uses participants’ photographs to prompt discussion within a qualitative interview (Harper, 1988, 2002; Clarke-Ibáñez, 2004; Copes, Tchoula, Brookman & Ragland, 2018; Boucher, 2017). Since, the participant provides images and selects the content of the images, they are actively involved in the generation of data. Therefore, this method provides agency for the participants to express what is important to them (Boucher, 2017; Copes et al., 2018). In reference to photo-elicitation, Harper (1988) explained that:

[a]s the informant studies images of his or her world and then talks about what elements mean, the interview produces information that is more deeply grounded in the phenomenology of the subject. A photograph, a literal rendering of an element of the subject’s world, calls forth associations, definitions, or ideas that would otherwise go unnoticed. (p. 65)

Thus, the use of photographs elicits responses, emotions and memories that generate conversation connected to the participants’ understandings, beliefs, and meanings, as opposed to the researchers (Harper, 2002; Glaw, Inder, Kable & Hazelton, 2017). Hence, conducting photo elicitation of Instagram accounts serves to reduce the potential of pre-conceived ideals regarding dominant assumptions. Furthermore, in explaining the significance and meaning of photographs, participants are empowered “to create narratives about the events and routines that make up day-to-day existence” (Hurworth et al. 2005, p. 53). By allowing the participants to situate their voice within their own everyday experiences and understandings, this method allowed the participants in this study some degree of control over the discussion which in turn, created unique data (Burke & Evans, 2011, p.2).
The participants in this study selected photographs that had already been posted on their Instagram account. In this way, this research differs slightly from common auto-driven photo-elicitation studies, where most studies ask participants to take photographs to answer specific research questions (See Dollinger & Clancy-Dollinger, 2003; Mills & Hoeber, 2011). In this research, the photographs existed prior to the interview. This is important because the notion that the camera never lies is deeply flawed (Leonard & McKnight, 2015). It has been suggested that when participants take a photograph for research purposes, they do so in a manner that expresses how they want to be seen or how they think they should be seen, rather than how they actually represent themselves (Thomas, 2009; Leonard & McKnight, 2015). By using pre-existing photographs, the pictures are more likely to express realities. Furthermore, using pre-existing photographs becomes of greater importance in consideration of the evolution of photography.

With the advent of the camera phone, photography is an aspect of our culture that is incorporated into everyday life, where the phrase, ‘photos, or it didn’t happen’ is a proverb for many youths in our society (Leonard & McKnight, 2015; Boucher, 2017). The taking of pictures is more than a documentation, but is a social and cultural act (Rose, 2016; Boucher, 2017). Thus, to use pre-existing photos not only captures images, but is also a snapshot into the social and culture worlds of young people, thereby providing several nuanced experiences and understandings of their everyday life-worlds.

Many researchers praise photo-elicitation as method because it enhances data collection (see Burke & Evans, Glaw et al.; 2017; Leonard & McKnight, 2015). This is because photo-elicitation acknowledges participants as experts in their own lives, which empowers the participant to use their agency and allows for collaboration between the researcher and the participant (Glaw et al., 2017). In ADPE, the participant has the ability to guide and control
conversation, therefore, they can share what is personally meaningful to them and in so doing, take the researcher down avenues of knowing they had not considered before (Smith & Sparks, 2016; Leonard & McKnight, 2017). Moreover, Harper (2002) contends that photo-elicitation may produce not only more information, but also different kinds of information. This is because “images evoke deeper elements of human consciousness than do words; exchanges based on words alone utilize less of the brain’s capacity than do exchanges in which the brain is processing images as well as words” (Harper, 2002, p. 13). Hence, photo-elicitation promotes reflection and critical thinking on an in-depth level, which justifies its use as a method to explore complex and multi-faceted health issues (Burke & Evans, 2011).

Additionally, it has been shown that the use of visual material with young people fosters a bond between researcher and participant which can reduce the researcher-participant power dynamic (Carlsson, 2001; Close, 2007; Clark-Ibáñez, 2007; Clarke, 2003). This serves to facilitate greater access into participants’ social worlds, viewpoints, memories and reflections, which will allow for richer and more meaningful discussion (Meo, 2010). Noland (2006) suggests that the use of ADPE provides a sense of comfort to participants as they have ability to choose what to speak about in the interview, which may reduce the stress of interviewing because they know what the content of the interview will be. The photographs become the central focus of the interview rather than the raw experiences of the participant (Leonard & McKnight, 2015).

While ADPE can be used as an independent method of obtaining data, it works best when used in conjunction with interviewing (Copes et al., 2018). Therefore, this research used ADPE in conjunction with qualitative semi-structured interviews. Qualitative semi-structured interviews were used “to create a conversation that invites the participant(s) to tell stories, accounts, reports
and/or descriptions about their perspectives, insights, experiences, feelings, emotions and/or behaviors” in relation to their Instagram activity (Smith & Sparkes, 2016, p.1). To encourage richer descriptions, the researcher prepared interview prompts that were designed as open-ended questions (see Appendix A). Harper (2002) suggests that having a prompt that promotes thinking about past experiences and posts will reduce the likelihood of receiving conventional and regurgitated answers (Harper, 2002). In this study, prompts were used to probe for deeper information on a particular topic and redirect the conversation back to health and fitness related behaviours.

Coleman (2008) used auto-driven photo-elicitation technique in her research that examined how young women understand their bodies and explained that photos sparked great conversation. Building upon Coleman’s (2008) method, this study asked participants to share their Instagram posts (this includes a photograph, caption and number of likes) as a direct tool to fuel conversation regarding embodied understandings of health and fitness. Since the aim of this project sought to gain insight into how young women understand and embody health and fitness through their social media practice, having their personally produced media guide the conversation was crucial. In this way, this research investigated individual understandings of health and fitness in relation to Instagram, as well as how understandings uniquely connect to health and fitness assemblages of young women.

Methods

One week prior to their interview, each participant was asked complete a brief online survey, via the UBC hosted version of Qualtrics. The survey collected data that provided the researcher insight into general background information about each participants age, education, sport and fitness history, and Instagram use.
Interviews varied in length, ranging from 60 minutes (1 hour) to 135 minutes (2 hours and 15 minutes). The average length of each interview was 86 minutes (1 hour and twenty-six minutes) and depended on how much information the participants had to share (See Appendix B). The interviews were conducted online through video-calling or in casual semi-public locations of the participants choosing. Participants were provided with the option to select the type (online or in-person) and location of their interview to enhance their sense of privacy, confidentiality, and security (Smith & Sparkes, 2016). To reduce perceived power differentials, the researcher dressed in casual clothing typical of the student population and explained to the participant that participation is confidential and voluntary, meaning that they are able to withdraw at any time. This encouraged a relaxed atmosphere which functioned to enhance the comfort of the participant.

Though most of the interview used photo elicitation methods, the researcher first gained a general understanding of the participant by asking broad and open-ended questions about the participants general Instagram use and understandings of health and fitness (See Appendix A). This functioned to provide the researcher with insights into the participants everyday life worlds.

**Participant Recruitment and Selection Criterium**

This research investigated Canadian young women (20-24 years) who are Instagram users, enrolled in a university program, and are pursing degrees related to Kinesiology. The age range of 20-24 was selected for three reasons. First, women aged 16-26 years make up 15% of users Instagram (Omnicore, 2018, Statista, 2019b). Thus, I decided to locate age inclusion criteria within this range. Second, social media technologies change very quickly and it is more likely that individuals within similar age ranges have similar experiences with social media platforms. Third, this age range is understudied as sociological research regarding the relationship between
embodiment and social media tends to investigate younger elementary and high school aged students (see Rich et al., 2011; Coleman, 2008; Pedersen & Tjørnhøj-Thomsen, 2017; Retallack et al., 2016; Jackson 2016).

To narrow the scope of this project, nine young women who are currently enrolled in a university program and are pursing degrees related to Kinesiology were considered (one PhD, three MSc, and five BSc) (See Appendix C). This is because it is presumed that they may become health or fitness professionals and in this future capacity they may have the potential to influence people’s understandings of health and fitness. Additionally, I hypothesized, based on anecdotal evidence, that this group was more likely to be consuming and producing content related to health and the idealized body on Instagram.

Nine individuals were recruited through purposive sampling. Purposive sampling was used because it allowed for the selection of specific participants from a specific group (Bryman, 2015). To aid in accessing this niche population, snowball sampling was also used. Snowball sampling uses participants to “propose other participants who have had the experience or characteristics relevant to the research” (Bryman, 2015, p. 415). Providing individuals met the selection criterium, a diversity of social, cultural and sport backgrounds were recruited. Recruitment posts were advertised online through Instagram and Facebook through public kinesiology pages affiliated with: University of Toronto (UofT), McMaster University (MU), Concordia University, and the University of Guelph (UofG) (See Appendix D).

This study used a small sample size to “increase the chances of close involvement with participants … and generating fine-grained data” (Crouch and McKenzie, 2006, as cited in Bryman, 2015, p. 12). Although the number of participants was small, the data set was large
because interview and visual data were analyzed together, thus nine participants allowed sufficient time for thorough analysis of the data.

An interview was arranged with each individual who expressed interest in participation (See Appendix E). At least one week prior to the interview date, I emailed each participant with details of the research project and reviewed ethics and consent (See Appendix F). Participants were given time to confirm their involvement in the study and, once confirmed as a participant, invited to participate in the survey and to select five to ten Instagram posts they would be comfortable sharing for the purpose of photo-elicitation interviews (See Appendix G). These individuals were also contacted 24 hours prior to the interview “by phone and/or email as a courtesy reminder, or to reschedule, if necessary, in case the participant needs to change the date, time or location” (Smith & Sparkes, 2016, p.9). Participants were completely anonymized.

Data Collection

Four sets of data were collected: survey answers, interviews, Instagram posts, and responses to follow up questions. Data was collected in three arrangements: 1) survey data was collected using the UBC-hosted version of Qualtrics, 2) interviews were be either in person or via video-calling and recorded using a mobile audio recorder and 3) Instagram posts and responses to follow up questions were collected digitally and stored on a password protected computer. All data was kept on a password protected computer and stored inside a locked room. Audio recorded data was transcribed into Microsoft Word documents directly after the interview to increase the accuracy of transcription. The data collection process was not focused on the temporal chronology of photos, but instead in the order in which the participant spoke about them. This is because Pink (2011) suggests that a focus on the temporal chronology of photos may not represent the participant’s experience. Therefore, participants were not prompted to
discuss their photographs in any temporal or chronological manner hence data was stored in the participant determined order. This way the data collection process encouraged participant led conversations about their experiences.

Though commonly used in ethnographic research, this research collected a ‘thick description’ of data. Thick description is a method by which attention is directed toward contextual details to facilitate the extraction of meanings, feelings, and experiences that shape and inform understandings (Burke, 2016). Since this research paid attention to the feelings that participants expressed regarding their own explanations of their photographs, a more comprehensive account of the embodied understandings was collected (Geertz, 2008).

**Researcher Reflexivity**

The role of the researcher is of the utmost importance as it is influential in dictating the quality and content of the interview (Smith & Sparkes, 2016). Hence, throughout this research I actively and reflexively engaged with my positionality to ensure that I was aware of how my identity shaped the research process (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I kept a journal so that I could understand and remain in control of my positionality by acknowledging my bias and understanding my own Instagram experiences and practices in relation to the participants. In this journal I recorded five types of information: 1) answers to three guiding questions (see Appendix H), 2) details from interviews (body language, language use, silences, funny, awkward, comforting and discomforting situations, facial expressions, and reactions to questions), 3) my own personal reflections regarding the interview (defining moments, key ideas, general thoughts and opinions regarding the interview structure), 4) potential follow up questions, and 5) general thoughts about the research process. I journaled before and after interviews and throughout the transcription process. I also allowed myself to journal at any time during the research process, so
that I could write about my thoughts in free-flowing pattern that encouraged movement back and forth between conceptualization, data collection, analysis and interpretation (Burke, 2016). This helped me reflect on the overall research process and inform any changes I need to make to the interview process.

**Data Analysis**

The data was analyzed using ethnographic content analysis (ECA), a systematic, analytical and non-rigid form of qualitative thematic analysis that facilitates the identification and organization of patterns within data. A rich thematic description highlights the predominant and important themes, which is valuable for investigation of under-researched areas, like how health is embodied online (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Since ECA “is embedded in constant discovery and constant comparison of relevant situations, settings, styles, images, meanings and nuances” (Altheide, 1987, p. 68) it allows for a systematic analysis using overarching themes. This encouraged reflexive movement between concept development, data coding, data analysis, and interpretation and allowed for the identification of new themes and patterns. Since this study does not consider data collection and analysis as distinct entities, insights into the relationships between research experiences and theoretical concepts may occur at any given time-period, or location in the research process (Pink, 2011). Thus, researcher reflexivity as documented in my journal, provided an outlet for analysing “the relationship between meanings given to photographs and video during fieldwork and academic meanings later invested in the same images” (Pink, 2011, p. 118). This inductive, iterative and open-ended style of ECA aligns with the overarching goal of this research, which is to gather participants voice and situated truths. Thus, data was analyzed using an inductive approach; whereby identified themes were strongly linked to the data themselves rather than to analytic preconceptions (Braun & Clarke, 2006).
Furthermore, ECA allows for exploration and analysis of various types of descriptive information of images, like lighting, filters, camera angles, captions, bodies, hashtags, and recognizes this data as constantly intersecting to create different meanings (Altheide, 1987). This is of great value for the analysis of photographs because it allows for every detail considered in the capture, editing, and posting of a photo to Instagram to be investigated. Seeing as the capture and viewing of photographs is a subjective process, to understand meaning an analysis of photographs must consider the processes and experiences of taking a photograph (Pink, 2011; Leonard & McKnight, 2015; Boucher, 2017).

The ECA in this research involved a constant and active re-reading and interpretation of the data set, coded extracts, and written analysis to determine themes. This analysis flexibly followed the process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) in their ‘6 steps to determining themes’. I familiarized myself with the data by re-listening to the recording of each interview one day after the initial interview and actively searching for meanings and patterns by jotting down my thoughts (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The transcription and initial analysis of each interview was completed immediately and before the onset of the following interview. This encouraged accuracy in transcription, ensured that interpretations of the findings were clearly derived from the data itself and mirrored the experiences of participant rather than bias of the researcher, and helped to identify the emergence of themes that may require further investigation in subsequent interviews (Burke, 2016; Tracy, 2010). To the best of my ability, I respected the ‘voice’ of the participants by transcribing their idiomatic language practices verbatim (Norman, 2013). The transcribed data was analyzed in relation to the Instagram posts. This way both sets of data will contextualize each other and form “not a complete record of the research but a set of different
representations and strands of it” that express how the data intertwine to create various meanings (Pink, 2011, p. 120).

Throughout the transcription and interviewing process, I generated initial codes that functioned to organize the data into meaningful groups. I coded, by hand, as many patterns as possible, included extracts of the data within each code to provide context and did not limit the number of times each extract could be coded (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Researcher judgement determined the extent to which a theme and or reoccurring pattern captured something important in relation to the embodiment of Instagram constructions, representations, and interpretations of health and fitness (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Once the data was coded, I broadly analyzed the data and created themes by sorting the “different codes into potential themes and collating all the relevant coded data extracts within the identified themes” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 89). Themes were not determined by how frequently certain incidents, words, phrases occurred, as a larger number of occurrences did not determine significance (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Instead, the data within themes related together meaningfully and formed a coherent pattern, which facilitated the creation of distinct themes that revealed significant findings or patterned responses (Pink, 2011; Braun & Clarke, 2006). Additionally, I used member checking of transcribed data to enhance data credibility and confirm that the interpretations of findings are derived from the data itself (Burke, 2016).

In summary, this study used individual qualitative semi-structured photo-elicitation interviews to gain insight into how young women, as producers and consumers of Instagram media, engage with Instagram’s ‘health and fitness’ culture. Nine women aged 20-24 years who were enrolled in university and kinesiology degrees were recruited using purposive and snowball sampling. Interviews were transcribed into narrative data and Instagram posts were saved as
visual data. Data was analyzed using ethnographic content analysis to investigate how the processes of both producing and consuming Instagram media operate as a socializing agent for young women and their embodied understandings of health and fitness. In conclusion, this methodology, to the best of my knowledge, has not yet been used to study the population of young women who are Instagram users aged 20-24 and thus addresses another gap in the literature.

Conclusion

This chapter described the methodological approach for this research project. The population, recruitment process, data collection, researcher reflexivity and data analysis were explained and justified. The next chapter presents a detailed discussion of the results of this research.

Chapter 4: Results and Discussion

In this chapter, I state and discuss my findings. The chapter is divided into three sections. In the first section, I answer the first research question, how do young women cultivate body capital within the field of Instagram? This section provides insight into the complex and multi-layered embodied health and fitness meanings that young women glean from their social media practices. This section explains the relationship between body capital and the processes of producing and consuming Instagram media. In the second section I answer the second research question, how do Instagram practices influence understandings of health and fitness? This section explains how Instagram practices reveal, amplify and incubate embodied identities and understandings of health and fitness. Hence, this chapter explores how people actually use Instagram in relation to the acquisition of body capital and how these practices influence how young women use Instagram to make sense of their embodied health identities. Following the two sections, I briefly overview key findings from this research and conclude the discussion.
RQ1: How Do Young Women Cultivate Body Capital Within the Field of Instagram?

This section is comprised of four sub-sections. The first section situates Instagram within Bourdieusian theory as a digital field of practice that is regulated by formal and informal sets of rules and regulations that govern the accumulation of body capital. The second section lists and discusses four informal rules and explains how the participants in this study both adhere to and navigate these rules. Hence, this section showcases how individual experience and Instagram use are networked together in an assemblage of relations that govern the highly nuanced and contradictory process of accumulating body capital on Instagram. The third section discusses the relationship between the accumulation of ‘likes’ and comments and suggests that this operates as a form of social distinction. The fourth section contains a brief overview of key findings and conclusions.

**Rules and regulations: Instagram is a space for self-expression, albeit self expression that is governed by rules and regulations.**

This research agrees with the general findings of Levina & Arraga (2014) who employed Bourdieu’s theorizations of cultural capital to define Instagram as its own distinct online field, whereby social status is acquired through acts of distinction. However, this research also extends the work of Levina & Arraga (2014) by investigating the unique power relations that govern how young women gain social distinction through the accumulation of body capital on Instagram. Although Instagram is regulated by formal rules (e.g. you are only allowed to share photos and videos that you have taken or have the right to share (Instagram Help Center, n.d.c)), this project focuses on informal rules (unspoken social norms that regulate Instagram use). Through a thematic analysis of interview and picture data, several key themes came together to form an informal set of rules and regulations that governs the acquisition and maintenance of body capital.
which in turn controls the maintenance of digital social hierarchies (Levina & Arraga, 2014).

Since various aspects of culture are inter-related and entangled within fields of practice, individuals create their own habitus within the boundaries of these fields (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Therefore, the crux of this project explains how the women in this study uniquely navigate these rules and regulations in order to create opportunities for social distinction through the accumulation of body capital. In my analysis, I have identified four inter-related informal rules regulating the accumulation of body capital through Instagram, including:

1. Rule 1: Making the most of yourself (i.e.): post content that showcases the shape and size of your body;
2. Rule 2: The Instagram paradox: be vainglorious without being vainglorious;
3. Rule 3: The camera does not lie but the photos do: enhance but do not edit your pictures; and
4. Rule 4: Blue chip Investments: show that you live a healthy and active lifestyle.

In listing and discussing these informal rules, I will showcase how interwoven and sometimes contradictory they are, whereby the exceptions to the rule prove the very rule. There is nothing simple about the relationship between the rules that govern posting content on Instagram and garnering body capital, as I show in the section that follows.

**Rule 1: Making the most of yourself (i.e.): post content that showcases the shape and size of your body.**

For the young women in this study, Instagram is like a digital catwalk whereby you are expected to show off your body’s shape and size. Every one of the images shared with this project display the body, with no images that do not include the body. Of the 47 Instagram posts shared with this project: 37 posts clearly showcase the shape and size of the user’s full body; seven showcase the user’s body from mid-thigh and upwards; two are pictures of body parts; and one showcases the users face through a collage of cropped pictures (see Appendix I). In other words, showcasing
the body is central to how the young women use Instagram, and thus an Instagram post that showcases the users full body has the potential to garner the most digital body capital.

Some of the participants explained that a desire to share their entire body on Instagram is fuelled by the need to provide photographic proof that they were actually present for the photographed experience. For example, Jackie expressed, “part of the reason that [I] follow people is so that [I] can keep up with the person themselves, not with what [that] person is feeling or what they are doing”. Jackie’s narrative positions the body, not its feelings, experiences or performances, at the center of Instagram practices. In this way, Instagram is a body-based platform for appearance-based assessments of followers, whereby users monitor their followers based, firstly, on their physical presence and appearance through body shape and size, and secondarily through facial expressions, and experiences. Hence, Instagram becomes an appearance-based platform that functions as a site for the policing of bodies. It is this body policing that regulates Instagram as a space for competition, where users are constantly expected to take their “best” (Annie) and most “aesthetically pleasing photos” (Karen). These appearance-based expectations perpetuate gendered notions that reinforce the experience that women are constantly under pressure to meet normative bodily expectations and thus must evaluate themselves and other women based on bodily appearance and presentation (Dworkin & Wachs, 2009).

Most of the participants explained that selecting a picture to post to Instagram was tied to gendered appearance idealizations. They spoke of wanting to take pictures that made them look according to traditional feminine norms, “thin[ner]” (Patty), and “lean[er]” (Harriet), as well as more emergent but equally as difficult to attain ideals to be more “muscular” (Erin) and “bigger” (Karen). This pressure to post your body online also provokes social pressure to conform to body
ideals, which may vary based upon the individual. Many participants expressed that they had felt the effects of this pressure, and these pressures can “lead to negative thoughts about what you are feeling verses how you see yourself” (Harriet). In this quote, Harriet highlights the difference between seeing your body’s appearance and feeling your body’s physical ability, for example, looking strong and feeling strong are not always congruous. An individual may feel strong but see themselves as fat. Since the participants are under pressure to share and consequently see their body online, this may influence how the participants come to feel about their bodies. Jackie described that she felt a disconnect between how some people see me versus how I see myself. Obviously, I see myself as a thinner, smaller version than I’m sure what people see me as. Especially because a lot of my friends are a lot smaller and shorter than I am, so they see me as this huge person, but then from my pictures are from my height or my point of view.

In this way, Jackie uses Instagram to post content that aligns with how she sees and experiences her own body. Hence, the experience of looking good on Instagram does not always reflect how the user felt at that particular moment. This means that Instagram is not a window into the subjective experience of the participant, but instead is a snapshot that may or may not be congruent with how they were actually feeling in that particular moment. In the quote above Jackie explained that she uses the Instagram platform to resolve her conflict with how she thinks people see her verses how she sees herself. Hence, the body is experienced, understood, and transformed through Instagram practices. This means that Instagram plays a central role in how we come to learn about and see our bodies. This finding aligns with research that suggests that without understanding how individuals learn with and through technology, research is limited (Petrina et al., 2008) in its ability to learn about the culture, practices, communities, benefits and implications of social media usage (Vivienne & Burgess, 2013).
Even though the participants stated that they could “post what [they] want[ed]” (Annie), these ‘choices’ were embedded within power relations and were, thereby, never ‘totally free choice’ (Retallack et al., 2016). Thus, this form of self and body policing presents self-objectification as a matter of individual ‘choice’, albeit ‘choice’ that is structured within fields of power relations. Jackie explained:

Let’s say for one of my pictures, it was me at some diner and I was very invested in my drink at the time. And one of the pictures it didn’t make it to Instagram, ‘cause I got way to excited because it was a really good drink, but then my friend who was taking the picture at the time she just kept on hitting the shutter button, so I got the picture not the exact picture where I was like ‘oh my gosh this is great,’ but a toned down version of it, so I was like that is the one that I will post, cause I don’t look crazy. So there is that […] well the thing is because I see that toned down picture, it reminds me of the original picture, it makes me laugh a bit just because that drink is that good, you know and had I posted that original picture I don’t think it would have been too big of a deal but it’s also like, I don’t know how people would react to that. If they were my best friends like sure they know my facial expressions, but for the rest of my what 1000 followers I feel like the majority would have been like ‘oh that’s kind of weird and doesn’t really fit in with this’, so it wouldn’t have been the best for my profile, or fit with how people see me.

Hence, Jackie chose to share a picture on Instagram that she believed would be the most socially acceptable to a virtual audience. Jackie is making decisions within the broader constraints of Instagram whereby socially accepted norms and normative gender expectations are a constant constraint that influences her Instagram practices. Therefore, users do not share their own bodies and experiences under conditions that are entirely of their own choosing, but rather must navigate between the structures of possibility that shape their practices and their own individual agency.

Despite knowing that posting Instagram content that showcases your entire body has the potential to garner the most digital body capital, most of the participants explained that, at times, they did not feel comfortable posting their full body. Some participants explained that when they
felt less comfortable with their body size and shape, they tend to post selfies\(^1\) instead of pictures that showcase their full body. Hence, the participants are enacting with agency by taking pictures to strategically control what they look like online. Karen explained:

> I used to post a lot more selfies. I’d post pictures with what I look like here (showing face). I’d be happy with what my face looked like and now I don’t have to feel like ‘oh I’m only comfortable [showing my face]’, like now I feel comfortable posting pictures of my body. So now it’s more body posts, before back then it was more selfies, I would not post a picture of my whole body.

This exception to the rule proves the very rule. This situates Instagram as a struggle of both conflict and conflict resolution because the very social pressure that pushes an individual to share their body on Instagram acts as the vehicle for change. Without knowing that women like Karen were posting selfies for the reason that they do not feel comfortable posting their whole body on Instagram one may take the wrong assertion, for instance that the post is initiated by narcissism (see Moon, Lee, Lee, Choi, & Sung, 2016). This highlights the importance of investigating not only the media under inquiry but also the meanings ascribed to such media. Hence, it is critically important to understanding the nuanced meanings that young women attach to their Instagram practices as well as the power relations that they navigate in constructing meanings.

The power-relations and rules that structure the field of Instagram place individuals with varying amounts of offline body capital in different social locations on Instagram (Sandford & Quarnby, 2019). This suggests that one’s body capital offline is intricately linked to the acquisition of digital body capital. Hence, Instagram is a cultural site that is permeable to forms

---

\(^1\) A selfie is self-taken photograph, usually of one’s face, that has been captured using a smartphone held at arm’s length or taken in a mirror.
capital from other places and contexts, which means that normative rules and expectations from elsewhere may mitigate online rules.

As one example of this, Jackie is part of the Arabic ethnocultural community and is a member of the Muslim religion, she chose to share a picture of her packing her suitcase whilst upside-down in a yoga handstand. In this picture, Jackie is wearing tight fitting yoga pants and a baggy blue T-shirt. When discussing this photograph, Jackie explained how she was unsure if this was an appropriate picture to share, and how at times, a selfie is more appealing for her to post:

It’s also a cultural thing of not wanting to display so much of your body, so that is why I was posting like a selfie or a picture of my dress over my yoga pose […] tight fitting yoga clothes like that sort of thing. I do remember when I took this picture I went to my brother and was like ‘do you think mum and dad would be mad if I post this?’ He was like, ‘ummm do what you want, it probably wouldn’t be the best, but post it. It’s fine […]’. So, it’s a cultural thing, but also a religion thing, so I’m Muslim and the way we operate is we don’t like to show to much of our body just because it’s a part of our modesty and that sort of thing. So whatever kind of portrays that more, is more acceptable. So, growing up, that is how I was raised so it’s how my mindset is. So despite following all these yoga channels that do all this it’s like, I can [post] some of it but not all of it […] typically all the yoga poses that are potentially considered inappropriate depending on the culture, for me and in my religion, to post it just to girls would be just fine, but my Instagram isn’t made for just girls, like, I’ve seen girls who wear a scarf, hijab, and they would have a private Instagram account and only have girls following them and they can post whatever they want. But for me that is too limiting, and also I don’t wear a scarf so it’s not really that much of a barrier to me, so I will post what I want but I just make sure that it is some level of modest and not something problematic.

Hence, there are circumstances where posting pictures of an individual’s body can detract from cultural capital. Jackie highlighted the ways in which Instagram users make active decisions to preserve other forms of capital, in Jackie’s case cultural capital. This suggests that the rule that encourages women to show their body could serve to exclude or severely limit some users. However, for Jackie this is not the case, as she creatively adapts to competing expectations between Instagram and her ethnocultural community. This suggests that different communities of
practice have different regulations that they must negotiate to accrue capital (ethnocultural identity, culture, body shape, and size). For example, in the quote above Jackie explained that posting a picture of her entire body in “tight fitting yoga clothes” would not accrue much body capital for her, since it infringes upon the “modest” custom of the Muslim religion. Hence, the creative practices that users employ to navigate the rules and regulations of accruing body capital allow users to engage with Instagram in culturally relevant and meaningful ways. This intersection of culture, religion, body capital, capital conversions and Instagram is a site of inquiry that deserves more research.

As other scholars have suggested (McRobbie, 1978; Bordo, 1993) characterizing women as a group of likeminded consumers not only fails to acknowledge their agency, but also overlooks influential factors of difference (e.g. culture, social class, race etc.) thereby simplifying a complex phenomenon. Hence, the practices by which individuals engage with Instagram should be conceptualized as encounters between bodies and practices that are produced through a range of networks and relations, including culture and religion (Duff, 2014; Coffey, 2016). Although Instagram posts that showcase the users’ entire body are held in high regard, the participants were critical of pictures that unapologetically show off the appearance of the body.

**Rule 2: The Instagram paradox: be vainglorious without being vainglorious.**

The participants described pictures that unapologetically show off the appearance of the body as “not resonating well” (Sarah) with them, and as “something that they would not want to do” (Annie). While participants critiqued this practice, they explained that “if [their] body looks good [in a picture, they are] probably going to post it [on Instagram]” (Sarah). At the same time, the participants explained that they “[won’t] post a picture […] if [they don’t] think [they] looked
good in it […] and [their] body [doesn’t] look good […] even if it was a good picture” (Annie).

Hence, users navigate a competing dynamic or paradox whereby they must determine how to be vainglorious, without actually being vainglorious. Sarah explained this competing dynamic whereby she does not “take a picture to showcase [her] body”, and yet she always posts pictures of herself on her own account, “I want it to be a picture of me. It’s my account, so I want to show that I am there”. Furthermore, Jackie explained that if she had “not been in [a] picture, I don’t think I would have gotten as many likes”. This means that Instagram posts should highlight the users’ body, yet not explicitly show off the body. This is a peculiar paradox, as some participants indicated that the whole point of posting to Instagram is to post content where you are “looking nice and doing something cool” (Annie).

In order to justify their position, users institute an informal nebulous rule that allows them to fall in the narrow gap between the confines of posting a flattering picture and not coming across as vainglorious. In the section to follow I will highlight how three of the participants used Instagram to uniquely navigate around being perceived as vainglorious, whilst showcasing their bodies. In the quote below, Annie highlighted this complex and contradictory process:

Personally, I don’t try and post pictures to show off my body per say. So, when I see girls that post pictures on the beach showing off their body, I just think ‘oh why would you do that?’ because it’s not something I would do. I don’t want to stereotype to say that it’s wrong to do that but that’s just not something I would do. Even though I have pictures of myself in a bikini on Instagram, but I don’t take it to show off my body.

In this excerpt, Annie reinforced the notion that posting your body online is an important part of garnering digital body capital, at the same time however, she indicated that posting a picture with the intent to showcase one’s body is in bad taste. Since, Annie explained that she does not take bikini pictures to “to show off [her] body”, she situates herself as the polar opposite to the ‘problematic other’ who uses Instagram as a place for gratuitous body displays. Annie also
projects intentionality onto other users, expressing that she knows why other people post the pictures that they do. By stating her own intentionality, Annie serves to exclude herself from the stigma of gratuitous body displays by projecting vainglorious intentions onto others. Hence, covert expressions of body capital may have the potential to garner more digital body capital than overt expressions because they appear to be less vainglorious.

When describing the process of taking her bikini picture, Annie explained how she navigates through posting pictures that represent an overt display of her body in two ways. Firstly, Annie frames her intentionality against the problematic others intentionality. Secondly, she shows her body in an active setting rather than in a passive setting. In this way, Annie is able to reproduce gratuitous body displays covertly under the guise of physical activity. Annie’s bikini picture showcases Annie and her friend smiling for a photograph, in their bikinis whilst standing on paddleboards at a lake. The picture is taken from a distance, which means that each woman’s entire body is visible. Annie explained the process of taking this picture:

What happened was (nervous laughter) we were sitting on the dock and then said, ‘hey we should get a picture of us looking cool on the paddleboards.’ So, then we got out there and got someone on the dock to take a picture of us! BUT, then we did actually go paddle boarding. It was definitely like, ‘oh let’s go out and get a picture of us looking cool on the boards!’ (laughing).

Even though Annie curated this picture for Instagram, she does not categorize this picture as an overt expression of her body capital because she appears to be in the act of doing, or at least preparing to do, physical activity, even though she is posed to be in action. Additionally, Annie’s picture showcases a busy environment (a lake, a dock, trees in the background, paddleboards and so on), in this way the body, although still a deliberate focal point, becomes part of a bigger picture. By embedding herself in physical activity and by projecting her intentionality against ‘problematic others’, Annie is able to showcase her body without ‘being caught’. Hence, by
reproducing gratuitous body displays through masquerades of physical activity, the user attempts to avoid the corollary of being framed as vainglorious. Therefore, pictures that show off the user’s body in a covert way, under the guise of physical activity, allow for the most opportunity to garner body capital. This is a significant finding as it conceptualizes health and fitness as both visual and embodied practices.

Pictures are not only taken by cameras, rather they exist in experiences of taking the photo, and in each individual interpretation of the photo. This reinforces Coleman’s (2008) finding that “experiences produced through one kind of image might complement or contradict experiences produced through other kinds of images” (p. 16). Since intentionality is interpreted by participants, what the participants say about their images, the images they produce, and how those images are interpreted by others may not share congruous meanings. Although we do not know how other Instagram users will interpret the participants’ posts, what is for certain is that it is important for users to present an internal consistency, whereby they adhere to certain Instagram rules at the same time that they are always in violation of these rules. In order to garner the most capital, the users attempt to connect congruous meanings between the consumers of their media by adhering to informal rules, whereby the gold standard is to have a nice body, and it is acceptable to show off that body, but only within specific contexts. Hence, these very experiences hold influence on how Instagram users are situated within the social hierarchy of body capital. The participants in this study are aware of these informal rules and are trying to narratively or discursively negotiate these rules as a means of maximizing body capital.

While the majority of the participants in this study navigated around being vainglorious, one participant embraced vanity and openly celebrated the gratuitous exhibition of her body. In
explaining her reason, Erin shared picture of herself standing in a bikini facing the camera whilst posed leaning against a palm tree on a beach:

In the moment I really was [comfortable in my body] and I feel like I represent someone who looks strong and is healthy, but also looks normal. […] there’s things on my body that I could look at and be like, ‘oh well I’m not super muscular looking or super toned or whatever’, but I was really happy about my body […] this is my body that can do all the things that I pride myself on and I just look like a good representation of what a normal fit person probably looks like.

Interestingly, through embracing the vainglorious nature of Instagram and participating in blatant gratuitous display of her body, Erin explained that she felt empowered by showcasing her body, since it is a “physical manifestation of all of [her] hard work” (Erin). In reproducing Instagram posts that display a gratuitous exhibition of the body, Instagram acts as a space where users subscribe to dominant ideas of health, fitness and beauty. This study highlights the complexity of the relationship between how people produce, understand, embody, and engage with media (see Mulgrew et al., 2017; Fardouly et al., 2017). For example, Karen shared a picture of “legs with running shoes”. This picture is taken from first perspective, Karen and her running partner are standing outside and toe-to-toe (face to face with their toes touching). Their entire legs from mid-thigh downward are captured in the photograph. Karen explained that:

I like how my legs look in the picture, I had a tan from the summer, and I was just happy so I thought I’m going to post this…[this picture] says that I’m physically fit because I went for a run after this picture, you can tell by the running shoes, and the sun outside that this person, well me, most likely went for a run. It shows that it is summer and I’m enjoying my time outside, that I’m taking advantage of the nice weather and not just taking a picture of my legs and posting it because I want too.

In the quote above, Karen is simultaneously speaking about feminine ideals of slender and tanned legs, at the same moment that she is describing her enjoyment of being physically active and moving her body. Hence, by understanding the meaning of Karen’s post, the viewer can now see that there is far more going on in the picture than adherence to feminine body ideals. Instead,
Karen is using Instagram as a space to project her ideas about femininity, the body, and physical activity.

Hence, posts on Instagram are decidedly ambivalent, both representing sub-ordination to dominant gendered notions at the same time they reflect bodily empowerment (Fiske, 2010). For example, it may be ultimately disempowering to conform to normative body gender idealizations, but there is power in adhering to those idealizations as it facilitates the acquisition of capital and feelings of accomplishment, pride and fitness. Hence, even though the participants subject themselves to various social norms that might be disempowering, they receive power from having body capital. This highlights the nuances of power, as it can be simultaneously repressive and empowering (Fiske, 2010). In this way, the participants construct and use their own bodies in agentic ways within the conditions of these power relations. Although these conditions prescribe social norms for idealized body types and health and fitness practices, the participants described a process of constantly learning how to maneuver through these relations to their benefit. Most of the participants in this study exercised their agency, albeit within the confines of broader constraints and always within the context of normative expectations, to navigate and work between these very constraints of power. In this way, power is constraining but not determining.

In this section, I have highlighted the ambivalence of power relations. These young women Instagram users must negotiate simultaneously meeting normative bodily expectations of feminine beauty while presenting themselves as physically active, happy, healthy and fit individuals. Far from being passive in their Instagram consumption and productions, these women have demonstrated considerable savviness and creativity in negotiating these competing demands. To that end, this finding extends McRobbie’s (1978) research that contends that
magazine readers may unconsciously follow trend and simultaneously reject them, to include Instagram users. This finding is significant because it moves Instagram use beyond moral panic discourse and frames it as a site of multiple meanings and practices.

Through learning the narratives behind Instagram posts, this research highlights the importance of understanding meanings attached to the social media practices of young women. This also showcases the vast divide between dominant (often psychological) research that problematizes Instagram use amongst young women and sees women, predominantly, as passive consumers of dominant gender ideologies (see Holland & Tiggeman, 2017; Fardouly et al., 2017; Mulgrew et al., 2017) and sociological research with women that investigates relationships with images as a complex and layered process that evokes different meanings and practices that occur across diverse contexts. When investigating media, both the media under investigation, as well as the meanings ascribed to such media must be analyzed, because they may not be congruous. Although participants were clear that Instagram photos should center around the body, it was also critical that the body represented was as close to ‘real’ as possible.

**Rule 3: The camera does not lie, but the photos do: enhance but do not edit your pictures.**

The participants were critical of Instagram users who edited their pictures to change something physically about their body size and shape. Every participant claimed that they “try not to look at people who edit themselves” because they prefer “more in the moment, genuine and authentic pictures” (Sarah) and that they “do not appreciate the people who are trying to put on a fake image” (Maude). Specifically, participants did not enjoy when users edit their pictures to physically change the outline or size of their body in order to “see something in a specific way” (Annie). Annie explained that:
you can tell when people do that, and it doesn’t look right, you can see them standing and their butt looks big and it doesn’t look proportionally sized. I think it’s weird because it doesn’t look right… I find sometimes my friends are like ‘oh look at this picture of this girl they definitely edit their body here you can see it the background’. It looks like it’s been tilted a bit you can see it because if you zoom in … the background looks like it’s been tilted a bit so you can definitely tell that they have edited their body.

Thus, editing a picture with the intention to alter the shape and size of your body is taboo.

However, this rule is somewhat misleading because, the participants also explained that using filtering techniques to edit a photo is an acceptable process. Erin explained that using filters is “probably normal for most people” and that they can be used to make pictures “more representative of what it looks like in real life”. This introduces another competing dynamic whereby it is, on the one hand, acceptable to use filtering techniques to enhance your photo in some cases, while on the other hand, it is unacceptable to edit to physically change body shape and size. Karen explained that she will use a filter if it:

will make the background look nicer, then sure, or if it will make the lighting look nicer then why not put a filter, but I would never physically edit something to make myself look different in the picture.

Although filtering is a form of editing, the participants in this study distinguished between filtering and editing. Editing a picture, they suggested, is physically changing the outline or size of your body, whereas filtering a picture is defined as altering the shades and colours of the image, but not physically changing the body. Though this distinction may appear to be murky as changing the background of an image will also change the foreground (that is, the body), the distinction lies in the fact that by altering the color of the image, you are not physically changing the shape of your body. For example, ‘pinching’ in the image to make the waist appear smaller or expanding the image to amplify the size of your buttocks is distasteful; however, changing the brightness of a picture to make one’s stomach appear more muscular is acceptable. This fluid
distinction provides the justification that allows participants to edit their pictures, without really editing their pictures.

The participants explained that filters allow for the production of images that are “more representative of what [things] look like in real life” (Erin). When describing how she uses filters, Erin explained that she selects filters that represent the situation being photographed. For example, when describing a picture of her at an Olympic weightlifting competition, Erin explained that “[I would] choose a filter […] [I] would look more athletic or more muscular in, versus something I look like a noodle in”. In this way, Erin is changing the lighting of the photo to make herself appear more muscular. The addition of a filter allows users to create congruency between how they think they look in real life with how the picture looks, without physically changing anything about their body. Thus, the participants in this study justify the use of filters under the pretence that filters can help curate ‘authentic’ experiences. This is a contradiction in itself because the participants are actually editing pictures to enhance the image of their body. This is a process that they “do not appreciate” because they proclaim it to be “fake”, and yet they are actively participating in the curation of images (Maude).

In a logically fallacious manner, the participants also explained that even though they participate in filtering their pictures to enhance their image, they suggest that the processes of editing pictures that other users engage in is “worry[ing]” and brought on by “negative thoughts and feelings” about their body (Erin). Once again participants ascribe feelings, motivations and intentions to other Instagram users, assuming that they know why people engage with the Instagram practices that they do. Ideas about the ‘authentic’ or ‘natural’ body seem to be at the center of this rule, whereby participants police the production of the ‘natural’ body within the virtual space of Instagram. The participants felt that editing the body was a form of cheating that
undermined not only the authentic body, but the presumed agency of the human subject. For example, Karen shared that:

You should work for [your body], and not just change the way it looks in a picture, but change it in reality [by working on it] because you may like how the picture looks but you might not be happy with the way you look if you are just editing the way you are in the picture.

Here the normative feminine ideal is something to be worked towards and not manipulated into existence through technology. Similarly, Rita echoed this concern for ‘the real’:

I won’t alter anything, to me I go into everyday thinking if someone found out who I was and looked me up online and saw my photos… does that truly show them what I am like in real life? Or does it look like a lie?

Hence, the participants experienced competing pressures that perpetuate desires for having an authentic ‘un-edited’ body, whilst also maximizing their body capital (the display and embodiment of a lean, taut and beautiful body). What is particularly interesting about this is that Instagram is often critiqued in public discourse for its editing capabilities (Jennings, 2019), where it is assumed that users manipulate and technologically enhance their bodies, and thus both produce and reproduce unrealistic ideals. However, the young women in this study saw this as a serious violation of the informal rules and regulations of Instagram, a violation that could result in the loss of body capital. It is this pressure to both appear ‘real’ and take advantage of technologies that are available to the user to represent an ideal body on Instagram that allows participants to differentiate, albeit paradoxically, between the processes of filtering and editing.

As mentioned earlier, the participants explained that they value Instagram posts that use “genuine and authentic pictures” (Sarah), most of the content posted on Instagram is curated through performances (i.e., posing, or participating in an activity for the picture), which means that rarely are these posts truly authentic. A considerable amount of cultural and identity work goes into creation of Instagram profiles. The participants in this study described taking pictures
as a carefully planned process that involves taking “million pictures (of me) in the exact same place just doing a bunch of different poses” (Jackie) and taking advantage of “optimal angles” (Karen) so that they can “present [their] best self” (Jackie). They do this “because one thing can change, and it can throw the picture off completely, which is why it’s important to take a lot [of pictures] and then you have the freedom to choose right after” (Jackie). This suggests that the process through which photographs are taken and selected is a form of editing in itself. In this way, Instagram users are curating and stylizing a particular lifestyle, body shape and size through posting content on Instagram.

In addition, the participants did not just capture moments through photography, instead they created moments for photography so that they had content to post on Instagram. When describing a picture of her taken from behind whilst walking through snow-covered woods with her hands raised up in the air in celebration, Karen shared:

I was going for a walk with my sister, and she is six years younger than me, so she is 16 right now, and she is really into Instagram, and the whole aesthetically pleasing pictures and she wanted to go for a walk and take pictures and I was like oh why not! So, we went in the path near our house and we were just doing silly things like jumping up and down and dancing around and taking pictures. This was meant for Instagram. So, these pictures were taken for Instagram that was the point of them. It wasn’t about taking a picture by accident and it looked nice.

Therefore, these moments are curated and performed so that the Instagram user can share content that is perceived as authentic. It is these pictures that are the most highly coveted as they intertwine with the taboo against vanity. However, the process of taking these photos is performative and highly stylized because the users are preparing for these pictures and in this way physically editing themselves for pictures. In the quote below Karen explained how she prepares for the picture to be taken:

I DID choose my outfit […]. I had my running shoes on, and my outfit was chosen because I knew I was going to take a picture for Instagram with my sister.
In this way, the online world shapes offline practices. This means that the participants deliberately and consciously posted on Instagram with the intention of creating an online persona that both adheres to social norms and the informal rules and regulations of Instagram outlined in this study.

Additionally, the “freedom to choose” (Jackie) a picture to post also comes with a freedom to choose which story you would like to tell, meaning that you can curate various ‘truths’. In describing how she selected a picture to showcase her experience surfing, Annie shared a picture where she is walking towards the ocean on a bright sunny day whilst carrying a surfboard on her head. Annie is photographed from behind and is wearing a wet suit that is zipped up halfway, so that only her legs are covered. She is wearing a bikini as her top so the rest of her back exposed. Annie shared:

> I thought this one was the most cool because I look, I felt like I looked the best in it, my hair’s down, you can see the background nicely in it, and I’m carrying the board, and in some of the other ones where I’m actually surfing… I looked kind of weird cause like your hairs all slicked back and in a full wet suit, so you don’t look as cool when you’re actually surfing, and I wasn’t that good, so I didn’t even look that cool when I was actually surfing. So, this one looked the best because I just looked more like I knew what I was doing.

Annie admitted that this picture creates the illusion that she is a more skilled surfer than she is because “she look[s] like [she] know[s] what [she is] doing and […] look[s] cool”. However, Annie explained that there were multiple pictures of her taken where she was actually surfing, but she decided not to post them because she “didn’t even look that cool when [she] was actually surfing”. Annie described the picture of her surfing:

> If you saw the picture of me standing awkwardly on the board in the smallest waves you could ever see… [the effect] would be a little different

Here, Annie explained that she chose a picture that gives off the illusion that she is a better surfer than she actually is. In this way, we can also use pictures to curate a particular set of experiences,
in stylizing a particular lifestyle. Since the content and method that the participants in this study describe mirrors that of a professional photoshoot, the notion that images are not consumed or produced in isolation from structural influence is emphasized. This highlights the notion that images are not only taken by cameras, but that they exist in experiences and those experiences might not be accurately reflected in images. Therefore, Instagram users are situated within networks of assemblages that influence how they understand and experience their embodied health and fitness.

To that end, this finding reinforces the notion that health and fitness and experiences that create or deny health and fitness should be understood as an assemblage that is inclusive of relations between, but not limited to, the self, technology (i.e. Instagram), experience, environment, and social location of the user (Duff, 2014). Hence, this research aligns with the contentions of Jackson (2016) who suggested that embodied self-understandings of media representations are “multi-layered and irreducible to linear ‘media effects’” (p.1). This means that investigations which do not consider unique lived experiences, for example research that solely uses psychological frameworks and quantitative analysis, only sees ‘one side of the picture’. This means that when researching media, we need to consider the multi-layered and complex processes of navigating media climates.

In addition, this also suggests that there are limits for some users, like access to certain locations (for example, being able to visit the coast, versus being landlocked in a city), quality of equipment, time, and skillfulness with photography. All of these aspects relate back to how much cultural and economic capital a particular Instagram user has available. In this way, cultural, economic, and social capital converge with the ability to accumulate body capital. This is particularly important because certain people have greater or lesser ability to invest in their body
capital, for example, being able to afford the economic cost of a gym membership. This means that body capital is intricately connected to factors including but not limited to economic, cultural, religion, and so on. Hence, the online and offline worlds form a symbiotic relationship that influences the individual’s ability to garner body capital. By condemning the editing process, whereby changing the shape and size of your body is criticized, body size and shape then become ‘permanent’ and un-changeable via technology.

Moreover, considering that capital can be accumulated, translated and reinvested between ‘fields’ (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992), the amount of body capital that an individual has in other ‘fields’ influences the amount of body capital that they can invest on Instagram and vice-versa. Hence, how a user is situated in body related status hierarchies will influence their ability to garner body capital. To change your place in this social ladder you must change the shape and size of your body, but you must not “fake” (Harriet) it, you must “work for it” (Karen). Not only does this situate different users in different social locations, it also places ceilings on the amount of body capital certain body types can acquire. Regardless, the body capital that you acquire online, must also match the body capital that you have in real life. By choosing to edit a picture, a user is misleading the public on the amount of body capital that they have, it is this action that is condemned and can result in a net loss of capital. This means that each user is situated in a certain social location on Instagram based on their body shape and size. In this way, body shape and size become a digital corporeal marker of social status.

Even though, the participants justified the use of a filter because its application does not change body shape and size (i.e. the initial distribution of capital), it does still change the body’s appearance. Instead of policing bodies, the users are policing the boundaries between the ‘real’ and the ‘virtual’, even though ‘real’ bodies are also edited. In this way, the participants are
building a boundary between ‘real’ and ‘virtual’ that may not exist, since these online bodies are already thoroughly technologized. This suggests that the boundary between real and virtual is irreparably porous. Choosing to use a filter on a photo becomes an activity available for equal access regardless of social location, but at the same time it will not help you move beyond a certain social location. This is because social location is contingent upon body shape and size.

In this way, filtering a photo becomes analogous with traditional bodywork practices like the application of make-up. In fact, often participants described using filters if they “need a blemish removed” (Jackie) or to “make their acne look less bad” (Patty). Hence, Instagram is a site of competition to garner the most ‘authentic’ capital, but it is also a site of exclusion whereby the amount of capital you can gain is limited by the amount of body capital you have in other settings. In this way, individual bodies present very real limits on what can be represented online, which suggests that one’s body capital offline positions them with differential power online to articulate the rules and regulations of Instagram. This insights that some users might feel a need to, or have a greater desire to, edit or curate their pictures based on their perceived amount of body capital. Hence, even though Instagram is its own separate and distinct field, it is heavily networked to the user’s experiences both on the app and in everyday life.

In conclusion, for the participants in this study, editing the body through technology is a social faux-pas because it removes any semblance of authenticity, however Instagram images are anything but genuine, authentic, or spontaneous, in fact they are highly stylized productions. This is significant because participants explain that showcasing a lifestyle that matches idealized expectations of health and fitness is an integral component of accruing body capital.
**Rule 4: Blue chip investments: show that you live a health and active lifestyle.**

The participants in this study explained that it is important to post a series of pictures that showcase a healthy active lifestyle. Thirty-eight out of forty-seven pictures that were shared with this project were taken in physical activity settings, such as hiking, mountain biking, road biking, cliff jumping, running, weightlifting, yoga, triathlon and so on (see Appendix J). Therefore, accumulating body capital is not only intricately linked with the conforming to visuals of ‘health and fitness’, but also with showcasing a healthy active lifestyle. When explaining why she posted a video of her yoga routine, Jackie explained that it “shows that this is my routine and I am regularly like this and that also shows health”. Hence, these users post about engaging in physical activity as a means to construct themselves as ‘healthy and fit’ because it facilitates the acquisition of a socially acceptable body and the body capital associated with such a body. This aligns with the research of Rich et al., (2011) whereby they found that health and fitness are conceptualized as both visual and embodied practices. Therefore, health and fitness are no longer only things that you just have or can see but are activities that you must actively engage in and share, prove, and or demonstrate on Instagram. In this way, health, fitness, and Instagram use are networked in an assemblage.

In a similar fashion to the first rule, where certain parts of the body hold more capital than others, certain activities also accrue more capital than others. Activities that best represent living a healthy-active lifestyle facilitate the largest opportunities for the accumulation of body capital. The participants in this study critiqued women who post photographs that showcase them in objectifying ways at the gym as “it appears as though they are doing these things to share their body online” (Sarah). In line with the second rule, even though this expression of body capital is
masked by the gym setting, the participants considered this an overt expression of vanity, and therefore condemned such Instagram practices. Sarah explained that:

There’s a certain type of person and image […] it is not just someone inside lifting weight, but on Instagram and social media the #fitspo and Instagram accounts where it appears as though they are doing these things to share their body online, and they aren’t necessarily going to the gym…like I think about it like this, I go to the gym and do an exercise so that I can do the activities that I like to do, like skiing, biking and everything else. Whereas I feel sometimes people at the gym who are taking pictures in the mirror are sometimes doing it more to get the physical benefits. They want a bigger butt, so that doesn’t resonate with me as much. Rather than exercising so that you can do activities that you enjoy doing, not so much for the physical benefits of exercising. […] What […] resonates with me is the outside doing something in nature, running or something like that.

In this quote, Sarah explained that this condemned practice involves more than just taking pictures at the gym. Rather, it also involves a way of being in the gym, a particular performance geared towards the achievement of vanity related goals, instead of ones that are performance based. Some of the participants explained that accounts under the #fitspo hashtag and fitness models (like ones sponsored by Gymshark) tend to be the most ‘problematic’.

Harriet: I don’t follow any fitness models or people who kind of like preach fitness, I used to follow a few, and it made me angry. So, I just follow accounts that post circuit videos, like that chick [@garagefitnessgirl]. No like fitness-inspo [#fitspo] chicks, like Gymshark stuff, like seeing things like that would make me ‘eugggh’. […] I don’t like that style of working out. Also, it’s like they are just super unrealistic […] for me per se. […] I just don’t want to look at that on my Instagram. They do a lot of promotions of their clothing brand […] or pictures of their body and I just don’t want to see that.

Erin: I feel like a lot of the gym shark models [are problematic]. I don’t really see them on my feed, cause of the algorithm, ‘cause I don’t look at them. I think it’s like for example, @nikkiblackketter, obviously she has a really great body, but I feel like just the way that I’ve heard people talk about her, and types of people like her, [some people] think that [body transformation] can happen quickly or like that that is an achievable or a very normal standard, to have a body that looks like that. Like I mean she’s a model in the fitness industry, a lot of them use fat burners, they watch their weight and workout all the time, that’s something I’m aware of but when I speak to some friends like that they have no idea about how much it really takes to be photo ready, for them. I have also heard more unrealistic expectations from friends that are all very aesthetic based, over performance based, like ‘oh I want to have abs,’ and
with the prevalence of these models showing up it makes it seem like everyone looks like that, but in reality no one does.

Hence, some of the participants demonstrated a critical awareness of mediated ideals and explained that they do not value accounts that promote engagements with the gym for aesthetic purposes. It is this particular display of bodies in gyms that makes the gym as an aesthetic site, and thus, a vainglorious space. Since, the participants expressed a disdain for the vainglorious, they avoid sharing Instagram posts in the gym in fear of being labelled as such. Interestingly, all of the participants in this study attend the gym regularly and partake in body work. Instead of sharing their regular fitness routine on Instagram, the participants opt for posting pictures in unique outdoor active settings. To show the work put into the creation of these bodies (i.e. experiences inside of the gym) gives others a glimpse ‘behind the scenes’ of what it takes to produce these bodies and images, it is this that is the taboo. This process is similar to the notion of the ‘miraculously smart student’ who claims that they never study for tests, but somehow always manages to receive an A+. In this way, the participants are doing a great deal of cultural work in producing content for Instagram, but the over-arching rule appears to be that you cannot get caught doing the work.

Of all the Instagram posts shared with this study that showcase physical activity: 30/38 posts showcase outdoor activities; 5/38 are videos of people weightlifting at the gym and; 3/38 are pictures taken at a yoga studio (See Appendix J). This suggests posting pictures where the user is participating in activities that take place in outdoor settings create the most opportunity for the accumulation of body capital. Therefore, it is not just what you look like in the photograph, but what you are doing, how well you are able to do the activity, and where you are that also matter. There seems to be a hierarchy of activities and places and that these hierarchies influence Instagram practices. This distinction between places of activity highlights that the
boundaries between fields are transgressive meaning that the rules and regulations from one field can influence the rules and regulations from another. For example, in terms of fitness achievements climbing to the peak of a mountain is likely a more highly regarded achievement than using the stair climber at the gym, in this way, posting a picture where you have climbed to the peak of a mountain tends to accrue greater body capital than posting a picture of you using the stair climber at the gym.

Interestingly, some participants in this study chose to showcase themselves in a gym environment. Of the 5 posts in gym settings, each post showcased a personal achievement. One participant explains that “I hit a PR [personal record] on squats and it was one of my goals that I set for myself when I was in high school, that I wanted to squat 200lbs before I was 20, and I got it, and posted it and it was awesome!” (Erin). Each post in a gym setting was a video clip that highlighted performance over appearance. When speaking about the video she posted on Instagram Jackie explained that “it shows more dynamically what I can do with my body”. Erin explained that, “people were really supportive [online], everyone was [commenting] ‘congrats’, ‘awesome’, ‘super’, I got no negative comments” (Erin). Therefore, posting gym videos when it showcases a personal achievement appears to be acceptable within certain communities. Interestingly, even though bragging about the achievement of physical activity related goals is vainglorious, it does not detract from the ability to acquire body capital.

Furthermore, sharing pictures of women actively engaged in physical activity challenges harmful gender hierarchies where, historically, mutually exclusive dichotomies frame masculinity through athletic behaviour against femininity as passive behaviour (Messner & Cooky & Hextrum, 2010). In this way, both posting and viewing the dynamic display of the female body on Instagram is transgressive because it disrupts the mind-body dualism that
positions women as passive (body) and men as active (mind) (Bordo, 1993). Even though 
Instagram is an appearance-based platform which reinforces the notion that women are 
constantly under the gaze, this finding suggests that Instagram can act as a space where users can 
disrupt dominant constructions of gender. In this way, Instagram use is also a method of 
negotiating harmful and limiting gendered body norms. Hence, research conclusions that blame 
social media for perpetuating the notion that physical attributes are a woman’s most important 
feature (see Engel–Maddox, 2005) are problematic and require much more nuance as to the 
meanings that women attach to their Instagram practices. Thus, the circumstances by which 
individuals comply, adapt and/or tailor to health, fitness and body related endeavours relies on 
their unique engagements with social media.

What your body looks like and what your body can do are both important factors in 
accumulating body capital. Some participants explained that they prioritize showcasing what 
their body can do, over what their body looks like if they feel as though their body falls outside 
of socially accepted norms. This suggests that certain users of Instagram may have different 
tastes regarding the type of content they like to post depending on where they are situated in the 
body capital hierarchy. For instance, Jackie explained that:

It’s tied too where I am from, just because my body type is not the same as the 
people I see every day at school or the people I hang out with. I come from a middle 
eastern background and we tend to put on weight easily and our body types are never 
usually the small and slim […]. I’m quite tall I’m 5’11 and on top of that I have quite 
a big build so it took me some time to get used to it and know that this is my build 
and it doesn’t mean that I am fat or huge it is just who I am and that’s where my 
fitness comes in. So, despite me looking different than western ordinary, I am still 
able to show that I have fitness and health and that I can run 5k’s and stuff like that.

Hence, participating in physical activity helps garner body capital regardless of body shape and 
size. This showcases yet another example of how the distribution of body capital related 
resources influences the type of content posted on Instagram. This highlights that our
experiences with creating content for Instagram posts and health and fitness are networked together in an assemblage of relations that redefines how we think about body capital (e.g. body size and shape, ethno-cultural identity, genetics). If the body does not fit the “healthy and fit” appearance, users can invest in body capital by showcasing what their body can do, intimating that despite the appearance of their body, they also participate in healthy activities. In this way, the participants navigated the informal rules in relation to their own bodies, experiences, identities and understandings of health and fitness. Most research on Instagram suggests a link between the accumulation of likes and comments with processes of social distinction, however, this research suggests that the association is much more complex.

**Validations from ‘likes’ and comments.**

In contrast to Levina and Arraga (2014), who suggest a correlation between social status and the number of ‘likes’ and ‘comments’ that a picture produces, I found that, ‘likes’ and ‘comments’ provide positive validation, but do not always indicate an increase in body capital.

Jackie: Ninety-nine point nine nine percent of the time I would like the picture [anyways], especially if its someone who I like, cause everyone who I follow on Instagram, I want to see their pictures [...]. So regardless of whether they are altered or fake, the point of them posting that picture is that they want to display something and if I like that picture then I will like it which usually I do.

This highlights that the behaviors and reasoning that regulate ‘liking’ and ‘commenting’ on Instagram are complex and multi-layered. In fact, the participants in this study explained that they are “not posting so that [they] can get likes” (Harriet) and “like it better when [they] get more comments from […] friends being like ‘oh cool picture’, rather than a bunch of likes where half of them are random people that [they] don’t really know that well” (Annie). This finding points to the quality of comments and likes (that is, who likes and comments) as being as (or perhaps more) important than the quantity of comments and likes one receives.
Interestingly, in May 2019 Instagram updated its app so that only the owner of the account that posted the photo or video is able to see the total number of likes received. Adam Mosseri, the head of Instagram explained that the recent update will function to make Instagram a less pressurized environment (Leung, 2019). However, this project suggests that the ‘likes’ and comments, though significant, may not be the driving force, or the only force behind social pressures to post on Instagram. It is clear that there is a connection between the desire to accumulate digital body capital and social distinction, and that this relationship is irreducibly complex and cannot be reduced down to the accumulation of ‘likes’ and comments.

**Conclusion.**

The acquisition of body capital on Instagram is reflected in how healthy and fit you are or appear to be. This section highlights that being healthy and fit is more than just ‘looking’ a certain way, but that it also involves participating in physical activity, and being able to navigate through informal rules and regulations. Further, this section suggests that individual factors of difference influence each Instagram user’s distribution of and ability to accumulate body capital. It is these unique distributions that influence power-relations and rules that structure the field of Instagram and position Instagram as a space of conflict and conflict resolution, exclusion and inclusion and empowerment and disempowerment. Young women undergo unique, complex, contradictory and multi-layered decision-making processes when producing media on Instagram. These engagements with media are important to investigate because they can influence how individuals understand, learn and embody certain practices (Hochman & Manovich, 2013). This will be discussed in the section to follow.
RQ2: How Do Instagram Practices Influence Understandings of Health and Fitness?

“You see these pictures every single day, and obviously what you see will influence what you feel and the things you do” (Sarah).

This section builds upon the first section. Section 4.1 explored the complex, contradictory, unique, and multi-layered decision-making processes that the participants undergo when engaging with Instagram. This section reveals how those Instagram practices shape embodied identities and understandings of health and fitness. This chapter is comprised of four subsections. The first section discusses how the participants in this study understand, embody, and use Instagram to reinforce and amplify their understandings of health and fitness. Specifically, I argue that the users follow and post content that aligns with their pre-conceived understandings of health and fitness, which leads me to suggest that Instagram acts as a digital incubator of habitus and taste. The second and third sections expand on the first section, explaining the ways Instagram practices influence how users see and position themselves within their digital communities of health and fitness and hence influence how they situate themselves within their understandings of health and fitness. More specifically, the second section describes how understandings of health and fitness are influenced by producing, sharing, and viewing the users own personal content on Instagram, while the third section describes the relationships between viewing public users’ content and one’s own embodied understandings. The fourth section contains a brief overview key findings and conclusions.

Speaking figuratively… literally: Instagram as an incubator of pre-conceived notions about health and fitness.

The participants in this study engaged with Instagram in two primary ways. First, they tended to ‘follow’ accounts owned by their friends that showcase personal pictures. Second, they ‘followed’ public accounts that tended to post content about “training […] like physio rehab and
performance-based stuff” (Erin), “exercises” (Karen), “bodyweight circuit training” (Karen), and “yoga” (Jackie). This is interesting because much of the literature about young people and social media focuses on the consumption of media from public accounts, yet the participants in this study (a select group of well-educated young women) did not use Instagram only to follow public accounts. This highlights the importance of this study, as it investigated the implications of engaging with private content that users consume and produce, a rarity in social media and embodiment research.

Interestingly, the participants explained that they both follow accounts and post content to their own account that aligns with their pre-conceived thoughts and ideas about health and fitness. In this way, Instagram incubates pre-conceived notions about health and fitness. By this I mean that Instagram is a site where the habitus and tastes of users are both publicly displayed online as well as taken up and embodied in everyday practices. This observation reinforces the theorizations of Turner and LeFevre (2016) who “suggest that social media use may contribute to an ‘echo-chamber’ effect, where users perceive their values and world-views to be more common than they are, due to selectively viewing contributions of other, similarly minded people” (p. 1). Specifically, I argue that this echo-chamber effect serves as an incubator, where the already existing bodily dispositions of the participants are intensified thus leading to a number of assumptions about bodies. Furthermore, I suggest that, central to these dominant assumptions, health and fitness has a ‘look’ or can be seen in body shape and size as well as in everyday practices, such as diet and exercise. It is also assumed that health and fitness are continuous, never-ending endeavours and that achieving the healthy and fit look is an ongoing process. Moreover, health and fitness are not simply appearance-based ideals, but are also associated with feelings, where it feels ‘good’ emotionally and physically to have a healthy and
fit (and fit-looking) body. Finally, I examine those moments of resistance, acknowledging that while most of the participants ascribed to normative ideals of health and fitness, there were moments of critical reflection, where alternatives ideas and practices were articulated.

One dominant assumption in the participants narrative is the notion that health and fitness can be *seen* through body shape and size, as well as witnessed through the type of images that an individual posts on Instagram. This affirms the research findings of Rich and colleagues (2011) who suggest that young women tend to understand health by contrasting good health with fatness. Though able to define the difference between health and fitness, the participants, expressed that a healthy body and fit body look like “the same thing” (Patty), meaning that a healthy body is a fit body and vice-versa. The participants explained that this body is “toned but not overly muscular, they just have a normal level of health. They don’t have too much extra weight on them” (Maude). While Karen, another participant, suggested that:

> You can tell that they workout, defined muscles, lean, they might have healthy food somewhere on their Instagram. You can tell that they take care of themselves as well as working out, in terms of what they eat and consume enough water, it looks like they are healthy you know, they have a certain glow to them

This indicates that a healthy and fit body includes more than the appearance of the body, as it includes performative dimension that plays out through posting particular images—those of healthy foods and an affective dimension—a ‘glow’, which I am reading as an intangible, almost aura-like quality. In this way, the participants not only surveyed their own Instagram practices, but also those of others, reading these posts as an entire assemblage that says something about the health and fitness of the poster.

Additionally, when asked to explain how their own pictures represented health, the participants answers circulated around the appearance of their own bodies. For instance, one participant explained that she “picked [this picture] because [her] arm looks jacked” (Patty), well
another commented “the pictures I have are all ones that my body looks good. And I’m happy with how it is presented” (Harriet). Hence, some of the participants described health in a way that is consistent with dominant constructions of health and gender, where health is assumed to reside in the lean, thin, and toned female body (Gard & Wright, 2005; Murray, 2012; Engeln–Maddox, 2005; Mulgrew et al., 2017). This suggests that some of the participants conflate health with a toned and thin feminine ideal, a notion that is a foundational pillar of healthism (Wright, 2012; Jeppsson, 2015; Stice & Shaw, 1994). Thus, this finding suggests that some of the participants may engage in health and fitness activities not exclusively for the purposes of wellbeing, but also to achieve a certain aesthetic. This finding aligns with Allender and colleagues (2006) contention that young women’s participation in physical activity is motivated around maintaining a slim body shape. On the one hand, it can be empowering, in terms of the acquisition of body capital, to achieve your ideal body shape and size, and to be in control of health and fitness habits. Then again, on the other hand, these posts also contribute to a pressure to participate in physical activity and healthy behaviours for appearance purposes as a means of accruing body capital. This amplifies dominant constructions that position health and fitness as something that can be seen, perpetuating the cultural belief that individuals should not only work towards achieving a thin, toned and supposedly healthy body (Engeln–Maddox, 2005), but also that it is within the means of individuals to do so. In this way, responsibility for the size, shape, appearance, and health of the body is reconstituted as a responsibility of the self-disciplined, self-regulating individual (Crawford, 1980). By speaking about and embodying health and fitness in this way, some of the participants contribute to the perpetuation of potentially precarious assumptions about health and fitness that not only inform their followers of misleading pretenses.
of health, but also feed (as opposed to disrupt) dominant socio-cultural understandings of health, fitness and the body (Evans & Rich, 2005).

Since, Instagram is an app that allows users to generate and share content broadly, as well as view the content of others, it is a site where users can project and amplify their ideas about healthism. These potentially harmful constructions of health and fitness are of particular concern given that the young women involved in this study are all current students of various university level kinesiology programs (five BSc, three MSc and one PhD) (See Appendix C). This is significant because a university degree in kinesiology is a professional credential that designates the holder as a recognized expert in physical activity, exercise, and fitness and their relationships to health. In this way, how the participants in this study understand, take up, and embody ideas about health and fitness has the potential to influence how other people understand, take up, and embody ideas about health and fitness.

Furthermore, the participants in this study not only view health and fitness as visible practices and bodies, but they also view health as something that is always ‘in progress’. Most of the participants suggested that “exercise is medicine” that involves “eating healthy and working out, getting some physical activity” (Jackie) and that in order to have health you need to lead a “healthy active life” (Annie). Each participant spoke about health in a way that placed the individual’s ability to be healthy as a personal obligation, that is a “sense of being” (Patty). Rita explained:

Taking care of yourself, mentally, physically, spiritually, and emotionally that when you’re healthy you’re taking just pride in all aspects of your life. When you’re eating, you’re eating to nourish your body […] if you’re physically active and moving you can be healthy, there’s is so many different aspects of health, that when people embrace it all together that is a healthy individual.
Rita opened her quote by acknowledging health as being something more than just the physical body and embodied practices, she included that health involves spiritual, emotional and mental realms. This acknowledgement is transgressive considering that dominant healthism tends to focus on the physical dimension of health (Gard & Wright, 2005; Murray, 2012; Wright, 2012; Jeppsson, 2015); however, she also resorts to health-as-usual descriptions (i.e. diet and exercise). Therefore, this quote seems to suggest that health and fitness are not the result of complex web of genetic, social, and ecological factors, but instead the outcome of various individual lifestyle choices, particularly about diet and exercise. This understanding places the onus of health and fitness upon the individual, regardless of their living conditions (stress, poverty, genetic predisposition to illness). When prompted the participants acknowledged that there may be other factors that contribute to health and fitness beyond individual control. However, they still expressed and determined the belief that health was ultimately within the control of the individual. For example, one participant explained that there are “genetic components where you can have a disease that you can’t change, but you can work improvements into your lifestyle or ways to minimize your diseases, so [health is] a component of everything” (Maude). In this context, health is no longer something we just have, rather it is a verb, a doing, and thus it is always ‘in construction’. In this way, a healthy and fit body does not just have a certain ‘look’, it is also accompanied with a certain type of performance that involves working on fitness (and by extension health). Hence, adhering to the ‘look’ of health and fitness and participating in these performances are central factors in embodying health and fitness.

Since the accumulation of body capital is linked to one’s ability to conform to idealized body standards (See Section 4.1), understandings of health and fitness are intricately networked to the accumulation of and the value placed on body shape, size, and associated practices (e.g.
eating and exercising). The role of Instagram in this context is as a platform to showcase bodies and bodily practices through posting an ensemble of images that include food, exercise, outdoor spaces, and bodies (and so on). This also suggests that each post must “fit nicely on […] the user’s] feed” (Karen). Karen explained “if I’m about to post another picture I’ll look through [my feed] to make sure the picture is a nice addition to my account. Just to confirm”. Hence, body capital is not only produced through digitally representing this ensemble, but in the user’s ability to maintain this ensemble. In this way, the process of accumulating body capital on Instagram is not only connected to an individual’s appearance or health and fitness habits, it is connected to how they choose to represent themselves. This is key because the participants are neither solely reading or depicting real bodies and practices, but rather are actively involved in representing bodies through curating images and practices that construct a particular lifestyle. This means that, for the participants, the bodies seen and shared on Instagram by users are curated to fit a certain aesthetic. This is an important point to make because the participants are exercising a great deal of control over the type of content that they show the world, as well as how they read the content from other people. Thus, participants are seeing bodies as they would like to see them, as well as producing their own bodies as they would like them to be seen. Although Instagram users have control over the content that they share on Instagram, they limited control over how that content is seen and interpreted by others.

So far I have argued that Instagram use, as described by some participants, does not function to challenge dominant constructions about health and fitness, rather it serves as a site where dominant constructions are reinforced, incubated, and amplified. In spite of this, the participants expressed moments of resistance to dominant constructions of health and fitness. It is important to note that these moments of resistance were not expressed in their behaviour on
Instagram, but rather in discussions of their understandings of and practices related to health and fitness beyond the app. These discussions are relevant as the participants offline practices tend to frame their online practices.

Although often the participants ideas about health and fitness were driven through appearance some participants explained that being healthy is more than just attaining a physical body. Rather, it is also a physical and emotional “feeling” that comes with being fit, as Annie described:

I’d say health is like eating well and exercising to exercise not just I want to get bulky or big muscles. It’s like I want to exercise so I can feel good about myself and feel good in my own body.

Sarah similarly described:

I train to be healthy because it makes me feel good inside, mentally physically, so I do it for my own well-being not because I want to look a certain way. But because it makes me feel good, I’m more productive I’m happier and all those things that we know exercise brings us.

Hence, health and fitness also center around feeling ‘good’ in your body. However, Sarah also explained that she feels the best in her body when she does not “have an insecurity about [her] looks [and doesn’t] feel like [she] needs anything to be bigger or smaller”. Sarah continued, explaining that she does not feel good in her body when she wants “to change things” like “lose weight” or want her “stomach to be flatter”. Hence, Sarah lives within a competing storyline, whereby she feels the best when her body conforms to the idealized standard, yet she expressed a disdain for performing exercise with the intention to change her body. Hence, when Sarah is satisfied with her body, she takes up the subject position that exercise for the purpose of changing your appearance may not be the healthiest activity, and yet she explains that she uses physical activity to help her maintain her body size and shape. This highlights that people live within complex and highly nuanced story lines that often are contradictory. Furthermore, this
finding also reveals that both pleasure and pain, empowerment and constraint, satisfaction and discontent can exist simultaneously as people try to attain normative bodily ideals.

In this context, health and fitness has multiple meanings that are navigated differently depending on how the participant feels being in their body. It seems as though feeling good in your body is accompanied with a confidence to post your body on Instagram, and hence garner body capital. In this way, one’s affective state not only influences their perceived body capital but is also networked to their ability to garner body capital. Harriet explained that she is aware of what a healthy and fit lifestyle consists of but explains that she has had “struggles with [her appearance], where …[she] want[s] to be very fit², and … put[s] so much pressure on [herself]”.

Harriet: Um, I think from kinesiology, especially [McMaster University] kinesiology we learn about so much holistic health, not in some voo-doo whoo-doo way, but more in the holistic healthy doesn’t mean exercising until the break of dawn or eating super-duper healthy. It’s realistic, so it talks about moderation and how you can improve your health, workout 3 times a week, like no you don’t have to work out 6 [times a week]. It’s just like go for a walk 3x a week. So how does that impact how I look at my body, it has provided me with a healthier aspect in the sense that it is all about moderation and that you do not have to be super-duper fit. It’s more like I try to exercise to provide myself with some mental energy and what not… Like I think I might be harder on myself, but I don’t think that is because of school, I think it’s just who I am.

In this excerpt, Harriet linked exercising in moderation to a ‘normal’ level of health, which she defines as holistic health. Harriet also explained that exercising ‘in-excess’, “6 times a week” may have a negative influence on how she sees her own body. Hence, Harriet is ambivalently situated between competing constructions (the struggle to be very fit as well as exercise in moderation), which highlights that there are tensions between achieving ‘holistic health’ and meeting dominant feminine norms of health and fitness. Harriet also denies that these

² In this context, Harriet is conflating fitness and appearance.
constructions have influenced her as she proclaimed that, “it’s just who I am”. Although, Harriet believes in individual self-determination, this research is presenting a conflicting notion whereby the participants in this study feel pressures to conform to dominant feminine norms of health and fitness (see Rule 1).

This competing storyline perhaps exists because of tensions between what the participants in this study are taught and what they do. We learn about health and fitness through multiple sites of formal and informal education, including schooling, media, the internet, friendship, family, and so on, and how we negotiate these ‘lessons’ influences the formation of identity. In the context of this study, how the participants navigate complex terrains of competing health and fitness discourses influences understandings and habits relating to health and fitness which influence the formation of identity. For example, Patty explained that her education in

“kinesiology [did not] really affect [the way she thinks about her body]” and that she “would feel the same way if [she] had done business or chemistry… [and that] … what [she] knows about [her] body has been from dance”. Patty explained that when competing in dance:

You are looking at yourself in the mirror for like 4 hours a day and like when you wear costumes on stage, you’re essentially in a bra top and leggings. So, like you have to look good to go on stage.

Hence, the participants understandings of health involve two different realms - what they know and what they do. In this way, the participants in this study struggle to bridge the divide between concept and practice. This finding highlights the importance of understanding the relationships between experiences, education (both formal and informal), and media images (as well as the embodiment of these images) as a network of relations that create complex and often contradictory understandings of health and fitness. This suggests that university level kinesiology programs compete with many contradictory messages. Many of these messages exist in media,
which tends to target young women as consumers, that expresses ideas of health and fitness at an affective and embodied levels (i.e., feminine and attractive girls are thin and toned girls, happiness is being thin and toned and so on). These bodily ideals have a firm affective hold upon us that influences our embodied desires and feelings. Therefore, kinesiology education should teach, not only about conceptual (i.e., rational ideals of health) and practical aspects (i.e., how we take up rational health messages) of health and fitness, but also the affective dimensions of health and fitness (i.e., how we feel about health and fitness messaging and how these messages make us feel about our bodies). In short, kinesiology curricula must consider how all three of these factors are networked together in an assemblage of relations.

Interestingly, seven out of the nine participants in this study explained that their bodies fit within ‘normal’ standards of appearance and identified themselves as “someone who looks strong and is healthy but also looks normal” (Erin). One of two participants who did not identify themselves as fitting in this ‘normal’ range, Rita, identified herself as “larger than the typical female athlete you might see or individual at the gym”. Interestingly, Rita’s opinions about health and fitness are different from the participants who identified their bodies as fitting within norms, she explained that “there is way more to health than what people just see”. In the quote below, Rita described her challenges in living within a world where health and fitness are predominantly seen through the shape and size of her body:

I guess growing up as I, I know I said earlier in the interview, I consider myself to be a larger female athlete, and while I’m not by any means a plus sized athlete, I’m by no means a petite scrawny athlete and I think for a while that was really hard to figure out what fitness meant to me. And if it was always going to be the girl who weighed 115lbs… I think I was like BORN at 115lbs [laughs]…There’s no amount of exercise cardio and still being able to love my life that would get me to being 115lbs, if that was what being a fit female meant. Over time trying to find the sport to compete in that matched with me. It was like ‘hey my build is power’. It’s not trying to be the fat girl, or the heavy girl, instead it was I’m the powerful girl and my sports need power, that’s what I’m suited for. So, I needed to find people and identify
people who had that same mindset, of I don’t want to constantly be told because I’m this weight I’m not fit. I heard that all the time in high school in gym class when our teacher would be like “okay we are going for a run, you can do a 3km, 5km or 8km” and I would do the 8km and beat girls who did the 5km, they would be like “you can run” and I’d be like “yeah I’m 170lbs and I can run faster than you”. It was the yes, I can run, I might move slower than other people, but I can complete it. And they didn’t even realize I could. So, when they were questioning if I could do it, I always thought like “why did you think I couldn’t?” People were just looking at my size and seeing “you can’t do this”. So, I was constantly trying to reassure myself and find confidence in the fact that [health and fitness] doesn’t have anything to do with how you look […]. You just have to be healthy and fit regardless of how you look.

Rita also explained that she does not “follow many fitness accounts” and instead follows accounts that are “are more about body positivity”. She suggested that this means that she experiences Instagram differently from the other participants. In this way, one’s habitus and tastes in everyday life will influence how an individual engages with Instagram. The accounts that Rita follows are related to different discourses and experiences, like, ‘fit at any size,’ body positivity and power sports. Following these accounts enables Rita to push back against the notion that femininity equals a narrow bodily ideal. In this way, Rita uses Instagram to reassure her position in and thoughts about health and fitness, hence, she uses Instagram to create an online habitus to help reinforce her offline habitus. In other words, Rita is using different means to accrue body capital. This highlights the notion users have different strategies for acquiring and definitions of body capital, where some users invest in normative constructions of the feminine body, while others invest alternative avenues, such as power sports. Since, the users have the ability to choose what type of content they would like to follow, Instagram acts as a digital incubator of habitus. This means that although Instagram is known as an appearance-based platform that is densely populated with appearance focused images that conform to and maintain societal beauty ideals (Fardouly et al., 2017), it can be used, as in Rita’s case, as a platform to disrupt those very ideals. In the next section, I discuss how the participants understandings of
health and fitness influences how the participants see themselves, which influences the type of content they choose to share on their private Instagram accounts.

**There is more to it than meets the eye: The complexities of seeing ourselves on Instagram.**

Previous literature tends to see Instagram pre-dominantly as a visual appearance-based platform (Ignatow & Robinson, 2017); however, I suggest that seeing yourself on Instagram is far more than just visual. Although seeing ourselves involves looking at pictures, the participants in this study explain that it also involves memories, physical feelings, mindsets, comparisons, judgments, and so on. This theme is particularly interesting as these Instagram practices actually influence the participants day-to-day habits relating to health and fitness. This section will be divided into two sections. First, I discuss the notion that personal Instagram accounts act as an archive for memories, which means that users are constantly seeing themselves. The second section discusses how Instagram accounts facilitate processes of self-surveillance and social comparison and how these processes are neither inherently good nor bad. Before concluding this section, I explain how these Instagram practices function to influence users’ day-to-day habits.

**Instagram as a digital scrapbook.**

The participants in this study claim that having an Instagram account is “just like having a scrap book” (Jackie). This means that participants post content on Instagram as a method to help them catalog and retain memories, experiences, and life events. As Jackie shared:

> I feel like everyone kind of knows what they have on their Instagram, these are memories that are so easily retrievable because you have posted it and you have gotten a response.

The participants explained that they remember moments and pictures “because they posted them on Instagram” (Karen). In this sense, Instagram is a digitally ‘permanent’ place for users to
showcase their best self (i.e. most attractive and exciting experiences), most often through images that feature their bodies. As a result, participants can see themselves, particularly their body and the associated evolution of body capital over time. From this perspective, Instagram is more than just an appearance-based platform (Ignatow & Robinson, 2017), it is also scrapbook that archives a timeline of appearances. To that end, the participants explained that the experience of constantly seeing themselves can be motivational and inspiring, but can also lead to self-surveillance and negative feelings about their body. Hence, engagements with Instagram can be empowering, and in other moments disempowering. In the writing to follow I will expand upon this complex and contradictory relationship.

Most of the participants explained that seeing themselves at their best can be an empowering experience as their posts act as reminders of how users like to see themselves. In this way, Instagram posts are catalogued representations and memories of the user’s health and fitness accomplishments. In describing Instagram as a form of scrapbooking, the participants suggested that Instagram operates as a memory enhancer that influences how they remember, reflect upon and feel about their bodies. In turn, this influences how the participants presently live in their own bodies. Erin explained:

So for me it’s just like when I feel sub-optimal, having a reminder of the times I felt really good with my friends or when I’m lifting [weights], it’s just it’s a reminder that I can still be there, and I can get there[...] Its nice ‘cause then your future self can also appreciate this[...] So, the things make you proud when you post them you can easily think back to it and it makes it easier to be in that moment and identify yourself with that because you are reminded of it by your post...like I guess having muscles and being strong and stuff is something that I know I couldn’t have done without hard work. So I was really not fit when I was a kid and seeing my body look strong and be strong now, kind of surprises me every day and I am so proud because I know that I have put in however many years of work and time in at the gym. It’s just a physical manifestation of all the stuff that I have done.

Moreover, Jackie shared a similar experience:
Well, I mean looking at the picture first of all makes me want to go outside and run again, just because I see that picture and I remember everything about it. Like hearing the water under us, or seeing people going on walks, feeling the warm weather, so I want to go out and run again. Seeing that picture of me at a good level of health makes me want to go back to that because that level of health will likely mean that I will go back to that level of happiness that I had when I took that picture.

These quotes provide a rich description of how pictures can extend into the affective realm. For example, Jackie explained that this image conjures memories of certain sounds, sights, and feelings that make her feel healthier and happier. In this sense, Instagram posts are self-fulfilling, whereby pictures act as positive feedback between beliefs and behaviors. Hence, Instagram posts consolidate the posters ability to be healthy, fit and strong. In this way, Instagram facilitates the user’s ability to embody powerful positive feelings from their past experiences. Consequently, being able to see themselves as healthy, even amidst a social pressure to conform to body ideals, can lead to feelings of being healthy and fit. Although there is considerable literature that points to the disempowering aspects to conforming to body ideals, the participants in this study identified with the positive outcomes, such as improved fitness, strength, and confidence. Thus, as the participants suggested in the excerpts above, there are pleasurable and empowering dimensions to working towards and embodying healthy active lifestyles. This finding highlights that power does not operate solely as oppression or prohibition but also in a positive sense, inciting particular desires and pleasures that may elicit feelings of strength and well-being. This aligns with the theorizations of Fiske (2010) who suggests that empowerment and disempowerment exist simultaneously. This means that at times the content of social media posts may reproduce dominant ideals, but the meaning of the posts may challenge the very same ideal. This finding aligns with the contentions of Retallack et al.’s (2016) study who suggest that social media can be used by the same person to both resist and celebrate hegemonic norms.
In addition, Erin explained that seeing her body “look strong and be strong” acts as a “physical manifestation of many years of work and time at the gym”. This means that seeing our bodies extends beyond just the visual sense, it is a process that evokes memories, experiences, and feelings about our bodies, and our experiences with our bodies. In this way, the meanings of pictures extend far beyond what is photographed. Hence, sharing posts on Instagram can have polysemic and rich semiotic meanings that influence how users understand their own health and fitness. This highlights the importance of recognizing that pictures not only speak a thousand words, but also conjure memories, sounds, smells, sights and feelings. In this regard, Instagram posts unfold into a rich, more than words, panorama. Therefore, to leave this analysis at the level of what is represented in the picture runs the risk of only revealing a fraction of the meaning behind a given picture.

Moreover, most of the participants also spoke about how pictures on Instagram can create negative feelings about one’s body and self. The participants explained that constantly seeing pictures of themselves on Instagram causes them to compare their current selves constantly to their former selves as seen on Instagram. Harriet explained that “pictures [on Instagram] are super powerful” because they allow “[me to] compare [myself] to what [I] once [was]”, which can lead to negative feelings.

Harriet: I think seeing pictures that are better, like, they aren’t positive because they lead to negative thoughts. But you like those pictures better. Personally, it can lead to negative thoughts about what you are feeling versus how you see yourself now. It’s kind of like ‘oh man how am I not like that now’.

Harriet further explained that when she experiences these negative feelings, she navigates around her thoughts by situating herself within her own life world.

So, for me it is hard because I’m always looking back at what I was and it’s not realistic with what I want to do, and my social [life] and wanting to be a physician. I need to be happy with just being fit, but not as fit as I once was because that only
matters to me, not to others. So, I think goal wise I want to have realistic fitness, stay in shape and enjoy being fit.

Harriet navigates feelings of body dissatisfaction by situating herself in her own life world. She does this by striving to achieve “realistic fitness” for her current lifestyle instead of the idealized content of her former self. This suggests that individuals face competing expectations (e.g. between the idealized feminine body and career aspirations) and come to understand health and fitness within their own life worlds. For example, in the quote above Harriet explained that she has to spread her time out into various social, educational, career and health and fitness practices, whereas Harriet explained that previously she was able to:

Integrate those […] aspects, especially being in the [kinesiology] program that I am in, […]allowed me to balance the idea of being at school, but I have a gym right beside me, and my friends are all in the program and they are all really into going into the gym and such. So, you kind-of kill two birds with one stone.

Harriet explains that she still posts content on Instagram, exercises and has a desire to improve her physique, but also explains that her time is also allocated toward different goals, like becoming a physician, or spending time with her friends. Harriet has decided to allocate resources differently; time is a resource that has to be shared over more than just fitness. Hence, the ability to be healthy and fit and or look healthy and fit changes as well as the value placed on body capital depending on goals, desires, and life circumstance.

Moreover, the participants explained that what they see when looking at their Instagram posts depends on their “mindset” (Karen). This suggests that even though Instagram posts are showing the same image, how the image is perceived changes depending upon a myriad of factors including time, context, ‘mindset’, and physical activity level. Erin, Harriet, and Karen explained:
Erin: There are stretches where I take four […] to two weeks off the gym, then I start to get more self-conscious of how I look, but when I’m in the gym consistently I find that those all go away basically.

Harriet: I think it’s more you usually do look the same, so I think it’s more of a mental point here, like sometimes you are just happier and that makes you feel better. […] And I think when you are with your friends and hanging out, you’re not focused on what you look like, you’re just having fun, whereas when you’re down and negative perhaps because you are hanging out by yourself perhaps because you don’t have that social [connection], so I think there’s a lot of mental and social factors that go into feeling good about your body, not just the physical parts.

Karen: Most of the time I look back on [those] pictures and like the way I look, it’s just in the moment when you’re like, ‘oh my gosh… why?’ But you look back and it’s good memories to have and you end up being less picky. I think like a year down the road, when you look back and check out your pictures, you think you actually do look good there even though at the time I thought I didn’t.

These quotes highlight that Instagram use is a complex entanglement of offline and online worlds, it’s never one or the other, but an assemblage of factors. This means that pictures are never just pictures, they are networked to our affective sense, as they convey feelings and emotions and are loaded with history. In this way, seeing (and by extension how the participants understand their own health and fitness) is a fluid entity that changes over time and in relation to feelings, experiences, and contexts. Hence, Instagram users see themselves differently depending on their own feelings, habits, experiences, and identities which all differ across context and time. This research aligns with the findings of Duff (2014) and Coffey (2016) who suggest that embodied understandings of health should be conceptualized as encounters between bodies and practices that are produced through a range of networks and relations (Coffey, 2016) including interactions with social media and by extension, technology.

These findings are significant because they highlight the importance of considering affective experiences, where previous literature does not. Previous literature largely
describes Instagram as a separate and constrained world, excluding the widespread notion that the online can insight negative feelings, however, this project surfaces the importance of interaction between the picture and individual. This means that how individuals feel (happy or fit) in certain moments shape how they then interact with Instagram. In this way, Instagram use is influenced by an incredibly complex entanglement of online and offline worlds that cannot be discounted or simplified. The next section will discuss the influences of sharing private content on Instagram, suggesting that unlike a scrapbook Instagram is constantly under surveillance by both others and the self.

**The effects of sharing our digital scrapbooks.**

Although Instagram is like a digital scrapbook in many ways, it is also very different. Unlike a scrapbook, Instagram posts are always available to be presented to an audience, of the account holders choosing, without the account holder actually being present in the showcasing. If you choose to show someone a scrapbook you can also choose who you show it to and when you show it to them. However, when you allow someone access to your Instagram account you may not know who is viewing your account, what they are looking at, and or how often they are viewing your content. In this way Instagram, provides people open opportunities to assess other individual’s bodily representations without the account holder knowing. Since the social pressure to post your ‘best’ pictures on Instagram (See Rule 1) is heightened, participants explained, Instagram can lead to self-surveillance and body checking practices. In the context of this study, ‘best’ refers to posts where users appear to ‘look’ their ‘healthiest’ and ‘fittest’ and hence conform to idealized body standards. The participants in this study explained that they “see these pictures every single day, and obviously what you see will influence what you feel and the things
you do” (Sarah). In this way, the content that is produced for and shared on Instagram influences how users come to see themselves which influences their resultant health and fitness behaviours.

The participants explained that viewing their own pictures on Instagram where their body does not appear to look the ‘best’ can cause negative thought patterns that interrupt their everyday thoughts and influence their health and fitness behaviours. On this point, Rita shared:

If I feel I look fat in a photo, so if someone asks me to go for ice cream and I say no, it’s like I’ll think why didn’t I say yes to ice cream? Is it because I’m training for something, or am I saying no to that because I looked fat in the photo, or am I now not eating for the rest of the day because I looked fat in the photo.

Similarly, Karen explained:

Sometimes my sister will take a funny picture of me and like I’ll feel like I will have fat here, even though I don’t, so at a random time in the day I’ll be like “uhm” (checking under her chin), no I don’t I’m okay. Like there’s no fat there.

The participants are fearful of being labelled as ‘fat’. This fear of having any fat at all, even a single and tiny roll under the chin, is linked to fat-stigma, a specific form of healthism whereby fat has become a marker of inferior social status, lack of self-discipline, efficacy and control (Wright, 2012; Jeppsson, 2015; Stice & Shaw, 1994; Bordo, 1993). Therefore, Instagram acts as a cultural space where ideals of healthism are perpetuated and broadcasted to inform and regulate everyday habits of users under misleading pretenses of health. Rita explained that “pictures are more permanent” than seeing yourself in a mirrors or reflections because they tend to make lasting impressions.

Since Instagram posts are understood as permanent and health and fitness are activities that must be constantly engaged with, posting a picture that aligns with the idealized body lets your followers know that you are engaging with health and are thus a morally responsible citizen. Instagram posts are also a display of the user’s health and fitness accomplishments, since the body is a symbolic representation of the self, with body size being a corporeal marker of social...
status (as indicated through body capital). Instagram posts act as a reflection of self-identity, where being able to ‘permanently’ showcase yourself as the ideal image is empowering. Hence, looking healthy online is directly related to feeling healthy offline. Patty explained that if she is “exercising more, [she is] going to feel better, be stronger and look better” which makes her “more likely to post”. This not only suggests that are offline habits influenced by online experiences, but that offline experiences influence online habits. This highlights the importance of considering the transmission of capital between online and offline fields influences understandings of health and fitness.

Although this finding may appear to perpetuate gendered notions that reinforce the experience that women are constantly under a normative gaze and thus must evaluate themselves based on appearance (Dworkin & Wachs, 2009), it also contradicts this notion. None of the participants in this project expressed a desire to change their body for approval, in fact most participants engaged with health and fitness to make themselves “feel good” (Sarah). In this sense, there is power in changing your everyday habits to achieve a certain aesthetic, even though this feeling of ‘good’ exists in response to measuring up to certain normative ideals of femininity, like body shape and size. This finding aligns with the contentions of Fiske (2010) who explains that “resistance to domination can take many forms, only some of which lie in the production of oppositional meanings” whereby “what is to be resisted is necessarily present in the resistance to it” (p. 56; see also Haug 1987; Dworkin & Wachs, 2009). Thus, instead of configuring femininity as a product of the power relations, I am choosing to highlight the embodied agency that women have in the creation of their femininities. However, most participants expressed that they felt better when they meet normative ideals of feminine beauty (i.e. a lean and toned body). In this sense, the control that participants have over the creation of
their own femininities is constrained by an expectation to look a certain way. That is, to the regime of personal obligation to ‘look good’, conform to bodily ideals, and aversion of fat and the deviant (fat) body (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2008). This finding also aligns with the findings of Retallack and colleagues (2016) who explained that, even when their participants resisted pressures to conform to normative ideals of femininity, their compliments to their peers relied on the “notion that their worth lies in body appeal/attractiveness” (Retallack et al., 2016, p. 16). Perhaps it is a common tactic for young women to resist ideals of femininity using the very conditions of their feminine oppression. Therefore, this research further reinforces the notion that engagements with social media can appear to be contradictory but are complex and rich in semiotic meaning.

In section one of chapter four I explained that pictures taken in physical activity settings garner the most body capital and that Instagram use perpetuates and complicates the regulation of healthism in society. This is because the participants viewed health as something to be seen, actively participated in, and shared online. Hence, the participants in this study are encouraged to showcase their thin and toned bodies on Instagram in the name of ‘health’. Thus, individuals are simultaneously pressured and empowered to partake in physical fitness, under moral obligations for health. In this context engaging in ‘healthy’ behaviours and sharing ‘health’ on Instagram can influence cultural understandings of and habits relating to health, fitness, the body and eating (Evans & Rich, 2005).

As a result of this desire to acquire high social status through accruing body capital, some participants in this study valued seeing health and fitness over actually having health and fitness. In what follows, I compare and contrast two different pictures that were shown to me in an interview with Patty. The first picture is an action shot of Patty water skiing in a large wake
behind a speed boat. Patty explained that she picked this picture “because water skiing is really hard and tiring and you have to be really strong to do it and because I am crushing it in this picture”. I followed up with Patty by asking if she has ever experienced feelings of strength when looking back on this picture, to which she responded, “umm no … I just remember water skiing”. Thus, Patty explained that she does not feel strong from viewing this picture, even though in was a time that she felt strong and skilled.

Interestingly, Patty also showed a black and white picture of her dancing at a competition. This picture was a close-up action shot that displayed her lean, toned and muscular back. Patty explained that she chose this picture because:

My back looks jacked! … I was working out pretty hard at this point this was probably when I was on my way to being my fittest. It’s also a pretty cool picture, I had no idea it was being taken. It was at my showcase for my dance team in my last year, and there’s always pictures being taken while you’re there. But I didn’t know where the photographer was standing, when I was scrolling through the pictures after I was like NICE.

This interaction, whereby Patty explained that a picture of her toned back incited feelings of empowerment, whereas a picture of her waterskiing did not, led me to probe further, which led to the following exchange:

Researcher (R): So how did it make you feel when you saw that picture?
Patty: I felt really good, I saw the picture and was like I’m going to post this on Instagram.
R: Very cool. So, does this picture ever make you feel confident or strong when you look back at it?
Patty: Yeah, both.
R: Why do you think this picture would make you feel something whereas the other didn’t?
Patty: Um, I think because this one you can like I said the other [one] was a representation of strength and in this one you actually see how strong I was.

Although the young women suggested elsewhere that the skilled body was of great importance, from Patty’s story it is apparent that the look or aesthetic of the body remains paramount. Hence,
seeing strength on Instagram is held in higher regard than showing strength because being able to see ‘health’ creates a domino effect. This means that, for most of the participants, seeing health is directly correlated with having a thin and toned body, which leads to the acquisition of greater body capital, which leads the branding of the user as a morally responsible citizen and ultimately lead to an increase in social status (Loy, Andrews, & Rinehart, 1993; White, Young & Gillett, 1995). Although there are numerous positives of performing body work for the purpose of posting on Instagram, there are also negative outcomes that create harmful tensions for certain bodies.

The direct relationship between feeling healthier when your body fits a certain aesthetic amplifies the harmful notion that health and fitness can be seen through body shape and size. Therefore, Instagram is a space of exclusion for certain bodies, where individuals with certain bodies that do not conform to this aesthetic ideal, may limit the content that they post on Instagram or exclude themselves altogether. Patty described her current body as being “chunky but funky,” and explained that, now, she takes pictures for Instagram differently:

Um, I wear baggier clothes, I don’t really post a lot, now that I am looking my last picture is pretty much just my face AND the one before that I am wearing a huge Christmas sweater. So, I guess I don’t post a ton, but I also don’t post a ton anyway. I feel sort of more self-conscious.

Most of the participants choose not to engage with Instagram, or at least to selectively engage, when their bodies do not conform to ideals. Rita shared that at times she does not want to be photographed for fear that her image in the picture may not reflect how she sees or feels about herself. Rita has a critical perspective on the relationship between body size, health, and beauty, which was unique to this study. She contended that “the size and weight of a person shouldn’t indicate their health”. Rita explained that when she goes out to events, she tends to “stray away from taking a photo when [she] feels good, just in the event that it can ruin” her experience:
I almost don’t want to take the picture because if it doesn’t match how I’m feeling then that feeling goes away. I’d rather be kept in blissful ignorance. You know the look might not work for me, but in my mind it does and I’m going to roll with it… I don’t want that feeling to go away when it’s something important I don’t want it to ruin my night out with my friends.

Taking pictures for Instagram can become a feared activity for individuals who “don’t look how [they] think [they] did” (Rita). Hence, this finding reinforces the theorizations of Fardouly and colleagues (2017) that suggest that Instagram’s popularity is invested in user’s engagement with body ideals. In this way, Instagram is a place of exclusion for users who do not feel as though their bodies meet the ‘appropriate’ standard. However, by choosing not to post pictures or as many pictures on Instagram when they feel “chunky but funky” users showcase agency in choosing when to post and what they post (i.e. a selfie), thereby deciding how they engage with social media in the production of digital body capital. Hence, the users highlight that although the boundaries of fields are porous, the users are able to ultimately decide when to interact with certain fields in order to preserve their perceptions of themselves.

These findings further solidifies the previous finding which suggests that social pressures to post a lean and toned pictures of the body on Instagram can facilitate and motivate individuals to be fitter, have healthier eating habits, and feel more confident in their bodies which in turn, facilitates the acquisition of body capital. For this reason, Instagram posts and the reactions to posts are intricately connected to how Instagram users’ practice and understand their own embodied health and fitness and how these relate to body capital. To that end, Maude described the power of the body in a manner that is quite similar to body capital:

You can be really smart but if you don’t look the part, sometimes people will turn their head and think less of you, whereas if you’re really attractive people will discount your intelligence. But I do think that between two people of equal intelligence someone that is a little bit more attractive without being extremely attractive will get in the door faster than someone who is average or below average
in different cultures [weight] matters to different amounts, but in North America, weight matters here. […]

This power, Maude continues, can translate back and forth between offline and online worlds:

Your Instagram is part of what people will know. I remember two years ago I went to Spain, I was there for the summer to learn Spanish and you meet people and you see them for the first day, so they follow you on Instagram and before they really had a lot of conversation with you, they will look through your social media and Instagram and they will get an idea of who you are based on what you have posted.

In the quote above Maude explained that there are privileges, both online and offline, that come with having a lean, toned and normatively beautiful body. In this way, body capital is power because it can be used as a resource to manipulate circumstances both online and offline. For example, a beautiful and normative body may increase the likelihood of being hired or owning an Instagram account that adheres to normative idealizations may increase likelihood of making friends. Although the participants spoke about feeling empowered to take control of their health and fitness as a positive outcome of the social pressure to post idealized bodies online, this empowerment is constrained with normative ideals of femininity and healthism, meaning that power is not liberation or freedom, but is always experienced within a particular set of structural constraints.

The participants explained this social pressure to post pictures of their thin and toned body on Instagram motivates them to change their health and fitness patterns leading up to events where they know that pictures will be taken, such as attending a wedding or going on a beach destination vacation. Thus, not only are Instagram users creating moments to be photographed (see Rule 3), they are also creating bodies to be photographed. Jackie explains that she spent the whole “summer leading up to [a] wedding” preparing her body in order to take a good picture for Instagram:
You can’t really go to an event without posting a picture, so I was like I need to look good for this wedding and had a very steady gym routine, and I would go out[side] a lot and generally try my best to be healthy and it all sort of culminated in this picture and it turned out well so I feel like it portrays a lot of my hard work.

Jackie continued to explain that at times she would feel “discouraged” when she did not maintain her healthy lifestyle by “eat[ing] unhealthy things”. However, Jackie explained that being able to take and post a picture where her body resembled idealized norms “makes me feel great, like I did it I reached my goal, and second that despite all the setbacks that happened I still made it”. In the end, Jackie’s investment in health and fitness had a good return since the picture was “well received” (Jackie) by her followers. This suggests that receiving positive feedback online contributes to ‘feeling’ healthy which contributes to one’s overall body capital. However, it is important to note that it is possible for the reverse to be true, where a desired look is not achieved and does not receive positive feedback online. This, in turn, may contribute to the diminishment of body capital and sense of self.

In conclusion, the participants in this study see themselves filtered through self-surveillance, perceptions of others, and social norms as well as through their own habits, tastes, experiences, and mindsets. Thus, this section highlights the importance of recognizing that women exist in different environments and situations which influence how they engage with and are affected by media.

Engaging with Instagram cuts both ways: The influences of consuming public Instagram media.

In the previous section I discussed the influences and implications of creating and seeing personal Instagram content. In this section I discuss the influence of consuming public Instagram media. When the participants in this study described who they follow on Instagram, they exclusively mentioned following women who post fitness and health content (see @steficohen,
@ClaireThomas, @NickBlackadder, @garagefitnessgirl, and @mattierogers). Some of the participants explained that being able to see these women perform physical activity is empowering. This content makes some of the participants feel motivated “because it makes [them] see that it’s not just the guys that can do that stuff” (Jackie). On this point, Karen explained that:

I think through Instagram is a great way [to motivate], there is a lot of female athletes, and fitness people on Instagram who use that platform and they post huge captions saying, ‘hey you can do this work out’. I like the fact that there are kinesiology accounts online, and athletic therapists and physio accounts that work with exercises and rehab and they are showing people what working out actually looks like. It’s not just some edited picture that makes your butt look bigger, its showing people what exercising actually looks like. And I think it’s important to make people aware of their body and let them know what they can do to improve it. So, I do think it is important for people in the health care system to be on Instagram to help promote that.

Hence, the women in this study explained that Instagram allows them to see other women being athletic and participating in physical activity. In this way, Instagram is a medium that brings visibility to the women’s sporting body and physical capabilities. As I argued earlier, users ‘follow’ accounts that align with their tastes, opinions, and ideals, thus the Instagram feed acts as a digital incubator of habitus. This means that Instagram is a space for bodies to be seen as the user would like to see them (particular body types, styles of working out, sports, fashion styles etc.). Therefore, the content that is consumed on Instagram is a unique reflection of each users’ habitus and tastes, which links them into a unique digital community of likeminded people who share their habitus and tastes online. Typically, women’s bodies are represented in mainstream media as posed and passive objects with the focus aimed at aesthetic qualities of body parts. This is contrasted often with men’s bodies being represented as active holistic entity with the focus on seeing physical capability (Mulgrew et al., 2017). Hence, Instagram acts as a medium through which users have the agency to disrupt gendered norms by providing a space for women to
promote and share women’s active ‘normal’ bodies, albeit within the gendered rules and regulations of the field. Erin explained that in the future, she would “love to see more […] promotion in performance and adding capacity to girls and women” because it “would have a really great impact on everything that they see themselves do”. This finding aligns with that of Mulgrew and Tiggemann (2016) who suggest that a focus on how the body feels and what it can do is the key component of promoting positive body image in girls and women. Hence, Instagram facilitates a sense of belonging to the fitness and health community (at least for those who meet certain norms) and can be used as a medium to promote positive body image in girls and women.

In addition, Erin, who identifies herself as of Asian descent, explained that she values Instagram because it allows her to see strong athletes with similar ethnocultural backgrounds, where such diversity is not always represented in dominant media formats.

Seeing them perform you are just amazed at the physical feats that they can do, so I think seeing people that look more similar to myself. There’s a girl who I follow on Instagram, who is Asian, and probably around the same size as me. So, when I watch her videos, I’m just like oh wow that’s so cool! Um and she looks like… you know she is muscular, but she is just a normal muscular person, but whenever I look at her videos its more of an inspirational thing, like wow that’s awesome she is kicking butt.

The ability to follow whomever you wish on Instagram is unique from other dominant forms of media. As a result, Instagram is a space for women to be able to see and relate to women who are similar to themselves. Using Instagram allows the user to create their own community by connecting with individuals who have shared interests, practice similar cultures and religions, have similar body shape and size, and or have the same or similar ethnicity. In the context of this study, the users explained that Instagram creates an intersection for culture, religion, body capital, and health and fitness behaviours. When describing how she found “confidence in the
fact that [health and fitness] doesn’t have anything to do with how you look” (Rita), Rita explained that:

There’s a girl on Instagram her handle is @thesamplan she is a former bikini competitor and has now turned to the health active lifestyle chick. She lifts, does occasional CrossFit and all around fitness, so she made that switch between what was looking fit and being fit and when I see her, I associate my body shape and size to her, and if I can do what she can do I think that I am fit. Cause she looks fit and I look more or less like her. So yeah, I find that reaffirms me, because I can see her doing things and I somewhat look like her so if you’re arguing that I don’t look fit, then all these girls that are in the fitness and health industry aren’t fit as well. And that’s when I get the “keep doing what you’re doing”.

Hence, Rita follows Instagram accounts to which she can relate her health, fitness and body shape and size. Instagram allows users to unite individuals who share similar influential factors of difference (e.g. culture, body shape and size) and create motivational and healthful digital communities. However, in the same sense Instagram may be exclusionary for users who do not see themselves in the bodies represented online. Thus, Instagram can be both a site of inclusion or exclusion depending on how the user engages with the app.

The participants in this study explained that they follow accounts that post “educational” (Harriet) content of “training…, physio, rehab…, performance-based stuff” (Erin), and “workout videos” (Karen). They explained that viewing this content helps them “find new exercises and things to do” in the gym (Maude). Harriet, who was the “fitness instructor of the year” at her local gym, explains that she uses Instagram content for her “own research” and that “it is very helpful” for selecting exercises to teach in her fitness classes. In fact, every participant expressed that they had gained valuable insight from health and fitness content viewed on Instagram, as the following narratives attest.

Maude: It’s a good supplement to my [kinesiology] degree. We do talk about some applicable stuff in Kin[esiology], but here you can watch other people workout, and analyze what’s good about their workout, think if you should change something about their workouts
Karen: I’d say 95% of it is all workout videos. Mainly why I have Instagram right now is because I’m learning so much. So, I follow different physios and I see their treatments and exercises, and I really like the exercises that I see from different Gymshark athletes and models and fitness gurus. […] I follow so many fitness people, it helps motivate me to work out that day, or to make sure I’m getting enough water intake OR if I see physios doing different rehab processes I’ll make sure that I’m mentally aware of my body to make sure that I’m sitting straight, and making sure that my body is ok.

Jackie: The infographic accounts […] will say eat this and not that and it will be a lot of like the same sort of things, like it’s a way to learn what to eat, and there’s a lot of really good recipes. @Tasty, they make things really quickly and it gives me ideas of what to eat, and that way I’m not really limited to like what I find in the fridge.

In this context, Instagram becomes a digital library that distributes health and fitness knowledge through alternative methods (like videos, pictures, and captions), one participant even suggested that it complemented her formal education in kinesiology. The participants explained that viewing this information motivates them to engage in related behaviours and influences their everyday health and fitness habits. Hence, Instagram is a powerful tool that can change health and fitness behaviours and habits.

In addition to feeling empowered by seeing athletic women’s bodies on Instagram, most participants expressed that they have also experienced negative thoughts brought on by social comparisons of themselves to the accounts they follow. The participants in this study explained that viewing Instagram posts of “women [that are] within the 1% of physique or athletics” (Erin) influences how they see themselves, which influences how they situate themselves within their worlds of health and fitness.

Harriet: Aesthetically all around you on Instagram, you see these super fit people and you’re like I work out 4-5 a week and I don’t look like that.

Erin: I think because I’m looking at women who are so high performing, it sometimes makes me feel so inadequate because your like how come I’m not like that or like how do I do that, if I even work like that for 10 years I don’t think I could ever look like that.
In this manner, Instagram facilitates self-surveillance and social comparisons of bodies meaning that viewing this content on Instagram has the potential to change how the participants perceive themselves. However, the participants also explained that they self-manage these feelings by situating themselves within their own life worlds, as Harriet suggested:

> Sometimes I think oh I could look like that, but then I think for me I have so many other goals and like enjoyments in life, where it’s like yeah I could exercise and like look like that, I know I could do that but it’s like how does that lead to me hanging out with my friends, or finishing my work or whatever it is.

Since Harriet considers how all the aspects of her life tie together to form her identity, she suggests that she is able to navigate beyond negative feelings of social comparison. Harriet situates herself within the context of her own life, thus health and fitness can be understood as unique and personal endeavours. In the quote above Harriet explained that she spreads her time out across many “enjoyments in life”, like exercising, hanging out with her friends, or finishing her work. This means that at times Harriet’s desires to succeed (gain capital) in other fields, for example school, take precedence over her desire to engage health and fitness and thus gain body capital. Hence, a user’s unique social location within other fields influences how they situate themselves within the sphere of health and fitness on Instagram as well as impact the amount of value they ascribe to that status/capital. This means that the relationship between Instagram practices, body capital and understandings of health and fitness are networked together in an assemblage of relations that include experiences beyond the app. This further showcases the complexities of the relationships between women’s embodied identities, unique lived experiences, and engagements with social media (Jackson, 2016).

In addition, the participants explained that they also combat negative feelings that arise from social comparisons by using Instagram. A few participants in this study explained that they
use the app to their advantage by following a limited number of accounts and using the built-in
time-limit feature:

Harriet: I time limit myself [on Instagram]. I give myself 6 min a day. [...] I often
even delete the app, and because then I don’t [...] go on popular pages, I’ll just look
at my friends, which is what I want it for like a social thing. And that is why I also
don’t follow that many people, like I could follow more, and like in theory then you
get more followers. Like, you follow people then they follow you back, but I don’t
care, I just want to look at things that are educational or my friends… I just think it’s
the more pictures, the more you are aware, the more you focus on it, the more you
are going to dwell on it. So I try to limit my Instagram use because I know the more I
look at something the more I’m going to be thinking about it all day and it will
impede my thoughts positively or negatively and I don’t need that all the time[...]So
If I think an account is leading to negative thoughts I will just unfollow it.

Sarah: So, before when I was so annoyed because I didn’t like the way I felt on
Instagram, and the pictures made me feel “ugh” that’s kinda why I was like, screw
this, this isn’t aligning with the person I actually am, so that’s why I unfollowed, and
then followed people who makes me feel good. This makes me feel happy when I see
these pictures. I don’t need to see pictures of Victoria Secret models in their bra and
underwear with 1% body fat, and me thinking why don’t I look like this? Well I
don’t want to look like that, so why do I care? And I would never be that person, so I
don’t want to see stuff that doesn’t align with my true values.

Thus, the participants overcome feelings of social comparison brought on by Instagram use by
altering their engagement with the app. The participants use Instagram with a critical lens, as
they are able to navigate around viewing harmful content and use the very medium that brought
on adverse social comparisons to overcome those same feelings. This is a very interesting
finding because previous research suggests that Instagram users are victims of Instagram images
(Strelan et al., 2003; Holland & Tiggeman, 2017); however, this research finds that users are
incredibly resourceful in limiting the negative impacts of Instagram. In her research, Jackson
(2016) found that although consumers are able to critically analyze media of the thin and
idealized body, they still desire conform to standards and experience their own bodies in abject
ways. Building upon Jackson’s (2016) research, I suggest that Instagram users, although at times
desire to conform to body standards and as a result experience their own bodies in abject ways,
are also able to navigate through media that triggers negative feelings of body dis-satisfaction. The participants in this study use Instagram to overcome negative feelings and facilitate the achievement of health and fitness goals. Thus, this research suggests that users navigate around consuming media that triggers feelings of body dissatisfaction and instead do their best to follow content that leads to positive feelings.

**Conclusion.**

In this section, I highlighted how Instagram practices reveal, reinforce, and amplify the complexity of relationships between women’s embodied identities and understandings of health and fitness. The content viewed on and produced for Instagram is a reflection of the user’s habitus and taste, hence, Instagram use can reinforce the users’ thoughts, understandings and habits relating to health and fitness. This understanding of health and fitness influences how the user engages with Instagram, which influences how they come to see their own bodies, which can influence their day to day health and fitness habits. In this way, engagements with Instagram influence how user’s uptake, understand, learn, and embody health and fitness. Thus, Instagram use is intricately connected to how individuals situate themselves within the world of health and fitness.

In conclusion, this section explains that interactions with Instagram play a central role in the learning process. The circumstances by which the participants in this study comply, adapt and/or tailor to health and fitness endeavours (Kwan, 2012) are influenced by their unique assemblages of Instagram use, lived experience, education, culture, race and embodied identity. Not all users engage with social media in the same way, therefore, it is extremely important to consider individual critical capacities, and unique factors of difference when doing research with social media users.
Chapter 5: Conclusion

This final chapter consists of five sections. First, I deliver a brief overview of key findings and summarize Chapter 4. I then provide a theoretical summary and a discussion of the key findings and their implications. Following this, I offer some methodological reflections that lead to suggestions for future research on social media and young women, after which I add my final thoughts on this project.

Overview of Research Findings

This study sought to answer two main research questions, 1) how do young women cultivate body capital within the field of Instagram, and 2) how do Instagram practices influence understandings of health and fitness? This research found that young women cultivate body capital on Instagram by adhering to the idealized notion of a living a healthy-active lifestyle. The participants did this by showcasing the shape, size, and ability of their own bodies within a diversity of relations (e.g. social location and experiences) whilst navigating through various social faux-pas’ (e.g. coming across as vainglorious and ‘editing’ photographs). These practices influenced the participants understandings of concepts relating to health and fitness which influenced how they engaged in health and fitness behaviours and came to see themselves. In short, a desire to garner body capital and the practices that Instagram users engage in to achieve such capital influence understandings, embodiments, and engagements with health and fitness.

In the first section of chapter four I explained that, for the participants, Instagram is like a digital catwalk whereby users are expected to show off, in a modest way, their body’s ‘unedited’ shape and size and healthy-active lifestyle. On the Instagram catwalk, users are also policed on their ability to adhere to gendered appearance idealizations (including body shape and size) and live a lifestyle that fits into the participants’ description of a ‘healthy and active’ lifestyle, which
includes participation in outdoor activity. In the second section of Chapter four, I explained that the participants understand health and fitness as related concepts that are always in the process of becoming and can be seen through body shape and size. This means that, according to the participants, being healthy and fit includes having a thin and toned body and constantly participating in physical activities, like hiking and running.

Hence, the ‘look’ of health and fitness is accompanied with a certain type of performance that involves working on fitness (and by extension health). It is important to mention that, although the participants all have a similar understanding of health and fitness, they are also members of a very specific population drawn from the kinesiology discipline (a discipline which is broadly defined as the science and art of the moving body). Hence, it is hardly surprising that they have this perspective. On Instagram, the participants also follow and produce content that aligns with their health and fitness perspectives. It is for this reason Instagram reveals, incubates, and amplifies the habitus and taste of the users. By this I mean that Instagram is a site where the habitus and tastes of users is both publicly displayed online as well as taken up and embodied in everyday practices. There were also a number of theoretical contributions that emerged from this research.

**Theoretical Summary**

This research situates Instagram within Bourdieusian theory as a digital field of practice that is regulated by formal and informal rules that govern the accumulation of body capital. The participants explained that various aspects of their life worlds (e.g. culture, mood, experiences, and so on) are inter-related and entangled within their Instagram practices. Hence, Instagram use is intricately networked to lived experiences and affective emotions. As such, the participants explained that they uniquely navigate through informal rules to create and follow content that
generates opportunities for the accumulation of body capital and in turn, social distinction. Hence, the participants build their own habitus within the boundaries of these fields (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992).

By exploring the participants’ individual life-worlds, this research determined that unique factors of difference interact with the informal rules that regulate power-relations on Instagram. In this way, unique factors of difference that determine body capital offline (body shape and size, experiences, and various other aspects of culture) influence how individuals are ranked on the social status hierarchy Instagram (Sandford & Quarnby, 2019). For example, some of the participants in this study explained that when they do not feel confident about their body shape and or size, they avoid posting pictures of their full body on Instagram, even though these images are the most coveted according to the informal rules the participants discussed.

This suggest that one’s body capital offline is intricately linked to the acquisition of digital body capital. In addition, considering that capital can be accumulated, translated, and reinvested between fields of practice (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992), the amount of body capital that an individual has in other fields can influence the amount of body capital that they can invest on Instagram and vice-versa. This means that Instagram is a space that is permeable to forms of capital from other places and spaces. Hence, even though the boundaries of the field of Instagram are transient and distinct, they can overlap and intersect with other fields. This suggests that individuals have the potential to engage with more than one field, regardless if it is online or offline, at a single point in time (Sandford & Quarnby, 2019). For example, Patty explained that if she is “exercising more, [she is] going to feel better, be stronger and look better” which makes her “more likely to post [on Instagram]”. Hence, how a user is situated in body related status hierarchies will influence their ability to garner body capital. This indicates
that distinguishing between online and offline worlds is arbitrary, as they appear to form a symbiotic relationship. This means that Instagram use is heavily networked to individual experience on the app and in every-day life.

This research also aligns with the findings of Duff (2014) and Coffey (2016) who suggest that embodied understandings of health, and by extension fitness, should be conceptualized as encounters between bodies and practices. These encounters are produced through a range of networks and relations (Coffey, 2016) including interactions with social media and by extension technology. This research extends the contentions of Duff (2014) and Coffey (2016) to suggest that Instagram users’ experiences are come together in an assemblage of relations that influence how they come to see themselves. In conclusion, understanding the relationships between body capital and Instagram use through Bourdieusian theory allowed for this research to express the complex and contradictory ways in which the participants use Instagram across a myriad of conditions. These complex and contradictory practices will be discussed in the section to follow.

Discussion of Key Findings

I must reiterate that there is no simple answer to either of the two research questions, rather the notion that Instagram use is complex, paradoxical and multi-layered serves as the most straightforward answer. This research explained that at times Instagram can exist as a space of conflict, conflict resolution, exclusion, inclusion, empowerment, and disempowerment. The determining factor regarding how Instagram space is experienced is intricately networked to the users lived experience and affective emotions. It is this understanding that provides some structure to the interwoven and often contradictory ways that young women cultivate body capital and engage with health and fitness on Instagram. These contentions are best represented through four key findings of this research. First, the study identified four informal rules that
regulate the acquisition of body capital on Instagram. Second, it was identified that these four rules are navigated by the users in the acquisition of body capital. Third, it was found that Instagram can act as a digital incubator of habitus and taste. Lastly, it was determined that Instagram use can influence day-to-day habits. In discussing these key findings, I will explain how the practices that the participants engaged in to garner body capital influenced their understandings, embodiments and engagements with health and fitness practices.

**The writing of four informal rules that regulate the acquisition of body capital on Instagram.**

I identified four inter-related informal rules that regulate the accumulation of body capital on Instagram, including:

1. **Rule 1:** Making the most of yourself(ie): post content that showcases the shape and size of your body
2. **Rule 2:** The Instagram paradox: be vainglorious without being vainglorious
3. **Rule 3:** The camera does not lie but the photos do: enhance but do not edit your pictures
4. **Rule 4:** Blue chip investments: show that you live a healthy and active lifestyle

The first rule explained that the participants value Instagram content that showcases the entire body. For the participants, posting pictures that showcased their full body had the potential to garner the most digital body capital. The second rule explained that even though the participants held high regard for Instagram posts that showcased the entire body, they were critical of pictures that unapologetically showed off the appearance of the body. Hence, the second rule highlighted a paradox whereby the participants explained how they post content that showcases their body without portraying themselves as vainglorious. The third rule introduced a competing dynamic whereby the participants explained that it is, on one hand, unacceptable to edit a photo to physically change body shape and size because it removes any semblance of authenticity. Yet, on the other hand, it
is acceptable to pose for pictures and use filtering techniques to enhance your photo, even though this process also removes any semblance of authenticity. Thus, the third rule explained that Instagram posts are anything but authentic, in fact they are highly stylized productions. The fourth and final rule explained that the process of accumulating body capital is not only intricately linked with conforming to visuals of ‘health and fitness’ but also with showcasing a healthy-active lifestyle. Predominantly, the participants explained that it is important to post a series of pictures that showcase an involvement in outdoor activities. These four informal rules shaped and influenced how the participants spoke about and engaged with health, fitness, and body shape, however, there was always room for challenges or non-adherence, as overviewed below.

**The process of navigating the aforementioned informal rules.**

Although the participants complied with the informal rules of Instagram in order to garner the most body capital, they also navigated around those very rules for the same end-goal. This means that the participants were able to construct and use their own bodies in agentic and empowering ways within the conditions of Instagram’s power relations. Hence, although Instagram governed by rules and regulations, its power relations are never determining and are only constraining.

Moreover, this finding also suggests that being both a consumer and producer of media is different from just being a consumer of media. For the participants, being both a producer and consumer of media interplayed with a myriad of factors, including but not limited to how they interpreted pictures, the process of capturing, editing, and sharing their own pictures, which accounts they chose to follow (and unfollow), and how often they chose to engage with the app. Often times previous research assumes that young women engage with social media in similar ways to mass media (see Holland & Tiggeman, 2017; Mulgrew et al., 2017); however, the
present research showcases that people tend to read bodies from mass media and social media differently. This means that social media users are reading and creating media in relation to their own content, feelings, experiences, and lifeworld’s, as well as in relation to mass mediated images. In this way, the process of reading and creating social media is heavily influenced by the intertextual significance of being both a consumer and producer of media. Since social media and mass media are two distinct and different platforms, the methodologies by which research investigates mass media might not translate to social media. This is heavily influenced by the fact that social media allows the user to produce their own content and select specific content to follow, as discussed in the section to follow.

**Instagram can act as a digital incubator of habitus and taste.**

I argue that the content that is shared and consumed on Instagram is a unique reflection of each users’ habitus and tastes, meaning that the participants reproduce offline fields in a virtual space. These practices connect users to a unique digital community of likeminded people who share their habitus and tastes online. Hence, Instagram is a space for bodies to be seen as the user would like to be seen (particular body types, lifestyle, etc.). This, I argue, means that the already existing bodily dispositions of the participants are intensified which may lead to a number of assumptions about bodies. I refer to this notion as a digital incubator, though some scholars (Turner & LeFevre, 2016) refer to this notion as an echo-chamber effect. Turner and LeFevre use the analogy of an ‘echo-chamber’ to explain that Instagram users may “perceive their values and world-views to be more common than they are, due to selectively viewing contributions of other, similarly minded people” (p.1, 2016). They go on to explain that this ‘echo-chamber’ may lead to negative effects which can enhance negative effects of social comparison. I argue that rather than being purely derisive, this ‘echo-chamber’ or incubator, can also hold positive influence.
This research shows that if users are posting and consuming healthy and empowering messages on Instagram, users can experience positive, motivational, and educational effects, that lead to alternative methods of health and fitness and embodiments. For example, the women in this study explained that they feel empowered when see other women being athletic and participating in physical activity on Instagram.

This finding is significant because it moves social media generally, and Instagram use more specifically, beyond moral panic discourse and frames it as a site of multiple meanings and practices that provoke both positive and negative experiences (empowerment and disempowerment). A considerable amount of research on Instagram seems to consider it as a separate and constrained world, where the online world can spark negativity that translates into emotion and experience in the offline. This project expands this notion to explain that sometimes pictures can elicit negative feelings, but that they can also lead to a cornucopia of various emotions, including happiness, motivation, and pride. When the participants viewed their pictures, they explained that their feelings were dependent upon their interaction between the picture and themselves. This means that resultant feelings are dependent upon an amalgamation of various factors that include, but are not limited to culture, mindset and physical condition. Instagram is brought to life by the ways the users interact with it, hence, we cannot discount the complexity of factors that determine how we engage with Instagram.

**Instagram use can influence day-to-day habits.**

This research reveals a mutually constitutive relationship between a user’s understanding of health and fitness and how they engage with Instagram. This relationship influences how users come to see their own bodies, which in turn influences their day to day health and fitness habits. In other words, seeing health and fitness through visual constructions on
Instagram influences how an individual takes up, understands, learns and embodies health and fitness. In this way, interactions with Instagram play an influential role in the learning process. This finding is significant because it suggests that social media can play a significant role in health education and promotion. This means that curricula, policy, and public discourse should discuss, not only conceptual (e.g. evidence based health directives) and practical (applying evidence based health directives) aspects of health and fitness, but also the affective (how we feel about participating in health and fitness) and how all three factors are networked together in an assemblage of relations. In other words, we need to recognize that people take up and embody health messages in diverse ways and have associated feelings that influence their health and fitness activities.

With this in mind, I suggest that Instagram may be a site for intervening in individual health practices. Thus, I propose that kinesiology curricula use Instagram a site to promote critical thinking about health and fitness and open discussion about Instagram use and its relationship to health and fitness. These conversations, about the affective margins of health and fitness, may help to bridge the divide between conceptual knowledge (what we know) and practical applications (what we do) in relation to health and fitness practices.

In fact, some of the participants in this study explained that they found the interview process of this study to be a very powerful and reflective exercise. Often at the conclusion of an interview, participants expressed that they were “really glad [they] got to talk about all this” (Jackie), because the interview was a positive process of “self-reflection” (Erin) that was “very insightful” (Jackie). Perhaps even a simple discussion can evoke critical thought about social media and its relationship to health behaviors, body image, and eating and exercise habits. It is time to start having these conversations because people engage with Instagram for better and or
for worse to get their health and fitness education. If we are not already having these conversations in health and fitness education, we need to be.

**Methodological Reflections**

In this study, I used auto-driven photo-elicitation interviewing techniques to collect data and analyzed the data using ethnographic content analysis. Since the capture and viewing of photographs is a subjective process, I intended to analyze the narrative data in relation to the participants Instagram posts. Instead, I examined the picture and narrative data in relation to one another. In other words, I analyzed the narrative data in relation to the picture data and the picture data in relation to the narrative data. I chose to analyze the data through this relational type of reading because at moments the picture was expressing something completely different from the narrative. In other words, the pictures introduced a different part of the user’s story, a part that often did not align with the entire experience. In fact, often the pictures ‘said’ something different to the narrative. However, this does not suggest that either the picture or the narrative are more truthful, but instead that neither entity on its own can describe the experience. For example, Patty, posted a picture of her and her friend at a popular running event. In the picture, Patty and her friend are smiling, hugging, and fist pumping the air as they celebrate the completion of their run. Both women are soaking wet and covered in mud appear to be extremely happy. As a result of this, my interpretation of this picture was that it showcases that the two young women had a fun time at the event, despite rainy and muddy conditions. However, Patty explained her experience as:

> The worst. I’m never doing it again. It was so poorly organized. And it also ended up pouring rain and thundering. So that didn’t help but it was also poorly organized.

When prompted as to why she decided to post such a happy picture when her experience was not pleasant, Patty explained that:
When we were at [the run], we took a ton of pictures because we knew we wanted to post on social media because [the run] is so fun, or it’s supposed to be so fun. But I picked this because I looked the thinnest in it.

When asked if Patty, included a caption on her picture that described her experience she explained that she did not.

No. [I] just [wrote] more that it was fun, let me find out what the caption was. I made the caption wet and wild (laughter).

Hence, Patty’s photograph expressed a different reality from her experience of participating in the running event. It is this re-occurring theme that prompted me to read the narratives in relation to the photographs. Interestingly, most of the photographs that the participants shared with me were all fairly similar in theme and intention (pictures showcased the user’s full body in active settings), however, no individual narrative overlapped.

To that end, this research supports Coleman’s (2008) contention that images are not only taken by cameras but also exist experiences where “one kind of image might complement or contradict experiences produced through other kinds of images” (p. 16). This means that although pictures may appear to be similar (or different), the experience of taking the photo is unique and hence, the meaning behind photographs are inimitable, and in this way, the pictures are simultaneously, similar and different. This research builds upon Coleman’s (2008) research to add that this contention holds true even when images may appear to be similar or the same. Therefore, this research highlights the importance of performing research with women, as opposed to studies that focus on the influences of Instagram posts (see Mulgrew et al., 2017; Fardouly et al., 2017) but not the user’s experience in relation to posts. Hence, future research should consider relationships with images as a complex and layered processes that can evoke different and multiple meanings, emotions, and conjure memories, sounds, smells, sights and
feelings in various contexts. Therefore, to leave this analysis at the level of what is represented in the picture runs the risk of only revealing a fraction of the meaning behind such picture.

In addition, seven out of nine interviews were conducted through video-calling. I chose to conduct most of the interviews through video-calling as I noticed that video-calling interviews consisted of richer narratives and discussions than interviews conducted in person. As the researcher, I felt more comfortable interviewing through video-calling and also felt as though the participants were more comfortable being interviewed through video-calling. The in-person interviews conducted in public places were not suited toward open discuss about the sensitive topic of body capital. In the future, I would recommend the use of video-calling when interviewing about sensitive topics relating to the body and its image.

**Conclusion**

Overall, this research highlights three key findings. Firstly, that research about Instagram must understand the complexity of relations within which users are situated and must navigate. Unique factors of difference, like body shape, culture, mindset, and lifestyle, come together to place each user in unique digital social locations which influences how they experience and accumulate body capital. Hence, Instagram use is heavily networked to experiences both on the app and in everyday life. Secondly, Instagram is a space for self-expression that is governed by rules and regulations, but the power relations that govern Instagram are never determining and are only constraining. This is because the participants construct and use their own bodies in agentic and empowering ways within the conditions of these power relations. For example, if the body does not fit the ‘healthy and fit’ appearance, users can invest in body capital by showcasing what their body can do, intimating that despite the appearance of their body, they also participate in healthy activities. This finding is significant because it moves Instagram use beyond moral panic.
discourse that frames Instagram as a site of negative experience, and instead frames it as a site of multiple meanings and practices that provoke both positive and negative experiences. Finally, this research explains that Instagram use is paradoxical in nature. On their own the pictures shared with this project do not come close to telling the entire narrative. In fact, often the pictures are saying something different to the narrative; however, this does not suggest that either the picture or the narrative are more truthful, but instead that neither entity on its own can describe the experience. Therefore, this research highlights the importance of performing research with women to investigate their relationships with images as a complex and layered processes that can evoke different and multiple meanings in various contexts.

Is Instagram a flawed and appearance-based space? Yes, but so is the beach. Like the beach, Instagram can be a space that evokes body anxieties, social comparison, and self-surveillance, but it can also be a space that empowers and motivates individuals to participate in healthy and active behaviours. Like most spaces and places, Instagram does not exist as only ‘good’ or ‘bad’, rather it is a rich, layered, and nuanced space, whereby experiences are influenced by unique engagements that depend upon a myriad of factors (lived experiences, mood, fitness level, and so on). This means that users can experience Instagram in ways that, sometimes simultaneously, contribute to positive and or negative senses of being. In this way, it is unfair to suggest that Instagram is only ‘bad’ as it is an appearance-based platform that can provoke body related anxieties (see Fardouly et al, 2017; Tiggeman & Zaccardo, 2015), because it is also a place where users can work through body image issues, as suggested in this research. Hence, we need to speak more about how we can use Instagram positively and provide users with the resources to do so. For example, by using Instagram as a tool to promote critical thinking about health and fitness in kinesiology and health education curricula.
In reflecting upon the entirety of this research, I contend that social media use and its implications are the result of many unique factors, which means that it is difficult to make general conclusions about the influences of its use. Thus, this dissertation and no further research can make definitive conclusions or universal statements about Instagram use. Though research can speak about who uses Instagram, how they use it, and why they use it. Hence, I contend that Instagram use says more about the user’s nature, than nature itself.
Works Cited


Close, H. (2007). The use of photography as a qualitative research tool: With reference to her own study of children with long-term conditions, helen close considers whether photography as a research method can be both valuable and ethical. *Nurse Researcher, 15*(1), 27-36. doi:10.7748/nr2007.10.15.1.27.c6052


Hutson, D. (2013). "your body is your business card": Bodily capital and health authority in the fitness industry. *Social Science & Medicine, 90*, 63-71. doi:10.1016/j.socscimed.2013.05.003


https://help.instagram.com/854227311295302


Levina, N., & Arriaga, M. (2014). Distinction and status production on user-generated content platforms: Using Bourdieu's theory of cultural production to understand social dynamics

doi:10.1287/isre.2014.0535

Leung, H. (2019, May 1). Would it be better if you couldn’t see how many likes a photo got? Instagram is testing to find out. *Time*. Retrieved from https://time.com


McGannon, K. R., Johnson, C. R., & Spence, J. C. (2011). I am (not) big... It's the pictures that got small: Examining cultural and personal exercise narratives and the fear of fat. In


doi:10.1016/j.chb.2015.12.059


Appendix A: Interview prompts

Interview Prompts:

1) How do you use Instagram?
2) What does health mean?
3) What does fitness mean?
4) What do you think are the characteristics or identifying features of a photograph that depict a healthy lifestyle? What are the characteristics of a photograph that depict a fit lifestyle?
5) Why did you post this picture on Instagram?
6) What do you think this picture says about you?
7) What factors do you consider in taking and posting a picture to Instagram?
8) Why did you choose to share this picture with the research project?
9) Can you tell me about the process of taking and posting this photo?
   - Who took this picture? Did you know this picture was being taken? Did you anticipate someone taking pictures?
10) Does the way you take pictures influence how you feel in your body?
11) How did you feel when you had the picture taken?
12) Did you know you were taking the picture for the purpose that it would be posted on Instagram?
13) Can you describe how you felt when you saw the picture for the first time?
14) Can you speak about how online users respond to this post? Why do you think they responded this way?
15) Do your followers respond differently to different types of posts?
16) How do you decide what content to post on your account?
17) Do you look back at your own content?
18) On Instagram, what significance does receive ‘likes’ or ‘comments’ mean to you?
19) Can a picture make you feel: confident, fat, strong, healthy, or fit?
20) Do you feel like there is an expectation for you to post certain pictures?
21) Do you edit your pictures? What do you think of people who do edit their pictures?
22) Can you speak about a time that someone posted a picture of you that you didn’t like?
Appendix B: Interview length

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Length of Interview (min)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Patty</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harriet</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jackie</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erin</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maude</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karen</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rita</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annie</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Appendix C: Participant demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Ethno-cultural community</th>
<th>Years active on Instagram</th>
<th>Current university program</th>
<th>Anticipated program completion date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Patty</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>PhD Kinesiology</td>
<td>August 2022</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harriet</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>MSc Kinesiology</td>
<td>September 2019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jackie</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Arab</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>MSc Kinesiology</td>
<td>August 2019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erin</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>BSc Kinesiology</td>
<td>April 2019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maude</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>BSc Kinesiology</td>
<td>April 2019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karen</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>BSc Kinesiology</td>
<td>May 2021</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rita</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>BSc Kinesiology</td>
<td>April 2019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>MSc Kinesiology</td>
<td>August 2019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annie</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>BSc Human Kinetics</td>
<td>April 2020</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix D: Recruitment post

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA
School of Kinesiology

A picture says a thousand words: an investigation of body capital and embodied understandings of health and fitness on Instagram

PARTICIPANTS NEEDED FOR

RESEARCH ON INSTAGRAM REPRESENTATIONS OF HEALTH AND FITNESS

We are looking for volunteers to take part in a qualitative study about the impact of Instagram representations of health and fitness.

You must be a WOMAN (20-24 years) who LIVES IN CANADA, is an INSTAGRAM USER, and enrolled in a KINESIOLOGY PROGRAM at a CANADIAN UNIVERSITY.

As a participant in the study you will be asked to take part in ONE interview session that will last between 60-90 minutes.

For more information about this study or to volunteer for this study please contact:

Meaghan Toll: [Contact information]

or

Dr. Moss Norman (Principal Investigator): [Contact information]

NOTE: If you choose to like or follow this research project you are likely to be identified with the study.

Version #2  February 6, 2019
Appendix E: Letter of initial contact

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA
School of Kinesiology
A picture says a thousand words: an investigation of body capital and embodied understandings of health and fitness on Instagram

Date ******* → 2019

Dear ******,

Thank you for your interest in our study! My name is Meaghan Toll and I am a second year MA graduate student in the School of Kinesiology at the University of British Columbia. I specialize in research regarding digital methodologies, media, and girls’ and women’s fitness and health. The study that you have expressed interest in intends to find out more about how young women’s Instagram practices shape their understandings of fitness and health.

This research is being done as part of my Master of Arts thesis (my supervisor’s name is Dr. Moss Norman). To participate in this study, you must be a woman who lives in Canada (20-24 years of age) is an Instagram user and is enrolled in a Kinesiology program at a Canadian University.

The goal of this letter is to request an interview with you to discuss topics related to how you use Instagram, understand health and fitness and how this intersects with how you feel about being in your body. Your involvement in the study would be very helpful and appreciated as we attempt to find out more about how the processes of simultaneously producing and consuming Instagram content interconnects with how young women feel about being in their body.

We hope to use this research to inspire critical thought about social media and its relationship to health and fitness behaviors, body image, and eating and exercise habits to better inform initiatives that seek to help young women deal with health and fitness related issues.

I have attached an information and consent form that provides you with more information about the study and procedures that this study will follow regarding confidentiality and research ethics.

When you have had the opportunity to read the information and consent sheet, please let me know if you are interested in being involved in the study. You can contact me by email ******* If you are interested in participating, we will meet for one 1-1.5 hour long interview at a time and location that is most convenient to you.

Thank you very much for your time and for considering this request. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,
Meaghan Toll
Appendix F: Information sheet and consent form

Information Sheet & Consent Form: A study about Instagram use and how young women feel about their bodies

Study Title: A picture says a thousand words: an investigation of body capital and embodied understandings of health and fitness on Instagram

The Research Team:
Principal Investigator: Dr. Moss Norman, School of Kinesiology, UBC, [redacted]
Co-Investigators: Meaghan Tull, School of Kinesiology, Graduate Student, UBC, [redacted]
Dr. Brian Wilson, School of Kinesiology, UBC, [redacted]
Dr. Jillianne Code, Department of Curriculum and Pedagogy, UBC, [redacted]

Brief Description of the Study: There has been widespread anxiety within popular media about how young women use Instagram, especially in relation to health and fitness ideals, and this anxiety is often uncritically reflected in research. However, there have been relatively few studies that examine how people actually use social media in relation to health and fitness practices and even fewer that explore how young women use social media to make sense of how they feel being in their body.

The goal of this study is to learn from participants about meanings about health and fitness gleaned from Instagram practices. Specifically, we hope to learn more about how young women make decisions about which photographs they will take, post, share, 'like', or 'dislike' on Instagram and how these decisions influence how they feel about their bodies. We hope to use this research to inspire critical thought about social media and its relationship to health and fitness behaviors, body image, and eating and exercise habits to better inform initiatives that seek to help young women deal with health and fitness related issues.

Your Participation: We will ask you to participate in one 1-1.5 hour long interview about your own Instagram posts and activity. One week prior to the interview you will be asked to complete a brief online survey and select 5-10 of your own pictures that you have posted on Instagram that you think showcase your body in a healthy and fit manner. You will be asked to bring a copy of the Instagram post to the interview and discuss the process of taking and posting the picture, as well as how each picture makes you feel. The interview will be recorded on a digital recorder and you will be asked to share off-line copies of discussed Instagram posts with the researcher. Immediately after completion of the interview, you will be asked to share off-line copies of discussed Instagram posts (using a screen shot) with the researcher. Data will be anonymized and stored on a secure server as a password protected and encrypted file. Interviews will be published under pseudonyms; images will be blurred to the extent of de-identification of individuals, locations, account handle names and environments. Interview and picture data will be linked under randomly assigned pseudonyms. Instagram posts will not be used in the final report.
Your Participation and the Results: This research will be submitted as a thesis (public document) in the partial fulfillment in pursuit of the degree Master of Arts in the department of Education in the school of Kinesiology at the University of British Columbia. Further, this research may also be presented at academic conference presentations and/or published in journal articles and books.

Will this study benefit you in any way?: The potential benefits from this study are broad. First, the hope is that these interviews will help individuals better understand the relationship between how they use Instagram and how they feel about being in their body. Second, in gaining a richer understanding about how young women use Instagram this study seeks to function as a tool that can be used to better inform initiatives that seek to help young women deal with health and fitness related issues that are of most concern to them.

Are there potential risks involved in the study?: There is minimal risk in participating in this study since participants will be speaking about their own life worlds. As experts on their own Instagram, health and or fitness routines, offering answers to the interview questions should not put participants in risk in any way.

Confidentiality: This research is confidential; thus, all data will be anonymized. Interviews will be published under pseudonyms, images will be blurred to the extent of de-identification of individuals, locations, account names and environments. Interview and picture data will be linked under randomly assigned pseudonyms. This means that your name will not be referred to in any of the documents emerging from the completed study. Instagram posts will not be used in the final report and hence, your pictures will not be included in any published document. All data will be stored on a password protected computer. Upon completion of the study, participants will be sent a summary of the results, a copy of the published paper, and an invitation to a presentation of the results.

Your Voluntary Participation: Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You are free to not answer any question, and you may withdraw from the interview at any time. If you wish to withdraw from the study after completion of your interview and prior to the publishing of the paper, your data will be removed and not be included in the study, nor will it be shared publicly. Once the study has been completed you will not be able to withdraw your data, since the results of this study will be reported in a graduate thesis and may also be published in journal articles and books.
Information Sheet & Consent Form: A study about Instagram use and how young women feel about their bodies

Public Availability of Research Data: Since this research may be published in journal articles and books, the data from this research may become publicly available at the time of publication, a requirement by some journals and funders. Once the data is made publicly available, you will not be able to withdraw your data. All data (interview and Instagram posts) will be anonymized and de-identified. Interviews will be published under pseudonyms; images will be blurred to the extent of de-identification of individuals, locations, account names and environments. Interview and picture data will be linked under randomly assigned pseudonyms.

Complaints or Concerns about the Project: If you have any concerns or complaints about your rights as a research participant and/or your experiences while participating in this study, contact the Research Participant Complaint Line in the UBC Office of Research Ethics at 604-822-8598 or if long distance, e-mail RSIL@ors.ubc.ca or call toll free 1-877-822-8598.

Please note “Taking part in this study is entirely up to you. You have the right to refuse to participate in this study. If you decide to take part, you may choose to pull out of the study at any time without giving a reason and without any negative impact on your position.”

Further Contact Information or Concerns: If you have any questions or desire further information about the project, please contact Meaghan Toll [REDACTED].

--------------------------------------------------

CONSENT

I have read the above information and understand the nature of the study. I understand that my participation in this study is completely voluntary and that I may refuse to participate in or withdraw from the study without any negative impact on my position.

I ________________________ (print name) agree to the above stated conditions and consent to participate in this study.

Your signature below indicates that you have received an information and consent sheet for your own records. Your signature also indicates that you consent to participate in this study.

Signed: __________________________________________________________________________ Date: ____________________
Appendix G: Pre-interview e-mail

Hi *****,

I hope you are well! I am looking forward to our interview on ***DATE ***TIME*** for my research project, A picture is worth a thousand words.

I am emailing you to ask that you complete two tasks before our interview:

1. A brief online survey. This information will help shape my understanding of your every-day life world. Please follow this link to the survey. This survey must be completed by SUBMITTED BEFORE (DATE ****).

2. Select 5-10 of your own pictures that you have posted on Instagram that you think health and fitness. Please bring your Instagram posts to the interview and be prepared to discuss the process of taking and posting the picture, as well as how each picture makes you feel. Immediately after completion of the interview, I will ask you to share off-line copies of discussed Instagram posts (via screen shot). This data will be anonymized and stored on a secure server as a password protected and encrypted file. Instagram posts will not be used in the final report. Any picture that you share will be blurred to the extent of de-identification of individuals, locations, account handle names and environments.

Please let me know if you have any questions!

See you soon,

Meaghan
Appendix H: Journal questions

1) What do I think I know about the participants and how do I think I know this?
2) What were my assumptions during the interview? Did these assumptions interfere with my asking of questions, behaviour or interpretation of participants responses? If so, how?
3) Did the environment of the interview or my emotional state impact the data collection process? If so, how?
Appendix I: Representation of the body in Instagram posts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Post showcases…</th>
<th>Number of Posts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The full body</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The body from the waist upwards</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual body parts</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The face</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>47</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Appendix J: Types of activity captured in Instagram posts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity Photographed</th>
<th>Number of Posts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Apple Picking</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basketball</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biking</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cliff Jumping</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coaching</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dance</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dragon Boat</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hiking</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Horseback Riding</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Obstacle Course Racing</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paddle Boarding</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rugby</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Running</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skiing</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surfing</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Triathlon</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Water Skiing</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weightlifting</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yoga</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>38</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>