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**The ‘Glow Up’ Imperative:
The Fitness Lifestyles of Young Women in Aotearoa New Zealand**

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Abstract

For many young women, their relationships with fitness, health and the body are shaped by unrealistic beauty ideals. Body image scholars have long focused on the impacts of the media and more recently, social media, on the way young women experience body satisfaction. This thesis investigates the lived experiences of young women in Aotearoa New Zealand, in relation to body image and fitness culture. Underpinned by feminist post-structuralist theory, this research project aims to amplify the voices and experiences of young women (18-25 years) to gain nuanced insights into how they interpret, internalise and negotiate the complexities of the fitness lifestyles and everyday body image. This study draws upon an anonymous survey (203 participants), as well as three focus groups and three individual interviews with 15 young women, with all participants considering themselves to be actively pursuing fitness lifestyles.

Conducting a thematic analysis, results showed that many young women are actively pursuing a range of fitness practices for diverse reasons and motives. However, many report feeling the pressure not only to adhere to thin ideals, but also to pursue bodies that are strong and toned. For many of the young women, however, the fitness lifestyles were also connected to broader social trends of ‘fitspo’ (fitness inspiration) and the ‘glow up’ (body and lifestyle transformation). Engaging with feminist literature on the pressures on young women to aspire and achieve ‘successful’ femininities in the context of neoliberalism, this research develops the concept of the ‘glow up’ in relation to their highly consumptive fitness lifestyles. In so doing, this thesis provides rich, nuanced and original insights into the pressures on everyday young women to pursue bodily and lifestyle transformation, and the effects on those unable to maintain their commitment to the ‘glow up’ imperative. Importantly, not all young women passively accept such limiting versions of the ‘body project’, with some actively acknowledging the harm that can be caused by the ‘glow up’ imperative. The thesis concludes with some researcher reflections on the contributions of this study and future directions to help young women redefine what it means to participate in meaningful physical activity.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

It takes me a while to get ready. First, I need to touch up my makeup and make sure my hair is still shiny and styled well. Then, I have to find an outfit that I will be comfortable in yet still shows off my best features. Once I am primed to my satisfaction, I smile at myself in the mirror. I feel good! And no, I am not getting ready to go out for a fancy dinner. Only to the gym. Now that I am single I find myself hyper aware of the male gaze at the gym. I also feel conscious of the judgement of other young women at the gym, who may not even be looking at me. Attending the gym more frequently has been part of my own 'glow up' journey; a journey I started to transform myself physically in the hopes of feeling better mentally. Other activities I have completed to 'glow up' include paying for expensive teeth whitening treatment, skincare, and makeup, and applying fake tan each week. But, it is a small price to pay for how good I feel about my appearances these days.

I enter the gym, feeling confident. I am proud of my body and the progress I have made. I even feel more confident wearing a sports bra at the gym now. But then, I step on the treadmill and the girl next to me, around my age, looks so effortlessly flawless. Her hair and makeup are perfect and she is wearing expensive activewear. I can't help but notice that she also has the perfect hourglass figure that up until now I thought I had achieved, but she just looks so much better. Immediately, I feel the need to cover up. I feel conscious of my stomach rolls and my cellulite, and I feel deflated, wondering why I will never look like her no matter how hard I try.

In the café after my workout, I flick open my screen and start scrolling through Instagram, trying to take my mind off my self-conscious doubts and worries. I stop on one of my favourite fitness influencers. The image shows her making up a healthy post-workout protein smoothie. She's still wearing her workout gear, but is perfectly made-up, not a hair out of place. Her smile radiates through the screen. I look down at my café coffee and muffin, my quick snack before rushing back to work, and feel instantly bad. If I really want to achieve a full 'glow-up', like the girl at the gym or the influencer on my screen, I need to try harder, or do I? Am I enough as I am? (Researcher reflections, 2023).

Women have long been made to feel as though we are lacking in some way, somehow never good enough as we are. This is especially true for the way we feel about our appearance, and the messaging comes from an abundance of sources: the media, films, the places we engage in fitness such as gyms, and even our own family and friends. But, perhaps, the most significant influencer of them all, is social media. Research has shown that being exposed to these messages from a young age causes girls to learn that their worth is intrinsically tied to their appearance (Banet-Weiser, 2017; Gibson, 2015; Jones & Young, 2021).

Young women in particular are affected by ‘fitspiration’ (fitness inspiration) content presented on social media platforms that prioritise aesthetically-oriented content, namely Instagram and TikTok (Pryde & Prichard, 2022). Having access to unlimited, heavily edited photos daily showcasing unattainable beauty and body standards understandably leads many young women to constantly monitor their own bodies to check how they shape up to these standards. Seeing this content prompts many young woman to ask: “How can I have what she has?”, “What do I need to do to look like her?”, and “Why don’t I look like her?” Such questions can surface ‘ugly feelings’ among young women, causing many to question their self-worth (Coffey, 2021; Ngai, 2005). Young women who are predisposed to mental health issues are more likely to engage in harmful behaviours such as eating disorders (Hsu & Vashi, 2017). In their national survey of youth in New Zealand, Utter et al. (2012) found 67% of females had participated in weight loss strategies compared to 36% of males.

Modifying and managing the female body has long been seen as a trend, and therefore so are the fitness practices women engage in in order to achieve the current ideal. One such recent social media trend is the ‘glow up’. To ‘glow up’ is to undergo a significant physical transformation, seemingly to increase one's feelings of self-love and appreciation, but in reality to fit into society’s narrow definitions of beauty. Because, as many young women have learned from a young age, to be beautiful and thin is to be successful, valued, and loved. As highlighted in the vignette above, even though I have studied this topic in-depth, I still feel pressured to consume health, wellness, and cosmetic products and engage in expensive beauty treatments and fitness practices. I still believe that in order to be viewed as a ‘successful’ young woman, my hair and makeup must be perfect every day, that I must maintain a fit and toned body, buy new clothes, and do all of this with a smile on my face.

There is nothing wrong with wanting to better yourself, but this betterment comes at a cost-literally and figuratively-when it forces you to constantly fixate on your appearance. Sadly, for many young women, this can lead to obsessive behaviour and mental illness (Bordo, 2009; Camacho-Miñano et al., 2019; Goodyear et al., 2021; Walseth & Tidslevold, 2020; Wang et al., 2020). Despite how they are presented online, these trends are neither harmless or empowering, and they are hurting many young women who might otherwise be spending time on far more important endeavours, for example, their mental health, their careers or their education.

This research builds upon and extends international research on women's experiences of body image, fitness and recreational physical activity (Belmonte et al., 2024; Brown & Tiggemann, 2020; Jones & Young, 2021; Kavasoglu & Koca 2022; Pryde & Prichard, 2022; Riley et al., 2023; Vall-Roqué et al., 2023) with a particular focus on young women (Camacho-Miñano et al., 2022; Goodyear et al., 2022; Kwon et al., 2023, McComb & Mills, 2022; Walseth & Tidslevold, 2020). This project seeks to understand how young women in Aotearoa New Zealand experience body image and fitness culture, the various influences (i.e., social media, gyms, peers) on their body image and body-focused practices (i.e., fitness, beauty, consumption), and how they navigate various social pressures. Creating space for their thoughts and experiences, the research also sought to provide solutions to help young women achieve more positive fitness and body image experiences.

As previously mentioned, limited research exists on the impacts of the effects of the 'glow up' trend due to its only recent popularity on social media. Body image scholars have investigated similar imperatives such as 'body work' (Coffey, 2016), 'fitspiration' (Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2021), and transformational imperatives (Gill, 2007; Riley et al., 2023). Though the 'glow up' can be understood through, and draws parallels to, these discourses, it is imperative that it is investigated as a separate entity. It is a crucial area to research and understand due to the often extremely harmful impacts this trend has on young women. The 'glow up' trend, though presented as an empowering and postfeminist trend, is actually yet another unrealistic standard that young women feel required to adhere to.

As a young woman working in the fitness industry for many years, I have seen the impact of these pressures on my friends, peers and clients. I wanted to conduct this research because young

women are underrepresented in research (Rayaprol, 2016) and yet they are suffering unnecessarily. My hope is that this research contributes to a wider field of body image research, especially in the context of Aotearoa New Zealand, that seeks to take the blame off young women, and instead turns to the wider sociocultural context for perpetuating these damaging messages. Ultimately, my goal is to empower young women and help them realise that their worth is based off so much more than their appearance. I also want to draw attention to the effects of these ideals that continue to circulate in the fitness industry, and to encourage those working in young women's health and fitness to reflect on the potential harm that can be done when encouraging a relentless pursuit of perfection.

The primary research question of this research is:

What are young women's experiences of fitness culture and body image in Aotearoa New Zealand?

My research is situated within Aotearoa New Zealand and focuses on young women aged 18-25 years old from diverse cultural and socio-economic backgrounds and geographical locations across the country, who consider fitness and well-being an important part of their lifestyle. This research project was guided by a post-structuralist feminist lens to recognize the power of such discourses on young women, and to also acknowledge their agency in navigating such pressures and expectations (Coffey, 2016; Goodyear, 2020; Rayaprol, 2016). With approval from University of Waikato Human Research Ethics Committee, I used purposive sampling to recruit participants who were young women (aged between 18-25), lived in Aotearoa New Zealand, and considered themselves as pursuing fitness lifestyles. I aimed to recruit with a diverse range of participants from different of geographies, ethnicities and fitness backgrounds. In the end, I recruited 203 survey participants and 15 focus group participants.

After this introduction, this Masters thesis consists of five chapters. In the following chapter, I located this project in relevant literature relating to young women's embodied experiences of health, fitness and beauty. Following this, I discuss the methodology, theoretical framework, and analysis that guided this research. Chapters Four and Five provide an in-depth analysis and discussion of the findings of my thesis to showcase the exponentially harmful impacts of this trend for young women.

In particular, Chapter Four presents key findings from the survey and focus groups relating to young women's fitness practices. In Chapter Five, I draw upon literature on feminist literature focused on neoliberal ideals of young women's femininities to examine the impacts of the 'glow up' imperative, and how young women are making meaning of pressures to embark on bodily and lifestyle transformations. Finally, I conclude this thesis with a summary of my research, a reflection of my work, and future implications for this field of research as well as for fitness professionals.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

In this chapter I provide a critical review of literature relevant to this study on young women's experiences of the fitness lifestyle in Aotearoa New Zealand. This research project is located at the intersection of three key bodies of literature, which are outlined herein. Firstly, I provide an overview of research on young women, body image and fitness culture. Secondly, I examine recent literature of fitspiration narratives in social media and other spaces. Thirdly, I critically engage literature on the rise of wellness culture and its impacts on women. The pressures that exist for young women today not only include achieving an unrealistic body shape, but also to adhere to social media trends that require maintaining an extensive beauty and fitness routine. I conclude by locating my project at the intersection of this literature and explaining how this study builds upon and extends research on young women's fitness, health and well-being.

Young women and body image

It is first helpful to understand what body image is. According to Grogan (2016), body image is "A person's perceptions, thoughts, and feelings about his or her body" (p. 4). Negative body image experiences can lead to body dissatisfaction, social comparison, and internalising unrealistic body ideals (Goodyear et al., 2019). Research shows that poor body image is pervasive in contemporary fitness culture, with many young women suffering from body dysmorphic disorder as well as eating disorders (Bordo, 2009; Camacho-Miñano et al., 2019; Goodyear et al., 2021; Walseth & Tidslevold, 2020; Wang et al., 2020). Body Dysmorphic Disorder (BDD), otherwise known as "BDD", is a debilitating disorder where an individual obsesses over their appearance, or flaws that may not even exist (Hsu & Vashi, 2017). Eating disorders are varied, and include detrimental behaviour such as starvation, purging, and compulsive eating (Bordo, 2009). Wright et al. (2006) found in their interviews with both young men and women that young women were more likely to be concerned with achieving and maintaining body ideals, thereby obsessing over their eating and exercise behaviours to achieve these ideals. Lowes and Tiggemann (2003) discovered that body image and social comparison issues seem to be prevalent in girls as young as six years old.

While emerging body image research aims to amplify the voices and experiences of young women, and recognize their agency in navigating various pressures and expectations, this has only recently been the case. Much of the literature on young women's body image has adopted quantitative approaches, offering statistics of how young women experience body image. For example, Gao et al. (2016), used a scale to measure body dissatisfaction and found that young overweight or obese women were more likely to experience negative body image and low self-esteem compared with average weight young women. We can see a similar pattern in Martínez et al. (2014) who utilised scales associated with body satisfaction as well as the Body Shape Questionnaire in their study and discovered that females in particular felt pressured to adhere to a thin ideal. Kwon et al. (2023) found from using the Vacillating Body Image Scale (VBIS) that young women should have better access to counselling on how to maintain a healthy and stable body image. They state that it is unclear whether body image is an individual or sociocultural issue.

Recent qualitative body image research highlights the importance of listening to young women's voices. For instance, Tiggemann et al. (2000) argue that body image is a complex topic and therefore more nuanced insights can be gained through qualitative methods such as focus groups where the participants' own voice can be heard. An example of this is Camacho-Miñano et al. (2019) using a participatory approach involving focus groups and semi-structured interviews to gain deeper insights into how young women engaged with 'fitspo' content on Instagram. They found that young women engage in this content to learn more about fitness and their bodies, but are vulnerable to body ideals and need to be educated on how to become critically aware of these ideals. Jong and Drummond (2016) were also interested in how and why young women in particular followed fitspiration content on social media. They used qualitative approaches including semi-structured interviews in order to hear "the perspectives of young females" (p. 766), as this demographic in particular seem to be the most vulnerable to negative body image experiences. Results showed that young women use social media networking sites to find health and fitness information and to gain motivation for their fitness journeys. They also found through their online ethnography of social media sites, that health and fitness content placed the onus on the individual to constantly work on themselves, stay fit, and manage their body weight. The messaging on these sites largely suggested

that if an individual does this, then they might be considered a “good global citizen” (Jong & Drummond, 2016, p. 763). Sumter et al. (2018) had more complex findings, suggesting that fitness content can have both a positive and negative effect on young women. This is because the trend can inspire and motivate young women to become involved in fitness, but often it can also encourage compulsive exercise and eating behaviours.

Walseth and Tidslevold (2020) used a participatory approach involving visual methods and interviews and invited their young female participants to select photos of women that they believed represented body ideals. The researchers suggest that existing research shows us that young women in particular are the most vulnerable to body ideals, and their results supported this, showing that 16-18 year old girls’ constructions of valued, beautiful bodies were those that were athletic, toned, and lean. Body image discourse is hard to escape in today’s society, and the language surrounding it, especially when referring to the female body, suggests a focus on the individual managing their behaviour rather than social change (Gibson, 2015). Next, I explore the concept of healthism and what it means to be perceived as ‘healthy’ in today’s society, to further demonstrate how health literacy persistently focuses on the individual.

Healthism and body image

In order to understand how many young women experience negative body image it is worth exploring the term ‘healthism’, first coined by Robert Crawford in 1980 (Beltrán-Carrillo et al., 2023).

Healthism suggests that each individual is responsible for maintaining their health, and should actively participate in self-monitoring practices including diet, exercise and weight-management interventions. Those who do not engage in this behaviour are believed to be “irresponsible, lazy, and lacking self-discipline” (Crawford, 1980, as referenced in Beltrán-Carrillo et al., 2023, p. 298).

Historically, a healthy individual was defined as someone who was free of diseases (Goodyear et al., 2019). In modern society, however, good health has come to be associated with fitting a certain bodily aesthetic, particularly one that is toned and low in body fat (Markula & Pringle, 2006). Goodyear (2020) proposed that in contemporary society, health is identified as maintaining “an attractive appearance and a fit, beautiful body” (p. 72). Azzarito (2009) adds to this argument, stating

that the definition of health in today's society is also discriminatory and racist, excluding people from minority groups who do not represent or share these highly Westernised ideals. Interestingly, Goodyear et al. (2019) refer to health as a "public performance" (p. 55) due to the way it is shared on social media in the form of health and fitness content to attract views, likes, and attention. Health and positive body image is emphasised to be the individual's responsibility, and people (especially women) are often ostracised if they do not appear to fit in with health norms (Duncan, 1994; Gibson, 2015; Markula, 2001; Markula & Pringle, 2006; Riley et al., 2023).

Gibson (2015) found that even therapists encourage female clients struggling with body image to engage in self-monitoring by reminding the client that issues such as body dysmorphia are the individual's responsibility. She stated that practitioners typically focus on 'curing' this pathology in women by using cognitive behavioural therapy, which prompts women to learn to monitor their own thoughts and behaviours. Markula (2001) explains how the medical discourse further encourages women to regulate their bodies, as body image disorders such as body dysmorphia are largely seen as a fault of the individual. Both Coffey (2016) and Riley et al. (2023) support that body image is seen as an individualistic issue and ignore the sociocultural factors (i.e., family, peers, social media) that may have given women these issues in the first place. Anderson (2012) describes how a commonly used body measurement in medicine, the 'BMI' method (body mass index) is utilised by those in positions of authority (i.e., healthcare professionals) to categorise people into either healthy or unhealthy. This has negative implications for young girls who then may feel that they need to lose weight or change their body in order to fit into a rather generalised, 'healthy' category. Furthermore, these tools place a large emphasis on monitoring body composition changes as opposed to fitness and well-being progress. Beltrán-Carrillo et al. (2023) found in their study of using these measurements on young women that it caused young women to correlate health with one's appearance.

Conrad (1994) contributes to the argument against healthism by suggesting that pursuing wellness is portrayed "as a good in itself" (p. 385) and something that is necessary for everyone. While there is nothing inherently malicious with this messaging, it aligns with the concept of healthism. As discussed, healthism tells us that it is the moral responsibility of an individual to better themselves. Not only is the expectation to maintain an unrealistic body shape, but to also maintain and

refine every aspect of one's physical, mental, spiritual and emotional well-being (Riley et al., 2023). In the next section, I examine how some body image scholars use post-feminist frameworks to understand in depth the body image experiences of young women.

Feminist Frameworks: Women and body image

Feminist scholars draw upon a range of social theories to rethink the complex relationships between youth, gender and body image. Laura Azzarito is a key body image scholar who explores the intersectionalities of race and gender when it comes to body image through a post-feminist lens. Azzarito et al. (2006) state this theoretical framework is important for this field of research as it recognises that women are “active agents” (p. 237) in creating their own experiences rather than “passive victims of oppression” (p. 224). It also leads to more nuanced insights. They add that feminist post-structuralism challenges traditional gender discourses, creating space for women's voices in research. They discovered through their observation of physical education classes and interviews with the teacher and students that girls actively challenge and resist gender stereotypes. Ultimately, this affects girls' participation in physical education as they do not wish to participate in hyper masculine spaces.

Azzarito (2009) reaffirms the narrative of what is represented to be an ‘ideal’ body with her ethnographic study involving high school students from the United States that aimed to understand how teenage boys' and girls' body image experiences influenced their engagement with physical education class. Purposive sampling was used to select participants based on a range of ethnicities, body shapes, abilities, and level of participation in their physical education class. The study showed how young people make sense of their bodies, feeling that “an ideal body is a body which is attractive to the opposite sex” (p. 28).

Though women are starting to become more empowered and take control of their bodies and feminine identifies, Azzarito (2010) argues that this empowerment is not available for all women. She explores the concept of “Future girls” and “Alpha girls” (p. 261) to explain how women are working to construct new ideals for themselves and break free from the traditional views of womanhood. The ‘Future’ or ‘Alpha girl’ is a young woman who demonstrates success in each area of her life and is

someone who “can have, be, and become whatever she wants” (p. 268). She is someone who is confident and takes on opportunities. While this modern movement could be perceived as empowering, the author contends that ultimately this messaging can be harmful for young women who do not have access to sporting and fitness culture, or who’s version of femininity does not align with this discourse. This includes women who are disabled or who belong to ethnic and/or religious minority groups, or who do not have the financial means to fund this type of lifestyle. Indeed, girls who do not fit with these ideals are referred to with disdain as “Other” girls (p. 261).

To help diminish the harm these exclusive messages could cause, Azzarito (2010) proposes that there is an opportunity in school physical education to start critical conversations with young girls, and encourage them to challenge these universal ideals and embrace their differences. Again, we see that young girls idealise a very narrow ideal of beauty because that is mostly what they are exposed to. The author claims that therefore modern feminine discourses such as ‘girl power’ are not universal and in fact are highly racialised, normalising and reproducing white feminine subjectivities.

Furthermore, Azzarito (2010) argues that the media plays a major role in the way young women understand their bodies. She suggests that the way health is portrayed in the media is heavily “racialized and classed” (p. 262), and draws on third-wave feminism to understand how women’s bodies become defined and constrained by traditional ideals from the patriarchy. She suggests that women can be seen as a form of surveillance of themselves due to the way they engage in self-monitoring behaviour to manage and maintain their physical appearance. The constant portrayal of health and beauty has lasting effects for young, impressionable women, especially those who do not fit in with these ideals.

Finally, Azzarito (2018) adds to the argument that body ideals are extremely narrow and shaped by “slenderness and whiteness” (p. 138). The opposite of this (black and plus-sized) is seen as a “low-status” (p. 138) femininity. This perspective was found through completing participatory research with female high school students in physical education class. The girls involved in this study agreed that the body ideal is typically represented in the same way in the media: white, skinny, hourglass figure. Azzarito (2018) suggests that neoliberal healthism messaging defines success for young women as obtaining “an attractive healthy, thin, fit body” (p. 137). Girls who fall outside of this ideal

are held personally responsible for their 'failures'. She argues that post-feminism is important in representing and giving agency to more marginalised groups in research, such as Black and indigenous people. As mentioned, this theory respects and invites the voices of girls, and therefore encourages them to think critically about gendered and racialised discourses.

Another important body image scholar, Coffey (2021) is critical of the current research approaches to body image. Coffey's approach has been shaped by feminist new materialisms, and the entanglement of the material and the discursive. In particular, Coffey's work is shaped by feminist Deleuzian ideas with affect central to her theoretical approach. As explained by Coffey (2015), affect refers to a "focus on the ways bodies both shape and are shaped by their physical and social environments" (p. 615). Coffey (2021) suggests that we need to focus on the "everyday embodiment" (p. 71) of body image, and the "mundane-ness" (p. 41) of daily well-being. Coffey (2022) stresses the importance of conducting participatory research with young people to gain richer insights into their everyday embodiment. Her methodology involved a combination of "in-depth semi-structured interviews and visual methods" (p. 70). The researcher noted that she used these particular approaches to give her young participants more autonomy in the research. The participants were able to use their smartphones to capture moments in their everyday lives that they believed represented well-being. Coffey (2022) analysed the case studies of two young participants who were part of a larger study, in which to gain a more nuanced understanding of the complexities of everyday embodiment and well-being, through the perspective of young people. She found that a sense of well-being is experienced and embodied differently by these participants, who use tools such as the support of family and peers and exploring nature to feel well in their lives again.

Coffey (2021) implemented new materialist methodology, again utilising interviews and photo-voice methods with a range of young participants who occupied various roles in life such as full-time work to studying at University, to gain rich insight into their experiences of everyday body image. She found that how young people felt about their body image was more dependent on factors outside of their control rather than any individual issues. These external factors include financial struggles, family commitments, and unpredictable work shifts. The author noted that not everyone has access to gym memberships and eating healthy can be expensive, which makes achieving body ideals even

more unrealistic. Most participants expressed more body concerns at times of high stress in their life. Coffey (2021) notes that how one feels about their body image can change on a day-to-day basis, and is not narrowed down to one single image or moment.

High value is placed on female attractiveness in society and for this reason, Coffey (2021) argues that body concern is “strongly gendered” (p. 79). Most participants in the study noted that body image was a major concern for them at some point of their lives. The researcher noted that the pressures that exist for young women to constantly sustain a positive attitude and ‘perfect’ body are incessant. She argues that these pressures disregard extrinsic factors such as financial stress and everyday life commitments that make achieving these ideals nearly impossible. The author also found that young women constantly feel that they are lacking in some way and need to work on their bodies, due to the constant comments they receive from partners, peers, or family. These comments have a lasting impact and cause these young women to feel as if they need to make serious lifestyle changes as soon as possible.

The way young women describe their bodies is aptly described as what Ngai (2005) refers to as “ugly feelings” (p. 2). Whereas young men displayed less self-consciousness towards their appearance, young women worried about their looks often to the point of obsessiveness. This would cause them to engage in behaviour to transform their bodies such as following a healthy diet, and at the extreme and dangerous end, form eating disorders. The author argues that body dissatisfaction has been normalised for young women, such that it is commonly understood to be exclusively a female issue. I now turn to literature that focuses on how young women experience body image and fitness culture in the context of Aotearoa New Zealand.

Youth, embodiment and body image in Aotearoa New Zealand

Various scholars have shown how pervasive body image ideals are in Aotearoa New Zealand society, and the impacts on children and youth. For example, Burrows (2008) conducted a health questionnaire in New Zealand schools to understand how primary and secondary school aged children make sense of health. The results demonstrated that many youth define health as focussing on monitoring eating and exercise habits and felt they could tell if someone was healthy solely based on

their size. However, some critiqued that fitting a body ideal necessarily equalled health. But the message for many youth remains that only those who fit a slim ideal are considered healthy. Interestingly, the researcher discovered that there were gendered differences in the questionnaire results, with young girls experiencing body dissatisfaction more significantly than their male counterparts. The results showed that secondary school girls struggle the most with their body image, with only 27% of senior level girls (aged 15-18 years old) selecting that they “always feel good about their bodies” (p. 31). Primary school aged girls (aged 5-11 years old) felt less body concern, with 51% of them selecting the same answer. Burrows (2008) ultimately encourages that we help children to see health as more than just one’s body composition.

In a subsequent study, Burrows and McCormack (2012) investigated how the health beliefs and values of health and physical education teachers in New Zealand primary schools influences their teaching practice. The researchers completed an ethnographic study at the school (including interviews with teachers) to understand how the teachers navigate the various health influences on their students. The teachers felt that the media exacerbated harmful messages around health and had a strong influence on children. They were mostly against BMI and other generalised measurements of health due to the feelings of shame and embarrassment this can cause children. The researchers discovered that the teachers aimed to promote health as a general sense of well-being rather than being slim. Despite these efforts, many of the children still identified slimness as central to the definition of health. The work of Burrows and colleagues is important as it shows how early these body image pressures start impacting youth, and the role of parents, schools, and health organisations in either reinforcing or challenging such all-pervasive discourses.

Focusing more on youth in Aotearoa New Zealand, Calder-Dawe and colleagues have examined how young people experience embodiment in several ways. Calder-Dawe and Carlson (2023) conducted interviews with young people who lived in Aotearoa New Zealand to understand their “embodied experiences” (p. 1225) such as body image. Many of the participants expressed a desire to avoid being fat at all costs, and associated being healthy with being slim, therefore “health is strongly aligned with achieving thinness and avoiding fatness” (p. 1232). The researchers found that many pressures exist for young women to be smaller, including their family and medical

professionals. In subsequent work, Calder-Dawe and colleagues have examined the powerful discourses and expectations on women to perform positivity (Calder-Dawe et. al., 2021), including the role of influencers (including health, well-being and fitness influencers) on Instagram (Calder-Dawe et. al., 2024). Taking up such ideas, Thorpe and colleagues (2024) have examined how young women living in Aotearoa New Zealand experienced changes in their embodied experiences during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, including the effects of the positivity imperative and how their increased use of social media affected their feelings about their bodies.

Body image and disordered eating research: Gender and cultural considerations

Though body image disorders such as body dysmorphia and eating disorders are significant issues in Aotearoa New Zealand (O'Brien & Hunter, 2006; Talwar et al., 2012; Utter et al., 2012) there is a deficiency of current research about this subject in this context, with most studies being conducted internationally (Boepple et al., 2016; Bordo, 2009; Brown & Tiggemann, 2022; Holland & Tiggemann, 2016; Hsu & Vashi, 2017). O'Brien and Hunter (2006) conducted a study examining the levels of disordered eating patterns and self-esteem in female university students studying physical education. They used surveys and questionnaires to identify self-esteem and body satisfaction levels in physical education versus non-physical education students. Their findings concluded that further research needs to be conducted on the rates of eating disorders for female university students who study subjects related to health or physical education.

On a positive note Cleland et al. (2023) suggest there has been significant progress in eating and body image disorders research within Aotearoa New Zealand. However, they do suggest a longitudinal and more comprehensive study would be beneficial, focussing on a diverse range of participants including male, and Māori and Pasifika participants. Talwar et al. (2012) agree that there is a lack of research surrounding body satisfaction levels in different ethnic groups in Aotearoa New Zealand and so they investigated the roles of ethnicity and body mass in relation to body image. They discovered that both Māori and European women are largely dissatisfied with their weight, and want to achieve a weight much smaller than they currently are. They suggest that further research needs to be conducted with different socioeconomic groups to understand how this can also impact body

dissatisfaction levels. McCabe et al. (2011) argue the importance of understanding the impact that sociocultural factors have on adolescents' body image experience. They found in their results that young people have different body expectations and ideals based on their culture. For example, the Tongan participants had a higher body mass index (BMI) on average than the Australian or Fijian participants, yet they experienced less body dissatisfaction. They therefore suggest that different cultures require and idealise different bodily ideals. The author states that in Tongan and Fijian culture, a larger body shows "a sign of care and nurturance" (p. 64) whereas young Australian women were more likely to strive towards thin body ideals.

According to Poulter and Treharne (2021), not all young women in Aotearoa New Zealand suffer from negative body image experiences. The researchers expressed the importance of focussing on the way in which some young women achieve self-efficacy and positive body image in order to educate others about 'body positivity'. In their study, they found that female participants seemed far more accepting of their appearance as they got older. These participants demonstrated awareness and criticism of how body ideals are forever trending and changing. They accepted that it was okay if they did not meet these ideals because it was unrealistic for them. They also seemed more appreciative of their body's functionality and overall health as they aged as opposed to their appearance.

Similar to McCabe et al.'s (2011) study, Poulter and Treharne (2021) also found a correlation between ethnicity and body image. For instance, one Pasifika participant commented that wider thighs were seen as "more beautiful" (p. 665) in her culture whereas an Asian participant described how she was seen as "chubby" (p. 665) in her home country, however in New Zealand she is on average smaller than most women. The researchers discovered that religion also plays a role in influencing how a young woman perceives herself with one female participant who was of Catholic faith stating that there are more significant things for her to be concerned with in her life. The researchers found that young women seem to become more appreciative and empowered by their bodies as they age. However, they also note that this occurs at about 18 years of age, when they transition into a new period of their lives that is not concerned with the trivialities of high school culture.

In their recent research with young Māori and Pacific women living in low socio-economic communities of South Auckland and Porirua, Nemani and Thorpe (2023) used "Mana Wahine and

Masi methodologies” (p. 972), which are methodologies that acknowledge and respects the “lived experiences” (p. 975) of Māori and Pasifika women. Qualitative methods including focus groups and digital journals were used to gain insights into how 31 young Māori and Pasifika women experience body image. These methodologies were also implemented to “amplify the voices” (p. 972) of these young women. The researchers found that, despite body ideals constantly being pushed onto these young women, and the criticism of their bodies, they remained proud of their appearance. These young women were aware of and rejected body ideals, and instead felt empowered by their appearance and body’s functionality. This is reflected in the way one participant recalls hearing and rejecting negative comments about her body, stating that she is “proud” (p. 983) of her genetics, and another participant who advises that young women should “just be happy with your skin and your body, your body looks nice” (p. 985).

In summary, it is clear that negative body image experiences such as eating disorders, low self-esteem, and social comparison exist especially for young women globally. Beltrán-Carrillo et al. (2023) note that healthism messaging places the onus on the individual to maintain a fit and healthy lifestyle. Young women feel this pressure even more so because of the unrealistic body ideals pressed onto them by peers, family, and society (Betz & Ramsey, 2017; Jones & Young, 2021; Lowes & Tiggemann, 2003). Another significant modern day factor that influences young women’s body image experiences is social media, due to the heavy promotion of maintaining feminine body ideals and pursuing a highly active lifestyle (Belmonte et al., 2024; Burnette et al., 2017; Fasoli et al., 2023; Goodyear et al., 2022; McComb & Mills, 2022; Mills et al., 2018; Pryde & Prichard, 2022; Slater et al., 2017; Tiggemann & Barbato, 2018; Webb et al., 2017). In the next section, I explore how social media, and in particular more popular platforms such as Instagram, is utilised by young women to navigate creating health and fitness lifestyles.

Social media and body image

The media has long promoted thin ideals. For instance, feminist scholars have examined the dominant discourses of body image ideals as perpetuated in women’s health magazines (Duncan, 1994;

Markula, 2001) and newspapers (Godoy-Pressland, 2015). Over the past two decades, researchers have focused on the role of social media in promoting unrealistic body ideals. In so doing, they have shown that the ever-changing and endlessly demanding body ideals presented on social media cause young women to practise excessive self-monitoring practices such as excessive training and disordered eating (Coffey, 2021; Walseth & Tidslevold, 2020). The popularity of social media and constant exposure to 'ideal' bodies also causes young women to compare their bodies to others (Riley et al., 2023). Wang et al. (2020) supports this, suggesting that social media sites can cause body surveillance and shame in female adolescents. Jong and Drummond (2016) argue that social media can exacerbate eating disorders and poor self-esteem in young women, due to the exposure of content such as 'thinspiration' where a thin body is praised and aspired to.

Over the past decade, body image scholars have increasingly focused on the impact of social media on women's relationships with their bodies. In a recent study, Brown and Tiggemann (2020) exposed female university students to a set of either travel or celebrity images taken from Instagram. Results showed that the participants who viewed the celebrity photos as opposed to the travel content experienced higher levels of body dissatisfaction and comparison. The researchers found that the captions used on social media had an effect on women's body image, and also investigated the role that celebrities play in sharing either 'body positivity' or negative body image online. Interestingly, the captions on the celebrity posts did not make a significant difference to body dissatisfaction levels, even if they were posting messages of 'body positivity'. The researchers argue that the addition of captions disclaiming editing or promoting 'body positivity' could even exacerbate poor body image and prompt women to focus more on the celebrity's body, especially if the celebrity pictured represents a thin ideal.

This is consistent with the findings of Holland and Tiggemann (2016) that showed that the female participants who were exposed to celebrity images experienced greater levels of comparison as opposed to those who were exposed to travel content. They also found that participants who had higher levels of celebrity worship (i.e., participants who felt more connected to their favourite celebrities) experienced greater levels of body dissatisfaction than those who did not. In terms of practical implications, Tiggemann and Barbato (2018) suggest that interventions could involve

encouraging women to limit their social media use. However, they do argue that this is not very realistic. Instead, another solution they suggest is to educate women about the potentially harmful impacts of commenting on appearance-related posts online.

More recently, body image scholars such as Vicky Goodyear have aimed to take the responsibility off young individuals. Goodyear et al. (2019) conducted body image research that took place in ten secondary schools in England. They implemented a participatory approach using classroom activities, focus groups, and surveys to gain in-depth insights into the social media experiences of the adolescents involved. The participants showed a mixture of responses to health-related social media content. Some of the young people interviewed felt they negatively compared their bodies to some of the toned, attractive bodies they see online. Whereas others were critical of the fabricated and posed bodies presented on social media, aware that celebrities often underwent surgery to achieve their looks. This places young people as more active users of social media who are aware of the misleading information that exists online. The researchers discovered that young people were frustrated that adults did not understand why they used social media. The participants strongly felt that adults need to become educated on social media to help their children become more informed of their social media practices. Goodyear et al. (2019) also advocate for social media companies taking responsibility in ensuring they provide safe online spaces for young people. They suggest this could look like banning content that is not appropriate for adolescents such as content that promotes thin or muscular ideals.

In addition to this, Goodyear (2020) states that social media is predominantly populated by young people. She argues that these platforms make it easy for youth to become fixated on their appearance and compare their bodies to others due to the constant exposure of body ideals online, as well as the normalisation of filters and heavy editing. The author states that young people also feel the need to post their own bodies online as a form of validation, and may feel pressured to because their peers do the same. Goodyear et al. (2022) urge that adolescents should be taught how to use social media in a way that empowers them and as a tool to help them learn about their bodies and health. They suggest that social media has the potential to teach young people about their bodies yet it can simultaneously encourage them to develop detrimental habits such as eating disorders and body

dysmorphia. However, there is hope as social media trends such as ‘thinspo’ and ‘fitspo’ are starting to be replaced by messages of self-love and ‘body positivity’, which I now examine in more depth.

The ‘body positivity’ movement

More emerging research is focussing on the implications of the fairly new ‘body positivity’ trend for young women (Cohen et al., 2019; Cohen et al., 2021; Riley et al., 2023; Stevens & Griffiths, 2020). This trend was created as a response to the heavily filtered and edited body ideals that are often posted online. The aim of this trend is to encourage women to embrace their bodies and resist normative feminine body ideals (Cohen et al., 2021). Cohen et al. (2019) conducted a content analysis, reviewing ‘body positivity’ content on Instagram and discovered that this movement aims to celebrate diversity by showcasing women of various body shapes and sizes. Slater et al. (2019) argue that it is impractical to persuade adolescents to delete their social media accounts. They instead found that exposure to content that mocks the thin ideal had a positive effect on young women’s body image. These results propose that social media can also be an empowering platform for young women to learn about and become more appreciative of their bodies.

Interestingly, Cohen et al. (2021) found through their review of ‘body positivity’ literature that, even though the movement can have positive effects on young women’s well-being and body satisfaction, it can also exacerbate existing body image issues. This is because the movement still has an overt focus on one’s appearance. Clark (2023) proposes that “body neutrality” (p. 1) could instead be a more practical solution to negative body image. They suggest that this is because it does not place the emphasis on the appearance of one’s body. Nevertheless, the research shows that some young women experience higher levels of body satisfaction after witnessing ‘body positivity’ content and therefore could be a helpful tool to help young women improve their body image (Cohen et al., 2019; Fasoli et al., 2023). Though ‘body positivity’ content is becoming more popular on Instagram, healthism trends such as ‘fitspo’ still exist and pressure young women to sustain often unrealistic healthy lifestyles (Boepple et al., 2016; Carrotte et al., 2017).

The above literature clearly shows us that social media is a major influence on the body image and fitness experiences of young women. Some young women use social networking sites such as Instagram as a pedagogical and motivational tool to get into consistent training and healthy eating (Goodyear et al., 2019; Goodyear, 2020; Goodyear et al., 2022; Walseth & Tidslevold, 2020). However, some struggle with social comparison with female fitness influencers, models, and celebrities that often promote unrealistic ideals on social media (McComb & Mills, 2022). Though fitness discourses and trends on social media are starting to become more uplifting and realistic, such as the popular ‘body positivity’ trend, heavy filters and editing, as well as highly unachievable ideals still rotate heavily on social media. There is a pressure that exists especially for young women to maintain a ‘fitspo’ lifestyle as well as achieve a body composition that is highly impractical for many young women to obtain (Pryde & Prichard, 2022). In my research, I take up these ideas, exploring how fit femininities are perpetuated in online spaces (i.e., social media) and fitness spaces such as gyms, and how they work to further create negative body image experiences for (some) young females.

Wiklund et al. (2019) conducted interviews with high school students in Sweden, selecting a combination of participants who had a sporting and non-sporting background. Their responses demonstrated that young people are aware of the unhealthy behaviours that fitness “hype” (p. 444) promotes, especially the harmful messaging that exists on social media. The adolescents recognised the restrictions current fitness trends imposed, suggesting that adhering to a health and fitness lifestyle feels like something one must do. Participants were able to reject these limiting fitness discourses and identify their own definitions of health, which included having a balance of good physical and mental health.

Despite this level of awareness, the body is still seen by many of the young participants as an “individual project” (Wiklund et al., 2019, p. 447) to be worked on, as adhering to body ideals is seen as a way to gain social capital with peers. This was expressed by some participants who were concerned that others would judge them if they did not take part in physical activity. The researchers noted that some of the participants felt the pressure to adhere to these ideals to gain popularity, as “a fit and good-looking body gives social status and value” (p. 447). Wiklund et al. (2019) postulate that

social media and the high-profile celebrities and influencers such as the Kardashians who populate social media, set the tone for body ideal trends. Then, impressionable young people who religiously follow these profiles feel pressured to achieve these ideals. They also found that peers can have, often unintentionally, a negative influence on a young person's body image by encouraging each other to attend the gym and get fit to be accepted socially. The researchers discovered that young people frequently share content displaying their bodies and physical progress in the gym, which made those who did not post this content or who were not fit feel worse about their bodies.

The rise of 'Fitspo' and the 'transformation imperative'

Transforming one's body is seen as vital to achieving health and happiness throughout fitness culture (Duncan, 1994; Gill, 2007; Riley et al., 2023). This is due to the rising popularity of social media trends such as 'fitspo' which involves sharing content depicting an aesthetically healthy and fit lifestyle (Sumter et al., 2018). A popular Instagram trend, 'fitspo' or 'fitspiration' promotes and glorifies total body and lifestyle transformation (Boepple et al., 2016; Slater et al., 2017; Sumter et al., 2018; Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015). More recent research focuses on the effects of popular social media trends such as 'fitspo' and how this influences young people's body image experiences (Camacho-Miñano et al., 2019; Goodyear et al., 2022; Jong & Drummond, 2016; Mills et al., 2018; Walseth & Tidslevold, 2019). On the surface, popular trends such as 'fitspo' look as though they advocate for maintaining a healthy, sustainable lifestyle, however Boepple et al. (2016) found through their analysis of 'fitspiration' websites, that this content typically showcases female body ideals, and encourages compulsive eating and exercise behaviours.

Extending on the implications of popular social media sites such as Instagram for women, Toffoletti and Thorpe (2021) use a feminist lens to examine how women engage with fitness content online, and how this shapes their own everyday fitness practices. They found in their analysis of a popular online 'fitspiration' community created by fitness influencer, Kayla Itsines, that a diverse range of women were all aiming to achieve similar body ideals, typically one that is slender.

Another space where 'fitspo' content heavily exists is on TikTok, which is one of the most popular social media platforms used by young people; Instagram being the most popular (Pryde &

Prichard, 2022). These researchers conducted a quantitative, experimental study with 120 female participants from Adelaide in South Australia, who were 17 to 25 years old. The researchers exposed the participants to either 'fitspo' or art content on TikTok and found that those who viewed the 'fitspo' content experienced a worse mood and higher social comparison rates compared to those who viewed the art content.

Body image concerns have grown in recent years for young people after the pandemic and as social media continues to grow in popularity (Thorpe et al., 2023; Vall-Roqué et al., 2022;). Also, participation in fitness culture seems to be growing increasingly popular for young girls, as trending body ideals call for a more toned appearance (Hartmann et al., 2018; Walseth & Tidslevold, 2020). My research is motivated to contribute to this growing body of literature by exploring the lived body image and fitness culture experiences of young women in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Camacho-Miñano et al. (2022) found through their focus groups with young women that they mainly engage with social media as they often feel they learn more about health and fitness through platforms such as Instagram rather than in their physical education classes, which are still seen as largely masculine and aggressive spaces. In this way, the researchers state that Instagram is seen as a gendered and feminine space. Toffoletti et al. (2023) discovered that women mostly saw Instagram as a positive space where they had a supportive community. Nevertheless, they are still vulnerable and this awareness does not necessarily translate into high levels of self-esteem. Indeed, many body image scholars share the sentiment that the world we exist in today does not allow for women in particular to feel good about their bodies (Azzarito, 2019; Banet-Weiser, 2015; Coffey, 2021).

Prior to social media, however, thin ideals were still heavily perpetuated by the media in the form of women's health magazines (Duncan, 1994; Markula, 2001) and newspapers (Godoy-Pressland, 2015). Tiggemann et al. (2000) found through their focus groups with year eleven girls (aged 15-16 years old) that sociocultural factors, especially the media, encouraged thin ideals in young women, and discovered that adolescents are aware of these influences and pressures. They were also interested in the language girls use to describe their bodies, finding it often was self-disparaging. One participant in this study summarised the collective thoughts of the group: "I would feel better about myself if I lost weight" (p. 651).

Burnette et al. (2017) proposed that limited qualitative research exists about the relationship between body image and social media. They discovered in their focus groups with 12-14 year old girls that they thought girls posted 'selfies' (photos of themselves) mainly on platforms such as Instagram for attention. In fact, one of the participants in this study stated that all of the participants in the focus group are "pretty confident" (p. 120). However, these views seem to contradict themselves. Though the girls demonstrated awareness and criticism of the potential harmful effects of social media exposure, they still compared themselves to their peers or celebrities online. It is apparent that body ideals have become even more unrealistic for young women especially in the modern day, and these ideals are perpetuated by trends such as 'fitspo' even within fitness spaces such as gyms, where many young women feel uncomfortable and marginalised (Coen et al., 2021; Johansson, 1996). I now explore how spaces such as these influence and can be harmful to young women.

Fit femininities: The rise of fitness and wellness culture

Over the past four decades, feminist scholars of sport and physical culture have examined the impact of active fitness participation and media consumption on women's understanding and experiences of their bodies. Duncan (1994) noted that in women's health magazine *Shape*, readers are subjected to continual exposure of photographs of women who represent the ideal body shape, coupled with articles that provide tips on how to look their best, take measurements, and lose weight. She argues that women are persistently encouraged through magazines such as these to alter their physical appearance, committing them to a "lifetime of self-monitoring" (p. 54). This encourages them to then partake in harmful eating and training behaviours including overtraining and disordered eating behaviours. Markula (2001) agrees with this sentiment, stating that *Shape* magazine solely presented photos of models with perfect bodies while simultaneously raising awareness about eating disorders. However, women should not be seen as completely acquiescent of body ideal discourse. Studies show that women are aware, and at times, critical, of these ideals (Burnette et al., 2017; Nemani & Thorpe, 2023; Poulter & Treharne, 2021; Tiggemann, 2000).

Walseth and Tidslevold (2020) argue that within these discourses exists a valued body discourse, and especially in young women, a valued body is one that is perceived to be beautiful,

toned, and healthy. In fact, Camacho-Miñano et al. (2022) found that young women keenly took health and fitness advice from Instagram influencers who represented body ideals. As mentioned above, this is also the case for celebrities who are often praised for representing body ideals (Brown & Tiggemann, 2022). Other scholars have focused on how women's experiences in spaces of sport and fitness shape their relations with their bodies (Azzarito, 2009; Camacho-Miñano et al., 2022; Clark & Markula, 2017; Coen et al., 2021; Godoy-Pressland, 2015; Hartmann et al., 2018). Riley et al. (2023) support the idea that following a fit and healthy lifestyle only encourages this self-surveillance and for women to engage in self-discipline. She argues that gym members are subjected to an ever-present gaze and encouraged to engage in disciplinary practices such as taking regular measurements of their body. According to Markula and Pringle (2006), many women are often highly aware of this gaze, and therefore tend to focus on toning exercises that will help them achieve this normalised body ideal.

Some scholars have shown how gyms are highly gendered spaces that marginalise women in a range of ways. Coen et al. (2021) found through their semi-structured interviews with 52 female and male Canadian gym users, that gender stereotypes are actively performed in the gym. Men are typically seen as strong, tough, and dominant, and women are still perceived as passive and delicate. Certain areas of the gym such as the weights area are seen as "masculine spaces" (p. 545) whereas the cardiovascular area contains equipment more suitable to women. For instance, one male participant noted the elliptical is "a female machine" (p. 548). The researchers also found that women must contend with a multitude of factors that cause them discomfort at the gym such as the male gaze. Participants were also invited to complete journal entries to reflect on their experiences within the gym environment over the space of a week. Interestingly, one participant reflected on the gym attire that was available to men and women. They noted that women's activewear is often revealing and accentuates their curves (i.e., with 'booty shorts'), whereas men's activewear is baggy, relaxed, and comfortable. The gym can be seen as a space of hegemonic masculinity due to the way men dominate these spaces through their sweat and grunting, and one where women are easily seen as "inauthentic participants" and "passive objects of men's gazes" (p. 548). The women at the gym felt timid and apprehensive of taking up too much space in the gym.

Johansson (1996) agrees that the gym is a “gendered space” (p. 32) that represents an entire lifestyle “where certain attitudes, bodies and styles are valued higher than others” (p. 32). The researcher notes that everything about gym culture idealises youth and beauty over health where “the ideal body is a young and healthy body” (p. 33). The researcher describes how some gyms are seen as “hot gyms” (p. 33) where those who do not fit body ideals feel like outsiders or unwelcome to train. Even the staff who work in fitness spaces often represent these youthful, fit ideals which can be intimidating for some. Similarly to Coen et al. (2021), Johansson (1996) proposes that certain spaces within the gym are “male territory” (p. 38) where women are subjected to the male gaze as they pass through this area to get to their preferred spaces. While some women welcomed this attention, most felt highly uncomfortable by it as shown in an interview with one female participant: “The girls usually dislike this situation. They feel that the men looking at them are critically evaluating their bodies.” (Johansson, 1996, p. 38). The male gaze therefore can be a limitation for many young women to start or continue their fitness journeys.

Contemporary body ideals and wellness culture

Body ideals are constantly changing, and it is worth noting how in the modern day, body ideals have formed to become even more unrealistic than before (McComb & Mills, 2022). In the 1990’s and early 2000’s, the feminine ideal was to be as thin as possible, akin to the body composition of famous supermodels at the time such as Kate Moss (Duncan, 1994). However, in modern society, with the increasing popularity and accessibility of fitness culture especially for females, women are now seeking out a ‘fit’ physique (McComb & Mills, 2022; Walseth & Tidslevold, 2020; Wiklund et al., 2019). As Wiklund et al. (2019) phrases it, “strong is the new skinny” (p. 448). Not only are young women expected to maintain a slim body composition, they must also develop muscle tone that is not too masculine, and curves in the ‘right’ areas, which the researchers propose is a “paradox” (p. 448).

Young females are expected via healthism messaging to maintain an extremely unrealistic body composition, but they are also pressured to maintain extensive beauty routines to appear attractive to the male gaze (Riley et al., 2023). It is now becoming increasingly common for young women still in their teen years (and sometimes even younger) to undergo various beauty treatments, and on the more

extreme end, cosmetic surgeries such as breast augmentation, in order to fit in with beauty standards (Gill, 2007). Anti-aging discourses are also now widely consumed by young women. Carter (2016) conducted interviews with 14 women aged between 30 and 45 from Toronto and Ottawa in Canada. The researcher investigated the routines and practises women engaged with every day, how they spoke about these practices, and who had influenced them to engage in these practices. The researcher discovered that women often felt self-conscious and concerned about how their bodies changed over the various stages of their lives. Being healthy to these women meant maintaining their youth and beauty via disciplinary body practices such as restrictive eating and maintaining a consistent workout routine. Carter (2016) argues that anti-aging discourses are highly gendered and women are under intense surveillance to maintain their appearance. This ties in with wellness culture, in which well-being is presented as a very narrow, aesthetic ideal.

O'Neill (2021) states that the wellness industry has grown dramatically in recent years and mostly targets young women, reminding them of their personal responsibility to constantly improve themselves. This is an important topic to understand in the context of body image, as it seems that even wellness, almost paradoxically, is an aesthetic construct (Conor, 2021). As Coffey (2021) states, her participants recognised "body image and wellness...as two sides of the same coin, and usually went hand-in-hand" (p. 35). Initially, it seems that the wellness trend intended to inspire individuals to become the best version of themselves. However, similar to health and fitness, it is yet another racialised and gendered construct, as wellness is often personified and aimed at by companies as a white, middle-class woman (Conor, 2021). Though wellness is at its most purest a holistic attainment of health for all, it ironically excludes those who do not fit in with its very narrow aesthetic ideal (Azzarito, 2010).

Conclusion

It is clear that negative body image experiences are a serious issue for young women in modern society. Body dissatisfaction can often lead to compulsive behaviour such as disordered eating and over exercising (Bordo, 2009; Cleland et al., 2023; Hsu & Vashi, 2017; O'Brien & Hunter, 2006;

Utter et al., 2012). It can also cause young women to engage in consumption practices that range from beauty treatments to complex cosmetic surgeries. Though body image issues have historically been viewed as an individual pathology, body image scholarship is now starting to focus more on the various sociocultural factors that contribute to the way young women perceive themselves (Azzarito, 2009; Coffey, 2016; Gibson, 2015; Goodyear, 2020; Riley et al., 2023). These include external factors such as social media, family or peer influence, and popular trends such as ‘fitspo’ (Carrotte et al., 2017; Pryde & Prichard, 2022; Slater et al., 2017; Sumter et al., 2018) and ‘thinspo’ which combines the words ‘thin’ and ‘inspiration’ (Wick & Harriger, 2018).

Many studies have concluded that social media is a major influence on the low self-esteem that is common in young women (Belmonte et al.; 2024; Boepple et al., 2016; Brown & Tiggemann, 2020; Carrotte et al., 2017; Hogue & Mills, 2019; Jong & Drummond, 2016; McComb & Mills, 2022; Pryde & Prichard, 2022; Slater et al., 2017; Slater et al., 2019; Sumter et al., 2018; Tiggemann & Barbato, 2018; Wang et al., 2020). Young women often use social media as a pedagogical tool to learn about health and fitness from their favourite influencers (Goodyear et al., 2019; Goodyear, 2020; Goodyear et al., 2022; Walseth & Tidslevold, 2020). However, the ‘thinspo’ and ‘fitspo’ idealisation that is perpetuated on social media is a significant cause of body dissatisfaction for young women. While emerging trends such as ‘body positivity’ appear to challenge existing body ideals, research suggests a more complex picture with new trends often reinforcing (more or less) limited and disciplining views of the gendered body (Cohen et al., 2019; Cohen et al., 2021; Riley et al., 2023; Stevens & Griffiths, 2020). Body image research is evolving from pathological to participatory approaches to hear directly from individuals and their experiences of fitness and body image, to identify practical solutions to help create more body positive experiences for young women. In the next chapter, I explore the methodology and theoretical framework implemented in this research to answer the research questions.

Chapter 3: Theory and Methodology

This chapter provides an overview of the methodologies and theoretical frameworks used to shape, guide and develop this project. For this study, I used a post-structural feminist approach to gain an understanding of the lived experiences of young women in terms of body image and fitness culture. This approach acknowledges and values young women's voices, and gives them agency in the research project, which is an important aspect of feminist research (Coffey, 2016; Goodyear, 2020; Rayaprol, 2016).

This research project included two methods. First, I conducted an anonymous online survey to gain a broad understanding of the body image and fitness culture experiences of young women living in various regions of Aotearoa New Zealand. Second, I implemented focus groups and individual semi-structured interviews with 15 young women to gain more nuanced insights into these lived experiences. Feminist post-structuralism shaped my engagement with both the survey and focus group methods. Providing open-ended survey questions that allowed participants to expand on their answers and share their thoughts, as well as implementing focus groups and a semi-structured interview approach, provided opportunities for young women to share their opinions and stories and become more active participants in the research (Walseth & Tidslevold, 2020). It was important that these young women felt heard and acknowledged, especially as I sought to understand from their perspective, how fitness and body image experiences could be improved for young women.

In this chapter, I discuss the theoretical approach that guided my methods, as well as acknowledge the ethical care involved in this research and my positionality as a researcher. I also go into depth about the participants who were recruited for this project, how and why they were recruited, and the data collection process. This research project gained ethical approval from the Human Research Ethics Committee from the University of Waikato on Monday, September 4th, 2023 (2023#26).

Theory and Methodology: Feminist Post-Structuralism

For this research project, I adopted an interpretivist epistemology and a relativist ontological approach. My research paradigm was interpretivist, social constructivist, and critical as I aimed to be an advocate for these young women and help create social changes (Mies, 1983). In particular, this research was inspired by the ontological and epistemological assumptions of feminist post-structuralism, which prioritises women's voices, lived experiences, and multiple subjectivities.

Another key focus of feminist poststructuralism is to critically identify and analyse the workings of gendered discourses. According to Willet and Etowa (2023), feminist post-structuralism relates to a range of epistemologies and ontologies, including a "relativist view of reality" (p. 6).

Weedon (1997) states that feminism "is a politics directed at changing existing power relations between women and men in society" (p. 1). Feminist theory seeks to "provide less oppressive ways of knowing" (Varga-Dobai, 2012, p. 8). A key aspect of feminist research is inviting your participants to play an active role in the research, and amplifying the voices of these participants, who may otherwise belong to marginalised groups (Rayaparol, 2016). Considering the participants in this research project were all young women, and sharing at times quite personal information about their health and fitness journeys, a feminist lens and approach to the research was appropriate and necessary. Furthermore, I was inspired to amplify young women's voices and experiences about fitness with the aim to create change in the New Zealand fitness sector, and to build more inclusive and supportive environments for young women. In this way, feminist politics underpins my research approach.

Feminist post-structuralism has been described as "a form of poststructuralism which can meet feminist needs" (Weedon, 1997, p. 20). It requires the researcher to acknowledge and reflect on their positionality. Feminist post-structuralists reject gendered discourses and fixed concepts around masculinity and femininity. They choose to view women as individuals with agency who actively used their lived experiences to find their identity (Azzarito et al., 2006). A feminist post-structuralist lens was employed for this research project as I aimed for my participants to have respect and agency within the research, and to treat them as experts of their own experiences (Coffey, 2022; Goodyear et al., 2019). This theoretical framework is important for researchers who wish to advocate for and help

create more positive experiences for women (Pierre, 2000). Rayaparol (2016) suggests adopting “holistic” (p. 385) approaches that recognise the complexities of embodied everyday life. Participants should be seen as valuable individuals whose voices were important to the project, and the distance between the researcher and the participants was narrowed. Post-structuralism aligned with the aims of this research as it concentrates on “the conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions of the individual, her sense of herself and her ways of understanding in relation to her world” (Weedon, 1997, p. 32).

Various sport, health, and physical education scholars have drawn upon feminist post-structuralism to understand young women’s experiences within a range of settings. For example, Azzarito et al. (2006) used a feminist post-structuralist perspective to acknowledge young girls as active subjects of their physical education experiences, and to gain in-depth insights into why they do not wish to participate in this subject at school. Employing this framework allowed the researchers to understand the gendered power relations that exist in this setting that lead to their reluctance to engage in physical education.

Another key scholar in this field is Pirkko Markula, who engages in feminist post-structuralism and Foucauldian theory in relation to women’s fitness to understand how women experience body image and fit femininities. Through her research, we can see that paradoxical body ideals have existed for women well before social media was created. For instance, Markula (1995, 2001) found through analyses of women’s health magazines that body ideal discourse is perpetuated throughout the media, and that women are expected to be both thin and athletic at the same time. Markula (1995) recognised qualitative methodology such as interviews as important to feminist research “to listen to the voices of the individual women” (p. 429). She explains that a postfeminist lens allows her to understand whether women are aware of the harmful body ideal discourse that targets them through these magazines. It was clear from her participants that women feel pressured to adhere to these ideals due to the constant surveillance surrounding them, even if they were critical of these ideals. This surveillance includes the male gaze and societal expectations.

Markula (1995) also discovered that women feel constantly worried about their ageing bodies from as young as their twenties, as well as their “problem areas” (p. 434). Women are often complicit

and unaware of engaging in their own oppression in this way. Though some of the participants were critical of this ideal constantly being presented in the media, they still sought it for themselves by participating in aerobic exercises aimed to achieve this ideal. Women constantly feel like they need to improve their body in some way, even if they are aware of the unrealistic expectations of this ideal. In this way, Markula (1995) suggests that women become what Foucault referred to as ‘docile bodies’ which are “ready to obey the regimes of power in society” (p. 449).

Markula (2001) furthers the oppressive nature of the women’s health magazine discourse through a Foucauldian perspective. She explains that these magazines will provide articles about ‘body positivity’ while simultaneously perpetuating body ideals through the photos they display. Through her analysis of magazines such as *Shape*, she observes how readers are reminded that though women should not strive for an ideal they “still only picture perfect bodies” (p. 165). This causes a woman to intrinsically tie her worth to her appearance. Markula (2001) argues that a Foucauldian perspective recognises readers “as subjects who actively challenge the magazine production of the singular feminine body” (p. 169). Some readers were critical of the contradictory messages presented in *Shape* magazine and one reader even suggested that the editor includes more diverse pictures of women’s bodies. However, Markula (2001) posits that the editors of such magazines occupy power positions and blame the individual for their supposed pathologies and body self-esteem issues.

Many researchers agree that feminist post-structuralism offers a modern, holistic, and a more inclusive way of understanding the multiplicities and complexities of women’s lives (Azzarito et al., 2006; Ollivier et al., 2020; Willet & Etowa., 2023). For instance, in their study of postpartum health, Ollivier et al. (2020) implemented a feminist post-structuralist framework to challenge the heteronormative, discourses that dominate postpartum sexual health. They urge for this lens to be implemented more frequently in this area to provide more accurate and holistic sexual health education, thereby reducing damage to an individual’s sexual health.

Willet and Etowa (2023) argue that feminist post-structuralism is an important theoretical framework for research areas such as women’s health. They posit that feminist post-structuralism welcomes a diverse range of participants and serves to deconstruct the healthism messaging that pervades many women’s health spaces. Feminist and post-structural feminist research has been used

quite frequently in research with young women in sport and physical education (Azzarito & Solomon, 2005; Azzarito et al., 2006; Azzarito, 2009). However, here I apply this in the fitness context to investigate how young women navigate their fitness journeys in spaces that are often oppressive and highly gendered.

Feminist post-structuralism shapes the methodology I have chosen for this research project. Focus groups and interviews were implemented to prioritise young women's voices, their lived experiences, the multiplicities of their lives and the dominant discourses that shape their relations with their bodies. A quantitative survey was also implemented to complement the focus groups and to access a broad, diverse range of young women across the country. These methods helped me acknowledge that all young women have different interpretations and lived experiences of body image, but there are dominant discourses that exist that shape their experiences such as the transformation imperative (Gill, 2007; Riley et al., 2023) and trends such as the 'glow up', which I will explain in depth later. Focus groups also generated discussion and gave each participant the opportunity to share their stories. This allowed for solidarity amongst the participants, and for the young women to connect and relate to each other.

Methods

With the aim of understanding young women's experiences of the fitness lifestyle, I implemented a mixed-method approach, including i) an anonymous survey and ii) focus groups and interviews. As discussed in the literature review chapter, body image scholars are urging for more qualitative approaches to understand the complex personal experiences of body image (Coffey, 2021; Goodyear, 2020; Tiggemann et al., 2000). While I utilised the qualitative methods of interviews and focus groups, I also used a quantitative survey because it allowed me to hear from a diverse range of participants from a variety of backgrounds, and to map broader trends across young women before delving more deeply in the complexities and nuances of young women's lived experiences via the focus groups and interviews.

Survey

Firstly, an anonymous survey was used to gain a general understanding of the themes that exist for body image and fitness culture experiences for young women. The survey consisted of 35 tick-box questions (many with open text boxes for participants to add further comments) and contained four sections to understand how young women experienced body image and fitness culture in Aotearoa New Zealand. These were: demographics, fitness and well-being experiences, social media and body image. The survey design was piloted with my supervisor and various friends from the same demographics. I reworked the survey design following their feedback. The final survey took participants an average of 10-20 minutes to complete.

Survey data was gathered for the anonymous survey over a timeframe of seven weeks (Friday September 15th, 2023-Friday, November 3rd 2023). First, I reached out via email to approximately 245 sports and fitness organisations throughout Aotearoa New Zealand, to introduce myself and my research project, and share the link to my anonymous survey. These organisations included commercial and privately owned gyms, fitness studios such as Pilates and Yoga studios, club franchises, and university gyms. Follow-up emails were sent two weeks after if no response had been received. I also shared information about the survey with lecturers in the University of Waikato Sport, Health and Human Performance programme, many of whom shared with their students, hence the high Waikato representation.

I also printed posters and visited local gyms within the Bay of Plenty area to introduce myself and the research project, and to share the posters in the fitness space. The posters contained a QR code that led to further information and the survey link, as well as a summary of the research project and the criteria for participant eligibility so that gym members could scan the code and access further information easily.

In the information page, participants were reminded that the survey was completely anonymous and therefore they would not be able to withdraw after completing it. The survey contained a cover page with further information about the research project and the participant's rights. There was also a link to a video introducing myself, my motivation for the research project, and explaining what the

survey was about and again the rights to participate. Participants were required to tick either an 'I agree' or 'I disagree' box before they commenced the survey to gain their consent. Once the survey had been completed, a 'thank you' page was presented acknowledging the participants for their time, and my own contact details if they had any further questions. Details of a youth helpline were also provided in case the survey arose any issues for the young women involved. I also invited participants to take part in focus groups if they lived in or near the areas where they were hosted and to email myself if they wanted to participate. Finally, this page contained the contact details for my supervisor, and the Human Research Ethics Committee if they had any ethical concerns about the research project. No participants reached out with any questions or concerns.

The final number of respondents included 203 females aged between 18 and 25 years old, who lived in various regions of Aotearoa New Zealand and identified with following a health and fitness lifestyle. Further information about survey participants is presented below (see Table 1.).

Table 1. Characteristics of Survey Participants

Characteristic	Number (%)
Age	
18-20	31%
21-22	25%
23-24	44%
Region of New Zealand (the survey respondents lived in)	
Northland	4%
Auckland	9%
Waikato	46.5%
Bay of Plenty	8.5%
Gisborne	0.7%
Hawke's Bay	3.5%
Taranaki	1.41%
Manawatū-Whanganui	6.34%
Wellington	6.34%
Tasman	0%
Nelson	0.70%
Marlborough	0%
West Coast	0%
Canterbury	7.75%
Otago	2.82%
Southland	2.11%
Ethnicity	
New Zealand European	67.86%
Māori	16.67%
Pacific Islander	1.79%
Asian Heritage	4.17%
Middle Eastern	1.19%
Other	8.33%

For those who selected 'Other' they were asked to specify, and this category included Latin American, African, Dutch, Ukrainian, Russian, South African, Indian, Somali, Australian, European South African, and Fijian/Indian participants.

Focus groups and interviews

Focus groups (and interviews) were implemented in line with a feminist ethics of care approach (Wilkinson, 1998). The same semi-structured interview guide was implemented for the focus groups and interviews. 14 questions in total were asked, and aimed to understand how young women experience fitness culture, body image, and their thoughts about whether young women feel pressured

to adhere to beauty standards and body ideals. I worked with my supervisor in creating the interview guide, and then piloted it with some of my friends prior to commencing the interviews with my participants to gain feedback on the questions and see if there were any further questions I needed to add or modify for clarity.

Recruitment

As I wanted to hear from a range of young women, I used purposive sampling to recruit participants from diverse cultural and socio-economic backgrounds and geographical locations across the country. I also reached out to connections from my own experiences within the fitness industry, such as other personal trainers, and utilising my current workplace, with my employer's permission, to reach out to current students who fit this demographic. Finally, I reached out to my own social media audience and followers that I have built up through my own personal training business via an email newsletter, Instagram stories and posts to gain further participants. These posts, as well as all participant information and consent forms were in plain and accessible language so that my participants understood what the project entailed.

Social media was chosen as the main form of participant recruitment since the target demographic of this research project predominantly spends time on social media, particularly Instagram (Brown & Tiggemann, 2020). Some participants had reached out to me to express their interest after seeing my Instagram post. This included three participants who were friends and trained together. Snowball sampling is a commonly used recruitment method in sociological research, and was therefore implemented in this study, with many young women referring others to consider participating in the research project. Mautner and Doucet (2008) suggest that this type of participant recruitment is often used in qualitative research as having participants who already have personal relationships helps to create a safe space where participants feel that they can openly share with each other. Therefore, all participants had self-selected as they had responded to my posts to express their interest. When participants reached out to express an interest in participating in my research, I offered them the option of doing a focus group or interview. Due to the sensitive nature of some of the topics (e.g., body image), I felt it was important to give the young women the option for either a focus group

or an individual interview. Most participants chose to participate in a focus group, however some selected the individual interview option as they were either unable to make the focus group date and time, or lived outside of the focus group location. One participant had strict time constraints that made it easier for her to complete an individual interview.

Participants in the focus groups and interviews included 15 young women aged between 19 and 25 years old and identified as female. All participants lived in various regions of Aotearoa New Zealand and identified with being interested in health and fitness lifestyles. The reason for the 18-25 year old age bracket is because this is the age group that mostly occupies social media, which has a significant influence on young women's body image experiences (Jong & Drummond, 2016; Riley et al., 2023). Information about the focus group/interview participants is displayed in Table 2. below:

Table 2. Characteristics of Focus Group and Interview Participants

Pseudonym	Age	Ethnicity	Occupation	Other contextual factors
Hannah	19	Information not provided	Information not provided	Information not provided
Elizabeth	19	Māori	Trades	Crossfit and powerlifting
Ashley	20	New Zealand European	Fitness industry	Information not provided
Grace	22	New Zealand European	Police force	Gym/group Training
Trinity	23	New Zealand European	Graduate student and working in the sport and recreation industry	Gym, and competitive/social football
Erin	23	New Zealand European	Science technician	Gym and hikes
Tiffany	23	Information not provided	Information not provided	Information not provided
Annika	24	South African	Intern quantity surveyor, part-time student	Mother, Gym, swimming and walking
Aroha	24	Māori	Community worker and part-time student	Badminton, dance and home workouts
Destiny	24	Māori, New Zealand European	Banking and finance	Group training
Eden	24	Māori	Teacher	Running, swimming, strength training, Pilates
Caitlin	25	New Zealand European	Office manager	Gym, strength training
Taylor	25	Māori, New Zealand European	Consultant	Gym/strength training and outdoor bush walks
Brianna	25	New Zealand European	Student	Water sports, hiking, swimming, gym
Madison	23	New Zealand European	Sports administration	Group fitness walks, and social netball

All of this information, as well as all of the transcripts, were stored in a folder on my laptop with two-factor authentication that only I had access to. Transcripts and data were shared only with my supervisor, without the participant's names. Pseudonyms were chosen for participants (with some choosing their own pseudonyms), who I then consulted with to ensure they were happy with these. No participant reached out to say they were unhappy with their pseudonym.

All focus group and interview participants received an information sheet and signed an informed consent form before participating, with opportunities to ask questions both via email and before the focus group/interview commenced. I gained consent from the interviewee/s to record

before doing so. Focus group participants did not receive a copy of their transcript due to concerns about the anonymity of individual data, but interview participants were provided with a copy of their transcript with an opportunity to provide any edits or comments to be removed within two weeks of receiving their transcript. No participants asked for edits to be made to their transcripts. Interview participants were also advised in advance that they had the right to have a cultural advisor or support person to be present, and ask for the interview to be paused or ceased at any point.

For both the focus groups and individual interviews, participants were reminded that they had the right to withdraw at any time before, during, or up to two weeks after the research project. No participants decided to withdraw or had any ethical concerns within the research process. All participants were reminded that the data would only be used for my thesis and any resulting publications. The interview and focus group participants were advised that they had the right to receive access to the thesis (or a summary of findings) once it was completed.

Data was collected over the timeframe of one month. Individual interviews were held online via the video conferencing platform Zoom, and took approximately 30-75 minutes. Focus groups were implemented across three different locations in Aotearoa New Zealand: Hamilton, Tauranga, and Wellington. These locations were chosen specifically for convenience, or because I had work commitments in these areas. All of these areas also are bigger cities within Aotearoa New Zealand, and have a local university. There are also many gym franchises within each of these cities, including new, trending group fitness gyms.

Five participants took part in each of the Hamilton and Wellington focus groups, and two attended the Tauranga focus group, therefore making the latter 'mini-focus groups' (Nyumba et al., 2018). Both the Wellington and Hamilton focus groups lasted approximately 90 minutes. These focus groups were slightly longer as some of the participants were already friends or knew each other from mutual friends. They were comfortable chatting with one another, and happily shared inside jokes or stories. The conversational nature of the focus group potentially helped those who were not part of the friend group to feel confident about joining in and sharing their thoughts. I ensured that other participants present who were not part of this friend group were still involved and worked to make them feel comfortable by building rapport and asking them for their thoughts on each question. An

icebreaker activity was implemented at the start of each focus group so that the participants could introduce themselves and learn a little bit more about each other so that they then felt comfortable sharing.

The Tauranga focus group only lasted 35 minutes perhaps due to the two participants not having an existing relationship unlike the other focus groups. There were also some disruptions in this focus group that affected the flow of the discussion. For instance, one of the participants had to bring her young son as she did not have other available care for him, and he was making noise that was disruptive to the recording. Initially, I felt hesitant when this participant expressed her need to bring her young son to the focus group, as she did not have any other available care for him. I was concerned that the child may be disruptive to the flow of the focus group discussion and the recording, however I wanted to be inclusive throughout my research project, as this is a key aspect of feminist post-structuralist research (Ollivier et al., 2020; Willet & Etowa, 2023).

Minor parts of the transcription were unclear due to participants talking over each other and laughing as they became more engaged in conversation. After the focus groups, I sent a group email to the participants thanking them for their participation and inviting them to complete an optional, subsequent individual interview if they felt upon reflection there was anything further they wanted to add or discuss that they felt was left out from the conversation from the night before. No participants had expressed interest in a subsequent interview.

Participants were asked at the end of the focus groups if there was anything else they wanted to add or discuss that they feel I may have left out, which led to new insights to come through. For instance, in the Hamilton focus group, the participants wanted to discuss the inaccuracy of women's clothing sizes in commercial clothing stores, and how this impacted the way they felt about their bodies. Each individual participant was passionate about this topic and shared how they felt about it, which gave me access to even more nuanced and in-depth data. This also occurred in the Tauranga focus group, where one participant wanted to share her high school experience of physical education. She explained that students were required to fit into a certain weight category, and emphasis was placed largely on body weight over educating students on how to exercise properly or the benefits of exercise.

Focus groups were held in the evening as most of these participants were either working or studying full-time and this allowed for plenty of time for participants to finish and come from work. Participants were reminded that all information shared within the interview/focus group was confidential. I explained the participants' rights to them again prior to recording. Participants were provided with the contact details of a youth helpline on their participant information sheet and I acknowledged at the beginning of each focus group that it was possible that sensitive topics could arise from the discussion of body image (i.e., eating disorders, suicidal thoughts). Participants were reminded that they did not need to answer any question that they did not wish to, and they did not need to provide a reason why. The group was also advised that they were more than welcome to leave the room for a break if the topic of conversation was triggering for them. This was important to mention as one participant shared how one of her friends experienced intense mental health struggles as a result of being bullied about her appearance at high school. Though no participants reacted negatively to this, this was an ethically important moment for me as a researcher as providing a trigger warning at the start of the focus group could have potentially prevented harm to my participants by ensuring they felt safe within this space. Participants were given Koha (\$50 voucher for a fitness store) as a form of compensation for their participation in the focus group or interview.

Strengths, limitations and reflections on the methodology

The focus group method was suitable for the demographic targeted in this research as it allowed for young women to share their stories and experiences in solidarity and connect with other young females. It also provides "a closer approximation to the natural" (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2013, p. 40) with many young women seemingly comfortable chatting, as if with a group of friends. I intentionally only recruited several participants for each as I did not want there to be too many participants, which could have limited the depth of discussion or been too overwhelming for more shy participants (Nagle & Williams, 2013). The Hamilton and Tauranga focus groups were held in private rooms at the University of Waikato campuses. The Wellington focus group took place at my workplace which is a tertiary campus, with permission from my employer. There were no other people present during each of the focus groups except for myself (the facilitator) and the participants

involved. I was always clear about my role as a researcher, and ensured participants were aware of when/where I was interacting as a researcher or a fitness professional (or fitness peer).

Focus groups also allowed participants agency and autonomy in the research as they had opportunities to 'take charge' of the interview space (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2013). I aimed to create as comfortable and relaxed a space as possible by hosting the focus groups in spaces that were familiar and accessible to most of the participants (i.e., at the local University), building rapport, and providing refreshments.

Focus groups were chosen as the primary method over semi-structured interviews as Kamberelis and Dimitriadis (2013) argue that focus groups can also enable the researcher to gain in-depth insights and more detailed information than other methods due to access to people's beliefs and for more natural, everyday conversations. Nagle and Williams (2013) agree that participants may be more willing and open to discuss more sensitive topics than they would in interviews due to the safe spaces created within groups. Groenewald (2004) also suggests that a reciprocal group discussion helps to build a sense of trust and safety.

A limitation of focus groups is that at times, certain personalities can clash and some more confident participants can dominate the discussion, while more shy participants may feel excluded or as though they cannot get their point across (Nagle & Williams, 2013). Cliques could form and one or two participants may have a stronger, more direct personality and take over the group. This seemed to occur at the beginning of the larger focus groups (Hamilton and Wellington) within this study due to some participants already knowing each other. Participants who were outside of these friend groups initially seemed more reluctant to share their own experiences. To ensure and encourage inclusivity within the focus groups, I invited each participant to share their thoughts on a question one by one. As the focus groups continued, the more shy participants seemed to gain confidence in contributing to the conversation as they related to the other participant's stories about certain topics.

Another limitation of focus groups is the timing. Often, participants would go on tangents and this would cause disruption in the flow of the discussion. Also, transcribing focus groups is a time-consuming process and it can be difficult to pick up on everything when the participants become

excited and talk over each other. Finally, Nagle and Williams (2013) do posit that anonymity can become an issue within focus groups due to the public nature of them.

Individual semi-structured interviews

Individual interviews were made available to those who expressed an interest in participating but were unable to attend focus groups due to living outside of the focus group locations, or being unable to make the focus group dates. They were also chosen as a feminist methodology, to offer a private one-on-one space for those who felt more comfortable sharing in this way. It also provided what Bishop (1997) refers to as an opportunity for collaborative storytelling in which the distance between the researcher and the participant is narrowed to give participants more autonomy in the research. These participants were required to meet the same criteria as the focus group participants (aged 18-25, live in Aotearoa New Zealand and interested in health, fitness, and well-being).

The main disadvantage with hosting interviews on a digital conferencing platform such as Zoom is that body language is not as easily interpreted as it is in person (Kähäri & Edelman, 2023). Also, on one occasion, there were interruptions with one of the participant's family members and pet dog interrupting the interview, which could disrupt the stream of consciousness from the participant. However, conducting interviews on Zoom allowed for more time-constrained participants, such as one who was a university student, to have the flexibility to take part. Also, they were in the comfort of their own home and felt more relaxed.

I specifically chose semi-structured interviews to have a structured question guide to adhere to, but also to allow for flexibility and for the participants to share any insights that they felt were important for them (Adams, 2015). This also allowed myself as the interviewer to have more flexibility with the questions I asked and add additional questions where I felt necessary for a participant to expand on an answer.

Survey

Wolff et al. (1993) suggest that implementing a quantitative survey as well as qualitative methods such as focus groups can be complementary to the research in that they provide validity and depth to

the analysis and provide different strengths and limitations. They argue that a key advantage of implementing a survey is that it can reach a much larger sample size compared to only implementing focus groups.

Despite criticism from feminist academics as being a positivistic method, Miner et al. (2012) posit that quantitative surveys can be productively utilized as a feminist research method because of their ability to reach a broad, diverse range of participants who may otherwise be marginalised in research. The researchers also argue that there is no singular feminist method, and encourages a triangulation of methods in order to better understand the multiplicities of human psychology. Finally, the researchers suggest that survey data is much more accessible than other methods and therefore has the potential to create “social change” (p. 2), which is an important value of feminist politics.

The anonymous survey was implemented in alignment with feminist research design and was chosen because of the anonymity it provides. Though typically a quantitative method, surveys still align with feminist research that also allowed for a clear set of broad themes to come through and enabled me to reach young women across the country. Braun et al. (2021) suggest that implementing a survey should be considered by qualitative researchers more as it allows the researcher to give voice to participants who may feel reluctant to share their stories in a face-to-face method such as interviews. They argue that this is especially true for research investigating sensitive topics, which is the case for this research project, hence why a survey was selected. Cohen et al. (2018) agree that a significant advantage of conducting online surveys is that they allow for a wide range of people to be accessed and is a less time-consuming data collection process.

The main limitation of surveys is that there is a restriction on how many open-ended questions should be asked, therefore not providing nuanced insights. Also, Cohen et al. (2018) note that some respondents chose to not answer certain questions or skipped the longer-answer questions. The researchers also argue that conducting online surveys can often be challenging due to a lack of presentation of certain subgroups. They suggest that a low response rate can result in a lack of credibility or reliability of the data. In regards to the survey I implemented, the sample was mostly Pākehā and from the Waikato region.

Despite concerns about the limitations of surveys, the data was valuable in that it provided a broad picture of New Zealand young women's experiences of the fitness lifestyle. Many participants also wrote into the open-text boxes, taking the opportunity to describe their experiences in more detail. As explained below (see Analysis), I used reflexive thematic analysis to make meaning of the survey data. Importantly, the survey data offered insights into key trends and patterns across young women that I could then explore in more depth in the focus groups and interviews. In this way, I see the survey and focus groups as complementary for the purposes of this study. Furthermore, there is a feminist politic in using the quantitative data, recognising that my results will have more impact in the fitness sector when young women's voices are accompanied with some statistics (Biber, 2011).

Reflexivity

A key aspect of feminist post-structural research is researcher reflexivity (Lather, 1991; Pillow, 2003). Trainor and Bundon (2021) note that it is important to consistently acknowledge one's positionality in the research. According to Hesse-Biber (2014), constantly questioning the power dynamics is a key aspect of feminist research. Pillow (2003) supports this, stating that reflexivity is an ongoing process of constantly questioning "how does who I am, who I have been, who I think I am, and how I feel affect data collection and analysis" (p. 176). According to Rayaprol (2016), self-reflexivity is a key aspect of feminist research, whereby researchers are strongly encouraged to consider how their "social location" (p. 171) could affect the research project.

Throughout the data collection and participant recruitment process, I acknowledged my positionality as a young woman who has experience within the fitness industry as a personal trainer and current fitness educator. Some of the participants were also friends, former clients or students who had reached out to me to express their interest in taking part in the research. I also acknowledged potential power imbalances between myself as the researcher with a background in fitness education, and my participants, by addressing how I will ensure my participants feel as comfortable as possible throughout the research process such as I have done above. I ensured that throughout the research project that I separated my role as a friend, personal trainer and tutor, to that of being a researcher. This approach aligns with a feminist ethic of care in which I remained highly reflexive about my

multiple roles and positioning, always prioritising the safety and well-being of participants (Thorpe et al., 2023a).

In order to maintain reflexivity within my research, I completed reflections after each interview and focus group, and maintained research field notes via the 'voice memos' app on my smartphone. I verbally reflected on how I felt each focus group and interview went, key moments that I picked up on, and what I felt could be improved on for next time. I am slightly older than my target participant demographic (27 years old), and therefore I did not always understand the lingo or trends they referred to, but understood modern pop culture and was aware of current popular celebrities that participants often referred to.

However, having not long ago been in this age bracket myself, I could easily relate to the participants and the struggles that can come with being a young woman pursuing a fitness lifestyle. I, like most of my participants, had been training at the gym for a number of years, so participants felt that they could relate as a group on this subject. Finally, the fact that I am a young woman myself may have allowed for the female participants to feel more comfortable discussing topics such as their experiences of the male gaze and the menstrual cycle. Yager et al. (2013) support this, finding that female participants generally preferred female interviewers, especially for participants who experienced higher levels of body dissatisfaction. They argued that this is likely due to the fact that women are perceived to be more sympathetic towards body image struggles. Frequent feedback was given by my academic supervisor in the form of weekly meetings to reflect on how each focus group and interview went, and where I could improve for next time.

Analysis

For the focus groups and interviews I used thematic analysis as it is a commonly used method of analysis for qualitative research (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Specifically, I used reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019). As the primary researcher, I completed all of the data analysis. Analytical software such as NVivo was not used as it did not align with my feminist research approach (Trainor & Bundon, 2020). Instead, all analysis was completed manually as it was important to my research that I spent plenty of time familiarizing myself with each transcript, and in this way,

the data became embodied, deepening my relationship with the participant voices and the issues of importance to them. I cross-referenced Trainor and Bundon (2020) as well as Braun and Clarke (2006) to further help me understand how to complete this process. Braun and Clark (2006) introduce thematic analysis as the process of finding and creating themes within qualitative data, and it is a method that can be used with a range of epistemologies and ontologies.

A noted consideration of thematic analysis is that it can be quite time-consuming as you can spend a prolonged time searching for themes (Bryne, 2022). Reflexive thematic analysis requires a rather in-depth and prolonged research process and a researcher who is constantly self-aware and actively involved in the process. Also, Braun and Clark (2006) suggest that some scholars have been critical of the flexibility within thematic analysis as a researcher could perhaps quite easily go off track, or not end up doing analysis at all. Braun and Clark (2021) propose that the main problem with reflexive thematic analysis is that many researchers misunderstand it, or accuse it of being atheoretical.

In order to complete reflexive thematic analysis, I followed Braun and Clark's (2006) six-step guide: data familiarisation, creating codes, looking for themes, theme refinement, theme development, and publishing the report. After reading and re-reading each transcript, I was able to identify any key codes that were consistently mentioned. From there, I created master lists of themes and subthemes, and added participant quotes that aligned with these themes. I re-visited these lists and was able to further refine themes in dialogue with relevant literature and key concepts. This was an iterative process, whereby themes were developed and refined continuously. Ultimately, I had seven main themes and 21 sub-themes as seen in Table 3. below.

Table 3. Focus Group and Interview initial themes and sub-themes

Themes	Sub-themes
Mental health and body image	Feeling good physically and mentally; Overcoming negative body image thoughts; Feelings of guilt/failure/frustration; Not having the capacity to help one's friends/having uncomfortable discussions; Social comparison
External influences	The gym environment; The male gaze; Sport/coach influences; Influence/support from peers/family
Social media	Being intentional with social media; Feeling inspired/informed by social media; The 'body positivity' movement; the 'glow up' trend; Fitness influencers and celebrities
Education	Education from study; Lack of education can be harmful (for beginners); Educating oneself through trial and error
Feminine body ideals and societal expectations	Female beauty standards/body ideals; Pressures/what you 'should' do/Imperatives; Female body changes; (Revealing) female clothing; Ethnicity/cultural differences

Initial themes were then further developed in dialogue with feminist literature on young women's embodied subjectivities, health, femininity, and fitness lifestyles. It is important to note that many of the participant's quotes that were included in this thesis have been edited for clarity due to the conversational devices (i.e., frequent use of words such as "like" and "um") often used by young women. Overall, I aimed where possible to include a range of voices, implementing as many of the participants' quotes into the thesis as possible. However, it was not always possible to include quotes from every participant. Instead, I aimed to choose quotes that effectively summarised the collective thoughts of the participants.

Survey Analysis

Reflexive thematic analysis was also used to analyse the survey data. As Thorpe et al. (2023b) propose, "surveys are important in providing a snapshot of patterns across girls and young women"

(p. 849). Analysing the survey data in this way allowed me to identify the themes and patterns of these young women’s fitness experiences. Also, providing statistics can make research data more accessible for the fitness professionals who I hope will benefit from this research. I also used Qualtrics software, where my survey was published, to view the statistics within each dataset.

The same reflexive thematic analytical approach was also applied for the survey to identify themes and subthemes. After refining codes and themes, I ultimately had five survey themes and 13 subthemes as follows:

Table 4. Survey themes and subthemes

Themes	Subthemes
Societal pressures and expectations	Social comparison; Peer and family influence; Beauty standards and body ideals; The male gaze; Revealing female clothing
Individual responsibility	The consistency/progress imperative
Overt focus on appearance over health	Feeling capable and confident; Female body fluctuations; Restrictive behaviour
Representations/Inclusivity	Feeling safe, welcome and encouraged in fitness environments; Accessibility to education and professional help
Social media	The ‘body positivity’ movement

There were many similar themes and subthemes between the survey and focus groups/interviews data. This is likely because similar questions were asked between methods with the aim of getting both breadth and depth of understanding young women’s fitness lifestyles (see Appendices two and three). In the two forthcoming analysis chapter, I draw upon more heavily on survey data in Chapter Four and focus group/interview data in Chapter Five. However, in some cases I bring the two datasets into dialogue to reflect shared themes. When a quote is used from the survey it will be acknowledged as ‘survey participant’, and quotes from interviews or focus groups by the participant pseudonym.

Conclusion

This research project, and therefore ethical and methodological decisions, were underpinned by a feminist post-structuralist perspective. Employing this theoretical framework allowed me to capture the diverse experiences of young women, with the feminist goal of ultimately advocating for young

women, who may otherwise be marginalised in research (Rayaprol, 2016), and in fitness spaces (Coen et al., 2021; Johansson, 1996). Implementing a survey and focus groups (and interviews) allowed for me to gain rigorous data and nuanced insights from my participants, and to gain an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of these young women. In accordance with feminist research, I maintained a reflexive role throughout and therefore my findings and analysis represent my own assumptions and worldviews (Hesse-Biber, 2014; Lather, 1991; Pillow, 2003; Trainor & Bundon, 2020).

In the remainder of this thesis, I bring the data from the survey and focus groups/interviews into dialogue with the ‘fit girl’ lifestyle identified by the participants. While the next chapter provides an overview of young women’s fitness practices, the following empirical chapter draws upon relevant theoretical concepts to further deepen the analysis. In particular, I draw inspiration from feminist literature relating to the ‘transformational imperative’, (Gill, 2007; Riley et al., 2023), aspirational (Allen, 2014; Gill & Orgad, 2018; Harris, 2003; McRobbie, 2015) and ‘fitspo’ discourses (Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2021).

Chapter 4:

Young Women, Embodied Femininity and the Fitness Lifestyle

Young women experience fitness culture and body image in more harmful ways than ever in today's society due to the plethora of social media trends and the popularity of slim-thick body ideals presented online (McComb & Mills, 2022; Riley et al., 2023). However, the data from this study shows that not only are young women striving to achieve body ideals, but they also feel pressured to achieve an entire 'fit girl' lifestyle, which influences the types of fitness practices they engage in. This lifestyle is so heavily glamorised on social media that it has become almost a necessary part of a young woman's identity. As Goodyear (2020) argues, being healthy in today's society means having a "fit, beautiful body" (p. 72). This was clearly reflected in my survey and focus groups/interviews. In this first empirical chapter, I explore the ways that young women living in Aotearoa New Zealand, engage with fitness culture, experience their body image, and negotiate neoliberal discourse of health(ism) to achieve the 'fit girl' lifestyle. I investigate the multiple ways in which young women actively choose to engage in, accept, challenge and/or reject valued body and 'fit girl' discourses, and the various spaces where these fit ideals come from. I draw primarily upon the survey data in this chapter, as well as some participant quotes from the interviews and focus groups.

Young women's fitness lifestyles

The survey (with 203 responses total) highlighted the importance of the fitness lifestyle among young New Zealand women, with 98% of the participants in this study stating that fitness/well-being are important aspects of their everyday lives. For some, this was a lifestyle they had been pursuing for some time, with 76% of respondents considering this as an important part of their lifestyle for two years or more, and 97% currently being active. The biggest influence for these young women to start

their health/fitness/well-being journeys was health reasons/goals (29%), followed by aesthetic reasons (18%). In the 'other' (please specify) section, many responses pointed to being involved in sports and improving their mental health as reasons for getting involved in fitness. The most popular form of fitness that the survey respondents took part in was lifting weights at the gym (23%) followed by outdoor fitness such as running and biking (18%) and taking part in cardio at the gym (16%). In the 'other' section, survey respondents also noted their main forms of physical activity which ranged from boxing, dance (i.e., pole dancing), horse riding, surfing, hunting and fishing, and even their job being physical. Weight lifting and resistance training have grown drastically in popularity for young women in recent years due to body ideals becoming more based around a toned and lean physique (Hartmann et al., 2018; O'Brien & Hunter, 2006; Walseth & Tidslevold, 2020). This is a stark contrast to the past two decades when young women primarily took part in cardiovascular fitness to achieve the thin ideals at the time, and for fear of becoming 'bulky' from lifting weights (Markula, 1995). In terms of how engaging in these forms of fitness made these young women feel about themselves, the response was equal amongst feeling happier, healthier, and better mentally (all respectively 12%). On the other side of this, a strong majority of participants ticked that they felt worried about what they look like when they participated in these forms of fitness (16%), which was followed by 'not feeling fit/strong enough' (14%).

Most of the young women in the survey had engaged in certain fitness practices to see significant physical results. The most popular activity that these young women had engaged with was taking supplements such as protein and fat burners (21%), followed by calorie tracking (17%). Fewer respondents had engaged in more restrictive activities such as disordered eating, nevertheless there were still 34 participants who had selected this option.

A significant majority of the survey respondents had tracked their fitness progress (91%) and the most popular form of tracking fitness identified was weighing oneself on the scales (20%), followed by fitness apps such as My Fitness Pal and Apps from fitness influencers (17%) and progress photos (17%). In the 'other' section, some respondents explained that they used fitness tracking to monitor their performance and progress in their sport. For most young women, tracking their physical and performance progress was seen as a positive tool as 25% noted that they felt more

accountable from tracking their progress, and 21% selected that they felt motivated by it.

Simultaneously, however, many respondents (15%) also selected that this tracking made them feel self-conscious. In the 'other' section, many respondents noted that progress tracking was a negative experience for them that worsened their mental health. Such negative comments included:

“disappointed when I don't get the results I want”, “Increased negative self-criticism, hyper focused on results, less sociable”, “discouraged” and two responses both noted “frustrated”. Beltrán-Carrillo et al. (2023) found that the young people in their study also had negative experiences when having their body measurements taken, as it increased their levels of comparison and feelings of low self-esteem.

Changing body ideals

Finally, in the body image section, most participants selected that they felt 'very strongly' that young women are pressured to adhere to beauty ideals. Respondents were asked to explain their answers, and an overwhelming amount of answers strongly felt that beauty and body ideals were ubiquitous and that young women felt pressured to adhere to these in order to feel “worthy”. Most respondents felt that this pressure existed due to social media and the internet being readily available and easily accessible for young women. The spaces identified as to where body image issues exist are included in the media such as films and television, the internet, social media, and more traditional media such as magazines. Other spaces included the fashion industry, as one respondent argued that trending women's clothing typically features revealing clothing that only allows a “thin and toned (body) to look good in it.” This sentiment was echoed by a focus group participant, Taylor, agreed with this stating that:

Especially I think ... over the past sort of year, it is very much that ... the early 2000s aesthetic is coming back but as well as the body type, because the clothes look best on the body type with the low rise jeans, the crop tops, the spaghetti dresses. It's made for that figure ... Like the clothing looks best on that body just slimmer.

Taylor suggests that modern fashion trends idealise the slim ideals present in the early 2000's, and therefore this type of clothing only looks good on a specific and ultra-thin body type. Female clothing trends therefore serve as yet another form of encouragement for young women to adhere to body

ideals, and suggests that ‘thinspo’ is still a highly encouraged concept (Wick & Harriger, 2018). However, there are a multitude of valued body ideals that young women are pressured to obtain.

Valued and paradoxical body ideal discourses

Young women have traditionally avoided resistance training for the fear of getting too muscular, which is still prevalent in today’s society and often causes young women to not participate in weight lifting exercises (Goodyear et al., 2021; Walseth & Tidslevold, 2020). Women who have a more muscular figure or who participate in traditionally hypermasculine sports such as bodybuilding and fighting sports have long been criticised in the media (and public) for appearing ‘too masculine’ (Godoy-Pressland, 2015; Kavasoğlu & Koca, 2022; McClearen, 2021; Shilling & Bunsell, 2009). Shilling and Bunsell (2014) postulate that women who do not conform to the ideal body presented to them in society are marginalised and labelled as “gender outlaws” (p. 478).

As identified by Wiklund et al. (2019), “strong is the new skinny” (p. 441), but women must only be lean and toned in the ‘correct’ places. Where the ideal used to be to maintain an ultra-thin figure (Duncan, 1994), now young women are expected to simultaneously maintain this figure while also having curves in the right places, even if their genetics do not allow this. McComb and Mills (2022) have labelled this the “slim-thick ideal” (p. 166), recognising the unrealistic requirements of this ideal. They note that this particular body aesthetic has replaced the ‘thin’ ideal and calls for “an hourglass figure” (p. 166) and a “slim waist and flat stomach, but large butt and thighs” (p. 166). The participants in the present study were aware of these paradoxical ideals: “You can be too skinny, too big, not toned enough, not curvy and skinny at the same time” (survey respondent), and “I think it's the big bum but not the Brazilian butt lift bum ... Big bum but still a small waist. Small everything else” (Caitlin, focus group participant).

Achieving this ideal has frequently been the motivation for many young women to start a fitness journey, and continues to be experienced by many of the young women in my study. As one interview participant, Eden, points out, “I feel like not many people start a fitness journey ... purely for health reasons, right? We all go into it ... looking for something, whether that's a flatter stomach or ... a bigger butt.” According to Tiggemann and Zaccardo (2015), women are not exercising

primarily for health benefits, but to create a body ideal. This shapes the type of fitness practices they choose to engage in. This is represented in the results of my survey, with 23% of the respondents taking part in weights training, a now highly popular form of fitness for young women, with the primary motivation to achieve a 'slim-thick' body composition.

Walseth and Tidslevold (2020) argue that there exists a valued body discourse in society. They found that for young women, a valued body is one that is perceived to be beautiful, toned, and healthy. The young women involved in their study mostly admired female fitness influencers who represented these ideals. Body image discourses are hard to escape in today's society, and the language surrounding it, especially when referring to the female body, suggests a focus on the individual managing their behaviour (Gibson, 2015). A significant majority of the young women in the survey identified being 'lean/toned' (24%) as the body image ideal for young women. This was followed by 'thin' (16%) and 'curvy' (15%). Betz and Ramsey (2017) agreed that young women are now exposed to a wide variety of body ideals, from thin to athletic to curvy. Their results demonstrated that the most favoured body ideal from young women is one that is athletic, and least admired the thin ideal. However, other recent studies show that the thin ideal is still heavily sought after by young women due to the 'thinspo' trend being perpetuated on the visual social media platform Tumblr (Wick & Harriger, 2018). However, both studies agree that regardless of the ideal, none cause higher levels of self-esteem in young women.

The varied bodily aspirations of the young women in my study signal that the singular body ideal has changed from what was idealised in recent decades, where thin internalisation was the dominant discourse (Wiklund et al., 2019). However, with the rise of the fitness industry and more women participating in weights training, the feminine ideal is now to maintain a fit, lean physique, while still ensuring a not too toned or muscular appearance so as to appear masculine (Walseth & Tidslevold, 2020). The following survey response expands on how the female body is treated as a trend that is consistently and quickly evolving:

Historically, women have been objectified with how they look. And the changes in ideal(s) are quick. Only 20 years ago was it ideal to be thin with small breasts and butt. Now the standards have changed where thin abdomen, larger breast(s) and butts are the ideal, but most types of muscle definition is unattractive. Many people feel pressured to follow these ideals in order to feel loved and accepted.

As this comment addresses, adhering to body ideals is not a suggestion, but rather seen as vital in order to fit in and “feel loved and accepted.” Young women do not just want to achieve their dream body, but they feel they need to be accepted in society. This idea has been seen throughout body image scholarship focussing on the experiences of young women. A key example of this is Azzarito (2018) who postulates that girls who do not fit in with the very narrow body ideals represented in the media (white, thin, conventionally attractive) are made to feel like failures for their ‘shortcomings.’ She also proposes that young women are encouraged to engage in “exercise practices as disciplinary practices” (p. 139) to be a successful and healthy, ‘good’ citizen.

The progress imperative

Most participants (90%) felt that their fitness and well-being journey had positively influenced the way they viewed themselves, and many long-answer responses were provided in the ‘please feel free to expand’ section. A commonality was expressed in these responses where young women felt conflicting feelings about their bodies, depending on a myriad of factors. These factors included the day, their mood, how well they were progressing at the gym, if their body had fluctuated after a significant life change (i.e., giving birth), and how they felt compared to other young women. A progress and consistency imperative was presented in the results in that many respondents noted that they only felt good about their bodies when “progress was made” or they had maintained their ideal body. This progress had to be “sufficient” and any minor slip-up caused the young women to again feel dissatisfied with their bodies. Almost as many young women (68%) had agreed that their fitness and well-being journey had negatively influenced the way they viewed themselves.

However, some participants argue that body ideals are not forced onto people and that it is up to the individual to decide whether they will be subjected to these ideals or not. This is demonstrated through the following survey responses (in response to the question: ‘how significantly do you feel young women are pressured to adhere to body ideals?’):

I feel that beauty standards do exist but it’s not like anyone is forcing them to be a part of them, there’s always people who don’t care such as myself.

I think it is all about how you allow yourself to feel, if you sit there all day and obsess over influencers with perfect bodies, all it will do is make you feel like shit. And most of the

time, they have changed their body in some way (surgery or photoshop) but still try (to) convince naive young girls that it's natural.

This reinforces the healthism discourse in which it is up to the individual to decide whether to engage in and feel affected by these trends which is arguably significantly challenging to do considering this messaging is, as one survey respondent put it, “everywhere.” This argument relies on an individual’s self-control and willpower alone. However, even for participants who seemed more accepting of their bodies, there was still a condition to this acceptance. It seems that one is only allowed to accept or love their body, as long as they are still working on their bodies as a project. Interestingly, other survey participants proposed that there were conditions to being ‘beautiful’, such as ensuring that you are still getting a workout in:

All shapes and sizes and beautiful, as long as you are getting some sort of workout in.

Just as long as I’m happy on the inside that’s all that matters not how I look although what I look like are the efforts and work I’ve put in which is a good reminder to keep going.

These feelings of lack and perceived failure in combination with the healthism discourses, work as a source of motivation for these young women to work harder and strive for even more, which again lead to further restrictive behaviour as demonstrated by the survey responses below:

Currently I’ve just been able to view myself negatively which motivates me to train harder.

Over lockdown I became really obsessive of exercising and limiting calories to try lose weight which made me insecure about my size even though I wasn’t overweight by any means and have always been pretty fit.

Yes, being focussed on tracking nutrition made me obsessive and I felt disgusting when I ate certain foods and thought I was defined by what I ate.

Yes absolutely, I am more confident in myself in many ways! But it is also in some ways made me more conscious and critical of myself, especially the way I look/ how lean I am.

These respondents express polarity in their fitness experiences. Some acknowledge the self-confidence they have gained from committing to consistent exercise, but this is contradicted by a newly-found critique of one's body. Some expressed ‘ugly feelings’ (Coffey, 2021; Ngai, 2005) towards their bodies such as feelings of disgust and insecurity. Young women are encouraged by society to fear failure and constantly striving for perfection (McRobbie, 2015). Therefore, it is easy to see how this striving for the “perfectible self” (McRobbie, 2007, p. 718) translates into their fitness journeys, something be worked on each day, but rarely achieved.

Many survey respondents stated that their fitness journeys had positively affected the way they look, but that this fluctuated on a daily basis and the way they felt about themselves was subject to a range of factors. Most participants noted that participating in regular physical exercise improved their mental health but they still were not completely happy with their appearance. Persistently striving to achieve a valued body causes many young women to become overtly focussed on the benefits of exercise for their appearance over their health. For many respondents, their fitness journeys made them feel healthier and better about themselves, and yet they still felt dissatisfied with their appearance. This is shown by the following survey response: “Yes and no. It makes me feel better mentally but I still don’t like the way I look.”

For those who suffered from pre-existing body image struggles such as body dysmorphia, fitness trends and body ideals only exacerbated the negative feelings they had for themselves. Young women feel pressured to maintain their progress and feel that if they were to lose any progress, that it would have a drastic effect on their mental health:

Body dysmorphia is an ongoing battle...Also the sense that the gains you have made are something you will constantly have to uphold to be happy.

I now feel scared, anxious, depressed, and upset if I put on any weight or don’t hit my weight loss goals, as I worry about spiralling back into my unhealthy habits. I’ve also noticed that I’ve found “new flaws” to focus on.

Being at peak fitness is difficult to get to and difficult to maintain, so when not at that level it’s easy to compare myself and what I looked like before.

These survey responses highlight that young women can struggle even further with body dissatisfaction once they get close to achieving their body ideals, because they feel pressured to maintain their appearance. Riley et al. (2023) support the idea that following a fit and healthy lifestyle only encourages this self-surveillance and for women to engage in self-discipline. Internalising this gaze, many young women focus on particular exercises that will help them achieve this normalised body ideal (Markula & Pringle, 2006). Walseth and Tidslevold (2020) note that trending body ideals encourage young people to practise self-regulation and disciplinary techniques by attending fitness centres and aiming to achieve this body ideal.

Other participants felt they had overcome the obsessive focus on tracking by changing the focus on what they were tracking from aesthetic or body composition elements (i.e., weight loss, tracking

calories) to focusing on the progress of their health. The progress and consistency imperative suggests individuals can only feel good about themselves if they are consistent with their self-care or workout routine. There is a feeling of lack and failure immediately as one pauses their routines, even if it is due to them having to tend to other commitments in their lives. This was echoed through multiple survey responses:

The only time I get negatively influenced on my fitness journey is when I'm not being consistent so then it feels like I'm letting myself down and I don't feel as good, physically.

If I have a rough week or am extra busy it makes me feel bad to not go to the gym or motivate myself, which then makes me feel very lazy and like I should be doing more.

I think negative thoughts when I don't stick to (a) diet or skip a workout.

Any failures I experience I then take out on myself and view myself as a failure as opposed to just failing one task.

When I see my progress I feel very happy.

Happy when progress is made.

When I take a break or get busy and don't train every day I feel guilty and that I'm not trying hard enough since discipline gets results.

As soon as I slack off from exercising and eating well, it has a negative impact. I stop liking the way I look and my confidence is affected.

These responses highlight the thought process that seeing results and progress almost immediately is a necessity to achieve the 'fit girl' look, and if one does not achieve this, then they feel like a failure. This leads to a constant, never-ending cycle of participating in practices to achieve this body ideal. In this way, the 'fit girl' lifestyle is never actually obtained, and one could be striving relentlessly and eternally for this ideal. A key message of this lifestyle is that happiness and love for oneself can only be achieved through drastic (and sustained/maintained) body transformation such as significant weight loss. Even participants who seemed to be firmly against body ideals and accepting of their bodies such as Annika, still felt as if they had shortcomings within their bodies that needed changing:

My stomach is a problem at the moment. So I need to get into that. (I don't know how to explain when you're used to having a flat tummy, now I'm seeing a little bit of a tube that bothers me). I know I'm not overweight or fat, but ... it bothers me. So that's something I need to work on.

Annika refers to part of her body as a "problem" because it does not adhere to body ideals. She expresses the "need" to change her body with urgency because of how it has changed since having a

child, and because to her it no longer fits the ideals. Annika therefore feels the pressure to change her body immediately in order to gain self-confidence. Markula (1995) also refers to how certain parts of the female body (i.e., the stomach, thighs, arms, and bottom) are presented as “problem areas” (p. 434) in women’s magazines because they are stubborn areas to lose fat. She states that workouts designed for women in magazines and in the media target these areas specifically since they are perceived as so undesirable unless toned.

The influence of social media

A strong majority of the survey participants indicated that they were currently active on social media (95%). The most popular platform that young women utilise is Instagram (26%), followed by Facebook (20%) and Snapchat (17%). Many body image studies focusing on young women and social media have specifically focused on the impacts of Instagram use for this reason (Belmonte et al., 2024; Brown & Tiggemann, 2020; Camacho-Miñano et al., 2019; Walseth & Tidslevold, 2019), but a more recent and increasingly popular social media platform, TikTok, should also be included in further research as this was still quite consistently used by the young women in the survey (15% used this platform regularly). This platform is similar to Instagram in that it focuses on aesthetically pleasing image and video content. Limited research exists on this platform currently due to it being fairly young, but Pryde and Prichard (2022) suggest that TikTok also promotes ‘fitspo’ ideals, causing low mood and high levels of social comparison in young women.

A significant number of young women in the survey noted that they did use social media as a tool to document their fitness journey (38%). For those who did use social media to share their fitness journeys, most respondents selected the ‘it keeps me accountable’ option (24%). This was followed by ‘it motivates me’ (19%), and ‘it’s a source of income for me’ (17%).

In the ‘other’ section, several participants echoed that they posted this content on social media to use it in the form of a visual “journal” to “look back” on the progress they had made. This form of progress tracking is highly visual and enables further self-monitoring and criticism from the individual but also from those who follow the individual online. Goodyear et al. (2019) suggest this is when health becomes a public performance. Goodyear (2020) also found that young people in

particular feel compelled to post their bodies online as a form of external validation and because often their peers are doing the same.

A strong majority of the survey respondents followed fitness well-being content on various social media platforms (83%). The most commonly followed content was fitness and/or wellness professionals (i.e., personal trainers, Pilates instructors, 44%) and fitness influencers (i.e., Chloe Ting, Kayla Itsines, 33%). These fitness influencers specifically are most well known for their focus on perpetuating body ideals. Chloe Ting has a fitness YouTube channel with videos with titles such as “get abs in 2 weeks” (Thorpe et al., 2023b, p. 856) and Kayla Itsines is most famous for her ‘Bikini Body Guide’ and the community (#BBG) she has created from that (Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2021).

In the ‘other’ section, several young women commented that they followed either influences, athletes, or just general people who either looked like them, or competed in the same sport. This could be because these young women feel inspired by these women and it gave them a role model to aspire to. Most of these young women saw social networking sites such as Instagram as a motivational and pedagogical tool, as the most selected options for how following this content made the participants feel were ‘Motivated’ (19%), ‘Informed/Educated’ (17%), and ‘Inspired’ (16%). The respondents noted that they receive their fitness and well-being information from a variety of sources, with the majority (18%) retaining this information from health and fitness professionals (i.e., dieticians, personal trainers). This was followed closely by the internet (17%) and social media (17%). In the ‘other’ section, several respondents commented that they gained their information from their sport science degree, their coaches, or from their own knowledge and experience of working as a personal trainer. Interestingly, most respondents found this information reliable/trustworthy some of the time (59%), and very few felt that it was not reliable/trustworthy at all (2%).

For respondents who chose not to follow this content, the reasons why they did not follow this content were equally split between ‘I don’t trust the information’ and ‘I’m not interested in it’. In the ‘other’ comments, a couple of respondents suggested that they do not follow this content as they have sufficient information to “train safely” and felt that they did not need to seek this information from social media. These responses were fewer, and it is clear that many young women use social networking sites such as Instagram as a pedagogical tool (Camacho-Miñano et al., 2019). Goodyear et

al. (2022) discovered the same, suggesting that social media has the potential to empower and educate young people about health, well-being, and fitness, if used in an appropriate way. However, from the current research data it is apparent that social media is still a common space of social comparison and surveillance for many young women. Annika, a focus group participant, resonated with this. When asked what the participants thought were the biggest body image pressures on young women, she responded: “Definitely social media. Everyone's got good bodies, big bums, big boobs, and then I'm here like "Ugh."”

To Annika, all the bodies she sees online are “good”, socially-valued bodies which make her feel as though she is somehow ‘lacking’ in her own body. Annika compares herself to other young women online, using the word “ugh” as a way to express the negativity she feels towards her body. Riley et al. (2023) argue that social media is a heavily influential space for young women, and whatever trends circulate on those sites dictate how young women engage in their fitness lifestyles. This is demonstrated by the following survey response, in response to the question, ‘How significantly do you feel young women are pressured to adhere to beauty ideals?’: “Social media portrays a certain type of body image that people should adhere to.” The use of the word “should” here postulates that achieving body ideals is a necessity and imperative. The following survey response agrees with this statement, and demonstrates how celebrities and influencers set the standard for young women, which typically presents a very narrow view of an ideal, valued body:

It's seen in social media and by celebrities and famous people as it's set as a stereotype for women there's very little body shape representation in a positive light which leads to people feeling like they don't fit in and something is wrong with them rather than the society we live in and the expectations that('s) have been ingrained into us.

This respondent feels strongly that social media and celebrities promote narrow body ideals which can cause individuals to feel that “something is wrong with them.” Shorter et al. (2008) found a significant relationship between celebrities and the body satisfaction levels of young women, suggesting their influence could increase eating disorders. Brown and Tiggemann (2022) agree that celebrities do have a significant and harmful influence on the way many women experience body image, particularly those more engaged in celebrity worship. This supports Hogue and Mills’ (2019) study, which discovered that young women often compare themselves to other young women on

social media, more so than their family members. As one survey participant suggests: “Often I find myself comparing to girls on social media who are skinnier than me/live a different lifestyle to me and I view myself as worse than them as a result.” Young women are reminded of their supposed shortcomings when they are constantly exposed to pictures of body ideals and glamorous lifestyles online. A focus group participant, Brianna, agrees that celebrities such as the Kardashians are a negative role model for young women:

Honestly, I think it depends what the Kardashians are doing ... Seriously, celebrities, influencers, social media. I feel like it's ... what the trend is. I'd say it is improving but the vast majority will follow that trend.

Brianna refers to the Kardashians specifically here, who are popular reality television stars mainly watched and followed by young women, as a significant part of the problem with promoting body image ideals. She explains that the current trend is whatever “the Kardashians are doing” and that they are constantly drastically changing their bodies, therefore their fans feel as though they should do the same. This is supported by the findings of Belmonte et al. (2024) which showed that popular celebrity figures such as Kim Kardashian are now considered the ‘ideal’ in terms of body shape. The researchers posit that young women are exposed to these ideals every day on social media where celebrities such as Kim Kardashian post revealing photos of their bodies almost daily.

However, some of the participants thought of social media as turning into a positive platform to help support their mental health and fitness journeys, as a diverse range of bodies now has become normalised, and some influencers are starting to challenge and resist valued body discourses by promoting the ‘body positivity’ or ‘#BoPo’ movement (Boepple et al., 2016; Riley et al., 2023). One focus group participant mentioned a particular influencer whose content she follows consistently because of the positive effect it had on her:

Brianna: There's also a New Zealand creator ... She just started a thing where she's like, everybody is a swimsuit body or everybody is a bikini body. And I think that is such a good thing especially since she's so realistic ... she exposes all the secrets about all these fitness influencers ... and she's just so real and ... she shows her stretch marks, she shows her pubic hair ... it's actually ... a breath of fresh air ... she's real ... and she's not fake like all the other ones.

Brianna follows this influencer because she celebrates and promotes normal female body features such as “stretchmarks” and “pubic hair”. Here Brianna suggests that positive role models for young

women do exist online and stresses that young women follow creators such as these as opposed to those who perpetuate body ideals. As mentioned in the literature review the ‘body positivity’ trend is a fairly new movement that promotes a diverse range of body shapes and sizes, suggesting that all bodies are beautiful and accepted (Cohen et al., 2019; Cohen et al., 2021; Riley et al., 2023; Stevens & Griffiths, 2020). However, though this trend aims to be a positive influence, it can still also perpetuate these ideals. For example, one focus group participant, Destiny, notes how “It’s like body positivity but still to an ideal,” positing that even trends that aspire to promote diverse bodies, still provide a very narrow view of what is considered beautiful. For instance, one participant, Madison, expressed how social media, and the trends and ideals promoted on social media, had a significant influence on her and the types of fitness activities she decided to participate in:

I was even thinking about it this morning. I was like, "Oh, maybe I should go for a run this weekend." And I have never liked running. And I'm like, "Why do I think that's a good idea?" But then recently, there's been a lot more people posting content about them starting running ... So it was a super weird thought that I had where I know, I don't particularly enjoy running.

In this quote, Madison explores the nuances of negotiating the types of fitness training she wants to engage in with the type of fitness training she feels she “should” engage in because of its popularity on Instagram. She is aware of the effects of these trends and questions herself (“Why do I think that’s a good idea?”) as she knows she is only interested in running because she sees others doing it online. This showcases the absolute saturation of the social media trends in young women’s lives, and how it can influence the types of fitness practices they choose to engage in. This ‘fit girl’ discourse is seen by many young women as difficult to escape because it is so prevalent in young women’s culture and environments. This is demonstrated by the following survey responses:

Especially nowadays, social media is everywhere. We all have phones, we all are online. There’s a lot of pressure for girls/women to look a certain way. But it’s with everything.

Due to the internet being readily available, everyday we will always see someone who "looks prettier" than us, therefore, we feel that if we look like them we will feel better about ourselves.

Social media is so present in our lives, we have it 24/7 so we are constantly exposed to the unrealistic ideals on it and it's hard to get away from it.

There's so much pressure to look a certain way due to social media nowadays. It can be hard for young women growing up looking at perfect influencers and expecting to look that way.

These respondents demonstrate that the 'fitspo' trend is almost inescapable for most young women as long as they have social media. The obvious solution here would therefore be to "quit social media" (as one survey respondent suggests). However, this is also very unrealistic for young women when social media is so accessible. Rather than encouraging young women to disconnect from social media, Goodyear (2020) instead proposes that young people are educated on how to use social media in a positive and pedagogical way.

Fitness spaces

Fitness spaces such as commercial gyms have typically been understood by researchers as hypermasculine spaces where women often feel marginalised and unwelcome (Coen et al., 2021; Johansson, 1996). Many participants in the current research noted how fitness spaces, such as commercial gyms, placed an intense focus on participating in exercise for aesthetic over health reasons. One participant, Erin, points out how many commercial gym challenges incentivise drastic body transformation by providing the participant who achieves the most fat loss with a monetary prize:

I've noticed a lot of ... people ... pay all this money to do these challenges where they scan your body and you win money if you lose body fat, and so it's like this obsession ... every day, it's like, I'm eating this, and I'm not eating carbs this week, because I've got a scan and ... I can't eat that. It's my birthday, but I'm not eating cake ... it's like, at what cost to your mental health is that it's very obsessive and ... I feel like it's quite interesting the money prizes for that sort of thing. I feel like it should be more consistency focussed rather than body fat and statistics ... So, I think those can be a bit toxic.

Here Erin explains how the body becomes a commodity as physical transformation is equated to monetary rewards in commercial gyms. Erin explains that this striving towards monetary gain as well as body composition changes causes many people to become "obsessive" and engage in restrictive behaviours such as limiting the types of food they can eat. Wiklund et al. (2019) also refer to this concept of the female body as a commodity which they relate to healthism. They state that this construct causes young women to engage in body project and obsessive practices similar to those Erin has mentioned to be part of the "fitness hype" (p. 450).

Most survey respondents (62%) believed that gyms/fitness studios are safe, supportive, body positive environments for young women. However, some felt that the male gaze was a significant factor in terms of why young women felt uncomfortable within their fitness facility, as often the gym was male dominated. This discomfort was expressed by the following survey response:

There are some older men ... and I feel nervous to sometimes use a piece of equipment because I feel like they will come and yell at me. This is because of my appearance, I am stronger than I look but still carry a lot of fat around my belly. You can feel their testosterone in the air, frustrated that a “fat girl” is using the equipment they want.

Very few survey respondents expressed that they felt fully safe and comfortable and enjoyed their fitness facility, or felt that it was a positive, welcoming environment. Others explained that they had experienced a number of gym spaces that made them feel uncomfortable before finally finding one that is “great and supportive” (survey respondent). In terms of what these young women felt their current fitness facility could do to improve to provide a safer, more body positive environment for young women, an overwhelming number of responses suggested that there be more female only spaces created within their fitness facility. Another popular response was to promote a more diverse range of bodies within their fitness facility as well as providing more accessible education. Suggestions from the survey respondents included workshops on women’s health, or providing free services on how to properly utilise the gym’s machines or demonstration of proper technique. One focus group participant (Eden) felt obliged to adhere to gendered constructs of the fitness space in her own experience:

It definitely took a really long time for me to get ... the courage to ... step onto the weight section ... it was just ... so much pressure and ... I can't tell you whether or not they were actually paying any attention to me but I felt like they were ... I was just hiding over in the little cardio section ... where I belong even though I hate it.

Eden states that she only trained in the cardio area of her gym (even though she preferred weights), because she felt as a woman that was where she belonged and also because the weights area was so male-dominated that she could “sniff it (the testosterone) in the air.” This statement reinforces how certain types of exercise and spaces within the gym become gendered and determine where women feel like it is safe and appropriate for them to train. In fact, Johannsson (1996) found that cardiovascular spaces within a fitness facility are typically associated with females, and the weights area is male-dominated. This docility is also ubiquitous in fitness spaces due to the various types of

surveillance available, whether that be through the male gaze (as explained by Eden above) or through the seemingly judgmental gaze of other females. This feeling of being judged by other women at the gym was felt by the following survey response:

I believe that women should be more encouraging of other women. We always compliment women in the gym in our minds ... We shouldn't be shy to encourage and uplift other women.

A third form of gaze is the gym facility itself, which is often lined with mirrors for members to be able to observe themselves at all times. Madison, an interview participant, commented on how she felt the floor to ceiling mirrors were excessive at her own fitness facility:

Even in the changing rooms ... there's mirrors everywhere, right? And so every time you're around the corner, you ... catch a glimpse of yourself and I just think ... the floor to ceiling mirrors around every corner in the changing rooms is just ... not necessary.

Madison argues that the mirror-lined walls are “not necessary” because of how easy it is to be able to observe oneself at any moment. Though it is not explicitly stated, Madison could be suggesting here that this observation encourages young women to constantly monitor and critique their bodies. Clark and Markula (2017) discovered this was the case in mirror-lined dance studios, where the young female dancers constantly gazed at their bodies. Clark and Markula (2017) discovered this was the case in mirror-lined dance studios, where the young female dancers felt the omnipresence of the mirror and constantly gazed at their bodies. Markula and Pringle (2006) also argue that the mirrors in fitness spaces such as health clubs encourage members to constantly gaze at themselves and others.

Navigating social pressures

Survey respondents also highlighted other internal or external pressures to adhere to body ideals such as society's expectations, culture, and their upbringing. As one respondent stated: “It is ingrained in us from a very early age.” Some young women commented that their family, especially their parents, would comment on their appearance/looks and compare them to others:

As an average looking person, I get negatively compared to among my family and friends. There is always someone more beautiful and better than me in every way, including academically intelligent. Most of us are average, and so I suspect, most of us get treated like we are not good enough (survey response).

This survey respondent feels the pressure from her own family and peers to achieve more due to the comparison she is often subjected to. She speaks for many young women in that most young women

do not fit the beauty standards and therefore do not feel “good enough”, even within their own families. Other participants acknowledged that their parents, particularly maternal figures, had a significant impact on the way they view themselves now as adults, suggesting that these pressures have a lasting impact into their adulthood. This was especially true for Taylor, a focus group participant whose mother often commented on her weight as a child:

I feel like there's so many things that impact you at a young age (and) carry with you ... because ... if you have ... that push from a parent or push from someone that's supposed to be this ... parental trustworthy figure ... pushing all of these ideas on you, you believe them. And then you get older and then your grandparents or something will comment that you need to eat less, like ... these (are) the people that you trust, and they're telling you all these things-so you believe them.

Taylor explains how her mother's influence on her body image as a child is still present with her as an adult, but she believed her mother's comments because she was someone she trusted. Jones and Young (2021) support this, finding that mothers have a significant impact on the way their daughters experience body image, especially if they often engage in negative self-talk towards their own bodies. All of these influences work to shape a young woman's beliefs about her body and pushes her to seek out ways in which to fit in with a 'fit girl' lifestyle.

The 'Fit Girl' lifestyle

For decades, being fit and healthy to a young woman has typically been associated with weight loss and achieving body ideals (Duncan, 1994). However, now fitness culture has become an entire lifestyle, which many of my participants referred to as being or becoming a 'fit girl'. The concept of being a 'fit girl' is explained by one focus group participant, Aroha, below:

Yeah, I think for me, there's this whole total aesthetic about being a 'fit girly'. From the lifestyle, even the cars, even the food, even what they're wearing, even some mannerisms ... it just all looks so desirable ... And so it almost is like getting something to strive (for) unconsciously whether that be money or a whole way of being or living or lifestyle.

Aroha idealises the 'fit girl' aesthetic and lifestyle, stating how she wishes she could attain this aesthetic, but that it is largely inaccessible for her. Though she is aware of the inaccessibility of this lifestyle, she still strives for it. Aroha explains how integral this lifestyle is to one's identity as it even includes one's “mannerisms”. The body, as well as the entire self, becomes a project to be extensively worked on to become a 'fit girl'. Achieving a certain aesthetic is so prevalent in young women's

culture that it is now even a significant part of their health and fitness journeys. One focus group participant, Hannah, expands on this:

I think the aesthetic of fitness ... being pushed so much and also ... that kind of aesthetic, not really being accessible unless you have a lot of money as well it kind of pushes this idea that you have to be ... buying all these things to start as well, which I think stops a lot of people starting ... I feel like there's so much focus on ... getting that perfect body ... rather than also focusing on ... while you're exercising, you're increasing all these good hormones and other benefits to it, rather than it just being an aesthetic thing.

Hannah suggests that achieving the “perfect body” is highly unattainable for many young women because of the high cost of having to buy certain products to achieve this look. This quote demonstrates that being a “fit girl” is an exclusive concept. This is comparable to Azzarito’s (2010) concept of ‘Future girls’ or ‘Alpha girls’, which refer to the concept of the modern woman who actively aspires to strive to be the best version of herself in every area of her life. The ‘fit girl’ discourse proposes a highly unrealistic standard of what young women ‘should’ be, and any individual who does not fit in with that is excluded from the ‘Alpha girl’ group and is dubbed as ‘Other girls’.

This glorification of the ‘fit girl’ lifestyle came from the popularity of trends such as ‘fitspo’ and ‘thinspo’ where a fit and thin body ideal, respectively, was heavily glamorised (Boepple et al., 2016; Slater et al., 2017; Sumter et al., 2018; Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015). In terms of what maintaining a ‘fitness lifestyle’ looks like to young women, there was an equal split for the following options for this survey question: ‘training a certain amount of times per week’, ‘following a self-care routine’, and ‘practising self-development’ (all 22%). A common response was to achieve “balance” in their lives, which looked like a combination of eating healthy and occasionally indulging in processed food such as takeaways.

Chapter summary

In summary, it is clear from the research findings that young women feel increasingly pressured to adhere to body ideals and keep up with the valued body discourses. These discourses surround young women in a multitude of spaces including social media, female clothing trends, societal expectations from their families or partners (the male gaze) and even the fitness spaces they engage in. The

participants in the study are aware of these ideals and their widespread presence, and therefore they feel incredible pressure to adhere to these ideals. Young women internalise these ideals and seek to adhere to them in a number of ways. This pressure influences them to engage in and restrict themselves to certain types of fitness practices and spaces, even at the sacrifice of their personal enjoyment. Neoliberal healthism messaging is so pervasive in young women's fitness lifestyles that they feel worthless and like their body is a "problem" if they do not adhere to these ideals. Even if they're not yet achieving these ideals, they feel a strong need to at least be actively and consistently pursuing such (unrealistic) goals.

In the next section, I continue discussing how young women engage in fitness lifestyles by introducing a popular social media trend that glorifies personal transformation: the 'glow up' imperative. I draw upon literature surrounding similar discourses to introduce and explain this trend, and the significant impact it has on young women's lives.

Chapter 5:

Young Women, Fitness and the 'Glow Up' Imperative

Amber embarked on a strict 'glow up' regime after a break-up with her boyfriend. She followed a programme created by an online fitness influencer that included daily workouts, and a strict nutritional regimen. She continued with this 'glow up' regime for five months, and noticed considerable changes in her body. Many people complimented her on her new appearance. While Amber loved her new look, it was taxing trying to stay with the strict regime. Ultimately she realised she was spending too much time and money in pursuit of an ideal that never seemed achievable. There was always something more to do, something new to buy, before she would achieve the ultimate 'glow up', and somehow this left her feeling worse off than before.*

Mary is 20 years old and always had a very active and sporty lifestyle. However, in the months leading up to her 19th birthday she decided to try one of the 'glow up' routines from a beauty influencer she'd been following for a while. Following the advice of the influencer, and some of her friends who had also been following the routine for a while, she started going for regular spray tans, got lash extensions, and started working out twice a day. Her pursuit of the 'glow up' occupied most of her thoughts, and much of her savings too. Initially, she felt great, her body was in better shape than ever before and people seemed to notice her more now. She didn't mind wearing activewear and revealing clothing anymore, because she finally felt good in it. But when she got busy with university, she found it hard to keep up with the regime. While Mary continues to stay active, she finds the pressure of the 'glow up' makes her feel bad when she can't fit it all into her busy life.*

In this chapter, I draw upon feminist literature on the neoliberal aspirational, transformational and body project to understand the 'glow up' concept, and the impact this trend has on young women's health, fitness and overall lifestyles. The narratives above are fictional compilations* created from

multiple participants in this study, both highlighting the pervasiveness of ‘glow up’ imperatives on young women’s lives. While ‘glow up’ is a popular cultural reference to a process of personal transformation or improvement (i.e., beauty, fitness, lifestyle), in this chapter I argue that the ‘glow up’ imperative actively works to perpetuate neoliberal healthism messaging and convince young women that they must actively and consistently work on themselves to feel good about themselves, and to be accepted in society. The ‘glow up’ is often referred to in conjunction with improving one’s physical appearance or aesthetic but it can also be applied in terms of one’s personal and professional achievement such as self-growth and career. Dictionary.com (2022) also states that the popular hashtag ‘glow up’ is often used for a physical transformation or ‘before and after’ photos to explicitly showcase the ‘glow up’ that has occurred.

The target audience of the ‘glow up’ is typically young people, specifically teenagers who have achieved a ‘glow up’ after going through puberty (Dictionary.com, 2022). The term was especially popularised by social media influencers in the fitness, wellness and beauty industries during the pandemic in conjunction with the ‘before/after’ photos. Searching the term ‘glow up’ on social media platforms Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok presents unlimited picture and video content of (typically) young women undergoing surgeries, beauty treatments, or providing advice to their followers on how to achieve the glow up themselves. Many YouTube personalities in the health, beauty and wellness space have a ‘glow up’ series where they document their own ‘glow up’ journey, presenting their viewers with the insights of their dramatic physical transformation so that they can apply it, too. A popular BBC television series titled ‘Glow Up: Britain’s Next Makeup-Star’ was also launched on Netflix in 2019, which is a competition series that focuses on talented makeup artists. The ‘Glow Up’ here refers to a physical transformation in the form of applying a makeup look, reinforcing its association with upgrading one’s appearance.

The ‘glow up’ imperative was a powerful, and somewhat unexpected, theme in my data, and thus it is necessary to engage with a closely related and useful body of feminist literature to deepen my understanding and the subsequent analysis. ‘Glowing up’ can be translated as an aspirational and transformation imperative that specifically targets young women (Gill & Orgad, 2018; Harris, 2003; McRobbie, 2015; Riley et al., 2023). This aspiration does not only extend to improving one’s physical

appearance, but also to aspiring for more in every area of a young woman's life (career, relationships, etc). In the first part of this chapter, I draw upon feminist scholarship focused on young women in the context of neoliberalism to connect the 'glow up' imperative to the resilience and "bounce-backability" (Gill & Orgad, 2018, p. 483) discourses that encourage young women to actively recover from times of significant stress in their lives. In the framing of this chapter, I also draw parallels from the 'glow up' to similar discourses of the 'body project' (Coffey, 2016) and 'fitspo' (Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2021). Following this conceptual framework, I then offer my analysis that draws primarily upon focus group and interview data with young women to highlight how the 'glow up' imperative is impacting their fitness lifestyles, and feelings about themselves. Herein I outline how the relentless pressure to be perfect, or to be aspiring and working towards 'perfection', can lead young women to engage in self-destructive behaviour and suffer from poor mental health.

In this chapter, I engage and extend feminist literature exploring post-feminism and neoliberal healthism discourses, introducing the 'glow up' concept which is a significant discourse impacting many young women's lives. While the 'glow up' is a cultural phenomenon, herein I develop the concept of the 'glow up imperative'. In so doing, I take inspiration from feminist literature on "body work as a moral imperative" (White et al., 1995), "post-feminist transformation imperative" (Riley & Evans, 2018), "the body positivity imperative" (Joseph & Chavez, 2023), and "the positivity imperative" (Gill & Orgad, 2022; Thorpe et al., 2024), and particularly feminist scholarship on the pressures and expectations (the imperatives) on young women to strive towards unrealistic body and lifestyle ideals of constant self-improvement. The word 'imperative' is used frequently across this literature, and herein I take up such vocabulary in coining the term the 'glow up imperative' to refer to the all-pervasive pressures and expectations on young women to transform their bodies and identities through a range of lifestyle changes (i.e., fitness, nutrition, beauty practices).

Conceptual framework: Aspirational labour, the 'transformation imperative' and the 'body project'

To make sense of the possible rapid growth and popularity of the 'glow up' trend, I turn to the literature surrounding resilience and aspirational discourses. The resilient female subject is identified

in Harris's (2003) 'Future Girl' who is introduced as a young woman who takes "charge of her life, seize(s) chances, and achieve(s) her goals" (p. 1). McRobbie (2015) uses a similar term with the concept of the 'Top Girl', agreeing that young women are now seen as "ideal subjects of female success" (p. 718) due to the opportunities available to them in the 21st century, and therefore are encouraged to persistently strive for "a perfectible self" (p. 718). According to Gill and Orgad (2018), resilience messaging is now more accessible than ever in the form of self-help literature, women's magazines, and on smartphone apps. These apps primarily market to middle-class women due to the fact they have "taken centre stage as the idealised bounce-backable resilient neoliberal subjects" (p. 491). They argue that resilience is framed as a positive imperative to help individuals have hope and self-efficacy after times of crisis however in reality it has underpinnings of toxic positivity.

Allen (2014) continues the argument that young women are targeted as "successful subjects" (p. 761) who are persistently encouraged to aspire for more, reinforcing a need to be resilient at all times. Gill and Orgad (2018) examine the prevalence of 'bounce back' discourses that encourage women to be more resilient subjects. Women are expected not only to 'bounce back' mentally and emotionally from significant life events (e.g., breakups, pregnancy, job loss or career set-backs, illness), but also physically, and to do so in an efficient and unrealistically quick manner (Roth et al., 2012). Importantly, the responsibility is on women to recover individually, so as not to disrupt their care, work and support for others. Rarely are women encouraged to acknowledge gendered inequities in systems that may have prompted their increased vulnerabilities, and/or limit their capacity to recover quickly.

The 'transformation imperative'

Another important body of literature that helps us to understand the 'glow up' concept is the transformational imperative. The concept of body transformation or drastic makeover has been seen endlessly in popular culture especially targeted towards young women (Gill, 2007; Riley et al., 2023). Feminist body image scholars have postulated that physical transformation has become an obsession in society, and the more drastic, the better. For example, Riley et al. (2023) explores the "change yourself" (p. 48) discourse perpetuated in makeover-based television programmes, which promised

the contestants inner happiness and confidence through changing their appearance. She states that the transformation imperative has become a “normative expectation” (p. 50), particularly for women, and though it presents itself as empowering it works only to encourage self-objectification. Banet-Weiser et al. (2020) refer to this makeover concept as being a “postfeminist sensibility”, (p. 10) stating that the female makeover was displayed as an imperative “to be positive, confident, and glowing” and to “upgrade...one’s life” (p. 5).

The ‘glow up’ imperative carries the same implicit messaging as the transformational imperative in that it suggests that transforming oneself (or ‘glowing up’) is the only solution for a young woman to achieve happiness, self-confidence and quality of life. The transformation imperative was seen in popular women’s health and fitness magazines from the 1990’s, where articles focusing on body transformation, dieting tips, and exercise regimes were a constant feature (Duncan, 1994). A more modern example of this is the ‘BBG’ (Bikini Body Guide) community created by fitness influencer Kayla Itsines, whose target demographic is women. Kayla persistently uses ‘before/after’ progress photos as a way to showcase how effective her programmes are (Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2021). Young women in particular are affected by this transformation imperative, because of the unrealistic body ideals they are constantly presented with, which can lead to self-monitoring and disciplining practices (Camacho-Miñano et al., 2019).

‘Fitspo’ and the ‘body project’

Finally, the ‘glow up’ imperative can be translated as a body project imperative and understood through the ‘fitspo’ discourses discussed in the previous chapter. Essentially, the ‘glow up’ frames the body as a “project” (Conrad, 1994, p. 385) to constantly be worked on. The body project imperative, though marketed as empowering for women, suggests that women have something ‘wrong’ with them that needs to be immediately corrected, solved and beautified. Coffey (2016) refers to this concept as ‘body work’ and suggests that this work is undergone to achieve the strict ideals presented today. Coffey (2016) attributes an increase of ‘body work’ practices to the heightened popularity of gym and fitness culture and the body ideals that are perpetuated through these environments and on social media. ‘Body work’ practices draw similarities to those of the ‘glow up’ imperatives, referring to

dieting and fitness practices, cosmetic surgery and beauty practices such as wearing make-up and fake tan.

The motivation to treat the body as a project can also be understood through ‘fitspo’ discourses. Toffoletti and Thorpe (2021) state ‘fitspo’ is used on social media to “encourage and inspire people to exercise” (p. 822), and promoted by popular fitness influencers such as Kayla Itsines. The ‘glow up’ trend is presented in a similar way, as a positive and empowering tool for young women to be able to access inner self-confidence through fitness, beauty and lifestyle practices. However, as Pryde and Prichard (2022) argue, while ‘fitspo’ may be framed through discourses of empowerment, it can also cause young women to engage in constant self-monitoring and comparison, due to the focus of body ideals that the trend promotes. As discussed in the analysis below, ‘glowing up’ is intrinsically linked with trends such as ‘fitspo’, both underpinned by the expectation and pressure on young women to invest emotional, physical and financial resources into the pursuit of aesthetic transformation.

Analysis: Young women and the ‘Glow up’ imperative

The ‘glow up’ was a significant theme that came up across all research methods, with almost all the participants expressing a desire to improve their physical appearance. In this section, I draw upon my focus group, interview, and survey data, as well as feminist literature to explain how the ‘glow up’ trend is shaping young women’s experiences of fitness culture and body image in contemporary Aotearoa New Zealand society. The ‘glow up’ trend is often presented online as a ‘life-changing’, ‘realistic’ checklist and step-by-step process in the form of video and/or picture content that young women should adhere to. The relentlessly demanding ‘glow up’ trend encourages young women to engage in ‘body work’ practices such as attending the gym and restricting their diet in order to achieve a successful ‘glow up’, purchasing an array of beauty products and keeping up with the latest clothing trends. In the context of neoliberalism, the ‘glow up’ imperative is directly connected to a range of consumption practices (i.e., gym memberships, activewear clothing, beauty products). I first discuss how the relentless pursuit of the ‘glow up’ causes young women to engage in other popular social media trends such as ‘fitspo’.

The 'glow up' requires an individual to maintain a high level of health and fitness. This was also identified as significant by several of the participants, who defined 'glowing up' as staying fit and adhering to 'slim fit' ideals (Wiklund et al., 2019). As soon as I mentioned the words 'glow up' during a focus group, Erin instantly commented: "It's always [centred around] weight loss" (edited for clarity). Many of the participants expressed a high levels of motivation to achieve this ideal for a number of reasons. This is seen by the survey responses below:

I sometimes feel that I must adhere to these ideals by being thin, having an hour-glass body figure, and little body-fat in order to be more attractive to males.

I am size 14, I have heard the most disgusting and degrading things about people my size and larger. I wish more than anything that I fit beauty ideal.

These young women either felt like they should adhere to body ideals, or desired it due to society's expectations of them. The first respondent felt the pressure of appealing to the male gaze and recognises the very narrow ideal she must fit into: "thin", "hour-glass", and "little body-fat." The second respondent also feels pressured by those around her due to the "disgusting" comments she hears about her body, with such comments acting as external pressures to fit in with the "beauty ideal."

Striving for a 'glow up' that incorporates unrealistic body ideals typically shapes the type of fitness practices women choose to engage in (Markula, 1995, Walseth & Tidslevold, 2020). For example, Erin, a focus group participant, felt as though she should follow fitness trends on TikTok in order to see results:

I definitely think ... online things like TikTok trends ... Like, you know that '3-10-30' or something treadmill challenge. I'm like ... I have to ... do that exact thing because that's what gets the results you know So it's like, a lot of things go viral and everyone's like "I have to do that".

Erin felt as though she should follow a certain fitness challenge she has seen online, even though it is not catered to her needs and found it almost impossible to do, because "that's what gets the results". Further participants shared similar experiences during their fitness journeys:

I think when I was young, I definitely had a 30 day ab challenge on my phone. Just wanted, abs like I've gotta have abs. (Tiffany, focus group participant)

As someone who goes to the gym 5 times a week to lift, I still feel pressured to 'look like I lift' as I have been going to the gym for years and the average person wouldn't be able to tell that I lift weights ... When I mention the gym, most people seem to think that I mustn't be working hard enough as I am not 'skin(ny)/toned' (they don't say this to me, but I can tell certain friends/family members think it). (survey respondent)

I think these days or the kids in my classes are like, "I want to be really skinny." Definitely ... celebrities and...people I guess that are cool at the time ... definitely influence the way, not even just like the way we want to look but the way we exercise. Like if you think about...I know everyone probably talks about this but like, Chloe Ting. (Eden, focus group participant)

These responses demonstrate the intense pressure felt by young women to engage in fitness practices such as lifting weights that will help them to achieve a 'glow up' and therefore 'slim-thick' ideals. For many young women, achieving these ideals are seen as imperative ("I've gotta have abs") to be accepted by their peers and society ("I can tell certain friends/family members think it"). As mentioned above, young women have long felt the weight of this pressure (Azzarito, 2018), however they must also be successful neoliberal subjects in each area of their lives in accordance with the requirements of the 'glow up' trend. Allen (2014) argues that young women are conditioned to fear failure and this worry was documented by the participants of the present study:

I definitely do ... notice when I am putting on weight or ... losing muscle tone ... and I'm like, oh, okay, I need to ... get back into my routine of going to the gym a couple of times a week and things. (Madison, interview focus group participant)

It's all or nothing ... you think, oh, to be doing well, I should go to the gym, three to five days this week and I should have done this ... but yeah, it's not always gonna happen. And like kind of just accepting that ... maybe you just went for a walk instead and that's okay. Rather than it's a "Oh, I haven't been to the gym so I'm failing". (Erin, focus group participant).

Both of the above responses demonstrated that young women do fear failure in the form of not maintaining body ideals as shown by the use of imperatives such as "I need to get back into my routine" and "I should go to the gym" However, implementing a post-feminist lens allows us to perceive young women as actively negotiating these often complex spaces of choosing between fitting in with society or looking after themselves. To cope with this incessant pressure, young women must reassure themselves constantly that they are achieving significant progress. Consistent fitness progress is a significant pillar of the 'glow up' trend. Focus group participants, Aroha and Taylor, both

explained how weight loss was a primary component of their personal ‘glow up’ journeys through the fitness lifestyle:

Aroha: Yeah, I lost a lot of weight as well afterwards...(speaking here about applying a ‘glow up’ after a relationship breakup).

Taylor: ...that's probably when I was at my lowest weight. And probably my fittest as well gym wise and stuff like that.

These participants demonstrate that adhering to consistent fitness practices in order to achieve weight loss was an imperative part of attaining a ‘glow up.’ Interestingly, good health in the context of a ‘glow up’ is almost always framed as weight loss rather than a sense of general well-being. Another focus group participant explains how the ‘fitspo’ trend is pervasive in her life, and how it causes her to want to ‘glow up’:

One of my favourite(s) is 'Oh May'...She is amazing. But every time she pops up, she's strong, she's lifting, she's hot, she's got the bod, she's got everything and I'm just like, "Oh my gosh", she makes me...want to go out work hard, get hot and just do it maybe for external validation ... for the aesthetic of it. (Aroha)

Aroha admits that her favourite fitness influencer prompts her desire to engage in an array of health and beauty practices in order to achieve a similar “aesthetic”, and the chance of similar forms of “external validation”. From this example, we can see that trends such as the ‘glow up’ and ‘fitspo’ are so pervasive that viewing one influencer’s content can cause a young woman to experience high levels of self-objectification and feel pressured to keep up with these trends. This was supported by many survey responses that collectively agreed that pressures to adhere to beauty ideals for young women were “everywhere”, but particularly on social media.

Another key pillar of the ‘glow up’ is adhering to society’s narrow definition of beauty which is predominantly white, thin, and young (Azzarito, 2009; Brice et al., 2023). A ‘glow up’ is by definition, a physical transformation so altering one’s appearance is essentially a requirement for this trend. The beauty practices involved in ‘glowing up’ range from purchasing skincare or cosmetic products or engaging in cosmetic treatments and surgeries, but all require the individual to engage in a range of consumption practices in their efforts to achieve (or maintain) a perfect, glowing appearance at all times. A focus group participant, Hannah, commented on how it felt like completing beauty

treatments at home was no longer good enough, and that her friends would spend excessive amounts of money on beauty treatments to achieve a 'glow up':

It's almost as if, treating yourself at home ... you can't get it to ... that perfect standard without spending so much money ... it's like so many of my friends ... they get their hair professionally done, they get their lashes and their brows done and their nails and they're like 17. And I'm like ... "why?"

Hannah demonstrates how pervasive the 'glow up' imperative is in her friends' lives, who feel the pressure to pay for expensive treatments to achieve the "perfect standard." Not only are young women expected to be a successful "future girl" (Harris, 2003, p. 1), but they must maintain a "perfect" appearance at all times, which is an implicit message of the 'glow up' discourse. A second focus group participant, Brianna, agrees that achieving a 'glow up' is difficult and unattainable for most young women:

I feel like every now and again, you'll get your hair done, or you get your nails done and ... that's a big positive thing. Or ... you go to the gym, and then you might have a body scan and they're like, "Oh, you've done so much to improve." And I feel like that's really good but obviously you just get busy ... and then those small things don't actually add up to make a big positive change, like you've had a big "glow up".

Brianna agrees with Hannah that a 'glow up' is a drastic transformation, and doing one or two things only makes one feel temporarily better, but it is not sufficient enough to achieve perfection as Hannah mentioned above. Brianna feels the need to tend to beauty and fitness practices to maintain a 'glow up' but feels that she never fully achieves it because of how unattainable it is. This leads young women, such as Brianna, to feel a never-ending pressure to purchase more beauty products in their efforts to achieve a 'glow up'.

As discussed in the previous chapter, beauty trends and standards that help to achieve body ideals have also been incredibly popular with young women in contemporary culture. These include a range of practices from beauty therapy (i.e., tanning, eyelash extensions, teeth whitening) to more costly, extreme and often dangerous treatments and surgeries such as the 'Brazilian Buttlift'. This cosmetic surgical procedure involves injecting fat into the buttocks to achieve the sought after 'hour-glass' look. The surgery is often cited as being dangerous and, according to a recent survey, the Brazilian Buttlift surgery has a mortality rate of one in 15,000 (Vecchio et al., 2021). Though my participants point out the absurdity and inaccessibility of these surgeries, they also express concern

that constantly being exposed to these trends on social media may have a strong influence on young women, despite the dangers of them. One participant, Annika, believed that some surgeries (such as the 'Brazilian Buttlift') were illogical, yet breast enhancement surgeries were acceptable since they "look nice" and "everything's in shape". To achieve a 'glow up', many young women feel obliged to spend copious amounts of money on beauty treatments and products, and some even turn to dangerous cosmetic surgeries. Hannah, another focus group participant, adds to this argument:

Yeah, going to get beauty treatments ... I feel like I've seen a huge rise in popularity with that. And especially ... with quite young people as well and it's like ... the people that I see-I'm 19, so I'm seeing you know, kind of around, even like 16/17 getting eyelash extensions weekly and stuff and I'm like, where are you getting this money it's ridiculous. And yeah ... because obviously, when a professional does something like that, it's gonna be a lot better than what you can achieve at home or a lot more perfect or whatever ... it's like, whatever happened to like plucking your own eyebrows? Like my mascara will be smudged by the end of the day. I can't afford eyelash extensions.

Hannah is critical of the perfection that the 'glow up' trend demands. She explains that her peers who are as young as 16 years old are paying to get eyelash extensions each week in order to achieve a "perfect" look. Though Hannah questions why her peers are paying for such expensive beauty treatments, she is also aware that it is because they feel the pressure to be "perfect." Hannah feels that this is a current problem young women are facing as she recalls a time where completing beauty treatments at home was acceptable.

However, as Aroha, another focus group participant, explains: "I have gone and had treatments, whether that's facials, body hair removal, and I know that in certain environments, that is ... the expectation". Aroha summarises the requirements of the 'glow up' trend, stating that consuming costly beauty treatments such as facials and body hair removal are expected of young women to achieve perfection. Young women are often targeted as "consumer-oriented" (Brice et al., 2023, p. 618). This is because they are such a large demographic of social media platforms such as Instagram where many businesses advertise their products. Social media influencers are paid by companies to promote their products and especially for influencers involved in the fitness, wellness, and beauty space, these products usually focus on altering one's appearance (for example, makeup and weight loss supplements). As well as promoting products, such digital wellness, health and fitness influencers are simultaneously reinforcing 'positivity' discourses (Calder-Dawe et. al., 2024) and

lifestyles, and in so doing, building communities of lifestyle consumers (Magladry et. al, 2022). One survey respondent noted how she felt she was constantly being advertised to with cosmetic products and clothing, and images typically presenting the “ideal body shape.” A second survey respondent was also hyper aware of this type of messaging stating that:

I think consumerism drives the female attitude towards our bodies and fitness. It creates toxic, harmful narratives that ruin young women's self-esteem and perception. Why? Just to sell the newest beauty regime or fitness product or stupid diet. And all of society just buys into it.

As such comments suggest, some young women are conscious of and reject this targeted advertising, yet most still feel pressured to engage in a range of highly consumptive practices because of the influence of social media.

One of the most high-profile examples of a celebrity perpetuating the ‘glow up’ trend, (as identified by my focus group participants) is billionaire beauty business owner and reality television star Kylie Jenner. Kylie Jenner is most well-known for her makeup company ‘Kylie Cosmetics’ which gained huge success with the release of her ‘lip kits’ in 2015 (Feng, 2024). The ‘lip kits’ were so successful because of the advertised promise of achieving ‘Kylie lips’, which were overly pronounced lips representing the beauty standards. Kylie credited her ‘lip kits’ as helping her achieve her own physical transformation, thereby telling her primarily young female audience that they could achieve the same look by purchasing this product. Young women are thereby marketed to in a way that promises them a ‘glow up’ similar to that of their favourite celebrities, and that this is accessible to them. One survey respondent notes the impacts this social media marketing has on young women: “Society makes you feel worthless if you don't look a certain way.” This sums up how powerful such messages are for many young women, prompting them to feel that they need to consume more products in order to change themselves.

Young women become active consumers of a range of products targeted to them as they strive for a ‘glow up.’ Several survey responses spoke specifically of obtaining the ideal body alongside revealing and fashionable clothing, with one suggesting that “There is a standard to be skinny, have no cellulite, have no fat, you’re pretty if you wear short shorts, or a crop bra, clear skin etc”. This suggests that achieving a ‘glow up’ requires extensive ‘body work’ (Coffey, 2016) and attaining specific products such as “short shorts” and skin care products to achieve “clear skin.” As identified

in Chapter Four (see p. 75), Aroha, identifies having high quality activewear as important to obtain the ‘fit girl’ look: “there's this whole total aesthetic about being a 'fit girly'... From the lifestyle (to)... even what they're wearing”. Other participants such as Erin pointed out the absurdity of maintaining a glamorous appearance in physical activity spaces such as the gym: “It's just not realistic. No one looks like that. Like we're rocking up the gym in baggy T-shirts, like, looking like crap”. We can see that young women experience a combination of feeling pressured to adhere to the ‘glow up’ trend while also being critical of it, and I explore further critiques from the participants later in this section. However, I now discuss how ‘body work’ and transformational imperatives draw parallels to the ‘glow up’ trend.

The ‘glow up’ and affect

The ‘glow up’ imperative has such intense requirements that it understandably causes significant distress and feelings of pressure in many young women. Though the trend is often depicted as a positive and empowering postfeminist concept for young women, it can actually often cause poorer mental health. The ‘glow up’ (falsely) promises young women happiness, fulfilment, and inner self-confidence as a result of significant physical transformation. However, the findings of this study show that those who do are seeking to achieve a ‘glow up’ often end up feeling worse about themselves. In this section, I explore how the ‘glow up’ surfaces negative affects—feelings, emotions, embodied reactions—impacting young women’s mental health, social comparison and relationships with their body. I draw upon aspirational, resilience, and transformational literature to demonstrate further how young women feel extensive pressure in their lives to constantly be striving for more, whether that be a significant aesthetic transformation and/or career success.

The participants in this study who had pursued a ‘glow up’ in their lives all demonstrated experiencing greater levels of body dissatisfaction after attempting this trend. Regardless, young women still feel the pressure to undergo a major transformation in order to feel “worthy and accepted” as put by one survey participant. One focus group participant, Erin, explained how she received the most compliments about her body when she had applied the ‘glow up’ but was going through mental health issues:

It's hard when you get ... the most compliments when ... your body looks the best. It's ... hard when ... that's when you felt really shit and you were doing all these toxic things but everyone's like "You look great, keep it up!" And it's like do you really want to keep it up? Like, you have no idea how people get to that space, so I feel like it's important to compliment people as a whole like things like you're glowing rather than like body focused. Like ... it's safer to just not comment.

Erin refers to the word “toxic” when explaining her experience of the ‘glow up’, which suggests that applying this concept is not as beneficial as it is presented on social media. Erin also argues that women tend to receive the most praise after transforming themselves, therefore providing positive reinforcement for them to continue, similar to the makeover programmes discussed by Riley et al. (2023). She explains that in order to transform her body, she had to engage in “toxic behaviours” which caused her to question whether achieving a ‘glow up’ is worth it. Erin makes an important point that though externally someone may seem fit and healthy once they have achieved a ‘glow up’, they may actually be suffering internally. In fact, harmful behaviours were commonplace amongst many participants, as demonstrated by the survey responses below:

Stop myself from eating at times due to gaining weight.

I have a bad habit of weighing myself after anything that I eat so I can see how much I gain weight.

Being focussed on tracking nutrition made me obsessive and I felt disgusting when I ate certain foods and thought I was defined by what I ate.

Over lockdown I became really obsessive of exercising and limiting calories to try (to) lose weight which made me insecure about my size even though I wasn't overweight by any means and have always been pretty fit.

I dread going to the doctors, specialists, and nurses because I am weighed and shamed ... and then told all my medical problems would be solved if I lost weight ... I get so emotionally down after those interactions and ... then will emotionally eat and stop being active for a while.

I will go to the extremes, either eat too much and not exercise or starve myself and exercise. I have no inbetween.

Currently I've just been able to view myself negatively which motivates me to train harder.

I tend to become obsessed with it and become overly critical about myself and always find a way to be displeased with any “progress” as it never seems to be enough.

These survey responses demonstrate that young women adopt a range of detrimental behaviours to cope with the pressures of being perfect, from starving themselves, constantly monitoring their

progress, and over exercising. Though these problems are widely acknowledged as highly prevalent for young women, the responsibility is still placed on the individual to solve these problems. Markula (2001) notes how women's health magazines provide help and support for eating disorders, they still only use models who represent body ideals for their photo content. This is reflected in online content depicting the 'glow up' trend which almost exclusively (as identified by the participants of the present study) presents a narrow aesthetic ideal while simultaneously telling its audience to love and appreciate themselves.

Another consequence of the 'glow up' trend being so pervasive is that it causes social comparison and therefore higher levels of self-objectification. Tiggemann and Zaccardo (2015) found that the women in their study experienced both as a result of viewing 'fitspiration' content on social media. It therefore makes sense that a similar social media trend such as the 'glow up' would cause a homogenous embodied experience. Being constantly exposed to content featuring fit bodies or glowing skin daily causes many young women to compare themselves to celebrities or social media influencers, or even their own peers (Hogue & Mills, 2019; McComb & Mills, 2022). The commonality of social comparison is expressed through one focus group participant, Tiffany:

I think ... we can say as much as we want like, I'm ... so happy in my own body ... I'm always gonna look at someone and be like, "fuck she looks good. I wanna look like that. How am I gonna do that?" And then naturally you do ... think ... "Okay, if she's doing that maybe I should start" which can be a good and a bad thing. You can take inspiration from it ... and if you're in a positive space about it, then it can be great. But if you're using it to ... compare and then beat yourself up about it then it can be dangerous ... There's two sides to it. It's kind of tricky.

Here Tiffany explores the "two sides" to social comparison, stating that it is not always a negative thing, because it can act as a source of motivation for some young women. However, she contends that it also causes young women to question themselves and where they could be striving for more in their lives. As explained by body image scholars, Goodyear et al. (2022) and Walseth and Tidslevold (2020), young women often use social media platforms such as Instagram as a pedagogical tool to learn about health, wellbeing and fitness. They have found, however, that these social networking sites can also drive social comparison in young women to the point where some adopt unhealthy behaviours such as disordered eating in order to try and replicate the body ideals often represented on social media.

The 'glow up' is not proven to increase feelings of inner self-confidence as it is so often advertised. In fact, the participants expressed that trying to adhere to the 'glow up' requirements caused them to feel worse mentally. Many of the participants who had applied the 'glow up' in their life experienced what Ngai (2005) terms "ugly feelings" (p. 2). 'Ugly feelings' refer to feeling so disgusted by one's appearance that it causes them to want to drastically transform themselves. Coffey (2021) also uses this term to explain heightened body concerns in individuals, which are especially felt by women. She expands on Ngai's (2005) framework that 'ugly feelings' can cause harmful, obsessive behaviours such as eating disorders, and limits an individual's ability to engage in health and fitness practices simply for enjoyment. 'Ugly feelings' relate to feelings of worry and concern about judgement from others (Coffey, 2021). One significant example of experiencing 'ugly feelings' was from a focus group participant, Taylor, who described the negative impact engaging in a 'glow up' had in her life:

I think I always imagine, in my head I'm gonna stop posting to social media and ... I'm gonna have this massive 'glow up' and no one's gonna see me for months and I'm just gonna come out looking super hot. And you do that for a couple of months and you get into a routine, and then you just stop and get nowhere. And then you feel really shit about it because you're like, "No, I planned to do this now." But ... in reality, you just look the way that you always look, but you feel like you've actually gotten worse ... I almost feel like to be able to get where I want to be, where society makes me think I want to be, I need to make myself depressed, so that I do all the things that made me lose weight. And that's kind of this mental battle and being like, do I start doing all these things that I know are really bad for me so that I can lose weight? Or do I keep living my life and I'm actually happy, but I don't look the way I want.

Here, Taylor explains how she implemented the glow up as a way to feel better about herself after a period of significant stress in her life (a break up) and gives us insight into her inner dialogue. She turned to the 'glow up' as a solution to help her cope with stress, as she viewed it as something that would drastically transform her body and her life. Here, we see the body becomes a project to be worked on in the hopes of achieving happiness, just as it is explicitly presented in popular makeover television programmes (Gill, 2007; Riley et al., 2023). However, though Taylor achieved her weight loss goal, she ultimately felt even worse mentally. The fact that implementing the 'glow up' caused Taylor to feel "depressed" contradicts the happy, 'glowing' disposition that this trend promises young women on social media. Following this trend led to Taylor going through an inner battle with herself of whether to continue her pursuit of the 'glow up' and therefore sacrificing her mental health, or to

reject it altogether. Another focus group participant, Aroha, recalled a similar experience from her own life:

During that state of 'glow up', I was kind of navigating heartbreak and all of these things. Even though I looked really appealing to how I would say, for my own visuals, the inside was not okay, mentally. So now, when I think about myself now and my mental state, I feel really, really happy. But there's always that disconnect between the two [sides] of your mental state, and the fact that you have to look like that, but every time I think about when I was in my 'glow up' ... I just think about the mental health aspect and I'm actually like, "Hmmm ... that's interesting." It's just interesting.

There are similarities here between Aroha and Taylor's glow up experiences. Both women turned to the 'glow up' as a solution to cope with their personal stress, or as an opportunity to 'bounce back' from the adversity in their life, however both ended up battling with further mental health struggles as a result of trying to adhere to this trend.

Many participants spoke of the mental health issues related to the 'glow up'. These young women questioned the inner torment they experienced between desiring to achieve body ideals and feeling like they had to sacrifice their mental health to achieve these results. A paradox exists here in that it suggests that happiness and good mental health cannot simultaneously be achieved in the 'glow up' state, even though this trend explicitly displays young women who appear happy, mindful, and successful. The 'glow up' trend on social media offers false promises of happiness. However, for many it exacerbates feelings of body dissatisfaction and discontent. The young women in this study described feeling further pressure from society and their peers to adhere to these ideals since they receive the most compliments about their bodies when they have achieved significant weight loss. Ultimately, these young women express their desire for people not to comment on their bodies, which only adds to their inner turmoil. This sense of failure and frustration is prevalent for young women who feel the stress of struggling to maintain a 'glow up' routine with their everyday commitments (i.e., work, studies):

I just feel like it's really hard ... to get into routine. And there's a lot of pressure to keep doing like day after day, keep going, go to the gym, go to work, do your study, do all of this. And it's just a lot like I was doing reasonably well, (at the) beginning of this year, I even signed up for some PT sessions and I was like "yeah!" And then I had endometriosis surgery. And then I had some family issues. And then I started studying. And I just couldn't get back into the routine and even still now ... I'm struggling in my head every day, like I have to go to the gym, I have to have this routine, I need to do exercise. But I don't, because I'm so exhausted. But then I feel so guilty and exhausted and ... depressed because I'm not doing those things but I'm not doing those things because I'm getting exhausted ... It's a full

cycle. And it's just hard to be like, I need to do this for my mental health and my general happiness as stress relief. But you don't think of it as a stress release, you think of it as something that has to be done and then it looks like a task list and you don't want to do it.

Here, Taylor provides an example of how attempting to apply the 'glow up' in her life caused her excessive stress and made her feel like even more of a failure. She clearly articulates the self-disciplinary aspects of the 'glow up', and explains how she went through a vicious cycle of wanting to achieve the 'glow up' but struggling to maintain the intense requirements of the trend due to the commitments of her everyday life (i.e., study, family). The 'glow up' trend consumed Taylor to the point where trying to apply it in her life became like another "task list" that she did not want to do, making exercise no longer enjoyable or meaningful. It is worth noting again how many imperatives are mentioned here ("need to" and "have to") to demonstrate the intense pressure many of these young women experience in their daily lives to adhere to these trends. In this way, the 'glow up' trend draws similarities to resilience and aspirational discourses that are persistently pressed onto young women and how these discourses then become internalised as self-discipline and negative affect (i.e., guilt, frustration, failure).

Young women's agency and critique of the 'glow up'

Some young women in this study presented a highly critical lens of the 'glow up' trend, either actively navigating these pressures to minimise harm on themselves (and/or) others or dismissing the trend altogether. For example, Madison, an interview participant, rejects the normative and internalised meaning of a 'glow up':

For me 'glow up' is ... way more than just how you look as well so often these people have had great opportunities at uni ... and then they've got a good job ... but then, the 'glow up' trend kind of reduces it to how they look rather than their achievements in life so that kind of irks me a bit ... just feels like we're all getting pulled into this cult where we all need to be the same and ... it really creates a clique sense of if you're not in then you're out.

Here, Madison expresses her frustration at how 'glowing up' is predominantly associated with improving one's appearance. Her personal interpretation of a 'glow up' is achieving one's dream job or doing well academically, and that this should equally be celebrated. Madison explains that society reduces a young woman's important achievements to her appearance and that everyone is striving to achieve the same look in order to fit in, which takes away a person's individuality. Madison states that

the 'glow up' creates an exclusiveness similar to that of high school cliques. Her own personal redefinition of a 'glow up' was academic and/or career success, as opposed to 'glowing up' her appearance. Here, Madison implicitly suggests that young women should be encouraged to aspire to more than just adhering to society's highly limiting ideals of beauty.

As signposted above, some young women in this study were also very aware of how they were targeted through advertisements, particularly on social media, and actively chose to not engage in it. The following survey respondent demonstrates this awareness:

There is a social expectation for women to look a certain way which is enforced through interactions and social media. It is also pushed through business trying to profit off women's aesthetics.

This survey respondent points out that current social media trends and body ideals drive consumerism in young women because of the 'social expectation' to "look a certain way." Young women may not necessarily be passive receptors of this advertising, but they can feel pressured to consume products or engage in certain practices to help them achieve a 'glow up' or fit in with society's expectations. Further participants, such as Erin, demonstrated a critical lens of the 'glow up' trend and actively resisted it:

I feel it's almost like toxic productivity, like you've got to plan your day to the minute and you've got to follow it. And ... you've gotta think about what you've sacrificed to do that like, I could go to the gym every single night, but then I might miss a dinner with my friends ... and like not feeling guilty about having dinner and cocktails and redefine what success is and being healthy is 'cause sometimes it is having a burger and a cocktail with your friends rather than saying "I can't come because I have to be good" or whatever.

Here, Erin, demonstrates a critical understanding of the pressures the 'glow up' trend places on young women. She uses the term "toxic productivity" to express how unrealistic and damaging the 'glow up' trend is for young women to the point where it becomes a form of financial, emotional and physical labour. The word 'toxic' is strong here and implies that this trend is unhealthy and even highly detrimental for some young women. Importantly, however, even for those who resist and criticise this trend, they still feel the pressure to adhere to these norms. This belief is summarised by the following survey response:

People are led to believe that their life needs to be a constant highlight reel and that they won't be 'accepted' into social groups if they don't look 'the part' or fit within a certain criteria.

However, Erin (like Madison) takes ownership of the 'glow up' trend by forming her own definition of health and success, and feels empowered by that. This supports that young women are also active agents of their own health and fitness journeys, rejecting trends such as the 'glow up' and learning to accept themselves as they are. Hannah, another focus group participant, shares a critical lens on the 'glow up' trend:

I definitely agree with the all or nothing and ... the unrealisticness of having a rigid routine ... I often see people doing challenges doing the same routine, especially morning routines ... it's like, wake up at 6am and then read for 15 minutes and then do this. And ... they're all promoting this idea that if you do this routine that's how you achieve the aesthetic that they were promoting ... but the routine would be your entire day. And ... a routine like that, for me would drive me insane ... it just wouldn't work for me at all... and ... promoting the idea of like you have to do all or nothing from 6am to 10pm this is your routine ... every day and if you miss a day, then you failed.

Similarly to Erin and Madison above, Hannah challenges and rejects the 'glow up' discourse, suggesting that the conditions of the trend make it almost impossible for most young women to achieve it. She questions the lack of individuality of the trend and feels strongly that the trend is catered to those who do not have commitments such as working full time, and therefore it sets the everyday young woman up for failure. She acknowledges the 'glow up' as all-consuming and a distraction from a more full and meaningful life.

Finally, some young women experience the 'glow up' trend on a spectrum of feelings whereby they are critical of the trend, and simultaneously compelled to implement it continuously. This is demonstrated by Taylor's response below:

It's still ... a mental struggle every day. I think lately being so busy ... I'm trying to tell myself ... that everyone fluctuates. I have the rest of my life, I'm gonna lose weight, I'm gonna gain weight, I'm gonna feel like I look ugly, I'm gonna feel like I look beautiful and I just need to get through my busy period, finish studying finish doing what I'm doing, and then focus on it later.

Taylor felt like a "failure" the first time she attempted to achieve a 'glow up' because she could not maintain the conditions and requirements of this trend with her daily commitments. Although Taylor acknowledged that this ultimately caused her to feel worse mentally, she also states that she will likely implement a 'glow up' later when she has finished her "busy period." This highlights how pervasive and lasting the effects of trends such as the 'glow up' can be for young women. Even though young women are aware of the negative effects of this trend, and have even experienced these effects

personally, they still turn to the 'glow up' trend as a solution to feeling beautiful and confident. The 'glow up' is presented on social media as a trend that is accessible for anyone, particularly young women. However, these participants have demonstrated that their daily commitments, (such as full-time work), actually prevent them from being able to fit in the intense conditions of achieving a 'glow up'. Here we see powerful parallels with the earlier work of Markula, who drew upon Foucault's technologies of self, to reveal the ways some women working in the fitness industry may become critical of powerful discourses and unrealistic body ideals, but even with such knowledge, continue to struggle to navigate these pressures and expectations (Markula, 2004; Markula & Pringle, 2006).

To summarise, it is clear that young women are not simply passive viewers of trends such as the 'glow up', and some even actively resist, ignore or navigate this discourse. Some young women even choose to empower themselves by creating their own personal definition of a 'glow up' focused on education and career goals. Nevertheless, this trend is identified as being so pervasive in young women's lives that even when young women are aware of the damaging effects of this imperative, they still feel pressure to implement it endlessly in order to feel accepted by society.

Chapter summary

In summary, this chapter has highlighted the incessant pressures young women experience in their everyday lives to adhere to a highly unrealistic standard of success, health, and beauty through the 'glow up' discourse. Not only do young women feel the pressure to adhere to body ideals which are arguably more unattainable than ever (McComb & Mills, 2022), but they also 'should' be bettering themselves academically and career-wise (Gill & Orgad, 2018; Harris, 2003; McRobbie, 2015) as well as maintaining the beauty standard through ceaselessly consuming expensive beauty products and treatments (Banet-Weiser, 2017; Gill, 2007; Riley et al., 2023). In this chapter, I explored the embodied knowledges adopted by young women who take on the 'glow up' trend and how such strict regimes impact their mental health and often leads them to suffer from negative body image experiences.

As seen from this analysis chapter, pursuing the 'glow up' can be a mixed experience for young women. However, for the most part these young women felt extensive pressure to fit in. Actively pursuing the body as a project can often have the opposite effect of what the 'glow up' proposes to help young women achieve, leading many young women to participate in a wide array of nutrition, exercise, and beauty consumption practices. Striving for a 'glow up' can often cause obsessive behaviour. These can lead to extremes such as undereating, overexercising and undergoing dangerous surgeries such as the 'Brazilian Buttlift' (Vecchio et al., 2021). For many others, the 'glow up' requires high levels of emotional, physical and financial investment (i.e., gym memberships, beauty products, clothing).

It must be noted that for some young women, participating in 'glow up' trends can have a positive impact such as encouraging them to adopt healthy habits such as exercise and eating well, as well as practising self-care. However, even young women who felt more accepting of themselves from applying these healthy practices still felt a pressure on themselves to maintain their 'glow up' which was often challenging to do. Also, if they did not adhere fully to the 'glow up' requirements due to their other daily commitments, they would often be excessively harsh on themselves, and consequently feel like a failure. Though the 'glow up' is presented as a 'fun', 'positive' lifestyle trend to help young women feel better about themselves, many of the participants expressed feelings of insecurity, low self-esteem and low confidence. While the 'glow up' trend is presented as optional and self-directed, it can become highly disciplinary in how young women are investing their time and energy, and feelings of self-worth in their ability to obtain and maintain such unrealistic lifestyle practices and routines.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

In this section, I summarise the main findings of this research, and whether these findings answered the research questions. I also discuss the strengths and limitations of this research, and implications for further research within the field. I conclude with a brief discussion of how my research has contributed to the wider body of body image literature, with some recommendations for future research.

The aim of this research was to understand, through a feminist post-structural lens, how as a society we can help young women to have more positive body image and fitness experiences, and to investigate the current and lived experiences of young women in Aotearoa New Zealand. The study achieved the research aims by hearing from a wide range of participants through two different research methods: 1) survey, and 2) focus groups and semi-structured interviews. Across each of these methods, the research was guided by a feminist post-structuralist framework, aiming to give young women more agency and autonomy within the research (Coffey, 2016; Goodyear, 2020; Rayaprol, 2016). Participants were recruited through purposive sampling techniques and predominantly through my own social media platforms due to this being a frequently utilised space for many young women (Burnette et al., 2017; Goodyear et al., 2022; McComb & Mills, 2022). Reflexive thematic analysis was implemented to analyse the findings of this research across all research methods. Findings in the present study are consistent with the findings of current body image research that young women do struggle with normative discontent and experience high levels of social comparison and self-objectification (Betz & Ramsey, 2017; Carrotte et al., 2017; Pryde & Prichard, 2022; Slater et al., 2017; Sumter et al., 2018; Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015; Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2021).

Secondary research questions included understanding what the main influences are on young women's body image. The present study discovered multiple factors that influence the way young women feel about their body image. This includes societal pressures such as family and peers, as well as the male gaze, and feeling judged by other females, that occurred within environments such as fitness facilities. A common response was that gyms often displayed posters representing body ideals or only hired staff that fit these 'slim-thick' ideals.

Social media and online trends such as the 'glow up' were frequently mentioned as a space of negative influence for many young women, with influencers and celebrities regularly posting photos of their bodies and endorsing a highly consumptive lifestyle that requires constant work on the body (i.e., fitness, nutrition, make-up and beauty treatments). Other media forms were also mentioned such as magazines and television series or movies where participants felt that body ideals were persistently represented. Some participants expressed that their upbringing, and particularly comments from family members on their appearance, affected the way they viewed themselves. Similarly to the young female participants in Jones and Young's (2021) study, some of these young women commented that their mother's relationship with health and fitness had a significant impact on their own body views. Young women expressed feeling that their worth was tied in with their appearance from a young age (Betz & Ramsey, 2017). Finally, the fashion industry was revealed to have a notable effect on young women's body image. It was identified by several participants that young women's clothing trends often showcase revealing clothing that feels as though it is made only for the body 'ideal', marginalizing and excluding those unable to achieve such ideals (or fit into such clothes).

This research also aimed to understand how young women make meanings of popular versions of youthful femininity and beauty (i.e., fitness and beauty influencers). It was clear that the array of influences discussed above significantly impacted how young women defined beauty. The results showed that many young women worship popular celebrities and influencers, or turn to trends such as the 'glow up' to make sense of beauty and femininity. Participants often compared themselves to their favourite social media influencers, whether from a place of admiration or from social comparison. Someone who was beautiful was fit, strong, and healthy, who represented the 'fit girl' lifestyle so often promoted online.

I also examined the activities that young women are engaging in in their attempts to achieve such ideals (i.e., exercise, dieting, consumption practices). The survey results show that most young women engage in some form of health and fitness activities to achieve these ideals including attending the gym regularly, tracking their fitness progress, and monitoring their eating patterns. Specific types of training (predominantly weighted resistance training) were undertaken to attain this ideal. The participants also followed trends such as the 'glow up' with the goal of achieving their own personal

transformation, and subsequently consumed the products required to help them acquire this. These products were typically health, fitness and beauty related, and in the most extreme cases surgeries such as breast implants.

Another research question was to understand how young women feel about their bodies in different spaces (i.e., gyms, fitness studios, health clubs, the home, school, social settings). The results indicate that many young women feel uncomfortable, insecure and unsafe within these fitness spaces. Several participants echoed feeling the need to “cover up” their bodies in public spaces such as the gym or the beach due to the male gaze, and even feelings of judgement from other females. Some women expressed feeling proud of the body progress they had made at the gym, whether this be weight loss, improving their sport performance or increasing their strength. However, most of these women also commented that they felt the pressure to maintain this progress and often experienced feelings of low self-esteem if they had skipped a day at the gym.

Finally, the participants were asked to explain what they believe fitness facilities can do differently to create and promote a more body positive environment for young women. An overwhelming response of participants strongly urged for female only spaces or training times to be considered within fitness facilities so that young women feel safer training there. Another popular response was to make health and fitness education more accessible within fitness spaces, and to also provide more diverse representation within these spaces. Very few participants felt that the current fitness spaces they exercised in were safe, welcoming, and inclusive for young women.

This study has contributed to the current field of body image research in that it has explored the body image experiences of young women who train recreationally in Aotearoa New Zealand. It has also investigated a very recent yet significant social media trend, the ‘glow up’ which up until now has not been extensively researched. To date, limited research on the ‘glow up’ exists, particularly in New Zealand, and this study locates this trend within relevant feminist neoliberal literature.

Researcher reflections

The strengths of this research project include the variety of methods involved. Implementing an anonymous survey allowed for a broad range of voices of young women and to understand their lived experiences from across the country. The survey received a substantial amount of responses (203) and allowed me to hear from a diverse range of participants. There was also some diversity in the interview and focus group participants as the eligibility criteria was broad, allowing for young women from a range of backgrounds to be involved. The main criteria was that young women were interested in health/well-being/fitness, which could be interpreted in a number of ways. These criteria did not exclude those who occasionally participated in fitness or who did not exercise at a fitness facility, and therefore was inclusive for a diverse range of young women.

The age bracket (18-25) requirements of the participants were a slight limitation in the recruitment phase of the research project. Originally, I had wanted to recruit participants aged between 16-25 years old, however, this would have been more challenging ethically with the limited time constraints of a Masters thesis. It would have been valuable to hear from younger girls as the participants (for the most part) expressed social media literacy and mostly expressed concern for girls younger, and therefore, more impressionable than them. A participatory action research approach, and digital ethnographic analysis of popular social media platforms such as TikTok and Instagram, were additional methods I had originally wanted to implement, but simply ran out of time to complete.

Finally, it should be acknowledged that though most (if not all) of the interview and focus group participants expressed some dissatisfaction with their bodies, only the survey respondents expressed experiencing eating disorders and/or body dysmorphia. Most focus group and interview participants were current or past university students and well-educated. Some even had studied or currently worked in sport and/or health and fitness. Therefore, it could be argued that the young women who participated in this study were in a more privileged and educated position to be able to discern misinformation on social media, and therefore were less affected by them. Another possibility is that the young women did not feel comfortable discussing such personal health information in a focus group setting.

Recommendations for future research

Moving forward, future research should take a humanistic and participatory, feminist post-structuralist approach that gives agency and autonomy to young women, and seeks to better understand their body image experiences. Existing literature proposes practical solutions such as educating young women about safer social media practices, as well as practising self-compassion as a way to cope with body image struggles (Clark, 2023; Coffey, 2021; Cohen et al., 2021; Goodyear, 2020; Riley et al., 2023). However, the responsibility is still placed on the individual. Those in authoritative positions within the health and fitness context such as personal trainers and physical education teachers need to educate young women about the harmful impacts of popular social media wellbeing trends such as the ‘glow up’. As a fitness professional myself, I am looking forward to taking the learnings from this study and sharing with my colleagues and industry to ensure the findings have an impact on fitness professional’s practice. Finally, future research should seek to include more diverse participants to better understand the role of culture and ethnicity in constructing young women’s ideas of body image (Nemani & Thorpe, 2023).

Research methods such as focus groups and semi-structured interviews can give participants the agency to share their experiences on their own terms, and to go deeper into such individual and collective experiences (Adams, 2015; Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2013; Nagle & Williams, 2013). There are potential limitations and ethical concerns for conducting research with young women about sensitive topics such as body image such as gaining informed consent, however shaping the research design in a way that incorporates the participants and engages them in the research will help participants to understand the purpose of the research (Camacho–Miñano et al., 2019). When well facilitated, focus group can provide a comfortable setting for young women to share and relate to each other’s experiences (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2013). Focus groups can also be an excellent method for making effective political changes and representing the voices of marginalised groups (Nagle & Williams, 2013). Finally, as Talwar et al. (2012) propose, further studies need to include more diverse participants in order to understand the roles ethnicity plays in female body image.

It is worth noting that ‘glow ups’ do not just apply to young women, though this is the most targeted demographic of this trend. It is important to acknowledge that young men also are influenced by trends such as these, and do suffer from low body satisfaction (Coffey, 2016; Coffey, 2021; Coffey, 2022; Goodyear et al., 2019; Goodyear, 2020). Young men should also be considered and invited to participate in future research for this topic. It would also be interesting to understand how youth in the LGBTQI+ community are making meaning of such trends, as well as older women who may also be experiencing pressures associated with the ‘glow up’ trend in different ways.

Finally, there are several strategies fitness professionals can implement into their service to help alleviate and educate self-surveillance in young women. Private consultations should include questions about a client’s performance and well-being based goals as opposed to only focussing on aesthetic-based goals. Intrusive body composition tests such as body scans and skinfold callipers that provide an individual’s body fat percentage should be discouraged when working with young women who are more predisposed to fixating over that percentage (Beltrán-Carrillo et al., 2023). Finally, fitness challenges that incentivise fat loss should at least be limited to those under eighteen years old, if not changing the messaging altogether. Progress in the form of mental well-being, strength, and fitness should also be incentivised. Personal training sessions with young female clients should place a focus on positive reinforcement and increasing the client’s mental and physical well-being, rather than only training to achieve a certain aesthetic. I also think it is important for fitness professionals to be supported in critically considering how they may be (inadvertently) endorsing or reproducing unrealistic body ideals, or trends such as the ‘glow up’ through their language and actions. All of these strategies can work to reduce self-monitoring and therefore self-surveillance within young women, and to produce more body positive and inclusive spaces for young women to find meaning in and through their moving bodies.

Final thoughts

To conclude, this research has highlighted the main concerns and struggles for young women regarding their body image and fitness experiences. It is clear that many young women do not have a

positive relationship with their bodies, or feel safe and comfortable in their current fitness environments. They are influenced by many factors and internalise these ideals, and this pressure often causes young women to engage in deleterious behaviours such as extreme dieting or restrictive eating. Also, pervasive social media trends such as the 'glow up' further influence young women on their health and fitness journeys to engage in certain health, beauty, and consumption practices. Though trends such as these, and similar (i.e., 'fitspo') can appear as an empowering postfeminist construct, they ultimately reinforce valued body discourses and unrealistic beauty standards.

Although more diversity is starting to be presented on social media in the form of 'body positivity', and this was recognised by the participants, a narrow body ideal is still presented through this ideal (Cohen et al., 2021). However, young women have agency in the choices they make on their fitness journeys and are aware of the damaging effects of social media. Many have tools they have either implemented or advice they give to their friends to help them experience greater body appreciation. This is reassuring. However, it must be noted that though young women are active agents of their health and fitness journeys, many are overwhelmed and influenced by harmful content presented to them on a daily basis. Many young women find body ideals and beauty standards inescapable and insurmountable, causing them to never feel good enough as they are. Future research should focus on the effects of new and upcoming social media trends such as the 'glow up' and practical implications to help young women find peace and happiness within themselves once and for all. As a fitness professional myself, I will take these learnings into my own everyday practices and hope this research is also useful for others seeking to create more body positive, inclusive and safe spaces for young women to engage in fitness practices and healthy lifestyles.

Epilogue

Running on the treadmill at the gym, I look around at all the bodies working out around me. Some young, toned and beautiful, others less perfect—older, injured, less able—but all striving. I feel the power in my legs and my lungs as I continue to put in another mile. Stepping off the machine, wiping it down, and making my way for the changing room, I navigate around all these other exercisers and note that each and every one of them has made a personal decision to be here today. There is power and beauty in such acts.

Entering the changing room, the mirror bounces back my reflection. I am hot and sweaty, my cheeks are rosy, and my hair is looking ruffled. Before this research, I might have hurried to tidy myself up, quickly reapplying makeup and touching up my hair. But through this project I've come to think differently about my own exercising and fit body. I have learned so much from the incredible young women who participated in my study. Though at times I still struggle with my own body image, I have listened to their stories, heard their pain, much of which has resonated with my own. This process has shone a new light on my own embodied fitness journey. I look back in the mirror and smile momentarily. .

I have also gained so much valuable knowledge and tools to take into my career as a fitness educator, to encourage new personal trainers to help their young female clients to have more positive fitness experiences. With this new knowledge, I can teach them to help their clients focus not only on their body composition goals, but also achieving progress in their strength, fitness, and overall well-being.

I also now know that as young women we are surrounded my messages and expectations. It's as if they come from everywhere and nowhere, such that we often feel we are in control, the ones doing the self-disciplining, the only ones driving our own 'glow up' stories. The 'glow up' is framed by such positive and 'empowering' language and imagery, how can it be harmful? But my research has shown that the 'glow up imperative' is in fact a powerful and harmful trend. Many of the young women in this research spoke of how this endless pursuit of an unrealistic ideal prompted negative feelings about themselves. Even for those feeling briefly happy with their progress, they knew this was

contingent on consistency, working everyday towards the ideal. A day off was not in the plan. In these ways, the 'glow up imperative' is not neutral, nor is it empowering. Rather than following such trends, young women need to be supported in identifying the harmful discourses that are working to shape our relationships with our bodies, and then to create our own definitions of beauty and success.

In my role as a trainer of fitness professionals, I take this responsibility forward, to identify the everyday workings of such discourses and to help others to see the effects, and to co-create alternative approaches to supporting young women in their health and well-being journeys.

Knowledge is power, and I feel a responsibility to use this knowledge carefully, and perhaps I can make a change in how young women live, feel and experience their own bodies.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Ethics Letter of Approval

The University of Waikato
Private Bag 3105
Gate 1, Knighton Road

Hamilton, New Zealand

Human Research Ethics Committee
Roger Moltzen
Telephone: +64021658119
Email: humanethics@waikato.ac.nz



THE UNIVERSITY OF
WAIKATO
Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato

4 September 2023

Francesca Kurghan
Te Huataki Waiora School of Health
DHECS
By email: fitbyfrannz@gmail.com

Dear Francesca

HREC(Health)2023#26 : Young Women's Experiences of Body Image and Fitness Culture in Aotearoa, New Zealand

Thank you for your responses to the Committee feedback.

We are now pleased to provide formal approval for your project.

Please contact the Committee by email (humanethics@waikato.ac.nz) if you wish to make changes to your project as it unfolds, quoting your application number with your future correspondence. Any minor changes or additions to the approved research activities can be handled outside the monthly application cycle.

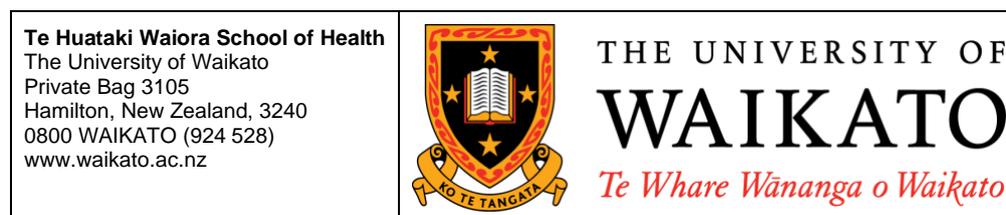
We wish you all the best with your research.

Regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'RM' or similar initials.

Emeritus Professor Roger Moltzen MNZM
Chairperson
University of Waikato Human Research Ethics Committee

Appendix 2: Focus Group and Interview Questions



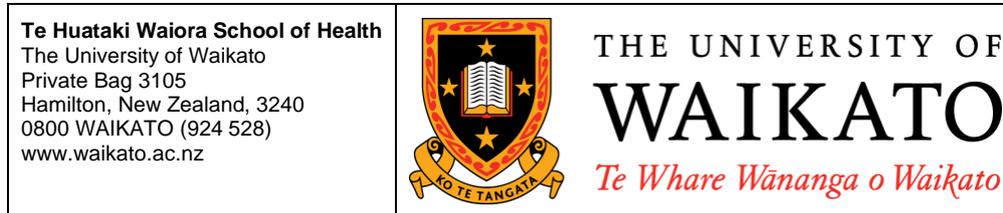
Focus Group and Interview Questions

Young Women's Experiences of Body Image and Fitness Culture in Aotearoa, New Zealand

1. How important is fitness in your lives? What do you enjoy about it?
2. What do you think are the biggest trends/influences on young women's fitness lifestyles today?
3. Where do you get your information about health, fitness and wellbeing?
4. Do you think social media and specifically Fitspo trends are impacting young women's relationships with their bodies?
5. What do you think are the biggest body image pressures on young women? (prompts: social media / peer group / mainstream media)
6. What effects do you think these pressures are having on young women? (prompts: relationships with food, dieting, over-exercising, aesthetic-beauty therapies)
7. How about yourselves? How are these pressures affecting you, your feelings about your own body? Where have/do these pressures come from for you? How do these pressures influence what you do in your day/week (i.e., fitness, beauty, eating, consumption)?
8. Are there places that you feel these pressures more intensely (i.e., school, social settings, gyms)? (Prompt: could you tell me a bit more about these spaces and where these pressures are coming from?)

9. Have there been times in your life when these pressures have negatively impacted your feelings about yourself?
10. Have you developed any strategies to minimise the negative effects of these pressures on your own mental health and wellbeing (i.e., social media / peer group). Have you ever sought external support to help you manage these feelings?
11. What are the things (i.e. people, self-care, culture) that make you feel good about your body?
12. How do you support your friends in navigating these pressures, and developing positive relationships with your bodies?
13. Did you think that gyms/fitness studios are safe, supportive, body positive environments for young women?
14. What do you think gyms/fitness studios could do to create more body positive environments for young women?

Appendix 3: Survey Questions



Survey Questions

Young Women's Experiences of Body Image and Fitness Culture in Aotearoa, New Zealand

1. How old are you?
2. What region of New Zealand do you live in?
3. What is your ethnicity?
4. Do you consider fitness/wellbeing to be an important part of your current lifestyle?
5. How long has fitness/wellbeing been an important part of your lifestyle?
6. What has been your main influence for getting into fitness/well-being? (Tick all that apply)
7. Are you currently physically active?
8. If YES, What are your main forms of fitness? (Tick all that apply)
9. How does this/these forms of fitness make you feel about yourself? (Tick all that apply)
10. When participating in this/these forms of fitness do you experience any of the following? (Tick all that apply)
11. Which of the following (if any) have you participated in on your fitness and wellbeing journey? (Tick all that apply)
12. Do you track/Have you ever tracked your fitness progress?
13. If YES, how do/did you track your fitness progress? (Tick all that apply)
14. How does/did this tracking make you feel about your body? (Tick all that apply)

15. Where do you get your fitness and wellbeing information?
(Tick all that apply)
16. Do you find this information reliable/trustworthy?
17. Do you think that gyms/fitness studios are safe, supportive, body positive environments for young women?
18. (If applicable) What do you feel your current fitness facility could improve on to provide a safer, more supportive and body positive environment for young women?
19. Are you currently active on social media?
20. If YES, what platforms do you most regularly use? (Tick all that apply)
21. Have you ever used social media as a tool to document your fitness journey?
22. If YES, why do you use social media to post this content?
(Tick all that apply)
23. Do you follow fitness and wellbeing content on these social media platforms?
24. If you answered YES to Q23, what type of fitness and wellbeing content do you mostly follow on these social platforms?
(Tick all that apply)
25. If you answered YES to Q23, how does this content make you feel? (Tick all that apply)
26. If you answered NO to Q23, why do you not follow this content? (Tick all that apply)
27. How significantly do you feel young women are pressured to adhere to beauty ideals?
28. Please explain your response:
29. What does living a fitness lifestyle look like to you? (Tick all that apply)
30. What do you think are body image ideals for young women?
(Tick all that apply)
31. Has your fitness and well-being journey positively influenced the way you view yourself?
32. Please feel free to expand:
33. Has your fitness and wellbeing journey negatively influenced the way you view yourself?
34. Please feel free to expand:
35. Feel free to add your thoughts on what you think could help improve young women's body image experiences

