



# Instagram and body image: Motivation to conform to the “Instabod” and consequences on young male wellbeing

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## Abstract

The current paper explores how male Instagram users' (MIU) perceptions of body image and behavior are affected by the exposure to fitness hashtags, and the consequences on their wellbeing. For this purpose, in-depth interviews were conducted with #fitfam MIU with different levels of engagement. Low-engagement MIU with low body-esteem long for the “instabod” and engage in body transformation efforts to follow the fitness trend popularized by Instagram, to emulate peers and Instagram celebrities, to gain popularity and to appear successful. Instagram community members use positive and negative reinforcements to strengthen body internalization. The body transformation effort motivates low-engagement MIU to engage more, which has various effects on wellbeing: on one side, they feel anxious and in competition with other peers which often leads to muscle dysmorphia symptoms; on the other side, they feel more masculine with higher self-confidence, they have higher motivation to stay fit and to eat healthily.

## KEYWORDS

body image, Instagram, male Millennials, wellbeing

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Body image concerns and eating disorders are escalating in many developed countries, both for females and males (Lovejoy, 2014). Eating disorders bear the highest death rate of any mental health illness among males, with 400,000 males in the United Kingdom alone suffering (2017). In the United States, eating disorders will affect 10 million males at some point in their lives (Wade, Keski-Rahkonen, and Hudson, 2011).

Traditional mass media are often accused of being responsible for manipulating young male body image perceptions (Barlett *et al.*, 2008). In image-based social media networks, such as Instagram, consumers' bodies are constantly on display and under scrutiny. Considering the popularity of social media among youths, especially teenagers, and the power of picture-based content that users share, it is crucial to investigate how exposure to this new channel affects body image perceptions and behavior, and particularly the consequences on consumers' psychological and physical wellbeing. Instagram is a mobile photo sharing network application, which allows its users to edit and share photos as well as videos. The mobile photo sharing app is one of the most popular social networks worldwide and reached one billion monthly active users in 2018, up from 800 million in 2017 and 600 million in December 2016 (Statista, 2017). Instagram users mainly post image-based content and can either like, comment on or repost other users' pictures. Tsai and Men's (2013) categorization has been applied in the current study to divide consumer engagement with social media into two categories: passive engagement, which involves reading posts and viewing pictures/videos; and an active one, which involves activities such as posting, sharing a post, or commenting. Thus, for this study, posting by using the fitness hashtag #fitfam denoted a high level of engagement (i.e., active participation), whereas viewing and browsing (passive participation) denoted low engagement.

Over recent years, there has been growing scholarly interest in the effect of social media on female body image perceptions (Fardouly and Vartanian, 2015; Fardouly and Vartanian, 2016; Ahadzadeh *et al.* (2017); Hendrickse *et al.*, 2017; Shankardass *et al.*, 2018). These studies have proven that engagement with social media can have negative effects on young female users' wellbeing such as poor sleep quality, low self-esteem, increased anxiety and depression (Woods and Scott, 2016; Primack *et al.*, 2017), low appearance satisfaction and negative mood (Fardouly *et al.*, 2017), high risk of body dissatisfaction, and thinness obsession (Hendrickse *et al.*, 2017). In more detail, participants who used more than two social media platforms had significantly more chances to experience both depression and anxiety symptoms (Primack *et al.*, 2017). Poor sleep quality is also common among social media users and, as such, it is associated with increased levels of overall social media use (Woods and Scott, 2016).

The above-mentioned research studies mainly used quantitative approaches and focused on the effect of social networking platforms (e.g., Facebook) by analyzing their impact on female body image. However, there is a gap in research about male users of social media (e.g., Instagram) and how their body perceptions are affected by digital platforms (Perloff, 2014; Fardouly and Vartanian, 2015; Fardouly and Vartanian, 2016). Lack of research on this gender may be due to the widespread stereotype that body image concerns affect only females and that males are at little or no risk of having issues related to their body image (McCabe and Ricciardelli, 2003; Daniel and Bridges, 2010). Because of this stereotype, male social media users may not be aware of the effect that social media has on them since males consider body image as a feminine issue and so they are reluctant to publicly share their body image concerns because they do not want to appear weak, sensitive or vulnerable (Hargreaves and Tiggemann, 2006).

Scholars call for qualitative research on the impact of social media on consumer behavior and societal wellbeing (Davis *et al.*, 2016; Shensa *et al.*, 2017); however, no in-depth study has been published about the process through Instagram in general, and fitness hashtags (i.e., #fitfam) in particular, and how this influences male users' body image perceptions, consequent behavior and wellbeing. To answer these research questions, the present study adopts a qualitative approach based on in-depth interviews with Instagram male fitness hashtag users aiming to explore their motivations for body image transformation and the consequences on their behavior and wellbeing. The present study lies within transformative consumer research, which focuses on significant social issues and challenges such as health and nutrition (Dahl *et al.*, 2018). On top of that, digital information seeking can affect physical activity and dietary health behavior and also mental wellbeing (Dahl *et al.*, 2018). Therefore, the current study aims to develop a theoretical framework which can potentially explain the various effects on consumer wellbeing of engaging with fitness hashtags on Instagram. We thus attempt to answer the following research questions:

How do Instagram fitness hashtags affect male body image perception? Why do male Instagram fitness hashtag users engage in body image transformation? How do Instagram fitness hashtags influence their wellbeing?

## 2 | LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 | Body image

Body image is defined as “the mental picture of one's body, an attitude about the physical self, appearance and state of health” (Fobair *et al.*, 2006, p. 580). Body image is not only about how individuals view their own bodies, but also how others see them and it directly affects self-esteem (Cafri *et al.*, 2006). A disapproving, dissatisfied picture of one's body image is often referred to in the literature as either “body image disturbance,” “body dissatisfaction” or “body image concern” (Thompson and Stice, 2016). These terms are interchangeably used to describe when a person's body image is negatively perceived (Gil, 2007).

According to Dittmar (2007), body image is a powerful aspect of consumers' identity. Not only does it have the ability to affect the way a person feels about himself/herself, but it can influence a person's behavior, too (Featherstone, 2010). Body image is pivotal to the self-concept and to self-esteem and has the capability to influence psychological functioning and diverse behaviors (Clay *et al.*, 2005). Being frequently linked to self-esteem, positive body image leads to greater self-esteem and overall happiness, whereas disapproving evaluations can lead to negative thoughts, depression, and anxiety (Leone *et al.*, 2005). In the following paragraphs, we outline the literature on traditional mass media and digital media regarding body image and fitness consumer behavior.

### 2.2 | How mass media shapes male perceptions of the perfect body

In Western post-modern societies, mass media plays a significant role in information transfer, decision-making and also in creating a societal ideal of body attractiveness (Homan, 2010). For instance, scholars argue that mass media plays a central role in influencing viewers' body image

perceptions. Mass media “bombards” male viewers with images of muscular, lean and well-toned physiques, whereas women are often portrayed as fit and thin (Leit *et al.*, 2001; Leone *et al.*, 2005). As a result, women are reported to be in fear of gaining weight, whereas males are divided between wanting to be slimmer or more muscular (Chia and Wen, 2010).

As such, males and females have different body ideals; while the male body ideal is a *V-shaped* figure with an emphasis placed on large biceps, chest, and shoulders, the female body image ideal is extremely thin, with the emphasis placed on slim hips, bottom, and thighs (Furnham *et al.*, 2002). In Cafri *et al.*'s (2002) study, it was evident that, on average, male participants wish to have a “14.96 pound” increase in muscle mass. The desire to conform to mass media's idealized body may affect males by making them feel worse about their body image and puts pressure on them to have the perfect body (Morrison *et al.*, 2004; Barlett *et al.*, 2008). A meta-analysis of the literature on mass media exposure and male body image shows that pressure from the mass media leads to body dissatisfaction, low body-esteem, psychological disorders (e.g., depression), and behavioral outcomes (e.g., excessive exercising) (Barlett *et al.*, 2008).

The ambition to cultivate the perfect body can lead young males to foster negative self-images and to participate in a number of body image investment activities, such as taking muscle gaining pills or steroids, engaging in excessive exercise, or having cosmetic surgery to sculpture their bodies (Leone *et al.*, 2005; Barlett *et al.*, 2008). All of these behaviors are commonly noted in the literature to be symptoms of muscle dysmorphia. Muscle dysmorphia is characterized by a pathological degree of discontent and/or misperception with respect to one's appearance of muscularity (Pope *et al.*, 1993; Pope *et al.*, 1997). According to Pope *et al.* (1997, 548) *persons with muscle dysmorphia are pathologically preoccupied with the appearance of the body as a whole; they are concerned that they are not sufficiently large or muscular; their lives become consumed by weightlifting, dieting, and associated activities.* Consequences of muscle dysmorphia include profound distress about having their bodies seen in public, impaired social and occupational functioning, and abuse of anabolic steroids and other drugs with disregard for their harmful consequences (Pope *et al.*, 1997; Leone *et al.*, 2005). Even though this disorder has been observed in women, men are often diagnosed with it as a result of society's expectation for males to appear muscular (Jung, 2011).

### 2.3 | Social media and body image

Social media plays a crucial role in young users' behavior and life decisions. In terms of body perceptions, existing literature has poorly explored the effect of exposure to social media and body image concerns for young users (Perloff, 2014). Studies on body image and social media can be divided into two categories: (a) studies which use content analysis to investigate the type of pictures posted, and (b) experimental studies which measure the impact of social media on users' body image perceptions. The first group of studies analyze the pictures posted on Instagram and conduct content analysis to identify the most frequently occurring themes. For instance, Tiggemann and Zaccardo (2015) conducted a content analysis of 600 fitspiration images from which results show that the majority of images of women contain only one body type, thin and toned, and most images contained objectifying elements. Network analysis on Twitter about #fitspiration revealed that these tweets largely relate to body appearance and weight loss, they often contain advertising and their audience is widespread across a range of individuals (Tiggemann *et al.*, 2018).

With regards to experimental studies on social media and body image perception, Tiggemann and Slater (2013) studied the relationship between adolescent girls' exposure on Facebook and body image; the scholars found that time spent on the internet, and particularly on the social network, increased body image concerns with regards to internalization of the thin ideal, body surveillance, and the drive for thinness. Similar results (body dissatisfaction) were found in a longitudinal (4-week) study of female students on Facebook (Smith *et al.*, 2013). Smith *et al.* (2013) revealed that those who were highly engaged with Facebook experienced higher body dissatisfaction and presented eating disorder symptoms. Meier and Gray (2014) argue that female users who are engaged in photo sharing or liking on Facebook were positively associated with body image disturbance. Engagement with social media seems to be linked with body perceptions and behavior. Fardouly and Vartanian (2015) examined how time spent on Facebook increases negative mood and that women with a high tendency for appearance comparison reported facial, hair, and skin-related discrepancies. Brown and Tiggemann (2016) in an experiment proved that participants who were exposed to thin body images showed significantly higher levels of body dissatisfaction than participants who were exposed to neutral travel photos. Ahadzadeh *et al.* (2017) collected data from 273 students (62% female) in Malaysia and found that Instagram usage was associated with body dissatisfaction (e.g., higher levels of internalization of the thin ideal, body surveillance, and drive for thinness) in college students with lower self-esteem. Additionally, they found that for people who care more about their appearance, this affects the magnitude of discrepancy between their actual and ideal features. In a subsequent study, Ahadzadeh *et al.*'s (2017) research stressed that the negative influence of Instagram usage on body satisfaction is mediated by self-schema and self-discrepancy sequentially (i.e., the negative effect is stronger for users with lower levels of self-esteem). Hendrickse *et al.* (2017) conducted a survey with 185 female undergraduate U.S. students and the findings showed that posting pictures on Instagram positively predicted both drive for thinness and body dissatisfaction through the mediating variable of appearance-related comparisons among female users, meaning that female users who are engaged with more appearance-related comparisons on Instagram show higher levels of body dissatisfaction. Holland and Tiggemann (2017) found that women who post fitspiration images on Instagram are more likely to suffer from eating disorders such as bulimia, to have significantly higher drive for thinness and to follow compulsive exercise methods. The study also found that Instagram has a bigger influence on self-esteem than other social media platforms, because of a clear association found between photo activity and body image concerns. Prichard *et al.* (2017) examined the impact of different "fitspiration" images (image with versus without text; body performing exercise versus posed body) on women's body image. The findings demonstrate that irrespective of body appearance or presence of text, exposure to fitspiration images decreases body satisfaction and increases negative mood. Dumas *et al.* (2017) investigated different like-seeking behaviors on Instagram and individual differences in the frequency of like-seeking behavior, as well as motives for Instagram use as mediators of these relationships. The results show that normative (e.g., using filters or hashtags) or deceptive (e.g., buying likes or changing one's appearance in photos using software) factors affected like-seeking behavior.

## 2.4 | Instagram and the rise of fitness hashtag communities

The current literature highlights the influence of mass media upon body image perceptions (Barlett *et al.*, 2008). However, traditional mass media consumption among millennials is

declining, while online video and social media consumption is on the rise (eMarketer 2019). Male millennials are increasingly using Instagram and fitness hashtags to share and gather information about fit bodies (Benson 2018). Social media allows its users to generate their own content that can be shared with hundreds, even millions of users globally. On a daily average, young users spend 40 min on YouTube, 35 min using Facebook, and 15 min interacting with Instagram (Asano, 2017).

Instagram users with public profiles can post photographs and videos by using a hashtag (#), which enables other users to see the photographs (Sheldon and Bryant, 2016) and eventually become followers. The pictures can be edited by users before being posted, which allows them to edit colors, resolutions or their body shape (Sheldon and Bryant, 2016). This type of filter-manipulation makes it more likely that Instagram users will be exposed to idealized representations of others (Hendrickse *et al.*, 2017).

Since Instagram is an image-based social network, it is thought to have enhanced intimacy in comparison to Twitter or Facebook (Pittman and Reich, 2016). Individuals create Instagram accounts to fulfill their need for social interaction, to observe others, to document their memories, to become popular, to express their identity through a social media platform and to enhance their creativity, like showing their photography skills (Sheldon and Bryant, 2016). In this way, individuals and their bodies are viewed and evaluated by others through the way they are presented online. Therefore, the differences highlighted above between Instagram and previously studied social media platforms (e.g., Facebook) call for an in-depth analysis of users' engagement with it.

As a result of the increased practice of using social media as a source of health information (Jong and Drummond, 2016), several fitness hashtags have emerged on Instagram. Users who are interested in fitness use hashtags such as #fit, #fitness, #fitspiration, and #fitfam in order to assert their "social media" identity. Fitspiration, an amalgamation of the words fitness and inspiration, is defined by Tiggemann and Zaccardo (2015, p. 61) as *a trend designed to inspire viewers towards a healthier lifestyle by promoting exercise and healthy food*. Posts will normally contain pictures of toned, muscular bodies, healthy foods, and exercise equipment and apparel. The #fitspiration ideals entail that its members prepare their meals for the week on Sundays, browse health and fitness blogs before they go to bed, do not miss one of their six weekly workouts, and most importantly, update their social networks about all of this on a daily basis (Rosenbrock, 2014). #Fitfam is another popular hashtag that has been created to provide its viewers with information and tips on exercising, training and being in shape. #Fitfam posts include selfies of fit adults, pictures before and after exercising, healthy food recipes, a variety of exercise methods (yoga, lifts), brands related to fitness and exercise (food brands or training equipment) and motivational quotes for exercising on a daily basis. #Fitfam had been used in 100 million posts at the end of 2019 (see Appendix).

### 3 | RESEARCH GAP AND QUESTIONS

The above review of the literature shows that there is a long tradition of research on exposure to mass media formats such as television shows, magazines and advertisements and body image concerns (e.g., Agliata and Tantleff-Dunn, 2004; Arbour and Martin Ginis, 2006; Perloff, 2014). A growing body of research has focused on the analysis of the relationships between social media exposure/usage and female body image perception. These studies predominantly use quantitative methods and highlight that exposure or engagement with social media has a variety of negative

effects on females' body image perception and eating behavior (e.g., Tiggemann and Slater, 2013; Meier and Gray, 2014; Fardouly and Vartanian, 2015; Tiggemann and Zaccardo, 2015; Brown and Tiggemann, 2016; Fardouly *et al.*, 2017; Hendrickse *et al.*, 2017; Holland and Tiggemann, 2017).

However, the literature review also shows that there is limited knowledge of other social media users (i.e., male) and platforms (i.e., Instagram). In fact, when males were included in the sample of quantitative studies their percentage was one-third of the sample and gender differences were not accounted for (e.g., Kim and Chock, 2015; Ahadzadeh *et al.*, 2017). However, the process and mechanisms affecting male users' motivation to transform their body in consequence of the exposure to social media body image can be different compared to female users. Furthermore, the social media effects may vary by platform type, and Instagram being a more appearance-based social platform may heighten body image concerns.

Previous research on digital information seeking and the effect on physical activity and dietary health behavior has called for further research on the level of engagement and trust within certain digital platforms (Dahl *et al.*, 2018). Scholars have called for qualitative research on the impact that social media has on consumer behavior and societal wellbeing (Davis *et al.*, 2016; Kucuk, 2016; Shensa *et al.*, 2017); however, no in-depth study has been produced on the role that Instagram fitness hashtags play on male users' body image perceptions, behavior and wellbeing. In order to address these gaps, the current study explores why male Instagram users (MIU) engage with fitness hashtags (i.e., #fitfam), engage in body image transformation and explores the consequences on their wellbeing. To do so we interviewed male millennial participants in order to provide an overview of their fitness lifestyle and also to provide fresh insights about the millennials' perceptions and behavior under the influence of an Instagram hashtag (#) community.

## 4 | METHODOLOGY

### 4.1 | Research approach and rationale

Due to the presence of gender stereotypes, males are commonly reluctant to publicly be honest about their body image concerns because they do not want to appear sensitive or vulnerable (Hargreaves and Tiggemann, 2006). Moreover, previous research has argued that qualitative research is needed to explore user behavior on social media (Shensa *et al.*, 2017) and to provide deeper insights about users' emotional connection with social media and its impact on wellbeing (Woods and Scott, 2016). Therefore, a qualitative research approach was chosen as it is the most appropriate research technique to explore real perceptions, attitudes and phenomena. Interviews were chosen for data collection due to their ability to uncover underlying motivations, beliefs, attitudes, and feelings (Rubin and Rubin, 1995), particularly in discussions involving sensitive or embarrassing topics (e.g., body image concerns, self-esteem) (Malhotra, 2007). In more detail, narrative interviews were used to shed light on the interviewees' experience of Instagram fitness hashtag usage. Furthermore, due to the nature and sensitivity of male body image concerns, the integration of the projective technique was deemed to be the most suitable for extracting data (Tantisenepong *et al.*, 2012).

Visual methods have been used for studying identity aspects and in particular the projective technique. This technique triggers the respondent to give more information about the studied domain than they would do if they were verbally asked in a traditional interview (Harper, 2002; Clark-Ibáñez, 2004; Van Auken *et al.*, 2010; Johnson *et al.*, 2011; Mount and Andrée, 2013; Chatzopoulou *et al.*, 2019). As such, selected #fitfam Instagram posts were projected to the

interviewees, which stimulated the conversation about the #fitfam trend (see Appendix). During the interview, these posts enabled the authors to uncover sensitive data about male body image concerns and shed light on how comparisons and imitations are made among Instagram #fitfam followers and generators (Jorgensen, 1989; Bar-Tal, 2004; Denscombe, 2010). Furthermore, the projective technique offered visual stimulus, which triggered the respondents to reply spontaneously and at the same time to provide rich, descriptive data relating to body concerns, ideal body perceptions, and imitation (Moore and Lutz, 2000; Roper *et al.*, 2007). This technique allows the researcher to explore feelings, perceptions and motivations which would be difficult to explore otherwise, especially if quantitative research methods were applied (Loudon and Bitta, 1993; Webb, 2002). The projective technique was also used to support the conducted interviews, which aimed to grasp the subjective feelings and perceptions about the meanings surrounding the ideal body and Instagram's effects (Donoghue, 2000).

## 4.2 | Context, participant selection, and data collection

Purposeful sampling, a non-probability sampling technique that is typically used in qualitative studies, was adopted to identify participants in order to collect data (Corbin and Strauss, 2008). We focus on young male millennial Instagram followers of #fitfam as they are the vast majority of Instagram users (34% of the whole Instagram user population) (Statista, 2020). Participants were partly recruited among the social circle of the researcher and partly through an invitation to the study posted on bulletin boards of various gym clubs in the North-East of England. The conditions to participate were that individuals had public Instagram profiles and had posted pictures with #fitfam or other fitness hashtags. The snowballing method was also used to approach additional participants with a different educational and occupational background. A reward of £25 was offered to each participant.

One-to-one face-to-face interviews were carried out so that detailed answers could be given by respondents who felt comfortable to disclose potentially sensitive, unspoken before, information. Participants included 25 male British millennials (aged between 18 and 25 years old) who were followers of the #fitfam and other fitness hashtags (e.g., #fitspiration). The 25 male participants ranged from students with an undergraduate degree to people in full-time employment with no degree. Most of the participants were living in the North-East of England at the time of the interview. It is important to note that in this area people tend to exercise in gyms due to limited opportunities for outdoor activities because of safety fears regarding traffic and crime (Rind and Jones, 2015). Table 1 provides information about the sample of this study.

Previous studies argue that engagement with a platform is paramount in determining social media influence on a user's body image perceptions (Tiggemann and Slater, 2013; Hendrickse *et al.*, 2017; Holland and Tiggemann, 2017). In summary, active and passive engagement with #fitfam was the criterion to distinguish between two categories of users, namely high- versus low-engagement Instagram users. All interviewees were asked to narrate the story of their use of and activity with fitness hashtags. The majority of participants started with passive engagement (following and browsing #fitfam posts) and later on moved to higher engagement levels (posting pictures with the #fitfam hashtag), which outlines the change of perceptions and behavior over time for the hashtag users.

A pilot test with four Instagram users was conducted prior to the interviews. From the pilot test emerged additional questions, to improve the structure of the interview, and to rephrase



**TABLE 1** Study participants

Participant ID	Occupation	Ethnicity	Age
ID 1	Personal trainer	British	22
ID 2	Business development executive	British	23
ID 3	Car mechanic	British	18
ID 4	Student	British	22
ID 5	Retail manager	British	23
ID 6	Business analyst	British	22
ID 7	Intern	British	21
ID 8	Student	British	19
ID 9	Sales assistant	British	22
ID 10	Retail manager	British	23
ID 11	Unemployed	British	20
ID 12	Student	British	19
ID 13	Student	British	20
ID 14	Asylum advisor	British	22
ID 15	Graphic designer	British	23
ID 16	Professional rugby player	British	22
ID 17	ICT advisor	British	22
ID 18	Business analyst	British	22
ID 19	Student	British	20
ID 20	Shop assistant	British	19
ID 21	IT manager	British	24
ID 22	Marketing assistant	British	24
ID 23	Entrepreneur	British	24
ID 24	Retail manager	British	24
ID 25	Sales manager	British	25

the questions that were difficult for the participants to understand. Interviewees were asked to narrate the history of their activity with Instagram and #fitfam over time. Integrative questions were asked including their motivation to join Instagram and #fitfam, their body image perceptions before and after joining the community, the ideal body image on #fitfam posts, body image investment, training routines, self-concept, self-esteem, eating habits, and body image satisfaction. The average duration of the interviews was 46 minutes and all interviews were recorded and then transcribed by one of the researchers (Silverman, 2011).

### 4.3 | Data analysis

Thematic analysis was used for two reasons: first, to summarize key features of the large data set into thematic codes (Nowell *et al.*, 2017); secondly, to analyze the data to form prevailing themes (Braun *et al.*, 2019). For the current research, thematic analysis was applied to examine

the perspectives of different participants in order to generate unanticipated insights (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2016). Thematic analysis was chosen for its flexibility to tackle the entire text as a potential unit of analysis and its ability to extract codes and themes (Braun *et al.*, 2019). As such, the initial codes were grouped if similar themes were identified, whereas if codes were irrelevant for the research objectives they were eliminated from the process. The coding process was manual and interview transcripts were reviewed more than once in order to get an agreed definition of the codes.

Subsequently, themes and sub-themes were established by categorizing the codes for their similarities. To improve the reliability of our findings, we conducted two rounds of data analysis (Fu *et al.*, 2017). In the first round, two of the authors independently extracted the factors corresponding to the key constructs. In the second round of analysis, a sample of 10 interviews was provided to two academics who were asked to code the interviews. There was disagreement over some codes, which was solved after a meeting in which we compared the different coding. Following Perreault and Leigh (2018), we calculated the reliability index, which was 0.80, thus well above the 0.70 threshold recommended in exploratory research (Rust and Cooil, 2018).

## 5 | FINDINGS

### 5.1 | From low to high engagement: How the #fitfam community changes male body image perceptions and motivates MIU to transform their body

Most of the interviewees initially had low engagement levels with fitness hashtags, namely they were browsing and viewing content posted on Instagram fitness hashtags in their spare time, without posting about themselves. Among these users, we could identify individuals with different levels of body-esteem. Body-esteem is defined as how one feels about his/her own body (Franzoi and Herzog, 1986). Instagram users with low body-esteem expressed that they did not feel good about their body image; some felt they were too skinny or fat. Our findings show that lower body-esteem male users were highly motivated to transform their body to look more similar to other hashtag posters. These users clearly express the desire to accept and try to achieve the #fitfam body image (internalization of the #fitfam body ideal). Users with low body-esteem showed a greater determination in engaging in body image investment to achieve the *instabod* ideal, in comparison with high body-esteem users.

“Looking at pics of my favourite athletes, actors, even friends on their Instagram did make me feel rubbish because as a skinny lad I couldn’t compete.” (P 16)

“I was secretly wishing to have the confidence to post my body without being laughed at when I was fat...everyone wants to be fit and look good and fitfam is a way for me to do it...I’ve lost two stone and go to the gym so I’m feeling pretty good right now and want to share it...but it’s down to me in the end to work hard and get that instabod!” (P 20)

Most of the interviewees with a positive body image were instead more critical toward the images posted, the latter perceived as unreal or “filtered.” Additionally, they also had a negative perception of some of the body images they saw on #fitfam. They declared that many of their

peers used the fitness hashtags to increase the number of followers, gain likes and comments from random users, and in general to become *Instafamous*.

“Those trends are an excuse for people to get their kit off and show their stereotype hot bodies whilst pretending they care about fitness to get more likes and followers, that’s my view of the trend...some of these photos (posted on #fitfam) are borderline porn (laughs).” (P 15)

“Using tags that mean ‘look at me I’m part of the fit family’” or “I’m inspirational”. It’s like they’re doing it just to feel secure about themselves.” (P 25)

## 5.2 | Phase: joining the #fitfam community

An online community can be defined as a group of people who share a common interest and interact with each other in the cyber space through electronic means such as chat rooms, online forums, and bulletin boards (Rheingold, 1993). #Fitfam community members share the common interest of “looking good,” namely being in good (body) shape and sharing pictures of workouts, exercising, body transformations, and quotes reinforcing their ideal of being fit. As millennials are seeking information, and as Instagram is a credible source of information for millennials, this community is also structured based on the information-seeking element (Okazaki *et al.*, 2015). Interview data highlight that #fitfam low-engagement users wished to become more active members and join a community of like-minded people who interact with users with similar interests, namely seeking information about fitness. They wished to use hashtags to describe and categorize their posts.

“I wanted to be part of it (#fitfam) and to be part of it you need to have big muscles...bigger is better when it comes to muscles, I just want to be bigger, life seems a lot more fun!” (P 3)

Interview data also reveal that members of the #fitfam community implicitly (through popular, highly liked body posts) set the norm for acceptance of new community members, which is the achievement of the ideal (male) body shape: big muscled arms, well-toned bodies, with large shoulders and shredded abdominal. According to operant conditioning theory, a behavior that is followed by unpleasant consequences is less likely to be repeated (Skinner, 1953). Similarly, in our study, we found that negative reinforcement is used by fitness hashtag members to discourage people from posting pictures of bodies that do not conform to the *instabod* ideal. Instagram’s portrayal of the perfect body is called *instabod* and is an international body image trend, which users project in their posts. Thus, specific body shape (i.e., fat and thin) pictures are discouraged through negative reinforcement by #fitfam followers (i.e., negative comments, stalking). Some interviewees elaborate on the fact that they felt they could not post on the platform when their body was fat or skinny for fear of being ridiculed by other community members. They explained that they felt it was necessary to create and maintain a positive body image because of the public nature of Instagram, which allows for a high level of stalking to take place.

“It’s probably where most people do their stalking because you can compare if your life is better.” (P 4)

“I have gone on that, seen what other people are posting so that I knew what was and wasn't acceptable to post....” (P 6)

Those with lower levels of body-esteem were more keen to internalize the body image standard frequently displayed in fitness hashtag communities and engage in body image investments for the following reasons: (a) to learn more about the fitness Instagram trend (follow the trend); (b) to emulate popular Instagram users (i.e., become *Instafamous*); (c) to gain popularity (i.e., number of followers); (d) to appear successful; (e) to appear more masculine.

### 5.3 | Phase: following the Instagram trends

The agenda setting theory of mass media (McCombs and Shaw, 1972) helps in explaining this phenomenon. According to the agenda setting theory there is a strong correlation between the emphasis that mass media place on certain issues, events, or aspects (e.g., relative placement or amount of coverage) and the importance attributed to these issues by mass audiences (McCombs and Shaw, 1972). More and more consumers use Instagram to share their life experiences and young consumers have a positive attitude toward the social media platform. Instagram sets trends and, according to interviewees, fitness has recently become a very popular trend among millennials on Instagram. The popularity of the fitness trend motivates users to follow the most popular fitness hashtags on Instagram (e.g., #fitfam) to learn more about this trend and the body shapes.

“The health and fitness trend now is just massive. And social media, Instagram, in particular, has just amplified that. Like everyone's into it who wasn't even into it years ago, and like you said there's the pressure to sort of conform to all that. And I think Instagram is very easy to use.” (P 19)

#### 5.3.1 | Emulating popular Instagram users (*Instafamous*)

The Instagram community is structured upon comparison, imitation and competition. Users are posting pictures of their bodies, their experiences, their daily routine, their possessions (i.e., their cars), their jobs, their partners and so on, whereas other Instagram users are comparing these images with their own life. Social comparison theory posits that people have an innate drive to evaluate their progress and standing in various aspects of their lives (Festinger, 1954). On Instagram, people compare their body with the body of “target” users to know where they stand. This comparison triggers the need to imitate popular peers and their body appearance, which is seen as the source of their success and popularity in the community.

“I think every guy is to some degree concerned about how big they are in comparison to their mates, social media and other things because we all seem to be comparing ourselves a lot more now.” (P 6)

The role of #fitfam *influencers* or the *Instafamous*, namely #fitfam users with a large number of followers, is particularly relevant in the #fitfam community. Fitness influencers set trends and promote a specific lifestyle, which is aspirational for numerous other (less popular) users who

start following them and attempt to imitate their lifestyle, recommendations, and behavior. These users desire to look like influencers and often use (e.g., food recipes) and buy the same products they endorse (e.g., food diet, protein brands) because they believe they can help them to improve their body shape. *Instafamous* users, in the same way as traditional celebrities, act as role models. They appear popular, successful, and attractive, and many people want to look like them, so they end up imitating what they do (i.e., gym workouts), what they eat (i.e., recipes), and what they recommend. The tendency to conform to successful role models explains why users feel that community users tend to post similar body image pictures showing how attractive their body is.

“I’ve got new gear that I’ve seen on it, nicked some recipes from the Body Coach’s Instagram...I definitely have been influenced.” (P 6)

“Well if you have them on your Instagram day in day out telling you this is what you should be doing, sooner or later you will start to listen to it...plus I know that what they were advising is, in the end, good for my body.” (P 14)

A common phenomenon among MIU has been the like-seeking behaviors. The “fitspiration” for young male Instagram users is to follow the Instagram trends and emulate popular Instagram users, the so-called “Instafamous.” As such, MIU want to follow the trend for a toned body like Instafamous users have. The toned male body which is built in gyms is the so-called instabod.

“I know I’ve already said this but even though I’ve lost weight and toned up I’m still not as big as I want to be, I want to get to the level of Rich Froning, he’s a professional bodybuilder who’s retired and is now like a fitness advisor.” (P 3)

#### 5.4 | Phase: gain popularity and appear successful

As discussed by interviewees, having an attractive body shape is seen as instrumental to gain popularity in this social media environment. Popularity here refers to the number of users that engage with the pictures or videos posted by the user, in terms of likes, tagging, and comments. Interviewees believe that the higher the number of likes for a user’s picture the more popular they become. Using a hashtag increases the visibility of the users as well as the number of followers, hence interviewees were highly motivated to make body image investments as they wished to increase their popularity within the fitness hashtag community. Having and showing an attractive body (i.e., a muscled body) through the use of fitness hashtags is how interviewees aim to increase their popularity. However, the body has to look as close as possible to the ideal body standard set by the #fitfam community members and influencers.

“It’s Mr. Muscle who gets more likes and comments saying ‘well done, keep up the good work’. It’s pretty clear then that for the majority of the time, to get a following on Instagram, especially to do with the fitness trend, you need to look hot.” (P 1)

Positivity bias is a psychological concept linked to research on the individuals’ self. According to this theory, people have a need to view themselves positively (Heine et al. 1999). Based on interviews, we found that Instagram users tend to show themselves in a positive light. The

majority of interviewees agreed that Instagram is the place where people seek to maintain a very positive image of themselves. Many users present only a very favorable, “retouched” image of themselves using the photo editing tools available on Instagram. Interviewees explain that people want to give the impression of an amazing life, having a hot body, an expensive car, or a bachelor’s degree from a prestigious university. Instagram is the place where people want to show off, look good and appear successful. As such, they often seek help from filtering tools to look perfect. Here, a muscled body is linked to presenting a successful image of oneself.

“I don’t think I’ve seen someone, girl or boy, upload a picture where they didn’t look as though they were trying to look attractive. Even with trips and stuff like that, people post things they want to show, like whether it’s a selfie or a trip, they want to look like an attractive, adventurous person on Instagram.” (P 3)

“For Insta I want to look good so I suppose I’ll upload pictures that I personally like myself in or if I’m doing something cool or ‘instacool’ (laughs)...so, you will be looking at your best and doing incredible things to shove it in your frenemies’ face (laughs)...No one uploads a post about a rubbish day on Instagram because you want to look like the happiest, sexiest, culturally experienced person on earth.” (P 16)

## 5.5 | Effects: high engagement with fitness hashtags and Instagram

Based on our findings, the motivations mentioned above drove interviewees to make body image investments and perform the “body transformation.” The body transformation enabled users to acquire the confidence needed to become more active members in the fitness hashtag community, namely to be able to post pictures of their body using fitness hashtags.

Interestingly, on #fitfam, showing determination to attain the *instabod* is reinforced by fitness followers through positive reinforcements (i.e., liking, tagging, and commenting). These reinforcements tend to motivate Instagram users to repeat and intensify their behavior. Operant conditioning theory suggests that a behavior that is followed by pleasant consequences, namely a reinforcement, is likely to be repeated, whereas a behavior that is followed by unpleasant consequences is less likely to be repeated (Skinner, 1953).

“Fitness posts encourage me to do exercise and diet. I do really believe that they want me to succeed with all the comments I get.” (P 2)

“People in real life don’t want to give you nice comments because they’re competitive and get jealous. Fitfam and Fitspiration taggers have really motivated me on some days, it’s just seeing someone doing it and then seeing how their body looks, you think I can do that.” (P 3)

“Well #fitfam has influenced me to carry on with my routine and even when I’ve been scraping by in the cash department I’ve always managed to keep my gym membership because I want to look good and carry on with my posts. Seeing how far other blokes like me have come on Instagram just because of how bulked up they’ve become, it makes me keen to carry on.” (P 19)

Findings reveal that the higher engagement with fitness hashtags has had an influence on interviewees' behavior, attitude and wellbeing. We found a mix of both negative and positive effects on users' physical and psychological wellbeing, such as: muscle dysmorphia symptoms, higher pressure and anxiety due to increased competition, as well as fitness motivation, enhanced masculinity, self-confidence, happiness, fitness knowledge, and healthy eating. Those highly engaged Instagram users who were motivated to exercise more and changed their lifestyle saw results on their bodies which made them feel happier and more self-confident. Positive and negative effects co-exist among young males, however, as chasing the "instabod" makes the MIU more vulnerable to face the negative effects. In other words, those young males who achieved the "instabod" feel happiness and more masculine by forgetting that they had to use steroids and in some cases to be socially isolated in order to achieve the ideal Instagram body (p. 2, 4).

### 5.5.1 | Competition, pressure, and anxiety

Highly engaged interviewees declared that being part of the #fitfam community made them feel more in competition with other peers and users. Feeling more in competition is the result of more frequent exposure and comparison to the bodies of other #fitfam users.

"It's changed me in the sense that I ehmm...I put a lot of work in so, hopefully that the other people using them, you know, don't look as good as me basically (both laugh)...It's changed, it's more competitive, I feel that I've got to keep going and pushing my hardest because...it's pressure, I won't lie, I feel pressured because of them, because you're never the best there's always someone better, and you've got to try to beat that person." (P 18)

The goal to achieve the instabod makes high-engagement Instagram users feel pressured and anxious. Stress and anxiety are expressed in terms of fear of losing muscle size and constant comparison with bodies that are perceived as fitter and bigger.

"I've kind of been scared of losing muscle." (P 4)

"As long as the picture is better than the one I posted last week, it will go up...It's more competitive, I feel that I've got to keep going and pushing...I feel pressure and anxious...there's always someone better and you've got to try and beat that person." (P 5)

### 5.5.2 | Muscle dysmorphia symptoms

High-engagement users are those who engage in behaviors that are harmful to their body, experiencing muscle dysmorphia symptoms. Three symptoms derived from the literature (Pope *et al.*, 1997) emerged in this study, including: feeling the need to exercise even if injured, social isolation, and the use of steroids.

#### *Social isolation*

One of the symptoms of muscle dysmorphia is the neglect of spending time with friends and family due to exercise commitments (Pope *et al.*, 1997). Some interviewees expect their peers to

respect these actions and to show understanding. Social isolation is caused by regular visits to the gym in their free time, which replaces social time. As such, going to the gym is preferred to meeting friends and family.

“I like to maintain the routine I’m in and family gatherings just mean sitting around, drinking beer and eating junk food. So as bad as that may sound, at this moment in time, I have been picking my lifestyle over my mum and dad and friends back home.” (P 2)

#### *Use of steroids*

Interviewees admitted steroids consumption while aiming to maintain a good body shape so as to be able to continue posting pictures of their body on Instagram. According to the existing literature, steroid use can only be considered as a muscle dysmorphia symptom if the user is aware of the potential risks, yet still chooses to continue consuming them (Pope *et al.*, 1997; Leone *et al.*, 2005). High-engagement users tend to consume steroids even if they claim to be aware of the negative consequences these may have on their health, yet they decide to use them to keep an acceptable body shape or to appear more attractive.

“I’m now beginning to get muscle definition...it’s like I’m a whole new person so I want to progress even further, and my friend recommended D-Bol and it really helped. Are you aware that steroids can be harmful to your body though? Yeah but it’s the same with going to the sunbed, you’re aware of the consequences but you do it anyway because you want to look good. It’s just a cheeky way of cheating.” (P 2)

“I’m using Dianabol which is completely legal, so I’ve not done anything wrong don’t worry (laughs)...I’ve not been able to go to the gym as much as I normally do so I was scared of losing muscle and I don’t want to lose my hard work.” (P 4)

#### *Excessive exercise*

Moreover, all highly engaged users admitted to exercising while injured, another muscle dysmorphia symptom (Pope *et al.*, 1997):

“Oh yeah like I’ve hurt my back a few times lifting real heavy weight but I just don’t want to lose track, I don’t want to lose gains and stuff, so I’ve always had to work. Especially since, I get loads of problems with my shoulders as well, so I keep going and pushing through. It makes you stronger!” (P 5)

### **5.5.3 | Fitness motivation**

Our data reveal that highly engaged users see the #fitfam posts as a motivation to keep focused on their routine and work harder to stay fit. This outcome translated in interviewees’ motivation to exercise more often and harder, the so-called fitspiration.

“It has spurred me on to work harder.” (P 1)



“It’s a very motivating app, but I think that’s down to everyone feeling the need to always be positive on it, and that can be pressurizing sometimes to some people.” (P 12)

“Seeing the pictures of guys on Instagram after coming back from traveling made me feel like getting back to the gym and gaining my muscle....” (P 18)

### 5.5.4 | Self-Confidence

Higher engagement with the community seems to have a positive effect on users' self-confidence. Self-confidence refers to an appraisal of one's competence, skills, or ability in general or in a specific domain and it is related to objective criteria and past performance (Crocker and Major, 1989). Interviewees discuss that posting with the fitfam hashtag, and receiving encouraging comments from other users, especially female users, boosts their confidence.

“I think my whole lifestyle changed, and Instagram has played a part in this, it has made me change for the better. Like...I want more things, I’m aspiring for bigger and better things and I do feel like I can get them. When I was fat and I gave up on myself and the way I looked it was a pretty shit time.... Lost weight, got more confidence, got happier and here I am with a new job, so yeah since using the tags I’ve become a lot stronger and independent...If I was to go back to the body that I had two years ago I would feel bloody depressed, but I won’t let that happen, I refuse it.” (P 2)

“I do like being fit. I definitely do appreciate the comments I get about me looking good, it’s a confidence booster.” (P 3)

“Just to get more likes on posts that shows the progress I’ve made with my body and it actually makes me feel a lot more confident, just being able to post those tags without looking like an idiot.” (P 4)

### 5.5.5 | Enhanced masculinity

Highly engaged interviewees also feel more masculine as a result of their body transformation. They feel stronger and more attractive because their body looks bigger due to higher muscle size and they feel proud to show it to the community.

“I mean I still had really good times when I was my skinny 18 year old self, but I am definitely a lot more confident and feel more masculine now that I’m bigger... (laughs).” (P 16)

### 5.5.6 | (subjective) happiness

Highly engaged interviewees state that they felt happier after achieving the body 'transformation'. They express how the popularity they gained through Instagram had improved their mood and life satisfaction, moving from a situation of semi-depression to a situation of happiness and

contentment with their life. The positive reinforcements of #fitfam community members seem to have a strong influence on how highly engaged #fitfam users feel (happy) about their life.

“Lost weight got more confidence and got happier. So yeah since using the tags I’ve become a lot stronger and independent.” (P 2)

### 5.5.7 | Healthy eating

Interviewees argue that Instagram has affected their eating habits in a positive way. Before joining the community, they state that their diet was unhealthy with excessive portions of sugar and calorie intake, and harmful drinking habits. According to interviewees, fitness community members have helped them to learn what food to eat to stay fit and not gain weight.

“All I do is go to the gym before work and try to eat healthy...now I’m less inclined to drink on weekdays...” (P 14)

### 5.5.8 | Fitness knowledge

Interviewees also state that Instagram has improved their fitness knowledge in that they have received good advice and tips from other users, which has enhanced their knowledge of body muscles and exercising (e.g., gym workouts). This knowledge has empowered high-engagement users who feel they know more about their body and how to stay fit.

“If I wanted health and fitness advice on social media, I would go to Instagram first...Some of the fitness accounts I follow are actually really good for advice because it’s not just photos but videos of how to do the exercises and what you should be eating...It has been able to influence some of the decisions I’ve made about what to wear to the gym, you know, what sorts of food are good for muscle growth and how to exercise for maximum effect.” (P 12)

The framework below depicts the process through which low-engagement #fitfam users are motivated to accept the ideal body shape set by the community (i.e., internalization) and engage

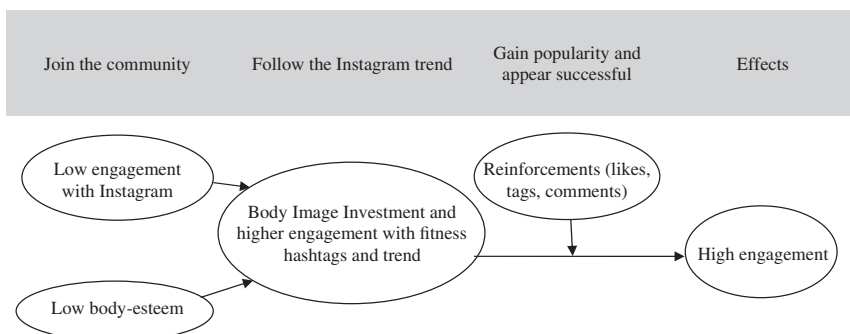


FIGURE 1 Theoretical framework: phases of MIU

in body image investments (the “body transformation”). The second part of the framework shows the consequences of the body transformation on high-engagement users’ psychological and physical wellbeing (Figure 1).

## 6 | DISCUSSION

We started our study by highlighting the growing issues of eating disorders and body image concerns among male millennials in developed countries and the lack of studies on the topic. This study is positioned in the transformative consumer research stream, which focuses on fundamental social problems and challenges related to consumption such as health and nutrition (e.g., Dahl *et al.*, 2018). Our study focused on the consumption of body images in the social networking platform Instagram and explored the reasons why fitness hashtag users change body image perceptions and behavior after having internalized the body images posted on this platform.

Our study proposes that popular Instagram hashtags (e.g., #fitfam, #fitspiration) are able to affect the perceptions, lifestyle and behavior of young millennials. The Instagram community, united by popular fitness hashtags, develops the ideal body image (instabod) and fosters adherence as a result of various social and psychological factors pressuring hashtag followers. The qualitative approach of this study has enabled us to gain an in-depth understanding of the process through which Instagram (millennial) male users transform their body according to the Instagram trends (the so-called instabod), which has not been studied before. We focused on male users and the Instagram platform as previous research has focused mainly on female users and social networking sites like Facebook, and medical social science scholars suggest that each social media platform has to be studied separately (Fergie *et al.*, 2016).

From a theoretical standpoint, the developed framework helps explain the process through which hashtag communities influence consumers’ perceptions as well as the consequences on users’ wellbeing considering the passage from low (passive) to high (posting using hashtags) engagement with fitness hashtags on Instagram. We have provided insights into the theories (e.g., agenda setting, social comparison theory, positivity bias, and operant conditioning theory) that contribute to the explanation of why male Instagram users engage in body image transformation (see Table 2 and Figure 2). Furthermore, we shed light on the consequences of being highly engaged with a fitness hashtag on consumers’ psychological and physical wellbeing.

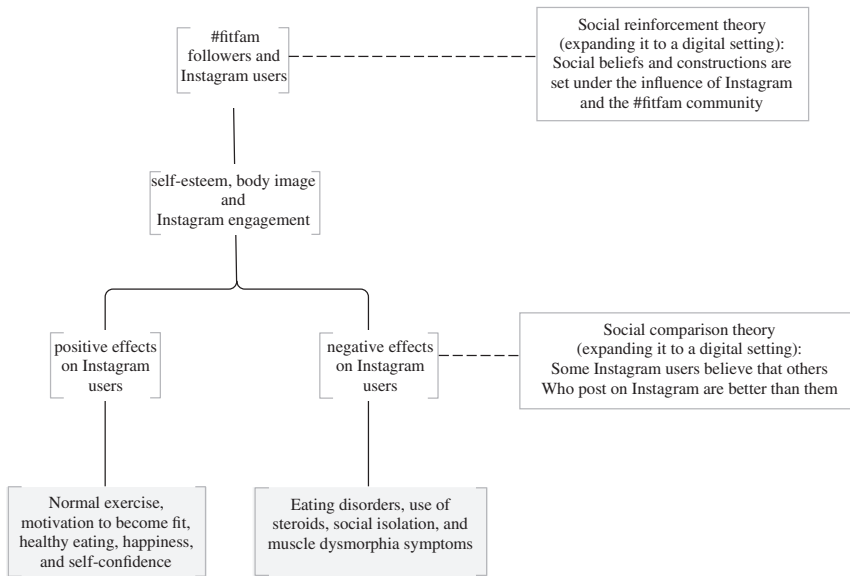
In our study, we provided fresh insights about the motivations of male millennial Instagram users to internalize the Instagram body and engage in body transformation (instabod), including: the desire to join the #fitfam community; the popularity of the fitness trend on Instagram; the influence of peers; the desire to emulate fitness celebrities (*Instafamous*), to gain popularity (i.e., increase the number of followers) and to appear successful.

These findings also suggest that the positive attitude toward the social media platform, the popularity of the fitness trend and hashtag, in addition to popular users (i.e., *Instafamous*), influence other users’ desire to imitate their lifestyle and body image. Our findings suggest that male Instagram users compare themselves and their body with the body image of other “target” users, namely normal users or Instagram celebrities (*Instafamous*) who appear “more muscled and well-toned” than them. Image-based social media places pressure on users to look and behave in a certain way, and this pressure results in heightened social comparison and dysfunctional scrutiny of the self. Social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) postulates that people often compare themselves to others and when someone believes that someone else is better than them, then these comparisons typically produce negative emotions. This theory explains

**TABLE 2** Theoretical links with Instagram phenomena

Theory	#Fitfam study
Operant conditioning theory contends that a behavior that is followed by unpleasant consequences is less likely to be repeated (Skinner, 1953).	Negative reinforcement is used by fitness hashtag members to discourage people from posting pictures of bodies that do not conform to the <i>instabod</i> ideal. Instagram's portrayal of the perfect body is called <i>instabod</i> and is an international body image trend, which users project in their posts. Thus, specific body shape (i.e., fat and thin) pictures are discouraged through negative reinforcement by #fitfam followers (i.e., negative comments, stalking). Some interviewees elaborate on the fact that they felt they could not post on the platform when their body was fat or skinny for fear of being ridiculed by other community members.
The agenda setting theory of mass media (McCombs and Shaw, 1972) argues that there is a strong correlation between the emphasis that mass media place on certain issues, events, or aspects (e.g., relative placement or amount of coverage) and the importance attributed to these issues by mass audiences.	More and more consumers use Instagram to share their life experiences and young consumers have a positive attitude toward the social media platform. Instagram sets the trends and, according to interviewees, fitness has recently become a very popular trend among millennials on Instagram. The popularity of the fitness trend motivates users to follow the most popular fitness hashtags on Instagram (e.g., #fitfam) to learn more about this trend and these body shapes.
Social comparison theory argues that people have an innate drive to evaluate their progress and standing in various aspects of their lives (Festinger, 1954).	According to our study, MIU compare their body with the body of "target" users to know where they stand. This comparison triggers the need to imitate popular peers and their body appearance, which is seen as the source of their success and popularity in the community.
Positivity bias is a psychological concept linked to research on the individuals' self; as such, people have a need to view themselves positively (Heine et al. 1999).	Based on our interviews, we found that Instagram users tend to show themselves in a positive light. The majority of interviewees agreed that Instagram is the place where people seek to maintain a very positive image of themselves. On Instagram many users present only a very favorable, "retouched" image of themselves using the photo editing tools available. Interviewees explain that people want to give the impression of an amazing life, having a hot body, an expensive car, or a bachelor's degree from a prestigious university.

the phenomenon of imitation and comparison in offline settings, but our study expands the theory to social media environments where it is easier for people to make comparisons with a multitude of other users whom they do not know. Previous research revealed that the desire to conform to the mass media's idealized body may make males feel worse about their body image and so pressurizes them into body image investment (Morrison *et al.*, 2004; Barlett *et al.*, 2008). In this study, and just like mass media, social media is the new channel where lifestyle (and



**FIGURE 2** Instagram phenomena linked with theories

body image) trends establish and grow. However, we have also discussed that the desire to change their body shape was more prominent among individuals with low body-esteem, while users with positive body-esteem were more critical toward the ideal body shape portrayed in fitness hashtag communities (instabod).

In self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987), discrepancies between the actual self and ideal self can lead to negative emotional states, such as disappointment and dissatisfaction. Male users who are dissatisfied about their body image yearn for the *instabod* and the discrepancy makes them feel bad about themselves and their capacity to compete. The desire to conform to Instagram's idealized body pressurizes low body-esteem users into body image investments (Morrison *et al.*, 2004; Barlett *et al.*, 2008). In the current study, male participants who perceived themselves as too skinny, in comparison with muscular males on #fitfam, were keener to complete the body transformation, due to the fear of them being perceived as less masculine, not popular, or unattractive. Other motives that pushed low body-esteem users to transform their body were to increase popularity and to appear more successful (yet attractive). Discussing these sensitive aspects about young male body transformation ambitions was possible due to the use of the projective technique. Showing posts with #fitfam enabled the researchers to grasp MIU feelings and beliefs about the instabod and fitfam phenomena. It would have been harder otherwise to discuss such aspects since males consider body image as a feminine issue and they are reluctant to publicly share their body image concerns because they do not want to appear weak, sensitive or vulnerable (Hargreaves and Tiggemann, 2006).

Previous studies argue that the more time female users spend on social media or the more engaged they are, the more they experience negative effects (Tiggemann and Slater, 2013; Hendrickse *et al.*, 2017; Holland and Tiggemann, 2017). Research on male body image and mass media pressure through television commercials and action figures showed that males have decreased self-esteem (Muris *et al.*, 2005), decreased body satisfaction (Agliata and Tantleff-Dunn, 2004) and decreased body-esteem (Barlett *et al.*, 2008), while studies on Facebook suggest that social grooming significantly leads to body image concerns (Kim and Chock, 2015). This study

reveals that body image investments and transformation leads to higher engagement, which can have negative as well as positive effects on male Instagram users' psychological and physical wellbeing. Accordingly, negative effects included pressure, anxiety and increased competition, as well as muscle dysmorphia symptoms. Ambition to cultivate muscularity is expected to lead to harmful muscle building practices (Barlett *et al.*, 2008), which was confirmed in this study. Highly engaged male millennials suffer from muscle dysmorphia symptoms, including feeling the necessity to exercise even if injured, social isolation, and use of steroids (Blouin and Goldfield, 1995; Pope *et al.*, 1997). Although high-involvement fitness hashtag users are aware of the harmful consequences of their actions (e.g., use of steroids), they continue their practices because they strive to keep the *instabod* shape that they can picture and post in the #fitfam community. Millennials as a generation are more focused on personal consumption in the present and not on saving for the future (Weber, 2017) and so, as it emerged from our findings, MIU that have high involvement with the platform are also not concerned about future health implications, only their current body image on social media. This finding integrates the findings of McCabe and Ricciardelli (2003), who propose that the pressure from mass media (measured as the number of hours spent viewing mass media) is negatively correlated with individuals' intention to grow their muscles.

Interestingly, while female social media users face more entirely negative effects (Tiggemann and Slater, 2013; Hendrickse *et al.*, 2017; Holland and Tiggemann, 2017), our study argues that high-engagement male users also discuss positive outcomes of body image investment on their psychological wellbeing, such as higher self-confidence, feeling happier and more masculine and attractive, knowing more about fitness and being more motivated to exercise. Previous studies propose that intensive or addicted Facebook users have lower levels of self-esteem and life satisfaction (Blachnio *et al.*, 2016). However, we found that highly engaged Instagram users feel happier and more confident about themselves and their body than low-engagement Instagram users.

This study highlights that individuals' knowledge of fitness, body muscles, and eating habits to stay fit has improved as a result of engaging with a fitness hashtag community. By providing these findings we respond to calls for scholarly insight into consumer research on consumers' willingness and aptitude to participate in healthful behaviors (Dahl *et al.*, 2018). Thus, the current research is moving one step beyond the existing literature by exploring the variety of effects (both positive and negative) that image-based social media platforms have on male millennials' wellbeing.

Remarkably, the positive reinforcement to exercise and achieve the ideal body image through new followers, likes, and comments had a positive impact on users' body-esteem. Therefore, the more likes and positive comments male users get, the more effort they will put into exercising as operant conditioning theory suggests (Skinner, 1953). Thompson and Stice (2016) discuss the development of internalization and call for research to document the effect that social reinforcement from family, peers, and the media has on the ideal body (i.e., thin ideal) internalization. Our study expands the theory to a social media setting. In our study, the ideal male body is continuously given positive reinforcement through likes, tagging and comments from #fitfam community members, while negative reinforcement is provided to those who post images that do not conform to the body norm (e.g., fat, skinny). In this way, the #fitfam community implicitly sets the norms (body shape and size) for belonging to it and tends to exclude or *stalk* those who do not conform.

Finally, we found that engagement leads to more engagement. Comments and likes to the Instagram users' photos encouraged them to engage with Instagram and exercise more frequently. Evidence of this behavior indicates that Instagram is an environment in which images are uploaded like "commodities" in the hope of social acceptance being given in the form of likes

and comments (Iqani and Schroeder, 2015). Viewing and commenting on social media increases the engagement of the user and can lead to various behavioral and attitudinal consequences. In fact, users who have become addicted to the consumption of “complimentary comments” continue uploading pictures to maintain or enhance their digital appearance. Millennials are also in the quest for identity construction and so those who are engaged with social media tend to follow hashtag trends as they wish to gain a certain “trendy” online identity.

## 7 | LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Like many studies, ours is not exempt from limitations. Since all participants were millennial male Instagram users (MIU) from the United Kingdom, no cultural comparisons could be made between users and so the first suggestion for future research would be to consider this aspect in further detail. Moreover, our study has focused on low body-esteem participants who engage with fitness hashtags and, as such, future research is needed for other types of MIU. The qualitative nature of the study requires quantitative analysis to generalize the findings; thus, a quantitative study that measures the relationships between the constructs that emerged in this study would be advisable. Research could be focused on other hashtag communities as well. For instance, the hashtag “#gains” was also mentioned by participants of this study. The “gains” trend encourages users to share their muscle gains via images and videos online, so this tag could potentially be more influential than #fitfam. Moreover, future research could relate Instagram fitness hashtags to the literature on fanatic consumption/behavior and propose a relevant emerging framework. Finally, a longitudinal quantitative study could be carried out to explore how much #fitfam affects male body image perceptions and behavior over time and what contextual factors moderate its influence.

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APPENDIX A

Examples of posts on instagram with fitfam hashtags.

#fitfam

100M posts

