**#NoFilter: An Investigation of Fitness Microcelebrities’ Portrayals of Body Image, Gender and Race on Instagram**

On November 4, 2015, Australian social media star Essena O’Neill announced that she was “quitting Instagram, YouTube, and Tumblr.” The 18-year-old O’Neill said in a post, “Without realizing, I’ve spent the majority of my teenage life being addicted to social media, social approval, social status, and my physical appearance” (letsbegamechangers.com). Social media have rapidly developed and evolved in their decade of existence. Today’s generation now grows up with cell phones and social media—something no other generation has had before. Its influences have directly affected the way that teenagers perceive themselves, as well as the way they communicate with one another. *CNN Special Report*’s “Being 13: Inside the Secret World of Teens” (2015), a two-year investigation followed the complicated lives of 13-year-olds in America to understand the implications of being the first generation to grow up on social media. The investigation exposed many of the problems that teenagers may face, which closely correlates to the issues that O’Neill brought to light in her confessional video.

As O’Neill pointed out, Instagram in particular is a forum where people may highlight the best parts of their lives through photographs, while keeping the rest hidden (“Why I REALLY am quitting social media,” 2015). This concept has distorted how others perceive themselves, especially as they begin to compare themselves to others. “I definitely feel pressure to look perfect on Instagram,” one 13-year-old said. “What goes through my mind as I’m posting a picture of myself, I’m thinking…what will people think of this? Are they going to approve? Are they going to think I’m ugly? Are they going to think I’m pretty? I’m thinking all these things and comparing myself to others” (“Being 13: Inside the Secret World of Teens,” 2015). High school students in another study conducted by Kalnes (2013) echo the sentiments of the teens interviewed in the *CNN* special, especially concerning the number of “likes” their pictures receiving and the connection with a thin figure. One student in the study states, “A lot of my friends are much thinner so you wonder why their photo has more likes than I do. Is it because they are thinner,” she asks (p. 66). Similar questions regarding weight, body image and popularity are common among teenage users of social media regardless of demographic boundaries.

The academic literature suggests that sociocultural factors, specifically the influences of media and advertisements, play a significant role in the connection of male and female perception of body image and body dissatisfaction (Agliata & Tantleff-Dunn, 2004; Benton & Karazsia, 2015). Studies have found that mass media misrepresent the ideal body image for the average man or woman and that “the level of beauty and physical attractiveness possessed by nearly all actors and models is characteristic of an extremely small segment of the population” (Ritchens, 1996, p. 111). Today, the mass media are not sole entities of misrepresenting the ideal body image. The shortened distance between the average man or woman and the celebrity, or figure that represents the “ideal body,” is becoming less distinct with the influx of new forms of social media. The increased access to content outside of traditional celebrities, such as singers, television stars and movie stars, has led to the development of the “microcelebrity” (Sneft, 2013, p. 346). With the relatively new and expanding influence of social media, research is just beginning to investigate its impact on its users.

Self-perception and satisfaction tends to vary with gender, race, and age. While most research focuses on the effects mass media has on women’s body image dissatisfaction, men also face body perception dissatisfaction and influences that women encounter (Agliata & Tantleff-Dunn, 2004, p. 7). However, male satisfaction with the body differs from that of female satisfaction (Karazsia & Crowther, 2010, p. 754). Historically, female satisfaction with body image is equated with thinness, while male satisfaction is equated with muscularity (Pascoe, 2015, p. 21). New research contradicts early findings and suggests that there is a shift in the female ideal body with an increased emphasis on “toneness,” muscularity, and training featured in popular culture media in recent years (Grogan, 2008). A significant amount of research investigates the differences of body image satisfaction of males and females, but little research explores the variances in body image perception in accordance with race/ethnicity.

The purpose of this study is to analyze the content of racially and ethnically diverse male and female fitness microcelebrities’ Instagram accounts to better understand the presentation portrayal of a fit, ideal body to the public. His/her self-presentation through photographs and captions will be analyzed through traditional gender norms, as identified by previous research conducted by Erving Goffman (1959) and Levant et al. (1992). The studies stemming from these scholars show the prevalence in which personal brands reflect and influence the trends of the ideal body of the man and woman, and the attitudes men and women of different racial backgrounds may face towards those images. Prior research investigating body image in the context of gender and race, as well as social media similarities and differences in the type of content male and female-run accounts display on their accounts will provide a deeper insight into these topics.

**Literature Review**

While scholars have taken interest in studying body image issues for some time, few researchers have examined the relationship between individuals’ social media use and body image. In congruence with the information found in “Being 13,” regarding teens’ frequent activity on social media, Pew Research Center revealed that 92% of teens report going online daily (Lenhart, 2015). Due to the rising and ever-present usage of social media, as seen in *CNN’*s “Being 13” (2015), the influence of social media on teens and the rest of the public needs to become a louder conversation in order to ensure responsible practices.

When a brand markets itself to its target audience, it must consider its social responsibility in portraying accurate information to its audience. As Essena O’Neill (2015) revealed in her YouTube post, many companies were paying her to use and post about their products. Most of these posts did not disclose the fact that she was being paid to promote the products, but were framed as an endorsement. The audience relies on the brand to present fair and accurate information in order to make an informed decision. However, that line begins to blur with the introduction of “self-branding” and the “micro-celebrity.” The self-branded individuals must consider their influence on their audiences’ perceptions of the ideal body and body image satisfaction. The following literature will investigate how body image, gender, and social media and the self-branded micro-celebrity cohere.

**Body Image and Mass Media**

Skewed body image perception has often been blamed on the distortions of bodies in television through advertisements and programming. Myers (1992) wrote, “The emphasis mass media places on the thin ideal body image may be responsible for body size overestimations that women make, and indirectly cause increases in anorexia nervosa and bulimia” (p. 108).Mass media promotes certain body types as being socially ideal and desirable, and many people accept the images portrayed as real, despite the fact that the projected body types are not realistic (Sohn, 2009, p. 20). As a result, the mass media affects our own body perception and satisfaction through depictions of extremely attractive individuals via mass media.

The majority of research has studied body image issues in the context of television and print advertisements, where the messages define attractiveness and beauty as physical appearance and predominately thinness (Harrison & Heffner, 2006, p. 162). Mass media have historically portrayed the ideal female body as lean and thin (Thompson, van den Berg, Roehig, Guarda & Heinberg, 2004, p. 302). According to the National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders (ANAD), the ever-present ideal body portrayed in advertising is only possessed naturally by five percent of American females. In other words, only five percent of women obtain this ideal body without extreme forms of dieting and/or exercise (ANAD, 2015). These pictures are presented as “normal,” which has shown to be internalized by females when they aim to emulate the image themselves (Myers & Biocca, 1992, p. 110). ANAD (2015) found that 69% of girls in the 5th-12th grade reported that magazine pictures influenced their perception of the perfect body and 81% of 10 year olds are “afraid of being fat.” These alarming studies suggest that the thinness seen in mass media may directly affect young women’s perceptions of their own identity.

While the “thin ideal” continues to be omnipresent, there is evidence that the ideal female body is making a shift from the traditional thin figure to one that is athletic—both thin *and* toned (Thompson et al., 2004). At this time, athletic female body images’ impact on women have been relatively unstudied, with the exception of one study conducted by Homen et al. (2012), which investigated the effect of viewing “ultra-fit” images for college women’s body dissatisfaction. While many years of research have indicated that mass media exposure to the “thin ideal” was closely correlated with body dissatisfaction of women, recent development in research has shown that an ideal body “is both thin and somewhat muscular (i.e. toned) and has significant impact on women’s state body satisfaction that is comparable to the influence of the classic thin ideal” (Benton, 2015, p. 25).

As reported by Reichert, Lambiase, Morgan, Carstarphen, and Zavoinia (1999), found that women’s bodies were focused on three times more so than men’s in magazine advertisements (p. 18). Advertisers explicitly target the body image of women in the marketing food and exercise products to reinforce the ideal female body (Myers, 1992, p. 109). The types of advertisements found within men’s magazines and women’s magazines differ. A study by Andersen and DiDomenico (1992) revealed that more diet-related advertisements and articles were found in female-targeted magazines and more exercise and weight-lifting advertisements were found in male-targeted magazines.

The male ideal body is primarily associated with its emphasis on muscularity and leanness. “Within today’s gym culture, the hard, beautiful body is idolized as both an aesthetic and a sexual object” (Andreasson & Johansson, p. 278). Whereas the female magazine advertisements emphasized dieting and controlling their weight, male-targeted magazines and advertisements lay emphasis on “molding their body through exercise” (Aglita, 2004, p. 8). When men engage in social body comparisons, the emphasis lies within muscle-related aspects of one’s body (Karazsia & Crowther, 2010, p. 748). Although the way females and males compare mass media images to themselves tends to differ, mass media plays a significant role in both genders’ perceptions of the ideal body.

**Representation of Gender**

To study gender presented in Instagram pictures, the research will use Erving Goffman’s (1959) theory of the presentation of the self, which has been the common conceptual approach to scholars studying gender in advertisements and television. Goffman (1976), an American sociologist, studied visual images in print advertisements and commercials and revealed specific gender differences. Goffman found five specific categories of women in advertisements: relative size, when a woman is depicted as smaller or physically lower than a man; feminine touch, where a woman is touching someone or something else; the family, where the family is depicted in the advertisement; subordination, where women are depicted “lowering oneself physically;” and licensed withdrawal, where women in the photograph are turning away from the camera, or appear “lost in thought” (Kang, 1997, p. 983).

As evaluation of body image varies between the gender lines, self-presentation of oneself is also notable through an analysis of gender and traditional gender norms. The shift in the ideal body image of women includes greater toneness and muscularity, which had once been more associated with masculinity. The results of the analysis will help determine whether or not females’ representation of gender has shifted with this change in the ideal body image.

In a study comparing female athletes and fashion models in *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit editions, Kim (2014) addressed that “traditional gender stereotypes seem problematic in portraying female athletes, given that such a practice emphasizes sexuality rather than athleticism” (p. 124). The athletes and fashion models were “clearly portrayed in similar ways,” especially in the sexual objectification of the female body (p. 136). The ideal body of the female body may have changed, but the modeling and presentation of the body seem to stay relatively similar to trends of the past. This study will analyze whether the *self* presentation of the female athletes adhere to the same trends.

Along the same vein, males also experience body dissatisfaction and engage in body changing behaviors to achieve their desired body (Karazsia & Crowther, 2010, p. 747). Muscularity is the main cause of body concern for males, where most males report a desire to increase muscularity (Ridgeway & Tylka, 2005, p. 218). A critical component of muscularity is also leanness, which has led to concerns regarding body weight (Karazsia & Crowther, 2010, p. 747). As interpreted by Karazsia et al., “These body ideals are portrayed in [mass] media. For men, the current [mass] media standard for attractiveness is tall, muscular, and lean” (p. 747).

Men have been studied in the context of “traditional masculinity ideology,” identified in the Male Role Norms Inventory (MRNI) developed by Levant et al. (1992). Their research suggested a seven-factor model: avoidance of femininity, negativity toward sexual minorities, self-reliance through mechanical skills, toughness and aggression, dominance, importance of gender, and emotional restriction (1997). In a comparative analysis of masculinity represented by lead male roles in action and romantic-comedy, research found variations of the seven-factor model of masculinity represented across both genres, depending on the situational context (Pascoe, 2015, p. 20).

With the shift in the ideal female body from thin to thin and tone, this research may reveal whether or not it may have affected the way a woman may present herself. This study seeks to explore the different ways that fitness-focused accounts on Instagram may present an ideal fit male or female. Many of the aforementioned studies were conducted 10-20 years ago, which leaves room changes that may be seen in this study. Finally, body image cannot be generalized solely along gender lines. Other factors, like race, also play a significant role in one’s body image perception. All of these elements are considered in this study and will be discussed further in the next section.

**Representation of Race**

Researchers have just begun exploring body image in the context of race and ethnicity and its relationship to gender. While a few conclusions have been made regarding specific races and body image, there is generally a lack of consistency in patterns to summarize and generalize body image concerns across different cultural groups (Ricciardelli, McCabe, Williams & Thompson, 2007, p. 600; Miller, Gleaves, Hirsch, Green, Snow, & Corbett, 199, p. 315) One study found that African American college students tend to have a more positive body image than White students (p. 311). There have been several studies indicating that the white population typically shows a greater dissatisfaction with his/her body image, while minority groups experience higher rates of satisfaction.

Although obesity is most common among ethnic minority groups in the United States, particularly in African American and Mexican American women, studies have suggested that black and Hispanic women show more satisfaction with their bodies than white women (Cachelin, Rebeck, Chung, Pelayo, 2002, p. 158). In a study examining body image by race/ethnicity in a university, African American females scored themselves significantly higher than their European and Latin American counterparts on sexual attractiveness and showed a higher sense of self-esteem regarding their weight than other women (Miller et al., 1998, p. 313). A recent study found that black women’s beauty standards were defined by their “hair, skin tone, curvaceous physique, and the attitude of being beautiful, such as self confidence, body carriage, and fashion style” (Capodilupo & Kim, 2014, p. 46).

European American women rated themselves considerably lower on all other groups concerning body esteem (Miller, Gleaves, Hirsch, Green, Snow, & Corbett, 1998, p. 315). Interestingly, in a more recent study of African American women with various backgrounds in education and age, it was found that the women that identified more in line with white culture were more susceptible to higher levels of disordered eating (Henrickson, Crowther, & Harrington, 2010, p. 91). Harris and Kuba’s (1997) research acknowledged that women who have internalized a “healthy cultural identity” are more likely to accept their body as attractive and embrace their culture’s concept of beauty. This is juxtaposed to women who deal with identity conflict and “may struggle between a desire to accept their own body and attempts to achieve the Eurocentric thinness ideal” (p. 346).

Studies have found that males desire a larger, more toned body, and further research has implicated that black and Pacific Islander males have an even greater preference for a larger body size and frame overall in comparison to white males (Altabe, 1998, p. 157; Ricciardelli et al., 2007, p. 600). Also in contrast to white males, black males displayed more pride in their bodies than white males, reflecting a more positive body image (Story et al., 1995, p. 177). Similar to the patterns shown in women, white men also faced more body dissatisfaction. The body dissatisfaction among white men was similarly mirrored in the dissatisfaction Native American and Hispanic men had in their own body perception (Ricciardelli, McCabe, Williams & Thompson, 2007, p. 601).

Although there have been findings to suggest how race affects one’s body image satisfaction, it must be considered that studies in minority groups are relatively few in comparison to studies of white culture. Without sufficient evidence, implications cannot be generalized to the entirety of a culture or population. Furthermore, the evidence that we have is primarily centered on mass media—little research has been conducted to determine the ways in which social media and social networking sites have influenced gender, race and body image.

**Social Networking Sites, Instagram and the Self-Branded Celebrity**

AOL, with its instant messaging, member profiles, and chat rooms, was the precursor to today’s social networking sites (SNSs). Social networking as we know today began in 2002 with Friendster.com and Facebook (“World Wide Web Timeline,” 2015). Instagram was launched on October 6, 2010, and within two months of its launch, it had one million users (Instagram, 2012). Instagram distinguishes itself from other social networking sites due to its platform of photo and video-sharing service. Users may post pictures and may also share captions, hashtags, other users’ handles, and locations along with their pictures.

Instagram has exploded in popularity and has surpassed Facebook and Twitter as the “most important” social network to U.S. teens (Guimarães, 2015). As of September 22, 2015, 400 million active users are on Instagram, with nearly 90% of users under the age of 35 (Instagram, 2015; Smith, C., 2014). With 52% of teens aged 13 to 17 years old using Instagram, it has become the second-most used social media platform for teens behind Facebook (“Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat Top Social Media Platforms for Teens,” 2015). Unlike the vast differences in usage by age, Instagram is fairly even in its usage by men and women. Interestingly, Instagram is more popular with non-whites, with 47% of African Americans and 38% of Hispanics using Instagram and only 21% of white, non-Hispanics using Instagram (“Instagram Demographics,” 2015).

The primary purpose of choosing Instagram for this study is due to its use of images, which will be the basis of analyzing the information. Secondly, the significant amount of users who are younger than 35 is important when trying to understand how brands send their messages and how users interpret those messages. Business Insider (2014) revealed that the 18- to 34-year old age bracket is a particularly “attractive platform for many apparel, entertainment, and media brands.” Many SNSs are considered to be personal spaces that users create to cultivate friendships, relationships, and networks, as well as “providing an outlet for personal creativity and expression” (Boyd & Ellison, 2007, p. 213). However, this line of connection begins to blur when including celebrities, athletes, models, other famous individuals, and even brands. The public display of one’s connections, “followers,” “friends,” etc. is a critical component of SNSs (2007, p. 213). Insinuating that one is “friends” with another page creates a new variation of connection and friendship beyond the everyday vernacular of the word (Boyd, 2006). With the ability to follow one’s favorite icons and see the “behind the scenes” life the icon has, he/she feels more connected to that person, as if the icon is an actual friend (Boyd, 2006).

The concept of friendship in SNSs becomes increasingly complicated with the introduction to a relatively new phenomenon of the “Microcelebrity.” Sneft (2013) coined the term to describe girls who broadcasted their lives over the Internet using pictures, video, and blogging to present themselves as a “branded package” to their online fans (p. 314). Using the “community” of an SNS, like Instagram, one can brand himself or herself to appeal to a particular niche and accumulate thousands, even millions of followers. Particularly on Instagram, they have most likely become familiar strangers to millions of teenagers and young adults (p. 352).

SNSs have created an entirely new space to interact with friends, followers, and celebrities. Barriers to contact have been reduced and, despite only showing snippets of one’s life, is social and revealing in nature. Considering the prominence of young users on Instagram is important to the understanding of this research. In “Being 13,” (2015) sociologist Dr. Robert Faris explains that social media is a kind of “rocket fuel for teens,” in that it’s “highly combustible and flammable, and it accelerates to the degree to which kids form their own self image and have feedback from peers that strongly influence what they think and how they think about themselves.” In other words, the interaction one has within this social space, like Instagram, directly affects one’s perception of himself/herself.

A brand has a social responsibility to its consumers to present factual, truthful information. Does a self-branded person need to uphold to the same responsibilities? “Microcelebrity means new threats and opportunities. It also means new responsibilities…in a time of crowd-sourced information, we are responsible for getting facts straight about the people with whom we feel the need to build strange familiarity, particularly when those people are across the globe” (Sneft, 2013, p. 353). Prior to this study, very little research has been presented on the affects of social media and body image. Encompassing both images and text, SNSs have many freedoms of expression. Anyone may follow, read, or see these microcelebrities’ posts; it is important for them to understand the effects they may have over their audience’s own body perception.

**Research Questions**

Although a significant amount of research has been completed on the effects of mass media on one’s body image and the ideal body, little has been conducted on social media. Studies conducted by Goffman (1959) and Levant et al. (1992) presented information on how to classify gender displays. Other researchers have used their studies to analyze advertisements, television, and magazines. As I evaluate the presentation of gender through fitness accounts on social media, I will be utilizing Goffman’s (1959) gender display framework to identify “traditional” depictions of females. Images of male fitness accounts can be analyzed according to the seven identified factors identified by Levant. This part of the research will explore the extent to which the individual owner of fitness account perpetuates his/her gender stereotypes in his/her own photographs.

Research has indicated that the ideal female body has transitioned from a thin, fragile-looking woman to a thin, toned woman—which has led to the same body dissatisfaction as the initial ideal (Benton, 2015, p. 25). Although seemingly empowering, images displaying the “ideal” body of men and women could lead to more dissatisfaction. The study will analyze the photographs to answer the second research question, which aims to identify the themes of ideal body image, as displayed in the self-presentation of the fitness microcelebrities. Similarly, previous studies have suggested differences in body image satisfaction in the context of race. By examining accounts of fitness microcelebrities of different races, the research will aim to identify any themes in body image ideals that emerge in the context of race/ethnicity.

*RQ1: How do fitness microcelebrities differ in their presentation of (a) race and (b) gender on Instagram?*

Although the pictures play an influential role in the message that is sent to the account’s audience, captions also have a significant part. To fully encompass the responsibilities that the microcelebrities hold when posting a picture, they must also consider what they are writing and how their audience may perceive it. By analyzing the text of the photographs, the study aims to reveal the common themes within the captions of the microcelebrities, the final research question.

*RQ2: Do the captions of fitness microcelebrities differ in their presentation of self by (a) race or (b) gender?*

**Method**

Due to the importance of the visual presentation of the fitness microcelebrities to this study, photos and captions from Instagram were gathered. This study analyzed how these microcelebrities have branded themselves. Body image and body image dissatisfaction continues to be a point of contention among young women and men. These young women and young men are the particular audience that can be found on Instagram, a SNS whose sole platform is to present pictures to the public. The study analyzed the visual elements of the posts to allow for a more objective evaluation to quantify and study the data (Elo & Kyngäs, 2007, p. 108).

*Sample.* Four male and four female accounts were analyzed. The accounts chosen for the analysis were run by microcelebrities and were selected based on their activity level on Instagram and the number of followers they had. The microcelebrities all lived in America, although they varied in race to examine similarities and differences among different races/ethnicities. The accounts, race and gender of the study can be seen in Table 1. The four male fitness accounts that were chosen were: @corygfitness and @jonnystraws, white males; @lazar\_angelov\_official,a Hispanic male; and @ulissesworld, an African American male. The four female fitness accounts that were chosen were: @followthelita, an African American woman; @massy.arias, a Latina and African American woman; @jenselter, a white female; and @qimmahrusso, an African American woman.

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| Table 1. *Micro-celebrities by Instagram handle, gender and race* | | |
| **Instagram Handle** | **Gender** | **Race** |
| @followthelita | Female | African American |
| @massy.arias | Female | Latina & African American |
| @jenselter | Female | White |
| @quimmahrusso | Female | African American |
| @corygfitness | Male | White |
| @jonnystraws | Male | White |
| @lazar\_angelov\_official | Male | Hispanic |
| @ulissesworld | Male | African American |

These fitness gurus have established themselves and have become “familiar strangers” to thousands, even millions, of people around the world. None of these accounts are of celebrities or professional athletes to ensure the status of “microcelebrity.”

*Data Collection*. Beginning on October 15, 2015, the 30 most recent posts from the selected date from each account. The photographs and the captions were analyzed separately, due to the fact that they might not be in correlation with one another. For instance, a caption could witty or inspirational, but have nothing to do with the actual action that is taking place in the photograph. For this reason, separate analysis of the two elements allow for a more complete, independent analysis. No videos were used in the collection.

*Coding.* The unit of analysis was the photograph, and in a separate procedure, the unit of analysis was the caption. Two coding schemes were used after determining the accounts to use for the analysis. Since the coding scheme used for the pictures will not apply to the text, a second coding scheme was developed to analyze the themes and patterns that emerged from captions. The two coding schemes provided additional insight into self-presentation and the messages sent from the fitness microcelebrities from their photographs and their captions.

*Coding Procedures.* All of the measures that were coded for were defined in the codebook, as seen in Appendix A. The codebook allowed for a complete and thorough definition for each category, as well as to allow the research to be completed unambiguously and objectively. Each photograph was coded for the following: the name of the microcelebrity, the focus of photograph (“selfie,” solo-shot, group picture), the level of action within a photograph (active fitness shot, passive fitness shot, non-fitness shot), the level of femininity or masculinity (Goffman’s gender display framework, and Levant’s seven-factor model of masculinity), the clothing (unrevealing, somewhat revealing, revealing), and the primary focus of the body (face, arms, pectorals/chest, stomach, legs, buttocks). The coding took place on a Microsoft Excel file.

*Coder Training.* One coder coded the entirety of both samples, while a second coder analyzed 20 percent of the samples. The second coder used a codebook provided to analyze and code the samples.

**Results**

The study yielded 240 pictures and captions from eight different microcelebrities. Men and women represented 50% of the total sample, respectively. Three of the microcelebrities were African America, three were white, one was Hispanic, and another was mixed (Latina and African American). In order to focus on the self-presentation of the microcelebrity, pictures of food, scenery, quotes, etc., were removed from the sample. Of these pictures, 132 were photos of the athlete by himself or herself, 57 were group shots with friends or family, 40 were “selfies,” and 24 were mirror pictures. These were not mutually exclusive, however. Several pictures featured a group of friends or family, and therefore applied to the “selfie” or “mirror shot” category, as well as the “group shot” category.

RQ1 asked how fitness microcelebrities differed in their presentation by gender and/or race. The pictures were analyzed through categories based on Goffman’s (1957) self-presentation scheme, which focuses on the presentation of femininity and masculinity. Although there was no significant difference in pictures displaying relative size, the family, or subordination, there were several significant findings for feminine touch and licensed withdrawal. For feminine touch, there was a significant difference between females and males (*x*2=25.426, (*df*) = 1, p < .001). Women had more instances of feminine touch (*n* = 39) than would be expected. For licensed withdrawal, there was a significant difference between males and females (*x2*=2.092, (*df*) = 1, p < .2). Males had more instances of displaying licensed withdrawal (*n* = 22) than would be expected.

RQ1 also examined how fitness microcelebrities differed in their presentation of self. Of the 240 pictures examined, 55.8% of the pictures were non-fitness shots, 26.7% were passive fitness shots, and only 17.1% were active fitness shots. Although there were no significant differences in active and passive fitness shots between men and women, there was a significant difference in non-fitness shots between females and males (*x*2=1.690, (*df*) = 1, p < .2). This information reveals that women had more instances of non-fitness shots (*n* = 72) than expected.

The analysis also examined how frequently microcelebrities focused on particular parts of the body. Multiple body parts could have been the subject of the picture, and were therefore not mutually exclusive. There were 108 pictures that had the stomach/abdominals as a focus point, making it the most frequent subject for a photograph. The arms were another big focus point, with 92 pictures, followed by the pectorals/chest in 89 pictures. Sixty-four pictures had the legs for a focus; 56 of those pictures were female and eight were male. Forty-six pictures had the face as a focus. Forty-three pictures had the buttocks for a focus. All 43 of those pictures were female. Thirty-three pictures did not have a particular focus on a body part. Twelve pictures focused on the back. The breakdown for the body focus of males, females and the total number of occurrences can be seen in Table 2.

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| Table 2. *Focus of body parts by gender* | | | |
| **Body part in focus** | **Male** | **Female** | **Total** |
| Face | 29 | 17 | 46 |
| Back | 6 | 6 | 12 |
| Arms | 32 | 60 | 92 |
| Pectorals/Chest | 44 | 45 | 89 |
| Stomach/Abs | 70 | 38 | 108 |
| Legs | 56 | 8 | 64 |
| Buttocks | 43 | 0 | 43 |
| N/A | 5 | 28 | 33 |

There was also a significant difference identified for each category detailing how revealing the microcelebrity was presented. Males more frequently presented themselves in an unrevealing way (*n* = 60) than females (*x*2=39.273, (*df*) = 1, p < .001). Females displayed more instances of somewhat revealing (*x2*=16.023, (*df*) = 1, p < .001) and revealing (*x2=*5.498, (*df*) = 1, p < .02) than males. Female microcelebrity accounts had 44 posts that were somewhat revealing and 61 posts that were revealing.

RQ2 asked if the captions of fitness microcelebrities differed in their presentation of self. There was a significant difference in captions that did not relate to the picture. Females displayed a higher frequency of unrelated captions (*n =* 46) than what was expected (*x2*=1.852, (*df*) = 1, p < .2). Of the 240 pictures, 82 captions positively changed the interpretation of the picture. Additionally, women more frequently posted captions that positively changed their pictures (*n =* 47) than men (*x*2=2.667, (*df*) = 1, p < .2). There were only eight instances of captions negatively affecting pictures, and no significant difference was found in gender or race with captions that did not change the picture. An influential factor that determined whether or not a caption would change the picture’s overall effect was the caption’s message. The caption could address multiple issues or points, and was therefore not mutually exclusive. The most common theme was “inspiration,” with 88 pictures featuring this message. There were also 88 pictures that had “other” themes, which will be discussed later. “Self-promotion” (68) and “self-confidence” (60) were also common categories that the captions supported. Fifteen captions referred to weight, 17 captions referred to body image, ten captions referred to gender, and four captions referred to race. There were 61 captions that did not fit into a theme.

Another important focal point of this analysis was the role that outside branding and advertisements played in the self-branding of the microcelebrities. While looking at brands, there were several significant differences that emerged. There were 45 total pictures that promoted a brand within the image. There was a significant difference in the frequency ofmen (*n* = 33) promoting brands in images than women (*x2=*12.062, (*df*) = 1, p < .001). Similarly, men (*n =* 55) displayed a much higher frequency of mentioning brands in captions (*x2*=14.523, (*df*) = 1, p < .001). Of the 82 captions with brands, 55 captions (67.1%) were by males. This also led to an interesting discovery of the relationship with brands and race. Of the pictures and captions with branding, differences emerged when the race of the microcelebrity was considered. Hispanics (*x2=*7.224, (*df*) = 1, p < .01), mixed race (*x2=*5.349, (*df*) = 1, p < .1), and African Americans (*x2*=5.924, (*df*) = 1, p < .1) had more instances of brands appearing in pictures than expected. A significant difference was also revealed in the captions, where African Americans (n = 36) more frequently (*x2*=2.178, (*df*) = 1, p < .2) included brands than the other races.

**Discussion**

Social media, and Instagram in particular, have given ordinary people the means to become microcelebrities by drawing in followers through their Instagram posts (and other social media platforms). By examining female and male fitness microcelebrities, this study allowed for a new interpretation of gendered self-presentation and advertisements. Using Goffman’s (1959) study of self-presentation, we are able to examine the differences in their behaviors.

One of the main objectives of this study was to examine how females presented their gender in an athletic sphere. Consistent with past research, females more frequently displayed what Goffman notes, “ritualistic touching,” (1959) in their pictures. This is considered a feminine behavior, and was prominent in females in this study as well. Touching could include touching oneself, such as a hand on the leg or face; it could include touching others, which was frequently found in group pictures, where females would pose with their arms around each others’ shoulders or hugging one another. When men engaged in touching, it was also often found in group pictures, specifically with a girlfriend or wife, where he would be hugging or touching the other woman.

When looking at the frequency of licensed withdrawal and men, the data showed that these pictures commonly featured a brand in the picture as well. In this case, the brand dominates the picture, while the male gazes away from the camera. Licensed withdrawal was another category in Goffman’s (1959) study of self-presentation, often associated with femininity. Interestingly, Goffman’s work heavily focused around feminine roles in advertisements, which is where the category of licensed withdrawal stemmed from. With this context, it seems that men adapt a more “feminine role” in a sense, when he is in picture alone with a product to brand. In other words, the product becomes the dominating role in the picture, acting as an advertisement.

In an effort to better understand the “ideal” body for an athletic man and woman, this study shows some interesting trends. One of the most surprising and distinct differences in self-presentation was found in men’s lack of pictures containing a focus on their lower body. Nearly every picture that focused on the legs and buttocks were from women. Meanwhile, women and men both had similar numbers of pictures containing the arms, chest, and abs. Another distinct difference between men and women resided in the amount of pictures that featured the microcelebrity in a revealing way, as opposed to a non-revealing way. There were significantly more pictures that featured men in a non-revealing way, countered with pictures of women, who were more frequently dressed in a revealing or somewhat revealing way. Unlike the study conducted by Smith and Sanderson (2015) on professional athletes on Instagram, female athletes were dressed significantly more provocatively and were featured in more non-fitness shots than men. The fact that these athletes are more esteemed for their bodies more so than their physical activity could play a contributing factor in the discrepancy.

The captions of the pictures brought some important topics into light. First and foremost, a picture cannot be taken on its face to understand the meaning. An important component of social media is utilizing all of the different mediums it has to offer: pictures, hashtags, captions, geo-tags, etc. Females often accompanied a picture with an inspirational caption to encourage her followers, which influenced the overall interpretation of the post. If the follower is only seeing the picture and breezing through the caption, he/she may not fully understand the post and may interpret it in a negative way. Additionally, Instagram has changed the format of captions, and no longer shows the full caption unless it is manually expanded. Therefore, this also plays a key role in the message that the followers are receiving by looking at a picture, considering over half of the captions change the picture in a positive way.

Another influential factor on the posts were brands and product placement. Some of these athletes have been sponsored by certain brands, and in return, they post pictures of themselves using their products. Most of the captions disclosed the product that he/she was promoting in the picture; however, most posts encouraged followers to try the product, but did not provide any insight as to whether or not they actually used the product or if they were being paid to advertise the product. Promoting brands and products introduces a new dynamic to their posts, and establishes a need for even greater social responsibility for microcelebrities to be fair and honest when posting to their hundreds of thousands of followers.

**Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

This research also came with a set of limitations. The first limitation being its inability to measure the impact the posts had on the microcelebrities’ followers. A large part of body image research focuses on the effects images such as these have on an audience. However, this study was able to investigate the pictures and captions of the posts, something no other researchers have done. Future research may want to consider analyzing the responses from followers. Their responses may give some evidence of effects the images have on followers. The impact that accounts such as these have on followers, young adults and teens in particular, is something that should really be considered in the future. Young adults and teens dominate the use of Instagram, and could follow accounts run by these microcelebrities. In Kalnes’ (2013) study, several respondents reported feeling self-conscious over their body type after looking at skinnier, fitter women on social media (p. 62). It is possible that their sentiments of body image could be influenced in the same manner with fitness microcelebrities, but further research is needed.

Another limitation was the broadness of the categories for the pictures and captions to be coded in. Many of the categories were not mutually exclusive, and therefore fewer conclusions could be drawn from the results. Additionally, the categories could have been more specific in identifying how suggestive pictures were. For instance, many female photographs that featured the chest were more suggestive in nature, while the male photographs featuring the chest showed more fitness-related activity.

This study was also limited by its small sample size. A larger data collection would allow for a more comprehensive look into the trends of self-presentation for race and gender. Going forward, future researchers should create a more specifically targeted sample that is fairly equal in popularity and activity level on Instagram, as well as a large representation of gender and race. Only white, African American, Hispanic and mixed races were included in this study. A broader range of races would capture a wider range to better reflect the population.

This research solely focused on pictures and captions, and it did not account for any videos or pictures of food, scenery, or words. This allowed for a better understanding of the self-presentation of the microcelebrity, but it may have established a limitation of understanding the complete “brand” of the microcelebrity. Many of the microcelebrities showed videos of themselves performing exercises. Several women posted pictures of inspirational quotes. There were also self-promotional posts for meet-ups and blog information, as well as brand-specific posts without the microcelebrity in the pictures. To understand the complete brand that the microcelebrity is portraying, all of the factors should be taken into consideration.

As social media continues to expand, research in this area will continue to move forward and diverge in new directions. An important direction will be an examination of the impact that these types of posts have on followers. A deeper analysis of the types of followers, the engagement of followers and the reactions of followers will provide a more comprehensive understanding of the impacts of social media. This study explored how microcelebrities brand themselves, but also revealed how they advertise other brands. There were several trends that emerged from the results regarding race and advertisements, which should be more closely studied going forward.

**Appendix A: Codebook**

#NoFilter: An Investigation of Fitness Microcelebrities’ Portrayals of Body Image, Gender, and Race on Instagram

At one time, mass media was the main contributing source of providing the image of the “ideal body,” through television, advertisements, and commercials. With the rapid expansion of social media, self-perception and body image satisfaction seem to have been negatively affected by users. Additionally, social media seems to have perpetuated new societal standards of the “ideal body” as well. This particular research investigates fitness microcelebrities (also known as “insta-famous”) on Instagram. These microcelebrities are famous for their Instagram pictures, specifically for their bodies. Outside of Instagram, these people would not be considered to be celebrities. The coding will provide information that will help us better understand how the body is being portrayed, particularly considering gender and race.

This study aims to answer the following questions:

*RQ 1: How do fitness microcelebrities differ in their presentation of (a) race and (b) gender on Instagram?*

*RQ 2: Do fitness microcelebrities differ in their presentation of self by (a) gender or (b) race?*

*RQ3: Do the captions of fitness microcelebrities different in their presentation of self by (a) gender or (b) race?*

To code, open the folder of pictures. There are 24 different pictures with their accompanied caption. To indicate your answer, place an “1” in the box\*. Mark all that apply.

\*Some questions may ask you to fill in a number, please do so accordingly.

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Please look at the photograph and caption together, then answer the following questions:

**Gender of the microcelebrity**

* Male
* Female

**Race of the microcelebrity**

* African American
* White
* Hispanic
* Mixed
* Not sure

**What is the focus of the photograph?**

* *Selfie*: The photo was taken of the microcelebrity by the him/herself. The photo was most likely taken with the front camera of a phone. It will most likely feature the face, but could also focus on the chest and/or abs as well.
* *Mirror picture:* The photo is taken in the reflection of a mirror, taken by the microcelebrity. Others may be in the background, but the microcelebrity must be the focus.
* *Solo-shot*: The photo only focuses the microcelebrity. The photo appears to be taken by another individual. You cannot see the camera in the picture. Others may be in the background, but the microcelebrity must be the focus.
* *Group picture*: The photo is taken of the microcelebrity with another person/other people.

**What is the level of action within the photo?**

* *Active fitness shot*: the microcelebrity is obviously engaging in activity, such as weightlifting, yoga, running, stretching, etc.
* *Passive fitness shot*: the microcelebrity is in a fitness setting, such as in a gym, outside, with weights, etc. The microcelebrity is not engaging in the activity. He/she may be posed in the setting. He/she should is wearing workout attire, such as gym shorts, t-shirt, spandex, etc.
* *Non-fitness shot*: the microcelebrity is not engaged in a fitness activity, nor is he/she associated with a fitness setting. He/she may be at home, in a kitchen, restaurant, bathroom, etc.

*\*If the picture's location is tagged at a gym, but the microcelebrity is in a locker room or bathroom, this will be a passive fitness shot, since it is suggesting he/she is at a fitness setting.*

**Are any of the five categories of gender presentation, as identified by Goffman, presented in the photograph?**

* *Relative size*: If a man and a woman are pictured together…a woman is depicted as smaller of physically lower than a man.
* *Feminine touch*: the microcelebrity is touching someone or something else; may be touching one’s leg, hip, face, etc.
* *The family*: the microcelebrity’s family is depicted in the photograph
* *Subordination*: the microcelebrity is depicted lowering herself physically; may be lying down, sitting, etc.
* *Licensed withdrawal*: the microcelebrity in the photograph is turning away from the camera, or may appear "lost in thought"

**What is the primary focus of the body?**

* *Face*: the picture primarily focuses on the facial features
* *Arms*: the picture may focus on the microcelebrity flexing his/her arms, or may be focusing on the strength of the microcelebrities' arms if he/she is lifting something, doing handstands, etc.
* *Pectorals/chest*: the picture may emphasize the chest, could be flexing pectorals
* *Stomach*: the picture focuses on the stomach and abdominal muscles, could be doing abdominal exercises
* *Legs*: the microcelebrity may be flexing legs (quads, calves, etc.), or doing work outs that emphasize his/her legs (squats, lunges, deadlifts, etc.).
* *Buttocks*: the picture emphasizes the microcelebrity's buttocks

**With 1 being unrevealing, 2 being somewhat revealing and 3 being revealing, how revealing is the clothing that the microcelebrity is wearing? Please place your number in the box.**

* *1= Unrevealing* 
  + Chest is completely covered
  + Sleeved shirt
  + Bottoms cover at least up to the tops of his/her knees
  + ex.)  
  + *To be unrevealing, the fitness celebrity must be covered on top and on bottom.*
* *2= Somewhat revealing:* 
  + Sleeveless shirt, exposing bare arms
  + Little to no cleavage
  + Shorts with approximately a 3'' inseam, at or just above mid-thigh
  + Skin-tight tank-top shirt/leggings
  + ex.)  
* *3= Revealing:* 
  + Sports bra/no shirt
  + Bathing suit
  + Significant cleavage
  + Shorts with approximately a 1-2'' inseam
  + ex.)  

**Are there any brands and/or products that are being promoted in this photograph?**

Does the microcelebrity endorse a product through his/her photo by using a specific brand or product?

**This concludes the questions for this picture; please proceed to read the caption to answer the next set of questions:**

**Does the caption relate to the action in the picture?**

* *Yes*:
  + The caption reflects or explains what is going on in the picture.
  + There may be an inspirational quote or message, but it is symbolic of the microcelebrity’s picture, such as lifting, weight-loss, or working hard.
* *No*:
  + The caption does not reflect or explain what is going on in the picture
  + This may include quotes that are irrelevant to the picture, particularly if the microcelebrity is in a non-fitness related shot.

**Does the caption contain a particular message? Place a 1 for each category the caption pertains to, and a 0 if the category is not present.**

* Self-confidence: the fitness celebrity expresses confidence in himself/herself through words; may say “proud of myself,” or “happy with myself,” etc.
* Inspiration: the fitness celebrity vocalizes an inspirational message or famous quote in the caption with the intention of encouraging followers and motivating them to work out
* Self-promotion: the microcelebrity includes a plug to his/her website, blog, social media site, etc.
* Gaining/losing weight: the caption focuses weight (could be his/her weight, or others’ weight)
* Body image: the microcelebrity addresses body image or the way one should perceive his/her body. He/she might address a particular body type (i.e. “strong not skinny,” or “#thickathletes”)
* Gender: the microcelebrity specifically addresses gender in his/her caption
* Color: the microcelebrity specifically address race or color in his/her caption
* Other
* No message: a matter-of-fact caption; doesn’t address any larger issue or concept, such as a song lyric or random quote; may be a “#tbt” or similar-type caption
* No caption: doesn’t contain a caption altogether

**Does the caption change the way you perceived the picture?**

* Yes, positively: the picture had either no influence or a negative influence originally, but the caption had a positive impact, altering the perception of the photo
* Yes, negatively: the picture had either no influence or a positive influence originally, but the caption had a negative impact, altering the perception of the photo
* No: the caption did not change the way that I felt about the picture

**Are there any brands and/or products that are being promoted in this caption?**

Does the microcelebrity endorse a product through his/her photo by tagging or hashtagging a specific brand or product?

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