REPRESENTATION OF WOMAN'S BODY ON INSTAGRAM: Qualitative Content Analysis of the year 2018 posts of top fitness influencer Michelle Lewin
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Abstract

This study is designed to observe what 21st century women’s body ideal is, to give an insight to the women’s body image representation on Instagram and to find out if social media influencer Michelle Lewin complies with this sociocultural image.

Although there is an extensive amount of research on the mass media’s effect on defining and imposing the ideals on women’s body image, few studies have explored and focused on the image-based social media platform, Instagram. Instagram is an important space for body image research, as its content is mainly visual and everybody has the ability to be both a consumer and an active producer of the content. Mass media have been frequently accused of imposing limited and unachievable representations of femininity and consequently causing perceived women dissatisfaction with their bodies. As Instagram is becoming increasingly popular, it is important to explore potential ramifications of this social paradigm for current and future generations. In this study, I conduct a qualitative content analysis of images of the top fitspo influencer Michelle Lewin specifically focused on women’s body image. By analyzing latest content (posts of the year 2018) from her Instagram account, I seek to understand what is the relation between the most common types of posts and the ones that receive most engagement from her followers.

Finally the research reveals: the most common theme of the images coded are those where Michelle Lewin appears posing in a sexually suggestive manner, unrelated to any fitness activity – those are the images that receive highest engagement from her followers. My hypothesis where I state that Michelle Lewin depicts 21st century woman’s body ideal ultimately proves right by the results of this study. At the end of the day, her body is the image of body ideal that she represents and commercializes though Instagram.

Keywords: Women’s Body Image, Social Media, Instagram, Fitness, Fitspo, Influencer, Michelle Lewin.
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Finally, I would like to thank my mother, who is my ultimate supporter and source of happiness, who always believes in me and helps me to persevere; I could not have done it without you.
Chapter 1 - Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to introduce the background and purpose of the thesis. The thesis objectives, research questions are presented together with the overall structure of the thesis and limitations.

Background

One’s body image is constructed around ideas or expectations presented by society of how bodies should appear, and not solely how one perceives their body shape, a concept originating with Paul Schilder (1999). Research have explored that the phenomena where individuals in societies are concerned with how others perceive their bodies, is influenced by sociocultural environment and the historical time period (Bartky, 1988; Cash, 2004; Paquette & Raine, 2004).

Concern about physical attractiveness has traditionally been found to be strongest among females for whom weight and body shape are far more important priority than is usually found among males (Collins, 1991; Wadden et al., 1991).

This thesis is designed to give an insight to the women’s body image representation in the media and has been specifically centred on the fitspo influencer’s Michelle Lewin’s body shape appearance on Instagram during last 4 months of this year 2018, since such images are believed to play a significant role in setting the standard of feminine physical beauty (Wykes and Gunter, 2005).

Further in this section I introduce fundamental insights to the history of social media that has led to the development of Instagram that is the social media platform where I am carrying my qualitative content analysis in and familiarize readers with my research object Michelle Lewin.

From Social Media to Social Business

According to Digital Trends, the first recognizable social media site was launched in 1997. It was called Six Degrees and enabled users to create a profile and make friends with other users. In 1999, the first blogging sites became popular, creating a social media sensation. Period
from 2002 to 2010 marks time when most social networking sites that are still popular today, like LinkedIn, Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, including photo and video sharing app Instagram, came into existence.

Instagram has undergone a complete metamorphosis from the iOs app. It was originally designed for to a huge social media platform with tons of benefits both for private individuals and businesses (Green, 2017). It was a success right from the beginning with over a million users only two months after it was launched (Cutler, 2012). Today, in time of social media platform proliferation, Instagram's growth has been astounding. According to Financial Times (2017) Instagram is adding 100M monthly active users every four months, as well as 1M advertisers every four months.

In relatively short span of time social media sites have transformed from information and imagery sharing platforms into actual communication gateways and tools for self-branding (Dodaro, 2018). Social media is increasingly embedded into the structures, forms and processes of everyday communication (Van Dijck, 2013) and through its viral and accessible nature, has induced new businesses, changed some industries and consequently made new type celebrities: social media influencers. Heather Saul (2016) from The Independent states: “Instead of turning to the pages of magazines, catwalks or films, Generations Y and Z now look to Instagram, Facebook and Twitter in search of their idols.”

These new celebrities also become role models for their followers, a very similar characteristic with the more mainstream A-list celebrities: movie stars, supermodels and television stars, with difference of being more relatable and approachable in the eyes of the target audience (Dredge, 2015). Michelle Lewin, being a fitspo$^1$ influencer, has become a role model for many. That has allowed her to influence the female ideal body worldwide from unhealthy skinny to healthy and fit by just posting videos and pictures with her cell phone (Begovic, 2015).

The fact that Lewin is a peer (in the sense of being everyday women, self-classified as raised from the average “girl-next-door”) rather than fashion model is likely to lead viewers to engage in greater levels of social comparison with them (Cash et al., 1983; Heinberg and Thompson, 1995).

$^1$ Fitspo = short for fitspiration: activity on social media intended to inspire people to get fitter by eating healthily and doing more exercise, especially photos and videos of healthy food and people exercising (Macmillan Dictionary).
Michelle Lewin

According to Influencer Marketing Hub (2018) Michelle Lewin is one of the best-known Instagram fitness models and body builders with currently nearly 13 million followers. Michelle was born in 1986 in Venezuela. She met her future husband Jimmy Lewin in 2009 and moved to South Florida (Begovic, 2015). Jimmy became not only her life partner but also got involved in her training and taught her to work out her upper body. In 2010, the two married. To this day, Jimmy is her personal trainer, agent, social media manager and best friend.

She is based in Miami, where the power of social media has allowed her to reach fans all over the world. CBS News has listed her in top 10 of the “Top social media influencers of 2018”. Lewin has been featured on dozens of magazine covers, including Playboy and Muscle & Fitness, she has her own line of supplements and a range of home-workout equipment, and cannot even take on new collaborations. "I am too busy with my own brands, and I have just started," she has commented to Forbes (2017).

Scientific problem and its relevance

The purpose of this study is to explore whether Instagram provides a platform for showcasing the change in how we perceive women’s body image. My research will also seek to explore whether the ability of women to be content producers, rather than just passive consumers in social media, shifts how women’s bodies are being portrayed.

Social media influencers are on the rise, becoming one of the biggest marketing and public relations trends of 2018 (St. Louis, 2018), so I am focusing on the Instagram profile of one of the best known Instagram fitspo influencers Michelle Lewin to find out what are the body image ideals she is imposing with her Instagram images.

I approach this research not only with the aware of the research gaps, but also with objective to be inspired and build upon existing body image related theories.
Aim and research questions of the thesis

From the above mentioned, the following research questions can be identified:

- What types of posts are observed on Michelle Lewin’s Instagram?
- What posts get most engagement from her followers?
  - Do these posts reflect the body image theory?

My hypothesis:
Michelle Lewin depicts 21st century woman’s body ideal.

Limitations

In regards to the research and theory used, I have only explored material that depicts woman’s body image perception starting from 20th century.

This research is a single case study of fitspo influencer Michelle Lewin since she can be viewed as a trusted source for wider audience of fitness, bodybuilding community (Lunn, 2017).

In the study I only picked one platform to monitor and capture posts – Instagram, since it’s content is image-based; therefore the use of other social networking sites, which Michelle Lewin have, are not considered and investigated.

Only Instagram images that have been made in last 4 months of this year 2018 (January 1st, 2018 – April 30th, 2018) were observed in the project. Instagram posts created before and after this timeframe were not included in the research. Instagram videos posted by Michelle Lewin were not taken into consideration either, although those accounted about half of the content available in this timeframe. I only coded the content that I found helpful to answer my research questions - images within the chosen timeframe. Disclaimer: I found some of the images deleted while in the process of the content analysis what might have affected the results of the research.

Based on the nature of the research I cannot generalize the results; however the results of the research can show pointers for further research.
Thesis outline

The thesis is divided into 5 chapters that allow reader to follow the research process, results and conclusions that were made.

First chapter, Introduction, described the research aims, its relevance and significance, and limitations, as well provided some background information on the research subject. The second chapter, Literature Review and Theory, explores available relevant literature and research on scientific concepts of woman’s body representation, gives an account of the theories the study is based on and suggests some theoretical framework to later help answer the research questions. The third chapter, Method and Material, details the methodologies which were used to collect and process the data used in the study. Results and Analysis, the fourth chapter, presents and analyzes the results of the study. The next chapter, Conclusions, explains what was gained in the project and what further research opportunities could be pursued in the future.
Chapter 2 - Literature Review and Theory

Literature Review

This literature review will explore existing research and theory conducted on body image and how the woman’s body image has transformed over time.

I will discuss various determinants that idealize a woman’s body and define beauty standards as well as media representation of the body image and its effects. In addition to that, I will try to unfold what makes women to trust and follow an influencer on social media.

Woman Body Image Change throughout History

Body image is a psychological construct that tends to comprise a mixture of self-perceptions, ideas, feelings about one’s physical attributes perception and it has been explored since 1960s (Wykes and Gunter, 2005).

The core of body image dissatisfaction has been driven by the (perceived) discrepancy between one’s ideal and actual body image (Heider et al., 2015). Perceived dissatisfaction with weight and shape of the body are believed to often provoke attempts to narrow this discrepancy through dieting and exercise (Silverstein et al., 1988).

Norms of feminine beauty, however, have varied over time (Seid, 1989; Wolf, 1992).

1900s: The Gibson Girls

The early 1900s liberated women from the huge crinoline skirts and big butt rage. "Gibson Girls" epitomized the ideal of beauty with their slender figures, full breasts and round hips. The ideal woman was passive, pale, modest and maternal. She was seen as a subject to her reproductive system and often confined to the home (Wykes and Gunter, 2005).

1920s: The Flappers

During 1920s the boyish expression became considered to be the most attractive. Women did not want to show off their curves, some even wrapped cloth around their breasts in order to
create a more androgynous appearance. The flapper dresses they wore during that time helped them hide their shape and give a flatter look, something women strived to have.

This also marks the period of strict diets, leading to the earliest concerns amongst the medical profession in the twentieth century about eating disorders (Fallon, 1990).

1940s: The Influence of Hollywood

In the years between the 1930s and 1950s, women strived to look like movie stars. Many societies associated a plump physique for women with attractiveness (Ford and Beach, 1952; Rudovsky, 1972). Advertisements from the 1940s and 50s depicted skinny women as being hopeless in romantic pursuits, noting that gaining weight was their only hope to attract a suitor (Bushak, 2015).

Perhaps the most iconic female figure of the post-war era and even into the early 60s was Marilyn Monroe - women aspired to her slim waists with full chests and hips. She was perceived as the epitome of beauty with her 90/60/90 hourglass figure (Bakutyte, 2014).

1960s: Dangerously Thin

1960s women embraced skinny, stick-slim figure, which was mostly achieved through strict dieting. Famous women strived to adopt a psychedelic rock star look of rail-thin model Twiggy and the slender, doe-like Audrey Hepburn, both of whom were fashion and body image icons during this decade (Bushak, 2015).

1980s: An Aerobic Body

1980s women continued obsessing over their weight. A slim, but toned body was considered beautiful, which naturally led to the boom of fitness and aerobics. Women wore tight workout clothing that emphasized their body shape. They strived for that toned look without gaining too much muscle.
1990s: The Heroin Chic Look

Although female attractiveness was once epitomized by a plump body shape, the contemporary ideal, at the close of twentieth century, emphasized a slender body (Wykes and Gunter, 2005).

As grunge took center stage in the 90s, a new look emerged, known as heroin chic: pale, wispy, slender, drugged look, a look that women most often achieved through extreme dieting. Models like Kate Moss were influencing women in 1990s and magazines were selling slenderness as part of sexual attractiveness and social success (Wykes and Gunter, 2005).

21st century: Embracing Curves

After decades of women attempting to look thin they finally began embracing curves again, advocating for slender but athletic, curvaceous figures. Many think that American reality television personality and socialite Kim Kardashian West has helped define a new body ideal of the 21st century (Howard, 2018), characterized by a large bosom and butt paired with a sinched-up thin waist.

Women who don’t naturally have those attributes, are invited to follow fit-spo influencers like Michelle Lewin that documents her journey on Instagram through motivational advice, inspirational stories, meal plans and educational videos to inspire and help them to strive for that ideal body.

Historical Research on Body Image

In academic and wider public discussions about media and body image, most of the attention is focused on the impact that media representations of body shape have upon women. Relationships between media representations and body image have been regularly, theoretically posed since Orbach (1978), who briefly noted the tendency for the media to produce a picture of ideal femininity as ‘thin, free of unwanted hair, deodorized, perfumed and clothed’. A thin body shape was being associated with success personally, professionally and socially (Bruch, 1978).

Coincident with this increasing norm of thinness, the rates of body dissatisfaction and eating disorders among women had risen (Silverstein, Peterson et al., 1986). Research on body image indicated that women consistently perceive themselves as overweight (and as heavier than
they actually are) and report a desire to be thinner (Mintz, and Betz, 1986, Cohn and Adler, 1992). Women also tended to report an ideal body size that was significantly thinner than their perceived actual body size (Cohn and Adler, 1992).

**Contemporary Research on Body Image**

Focus on the body rather than on the soul appears parallel the explosion of the mass media over the past 40 years (Wykes and Gunter, 2005). Contemporary obsession with body shape engenders addictive and/or destructive behaviors with means of weight and shape control (Wykes and Gunter, 2005). Normative statistics of body image disturbance, however, are less easy to find.

Similarities in judgments about physical appearance and attractiveness can occur across cultural groups and according to Wykes and Gunter (2005) vast comparison of the surveys conducted across the globe concludes: dissatisfaction with body shape is greatest among women regardless of ethnicity.

On survey conducted in 2000 by *Top Sante* in the UK’s national daily newspaper *Daily Mail* was found that more than eight in ten (83%) of women felt inhibited by their body and that their life would be considerably improved if they were happy with their body (Stevenson, 2000).

A year later the same magazine conducted a further survey, and, once again, the great majority (85%) were unhappy with their shape and nine in ten (90%) said that their appearance depressed them and seven in ten (73%) reportedly thought about their size and shape every day.

Similar surveys conducted by *Garnier Cosmetics* in Britain, the US and Australia reported that most of the respondents thought about their bodies a lot (Wykes and Gunter, 2005).

**From Media Representation to Audience Impact**

Explanations of these different perceptions have increasingly pointed to the media and to claims that an idealized, slender female form is over-represented with possible harmful consequences for the self-perception of women who do not see themselves as complying with the stereotype of acceptable feminine beauty (Wykes and Gunter, 2005).
Research on the representation of body image in the mass media spans more than 30 years. Certainly, the cultural standard of beauty in relation to body shape is promoted, to a significant degree, via the major mass media.

Orbach (1978, 1993) has always argued that the media affects young women’s self-perception negatively because it presents very limited and unachievable representations of femininity and it confirms to be true by Gayle R. Bessenoff (2013) who conducted a study to examine the impact of fashion magazines on women’s body image. There were thirty-nine participants, all undergraduate women; half were given fashion magazines and the other half were given news magazines to view prior to completing a survey about body image satisfaction. The women who viewed the fashion magazines were less satisfied with their bodies and wished they weighed less. They were also more frustrated with their current weight and were preoccupied with the desire to be “skinny.” What was found was that these advertisements not only increased body dissatisfaction, but also amplified feelings of depression and lowered self-esteem.

Yet, despite the criticisms leveled at the media in this context, surprisingly little work has actually addressed either the nature of media representations of the body or the ways in which audiences may interpret such images (Wykes and Gunter, 2005). Although this position has changed over time, there is still the need for more research into the role of the media, since social media has increased media effects in volume, spread and representation role.

Social media provides a new social stage where the boundaries between contemporary celebrities and everyday people disappear, and where everyday people can become influencers easily (Patel, 2016).

The commercial and business aspect comes in when media influencers and celebrities use social media as an advertisement tool, firstly, advertising themselves as a brand and then, advertising brands through their fame (Dredge, 2015) as it usually is the case of social media influencers.

**Success of Social Media Influencers**

Bordo (1993) claimed that in many ways contemporary culture appears more obsessed with the control of unruly body than previous eras and that the diet and exercise industries are evidence of this.
There is more going on here than mere marketing, in fact marketing only works because it is fitted with already culturally resonant and acceptable models of femininity (Wykes and Gunter, 2005).

Over the past 30 years after Orbach (1978) identified the unreal feminine picture purveyed in the mass media there are even more ways of achieving what remains an unreal ideal. As well as fashion and diet there is exercise, rejuvenation, surgical re-modeling and chemical maintenance and it permeates all of our popular culture and much of our purchasing. And rather certain kind of women are marked out as appropriate for beauty enhancing products, since they are normally displayed on the young, the slender, the sexually alluring, the white and the wealthy. Consequently women are confronted with these two options – an expensive, even painful search for ways of fitting the femininity on offer or staying in exclusion to the dark zone of non-conformity (Wykes and Gunter, 2005).

The above gives reasoning why so many women search for inspiration, follow and trust influencers on social media.

**Theoretical Framework**

This section will review theories relating to role models, covetousness, aspiration and pre-existing mental schemas and assessments as means of explanation of the role of the media in the phenomenon of women preoccupation with their body image.

I am using the theoretical framework of four theories - Social Learning theory, Social Comparison theory, Cultivation theory and Objectification theory - to help understand the scope of the changes created by the social media; cause and effect relationship about the change in the women’s representation in media to be able to make sense of these changes.

The chosen set of theories will help me to stress the close relation between social media mediators’ representation of women’s body and its effect on perceived body ideals.

**Social Learning Theory**

In the social learning system, new patterns of behavior can be acquired through direct experience or by observing the behavior of others (Bandura, 1971, p. 3).
It also serves in explaining human responses to the impact of mass media. Since the Social Learning theory places emphasis on imitation, it provides an explanation for how women may come to believe in the thin ideal and become motivated to engage to take extreme measures to meet this ideal.

**Social Comparison Theory**

Appearance comparisons are central to the development of body image concerns. Social comparison theory posits that individuals establish their personal identity, through making comparisons between themselves and others who possess specific, valued attributes (Festinger 1954).

This theoretical model can be used to explain how media’s representation of body ideals has an effect on eating disorders, women’s body dissatisfaction and self-esteem (Tiggemann and Zaccardo, 2015; Corcoran et al., 2011). Women determine their own worth by comparing themselves to the other women (Festinger, 1954). Social media constantly gives women the opportunity of comparing themselves with peers (Tiggemann and Zaccardo, 2015). If the discrepancy between their bodies and representations of women in the media is too high, women get dissatisfied with own bodies, what may cause developing eating disorders and psychological problems in the long term (Corcoran et al., 2011).

**Cultivation Theory**

This social learning theory of media influence posits that media ‘ideals’ can exert powerful effects on media audiences if they are prevalent and provide an incentive to people to emulate them. Media provide role models from which the public at large can learn and regular exposure to certain role models cultivates audience’s consciousness that they are the norm.

Traditionally, cultivation theory is directly related to the effects of television viewing with attempts to understand the connection between what people watch and what they believe to be true or not (Gerbner et al., 2002). While social media is just one of many sources that have the potential to shape attitudes (Morgan & Shanahan, 1997), research contends that attitudes are strongly influenced by mediated reality (Cohen & Weimann, 2000). Morgan and Shanahan
(1997) refer to this as mainstreaming and resonance, which are two constructs of cultivation theory.

Mainstreaming is the homogenization of viewer perceptions about reality, which refers to cultivation of shared meaning among people (Morgan & Shanahan, 2010). Resonance therefore, is the result of the cultivation effect, which is strongest when a viewer compares personal views with mainstream perceptions (Cohen & Weimann, 2000). So for instance if the media depicts a slim physique as attractive, this body image attains the status of an ideal that everyone should attempt to achieve (Wykes and Gunter, 2005).

**Objectification Theory (specially sexual objectification)**

Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) argue that women begin to view themselves as they think other people view them. In order to ‘fit in’ they attempt to comply with the cultural images of the idealized vision of beauty. They begin to internalize what society deems is an appropriate look. Women begin to feel that these views are in fact coming from within themselves and not external pressures such as the media, as a result women start viewing their own bodies as objects for society (Mitchell and Mazzeo, 2009).

As a consequence of living in an objectified society women learn to objectify themselves - they internalize society’s feminine ideal of thinness and youthfulness and begin to measure their worth against this ideal (Crawford et al., 2009). Cory and Burns (2007) argue that the objectification theory is perhaps one of the most fundamental theoretical approaches that have emerged in understanding the causes of negative body image.

Objectification Theory is used in many studies as a framework of women’s body image and body dissatisfaction (Holmstrom, 2004; Tiggemann and Zaccardo, 2015; Tiggemann and Harper, 2008). According to Tiggemann and Harper (2008), images featuring slender models encourage women to evaluate the appearance of the body similar to a third-person view. According to Ghaznavi and Taylor (2015), exposure to objectified images, such as fitspo imagery, increase self objectification, weight related anxiety, body dissatisfaction and eating disorders.
Summary of Literature Reviewed

For centuries women have faced evolving ideals of body image. Over the course of time women body image perception has shifted from curvy to thin women and vice versa. Knowing the history of how women’s body image changed over the course of time gives us a better understanding of body image in the present.

Whatever the current cultural standards, one consistent pattern has been the greater emphasis on physical appearance to the way women are judged than to the way men are judged (Wykes and Gunter, 2005). That explains such a strong social media following of female Instagram influencers, including Michelle Lewin.

In light of social learning theory (Bandura, 1971), it is plausible that the appearance focus of Lewin’s images influences numerous women’s self-regulatory behaviors and standards. Being exposed to such imagery women come to believe that Lewin is the advocate for the slender, curvy and well-toned body image and becomes motivated to take measures to meet this ideal. As a consequence of exposure to such imagery, women following Lewin are likely to experience dissatisfaction with their own body. Furthermore, social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) would argue that these effects would be further exacerbated when the comparison targets are relatable peers, influencers like Michelle Lewin.

However cultivation theory (Gerbner et al., 2002) defends the view where not only individual peers but rather all mainstream media, including social media, is responsible for shaping beliefs and attitudes by producing a cultivation effect on women’s body ideal. So if media wouldn’t depict slim, yet toned physique as being attractive, Lewin having the body she has, wouldn’t be one of the leading social media influencers.

Using objectification theory (Fredrickson and Roberts, 1997) as a framework to deconstruct these issues, explains proliferation of sexualized images found in Lewin’s Instagram account, as it can be viewed as a direct consequence of what objectified society expects to see - a woman as a sexual object. At the end of the day, her body is the image of body ideal that she sells through social media. Only if the audience complies with this look that she depicts, the social media engagement will raise. Therefore to be able to compete with the market leaders, Michelle Lewin has to provide what sells best – and my theory confirms, those are the images where she appears in bathing suit or underwear, posing in sexually suggesting manner.
Chapter 3 - Method and Material

This thesis builds upon an existing theories and emerging area of research. By using qualitative content analysis, observing images and drawing representative samples, conclusions can be made in order to answer the research questions.

Qualitative Content Analysis

Never before in human history has mediated communication been so central, pervasive, and important to human civilization, and absolutely necessary and central to the development of a communication science is means of logically assessing communication content (Riffe et al., 2014). In other words, understanding communication content may enable us to predict, explain, and potentially control phenomena (Reynolds, 1971).

According to Riffe et al. (2014) content analysis as information-gathering technique is the best way to logically assess communication content, because it allows to illuminate patterns in communication content reliably and validly, and such patterns can help to find content causes and predict content effects. By definition content analysis involves drawing representative samples of content, use category rules developed to measure or reflect differences in content. (Riffe, et al., 2014). To be able to draw the conclusions in this study, I used content analysis to determine common visual themes and patterns in the images Michelle Lewin posts.

I gathered and analyzed recent Instagram posts of Michelle Lewin dating back to the beginning of this year (January 1\textsuperscript{st}, 2018 – April 30\textsuperscript{th}, 2018), a total of 31 images. I examined the activities displayed in the photos, which I expected to be largely related to exercise, assessed if images contained elements of objectification and sexual objectification. I looked at the it in relation to engagement per post: likes, comments.

The primary sources used in this research are samples of images from Lewin’s Instagram account. In order to determine the historical perspective of body image perceptions, scholarly monographs, academic journals and Internet research were used. The secondary sources are books such as The Media and Body Image: If Looks Could Kill by Maggie Wykes and Barrie Gunter (2005) and Analyzing media messages: Using quantitative content analysis in research by Daniel Riffe, Stephen Lacy and Frederick Fico (2015) to name a few.
**Method**

**Data Collection**

The data for coding was collected from images posted of Michelle Lewin’s official account on the photo-sharing website Instagram. Her account was searched for the latest images and dating back to the beginning of this year (January 1st, 2018 – April 30th, 2018).

After removing the posts containing videos, a total of 31 images were analyzed.

**Codebook**

The codebook was derived from the previous codebooks employed by Tiggemann and Zacardo (2016) in the analysis of thinpiration content on Instagram and by Smith and Sanderson (2015) in the analysis of athlete self-presentation on Instagram. The codes for content were developed after an initial scoping review of the images which determined what codes were relevant for the analysis.

The images were coded for body part and objectification, as well as sexual objectification. Body parts were coded to determine which body ideals were featured most within the images posted. The frequency of the body part featured within images was coded as an indicator of objectification of the body, which has been previously used as a code in other content analysis done by Smith and Sanderson (2015). For this code, an increased representation of specific body parts indicated increased objectification, this is because decreased visibility of the body as whole reduces the body to an object where it is seen in relation to its individual parts, and is not viewed in its entirety. The images were coded for sexually objectifying features as well to determine whether she is being promoted as an object for sexual pleasure.

**Coding procedure**

Coding procedures were utilized only for the photographs of Michelle Lewin. The unit of analysis was the photograph. Using a coding scheme adapted from Tiggemann and Zacardo (2016) and Smith and Sanderson (2015), each photograph was coded for the following 11 items: for the activity she engaged in: fitness related posing, fitness unrelated posing, engaging in a fitness activity; for the presence of objectifying features/ focus on a specific body part: breasts,
abdominals, buttocks, legs, arms; as well as sexually objectifying features: striking a sexually suggestive pose, posing in a bathing suit or underwear and posing in a body shape revealing clothing. More detailed descriptions of coding categories are provided in Table 1.

For each image, number of *Likes* and *Comments* were documented, that I used to calculate the engagement rate per post using a formula by Laurence (2017):

\[
\frac{\text{(Likes + Comments)} \times 100}{\text{Number of followers}}
\]

**Table 1: Coding Scheme (Description of coded variables)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Action</strong></td>
<td>The action Lewin is carrying out in the image:</td>
<td>Posing fitness unrelated; Posing fitness related (e.g., in fitness clothes or at the gym); Engaging in a fitness activity (e.g. lifting weights, doing yoga or running).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Objectification</strong></td>
<td>Presence or absence of elements of sexual objectification:</td>
<td>Posing in a sexy manner (e.g. alluring/ sultry gaze, winking or arching back); Posing in bathing suit or underwear; Posing in rather revealing clothing (absence or tightness of clothing).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Focus</strong></td>
<td>A specific body part is the main focus of the image:</td>
<td>Breasts; Abdominals; Buttocks; Legs; Arms.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Results

Action, Objectification and Focus

The activities depicted in the images are presented in Table 2. It can be seen that most images (97%) were posed shots. In a approximately three quarters of all images (76%) she was posing unrelated to fitness activities, in one quarter of images (15%) she was posing in gym clothing and only one tenth of all images (9%) showed her engaged in some exercise or fitness activity.

In terms of objectification, the majority of images (97%) featured at least one of the specified aspects of objectification. As it can be seen in Table 2, 68% of all images coded, contained well visible and toned legs and about a half of all images featured her cleavage, consequently legs (27%) and breasts (22%) are leading the focal point in most of the images, leaving arms (20%), buttocks (17%) and abdominals (14%) behind.

In more than half of all images (55%) Lewin was posing in a bathing suit or underwear, and in nearly half (48%) of all shots she was posing in a sexually suggestive manner. Looking at it proportionally, in 41% she was posing in a bathing suit or underwear, in 37% of posts she can be found striking a sexy pose and in 22% of posts she appears in rather body shape revealing clothing that accentuate her curves and angles of the body.

Table 2: Action, Objectification and Focus

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<th>Details</th>
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<td>Posing fitness related</td>
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<td>Engaging in a fitness activity</td>
<td>3 (9)</td>
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<td>Objectification</td>
<td>Posing in a sexy manner</td>
<td>15 (37)</td>
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<td>Posing in bathing suit or underwear</td>
<td>17 (41)</td>
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<td>Posing in rather revealing clothing</td>
<td>9 (22)</td>
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<td>Focus</td>
<td>Breasts</td>
<td>17 (22)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Abdominals</td>
<td>11 (14)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Buttocks</td>
<td>13 (17)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Legs</td>
<td>21 (27)</td>
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**Engagement**

Liking was the most popular form of engagement. On average an image post received 328K *Likes* and 2338 *Comments*, that resulted on average of 2.57% engagement, which is a baseline indicator, taking into account that Michelle Lewin currently has 12.9M followers. The highest number of *Likes* for one image was 547K, the highest number of *Comments* was 4209 and the highest number of engagement was 4.28%.

Looking at the 10 posts with the highest user engagement (Note: Table 3 can be found in Appendix), I can say that highest engagement received images where Lewin was posing not related to any fitness activity (100%), where she was wearing bathing suit or underwear (70%) and revealed her breasts (90%) and legs (70%).

**Discussion**

The first research focus was on identifying the activities involved in the images found on Lewin’s Instagram account. It was interesting to find out that majority of the images isn’t the content one may expect - of her hard work at the gym-, rather pre-composed and posed shots. Most of the images weren’t fitness related; only a one tenth of all images coded were of her undertaking fitness exercise. In three quarters of the images Michelle Lewin was found posing unrelated to any fitness activity. In simple number terms, the qualitative content analysis done on the images posted in Michelle Lewin’s Instagram account indicates an under-representation of the images where she appears without make-up, in home wear or casual pictures doing daily chores like grocery shopping or doing laundry. What such quantification means and what impact it might have requires going beneath the surface of her fitspo imagery to explore resonance with reality, roles played and values implied.

The second and third research focus was on identifying objectifying and sexually objectifying elements. Based on my research, there seems to be a general emphasis on appearance, also the majority of images featured at least one objectifying feature, most commonly a focus on a particular body part rather than the whole body. The most common theme of the images coded was that of Lewin appearing sexually suggestively posing in a
bathing suit or underwear. Roughly half of the images accounted that. In more than half of the images she was found with her legs and/or breasts as the focal point, likely attributed to her posing in bathing suits or underwear. That result should be considered in that context; are the eyes are drawn to her legs and breasts naturally, or because she is exhibiting a sexually suggestive behavior.

The degree of engagement with the images on Lewin’s Instagram is notable. The images that received highest engagement are those that are well represented in her account - images where she can be seen posing in a bathing suit or underwear and flashing her toned legs and full chests (aka breasts). This proves that Michelle Lewin knows her audience and caters it well.
Chapter 4 - Conclusion

Conclusion

What people consider to be the ideal woman has changed over time, what has not changed is that women have always been striving for the perfect body, no matter the consequence. Although there is a notion that body-positive movement aims to overturn the glorifying standards for women, and represent bodies of all shapes and sizes as acceptable in the media (Bushak, 2015), in reality woman’s ideal appearance is markedly measured by the entertainment industry and consequently the average woman’s body image is noticeably underrated and largely unacceptable in these circumstances (Miller, 2017).

The ideal woman was once knowable and relatively stable, now she is ever-changing, elusive and more shapely and curvy rather than slender as it was back in a day (Lockett, 2002). Some ways of fitting in today’s woman’s ideal involve changing the body and appearance. There are products and processes that actually act to change the body by modifying shape, size and/or attributes, from diet to cosmetic surgery. Following a fitspo influencer like Michelle Lewin and going to the gym rather than doing a cosmetic surgery arguably offers a less destructive choice amongst similar models of reaching that attractive femininity. This research sought to expand on the literature regarding the 21st century woman’s body ideal, specifically focusing on Michelle Lewin as one of the top social media influencers and on Instagram as currently the most influential visual social media medium.

At the beginning of the thesis I stated following research questions:

- What types of posts are observed on Michelle Lewin’s Instagram?
- What posts get most engagement from her followers?
  - Do these posts reflect the body image theory?

Based on the qualitative content analysis I found out that majority of the images found on Lewin’s Instagram account are pre-composed, posed shots done by a professional (photographer). In most of the images she appears posing unrelated to any fitness activity, what indicates an under-representation of the images where she appears without make-up, selfies taken with her phone, instead she always appears picture perfect in a predecorated set.
Based on my theory reviewed, in Lewin’s pictures there seems to be a general emphasis on appearance. The most common theme of the images coded was that of Lewin appearing sexually suggestively posing in a bathing suit or underwear – those are also the images that received highest engagement from her followers. The majority of images featured at least one objectifying feature, most commonly a focus on a particular body part rather than the whole body (mostly legs and/or breasts as the focal point). Objectification theory sees that as a direct consequence of what objectified society expects to see - a woman as a sexual object.

Both social learning theory and (Bandura, 1971) and social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) then argues that Lewin being a relatable peer and an advocate for the slender, curvy and well toned body image keeps her female followers motivated to take measures to meet this ideal.

These (slender) representations are worrying enough when viewed in the light of cultivation theory (Gerbner et al., 2002) that defends - both mainstream media and social media (including individual peers) is responsible for shaping beliefs and attitudes by producing a cultivation effect on women’s body ideal. The problem may be that practically every image depicting woman’s body as we clearly see in Lewin’s example is normalizing an illusion of desirable bodies, encouraging an unattainable quest for perfection.

To conclude, my hypothesis where I state that Michelle Lewin depicts 21st century woman’s body ideal was ultimately approved by the results of this study. She herself is that every changing woman that is slender, yet fit and curvy and that explains why women find her so relatable and follow her on social media worldwide.

**Directions for Future Research**

In terms of future research, it would be interesting to have a more diverse study on social media influencers’ impact on women’s body perception as this study only focused on Instagram and Michelle Lewin – as one of the most paid Instagram influencers. More generally, fitspo images are said to have the potential to simultaneously be both inspiring and detrimental to body image, what is a useful foundation for future research of this aspect.

Another direction for the future research would be to interview Michelle Lewin (or possibly even other top fitspo influencers) directly about her motivation for posting, and any potential strategy she engage in when deciding which photographs to post, that may showcase what she perceives to be the salient aspects of her true identity.
References


Hart, Maria. —See How Much the ‘Perfect‘ Female Body Has Changed in 100 Years (It's Crazy!) [online]. Greatist. Available from: https://greatist.com/grow/100-years-womens-body-image


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<th>Engaging in fitness activity - c</th>
<th>Sexy posing - d</th>
<th>Posing in bathing suit or underwear - e</th>
<th>Posing in rather revealing clothing - f</th>
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Percentage: 81%, 16%, 10%, 48%, 55%, 29%, 55%, 35%, 42%, 68%, 52%

Average: 328713.548, 2338.25806, 2.57