Instagram and male body image: An in-depth study of perceptions surrounding Instagram-related body ideals amongst gym-going, male students at Rhodes University.

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Abstract

Guided by the disciplinary power and social comparison theories, this study sought to explore the perceptions of Instagram-related male body ideals amongst young, gym-going men enrolled at Rhodes University. Seven in-depth interviews were conducted, and the responses suggested that Instagram use shaped young men's body-related perceptions in a variety of complex ways. The findings suggested that Instagram exposed users to a lean and muscular body ideal and that perceptions of this ideal were shaped by factors such as Instagram's positivity bias, the age of users, and the exposure to the idealised bodies of fitness influencers. Furthermore, perceptions of Instagram's male body ideal were influenced by context. Black South Africans that attended majority white high schools were more likely to conform to the male body ideals associated with their school environment. In such instances, individuals rejected the body norms associated with their ethnic backgrounds in lieu of striving for a lean and muscular body. Additionally, perceptions of body dissatisfaction were evident in cases where upward social comparisons were made with unrealistic male body ideals. Conformity to Instagram's male body ideal also suggested that male users were subjected to a coercive form of power that resulted in their active participation in the reproduction of male body ideals.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1. Context of the research Within the field of Gender Studies, prior to the 1980s body image was regarded as primarily a female issue, leading to most studies on body image focusing on women's experiences. This was due to the belief that women face more social pressure to conform to certain body sizes and shapes than men. However, since the latter part of the 20th century, there has been a cultural shift in attitudes towards the male body, resulting in increased attention being paid to men's body image issues. This shift is linked to the increased use of male bodies in television, billboard and magazine advertisements, as well as the growth of male body-focused magazines such as GQ and Sports Illustrated, which led to the production and dissemination of male body ideals and, subsequently, increased male body dissatisfaction. In recent years, researchers have begun to study men's experiences of body image to gain a better understanding of this increase in male body image issues. However, most studies dealing with this issue use quantitative means of analysis and don't provide an in-depth understanding of men's subjective experiences of body image (Daniel & Bridges, 2009: 132).

This study aims to contribute towards addressing this gap by using a qualitative approach to study male body image, specifically pertaining to Rhodes University male students' engagement with Instagram. The study's focus on gym-going male students is motivated by previous research identifying the male drive towards an increasingly muscular physique as a crucial aspect of male body image. Additionally, men who engage in body-building practices are more likely to subscribe to male body ideals. Previous studies, such as Furnham and Baguma's (1994) study, have also suggested that black African men may adhere to different body ideals than white western men. For instance, black Kenyan men have demonstrated less preference for muscularity in comparison to white men from the US and Europe. In South Africa, body image issues were observed more in black men residing in urban areas than rural areas (Ricciardelli, 2007: 589).

The study's focus on Instagram is motivated by its picture-focused content and its greater impact on body image compared to other social media platforms. The dominant male body ideal portrayed on Instagram is said to be lean and muscular. It has also been suggested that increased exposure to male body ideals leads to male body dissatisfaction, especially when individuals perceive their bodies as unfavorable when compared to the ideal (Tager *et al*., 2006: 229).

It has been suggested that young adults are more likely to internalize and conform to social media body ideals, resulting in increased pressure to present an ideal image of themselves on platforms such as Instagram (Rounsevell *et al*., 2020: 37). This social pressure is said to contribute to a culture of peer comparison and competition, leading to increased self-surveillance and self-regulation. Therefore, this study focuses on male university students as participants as many Rhodes University students fall within the young adult population group.

The theoretical frameworks guiding this study are Michel Foucault's theory of power and Leon Festinger's social comparison theory. Foucault's (1977) theory of power examines the ways in which modern forms of power are directed towards and enacted on the body. Modern forms of power are subtle and coercive, seeking to regulate and control bodies, producing "docile bodies" in the process (Foucault, 1977: 138-139). Through an analysis of Foucault's (1977) key concepts related to his theory of power, such as disciplinary power, docile bodies, and the Panopticon, this study aims to analyse the ways in which modern forms of power operate through Instagram use. This study argues that Foucault's conceptualizations of disciplinary power and docile bodies are relevant to the objectives of this research. The promotion of male body ideals on Instagram ensures the docility of users' bodies, as it shapes and manipulates their outward features, gestures, and behaviors. Furthermore, Foucault's use of the Panopticon is also useful for analyzing the ways in which Instagram use can promote self-surveillance and self-regulation in men. The combination of Instagram users' increased visibility and the omnipresence of their audience suggests parallels between Instagram use and Foucault's metaphorical use of the Panopticon. In the context of this study, Festinger's (1954) social comparison is useful in understanding the ways in which male Instagram users engage in upward social comparisons with idealized male bodies on the application. Furthermore, Festinger's (1954) social comparison theory is also useful in analysing the ways in which such comparisons may result in increased body dissatisfaction amongst male Instagram users.

1.2. Research purpose and aims

Research Question: What are the perceptions surrounding Instagram-related body ideals amongst gym-going, male students enrolled at Rhodes University?

The main goal of this study is to *explore the perceptions surrounding Instagram-related body ideals amongst gym-going, male students at Rhodes University.* The subsidiary goals are to:

a) Explore the perceptions of the dominant body male body types viewed on Instagram.

b) Explore the role of Instagram-related male body ideals in shaping the ways in which gym-going, male students at Rhodes University perceive their own bodies and the bodies of other men.

c) Consider how societal norms and values play a role in the perception of Instagram-related male body ideals.

d) Explore perceptions surrounding self-surveillance and self-regulation in relation to Instagram-related male body ideals.

e) Analyse the role of Instagram-related body ideals in shaping self-perceptions of well-being amongst gym-going, male students at Rhodes University.

1.3. Research strategy

This study incorporates a qualitative approach as this type of methodology is associated with "the collection and analysis of in-depth information on a smaller group of respondents" thus aiming to produce rich, detailed qualitative data (Roberts *et al*., 2003: 3). Furthermore, using a qualitative approach aligns with the exploratory nature of this study through its focus on the interpretation of meanings and subjective experiences (Denscombe, 2010: 101). The qualitative approach also allows for a degree of "flexibility and adaptability" allowing the researcher to be responsive to developing circumstances, allowing one to adapt and make necessary changes as the research progresses (Denscombe, 2010: 109). This is particularly useful in the context of the constraints associated with completing a master's half-thesis, that is, the time and resource constraints linked to conducting a student project in the allotted one-year time frame.

The philosophical position underpinning this study is interpretivism due to its epistemological approach that views knowledge of the social world as reliant on "human capacities" (Denscombe, 2010: 119). Furthermore, interpretivism is linked to the ontological position known as constructionism, which refers to the ways in which social reality is said to be constructed through "people's perceptions" and interactions with their social environment. Therefore, interpretivism is useful when collecting and analysing qualitative data on perceptions and subjective understandings, thus making it suitable for the purposes of this study.

1.4. Research methods

The method of data collection implemented by this study was in-depth, semi-structured interviews, as this allowed for the collection of in-depth and subjective data related to the research topic (Bryman & Bell, 2012: 27). The research instrument used was the interview schedule (see Appendix A). Data was collected and stored on listening devices which were used with the knowledge and consent of participants.

This study made use of non-probability sampling techniques to select participants relevant to the research. This included elements of both purposive and quota sampling. The selected sample was intentionally small, consisting of seven male students at Rhodes University, to allow for the collection of in-depth data within the given timeframe of the research project.

Purposive sampling was used to select "particular individuals and categories of individuals" to participate in the study (Roberts *et al*., 2003: 36). This sampling method is useful in selecting participants based on prespecified characteristics that are relevant to the topic under study (Leedy & Ormrod, 2015: 336). As such, participants were required to identify as male, and use both the Rhodes University gym and the Instagram application. The selection of participants with these characteristics was achieved by approaching potential participants in the Rhodes University gym and requesting their participation in the study.

In addition, quota sampling was used to select a sufficient number of participants from different categories (Roberts *et al*., 2003: 36). This is important as it allowed for the selection of participants who represented different perspectives on the topic under study (Leedy & Ormrod, 2015: 336). Furthermore, quota sampling ensured the deliberate selection of participants "in proportion to their profile in the total population" of the Rhodes University gym (Denscombe, 2010: 184). This ensured that the selected participants were a representative sample based on the demographics of the research population. Considering these factors, this study used quota sampling to select 4 black South Africans, 2 coloured participants, and 1 white participant.

1.5. Analytical tools

Qualitative data collected from the interviews was analysed using thematic coding. Initially, a predetermined list of themes was derived from the research problem and subproblems. Subsequently, this information was used to "identify general categories or themes" which were classified accordingly and analysed to look for possible patterns amongst the interview responses (Leedy & Ormrod, 2015: 315). The instrument used for analysis is the Table of Codes

and Subcodes (see Appendix B). Lastly, the data was integrated into the study by unpacking the meanings attached to identified themes and the relationships between them. This included processes such as making comparisons or identifying contrasts within the data, linking findings to the theoretical framework guiding the study, and speculating about possible cause-and effect relationships (Leedy & Ormrod, 2015: 314-315).

1.6. Limitations

Qualitative research involves significant decision-making and thus is vulnerable to issues such as researcher bias and predispositions (Leedy & Ormrod, 2015: 319). Therefore, this study acknowledges that it is not possible to achieve true objectivity in conducting the research. Subsequently, this study took a variety of steps to mitigate the absence of complete objectivity. These steps included the inclusion of contrasting or contradictory collected data to avoid "cherry-picking" of data, seeking constant feedback from the supervisor, and overt acknowledgement of researcher biases (Leedy & Ormrod, 2015: 319). Time constraints were a significant limiting factor, as the study had to be completed within a year, according to the requirements of a Rhodes University Coursework and Thesis Master's Degree. Subsequently, only a limited number of participants were selected. Furthermore, the selection of participants was further affected by the fact that not everyone that was approached agreed to be in the study.

1.7. Ethical considerations

The study conducted was a minimal risk study. However, it was still guided by RUESC's ethical framework, for example the study took steps to maintain the anonymity of the participants and ensure that their information and identities remain confidential. Participant consent was attained prior to the conducting of the interviews and was achieved by asking participants to sign consent forms (see Appendix C).

1.8. Site of study

Rhodes University is a small, English medium university situated in Makhanda in the Eastern cape of South Africa. Founded in 1904, Rhodes University is situated in the historic city of Makhanda, formerly known as Grahamstown (Times Higher Education, 2023). The university has six main faculties including humanities, commerce, education, law, science, and pharmacy. The relatively small size of the university means that students have access to close supervision from academic staff throughout their studies, and the size of the surrounding city places most amenities within walking distance (Times Higher Education, 2023).

There are between 8700 and 9300 students currently enrolled at Rhodes University, with around 6500 undergraduate students and approximately 2750 postgraduate students, 20% of which are made up of international students (Rhodes University, 2023). Female students make up about 60% of the student body with male students making up around 40% (Rhodes University, 2023). Over 70% of students enrolled at Rhodes University are black African students (Rhodes University, 2019).

Chapter 2: Contextualising Instagram-related male body ideals

2.1. Introduction

Existing literature dealing on body image concerns has largely focused on the ways in which women experience this phenomenon. The focus on the female experience has been attributed to traditional beliefs that males are at a minimal risk of exhibiting issues related to body image (Daniel & Bridges, 2009: 32). However, Daniel and Bridges (2009: 32) state that in recent times researchers have begun to question the validity of these claims, thus resulting in the emergence of a new focus on body image perceptions amongst males. Despite this emerging field of study, the topic of male body image remains an under-researched area. To contribute towards filling this gap in the literature, this study seeks to analyse the linkages between Instagram use and body image perceptions amongst male, gym-going students at Rhodes University.

This literature review chapter critically engages with relevant literature on the topic of social media and body image perceptions amongst males. The first section looks at the historical roots of studies on body image, most of which focus on the female body experience, which is linked to a discussion on the rising interest in male body image concerns. This is followed by an analysis of various key concepts and themes related to this study, such as male body ideals, factors affecting internalisation of body ideals, and body dissatisfaction. The final section looks at the existing literature on the linkages between social media and male body image, focusing on the ways in which Instagram disseminates male body ideals, as well as these ideals' role in shaping the body experiences of men.

2.2. Contextualising studies on male body image

Prior to the 1980s, body image was predominantly viewed as a female issue (Cohane & Pope, 2001: 373). Subsequently, most studies on body image focused on women's body experiences. For instance, Bartky's (1988) work titled *Foucault, femininity and the modernization of patriarchal power* analyses the various practices and discourses aimed specifically at women and their effect on multiple aspects of female body image. Through this analysis, Bartky explores the ways in which the female body is controlled in what she describes as "a disciplinary regime of femininity" (McNay, 1991: 131). Subsequently, Bartky's (1988: 64) analysis highlights a central theme of feminist theories of the body, that is, the need to address "the forms of subjection that engender the feminine body". The reasoning behind this has been

attributed to a consensus that social pressures to be a certain size or shape are more pronounced for women than men (Grogan & Richards, 2002: 219). These pressures manifest in a variety of ways and have been linked to factors such as gender socialisation, gender norms and values, and cultural beauty expectations (Neagu, 2015: 32). According to Daniel and Bridges (2009: 32), the lack of studies on male body image issues is linked to the perception that men are at little to no risk of experiencing body image issues.

However, from the late 1980s onwards a cultural shift in attitudes towards the male body has seen increased attention paid to men's body image issues. This shift in attitudes has been linked to the cultural shift in popular media portrayals of men's bodies in the 1980s that saw the male body increasingly used in place of the female body in television advertisements (Grogan & Richards, 2002: 220). Subsequently, it is argued that these representations of the male body in the media resulted in the production and dissemination of male body ideals. The pressure to conform to these ideals was linked to increased male concern with body image. Furthermore, failure to live up to these ideals was linked to male body issues such as body dysmorphia and steroid use, both of which are linked to male body dissatisfaction (Leit *et al*., 2002: 334). This is supported by increased observations of male body dissatisfaction in recent years (Neagu, 2015: 32). Due to these developments, researchers have recently begun to engage in studies that aim to "define, measure, and develop theories that capture" men's experiences of body image and in doing so, gain a better understanding of the recent increase in male body image issues (Daniel & Bridges, 2009: 32). However, despite recent interest in male experiences of body image, very few studies exist explicitly dealing with this issue, most of which incorporate quantitative means of analysis. For example, findings from prior studies on male body image concerns, incorporating an assessment tool known as the Drive for Muscularity Scale which is used to capture the construct of male body image as related to the drive for muscularity, have proposed that media exposure to male body ideals was positively correlated with the drive for muscularity in male participants (Leit *et al*., 2002; Morrison *et al*., 2003). Subsequently, this study seeks to engage with the topic of male body image by incorporating a qualitative approach aimed at understanding men's subjective experiences of body image issues. A useful way to better understand subjective male experiences of body image is through the analysis of key concepts and themes related to this topic, such as male body ideals, sociocultural influences of body ideals, and body dissatisfaction.

2.2.1. Western male body ideals

Contemporary western culture has become increasingly focused on the male body, evident in increasing representations of men's bodies in the media (Smith *et al*., 2011: 232). In contrast to female body ideals, which portray the ideal female body as thin, western portrayals of the ideal male body associate attractiveness with increased muscularity. Early studies on muscular male body ideals showed evidence of the widespread impact that such ideals had on public perceptions of male bodies. Murray *et al*.'s (1996) study on muscular body ideals reported that 72% of participants, both male and female, believed that society had an ideal body type for men. When describing this ideal, 74% of the participants reported that the ideal male body was muscular (Morrison *et al*., 2004: 574). A study by Thompson and Tantleff (1992) supported the notion of a muscular body ideal for men, with participants of this study perceiving "male figures with muscular chests" as more assertive, confident, and popular. Other studies linking male body image and muscular body ideals have incorporated assessments to measure the extent to which muscularity impacts male body experiences. In a review of existing assessments of male body image, Cafri and Thompson (2004) argued that the Drive for Muscularity Scale (DMS) was the most effective instrument for measuring male body image experiences. The DMS measures men's drive towards attaining an increasingly muscular body and its development was motivated by evidence suggesting that men's drive to muscularity was one of the most significant factors related to male body image (Daniel & Bridges, 2009: 32). In addition, Hallsworth *et al*.'s (2005) study on individual differences in male body image noted that men that engaged in bodybuilding practices exhibited a higher drive for muscularity in comparison to men that did not lift weights. Furthermore, Marzano-Parisoli (2001: 225) suggested that men who engage in body-building are more likely to subscribe to male body ideals. Therefore, these factors motivate this study's focus on gym-going, male students.

According to more recent studies on body ideals, the current male body ideal is described as "V-shaped", with a muscular upper body, well defined abdominal muscles, and narrow hips (see Tiggerman & Anderberg, 2020; Watson & Murnen, 2019; Chatzopolou, Filieri & Dogruyol, 2020). However, according to this ideal, men do not strive to be hyper-muscular, like bodybuilders. Instead, the ideal male body is characterised as an athletic build, that is, a combination of muscularity and leanness (Watson & Murnen, 2019: 2). According to Tiggerman and Anderberg (2020: 238), this ideal is visible in the increasingly objectifying presentation of bare-chested men in advertising and other media outlets. Subsequently, it has been argued that this ideal underlies men's increased desire to be both more muscular and

leaner (Tigger & Anderberg, 2020: 238). Similarly, the current male body ideal favoured by American media is one characterised by highly defined muscularity and leanness. It has been noted that male models in popular magazines possess bodies that have become increasingly muscular, whilst decreasing in overall size (Taylor & Fortaleza, 2016: 380). Similarly, male protagonists in movies are often played by muscular actors. One reason behind the male desire for increased muscularity is its association with status and masculine norms, such as power, control, and assertiveness (Smith *et al*., 2011: 232). Although linked to western male body ideals, the dominance of western media portrayals of male bodies has also been linked to the internalisation of muscular body ideals in non-western contexts. This highlights the need to assess non-western body experiences in the context of the dominance of western male body ideals.

2.2.2. Male body ideals in non-western contexts

According to Gultzow *et al*. (2020: 281), sociocultural influences play a significant role in shaping male body ideals. This notion is supported by Ricciardelli *et al*.'s (2007) study on the role of ethnicity and culture in male body image which suggested that black African men may adhere to different body ideals than white western men. For instance, findings suggested that black Kenyan men "demonstrated less preference for muscularity" in comparison to white men from the US and Europe (Ricciardelli *et al*., 2007: 589).While muscularity is associated with the dominant male body ideals in western contexts, this is not the case with many non-western cultures. Cross-cultural studies provide useful data in analysing the role of cultural values in shaping male perceptions of their bodies. For instance, Taiwanese men exhibit less discrepancy than their western counterparts in terms of actual and ideal body type. This is likely because Taiwanese media outlets place significantly less emphasis on Asian male bodies than western media (Campbell *et al*., 2005: 371). This notion aligns with traditional Chinese ideals of masculinity that prioritise intelligence over other attributes, such as muscularity. In contrast to western body ideals, many non-western cultures view fatness as more desirable as it signifies health, wealth, and fertility (Thomas & Kleyman, 2020: 312). For example, a Kenyan study on body ideals conducted by Ettarh *et al*. (2013) reported that most participants viewed larger bodies as "the preferred ideal body". Similarly, in a study looking at cross-cultural differences in body evaluations, Furnham & Baguma (1994) noted that Ugandan participants viewed larger bodies as more attractive and healthier than thinner bodies, whereas British participants viewed them as less attractive.

2.2.3.The impact of western body ideals on South African men

Traditionally, it was believed that non-western societies were "shielded" from experiencing body image-related issues and problems related to body size or shape were largely viewed as a western phenomenon (le Grange *et al*., 1998: 250). One explanation for this belief was that body image was said to be linked to western media representations of the body. Therefore, in such instances, non-western societies were said to be protected from experiencing body image issues because of their reduced exposure to western media (Campbell *et al*., 2005: 372). However, the dominance of western media in recent years has resulted in the spread of body ideals to non-western contexts. In the context of globalisation, non-western populations are becoming increasingly exposed to western body ideals through American movies, television, and music (Thomas & Kleynman, 2020: 316). This has led some theorists to argue that the introduction of western body ideals to non-western societies could result in increased body ideal uniformity across cultures through the internalisation of these ideals.

In the South African context, the dominance of western male body ideals has been linked to the legacy of apartheid and its associated masculinity norms and values. According to Reardon and Govender (2011: 79), apartheid-related male body ideals are closely related to western body ideals through their association with muscularity. For white South Africans, conforming to muscular body ideals was linked to their consolidation of power and privilege in society. Subsequently, for many white South Africans, muscular male body ideals came to symbolise power, control, and domination of others which manifested in problematic behaviours characterised by "aggression, domination, and self-interest" (Reardon & Govender, 2011: 79). However, the study neglected the impact that these ideals had on non-white male South Africans, thus highlighting the need to explore this phenomenon. Despite increased interest in the linkages between western body ideals and non-western body experiences, this area of study is still significantly under researched, thus highlighting the need to develop more context-specific analyses of male body experiences.

The impact of western body ideals in South Africa can potentially be linked to the country's past. During apartheid, the white minority was the dominant group whilst the black majority was marginalised. However, following the collapse of the apartheid regime, many spaces retained western cultural aspects. For example, the integration of South African schools exposed a greater number of black children to western ideals. Other factors, such as upward mobility of black classes and greater urbanisation, have also been linked to the increased

internalisation of western ideals. These factors have been linked to negative outcomes such as cultural erosion, confusion over racial identity, and inter-generational conflicts within family structures (Marais *et al*., 2003: 45). Subsequently, Marais *et al*. (2003: 46) state that, in the post-apartheid era, young black South African men are increasingly exposed to new social pressures that could potentially alter their bodily perceptions. Coetzee & Perrett's (2010: 73) study comparing African and Caucasian body ideals in the South African and American contexts found that the "young African elite" are increasingly exposed to new African body ideals that closely align with western body ideals. This point is supported by Tovée *et al*.'s (2006) study that showed that South Africans that moved to the United Kingdom perceived leaner bodies to be more attractive than their counterparts living in rural South Africa. Furthermore, evidence suggests that exposure to western body ideals can be linked to increased body dissatisfaction. For instance, in South Africa black men residing in rural areas are said to have less exposure to western body ideals than black men residing in urban areas and are therefore, less likely to experience body image issues (Ricciardelli *et al*., 2007: 589). This notion is supported by Marais *et al.*'s (2003) study on acculturation and eating disorders which showed that higher levels of body dissatisfaction amongst black South African men were linked to the rejection of traditional values, thus suggesting that, by assimilating to western body ideals, participants were more vulnerable to experiencing negative perceptions of their own bodies.

2.2.4. The linkages between age and the internalisation of male body ideals

Existing studies on male body image have identified age as another significant factor affecting the internalisation of male body ideals. According to Neagu (2015: 33), young adults pay significant attention to their bodily selves and physical appearance. This is due to young adults' impressionability during this life stage, resulting in increased social pressure to conform to dominant body ideals. According to Smith *et al*. (2011: 232), data collected from focus groups reported that young men perceived a social expectation to have more muscular bodies, as conformity to this ideal was linked with increased self-confidence and social power. Similarly, Groghan and Richards' (2002) exploratory study on male body image found that young adults and teenagers reported increased peer pressure to conform to muscular body ideals and that conformity to these ideals was linked to feelings of acceptance by their peers. Subsequently, the linkages between age and the internalisation of male body ideals supports this study's focus on university students' body experiences.

2.2.5. Body dissatisfaction in men

People experiencing body dissatisfaction are said to feel dissatisfied with their appearance and perceive a discrepancy between their current physical appearance and idealised appearances (Rounsefell *et al*., 2020: 20). Male body dissatisfaction is said to occur when men perceive a discrepancy between male body ideals and their actual bodies. According to Morrison *et al*. (2004: 574), male body dissatisfaction can occur when men deviate from muscular body ideals, either by perceiving themselves to be too thin or too fat, and that this results in negative body image. Leit *et al*. (2002: 337), provide a similar description by describing male body dissatisfaction as a reflection of an increased discrepancy between the degree of muscularity that men perceive themselves to possess and the level of muscularity that they would ideally like to achieve.

Male body dissatisfaction has been linked to popular media's promotion and dissemination of muscular body ideals. According to Michaels *et al*. (2013: 175), media portrayals of male body ideals are "incongruous with the average man's body". This is because popular media portrayals of men's bodies are often significantly larger and more muscular than that of a normal sized adult male (Smith *et al*., 2011: 232). Subsequently, the unattainability of male body ideals has been linked to increasing body image issues in men. According to Daniel and Bridges (2020: 34), large scale surveys of male body image showed that, in the past three decades, male body dissatisfaction has increased from 15% to 43% amongst participants. Furthermore, male body dissatisfaction has been shown to affect younger populations more. This is evident in a study that found that nearly 84% of male university students that participated in the study experienced some form of body dissatisfaction, as compared to 69% of older adult participants (Daniel & Bridges, 2010: 34). These studies, however, were conducted on western populations and therefore, highlight the need for similar explorations in non-western contexts.

Unfortunately, negative body image or body dissatisfaction are linked to a variety of issues related to the subjective well-being of young males. According to Rounsefell *et al*. (2020: 20), body dissatisfaction can lead to issues such as depression, low self-esteem, and lower quality of life. Body dissatisfaction has also been associated with a variety of behavioural issues in young men, such as increased steroid use, extreme dieting, and excessive exercising (Tager *et al*., 2006: 229). The linkages between muscular body ideals and male dissatisfaction have also

been linked to an increase in body dysmorphia, a disorder in which men become obsessed with achieving an increasingly muscular body (Leit *et al*., 2002: 334).

2.3. Instagram and male body image

With the increasing popularity of the Internet, research on body image has undergone a shift in focus from traditional media outlets to social media platforms. In particular, there has been significant interest in Instagram, a social media platform specifically designed for the sharing of photographs (Tiggerman & Anderberg, 2020: 237). Previous studies have identified photo-based platforms as problematic for body image (see Cohen, Newton-John & Slater, 2018; Holland & Tiggerman, 2016). For instance, Chatzopolou *et al*. (2020: 1271) states that, on Instagram, users' bodies are constantly on display and under greater scrutiny than other social media platform, such as Facebook and Twitter. The focus on Instagram is also supported by the widespread use of the platform, with over 500 million daily users worldwide (Statista, 2020a). Furthermore, Chatzopolou *et al*. (2020: 1971) noted a significant increase in Instagram users between 2016 and 2018, from 600 million to over 1 billion users in the space of two years. Subsequently, the combined popularity and influence of picture-based platforms underlies the importance of investigating the ways in which exposure to Instagram shapes users' perceptions of their own, and other people's bodies (Chatzopolou *et al*., 2020: 1271).

However, despite the growing number of studies on Instagram and body image, most of these focus on women's body experiences (see Pedalino & Camerini, 2022; Brown & Tiggerman, 2016). In contrast, little research has been done on the impact that Instagram has on male body image. This is despite the popularity of Instagram amongst male users. In contrast to traditional media outlets which have seen greater female interaction, such as fashion magazines, Instagram has seen significant male use, with over 46 million monthly male users in the US alone (Statista, 2020a).

2.3.1. Instagram and body dissatisfaction

Although a number of experimental studies have been conducted showing that exposure to idealised Instagram imagery is linked to body dissatisfaction in women (see Brown & Tiggerman, 2016; Tiggerman & Zaccardo, 2015), little research has been done on the topic of men's body dissatisfaction in relation to Instagram use. This is despite evidence that suggests that, similarly to women, Instagram exposes men to a multitude of unrealistic body ideals (Tiggerman & Anderberg, 2020: 238). For example, influencers on Instagram are said to play a role in promoting unrealistic male body ideals. According to Matzen (2020: 15), influencers

can negatively impact the body perceptions of their followers through the constant exposure to muscular bodies. This issue is exacerbated by influencers tendency to alter their images in a manner that promotes an even more unrealistic ideal (Heinicke & Vagic, 2023: 37).

2.3.2.The role of fitness influencers in shaping perceptions of the ideal male body

Instagram has given rise to a new kind of celebrity known as 'influencers', characterised by their extensive followings (Tiggerman & Anderberg, 2020: 238). These influencers, who have a minimum of 40 000 followers, are often very attractive and use their widespread reach to promote products or influence the decisions of their fanbase in other ways. According to Tiggerman and Anderberg (2020: 238), Instagram influencers occupy a space "somewhere between peers and traditional celebrities in their status". According to Matzen (2020: 7), influencers can shape the perceptions of young adults on Instagram due to their relatability. This is because many influencers share characteristics with their followers, whether it be in terms of their age, their background, or their interests. Matzen (2020: 7) describes the "average influencer" as someone from a relatable background, that is, a "regular" person who became famous for the content that they post on social media. Furthermore, the influence of these online celebrities can be tied to their ability to target niche areas of interest on social media platforms. For instance, many male influencers target users interested in the fitness industry, positioning themselves as credible authorities on industry-related topics. Additionally, influencers' ability to shape the perceptions of their followers is strengthened through direct communication, as they are able to respond directly to users through the comments section on Instagram (Matzen, 2020: 7).

2.3.3. Fitspiration

A relatively new trend on Instagram, known as fitspiration, has been identified as particularly relevant to the ways in which male bodies are viewed on the platform (Tiggerman & Anderberg, 2020: 238). Tiggerman and Anderberg (2020: 238) describe fitspiration as an amalgam of the words fitness and inspiration, consisting of images aimed at promoting exercise and the pursuit of a healthy lifestyle. Posts aligned with this trend are usually images of "toned, muscular bodies", exercise equipment, and apparel (Chatzopoulu *et al*., 2020: 1275). The posts also include selfies of fit adults before and after exercising, a variety of exercise methods, and healthy recipes. Fitspiration and its associated ideals entail that users follow strict diets, engage in multiple workout sessions per week, and browse through health and fitness blogs daily (Chatzpolou *et al.*, 2020: 1275).

Despite the potential for health benefits, studies have shown that exposure to fitspiration content can lead to negative body perceptions in women. For example, a content analysis of 600 fitspiration images conducted by Tiggerman and Zaccardo (2015) found that most posts consisted of objectifying elements and portrayed a female body ideal that was thin and toned. However, other studies have indicated that fitspiration imagery impacts male body perceptions as well by highlighting the fact that 30% of fitspiration posts were of men, mostly bare-chested and with high levels of muscularity (see Deighton-Smith & Bell, 2018; Tiggerman & Zaccardo, 2018). Furthermore, a recent study conducted by Fatt *et al.* (2019) found that men's exposure to fitspiration posts was indirectly related to negative perceptions of their body via muscular ideal internalisation. Similarly, Tiggerman and Anderberg's (2020: 241) on the effects of influencers and fitspiration on male body image found that fitspiration content is "harmful to men", particularly regarding their levels of body satisfaction.

2.3.4. Instagram and the dissemination of western male body ideals

Gultzow *et al*.'s (2020) study on male body portrayals found that Instagram was saturated with posts of lean and muscular white men, often engaged in exercising. Furthermore, posts that aligned with this body type were noted as receiving "overwhelmingly positive" interactions (Gultzow *et al*. 2020: 288). Subsequently, not only do such posts align with western male body ideals, but their association with positive responses is likely to encourage male users from other races or ethnic backgrounds to conform to these ideals, regardless of the body ideals associated with their specific contexts. Therefore, these findings support Thomas and Kleynman's (2020) assertion that the dissemination of western body ideals to non-western contexts could result in increased uniformity of body ideals (see 2.2.3.).

2.3.5. Age and the internalisation of Instagram-related body ideals

According to Pedalino and Camerini (2022: 1), Instagram is "one of the most popular social media platforms among the younger population". Furthermore, Rounsefell *et al*. (2020: 37) found that young adults were more likely to internalise and conform to social media body ideals, resulting in increased pressure to "present an ideal image of themselves" on platforms such as Instagram. In doing so, young adults often perpetuate Instagram's culture of peer comparison and competition, resulting in increased self-surveillance and self-regulation. It has also been noted that the increased pressure for young adults to conform to Instagram-related body ideals places them at a higher risk of experiencing body dissatisfaction (Rounsefell *et al*., 2020: 37). Social media marketing companies have also been known to take advantage of

young adults' predisposition to engage in social comparisons by utilising image-based marketing strategies that use idealised images of influencers and other celebrities to sell products to this population group (Rounsefell *et al*., 2020: 20).

2.4. Conclusion

Existing literature has identified male body image concerns as an increasingly problematic issue in contemporary societies. Despite the increase in studies looking at men's experiences of body image, much of the literature surrounding body image focuses on the female experience. Furthermore, studies that do focus on male body image often look at the topic from a western perspective, thus neglecting non-western male body experiences. Increased social media usage in recent years has also been identified as a significant contributor to male body image concerns and therefore, warrants further exploration. Subsequently, in trying to fill this gap, this study has adopted a qualitative and context-specific approach to male body experiences by looking at the impact of Instagram-related body ideals on the body perceptions of male Rhodes University students.

Chapter 3: Theoretical perspectives on male body image

3.1. Introduction

Michel Foucault's (1977) theory of power, outlined in his book titled *Discipline and Punish*, outlines the ways in which modern forms of power are directed towards, and enacted on, the body. In contrast to premodern forms of power, which are characterised by visual spectacles of power and punishment, modern forms of power seek to regulate and control bodies in subtle and coercive ways, producing "docile bodies" in the process (Foucault, 1977: 138-139). By analysing Foucault's (1977) conceptualisation of key concepts related to his theory of power, such as disciplinary power, docile bodies, and the Panopticon, the first part of this chapter seeks to analyse the ways in which modern forms of power operate through social media platforms, particularly Instagram.

Festinger's (1954) social comparison theory argues that people possess an innate drive to evaluate themselves in terms of performance and appearance, resulting in a tendency to compare themselves with others. Furthermore, Festinger's (1954) theory also suggests that people perceive their own appearance through comparison with sociocultural ideals portrayed in the media. Subsequently, according to Watson *et al*. (2019: 2), social comparison theory represents a useful framework for analysing the effects of exposure to body ideals on male body image. Regarding Instagram usage, Tiggerman and Anderberg (2020: 238) suggest that social comparison plays a role in shaping Instagram users' self-perceptions of their bodies. In particular, exposure to body ideals is linked to body dissatisfaction through the process of upward comparison that results in Instagram users falling short of unrealistic body ideals. Thus, the second part of this chapter seeks to apply and justify the use social comparison theory as a theoretical framing for this study, particularly in relation to the main objective of the dissertation, that is, the analysis of the relationship between Instagram-related body ideals and perceptions of male body image amongst male students at Rhodes University. This will include an overview of the historical roots of the social comparison theory as well as its linkages to its more recent developments. This will be followed by a critical analysis of social comparison theory's relevant concepts, as well as their applicability to the context of this study.

3.2.1. Historical roots of Foucault's theory of power and its focus on the body

Foucault's theorisation of power coincided with the emergence of postructuralism as an influential movement in the latter half of the 20th century (Armstrong, 2003: 1). Specifically, Foucault's identification of the body as a central concept of his theory of power is linked to the

field of French poststructuralism (McNay, 1991: 126). For poststructuralists, the significance of the body as a site of social enquiry is based on the need to deconstruct the problematic dualisms associated with classical knowledge systems and thought. According to McNay (1991: 126), such dualisms are evident in the "Cartesian opposition between body and mind". This dualism, which represents a central theme of classical thought, views the mind and body as "distinct and separate" (Spyker, 2021: 9). Furthermore, Cartesian dualism associates the mind with attributes such as creativity and rationality, whilst the body is viewed as being inferior to the mind, weighing it down in the process (Spyker, 2021: 9). In response to classical thinking's portrayal of the body as separate and inferior to the mind, poststructuralist theorists writing in the 20th century have produced multiple critiques in opposition to the notion of Cartesian dualism. It is within this context that Foucault produced his theory of power.

Through his theorisation of power, Foucault describes the transition from the monarchical or sovereign power, which he associates with premodern societies, to a "modern regulatory power" made up of disciplinary practices, surveillance systems, and tactics of normalisation (Deveux, 1994: 224). This transition is characterised by a shift in the way in which power itself is exercised. Foucault argues that in premodern societies, power lay in the hands of a sovereign authority who exercised absolute control through the threat of, or public display of, violence (Armstrong, 2003: 2). However, from the 17th century onwards Foucault states that a new form of power emerged, one that was exercised in more subtle ways, required less force, and was more extensive through its localised effect in individuals' bodies (Gehring, 2017: 46). This coincided with a period of rapid population growth in western Europe thus prompting the state to exercise power in ways that require "minimum expenditure for the maximum return" (Deveux, 1994: 224). According to Deveux (1994: 224), a central principle related to this new form of power was discipline. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault analyses the disciplinary practices of modern power through his conceptualisation of disciplinary power (Armstrong, 2003: 2).

3.2.2. Disciplinary power and "docile bodies"

Disciplinary power is characterised by its treatment of the body as an object to be trained and manipulated (Armstrong, 2003: 2). In his conceptualisation of disciplinary power, Foucault analyses the disciplinary tactics or practices associated with this concept. For Foucault, these practices first emerged in modern institutional settings such as armies, schools, prisons, and hospitals (Bartky, 1997: 129). Eventually, these practices began to be used by the state more

broadly as tools of social control and regulation. According to Armstrong (2003: 2), the central characteristic of disciplinary power is that it is "exercised directly on the body" through practices that subject the body's activities to processes of constant surveillance and scrutiny thus allowing for the "pervasive" control of the conduct of individuals.

Foucault states that the main goal of disciplinary practices is to increase the "utility of the body" (Bartky, 1997: 129). In achieving this goal, disciplinary power seeks to manipulate the elements and behaviour of the body thus producing "subjected and practiced" or "docile" bodies (Foucault, 1977: 138-139). The docile body is a practiced subject in the sense that its activities are governed by what it is expected or required to do, as opposed to what is it able to do (Krasmann, 2017: 14). The production of docile bodies, therefore, involves a process of coercion directly exercised upon the body and its activities thus introducing a new "microphysics of power" that shapes individual conduct (Bartky, 1997: 130). This reiterates the notion that disciplinary power marks a shift in the ways in which power is exercised, from the premodern "visual" spectacle of monarchical or sovereign power, to a more subtle, insidious form of control (Krasmann, 2017: 12). Heyes (2007: 6) states that disciplinary power is not a substance but is instead a "series of circulating relations". It cannot, therefore, be located in an institution or an individual, instead operating on the population and their bodies through techniques of control and regulation under the guise of "mutual benefit" (Heyes, 2007: 6). Therefore, this form of power becomes a part of the subject as opposed to existing externally from it.

This study suggests that Foucault's conceptualisations of disciplinary power and docile bodies are relevant to the objectives of this study. Firstly, the internalisation of disciplinary power is relevant to this research topic because research on body image has identified the media as playing a significant role in the definition and perpetuation of body ideals (Daniel & Bridges, 2010: 33). Male body ideals, such as the muscular and lean male body type, have increasingly been portrayed in social media representations in recent years. Instagram has been identified as a key platform for disseminating male body ideals due to its positivity bias, whereby users often present "idealised images of themselves" (Pedalino & Camerini, 2022: 1). This male body ideal is strongly linked to the norms of dominant masculinities through its association with power, assertiveness, and control (Smith *et al*., 2011: 232). Through the internalisation of these ideals, men's bodies are subjected to a "machinery of power" that "breaks it down and rearranges it" thus producing practiced subjects (Foucault, 1977: 138-139). This power, which is disseminated by social media portrayals of men's bodies, results in men internalising

masculine body ideals to the extent that it the male body ideal becomes intertwined with their sense of self. In some cases, men may internalise these body ideals by "setting them as personal goals", experiencing body image concerns when they fail to meet these ideals (Daniel & Bridges, 2010: 32).

According to Gultzow *et al*. (2020: 281), Instagram, due to its image-based focus, plays a significant role in the development of negative body image amongst men. Through their exposure to male body ideals, male Instagram users can identify and reinforce their own values about body shape, physical activity, and eating (Gultzow *et al*., 2020: 281). Subsequently, the promotion of male body ideals, particularly muscular and lean bodies, on Instagram ensures the docility of users' bodies, as it shapes and manipulates their outward features, gestures, and behaviours. Furthermore, compliance or docility can be linked with social rewards on Instagram, through disciplinary practices or functions such as "likes" or "comments" which become associated with positive emotions and outcomes amongst users (Gultzow *et al*., 2020: 281). Additionally, noncompliance is linked to lower levels of body dissatisfaction (Pedalino & Camerini, 2022: 1). Subsequently, this study suggests that the subtle and coercive nature of the influence of Instagram-related male body ideals increases the applicability of Foucault's theory of power to this research project.

3.2.3. Panoptic gaze and self-surveillance

According to Armstrong (2003: 2), "constant surveillance" is a key component of disciplinary power. Foucault (1977: 201) argues that constant surveillance is a central technique of this form of power that induces a mental state of "permanent visibility" within the individual. In his conceptualisation of disciplinary power, Foucault links the notion of an internalised perpetual visibility to Jeremy Bentham's model of the Panopticon, which refers to the latter's design for a prison that would induce in prisoners a sense of constantly being watched, thus making them more likely to police their own behaviour (Deveaux, 1994: 225).

Bentham's Panopticon is described as a circular perimeter building with a tower at its centre (Bartky, 1997: 131). The tower has large windows that look out onto the inner side of the periphery structure, which is divided into cells with windows facing both the tower and outside. The inward facing windows ensure that the prisoners are visible to the guards in the tower, whilst the outside facing windows provide backlighting that enhance the visibility of the contents of the cell (Bartky, 1997: 131). Furthermore, the guards in the tower can see the prisoners in their cells without being seen themselves, therefore the prisoners become aware

that they may be monitored at any given moment thus warranting that the behave as if they are constantly being watched.

According to Manokha (2018: 222), Bentham's Panopticon is characterised by three key assumptions, namely the omnipresence of the guard or overseer facilitated by their "total invisibility"; the universal visibility of the prisoners; and the assumption that the prisoners are constantly under surveillance. The omnipresence of the overseer relates to Foucault's conceptualisation of disciplinary power through its reduced expenditures of force whilst ensuring that the effect of power is more far reaching (Deveaux, 1994: 224). This is because the Panopticon's design makes it impossible for the prisoners to discern if anyone is present in the tower and therefore, the prisoner cannot be sure if they are being watched or not. Subsequently, the panoptic gaze of the guard ensures that the exercise of power becomes less visible and more indiscernible thus making it "anonymous and dispersed" (Krasmann, 2017: 13). This means that power is continuously exercised, even in the absence of the overseer. Coupled with the heightened sense of visibility and the idea of being constantly under surveillance, power infiltrates the mind of the watched in a manner that makes them contribute to their own subjection.

Subjection, therefore, is not only the product of visibility but of imagination as well, as the subject's belief or "idea" of being watched becomes a part of the disciplining process (Krasmann, 2017: 13). According to Krasmann (2017: 13), "anticipating the gaze" means that the subject assumes and accepts the power of the panoptic gaze thus rendering the use of force unnecessary. Subsequently, power is exercised over oneself, manifesting in self-regulation and self-restraint (Manokha, 2018: 222). This leads individuals to adjust their behaviours in manner that conforms to the norms they assume they are expected to adhere to. In this sense, the panoptic gaze can be related to a normalising gaze, one that coerces individual conduct under the guise of mutual benefit, ensuring adherence to societal norms through a process of self-regulation and self-restraint (Deveaux, 1994: 225).

This study suggests that Foucault's use of the Panopticon in his theorisation of power is a useful tool for analysing the ways in which social media platforms promote self-surveillance and self-regulation in men. According to Gultzow *et al*. (2020: 281), the "ubiquity" of social media means that men engage with social media platforms such as Instagram just as much as women do. Coupled with the image-focused nature of Instagram, this means that men's bodies are becoming increasingly visible. Observers, manifesting as followers, are not physically present

or visible, but their presence is felt through their interactions, either through liking or commenting on one's posts. Furthermore, when one posts on Instagram, their image remains on the platform, visible to their audience even when they themselves are not online. The combination of Instagram users' increased visibility and the omnipresence of their audience suggests parallels between Instagram use and Foucault's metaphorical use of the Panopticon. For instance, studies on social media have shown that, to gain approval from their followers, Instagram users tend to "resort to self-presentation behaviours" in which they try to match anticipated expectations by presenting a highly-refined image of themselves (Pedalino & Camerini, 2022: 2). Coupled with the social rewards linked to conforming to Instagram-related body ideals, users increasingly engage in body surveillance, which refers to the process of constantly monitoring one's body from the "perspective of an outside observer" (Daniel & Bridges, 2010: 33). According to Daniel and Bridges (2010: 33), the increased self-consciousness associated with body surveillance can lead to higher levels of body dissatisfaction in both men and women.

3.3.1. The historical roots of social comparison theory

Within the field of the social sciences, early theorising on social comparisons can be traced back to the works of Sherif and Hyman (Buunk & Gibbons, 2007: 3). According to Sherif (1936), two people that encounter the same unstable situation develop a single characteristic reference point through a process of mutual social influence. Hyman (1942) also addressed comparison processes by asserting that the assessment of one's status in relation to characteristics such as intellectual capability, financial status, and physical attractiveness was dependent on the group with whom the individual compares themselves. However, it was not until Leon Festinger's (1954) paper that the notion of social comparison was explicitly used and a systematic theory on social comparison was produced.

Festinger's (1954: 217) social comparison theory was based on the assumption that individuals are motivated by the desire to know that their opinions are correct and the need "to know what one is and is not capable of doing". Although this motivation was not considered to be social in character, Festinger (1954: 217) argued that the fulfilment of this motivation became social when people were unable to evaluate abilities and opinions by objectively testing them against physical reality. In such instances, people tended to evaluate their abilities and opinions "by comparing themselves with people who are similar to them on relevant dimensions" thus engaging in a process of making social comparisons (Hogg, 2000: 402). According to Hogg

(2000: 402), these assumptions formed the basis upon which Festinger produced insights into a range of social phenomena such as competition, conformity, attraction, and affiliation. However, despite the popularity of social comparison theory, there were a number of issues associated with its early interpretation. For instance, Festinger's theory of social comparisons has been criticised for its narrow focus on the comparison of opinions and abilities and for failing to differentiate between self-evaluation and esteem enhancing self-validation (Jones & Regan, 1974: 133). In response to some of the shortfalls of Festinger's original theorisation of social comparison theory, a variety of scholars have attempted to build on the existing theory by developing their own interpretations of social comparison processes.

3.3.2. Recent Developments in Social Comparison Theory

Over the past five decades, social comparison theory has undergone multiple reformulations, transitioning from a focused theoretical statement related to self-evaluation through comparison to a varied and complex theoretical framework encompassing numerous different approaches and applications (Buunk & Gibbons, 2007: 3). One development related to social comparison has been the shift in emphasis from Festinger's assumption that individuals desire to evaluate themselves accurately to the assumption that people desire to evaluate themselves in a way that enhances self-esteem. The addition of the notion of self-enhancement was motivated by the idea that people may engage in self-comparisons to feel better about themselves, as opposed to merely evaluating their abilities (Hogg, 2000: 402). Subsequently, it became increasingly accepted that social comparisons are motivated by both the need for self-evaluation and self-enhancement. Based off this assumption, two key concepts emerged, namely upward comparison and downward comparison. The concept of upward comparison was based on the notion that self-evaluation was satisfied by making comparisons with people that are similar to oneself but are also perceived to be marginally better off (Hogg, 2000: 402). In contrast, Hogg (2000: 402) states that the concept of downward comparison was predicated on the assumption that self-enhancement is achieved through social comparisons with people perceived to be worse off than oneself.

In recent years, social comparison theory has been applied to analyses on the linkages between media portrayals and body image (Buunk & Gibbons, 2007: 4). According to scholars such as Jones (2001), models appearing in the media were shown to be targets of social comparison and exposure to these models, who were often associated with idealistic body types, was associated with higher levels of body satisfaction. Other studies have suggested that social

comparisons based on physical appearance tended to be upward comparisons as opposed to downward comparisons, and that these comparisons often produce negative self-perceptions of physical attractiveness (Morrison *et al*., 2004: 575). For example, Thornton & Moore (1993) observed that both male and female participants exposed to images of same-sex models perceived themselves to be less attractive than those who were not exposed to these images. In a similar study, Martin & Kennedy (1993) found that comparisons with professional models in the media were associated with negative self-evaluation and greater body dissatisfaction. Subsequently, the recent applications of social comparison theory to analyses on the role of media platforms in producing negative self-evaluations and body dissatisfaction have motivated its selection and application to this study.

3.3.3. Linking Social Comparison Theory, Instagram Use, and Body Dissatisfaction in Young Males

The recent applications of social comparison theory to studies on the relationship between social media platforms and body dissatisfaction highlights this theory's relevance in the context of the main objectives of this study. Furthermore, these studies have identified a variety of key concepts related to social comparison theory that are particularly useful when analysing the relationship between Instagram use and body dissatisfaction amongst young male students. These concepts include Instagram's positivity bias, upward comparison, and body dissatisfaction.

Instagram, with its picture-focused content, has been identified as having a greater impact on body image than other social media platforms and therefore users are more likely to engage in social comparisons with other users (Gultzow *et al*., 2020: 281). However, according to Pedalino and Camerini (2022: 1), Instagram's content is often characterised by a positivity bias which means that users generally upload idealised images of themselves. For young males the ideal body type reflects dominant male body ideals and therefore, is often portrayed as lean and muscular and is associated with masculine norms and values such as power, strength, and dominance (Tager *et al*., 2006: 228). Regarding Instagram use, conformity to these ideals is linked to greater rewards in the form of interactions such as "liking" or "commenting" on people's uploaded content (Pedalino & Camerini, 2022: 2). This notion is supported by Gultzow *et al*. (2020: 281-282) who hypothesised that being lean and muscular would result in higher levels of engagement and social rewards on Instagram. However, these processes are not linked to body dissatisfaction directly. Instead, body dissatisfaction occurs because of social

comparison processes. For instance, Tager *et al*. (2006: 229) state that increased exposure to male body ideals is likely to result in male body dissatisfaction "when they perceive their bodies as comparing unfavourably to the ideal". This notion is supported by Tiggerman and Anderberg (2020: 238) who state that exposure to body ideals is linked to body dissatisfaction through the process of upward comparison that results in Instagram users falling short of unrealistic body ideals. Although social comparison theory originally suggested that people were more likely to engage in comparisons with individuals that were similar to themselves, studies have shown that both men and women often make appearance-related comparisons with dissimilar others, such as comparing themselves with unrealistic imagery of body ideals (Watson *et al*., 2019: 2).

Pedalino and Camerini's (2022) study on Instagram use and body dissatisfaction looks at the role that upward comparison plays in producing negative self-perceptions in young females. Although the focus of the study is on young females as opposed to young males, Pedalino and Camerini's (2022) study produced some valuable insights that may be applicable when looking at Instagram's role in producing body dissatisfaction amongst young male students at Rhodes University. In particular, this study's focus on upward comparison processes highlighted the ways in which the dissemination of idealised body images by social media influencers coincided with increased negative self-evaluation amongst young users (Pedalino & Camerini, 2022: 3). According to Pedalino and Camerini (2022: 3), upward comparison refers to the process of comparing oneself to someone else that they perceive to be "better off", often in association with one's physical appearance. Therefore, Instagram, with its abundance of idealistic images portraying physically attractive, lean, and muscular bodies, presents young male users with multiple opportunities to engage in upward comparison with other users. In many cases, users practice upward comparison by engaging with, comparing, and presenting themselves alongside social media influencers. This is supported by Heinicke and Vagic's (2023: 44) study that showed that, when exposed to the idealistic bodies of Instagram influencers, male users tended to not only to perceive the influencers' bodies as "flawless" and "good looking", but also perceived the attractiveness of their own bodies by measuring themselves against this ideal. According to Tiggerman and Zaccardo (2015), this process is exacerbated by Instagram because the application allows for individuals to engage in multiple comparisons with relative ease.

However, Brown and Tiggerman (2016) found that exposure to Instagram images depicting attractive and physically fit celebrities was linked to higher body dissatisfaction mediated by

social comparison. Other scholars, such as Suls *et al*. (2002: 162), reiterate the link between upward comparison and negative self-perceptions by stating that exposure to people that are perceived to be superior can lead one to negatively evaluate themselves based on the idea that they are relatively disadvantaged. This is evident in Karazisa and Crowther's (2009) study which found that university-aged male participants frequently engaged in comparisons with images portraying muscular body ideals, and that this process was linked to increased levels of body dissatisfaction. Furthermore, body dissatisfaction in relation to Instagram use is intensified by the interactive processes such as liking and commenting on photos. Pedalino and Camerini (2022: 3) state that greater number of likes on photos were often associated with higher levels of perceived attractiveness, thus leading to an increased likelihood of "appearance comparison and body dissatisfaction".

3.4. Conclusion

The first part of this chapter outlines the ways in which modern forms of power are enacted on the body to produce "docile bodies", that is, bodies whose outward appearance and behaviours have been manipulated by systems or regimes of power (Foucault, 1977: 138-139). Through the analysis of Foucault's (1977) theory of power, this chapter suggests that the concepts of disciplinary power, docile bodies, and the panoptic gaze are applicable to the ways in which power operates through social media platforms such as Instagram. This is evident in the ways that Instagram can be linked to the promotion and dissemination of male body ideals, the manipulation of male bodies, and the promotion of self-regulating practices amongst male users. Subsequently, these characteristics suggest the applicability of Foucault's (1977) theory of power to the objectives of this study.

The second part of this chapter looks at the role of social comparison theory in shaping body experiences. The application of social comparison theory is motivated by its relevance to the main objective of this study, that is the analysis of the relationship between Instagram related body ideals and perceptions of body image amongst male students at Rhodes University. In particular, recent developments in social comparison theory have seen its increased applicability in relation to studies on the relationship between social media and body dissatisfaction. Through its conceptualisation of upward comparisons, social comparison theory provides a useful tool for analysing the ways in which male students at Rhodes University engage in social comparisons with people that they perceive to be better off than themselves, particularly in terms of muscularity and other masculine body ideals. Furthermore,

through its connection with body dissatisfaction, social comparison theory also outlines the ways in which social comparison processes can result in negative self-perceptions amongst young adult men.

Chapter 4: Interpreting perceptions of Instagram-related male body ideals

4.1. Introduction

This chapter aims to provide an analysis of the data collected from the semi-structured, in-depth interviews, contextualising it in connection with the literature review. The process of analysis highlighted several relevant themes embedded within the participant responses. These themes were used to divide the chapter into four main sections, namely the lean and muscular body ideal, the factors influencing perceptions surrounding Instagram's male body ideal, self-surveillance, and body dissatisfaction. These sections were further divided into subthemes to give a wholistic account of the participants' perceptions surrounding Instagram's male body ideals and the concepts relevant to their subjective responses. Furthermore, this chapter used both Foucault's theory of power and Festinger's social comparison theories as theoretical lenses with which to interpret the collected data.

4.2. Brief description of participants

To ensure confidentiality, the names of the participants have been omitted. Participants are instead identified by the order in which they were interviewed, that is, Participant 1 through to 7. All seven participants included in this study are male students enrolled at Rhodes University, aged between 19 and 29 years of age. They are all signed up for the Rhodes University gym and were frequent users of the facility and are all users of the Instagram application. Participants of this study are all daily users of Instagram, using the platform multiple times a day. Participants were selected in a manner that reflected the demographics of gym users at the Rhodes University gym. Participants 1 and 2 are both black South African students that are in the final year of their undergraduate degrees and are both studying in the humanities faculty. Participant 3 is a coloured second-year undergraduate student enrolled in the Bachelor of Arts programme. Participant 4 is a black South African student, currently doing his Master of Commerce degree. Participant 5 is a black South African student currently doing his Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) degree. Participant 6 is a coloured Zimbabwean Masters student in the humanities faculty. Lastly, Participant 7 is a white South African student currently doing his second year of a Bachelor of Science degree.

4.3. Lean and muscular male body ideal

One of the main goals of this study was to explore the participant perceptions of the dominant male body types portrayed on the Instagram application. Instagram is increasingly becoming

associated with the dissemination of male body ideals. Instagram users can instantly share images and videos on their profiles, as well as view the profiles of other users. Unlike other social media platforms, many Instagram profiles are not private, making them more accessible to other users (Marshall *et al*., 2020: 572). Subsequently, exposure to male bodies on Instagram is widespread and frequent. Participant 3 identified the dominant male body type he viewed on Instagram as:

> *Very, very muscular. Like, they've been gyming for 5 or 6 years. They've built up a lot of muscle, lean muscle. Like almost no fat on them.*

Similar responses were provided by the other participants, for instance, Participant 1 described Instagram's dominant male body type as consisting of :

> *Mostly ripped guys. Not a lot of body fat. It's not too big, but like very muscular.*

Participant 4 stated that they were most exposed to bodies that were:

> *Highly athletic…large muscular body types…their body fat percentage is next to nothing…highly lean.*

For Participant 6, there was a prevalence of "a shredded kind of body type". Similarly, Participant 2 stated:

> *So, most of the male bodies that I encounter are usually ripped, probably five per cent body fat…you never really see people bulking…it's just these cut people.*

Participant 7 stated that he was exposed to:

> *Muscular guys, like huge and often shirtless and exercising.*

Lastly, Participant 5 stated that the male body type that they were exposed to most on the Instagram application as:

> *Very lean, very muscular, quite tall, very aesthetic, strong.*

Participants' identification of the dominant male body type on Instagram as lean and muscular indicates some similarities with the findings of Gultzow *et al.*'s (2020) study which indicated that the Instagram application was saturated with images and videos of lean and muscular men. Participant responses also reflected the views of other scholars writing on male body image, such as Paulson (2020: 64), who states that the ideal male body type, also known as the mesomorph ideal, has become increasingly associated with higher levels of muscularity and leanness. This ideal is associated with the norms of hegemonic masculinities, such as power and control (see 3.2.2). According to Marshall *et al.* (2020: 571), muscularity is traditionally

considered to be a symbol for male dominance and thus, an important tool in the construction of hegemonic masculine identities.

4.3.1. Perceptions surrounding the ideal male body type

During the interview process, respondents described their personal opinions of what they believed constituted the 'ideal male body type'. Participant 4 perceived the ideal male body type to be:

> *Taller than average, so 5 ft 10, 5 ft 11 and upwards. Muscular, broad shoulders, big legs, and definitely definition is the name of the game there, like having abs. Like almost be able to be the full spectrum of human anatomy and see every single muscle when you're moving.*

Participant 3's perception of the ideal male body was as follows:

> *Uhm…obviously like big right…well-rounded muscles. Obviously different people have different genetics but as long as you get to like a certain body fat percentage, a certain muscle percentage, should be fine. So very muscular, very low body fat percentage.*

Similarly, Participant 1 stated:

> *I would say like…not too big, but very muscular and ripped.*

These perceptions of the ideal male body type bear a resemblance to the lean and muscular ideal that is prevalent on Instagram. This study suggests that the similarities between Instagram's male body ideal and participant opinions of the ideal male body type may be understood by using Foucault's (1977) theory of power. Through the manipulation of the body's behaviours and elements, disciplinary power seeks to produce "docile bodies" (see 3.2.2). In particular, the production of docile bodies incorporates a process of coercion that acts directly upon the body and shapes its conduct. Thus, it can be argued that these participants may have been subjected to this disciplinary power resulting in their internalisation of Instagram's male body ideal and subsequently, shaping their conduct in a manner that reproduces and disseminates the lean and muscular ideal. This coincides with Daniel and Bridges (2010: 32) statement that the internalisation of the lean and muscular ideal can result in the male body ideal becoming intertwined with an individual's sense of self, resulting in them setting the ideal as a goal for them to achieve.

There were, however, some differences in self-perceptions of the ideal male body type amongst participants. Participant 2 perceived the ideal male body type to be one that was slimmer in nature:

> *So my body transformed a lot throughout the years and when I was chubby there was like negative comments. But when I got slimmer then I was at peace. So I think it's that slim, not too chubby not too built kind of body. A "balanced" physique.*

However, the wording of his response suggests that this perception is possibly attributed to personal circumstances, particularly his past experiences of "negative comments" associated with his former physical appearance. Similarly, Participant 6, who expressed a desire to lose weight and increase their fitness, also viewed a slimmer figure as more desirable:

> *I'm not trying to be big or bulky. Yeah, I'm looking for like a lean, shredded body.*

Therefore, in the absence of the desire for a more muscular physique, these two participants were in favour of a leaner body type thus suggesting that possessing lower body fat was a more desirable trait to them. These responses shed light on the ways in which personal attributes or circumstances can potentially impact the influence of Instagram male body ideals, thus showing that, in some cases, users are more likely to form body-related opinions based on their own goals or experiences.

4.3.2. Constant exposure to lean and muscular body ideal

Unlike other social media platforms, Instagram content is mainly image-based, which makes it particularly potent "in a society that is becoming more and more reliant on visual stimuli" (Paulson, 2020: 68). Coupled with the popularity of the platform amongst young male users, Instagram is said to expose people to body imagery at a "vast…regular and frequent" scale (Marshall *et al*., 2020: 573). This can be linked to the design of the Instagram application, such as its flexible design that allows users to access images related to their interests with great speed and efficiency. This process involves user engagement with features such as hashtags, comments, and likes (Marshall *et al*., 2020: 572). Furthermore, Instagram is primarily accessed by users through their mobile phones. The convenience of mobile phones allows users to instantly share content and view the content of others at any time. Subsequently, Instagram exposes young adult male users to a constant stream of images and videos, much of it being images of muscular, lean bodies. Some participants discussed the effect that this constant exposure had on their perceptions of male bodies. For example, Participant 4 stated:

> *I think also seeing these like almost perfect bodies so frequently, we've kind of forgotten that the whole point of being in the gym or working out is for health and wellness. Like it's not necessarily to look like the next stud when you're walking on the beach… but we feel like we need to do this extra stuff because we're not meeting the goals of the person that we've decided that we're going to try to emulate and try to become like.*

Similarly, Participant 7 stated:

> *I think if you get flooded with like the same image over and over you kind of start to feel like this is what a lot of people look like and this is what you kind of should go for, you know.*

These responses indicate that frequent exposure to idealised male bodies on Instagram promoted the internalisation of the lean and muscular body ideal. This is likely due to the ideal becoming normalised thus resulting in the participants perceiving an expectation to conform to this ideal. According to Foucault's (1977) theory of power, individuals play an active role in the reproduction of such cultural expectations. This happens when such individuals compare their own bodies to idealised bodies and resort to trying to emulate them. Subsequently, this type of power acts on the body directly by shaping its conduct. In this case, participants expressed their desire to achieve a body that reflects Instagram's male body ideal, that is, a lean and muscular body type.

A significant factor in Instagram's ability to expose male users to idealised male bodies is its use of algorithms. According to Paulson (2020: 67), Instagram uses algorithms that are based on the pages that users visit and the photos that they like and comment on. Once it has been established that a user takes an interest in exercising or gaining muscle, Instagram's algorithm exposes them to more content related to these themes. Therefore, male users who express an interest in gym-related content are often increasingly exposed to the lean and muscular male body ideal (Paulson, 2020: 78). This is reflected in Participant 1's response:

> *With Instagram…algorithms…you're gyming, you talk to your friends about gym, and the only thing you see is gym content, you know?*

Similarly, Participant 4 stated:

> *The minute you search anything health and fitness or even food like nutrition wise…these profiles come on your explore page. Now that you've looked at that, your explore page and even your news feed become more populated with a couple more posts of fitness influencers. So yeah, you end up consuming a lot of photos and media of a body type which is definitely not mine.*

Subsequently, these responses show how Instagram uses technology to disseminate male body ideals thus making exposure to lean and muscular bodies almost unavoidable, particularly amongst male, gym-going users.

4.4. Factors influencing the perceptions surrounding male body ideals on Instagram

This study found that participant perceptions surrounding Instagram's male body ideals were influenced by multiple factors. These factors include the drive for muscularity, Instagram's positivity bias, sociocultural factors, age, and exposure to fitness influencers.

4.4.1. Drive for muscularity

Leit *et al.'s* (2002) study identified the 'drive for muscularity' as one of the most significant aspects of male body image. It is argued that the muscular body "represents a drive for power, dominance, strength, sexual virility, and self-esteem", all of which relate to norms and values pertaining to traditional perceptions of manhood (Matzen, 2020: 20). This notion is supported by Marshall *et al*. (2020: 571) who state that muscularity is viewed as a sign of male dominance and often underlies the construction of hegemonic masculine identities. Subsequently, this has led some scholars to argue that, just as women have been subjected to a culture of thinness, men have now "become vulnerable to a culture of muscularity" (Paulson, 2020: 63). Furthermore, Paulson (2020: 64) also argues that there is a link between men's increased drive for muscularity and higher levels of body dissatisfaction. This is evident in Participant 2's statement:

> *And then I'll ego lift a lot, actually and my body will be so sore. I used to bench press like four times a week trying to get (a bigger) chest. And in that sense it was negative because I wasn't… I wasn't training properly. I didn't know anything about resting, about eating, dieting. I was just like…I want to be like this. This is what it means to be a man.*

From this response we can see that Participant 2 expressed a desire to be more muscular. However, Participant 2 perceived his quest for a bigger chest to be a negative experience, particularly in terms of his physical health. This response may be understood using Foucault's (1977) theory of power, as his behaviour is seemingly subjected to the "machinery of power" associated with the dominant male body type, that is the lean and muscular physique (see 3.2.2). According to Foucault (1977: 138-139), this form of power acts on the body thus rearranging its actions and behaviours. Therefore, Participant 2's exercise behaviours are shaped by the expectation to achieve a lean and muscular body type, thus contributing to the reproduction of Instagram's male body ideal in the process. The use of the phrase "this is what it means to be a man" also suggests adherence to the cultural expectation for men to be more muscular (Marshall *et al*., 2020: 571).

According to Leit *et al*. (2002), media exposure to male body ideals has been linked to an increased drive for muscularity in men. This is due to factors such as the widespread exposure of men to images of muscular men on platforms such as Instagram. Thus, it can be argued that men are afforded multiple chances to engage in upward social comparisons with lean and muscular Instagram users whom they perceive to be better off than themselves (Stiff & Cutts,

2023: 2). Subsequently, in trying to emulate 'better off' people, male Instagram users may exhibit a drive for muscularity.

4.4.2. Positivity bias

The content portrayed on Instagram is said to be characterised by a positivity bias, which means that users tend to upload idealised content of themselves (Pedalino & Camerini, 2022: 1). In turn, the social rewards linked to posting content that conforms with Instagram-related body ideals is said to place users under increased pressure to follow suit. While discussing male posting trends on Instagram, Participant 2 stated:

> *They're always posting themselves with a pump, good lighting. I guess to them who really wants to show anything else, you know?*

Similarly, Participant 4 stated:

> *I guess it comes down to the normal human condition of people only post themselves when they feel like there's something for others to envy.*

These responses indicate that male Instagram users tend to engage in self-presentation behaviours that result in them valuing their bodily appearances for the "purposes of public viewing" (Marshall *et al*., 2020: 572). The responses also highlight some of the ways in which male Instagram users perpetuate Instagram's positivity bias, such as by being highly selective in the ways in which they present themselves. According to Marshall *et al*. (2020: 572), such modes of self-presentation can result in increased pressure to conform to body ideals on social media and that this process can be better understood using Foucault's theory of power. This is because Instagram users are said to engage in self-surveillance behaviours by critiquing their own bodies and comparing it to the idealised content posted by other users. Subsequently, this results in male Instagram users trying to emulate such content by only posting idealised versions of themselves, thus perpetuating Instagram's bias towards male body ideals in the process. This desire to emulate idealised content is evident in Participant 6's response:

> *When I'm on Instagram, it's just a whole lot of images and I feel the problem with Instagram is people posting themselves at their best. So it gives you an immense amount of pressure on how you look, the way you present yourself. Especially with the bodies. If you keep getting hit with images, especially like my friends who are like shredded and when they post I almost like reflect on myself…like reflecting on "oh yeah, I need to put in more work to catch up", you know, I mean with where they are.*

In conjunction with Foucault's theory of power, the influence of Instagram's positivity bias may also be analysed using Festinger's (1954) social comparison theory. According to Paulson (2020: 68), Instagram users are constantly exposed to a stream of curated and enhanced

pictures. Combined with the accessibility of Instagram, male users are thus afforded multiple opportunities to compare their bodies with the bodies of other users. Furthermore, it may be argued that Instagram's positivity bias exacerbates upward social comparisons, as male users are more likely to encounter lean and muscular male bodies, thus promoting social comparisons between male Instagram users and others that they perceive to be better off than themselves.

4.4.3. Sociocultural factors affecting perceptions of male body ideals on Instagram

Sociocultural factors are said to play an important role in prescribing male body ideals. This notion is supported by Furnham & Baguma's (1994) study on cross-cultural differences in body ideals, which found that African participants viewed larger bodies as more attractive, whereas their western counterparts viewed thinner bodies as more attractive. For example, Participant 4 stated that:

> *I guess if I were to go like ethnically or culturally. The kind of thing is like, especially in my culture, that heavily muscular, lean body type is not necessarily the one that's favoured. It's more just being large in size and stature, so commanding a presence and then having an underlying strength attached to that.*

However, although his ethnicity may have played a role in the way in which Participant 4 perceived other male bodies, its influence was minimal in relation to other factors, such as the dominant culture of his high school. Regarding this, Participant 4 stated:

> *School definitely did impact how I view other bodies. I mean, that's where me starting to go to gyms, starting to try and take supplements, watching all these videos, you know, following these guys on Instagram, that's where it really started.*

Participant 5 had a similar experience in which he describes the ways in which his school culture had more influence over his perception of male bodies than his upbringing:

> *Being a black person from the location…people who did bodybuilding were seen as like "what's wrong with you?", you know, because a lot of people played soccer. But going to a white school, seeing guys play rugby, lift weights…that influenced me to be like "I want to be big as that guy. I want to be as strong as that guy".*

The internalisation of male body ideals associated with being educated in 'white schools' can possibly be linked to the argument that the introduction of western body ideals to non-western societies "could result in increased body ideal uniformity across cultures" (Thomas & Kleynman, 2020: 316). In particular, the responses mirrored the existing literature on male body image in South Africa (see Marais *et al*., 2003; le Grange *et al*., 1998; Ricciardelli *et al*., 2007). Similarly, the participant responses showed that exposure to the culture of 'white schools' played a role in the types of bodies that these individuals idolised, suggesting some

degree of assimilation to the dominant culture. Furthermore, Participant 5's statement regarding the way in which his school environment influenced the ways in which he perceived others' bodies suggested that he rejected the culture of his upbringing to some extent, resulting in potential conflict with the values and norms of his home environment. This is evident in Participant 5's identification of negative responses to his interest in bodybuilding, exemplified by the reaction of "what's wrong with you?" upon his return home. Furthermore, Participant 5's input also shed light on the differences in body perceptions between urban and rural populations (See Ricciardelli *et al*., 2007). Additionally, Participant 5's experiences could potentially be linked to Coetzee and Perrett's (2010) study that showed that young, black South Africans that reside in westernised spaces are more likely to adhere to, or conform to, western body ideals. This is evident in participant 5's response of:

> *But yeah, so I think like when you get exposed to different cultures from a young age. Like white people, black people, coloured people, you sort of like feed off different people. So, I followed a lot of my high school friends who go to the gym, you know, because I was spending most of my time with them and not a lot of time with the guys back at the location playing soccer who didn't lift weights or go to the gym.*

Therefore, it may be argued that these responses are consistent with Marais et al.'s (2003: 45) claim that, following the end of apartheid in South Africa, "the dissolution of segregation" and the "integration" of South African schools has resulted in increasing contact between different cultures, which has been linked to internalisation of western male body ideals in non-western contexts. Interestingly, the white and coloured participants of the study did not perceive their high school experiences to have shaped the ways in which they perceive male bodies at all. For white students, this could possibly be due them experiencing less pressure to conform in an environment where they are at little risk of being identified as an outsider. However, it could also be possible that they may be less aware of their conformity to the culture of their high schools, as this culture is similar to that of their upbringings. Therefore, it may be plausible that their immersion in white culture could result in its influence over bodily perceptions being less overt or obvious.

Participants' internalisation of male body ideals linked to their high school experiences reflects some of the key concepts of Foucault's (1977) theory of power, namely disciplinary power and self-surveillance. Disciplinary power is said to have emerged in settings such as schools, prisons, and hospitals (see 3.2.2.). Disciplinary power is subtle in nature, operating on the body in a coercive and pervasive manner. This means that power is not exercised overtly, and individuals subjected to this kind of power seemingly act out of their own free will. However,

disciplinary power is said to produce "docile" or subjected bodies, through processes such as constant surveillance which aim to regulate and control the elements of people's bodies (Foucault, 1977: 138-139). Subsequently, disciplinary power ensures that one's bodily conduct is guided by expectation and not by will. For some participants, there seemed to be a cultural expectation to achieve a more muscular body ideal, even if it went against the norms associated with their ethnicity. Instead, these participants conformed to the dominant body ideals of their high school, thus actively reinforcing and reproducing the expectation to be more muscular. This process is exacerbated by self-surveillance through which individuals compare their bodies against the dominant body ideal and incorporate behaviours that bring them closer to this ideal (Marshall *et al*., 2020: 572). For example, Participant 5 was influenced to strive to "be as strong" and as "big" as his peers at high school and Participant 2 began to "gym…and take supplements".

Some participants perceived their high school cultures as having a negative effect on the ways in which they perceived their own bodies in relation to the bodies of others. For example, Participant 3 remarked that:

> *Yeah, I mean obviously you go to a high school gym and you check these guys' bodies…you see them lifting heavy weights and stuff…so I mean that kind of demotivates you in a way because you can't lift what they lift. That would be like the high school gym culture.*

Furthermore, Participant 4 stated:

> *Maybe you'll watch like a rugby tribute or you watch your first team and you see like a guy who's just like two years older than you and he, he's a monster. And it's just like, well, if he can do that at 18…why can't that be me?*

Both responses exhibit elements of upward social comparisons as the participants engaged in comparisons with others that they perceived to be better off than themselves. Furthermore, the responses suggest that these participants felt that they were failing to achieve the kinds of bodies that their peers had attained. Subsequently, this reflects the notion that upward social comparisons may often lead to higher levels of body dissatisfaction when there is a perceived mismatch between the ideal and one's actual body (Tager *et al*., 2006: 229).

4.4.4. Age

Neagu (2015: 33) states that young adults are more likely to pay attention to the appearance of their bodies than other population groups. Furthermore, Smith *et al.'s* (2011: 232) study on

male body image found that young men "perceived a social expectation" to be more muscular. Similar sentiments were evident in some of the participants' responses. Participant 2 stated:

> *I think the 18 to 29 age group is probably the most influenced to get a massive figure. Because it could be about finding yourself or…you're kind of building your confidence. Yeah, I feel. like that 18 to 29 age group is like the crucial age group. You're susceptible to all kinds of influence, all kinds of pressure.*

Participant 1's response did bear some similarities to that of Participant 2 when he stated that:

> *These are probably our best years of our lives. You know, like this is when we are most active. This is why I'm trying to like push for a better body so that I still look good, in good shape and everything.*

These responses suggest that, to some degree, age can influence male perceptions of their bodies and the bodies of others. Based off the responses, this could be due to factors such as the impressionability of young males, and the increased pressure to conform associated with this age group. This process is exacerbated by the popularity of the Instagram application amongst younger individuals. According to Heinicke and Vagic (2003: 6), nearly 17 per cent of all Instagram users are young men aged between 18 and 24 years of age. This is supported by Tiggerman and Anderberg (2020: 237) who stated that Instagram was "particularly popular with young adults aged 18 to 34 years", with many of these users consisting of young men as well.

Heinicke and Vagic (2023: 8-9) identified that younger men are increasingly being subjected to body ideals on social media platforms through their constant bombardment with of imagery of "how they should look like". Young men are often exposed to male body ideals several times a day when using Instagram. According to social comparison theory, this level of exposure in young men increases the likelihood that members of this population group will engage in upward social comparisons, as they compare their own bodies to idealised bodies of other male users (Paulson, 2020: 65-66). This could potentially lead to increased levels of body dissatisfaction in young men, especially in instances where male users feel that they fail to live up to the ideal. According to Paulson (2020: 64), many university-aged men perceive the ideal male body to be significantly more muscular than their own bodies.

The influence of age on perceptions of male body ideals may also be understood using Foucault's (1977) theory of power, particularly regarding his conceptualisation of self-surveillance, which refers to the process of monitoring one's own body in relation to cultural expectations or body ideals. Instagram is said to facilitate constant self-surveillance due to users' frequent exposure to images of idealised bodies (Marshall *et al*., 2020: 573).

Subsequently, it may be argued that the widespread use of Instagram amongst young men could result in increased levels of self-surveillance amongst this population in group, thus resulting in increased conformity to male body ideals.

4.4.5. The role of fitness influencers on Instagram in shaping body perceptions

Various studies have suggested that fitness influencers on Instagram play a role in exposing male users to body ideals (see Tiggerman & Anderberg, 2020; Matzen, 2020). Many respondents identified that influencers shaped their online experiences of body image in some form. For example, Participant 2 stated:

> *I think because of my algorithm and everything… I have people that I follow like fitness influencers… so most of the male bodies that I encounter…it's usually ripped. Yeah, probably five percent (bodyfat). And…yeah, that's usually what I see.*

Participant 3 gave a similar response, stating that:

> *I follow a lot of gym people on Instagram, like Sam Sulek, strength training and stuff like that. So that's mostly what I'm exposed to.*

Furthermore, Participant 3 went on to state that:

> *I mean Sam Sulek and those guys are influencers. So, this stuff is spread very widely on the app, so basically everybody sees it.*

Similarly, Participant 4 named various influencers when describing the male body ideals that they were exposed to when using Instagram:

> *Then you get like your Nick Bez, Simeon Pandas and so on. So, like really large, muscular guys. You know, you see the old photos of Arnold, Ronnie Coleman.*

These responses showed that participants associated the dominant male body ideals on Instagram with specific fitness influencers which, among younger male users, have become household names, such as Sam Sulek, Simeon Panda, Nick Bez, and Chris Bumstead. A quick online search will show that all these fitness influencers have fanbases of well over a million followers, thus highlighting their Instagram celebrity status and therefore, their extensive reach on the application.

Festinger's (1954) social comparison theory may be used to understand the ways in which Instagram's fitness influencers can shape the perceptions of male users. According to this theory, individuals often make comparisons with dissimilar others, especially when making comparisons based on one's physical appearance (Watson *et al*., 2019: 2). In such instances, upward social comparison occurs as individuals compare their own bodies against the bodies

of others that they perceive to be more attractive. Regarding Instagram use, male users often engage in upward comparisons with fitness influencers as these individuals often possess physical traits that reflect the lean and muscular body ideal. Following this, male users may try to emulate fitness influencers if they perceive their own bodies as falling short of this ideal. For instance, Participant 2 stated that:

> *You see Arnold's chest and are like… yeah, I want that. I want that so bad.*

It has been argued that such comparisons can have a negative effect on men's perceptions of their bodies. This is because it is argued that fitness influencers promote an unrealistic male body ideal on Instagram (Heinecke & Vagic, 2023: 37). Subsequently, this may decrease the likelihood that male users will be able to achieve the kind of body that they are comparing their own bodies to, thus increasing the risk for body dissatisfaction to occur.

4.4.6. Fitness influencers and motivation

Although it is often associated with negative outcomes, it is important to note that the processes related to social comparison theory can have a positive effect on the body-related perceptions of male Instagram users. For example, Stiff and Cutts (2023: 2) argue that upward social comparisons can be aspirational by motivating individuals to better themselves. This notion is motivated by the idea that people engaging in social comparisons may desire to evaluate themselves in a manner that enhances their self-esteem (see 3.3.2.). This is evident in Participant 5's statement:

> *(Fitness influencers) show me what the human body is capable of…if you dedicate yourself and if you train without having outside influences. If I just train for a couple of years and max out I wanna see how I could look in a couple of years.*

This response shows that Participant 5 perceived fitness influencers to have a positive effect as they motivated him to exercise. This notion is also reflected the findings of Heinicke and Vagic's (2023: 37-38) study which suggested that the "perceived credibility" of the fitness influencer impacted participants' behaviour, particularly regarding exercise. Furthermore, the aforementioned study also suggested that participants perceived that the success of the fitness influencer would "translate to their own results" (Heinicke & Vagic, 2023: 38). Fitness influencers also seemed to have a positive influence on Participant 3's approach to exercise. Participant 3 stated that:

> *I mean gym helps with a lot of other things in your life. I mean and it shows with the influencers as well. How it's helped with their lives.*

Subsequently, the responses given by Participants 3 and 5 suggest that engaging in upward social comparisons with fitness influencers does not always have a negative impact on one's body-related experiences. In contrast to much of the literature on upward social comparisons, these respondents were motivated by the content uploaded by fitness influencers on Instagram. However, this is not always the case as some of the other participants perceived that fitness influencers often misrepresented themselves on Instagram.

4.4.7. Fitness influencers and misrepresentation

Some participants pointed out that they felt that there was some dishonesty on the part of fitness influencers. For example, Participant 2 responded:

> *I recently learned that one of my one of my favourite fitness influencers that I follow… his name is McCall Fitness…he came out about a year ago and was saying he took steroids. But before that his Instagram page claimed that he had a natural physique. And then he exposed himself and he said I'm sorry I did this and that. And that lowkey hurt me because I was like, as a fitness influencer, I don't mind, like, if you take steroids, but just be honest about it because there's these kids out there that are looking up to you saying "ohh…I want to look like this". And then they go to gym for like 3 or 4 years and they lose confidence in themselves because they can't get to that level that they're trying to get to. So, I don't think they're realistic in the way that they promote themselves.*

Participant 4 also had reservations regarding the conduct of fitness influencers, stating:

> *These fitness influencers, they use their body to kind of say I've achieved this, but they'll never tell you how they really achieve this. And then so if I can do it, you can do it. But since you can't do it on your own, follow me and I'll guide you on how to do it.*

These responses reflect the sentiment that many male users on Instagram acknowledge that fitness influencers can and do misrepresent themselves on Instagram. However, the constant exposure to such content often results in men still comparing themselves to these "unfair" body ideals (Heinicke & Vagic, 2023: 37). The problematic nature of this phenomenon may be linked to the process of upward social comparisons. According to Tiggerman and Anderberg (2020: 238), exposure to unrealistic body ideals online can result in increased levels of body dissatisfaction, especially when male users perceive a mismatch between the body ideal that is portrayed by fitness influencers and the reality of their own bodies.

4.5. Self-surveillance

Instagram enables users to be highly selective about how they present themselves to their followers. This results in a tendency for users to present 'idealised' versions of themselves through posting carefully regulated photographs (Marshall *et al*., 2020: 572). According to

Marshall *et al*. (2020: 572), such processes of self-presentation can exacerbate individual's desire to conform to cultural expectations, such as appearance-related norms. To find out if they engaged in any form of self-regulating behaviours in relation to Instagram use, participants were asked whether the male bodies they viewed on the application influenced what they, themselves posted on the application. In response, Participant 2 stated:

> *Yes, they do. Thinking about it, I always go back to these influencers, think like…this is where I want to be…I can't post yet. At some point I wasn't even taking progress pictures because I was like I'm not there yet. So, I don't post because of stuff like that.*

Participant 2's response identifies various factors that influence his decisions related to posting on Instagram. For instance, Participant 2 engaged in upward social comparisons with 'influencers' by indicating that he wished to emulate them. This coincides with the findings of Barry and Martin's (2016) study on social media and self-presentation which found that men who use social media platforms, such as Instagram, tended to compare themselves to idealised bodies of other men posting on social media. Participant 2's response also shows elements of self-criticism. According to Marshall *et al.* (2020: 572), male engagement with social media platforms "compels" men to think critically about the appearance of their bodies and to value their bodies for the purpose of being viewed by the public. Theoretically speaking, Foucault's (1977) theory of power could be useful in understanding Participant 2's self-regulating behaviours.

Foucault's (1977) theory of power argues that people can be seen as active agents in the production of cultural expectations through their daily behaviours, thought processes, and interactions. This is evident in the ways in which Instagram users, such as Participant 2, critique their own bodies and compare them to the idealised bodies of other Instagram users (Marshall *et al*., 2020: 572). Subsequently, it can be argued that, through self-surveillance, male Instagram users appropriate cultural expectations related to male bodies, thus actively reinforcing and reproducing these male body ideals in the process.

4.5.1. Increased visibility of Instagram users

A relevant factor underlying self-surveillance is the increased visibility of male Instagram users. Instagram has been identified as a "potent" site for self-surveillance due to its association with "countless" images of bodies (Marshall *et al*., 2020: 572). Whilst discussing the ways in which male body ideals affected their own posting-related activities, Participant 4 stated:

> *Why would anyone want to see me if I don't look like how everyone else does? I mean when you post yourself like that you really do expose yourself to the world. And then it*

> *even comes through in all forms, because it doesn't even have to be like gym posts, or like shirtless things or whatever. Like, even when you're just wearing a t-shirt or whatever. Like then there's a gap by your arm. You're not filling out your shirt the way that these perfect body type guys are. And then it's like, well, someone's going to ridicule me for this. Or someone's going to point this out. So why would I expose myself to negative comments when I can just keep it to myself?*

This response suggests that Participant 4 not only experiences pressure to conform to Instagram's male body ideals, but also experiences a heightened sense of visibility. This sense of increased visibility is evident in the use of the phrase "when you post…you really do expose yourself to the world". The effect of this visibility can potentially be explained by Foucault's (1977) theory of power, particularly through his conceptualisation of the panoptic gaze, which was based on Bentham's Panopticon, a prison model designed to create a sense of constant surveillance, thus making prisoners more likely to self-regulate their behaviour (see 3.3). In the context of this study, potential parallels can be drawn between the panoptic gaze and the universal visibility associated with posting on Instagram through their fostering of a perpetual feeling of being watched. Subsequently, it can be argued that Instagram users' heightened visibility results in power being exercised over oneself by means of self-surveillance and self-regulation, evident in Participant 4's avoidance of posting on the platform. Thus, force is unnecessary, as power is exercised in a subtle manner that is both "anonymous and dispersed" (see 3.3). This exercise of power ultimately results in the reproduction of Instagram's male body ideals through male users conforming to the dominant appearance-based expectations.

Participant 4 also expresses self-surveillance and self-regulation in his decision not to post on Instagram, expressing concern over the possibility that he might be criticised for uploading content that does not meet the male body ideal associated with "perfect body type guys". Therefore, this bears some similarities to the sentiment expressed by Marshall *et al*. (2020: 572) who state that self-surveillance on social media platforms can promote feelings of judgement by other users, as well as exacerbate one's desire to conform to appearance-based expectations. Using Foucault's (1977) theory of power as a framework for interpreting this response, it may be argued that Participant 4's self-regulation of his posts contributes to the appropriation and reproduction of male body ideals on Instagram.

4.6. Body Dissatisfaction

Body image is a multidimensional construct that reflects an individual's degree of satisfaction with their appearance. This perception can affect an individual's behaviours, thoughts, and feelings about oneself, often in a negative way (Paulson, 2020: 63). Stiff and Cutts (2023: 1)

suggest that Instagram use may lead to increases in body dissatisfaction. Although most work regarding this topic has focused on women, there is increasing evidence that men are experiencing body image issues in relation to their exposure to idealised body imagery. Numerous studies have reported linkages between the exposure of young men to male body ideals on Instagram and higher levels of body dissatisfaction (see Tiggerman & Anderberg, 2020; Fatt *et al*., 2019; Griffiths & Stefanovski, 2019). Like women, men are said to internalise the images that they see on Instagram as the norm. However, whereas women are said to experience pressure to conform to a thin ideal, men tend to feel pressure to obtain a lean and muscular physique (Stiff & Cutts, 2023: 2). The reinforcement of these unrealistic body standards on Instagram is exacerbated by actions such as liking and commenting and can result in male users making unhealthy associations between perceived norms and outcomes (Stiff & Cutts, 2023: 2). Subsequently, body dissatisfaction is said to occur when men compare themselves to this male body ideal and perceive a discrepancy between the ideal and their actual bodies (Paulson, 2020: 65-66). In discussing their perceptions around the ways in which male body ideals on Instagram affected their body image, some participants gave responses that indicated that they experienced a degree of body dissatisfaction. For example, Participant 2 stated:

> *Yeah, I think I've felt very self-conscious in, like seeing all these big guys…how I was trying so hard to get there and I wasn't there.*

By analysing this response, elements of body dissatisfaction become evident, namely Participant 2's feelings of being "self-conscious" when comparing himself to the "big guys" he saw on Instagram. The implication here is that the Participant 2 experienced negative feelings due to his perceived failure to emulate the muscular bodies that he was exposed to on Instagram. Similarly, Participant 5 stated:

> *I wanted to work out because they were in better shape than me. Like you see these guys, they're only 21 and I'm like "what is he doing different"? So, you sort of feel pressured by them.*

Such experiences of body dissatisfaction may be explained by Festinger's (1954) social comparison theory. Social comparisons can operate in lateral, downward, or upward directions, with the latter being considered more important regarding physical appearance. Upward social comparisons occur when one compares themselves to someone else that they perceive to be better off than themselves. In this case Participant 2 can be said to engage in upward social comparisons with the "big guys" that he is exposed to on Instagram. Upward social comparisons may have an aspirational effect, but often result in negative feelings like envy and

shame, evident in Participant 2's feeling of being "self-conscious" (Stiff & Cutts, 2023: 2). Furthermore, upward social comparisons made by men using Instagram tend to be based on perceived levels of muscularity (Paulson, 2020: 66). This means that, when using Instagram, men are often said to engage in upward comparisons between the lean and muscular male body ideal and their own bodies. When this comparison is perceived to be unfavourable, male Instagram users are said to be more likely to experience feelings of shame and body dissatisfaction (Stiff & Cutts, 2023: 2). Hence, social comparison theory may be useful in understanding Participant 2's body dissatisfaction in relation to his perception of falling short of the ideal, evident in his use of the phrase "how I was trying so hard to get there and I wasn't there".

4.6.1. Unattainability of male body ideal on Instagram

The link between exposure to Instagram's male body ideals and body dissatisfaction may be attributed to the unattainability of these ideals. This is because the male bodies associated with these ideals are often a lot larger and more muscular than the average male adult (Smith *et al*., 2011: 232). This point is reiterated by Michaels *et al*. (2013: 175), who state that male body ideals portrayed in the media are "incongruous with the average man's body". Subsequently, the inability to live up to Instagram-related male body ideals could possibly explain participants' dissatisfaction with their own bodies. In discussing the perceived unattainability of idealised male bodies on Instagram, Participant 4 stated:

> *I do think that it's quite unrealistic…you change your diet…you train everyday… you take the supplements…but you're nowhere closer to that ideal.*

Similarly, Participant 1 responded:

> *Most of the time I feel like when I look at these guys, I'm like, no, it can't be real. Yeah, you know, so I'm always thinking like, should I use something stronger, something that can actually work, or use supplements which is very slow. I'm always wondering like, what am I doing wrong? How do I actually get there? Like how do these guys get there because some people post their programs like yeah… trying to get this just follow this to this daily… and I've tried those things but still it seems impossible to some extent, you feel like you're not gonna get there. It's just…always out of reach and it's just like demotivating you.*

Both participants 1 and 4 pointed out that they believed that the male body ideals that they were exposed to were unrealistic. This reflects Rash's (2004: 1) statement that there exists a mismatch between socially accepted male body ideals and the physical reality that the "average man can realistically achieve". Despite this mismatch, Rash (2004: 1) argues that some men still exert a high degree of effort to bridge the gap between the ideal and their own bodies.

Subsequently, in trying to achieve this unattainable ideal, some men are said to engage in "muscularity-oriented" behaviours, such as excessive weight training and the consumption of protein supplements (Paulson, 2020: 65). These behaviours are evident in the responses as both participants 1 and 4 expressed that they used supplements and engaged in regular exercise in pursuit of Instagram's male body ideal.

From a theoretical perspective, the behaviour of participants 1 and 4 could be explained using Foucault's (1977) theory of power. It may be argued that, by electing to consume supplements and engage in rigorous training activities in pursuit of the lean and muscular ideal, participants 1 and 4 are internalising and conforming to Instagram's dominant male body type. In doing so, they not only seek to live up to perceived male body expectations, but also contribute to the reinforcement and reproduction of the lean and muscular male body ideal.

4.6.2. Unhealthy behaviours

In trying to alleviate body dissatisfaction, some male Instagram uses may engage in healthy exercise behaviours, such as excessive weight training and the use of anabolic steroids (Paulson, 2020: 65). According to Paulson (2020: 65). The illicit use of performance enhancing drugs, such as anabolic steroids, is a major health issue amongst university-aged men and is linked to body dissatisfaction. The increased abuse of steroids amongst young males has been linked to their exposure to unrealistic male body ideals on Instagram. In particular, it is argued that the reinforcement of the mesomorph male body ideal can influence male Instagram users to make unhealthy associations "between perceived norms and their outcomes", thus resulting in the intake of steroids as they try to reach this seemingly unattainable goal of being both lean and muscular (Stiff & Cutts, 2023: 2). This is exacerbated by the reality that many of the idealised male bodies on Instagram seen on Instagram belong to anabolic steroid users. For example, Participant 7 stated that:

> *I'm not sure if the male bodies on Instagram are achievable, because I feel like most of these guys are on steroids.*

Furthermore, other participants stated that, in trying to achieve a similar body type to those that they were exposed to on Instagram, they themselves engaged in steroid use. For instance, Participant 1 stated:

> *I've also like…gotten like pills. I think they are actually steroids, but like, not hectic steroids. I've tried those, you know, and at some point, it was working. But like with these types of things you need to be like consistent with them. So, like once you stop you go back to where you started basically.*

These responses highlight the dangers of exposing young men to unrealistic male body ideals on Instagram. The lean and muscular ideal is inherently problematic, as it is almost impossible to achieve such high levels of muscularity whilst maintaining a very low body fat percentage. Subsequently, as male users engage in upward comparisons with other users that take steroids, they themselves may turn to anabolic steroid use in an attempt to alleviate the body dissatisfaction associated with failing to achieve the lean and muscular body ideal.

4.7. Conclusion

The findings of the data collection and analysis process found that Instagram's male body ideals are multidimensional in nature and perceptions surrounding these ideals are influenced by multiple factors. This section identified multiple themes related to participants' perceptions of male body ideals on Instagram, such as the lean and muscular male body ideal, the factors influencing perceptions of this ideal, self-surveillance, and body dissatisfaction. These themes were then further divided into subthemes to provide a more wholistic account of the different aspects of perceptions surrounding Instagram's male body ideals. Furthermore, the data collected from the interview responses was analysed using both the evidence gathered from the literature review and the theoretical frameworks relevant to this study, namely Foucault's theory of power and Festinger's social comparison theory. The subsequent findings showed that participant perceptions of Instagram's male body ideals showed the complexity of this topic, as well as the importance of context. For instance, context played an important role in determining how black participants perceived other male bodies, especially regarding their high school experiences. Other contextual factors include the age of the participants, the frequency with which participants were exposed to Instagram's male body ideal, and participant exposure to fitness influencers. Of theoretical significance was the evidence suggesting that some participants may have played an active role in reinforcing and reproducing Instagram's male body ideal, a process which may be better understood using Foucault's (1977) theory of power. Additionally, the findings suggested that feelings of body dissatisfaction expressed by participants may be exacerbated through their engagement in upward social comparisons, both with their peers and with fitness influencers on Instagram.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

The first chapter of this study set the context of the research. This involved identifying some of the motivating factors for conducting research on the topic of Instagram-related male body ideals. Factors ranged from the need to further explore the under-researched topic of male body image, the popularity of Instagram amongst young men, and the proposed linkages between exposure to body ideals and body dissatisfaction in young men. Additionally, the first chapter also outlined some of the more practical elements of the research, that is, processes related to the research design. This included an overview of design elements such as the implementation of a qualitative approach, the use of quota and purposive sampling methods, the use of a small sample size, and the steps taken to ensure that the research was conducted in an ethical manner.

The second chapter looked at the current state of the literature on male body image and Instagram. This involved analysing existing studies related to this field which included research on male body image and ideals, the dominance of western male body ideals, Instagram's role in disseminating male body ideals, and the linkages between this exposure and body dissatisfaction in young men. Through the analysis of literature on these topics, this study was able to identify gaps that required further attention, such as the lack of qualitative studies on male body image, particularly in non-western contexts. Subsequently, this chapter proved useful in identifying relevant themes that were used to guide the data processing and analysis component of the research.

The third chapter outlined the theoretical frameworks that underpinned this study, namely Foucault's theory of disciplinary power and Festinger's social comparison theory. Foucault's theory of disciplinary power proved useful in identifying the subtle ways in which power can be enacted upon people's bodies. Through his conceptualisation of docile bodies and the panoptic gaze, Foucault illustrated how hidden forms of power can influence both people's appearance and their behaviour. Further, Festinger's social comparison theory was particularly useful in highlighting the ways in which young men form perceptions on body image through processes of social comparison. In particular, social comparison theory proved useful in describing the ways in which men were prone to internalising male body ideals through the process of upward comparison with fitness influencers on Instagram.

The fourth chapter set about presenting and analysing the data that was collected over the course of this study. The data collected from the responses found that participants' perceptions surrounding Instagram's male body ideals were shaped by multiple, complex factors. Key

themes that were identified during this chapter were participants' exposure to a lean and muscular male body ideal, the various factors that shaped participants perceptions of this ideal, perceptions of self-surveillance, and perceptions of body dissatisfaction. Factors that shaped participant perceptions of Instagram's male body ideal were context-specific and included participants' drive for muscularity, Instagram's positivity bias, participants' sociocultural backgrounds, participants' age, and participants' exposure to fitness influencers on Instagram. Furthermore, Foucault's (1977) theory of power was useful in illustrating how participants actively reproduced Instagram's male body ideal by striving to achieve lean and muscular bodies themselves. Festinger's (1954) social comparison also proved useful in understanding the ways in which participants engaged in upward social comparisons with fitness influencers and their peers, a process that often resulted in body dissatisfaction when participants perceived that they were unable to achieve an idealised male body.

Although the qualitative nature and limited scope of the research reduces its generalisability, this study contributed to the emerging field of studies on male body image. Coupled with the increasing exposure of young men to male body ideals on social media platforms, such as Instagram, this study highlights the complex ways in which men experience body image in modern society. Furthermore, this study also emphasises the need to engage in more context-specific analyses of male body image, particularly in the South African context. Lastly, this study also looks the potential dangers that are associated with exposure to male body ideals on Instagram, such as body dissatisfaction. Therefore, at least in the context of Rhodes University, this study has the potential to stimulate conversations surrounding male body issues which will hopefully help to overcome the stigma attached to this topic.

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Appendix A

Interview Schedule

1. How long have you used the Instagram application for?

2. How often do you use the Instagram application?

3. When using Instagram, what kind of male body types do you encounter most?

4. Do these body types influence the ways in which you view your own body? If yes, in what ways do they impact your perception of your body?

5. In your opinion, what do you think the ideal male body type is (in terms of physique, build, physical appearance, etc.)?

6. Is this "ideal" male body type one that you encounter often when using the Instagram app (either through your "explore" page or through the content of those you follow)?

7. Do you feel that Instagram plays a role in exposing men to male body ideals? If yes, could you explain some of the ways in which you think this might occur? Do you feel as though these ideals are realistic or achievable?

8. Do you feel as though your background (ethnic, socioeconomic, cultural, age, etc.) affects how you perceive male bodies on Instagram?

9. Do the male body types you see on Instagram influence your decision to go the gym in any way? If yes, do you feel as though this influence is positive or negative? (i.e., do you feel pressured to go to the gym?)

10. Do the male body types you encounter on Instagram influence what you, yourself post on the application?

11. Do you consider the opinions of your followers when you post on Instagram, particularly in relation to your body?

12. Do the male body types you see on Instagram affect your feelings of wellbeing in any way? If yes, then how?

Appendix B

Table of Codes and Subcodes

Code	Full Name	Description	Direct Quote (Interview Responses)
	Male Body Ideals		
MBI-DFM	Drive For Muscularity	Male drive towards muscular physique viewed as one of the most important aspects of Male Body Image.	
	Internalisation of Male Body Ideals		
IMBI-B	Bodybuilding	Men that engage in bodybuilding more likely to subscribe to male body ideals.	
IMBI-A	Age	Young adults experience increased pressure to conform to male body ideals.	
IMBI-EC	Ethnicity and Culture	Differences in ethnicity and culture linked to variations in internalizing male body ideals.	
	Instagram-related factors		
IRF-PB	Positivity Bias	Instagram's positivity bias makes users more likely to upload idealised images of themselves.	
IRF-DI	Dominant Ideals	Dominant male body ideals on Instagram associated with being lean and muscular.	
IRF-BD	Body Dissatisfaction	Failure to live up to body ideals linked to higher levels of body dissatisfaction.	
IRF-LC	Liking and Commenting	Social rewards in the form of likes and comments influence subscription to body ideals.	

Appendix C

Consent Form

PARTICIPANT INFORMED CONSENT DECLARATION

(To be signed by research participant/s)

Project Title: **Instagram and male body image: An in-depth study of perceptions surrounding Instagram-related body ideals amongst gym-going, male students at Rhodes University** **……** .

…*Declyn Nikiforos* from the Department of ……Sociology……, Rhodes University has requested my permission to participate in the above-mentioned research project.

The nature and the purpose of the research project and of this informed consent declaration have been explained to me in a language that I understand.

I am aware that:

1. The purpose of the research project is to explore the perceptions surrounding Instagram -related body ideals amongst gym-going, male students at Rhodes University.

2. Rhodes University has given ethical clearance to this research project 7404 and I have seen/may request to see the clearance certificate by contacting the Ethics Coordinator (ethics-committee@ru.ac.za)

3. By participating in this research project I will be contributing towards producing new knowledge on male body image in relation to Instagram use.

4. I will participate in the project by sharing my perceptions and/or opinions of Instagram-related body ideals.

5. My participation is entirely voluntary and should I at any stage wish to withdraw from participating further, I may do so without any negative consequences.

6. I will not be compensated for participating in the research, but my out-of-pocket expenses will be reimbursed.

7. The following risks are associated with my participation: N/A

8. The Researcher intends to publish the research results in the form of N/A***……***…….. However, confidentiality and anonymity of records will be maintained and my name and identity will not be revealed to anyone who has not been involved in the conducting of the research, ***unless I indicate to the contrary/recognize that as a public figure my identity will inevitably be/become known, in which case I agree to accept the loss of anonymity.***

9. In terms of the Protection of Personal Information Act (No. 4 of 2013) it remains my right to request the Researcher to provide me with a detailed explanation of exactly how confidentiality and anonymity of the data I provide will be achieved. I may also request to know exactly how my personal information will be stored securely, for how long it will be stored.

10. If any data collected from me for this research project is to be used by the Researcher for any further study, I am to be informed in writing and my written consent requested again. I need not give consent for the new research if it is incompatible with the initial purpose of the present study (POPIA, s15(3)). Equally, I can simply reject the request. In such cases, a formal request needs to be made to me by the researcher via the Ethics Coordinator (ethics-committee@ru.ac.za).

11. In terms of the POPI Act, I possess the right to receive feedback about this research. This will take the form of debriefing on findings of research unless ***I elect not to receive this feedback.***

12. Any further questions that I might have regarding the nature of the research and/or my participation in it will be answered by Declyn Nikiforos (g18n0750@campus.ru.ac.za).

13. By signing this informed consent declaration, I am not waiving any legal claims, rights, or remedies. A copy of this informed consent declaration will be given to me, and the original will be kept on record by the Researcher.

14. I ***agree/disagree*** (delete inapplicable) to the Researcher's request to take photographs, or videoing me as part of this research project, recognizing that agreement here is likely to raise the risk of compromising my anonymity and that steps will be taken to ensure this will not happen it my consent is given.

15. I ***agree/disagree*** (delete inapplicable) to the Researcher's use of voice recording of my comments and opinions during interviews, the purpose of which is to ensure the accurate recording of my views/responses. Furthermore, I have the right to request a copy of the interview transcriptions to confirm that my opinions are accurately recorded

I, ……., have read the above information / confirm that the above information has been explained to me in a language that I understand and I am aware of this document's contents. I have asked all questions that I

wished to ask, and these have been answered to my satisfaction. I fully understand what is expected of me during the research.

I have not been pressurised in any way and I voluntarily agree to participate in the above-mentioned project.

…….. …… …….

Participants signature **Witness** **Date**