Fitness ideal, how does it work?

A multimodal critical discourse analysis of how male fitness body ideal is communicated on Instagram.

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Abstract

Fitness is considered as a diverse spectrum and the society surrounding it is considered to be in constant flux. There are few male fitness influencers on Instagram acting as mass mediums communicating their daily lives in front of a mass of followers. This study investigates how five Swedish male fitness influencers communicate male body ideal by gathering 15 similar Instagram posts while qualitatively analysing five of them. Methodology-wise, multimodal critical discourse analysis (MCDA) is used to analyse Instagram posts made by Swedish fitness influencers that are communicating something explicitly referred to fitness. Structure of the analysis relies on semiotic denotation and connotation while Critical Discourse Studies (CDS) theory is operationalised on linguistic and semiotic elements. The analytical results argue that they were following three sorts of discourses for communicating their daily lives. Additionally, the identified three discourses are argued to be constructed under certain ideologies.
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1. Introduction

1.1 The rise of influencers

Communication, generally explained, consists of one person sending a message to a receiver – the railway model (Gripsrud, 2011, p. 143). On social media, the sender can connect with people by sharing own, everyday experiences and also follow what others share. For example, if one sender communicates to many people on Instagram, the sender could be considered as a mass medium (Castells, 2010, pp. 88-89). Therefore, having many followers can be understood as having power to communicate with many. Mass communication has arguably an ability to communicate norms and values which its receivers can learn to internalize into their own lives (Howarth, 2007, p. 26). According to the railway model; influencers (persons) are acknowledged as a modern social phenomenon who share content (messages) that is able to impact many peoples’ (receivers) perception of something.

Instagram has, according to the newspaper Insider (2020), made it easier than before for fitness people to share workout ideas and tips. The shared content generates attention for the influencers and thereby increases their amount of collective of followers (2020). Although, one thing to point out is that “[…] there are tons more who don’t know what they’re talking about and simply grew their following because they have a banging body.” (Insider, 2020). This can be understood as influencers’ increasing attention either comes from professional tips for training or by having an admirable body. The generated attention gives them trustworthy legitimacy for promoting ideas or products as sellable products for followers to either internalise or buy (Small Business Trends, 2021, Gillberg, 2014, p. 28). Consequently, this study will focus on investigating how male fitness influencers communicate male fitness body ideal on Instagram.

1.2 Cultural collectives

A cultural collective consists of grouped people who share something with each other, commonly like-minded norms and values about e.g., how things should be. Like-minded norms and values often contribute to, and strengthens, a collective’s cultural identity. Those who share like-minded norms and values as a collective would also therefore naturally want to be associated with this certain collective. However, sometimes it can be difficult to implement social practices according to a collective’s norms and values, thus recognize oneself living by them.
For example, when someone would like to be identified with a well-recognized cultural identity, e.g., a fitness person, he would have to internalise the collective’s norms and values and live by them to be considered a fitness person. When those norms and values come into social practice in between members of a fitness collective, the practices act as a form of realisation of ideas about how things should be. I.e., showcasing a muscular upper body instead of showcasing the lower body could act as an example how a social practice can come up with an idea of how the fitness identity should be practiced. Fitness, on the other hand, is a spectrum consisting of a diverse amount of cultural collectives with different sets of like-minded norms, depending on sport or physical activity. For example, bodybuilders have another muscularity than bicyclists have.

Stargage’s (2022) list of Swedish fitness influencers has tagged every listed influencer with the tag fitness. However, their Instagram profiles’ content can vary between sports as F-1, boxing and other health inspiring activities. This diversity describes the spectrum of fitness by presenting that an F-1 racer does not necessarily train, look nor perform daily activities as a boxer does, while they both can be considered as having a fitness identity. Furthermore, @lucas_simonsson is ranked in the top of the Stargage (2022) fitness list while approximately his whole Instagram profile consists of comedian videos – not anchored to any specific sport activity. This does not necessarily mean that the list has tagged @lucas_simonsson wrong. Instead, it acts as an example of how broadly interpreted the identity of fitness can be. Consequently, it means that fitness is a diverse spectrum which may be contextualised in several ways, thus relating one’s social identity to fitness.

1.3 Idealised goals

“[…] the ideal male body image, as portrayed by the media, appears to have grown steadily more muscular over the years.” (Olivardia et al., 2000, p. 1295). According to Olivardia et al. (2000, p. 1291), there exist males who suffer from muscle dysmorphia, a mental disorder making one pathologically preoccupied with muscularity by applying dangerous techniques to reach an ideal body. A person with muscle dysmorphia tends to be dissatisfied with their body, suffer from eating disorders and is more inclined to use anabolic steroids due to having a perception of the ideal male body as muscular (2000, p. 1291).

An ideal is a widely acknowledged goal, free from flaws, and could be problematic if embodied with body characteristics. For example: if a few similarly contextualised influencers tend to mass communicate male body characteristics in similar ways, they
construct an ideal self (Berglez, 2016, p. 173). The ideal self gets constructed by them communicating professional and formal skills while simultaneously demonstrating personal and informal charisma in front of an audience (Goffman, 1959, p. 123; Berglez, 2016, p. 173).

In this sense, influencers idealising their own body’s characteristics through self-referencing techniques could be considered as creating a socially constructed, false goal for their followers. A goal that assumably generates a demand for those whose bodies’ do not yet qualify with the communicated ideal. I.e., instead of independently focusing on real needs, such as living a healthy lifestyle through fitness activities, an idealised body could be internalised by followers and act as a false need for them to achieve (Marcuse, 1968; as cited in Giddens & Sutton, 2014, p. 56).

“It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but on the contrary their social being that determines their consciousness.” (Marx, 1977 [1857], as cited in Chakrabarti, 2021, p. 39). Thereby one must socially refer to something else (i.e., a cultural collective) to form consciousness. However, a problem arises when social practices become discursively dominant in a certain cultural collective. Social practices can discursively legitimise certain things, e.g., an ideal, as long as the practices being implemented go in line with the collective’s like-minded norms and values. Especially, if social practices are communicated in a top-down manner from influencers, internalisation of what has been communicated is assumed to be even more prominent. For example, if a cultural collective values well defined muscularity as their norm, it could result in a social practice where influencers highlight their definition of muscularity by taking selfies under a focused light generating shadows over his muscles, making them seem more defined.

Depending on cultural collective, norms and values may be different. Some men could perceive being slim as an ideal, others could perceive being muscular as an ideal. The ideal, however, is dependent of how social practices take place in the collective. To be able to sift between body ideals of multiple collectives, one needs to narrow down to a specific cultural collective, which will define this study’s context.

In general, those who spend time developing their body’s physical characteristics in a gym will hereby empirically act as the cultural collective of interest. What will be studied in particular is how influencers of a fitness collective communicates body ideal through social practices and if the practices can be categorised as discourses for communicating body ideal.
1.4 Discourses for communicating body ideal

Fitness influencers can be defined as successful of their cultural collective and therefore also have a persuasive effect on their followers when sharing their fitness lifestyle through social media. Social media content is assumed to be able to exert power over their followers’ consciousness by idealising influencers’ own body characteristics as a well-known social identity. Nonetheless, when fitness influencers communicate their lifestyle, they can do it under a diverse amount of ideological circumstances.

For example: in individualistic ideology, one is expected to develop and go through life alone (Giddens & Sutton, 2021, p. 105). In context of fitness, that could be to call oneself as beast by facing their fears alone (Khan, 2021). On the other hand, male fitness influencers could also communicate their identity as a part of a collective by sharing solidarity, meaning that the group is more important than themselves (Giddens & Sutton, 2021, p. 57). E.g., naming one’s group as family. Such contrasting ideological circumstances could assumably affect the construction of an influencer’s communication and therefore result in different social practices for communicating body ideal.

Although, the question of how male fitness influencers communicate their body characteristics as an ideal through social practice remains unclear at this point. Unclear because a body’s characteristics consist of both physical and aesthetical elements which get communicated in different ways depending on context. For example: someone working out in a gym will probably have developed their muscularity in some way (depending on sport) and will also have selectively pose and gaze for an Instagram post, which are considered as social practices. Additionally, a body does not only get ornamented by physical expressions, but also by having e.g., certain clothing, a tan, hairy arms, a beard or earrings (aesthetics) – in combination with physical elements.

Instagram posts vary from time to time, communicating new social practices. The variations’ diversity is assumed to be driven by discourses characterising the variations for how influencers communicate their bodies. Hence, this study is interested in investigating if such variations could be divided into multiple discourses.

According to Inzio (2018), almost 80% of Swedes have done something purposefully to reduce body weight by either changing diet or training differently. Additionally, most men and women get undesirable comments about their body, especially those who are under 29 years old (2018). Body ideal is problematic because it potentially could force those who do
not qualify with a given ideal to leap risk of entering a negative spiral of insatiable desires of being someone else (Björknert, 2019, p. 67), or eventually suffer from muscle dysmorphia (Olivardia et al., 2000, p. 1291). Moreover, there has been quantitative research done on males’ media exposure in relation body ideal, but the results have remained limited due to being quantitative and not qualitative (Leit et al., 2002; Olivardia et al., 2000; Åhlstrand, 2015; Boepple et al., 2016; Boepple & Thompson, 2016; Karsay et al., 2021).

Thus, body ideal is assumed to be anchored in norms and values legitimising certain social practices more prominently than others. E.g., it is common sense that more men strive for a muscular upper body while more women conversely do the same with their lower body, reaffirming gender as a dependent variable for body ideal. In this sense, Björknert (2019) has qualitatively investigated Swedish female fitness influencer’s communication of body ideal and contributed with interesting results to the scientific field of mediated body ideal. However, the field lacks studies with qualitative approaches digging deeper into the mediation of male body ideal. Consequently, this study will scrutinise how Swedish male fitness influencers communicate male body ideal on Instagram.

2 Aim and research questions

The aim of this study is to investigate if Swedish male fitness influencers’ variations of Instagram posts can be divided into discourses for communicating body ideal? Additionally, it would be interesting to problematise eventual variations in relation to different ideologies. This is because ideology is assumed to be able to affect how the male body is represented. The research questions are therefore:

1. How does Swedish male influencers communicate male body ideal when explicitly referring to fitness in their Instagram-posts?
2. What kind of different discourses could be observed?
3. How can this be interpreted from an ideological perspective?
2.1 Disposition

This paper will begin with further introducing its aim of research and research question. Subsequently, a background will contextualise further reading. With a context in mind, literature will be reviewed to position this study’s relevance in relation to other studies with related characteristics. Hence, by drawing upon earlier research the reader will acknowledge why this study contributes to earlier empirical findings about e.g., male body ideal and media exposure.

Furtherly, a theoretical chapter will clarify what theories will be operationalised concerning body ideal and influencers. Methodology-wise will critical outlook be applied through an analysis of Swedish male fitness influencers’ Instagram posts. Lastly, upcoming results will be categorised by discourse and problematised in terms of idealising male fitness body characteristics.
3 Literature review

3.1 Media images effect on male body ideal

“The relationship of male body image to media influences has become an area of increasing scientific interest” (Leit et al, 2002, p. 334). Leit et al. (2002, p. 334) was interested in how mass media images could affect men’s attitudes of their body appearance. Therefore, Leit et al. (2002, pp. 335-336) structured two groups; one exposed to advertising with muscular men and another group exposed to neutral advertising. Their task was to recall body ideal perceptions directly after having seen the advertisements. Subsequently, Leit et al. (2002, p. 337) found out that the group exposed to muscular advertisements valued being muscular as more important than controlling body fat, in relation to the neutral group. Conclusions were drawn and argued for that a brief presentation of muscular media images can affect males’ perception of an idealised male body, thus also generate body dissatisfaction (2002, p. 337).

3.2 Fitness websites

Boepple et al. (2016, pp. 132-135) performed a quantitative content analysis of fitspiration websites which, according to the websites, were inspiring people to live healthy and fit lifestyles by posting images and texts contextualised with exercise and diet. In addition, Boepple and Thompson (2016, pp. 98-100) took it a step further by comparing fitspiration websites to thinspiration websites.

Boepple et al. (2016, pp. 132-135) examined how body ideal was presented on fitspiration websites by coding their images of women and their appearance in relation to the image’s text. As a result, images on fitspiration websites tended to over-value appearance by promoting dietary restraint in combination to excessive exercise and represent women’s ideal as thin and attractive (2016, p. 132-135). Therefore, fitspiration websites can be argued to have power to one-dimensionally limit their visitors’ prevailing perceptions of what a fit female body looks like.

Additionally, Boepple and Thompson (2016, pp. 98-100) constructed a study with similar characteristics that aimed to develop the empirical knowledge from fitspiration websites. This is because, after an exploratory examination, thinspiration websites were argued to idealise thin bodies more than fitspiration websites. This hypothesis was also proven by the study’s results showcasing thinspiration websites communicating food guilt, dieting restraint, thin
poses and losing fat, or weight, more than fitspiration websites were doing (Boepple and Thompson, 2016, pp. 98-100).

3.3 Body image and men.

One thing that the presented studies about body ideal have in common is that their empirical object is centred around women. There has also been research done on males’ relation to media content and body ideal.

Åhlstrand (2015, p. 13) found through qualitative interviews that exposure of pictures on Facebook can have a negative impact on young people’s perception of body ideal and health. Meanwhile, Karsay et al. (2021, pp. 61-63) studied how the use of Facebook, Instagram, music videos, television and pornography could relate to adolescents’ perception of body image. This is the first study conducted to research how positive body image is constructed in relation to five forms of mass media (Karsay et al., 2021, p. 75). Media exposure is hypothesised to force people to compare their own bodies to others (self-objectification), preventing them to develop a positive body image, thus a healthy well-being (2021, p. 75). Furthermore, because media usage can differ depending on one’s gender, Karsay et al. (2021, pp. 61-63) methodologically wanted to compare boys and girls self-objectification.

In their results, Karsay et al. (2021, pp. 69-70) presented that girls use Instagram and watch music videos more than boys. Boys, on the other hand, watched pornographic content more than girls. Consequently, girls were proven to have lower levels of positive body image and went through self-objectification more often than boys (Karsay et al., 2021, pp. 69-70).

Subsequently, Karsay et al. (2021, pp. 72) concluded that girls use of Instagram correlated with an increased amount of self-objectification. For boys it was the same, but their perception of body image remained unexpectedly positive. Karsay et al. (2021, pp. 76-77) suggests defining Instagram usage as a double-edged sword. On one edge, it might generate positive body image, especially for boys. On the other edge, the use of Instagram was proven to have a causal relation with users’ self-objectification, which is argued to be harmful for their body image and health (Karsay et al., 2021, pp. 76-77; Barlett, 2008, p. 284).

However, Karsay et al. (2021, pp. 76-77) cannot say anything definite about the usage of Instagram’s causality with body image and health due to Instagram’s nature of being multifaceted with a diverse spectrum of shared content. Body image dissatisfaction has earlier been argued to be anchored in sociocultural factors as “[…] internalisation of societal
standards and appearance comparison.” (Barlett et al., 2008, p. 283). Appearance comparison is synonymous to self-objectification and has been covered in this chapter, but internalisation of norms has not. Barlett et al. (2008, pp. 283-284) exemplifies a culture’s understanding of beauty as a product of internalisation, which might as well be likened to a culture’s understanding of body ideal.

3.4 Influencers impact on body ideal and health

Björknert (2019) conducted a study about how Swedish female influencers communicate prevailing body ideals versus health benefits reflected with training in messages on Instagram. Björknert’s (2019, pp. 12-18) study is based on research done on female body ideal, fitness in media, health benefits from training and representation on Instagram. As a result, Björknert’s (2019, p. 11) study operationalised a theoretical framework consisting of the male gaze, consumption society, two step flow, qualitative text analysis and visuality by using methodological concepts of multimodal critical discourse analysis (MCDA).

What structurally enabled Björknert (2019, p. 10) to answer her research question was that her findings were categorised into three categories: body ideal, health benefits with training and to sell yourself (2019, p. 41). According to the result categories, female fitness influencers’ messages visually reflected prevailing body ideal by selectively choosing clothing framing their body as toned, sculpted and thin (Björknert, 2019, pp. 62-65). Some of the study’s results were problematised as communicating training health benefits but only as linguistic constructions, framing training as a source of energy and happiness instead of physical strength and stress tolerance (Andersson, 2012, as cited in Björknert, 2019, p. 65).

Furthermore, the result category of selling yourself showed that influencers promoted their own physical aesthetics as a prevailing body ideal (as a sellable product) (Björknert, 2019, p. 67). Moreover, the study unexpectedly discovered other relevant findings as influencers regular use of potentially cultural symbols, titles and Instagram as a place for opinion formation (2019, pp. 60-61). These findings and conclusions act as a mapped compendium of how a handful of female influencers’ reproduce discourses about body ideal and health benefits.

3.5 Identified knowledge gap

The literature review has referred to studies that have analysed how a brief media exposure of male body characteristics could affect males’ attitudes towards male body ideal (Leit et al., 2002, p. 334). Boepple et al. (2016, pp. 132-135) and Boepple and Thompson (2016, pp. 98-
100) quantitatively analysed fitness websites communication of female body ideal. Both Karsay et al. (2021, pp. 61-63) and Barlett et al. (2008, pp. 283-284) have done quantitative research and presented that self-objectification correlates with body dissatisfaction. Although, the studies presented are limited due to being quantitative. Therefore, they have not been able to generate results clarifying latent norms and values concerning body ideal.

For this reason, conducting a qualitative investigation of mediated body ideal could contribute to the knowledge gap of how males are communicated online by investigating communicational aspects concerning body ideal. Björknert’s (2019, pp. 12-18) results act as a practical example of such acknowledgement where Swedish female fitness influencers were proven to discursively communicate body ideal and expected health benefits from training. Therefore, a qualitative investigation of Swedish male fitness influencers communication on Instagram could similarly contribute with knowledge about how diversely male fitness body ideal gets communicated. This will be done by examining Swedish male fitness influencers’ construction of Instagram posts.
4 Theory

4.1 What is ideology

Wodak and Meyer (2016, p. 8) have broken down ideology to be defined as a coherent and relatively stable set of beliefs or values and describes it by writing “Ideological systems work to integrate people into social networks of oppression and subordination.” (Stoddart, 2007, p. 200). Arguably, those who do not qualify with a communicated body ideal get subordinated.

Critical discourse studies (CDS) research is interested in discovering latent beliefs and values, not the overly clear ones as believing in God or karma. Additionally, discourses could be understood as products of the overly clear ideologies. More specifically, discourses are often disguised through metaphors or analogies such as: “[...] life is a journey, social organisations are plants, love is war’ and so on” (Lakoff 1987; Lakoff and Johnson, 1980, 1999; as cited in Wodak & Meyer, 2016, p. 8). In fitness context that could be e.g., hard work pays off – or – no pain, no gain.

To qualitatively analyse how body ideal gets communicated, one needs to consider ideological beliefs and values. Ideological beliefs and values together form dominant discourses (Gillberg, 2014, p. 11). For example in a fitness context, beliefs and values about exposing muscularity could result in a social practice (discourse) of them shaving their arms for this purpose. Therefore, discourse can be a social practice involving communication of body ideal.

4.2 Body ideal ideology

Borders between life, body an art has been removed (Wollter, 2018, p. 96). Meaning that their communication have converged and now overlap each other, making it harder to distinguish between them. Thin women have been idealised through generations of norms and values (2018, p. 59). Being chubby in a society where thin is idealised equals not following the societal ideal and situates those with chubby bodies as non-admirable (2018, p. 59). A body ideal exists and gets reproduced in e.g., movies, books, and other mediums, while their communication is rarely variated from the societal ideal of how a body should look (2018, p. 59).

The recreational character of body ideal therefore gets manifested through a diversity of social practices in different mediums and are grounded in a society’s ideological structures defining the societal ideal for what is admirable and not.
Wollter (2018, p. 95) writes that it is possible to communicate oneself in all possible ways on Instagram: e.g., as a superhero or a monarch, through different shapes and filters. This point means that social media can be used to showcase one’s personality in endless ways. Likewise, a handful types of representations get considered as what to expect in certain contexts. E.g., violence gets naturalised at sport events as a natural social practice (Kronlöf, 2021, p. 65). Similarly, e.g., a certain pose or mood could be considered as a natural thing to communicate in fitness context.

In addition, what defines a real man’s body as an ideal may depend on context and include several things that cannot be affected, such as ones height (Kronlöf, 2021, p. 80). Meanwhile, those who do not fit into an ideal but still strive after it, could find a fitting through an alternative compensation, such as having a lot of money (2021, p. 80).

4.3 Critical discourse studies

In CDS, a social phenomenon can be conceptualised as a discourse (Wodak & Meyer, 2016, p. 17). Social phenomena are considered complex and require multidisciplinary critical examination to enable a breakdown of its complexity (Wodak 2012c, van Dijk 2013, as cited in Wodak & Meyer (2016, p. 2). Wodak and Meyer (2016, p. 2) emphasise critical discourse studies as applicable for several scientific disciplines due to their interdisciplinary useability for deconstructing complex social phenomena. Discourse can be anything from a political strategy, narrative, political strategy, text to an image (2016, p. 3). As an example of a fitness context: to represent oneself as a beast, one must have veiny body parts to prove their legitimacy under a dominating discourse where the identity of a beast is discursively anchored in visible veins. Therefore, a uniform method or theory for CDS does not exist (2016, p. 5).

Societal super-structures of dominant beliefs and values (ideologies) are often perceived by people as neutral and will therefore be taken for granted, resulting in that people will not find any reason of challenging its consequential practices (Wodak & Meyer, 2016, p. 9). E.g., a body ideal in fitness context could be that every fit person has abs and physical strength. Those who socially can prove themselves having both will probably do this through certain practices showcasing their abs and strength in some way. If these practices turn out to be dominant in relation to other practices, they can limit other people to think one-dimensionally and therefore control people to forget about alternatives to what is generally considered as common sense (2016, p. 9). For example, strong-man competitors often do not have abs but
could be considered as fit due to being strong – meaning that the absence of abs is not always a signification of not being fit.

This means that if members of a society think one-dimensionally, the members of the society have paradoxically trapped themselves into reducing space of alternative thinking. Consequentially, with reduced alternative thinking, they arguably get prohibited from challenging dominant structures of their society: e.g., why should everybody strive after visible abs when only being strong is enough to be considered as fit?
5 Methodology

5.1 Empirical framework

To investigate how Swedish male fitness influencers communicate male body ideal, it is relevant to analyse their recently published Instagram posts which explicitly are associated with fitness. In particular, Instagram posts that are referring to gym training or presenting an influencer’s body having an explicit relation to another object’s characteristics will be treated as valid empirical objects.

Considering upcoming empirical objects, any Instagram post can be structured with visual content and be combined with a descriptive text of linguistic elements. Worth pointing out is that there must be visual content for text to be posted on Instagram. This is because the interface for publishing a post does not allow text to be published without an image. However, both visual and linguistic choices will be taken into consideration when analysing Instagram posts due to images’ and texts’ mutually complementing character of symbiotic communication.

Otherwise, if one would not have analysed both image and image text, the overall interpretation of an Instagram post could miss essential information concerning what the influencer initially wanted to communicate. This would also conflict with the study’s reliability. Therefore, this study will operationalise tools from MCDA to analyse images with the image text in mind during the analysis of Instagram posts (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 30).

5.2 Critical discourse studies

Critical discourse studies (CDS) is a diverse paradigm for research. However, it can be narrowed down to a description as being a problem-oriented, eclectic tool for studying social phenomena hiding ideologies and power relations (Wodak and Meyer 2016, p. 4). In this sense, Wodak and Meyer (2016, p. 3) have stated guidelines for those wanting to conduct CDS as research method. The guidelines describe the necessity of formulating critical goals and to specify what methodology will be used to realise those goals. Following the guidelines will narrow down the methodological approach and improves the possibilities of conducting valid research. Otherwise, CDS could generate uninteresting results in relation to a study’s research questions due to CDS’ diverse nature of being able to be applied on any social phenomenon with several problem-oriented approaches from multiple perspectives.
To narrow down CDS for use as research method, the researcher needs to explicitly define their interests and positioning (subjectivity) to gathered empirical material and use tools from CDS as objective as possible. Hence, the goal for this study is to answer how male body ideal gets communicated through different ideological discourses and will be realised by using *denotation* and *connotation* as structural tools for analysing empirical data (Barthes, 1973; 1977, as cited in Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 49). The analysis will further advance its interpretations by using tools from multi-modal discourse analysis (Machin and Mayr, 2012), My subjective premise as researcher is hereby clarified as: I believe that the upcoming empirical data hides latent discourses concerning male body due to including *fitness* as spatial variable.

5.2.1 MCDA

Visual semiotic choices will be analysed in two steps: denotation and connotation, which according to Machin and Mayr (2012, p. 49) are clustered as two methodological steps for analysing visual content in a structural way. It is a division of what is objectively presented and what could subjectively be interpreted (Barthes, 1973; 1977, as cited in Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 49). E.g., seeing a male influencers spreading his arms, showcasing his biceps could be an objective interpretation of the event. By contrast, the pose could also be interpreted by connoting a formal pose in bodybuilding named *double biceps*, which requires cultural reconsideration to be acknowledged.

Words and images could be analysed in terms of their representation of entitling speakers in an ideological way (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 70). Images for example, could showcase actors with a selectively chosen *pose* and *gaze* communicating ideology (2012, pp. 70-75). As a hypothetical example: a male influencer could in the image present himself by directing his gaze outside the camera and highlighting his muscularity by a pose of spreading his arms while flexing his biceps. Together, they could e.g., ideologically be interpreted to communicate beliefs and values of a male being focused and strong.

Moreover, signs of *absence* can also contribute to a deepened understanding of an empirical object. To look for absences, according to Machin and Mayr (2012, p. 5), is to critically question taken-for-granted assumptions clustering ideas which appear as natural in society. Therefore, while studying what gets presented in influencers’ Instagram posts, it is necessary as a researcher to engage in what could be missing.
In addition, *iconography* will be added to the analysis schema which includes *attributes, settings* and *salience* (Machin and Mayr, 2012, pp. 51-56). Machin and Mayr (2012, pp. 51-56) present *attributes* as objects (e.g., training clothes) available in an image and could be questioned by a researcher in terms of what discourses they may contribute to produce. Secondly, *settings* consider the ordering of objects, how they are situated, e.g., how training clothes are fitted to one’s body. Thirdly, *salience* is used to analyse if an image’s colour, tone or focus has been designed to communicate something e.g., by manipulating colours or tones, or by generating focus by blurring the background (Machin & Mayr, 2012, pp. 51-56).

Representational strategies and iconography will together be used to enable the categorisation of communicational discourses and also explicitly define how body ideal is communicated.

**Table 1**
*Analysis schema consisting of three steps*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step 1</th>
<th>Step 2</th>
<th>Step 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Denotation of visual</td>
<td>Connotation of visual and linguistic elements.</td>
<td>Results get categorised by ideological discourses and how they communicate body ideal is problematised.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and linguistic elements</td>
<td>Additionally, MCDA tools will be operationalised onto the connotations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Own elaboration.

5.3 **Selection criteria for empirical objects**

The selection of empirical data will involve five accounts with at least 10,000 followers. All the accounts need to be managed by a male and this will be reassured by doing an exploratory analysis by looking at the accounts’ 20 latest posts before the main analysis starts. The amount of posts is limited to 20 posts due to that the time horizon for this study does not allow more data to be analysed.

Three posts will be selected from every account during the exploratory investigation. The selection will strive to choose images which explicitly have a differentiating (categorical) feature and generally could be considered as normal ways of representing the male body in context of fitness. E.g., if the image solely exposes the male fitness influencer during
workout, or if he is standing next to another object of explicit relevance to his body. The selection will be implemented in this way because of the investigative interest of wanting to categorise influencers’ communication into ideological discourses by analysing regularly occurring Instagram posts. There are no statistics to be presented in terms of how often these types of posts occur, but the empirical selection will mirror the most occurring ways for communicating the male body considering the influencers’ 20 latest Instagram posts.

However, to define an approximate time frame for the empirical data, the chosen influencers tend to post Instagram posts all from every day to every third day. This means that an analysed post may be minimum one day old and maximum 60 days old at the time that the empirical data was gathered.

Nevertheless, the images cannot be chosen if they connote to be dedicatedly posted to present the influencer’s prepared body shape for an upcoming bodybuilding competition. Such pictures are considered as not being valid for analysis of body ideal because their body’s presentation is dedicated to an upcoming competition, which has formal criteria for body shapes. The formal criteria are considered to prolong the distance between followers’ eventual perception of communicated male fitness body ideal, making it more difficult for them to recognize themselves in what is being communicated. Such pictures are therefore assumed to not equally communicate body ideal as other, naturally posted, pictures do. Additionally, competitions are not either considered to be a part of the non-competitive peoples’ daily lives and most of their followers are considered to be non-competitive.

Furthermore, for an Instagram account to be chosen as a part of this study’s empirical selection, the account needs to be managed and present the Swedish male fitness influencer in its posted images. Nevertheless, before choosing accounts, an exploratory pilot project was conducted. It was meant to try to define what generally counts as a border of becoming someone who is able to impact masses’ perceptions via social media (an influencer). In this sense, the term influencer has intentionally not been used during the pilot because it is more often used to name those sitting on top of the pyramid rather than referring to those who can influence masses. After the pilot, the border for becoming someone who is able to impact masses’ perceptions via social media was concluded to be at 10,000 followers.

Table 2

*List of selected Swedish male fitness influencers and their amount of followers*
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instagram account</th>
<th>Amount of followers 2022-05-09</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>@iamashkan</td>
<td>22.500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>@redirfitness</td>
<td>25.700</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>@akorahim</td>
<td>94.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>@henriklindh81</td>
<td>17.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>@km.fitness</td>
<td>21.100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Own elaboration.

5.4 Ethical considerations

Scientific research is increasingly being done on the internet because social interaction is increasing online (Eldén, 2020, p. 117). Eldén (2020, p. 117) states that internet’s development has gone faster than ever before which simultaneously also has made internet to play a bigger role for peoples life’s. Search engines have been developed so far that it is almost impossible to anonymise analysed social media content because citations are easily made searchable (2020, p. 117). This study does not intend to highlight any negative results. It intends instead to make the communicated body ideal visible for anyone interest in this field of research.

As a researcher, it is important to take special care considering the people being analysed, having their privacy and dignity in mind (Bechmann & Zevenbergen, 2019, p. 12). Major considerations should be taken considering that the fitness influencers on Instagram that are collected for this study are human subjects with feelings (Markham & Buchanan, 2012, p. 6). The chosen Instagram posts in this study all come from open Instagram accounts that anyone can access, thus being easily searchable and cannot be considered as private accounts (2012, p. 6). If an analysis of their communication can be in the interests of the common good, whilst not portraying anyone negatively, the analysis can be rationalised as ethically right.

6 Criticism

6.1 Not including theory about masculinity

The analytical positioning is argued to retain objectivity by not relying on traditional understandings of what is masculine. Otherwise, if this study would have relied on theoretical understandings of what masculinity is while analysing empirical data, it could disrupt the study’s objectivity. Therefore, the analysis is assumed to make less biased interpretations of what kind of male body ideal is communicated. Neither it is necessary to rely on traditional
understandings of masculinity to study today’s communication of what constructs a prevailing male body ideal. Therefore, a theoretical background defining masculinity is not present in this study.
7 Analysis

In this chapter follows five analysed influencers’ posts. The posts diversely consist of representations of the influencers themselves by showcasing an image and an image text. Every post will be argued to to be ideologically dominated in a certain way.

7.1 @iamashkan’s post

7.1.1 Denotation

In the image we see @iamashkan’s upper body with his face and gaze pointing outwards from image. His facial expression looks exhausted. His left arm is flexing his triceps and his upper body is in full focus in comparison to his background which is full of blurry, blue-coloured lights. He is wearing a red tank top and a black snap-back cap in a reversed way with the cap’s screen pointing backwards. On the tank top it says GASP and it is fitted to his body moderately – not tight and not loose. His ears are tucked in under the cap. There is not hair visible on his exposed skin than his facial beard.

In the post’s text it says “Something is coming, stay tuned” followed by a camera emoji and a tag @snoborgs. Moreover, hashtags are also written (appendix 1) in combination with tags as: @officialgasp, @mutantnation, @gymleco and @macromeals.se.

7.1.2 Connotation

Ideologically speaking, the image’s semiotic elements together arguably communicate ideas about that fitness males do not need to smile while expecting something, it is better to stay humble. Males are here portrayed as if they were cold hearted, acting like soldiers, i.e., exposing no emotions – only rational functionalism (Frangeur & Nordberg, 2009, p. 3).

Furthermore, this post argues that it is important to maintain the body’s fat at a low level by highlighting veiny arms, thus densifying a rational analogy between a fitness male body and a
beast’s characteristics (Kjeldsen, 2008, p. 44). Veins are in this case considered as indicators of how fit the male body is.

With such ideological ground, one could suggest that @iamashkan shaves his arms to expose his veins even more as a discursive practice (Gillberg, 2014, p. 11). Additionally, because he awaits something ahead of himself without exposing any positive face expressions, it means that being humble could be considered as another typical discursive social practice for fit males to practice. @iamashkan could in this analysis be ideologically considered as strong and quiet alone. The overall connotation is interpreted to communicate norms and beliefs representing the ideology of individualisation (Giddens & Sutton, 2021, p. 105).

This is because the absence of other people (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 5) portrays @iamashkan to just have been through a workout of training triceps by himself. Furthermore, the blurred background seems to consist of gym equipment and the image’s focus (2012, pp. 51-56) is set on his body, which raises notions of importance for the viewer. Additionally, the arm’s veins seem to be more visible than what is usual during resting heart rate. This portrays @iamashkan as being irregularly strong and self-dependent.

Moreover, standing in such position is culturally known in the sphere of fitness as a side triceps pose (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 74) for showcasing muscularity and aesthetics of the triceps muscle. This raises even more importance for his arm’s muscles, as if they were attributes with certain settings (2021, pp. 51-56). Although, the gaze is usually supposed to be directed in the same direction as the triceps is showcased. Because he exhaustedly directs his gaze slightly upwards outside the image, with his ears tucked in the cap, one could argue that @iamashkan’s gaze (2012, p. 70) is focused on something ahead of him. He does this with a humble approach, as if he is prepared for meeting what is coming towards him. Having such approach connotes his control over “the line between nerves and excitement.” (Khan, 2021).

Because he wears a mesh ventilated cap in reverse, it is interpreted as an attribute with a setting (Machin & Mayr, 2012, pp. 51-56) which functionally hides his bald head which enables him to train more efficiently without a disturbing screen in front of his face. Otherwise, wearing a cap in a reversed way has no other values than aesthetical ones, as if it considered to be cool (Frangeur & Nordberg, 2009, p. 99). This connotes that he has regulated his own appearance to be efficient and cool while facing what is in ahead of him (his fears) (Khan, 2021). Being bald is therefore not cool, making his cap function as a masculinity-creating marker (2009, p. 99).
Furthermore, there is no hair on his arm and his skin has low amounts of fat, which supposedly optimises the exposure of his veins on his arm. Moreover, the picture has supposedly been manipulated to have a higher saturation, thus highlighting the veins – making them look bigger. This is a way of articulating importance for the viewer (2012, p. 203) by giving salience to the veins by exaggerating their definition (2012, p. 55). His skin is also in lighter tones (2012, p. 55) than the rest of the image, attracting the viewers eyes to what is important. Undoubtedly, the arm’s muscular characteristics and his aesthetical veins of his triceps are connected to be the main event of this picture. Consequently, he is connoted to communicate that he is performing well and is ready to take the next step and do even better.

Considering the text, it explicitly says that @iamashkan is waiting for something and that everybody else also should be paying attention to what is coming, reconfirming his humble focus. The hashtags connote his classification as a social actor to be functionalised (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 81) as a beast and individualised (2012, p. 80) because all human characteristics are interpreted to refer to himself, such as: #dedication, #discipline and #focus. Consequently, he personifies the photographer @snobergs while impersonalising @officialgasp, @mutantnation, @gymleco and @macromeals.se (2012, p. 79). This is probably a signification of his success as a networking influencer having a photographer and business relations with fitness corporations. These connotations go in line with Khans’s (2021) list of how to unleash one’s inner beast: e.g., generating business, managing nerves, being humble and trusting oneself.

Furthermore, @mutantnation is specifically more extreme than other general supplement brands because of their slogan “Leave humanity behind” (Mutant, n.d.). The same reasoning goes for @officialgasp (Gasp, n.d.) considering other regular clothing distributors as e.g., H&M, and @macromeals (Macro Meals, n.d.) considering nutrition in comparison to regular food distributors. Being associated with extreme brands is interpreted to reassure @iamashkans status ready for whatever is coming. Summarising, the connotations of being ready for whatever refer to how one is expected to act in an individualised society to be successful.
7.2 @redirfitness’ post

7.2.1 Denotation

This post is published by @redirfitness and consists of an image representing four males in a gym. The three participants to the right are influencers who are a part of this study’s empirical data selection – including @iamashkan to the most right. All of the participants’ clothing have uniform colouring. One of them has a tattoo on his forearm. They all smile and look into the camera’s lens, while @iamashkan squints with his eyes. @redirfitness, on the other hand, has shorts instead of pants, exposing his legs’ muscularity. On every shirt there is a print stating Gymleco and on the rest of their clothing there are brands as GASP, Better Bodies, Adidas, Nike and Reebok. @iamashkan wears a cap while the others have stylised their hairstyle in a similar way – the hairs point slightly backwards and those with beards have their beards cut short. Everybody flexes one arm in a similar positioning while with the other arm having physical contact with another participant.

In the post’s text it says: “A part of Team @gymleco Family” with a heart and fire emoji and reference to a photograph’s Instagram page. Right beneath the text has @redirfitness posted a comment looking like it belongs to the post’s original text description, consisting of hashtags, tags, discount codes and a reference to a coach (Appendix 2).

7.2.2 Connotation

In this post we could connote that the post communicates values of group affiliation and happiness through discursive social practices (Gillberg, 2014, p. 11) such as the selectively chosen arm posing, unitary clothing, smiling face expressions towards the viewer and by having physical contact between the participants represented as a family. This picture is seemingly contradictory concerning masculinity because physical contact is traditionally considered as non-masculine behaviour (Fragneur & Nordberg, 2009, pp. 214-215).

Consequently, the overall connotation is interpreted to communicate norms and beliefs
representing ideology of collectivism because the participants are connoted to communicate as a unitary group rather than separate individuals (2009, p. 32).

This post’s structure explicitly connotes a representational attitude (Machin and Mayr, 2012, p. 70) of group affiliation and happiness because every participant smiles while looking into the camera’s lens, determining their gaze (2021, pp. 70-74). Due to their uniform clothing, they connote to have organised themselves as a solid team through their choice of attributes and settings (2012, pp. 51-56). Every participant’s flexed arm flexes their biceps, triceps, forearm and hand – connoting strength and unity as a selectively chosen pose (2012, pp. 74-75), reaffirming their collective status. Moreover, the picture’s saturation has been manipulated to give salience (2012, pp. 54-55) to their arms, and non-hairy legs of @redirfitness, muscularity. Consequently, this image draws more attention to the participants as a unified group of muscular men, rather than representing them as individuals flexing their muscles individually.

Moreover, the text explicitly communicates the same values in the picture by stating that they are a part of the @gymleco family, which is a classification of collectivism (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 80), which once again reaffirms their collective status. They all connote to have a formal sponsor contract with @gymleco, portraying them as formal professionals of fitness. Therefore, they are not connoted as a family with personal relations. Instead, they are connoted to be a corporative family consisting of professional relations for marketing the Gymleco brand.

Because those with hair stylise it backwards and those with beard have it cut short, it is connoted to be an example of discursive social practice for idealising body parts (Gillberg, 2014, p. 11). The hair and beard style acts in this case as an extension for their bodies unifying representation.
7.3  @akorahim’s post

7.3.1  Denotation

Here we see a Mercedes-Benz steering wheel and the instrument panel of the car, with GPS activated. Two legs are exposed under the steering wheel with a glimpse of short shorts at the bottom of the image. The sky is also represented with blue and white colours.

The post’s text denotes @akorahim as a fan of Mercedes-Benz and that he owns a car model named A200 with AMG package. He writes that he never gets tired of driving the car, that it is efficient, fast, really good looking and that it has very good comfort. @akorahim also tags his car service company and recommends them because they are professional, and both sell new and pleasing cars (Appendix 3).

7.3.2  Connotation

Ideologically speaking, @akorahim is considered communicating body ideal consisting of muscular and veiny thighs in relation to being efficient and fast. This is being done through discursive social practice (Gillberg, 2014, p. 11) as holding relaxed onto the sports car’s steering wheel while conversely flexing his thighs and linking his comfort and muscularity to a sports car’s glorified characteristics: efficient and fast. The overall connotation is interpreted to communicate norms and beliefs representing muscular and veiny legs as a body ideal, while prolonging the idealisation by referring to the sports car’s characteristics. The reference also works as a extended technique for communicating what is masculine (Frageur & Nordberg, 2009, p. 74). Consequentially, by linking the body and car together, the Instagram post materialises (2009, p. 19) @akorahim’s body and the sports car as having converged and now overlap each other (Wolter, 2018, p. 96).

Because @akorahim wears abnormally short shorts for doing something else than training, he connoted to be on his way to train or is recently done training. His legs are flexed and non-
hairy, which suggests that they are shaved. Therefore, his legs act as attributes with a certain setting (Machin & Mayr, 2012, pp. 51-56) while simultaneously also constituting his pose (2012, pp. 74-75). This is because his thighs controversially are flexed while he presents himself as relaxed. Flexing while being in a comfort zone is controversial because, generally considered, when something is comfortable is the body not supposed to flex. This means that he values the veins and muscularity of his thighs as something important for his identity. Consequentially, his legs act as objectified attributes due to being materialised, which we will come into later in this text.

Furthermore, his type of car, Mercedes, is a well-known comfortable luxury car brand with AMG-versions having additional sport characteristics. If he would not have considered efficient and fast as important self-representational characteristics for himself, he could assumably have chosen to buy a regular A200 without the AMG sport characteristics as addons. This is a logic assumption based on the fact that the AMG addons add aesthetical speed and efficiency to a car, i.e., by bigger rims and a spoiler, etc... Because he sits flexed in a sports car and refers to it as comfortable while holding the steering wheel in a similar way, it reaffirms the connotation of @akorahim’s interest of materialising his thighs through Mercedes Benz and AMG’s characteristics.

The embedded values of his grip over the steering wheel is connotated to be exaggerated through a rhetorical hyperbole (Kjeldsen, 2008, p. 218) linked to his body. The grip is considered to be an abnormally relaxed way of holding a steering wheel of a sports car. Due to its abnormality, the grip furtherly forges him and the car together. This connotes him as being closely related to the car and that he has been driving it comfortably for a long period of time. In addition, because he refers to used cars (in Swedish: begagnade bilar) by naming them “behagande” bilar (in English: comfortable cars), he strengthens the communication of Mercedes as being a comfortable car to drive. This is an example of how he classifies the Mercedes Benz in terms of its functions (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 81). Such communicative acts are considered as discursive social practices (Gillberg, 2014, p. 11) communicating materialising norms and values about his thighs’ muscularity as something natural. This is being done by him legitimising his flexed thighs through the functional realm of Mercedes Benz AMG of being comfortable, efficient and fast.
7.4 @henriklindh81’s post

7.4.1 Denotation
A topless, veiny and muscular man stands in the centre of this picture, wearing black and red shorts. One of his forearms have a tattoo, while both have jewellery around their wrist and his neck. He holds onto two packages of supplements containing multi-vitamins while wearing sunglasses. His face is angled, making him look outside the picture while his eyes are hidden under his sunglasses. The background is blurred but the picture seems to be taken outside during a sunny day. In the post’s text it says: Don’t forget to take your vitamins kids, following with some hashtags (Appendix 4). His hairstyle is cut short and stylised backwards.

7.4.2 Connotation
Here, ideological values are expressed as him being strong and alone. These values get manifested through discursive social practices (Gillberg, 2014, p. 11) practiced by @henriklindh81 when he flexes his muscular and veiny upper body in a formal pose for fitness competitions. There are no emotions connoted in this post, only an encouraging message telling his followers, in a humoristic way, to not forget to consume their multivitamin supplements. Humour is not used to generate laughs, it is conversely used to make his followers buy the promoted products (Kjeldsen, 2008, p. 21). The overall connotation is therefore interpreted as @henriklindh81 persuasively tries to advertise the supplements through his body’s characteristics. Therefore, his message is ideologically set in an ideological structure of commercialism, where the focus arguably is to promote products.

In the image, his body connotes being some form of walking advertising pillar. This is because his upper body’s musculature and the supplements he holds on to is what is in focus of this picture, giving them salience by blurring the background (Machin & Mayr, 2012, pp.
The pose (2012, pp. 74-75) showing a rotated, flexed upper body in this manner is culturally known in the fitness industry as a formal pose for fitness competitions where the shoulders’ wideness and the waist’s smallness are articulated as important (2012, p. 203). By implementing this pose while holding the supplements, it makes his body and the supplements to act as attributes with selectively chosen settings (2012, pp. 51-53) to connote an advertising pillar. The sunlight in this case highlights his shoulders, chest and arm musculature, raising even more salience to certain body parts (2012, pp. 54-56). Connoting more specifically the importance of his arms, shoulders and chest musculature.

Furthermore, with his gaze (2012, pp. 70-74) being focused on something outside the picture, while his body’s pose is rotated towards the viewer, it connotes that something else than the viewer has caught his attention and that he is a focused, busy man. Busy because he can promote supplements while focusing on something else. Consequentially, he is connoted to implement a discursive social practice (Gillberg, 2014, p. 11) for advertising commercialised products by flexing his upper body in a selective way, portraying him as a businessman who is busy and successful. Because the connotations of @henriklinhd81 portray him as a busy and successful businessman, they reaffirm the idea of his post implementing a discursive social practice making his body function as an advertising pillar.

Moreover, adults are generally known as role models for kids. E.g., only adults regularly call kids for kids while kids call each other something else, like friends or boys and girls. Consequently, because he encourages his followers to not forget their vitamins, and names them kids, he legitimises his communication as coming from above, thus generating a hierarchical relationship to his followers. Furthermore, he classifies his followers as a generic type of collective (Machin & Mayr, 2012, pp. 80-81) by naming them kids. Logically, if the followers are kids and no other person is around @henriklinhd81, then the absence of people (2012, p. 5) must mean that he indirectly refers to himself as a role model communicating with the kids. Due to communicating himself as being a role model (Wollter, 2018, p 95) he legitimises himself as an advertising pillar.

Moreover, with the sunglasses, @henriklinhd81 hides his personality, which is another attribute in this image (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 51-56). Because the sunglasses hides his face, he connotes a person without emotional character. Emotional expressions are therefore absent (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 5). Instead, expressions take place through his flexed upper body, with shoulders, chest and arm musculature in focus. Due to him expressing himself
solely through his musculature, and no other person is present, he is connoted as strong and alone.

7.5 @km.fitness’ post

7.5.1 Denotation

@km.fitness stands in the centre of the picture, onto a treadmill. He wears a camouflage t-shirt. He has on-ear headphones covering his ears. His thighs are exposed by wearing short shorts and the thighs are veiny. Considering his upper body’s skin, only his forearms and face are exposed. His hairstyle is stylised backwards and his beard is cut short. One of his forearms has a tattoo on it. The background showcases a corner of white walls. His face is angled outside of the image with raised eyebrows.

The post’s text (Appendix 5) states that he is not interested in moving fast in wrong direction and instead wants to move slowly in the right direction.

7.5.2 Connotation

The connotations of @km.fitness’ post is similar to @iamashkan’s connotative results. They both have an overall connotation referring to ideology of individualisation by putting him and his goals in the centre of importance. They both implement discursive social practicing (Gillberg, 2014, p. 11) highlighting a certain muscular and veiny body part in combination with a non-emotional face expression connoting a humble attitude.

@km.fitness highlights his veiny and muscular thighs by having irregularly short shorts and has manipulated the tones and saturation of the picture for this reason (Machin & Mayr, 2012, pp. 51-56). His background is not blurred as @iamashkan’s but situates him in a corner of whiteness and therefore connotes him to be alone. In addition, he also wears headphones (an attribute) which makes him appear unsocial for the moment through its setting (2012, pp. 51-
reaffirming his loneliness. He does not either show any emotional expressions. Instead, he only raises his eyebrows, connoting to his gaze to focus on something ahead of him (2012, pp. 70-74). This means that the post is dedicatedly supposed to highlight him as an individual having goals.

The moment that this picture was taken was either during or directly after a workout. This is because the veins on his thighs seem to be more visible than what is usual during a resting heart rate. He is connoted as warming up or doing post-workout cardio on the treadmill. Due to having his hands on his hips, his pose (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 74) is connoted as being weighed down by something, as if what is ahead of him weighs him down. His upper body is connoted as less important with the camouflaged t-shirt in relation to his veiny thighs. The lightning hits his face from above while the image’s tones and saturation seems to be manipulated, generating salience to his veiny thighs and his face (Machin & Mayr, 2012, pp. 51-56).

This post reminds about @iamashkan’s post – both are selectively exposing veiny body parts while covering the rest of their body with clothing while connoting that they have something tough ahead of them. Other people are absent (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 5) which connotes him as being a lonely and strong man with goals that he wants to reach.

In addition, because @km.fitness text emphasises that where he is going is more important than the speed he is travelling in, it portrays him as being focused on a specific goal that he respects. Such portrayal connotes a humble attitude for trying to reach his goal.
8 Presentation of results and discussion

The study’s results point out three dominant discourses that Swedish male fitness influencers have been communicating on Instagram. Namely: individualised, collectivised and commercial discourse.

8.1 The individualised discourse

This discourse situates the male as strong and alone and communicates prominently muscular, veiny and non-hairy arms and thighs as a body ideal for male fitness people. Every chosen fitness influencer communicates through this discourse in at least one of their Instagram posts.

The individualised discourse consequently communicates a humble attitude, representing a lonely participant with his gaze directed at something else than the viewer. What is being communicated is solely limited to highlighting the influencer and his future, letting his body speaking for him. There are no signs of social interaction either. The image is mostly combined with a text that either acts encouraging or speaks of the influencer and his own goals.

It has been identified that muscular arms and thighs get idealised in two ways. Furthermore, the idealised body parts are suggested to have visible veins and to be shaved from hair. However, shaving arms and legs is not traditionally considered as a masculine stereotype and is generally as something non-admirable for males to do (Wollter, 2018, p. 59). Conversely, in context of fitness it is considered as one of the most prominent characterising ideals communicated through the individualised discourse. Moreover, not only does physical elements get idealised but also does the aesthetical expressions communicate humble attitude. In this discourse, men are not supposed to get over-excited, nor act happy, when speaking of their own goals or act encouraging. Instead, they are supposed to be humble and strong while being alone.

Moreover, the individualised discourse communicates norms and values reminding of what usually characterises a narcist due to presenting the influencers as self-occupied whilst striving to achieve their own goals, as if their life was a journey (Lakoff 1987; Lakoff and Johnson, 1980, 1999; as cited in Wodak & Meyer, 2016, p. 8). According to Wodak and Meyer’s (2016, p. 9), this discourse communicates the self-occupation as something taken for granted as if every man should be self-occupied while working towards goals, thus avoid eye-contact. Despite of them following their goals, one could ask what happens when such norms
and values get internalised (Howarth, 2007, p. 26) by the mass of followers receiving this kind of portrayal of fitness males acting self-occupied? Additionally, from another perspective, could peoples motivation for social interaction get affected? For example, if one would have internalised norms and values from this discourse, their motivation for asking for help could get reduced because needing help could be considered as being weak. Men are supposed to be strong, making being weak as something non-admirable (Wollter, 2018, 59).

Additionally, is avoiding eye-contact with people considered as what to expect (Kronlöf, 2021, p, 65) from a fitness person’s behaviour to retain the idealised loneliness? To criticise such anti-social behaviour would be to argue for that the discourse portrays men as existing in a one-dimensional realm (Wodak & Meyer, 2016, p. 9). Face-to-face interaction is clearly what is missing in this discourse and is considered essential for interaction between people for generating meaningful social relationships (Aronson, 2020, p. 366). Neither does falling in love with oneself not necessarily need to come with a reductionist effect on ones motivation to interact with others.

However, because this discourse communicates male fitness influencers as self-occupied, strong and alone, it could have a reductionist feature. This feature could assumably limit male fitness people to think one-dimensionally and thereby make them strive to avoid social interaction (Wodak & Meyer, 2016, p. 9). This is because being strong alone is what makes a real man in this discourse (Kronlöf, 2021, p. 80).

8.2 The collective discourse

The second identified discourse of communication is conversely different by including what was missing in the individualised discourse: eye contact with the viewer, more than one person and smiling face expressions. The prominence of idealising arms as muscular was retained by the influencers unitarily flexing arms towards the camera. Although, choice of clothing and physical touch was particular for this discourse and is interpreted to function as a symbolic link between the influencers, communicating group affiliation. Therefore, the communication of social interaction, group affiliation and positive emotions are considered as most prominent differences from the individualised discourse. Concerning body ideal has muscular arms and thighs been communicated more prominently, thus following earlier communicational techniques for idealising body parts as compared with the individualised discourse.
Moreover, group affiliation communicates positive feelings and acts as a norm for social interaction. Thus, it motivates people to interact with each other. Additionally, this discourse communicates values of spending time together and eye-contact as normative when more than one person is at present, which is interpreted as this discourse’s common sense (Wodak & Meyer, 2016, p. 9). Consequentially, the collective discourse arguably contrasts the individualised discourse in a significant way.

Considering the collective discourse from a critical perspective, one could overview that this discourse was only represented in one post and should be considered as rare in relation to the other two. Due to this could the collective discourse also eventually communicate an idea of when influencers socially interact in real life with each other, they do it with in terms of business. This is because assumably all influencers in this discourse are connoted having a formal business contract with the same corporation: Gymleco.

This means that their social interaction could be interpreted as not being solely driven by the will of making a friendship, instead it is also portrayed as doing business. In theory, the collective discourse might as well act as a signification for advertising Gymleco as a corporation. This is due to their unitary clothing being one of the most unifying elements in this discourse. Therefore, the collective discourse could be explained as encouraging social interaction through not only friendship, but also business.

The business interpretation has similarities to the individualised discourse, where the influencers are supposed to rationally strive after their own goals. Therefore, even if the collective discourse is communicating in a significantly different manner through social interaction, group affiliation and positive emotions, it still is interpreted to communicate fitness males as being determined to achieve their goals by doing business.

However, this discourse was only identified in one of 19 Instagram posts, meaning that there possibly is more to investigate concerning the collective discourse. However, one analysed Instagram post is still argued as enough empirical data to validly identify its communication as an own discourse communicating male fitness body ideal.

8.3 The commercial discourse

The most prominently communicated body ideal in the commercial discourse was muscular and non-hairy arms, shoulders, chest and thighs, with notably less focus on visible veins if
compared to the individualised discourse. Furthermore, the influencer was positioned in the centre, as in the individualised discourse, but with an object in close proximity to his body.

Thus, the commercial discourse gets identified when a post consists of a male fitness body and a commercialised product that is referred to by rhetoric’s such as humour or exaggeration (Kjeldsen, 2008, pp. 21, 218). Additionally, what is unique for the commercial discourse is its process of materialising body characteristics as if they were advertising props. In particular, the materialisation process happens through two different flows. Either a product’s characteristics gets transferred to the body, or the body transfers its characteristics to a product.

For example, when a product is being highlighted, a muscular body is centred in the image’s centre. In this case, the body characteristics are interpreted to be transferred to a product by the influencer holding the product in his hand. His body in this case interpreted to act as an advertising pillar. Worth noting is that when a product is referred to by text, it is done through rhetoric’s which do not explicitly raise notions of the products own characteristics by using adjectives. Instead, the product solely absorbs all characteristics of the male fitness body holding the product.

Conversely, when a product’s characteristics is being transferred to a male fitness influencer’s body, it gets more complex in terms of the varieties of how the body and product relates to each other. To enable a male fitness influencer’s body to be associated with another product’s characteristics, the influencer must explicitly refer to the product’s characteristics through the image’s text. Hence, the reference is implemented by naming at least one adjective describing the object’s characteristics that he wants his body to be associated with. By the use of adjectives, they clarify what characteristics the body is supposed to absorb, thus materialising the male fitness body.

Moreover, @henriklinth81 was most prominently communicating through this discourse because of showcasing his upper body as a commercial pillar for fitness products, such as supplements and training accessories. In addition, @akorahim was relating his thighs muscularity and veins to the characteristics of AMG, as if his legs were efficient and fast (adjectives). Furthermore, @iamashkan also had a post with a fat (adjective) vehicle behind him in the image, which unfortunately had no room for analysis. Being fat is a metaphor in Swedish for being big (Kjeldsen, 2008, p. 7). Which could connote a relationship to @iamashkan’s muscularity.
Furthermore, as mentioned in the introduction: @lucassimonsson is ranked as a top male fitness influencer (Starngage, 2022). Although, he posts totally different content on his Instagram when compared to this study’s selection of male fitness influencers. Therefore, the identified discourses for communicating male fitness ideal should be considered as a minor part of how diversely body ideal can be communicated in context of fitness.

8.4 Darker clothing and masculinity

There was arguably another body ideal identified which was not critically enough thought of during the analysis. Subsequently, after the analysis, it was realised that the influencers’ clothing only consisted of either black and white, or dark versions of grey. red, green or blue colouring. No image denoted an influencer wearing e.g., neon coloured clothing. This is interesting in relation to Björknerts (2019, p. 77-94) study which had some female fitness influencers who used neon coloured, or lighter toned, clothing. Light and dark tones have traditionally been divided by what is masculine and feminine (Frangeur & Nordberg, 2009, p. 83). Thus, Swedish male fitness influencers are interpreted to reproduce a division by idealising male bodies being limited to wearing dark clothing.

8.4.1 Additional unifying link

Notably, every influencer that had hair on his head and beard on his face were similarly cut. Neither was the recurrence of such hair and beard styling noticed during the analysis. This means that all influencers, except @iamashkan, communicated their hair and beard styles as an aesthetical ideal, overlapping all three discourses. The recurrence of having similar hair and beard styling could therefore be interpreted as common sense and should be considered as an additional naturalised body ideal for male fitness people to have (Gillberg, 2014, p. 11).

8.5 Compensating for missing body ideal and a suggestion for further research

Because this study has identified discourses for idealising characteristics of a male fitness body, it has also shown how the communication of body ideal can promote a certain attitudes for men to approach while being alone, interacting with people and relating to objects. Because the discourses’ construction were not explicit while before the analysis, they could arguably be considered as something to expect Swedish male fitness influencers to communicate (Kronlöf, 2021, p. 65). Nevertheless, the communicated ideals concerning developed muscularity is not achievable overnight and can be tough achieving for those following what is being idealised. Due to the difficulty of achieving the idealised body, the ideals could assumably lead the influencers’ followers into entering a negative spiral of
insatiable desires of being someone else (Björknert, 2019, p. 67), or eventually suffer from muscle dysmorphia (Olivardia et al., 2000, p. 1291).

Generally considered, to be associated with the top of a pyramid is usually something appreciated. Although, even if body ideals exist in society, it does not always mean that everyone follows what is on top of the body ideal pyramid. Particularly, some people strive after being themselves and could eventually try to be as unique as possible. This perspective is worth considering, otherwise this study’s results could be interpreted as stating that everyone who follows these influencers on Instagram are trying to be like them. However, this is not the case.

Hence, those who actively try to achieve these goals are considered to be managed through a relationship of power where the influencers have power to idealise their bodies characteristics through discursive communication (Wodak and Meyer 2016, p. 4). The discourses are identified to either idealise certain physical and aesthetical elements of the male fitness body, promote commercialised products and also communicate attitudes for how a male should behave concerning being social.

In theory, there are people who are more prominent of being affected from such idealising communication, thus trying to achieve what has been idealised as being a real man (Kronlöf, 2021, p. 80). For example, people with low self-esteem often search themselves to a group (Fennell. 2021, p. 32). This could be a cultural collective sharing the same social identity. If one with low self-esteem would like to be identified as a fitness person, as in the case of the influencers, this person is argued to be more prominent to get trapped into the problem of insatiable desires, thus eventually suffer from muscle dysmorphia. This clarifies that the relationship between an influencer in power and his followers is considered as a diverse spectrum of how prominently power is exerted. It depends on the follower’s individual situation. Some could possibly take the discursive communication with a grain of salt; others could dedicate their time to look and behave like their role models.

Another critical perspective considers the idealised hairstyle: how do all bald people feel about such an aesthetical body ideal? Is @iamashkan wearing a cap because the others have a uniform hairstyle to compensate the hair that he does not have (Kronlöf, 2021, p. 80)? There is objectively nothing wrong with being bald, hair falls off by age. Nevertheless, society could believe that it is wrong, making people think that being bald is wrong (2021, p. 65) and stigmatise them (Therrien, 2018). Consequentially, this process would be an example of how
bald people would suffer from subordinating consequences from an idealised hairstyle (Stoddart, 2007, p. 200). The bald ones could, e.g., instead of trying to reach the ideal of having hair, do the opposite and try to hide what they are missing under a cap. Hence, the idea of people avoiding what is idealised in society opens up for further research concerning body ideal. Earlier research has not studied what people actively do to avoid them, as an escape from the insatiable desires that Björknert (2019, p. 67) referred to.

Furthermore, both Karsay et al. (2021, pp. 61-63) and Barlett et al. (2008, pp. 283-284) pointed out self-objectification as one of the main reasons for why their empirical subjects experienced dissatisfaction from media exposure and therefore could conclude that dissatisfaction has a relation to media exposure. Although, they have not investigated if their empirical subjects’ different attitudes towards the implementation of self-objectification leading to the dissatisfaction. This is an interesting question because the boys’ attitudes were less affected from self-objectification in relation to how girls' attitudes were affected (2021, p. 72). One hypothetical explanation for this is that boys have more efficient techniques than girls for avoiding comparing themselves with others on Instagram.

Nevertheless, such further research will probably not be able to fully define the causality between media exposure and self-objectification leading to dissatisfaction (Karsay et al., 2021, pp. 76-77; Barlett, 2008, p. 284). However, it could contribute with knowledge about why Instagram is less of a double-edged sword for boys than for girls by investigating how idealised attitudes that are gender specific interfere with self-objectification (2021, pp. 76-77). This is due that the female fitness influencers in Björknert’s (2019, p. 65) study communicated energy and happiness which is contrasts this study’s idealised male attitudes: exhausted, busy and humble.

Summarising, the individual and commercial discourse is arguably relating to over-valuing the appearance of muscularity, similarly as fitspiration (Boepple et al., 2016, pp. 132-135) and thinspiration websites (Boepple and Thompson, 2016, pp. 98-100) were doing while idealising women as thin and attractive. To develop this study’s results even further, one could either dig deeper into the spectrum of fitness or interview some of those who follow this study’s empirical subjects and see if they experience themselves going through the process of self-objectification (Karsay et al., 2021, pp. 61-63; Barlett et al., 2008, pp. 283-284).
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10 Appendices

10.1 Appendix 1 - @iamaskan

10.1.1 Post 1

#aesthetic #focus #gym #muscle #fit #fitfam #gohard #beastmode #bodybuilding #ifbb 
discipline #gianz #bodybuilding #aesthetic #physique #discipline #training #workout #motivation 
dedication #hardwork #lifestyle #healthiswealth #healthy #fitness 
explore #fitnessmotivation #gymlife #Workout #motivation #gasp
10.1.2 Post 2

iamashkan • Följer

Got some goals to Crush 😍

Vad har ni för mål? Jag är nyfiken oavsett om det är träningsrelaterat eller ej så dela med er så kan vi motivera och inspirera varandra 😊

@sloborgs
@mutantnation
@officialgasp [ kod Ash15 😞 ]
@macromeals.se
@gymleco
online coaching | iamashkan.com
#goals
#mutantnation
#motivatedmindset
#driven
#drivenbypassion
#nothingimpossible

Love from 💛

Publicera

10.1.3 Post 3

iamashkan • Följer

Sol, fredag och en fet monstertruck vad mer kan man önska sig? Önskar er alla en trevlig helg. Spid kärlek & positiva viber och gör det ni mår bäst av så maxar ni livet😊

#happyminddappylife
#goodvibestribe
#doggeram
#doggeramtrx
#stayhappy
#fredag
#tjänjag 😃
#positivelivesonly 😍

3 x

Publicera
10.2 Appendix 2 - @redirfitness

10.2.1 Post 1

#betterbodies #officialgasp #nocco #deltagym #stockholm #sverige #dallas #malmö #kristianstad #helsingborg #göteborg #kurdistan #kurd #dohuk #hewler #kurdish #classicphysique #bodybuilding #fitness #shapeoftheday #model #caseyourdream

- 15% Discount on @officialgasp or @officialbetterbodies use Redir15 and support 🤝

- 20% Discount on your first time at @manuellaterapeuten use Redirfitness

- 15% Discount on @gymleco when you use Redir15

- Team 👏

@gymleco

@ironbetterbodies
@officialbetterbodies

@officialgasp

@nocco

-

Coach: @jonathanfogelberg

10.2.2 Post 2
10.2.3 Post 3

Är du också Mercedes fan 😍

10.3 Appendix 3 - @akorahim

10.3.1 Post 1
Nu har jag haft A200 med AMG paket. Jag tröttnar inte på hur skön den är att köra, smidig, bra komfort, snabb och sjukt snygg.

Tack till @olofssonauto som hjälpte mig med bilen och med otroligt bra service. @mercedesbenz

Är du ute efter köpa ny bil så rekommenderar jag Olofsson Auto starkt. Proffsig och kunniga!

De har Mercedes-Benz nybilshall och en hall med ”behagande” bilar. Du hittar allt från personbilar till supersportbil.

In och kolla in deras bilar www.olofssonauto.com

10.3.2 Post 2
10.3.3 Post 3

10.4 Appendix 4 - @henriklinhd81

10.4.1 Post 1

#bodybuilding #mensphysique #classicphysique #npc #ifbb #gains #muscle #fit #fitness #marbella #realpadelclubmarbella
10.4.2 Post 2

henrikindh81 • Följ

henrikindh81 When the pump hits ...
My favorite "Pvo"
Monster pump from @tesla_nutrition with 0.7 l water + 2 gr extra pink salt.
Pvo + plenty water = extra salt
Gain 🤝Fitness 🤝Men's Physique

@giibbenaktive
#gasp #betterbodies #gymleco #fit #fitness #mensphysique
#bodybuilding #classicphysique #ifbb #npc #noacco #nygpe #body
#personaltrainer #marbella #diet #shredded

1 v

Lägg till kommentar...
Don’t worry about speed, direction is more important. I rather be moving slowly in the right direction than fast in the wrong one. 💯📈
km.fitness • Följ

km.fitness Livet är alltid lite roligare med lite pump 😊

2 v

Lägg till kommentar...