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Affiliation and Body Image in Hashtag Use: A Social Media Critical Discourse Study of
Fitness Influencers on YouTube Shorts

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Abstract

Social media has created digital spaces for users to form communities, bond and align with shared values and beliefs. In this context, influencers can be considered stakeholders; as information providers they hold high social status within a particular digital community. Understanding influencers discourse is pertinent to foreground and challenge practices that may be detrimental for users. This is especially relevant in the fitness sphere on YouTube Shorts. Due to the increasing efficiency of Shorts, fitness-related content can be consumed at higher rates and in more persuasive formats. Von Polheim et al.'s (2023) and Ratwatte and Mattacola's (2019) research on influencer discourse has highlighted health behaviours that may negatively impact users' dietary and physical habits as well as promote unhealthy body image goals. Still not much research has been done on how hashtags function as discourse markers. Far from being only organising tools, hashtags are discursive in that they spur the formation of communities around specific topics by rendering information clickable. Similarly, hashtags can highlight specific values that circulate within the language of the fitness community. This dissertation aims at studying the functions fitness-related hashtags carry out, and the values transmitted in YouTubers' discourse from a Social Media Critical Discourse Studies (SM-CDS) approach. Five major categories of hashtags have been identified and labelled into FITNESS, WORKOUT, TARGET, PLACE and OTHERS. The analysis revealed three main affiliative functions: self-representation (e.g., presenting the self as trustworthy), community membership and self-branding. Fitness influencers use these strategies to legitimise their online persona and engage with their followers. The analysis also revealed a discourse formation around appearance-oriented values; even though there are

some health and wellbeing-focused practices, weight loss and body image remain forefront in fitness influencer discourse.

Keywords: Fitness, YouTube Shorts, influencer discourse, SM-CDS, hashtags.

Resumen

Las redes sociales han propiciado la aparición de espacios donde los usuarios pueden formar comunidades digitales y establecer relaciones en torno a intereses y valores en común. En este ámbito, los influencers son actores clave ya que ocupan un alto estatus social como difusores de información dentro de las comunidades digitales. Estudiar el discurso de los influencers permite dejar al descubierto y cuestionar las prácticas que pueden ser perjudiciales para la salud de los usuarios. Esto es especialmente relevante en el mundo ‘fitness’ que se promueve en los videos cortos o ‘Shorts’ de YouTube. Debido a la eficiencia de los Shorts para presentar información sobre ejercicios o nutrición de manera más rápida, el mensaje puede resultar más persuasivo. Algunos estudios que se centran en el discurso de los influencers, por ejemplo, Von Polheim et al. (2023) y Mattacola (2019), han destacado que los influencers tienden a promover prácticas físicas y alimenticias que pueden llegar a afectar negativamente los hábitos de salud de los usuarios, así como fomentar una percepción negativa sobre la apariencia física. A pesar de ello, la investigación sobre hashtags como marcadores discursivos es limitada. Los hashtags no únicamente cumplen una función

organizativa, sino que también facilitan la formación de comunidades digitales al permitir que los usuarios tengan acceso a información relevante con tan solo un ‘click.’ Así mismo, los hashtags reflejan los valores que circulan dentro de la comunidad fitness mediante el lenguaje empleado por los miembros de la comunidad. Esta tesis tiene como objetivo analizar, desde un enfoque de estudios críticos del discurso en redes sociales (SM-CDS), las funciones que cumplen los hashtags de fitness y los valores que los YouTubers promocionan a través de su uso. Un análisis inicial de los hashtags ha permitido identificar cinco categorías principales: FITNESS, WORKOUT, TARGET, PLACE y OTHER. El análisis cualitativo ha identificado tres funciones principales con fines de afiliación: autorrepresentación (por ejemplo, presentarse como confiable), pertenencia a un grupo y autopromoción. Los influencers de fitness se apoyan en estas estrategias para validar su imagen pública y captar la atención de sus seguidores. El análisis cualitativo también ha reflejado la formación de un discurso en torno a criterios estéticos; a pesar de que los hashtags también han evidenciado prácticas vinculadas con el bienestar y la salud, la pérdida de peso y la apariencia física continúan siendo dos de los valores más prevalentes en el discurso de los YouTubers de fitness.

Palabras clave: Fitness, Shorts de YouTube, discurso de influencers, SM-CDS, hashtags.

1. Introduction

With the rise of social media (SM), digital communities have emerged as spaces where users interact, negotiate meaning, and share information based on common interests and goals. These communities are shaped not only by technological affordances but also by online discursive practices. Such groups often develop “shared norms, a sense of common history [...] and an awareness of difference from other groups” (Androutsopoulos, 2006: 6). Within these virtual spaces, users can negotiate their identity as content creators or consumers through interaction. Content creators, like fitness influencers, gain visibility by producing and disseminating topic-specific information, e.g., fitness, thereby reinforcing their social role within the community (Lavoie et al., 2025; Tewatia & Majumdar, 2022) and building authority through discourse (Ratwatte & Mattacola, 2019). As forefront figures their discourse reflects values held within the community of which they are part; values that may be constrained by a socioeconomic interest. Similarly, they legitimise fitness-, beauty-, health-related values and beliefs by building trust with their community of followers. Studying and understanding the values held within the fitness community is paramount as their discourse can influence the health, dietary and fitness practices of users. From a sociological viewpoint, studying influencer discourse of fitness is relevant as it reveals how social values about health and body image are negotiated, legitimised and reproduced in online spaces.

In one of the most recent bodies of research carried out in sociolinguistics, Zappavigna notes how online users involve in “ambient affiliation” via hashtag use (2011:

15). According to Zappavigna, hashtags are metadiscursive tools in that they enable online groups to bond, align with ideologies and navigate content through what she terms “searchable talk” (2015; 2018). Within the fitness community, hashtags are a key affordance through which influencers build communities, shape values and exert social power. Despite some research carried out on YouTube influencers (see Chovanec, 2024; De Kock, 2021), little research has focused on analysing how fitness YouTubers use hashtags as discourse markers. Therefore, this dissertation aims at contributing to research on SM discourse by analysing hashtags in YouTube Shorts to pinpoint what fitness-related values they endorse. YouTube shorts are worthwhile studying due to their increasing popularity since their addition to the platform in 2020. They have become a source for concise, fast-delivered information. In an era of mass online communication, where influencers are positioned as stakeholders, it is necessary to expose and challenge harmful discourses. More specifically I look into the type of hashtags that are more prevalent in influencer discourse; the affiliative functions they serve and the values they endorse.

2. Social Media Affordances and YouTube

SM is theorised to be a “communicative dynamic” that shapes and is shaped by how users engage with available digital affordances (KoshraviNik, 2023: 2). Barton and Lee (2013) define affordances as the limiting or enabling possibilities people perceive in a given [SM] context (27). They offer communicative choices to users which may shape the way people communicate and the language they use online. For instance, a platform that limits

communication to written mode alone, may encourage creative ways people use the given resources for communicative purposes, e.g., the use of emoticons for emphasis (Page et al., 2014: 18). As a result of this, new language practices emerge (Barton & Lee, 2013: 28).

SM affordances include not only meaning-making possibilities, but they also enable interpersonal connections with omniscient online members. The interpersonal affordances of some SM sites enable users to engage with other users or content anytime and anywhere. This type of system is referred to as asynchronous because participants interact on separate time frames through “sequenced” messages (Page et al. 2014: 18). An example of asynchronous systems is YouTube which offers limitless content creation and content consumption without time or space restrictions. As it is the case of YouTube, some affordances are platform specific.

YouTube, founded in 2005 (Welbourne & Grant, 2016: 2), is characterised by content provision in video format. YouTube users rely on audiovisual affordances of the platform to disseminate their content. Due to its increasing popularity, the platform has become a space for successful and influential users, known as YouTubers (Ratwatte & Mattacola, 2019: 5). The increasing consumption of YouTube videos has created a new demand for more engaging, fast-paced video production (see Ten Hove & Van der Meij, 2015). In response to this, short video formats, also known as Shorts, have been recently added to the platform (Roberts & David, 2024: 1). Shorts are brief videos that last under 60 seconds and are designed to maintain viewers engaged for as long as possible (Roberts & David, 2024: 2), thereby expanding the affordability of the resources the platform offers. This new format is relevant for fitness influencers seeking to deliver concise, effective demonstrations to fit the

needs of viewers; and attract prospective followers and consumers. YouTube Shorts also allow followers to interact with one another or influencers through the comment section, thereby enabling parasocial interactions between content creators and consumers. Other affordances include adding texts or ‘captions’ to identify what the topic of the video is; and hashtags which allow content to be searchable, and findable by other users (Zappavigna, 2011).

Hashtags are user-generated tags that can be formed by single words, e.g., #fitness, or noun phrases, as in #noexcuses, or clauses (Zappavigna 2018: 4). They are metadiscursive because they enact the three major communicative functions of language (Zappavigna, 2011). Following Halliday’s Systemic Functional Grammar, Zappavigna identifies how hashtags enact experiential, interpersonal and textual functions. First, hashtags carry out an experiential function because they help identify the topic of conversation within a post, e.g., #fitness (9). Secondly, they are interpersonal because they enact a social function as they enable the formation of online communities around various topics e.g., fitness, political events (Zappavigna, 2011; 2015). This is also known as “ambient affiliation” since hashtags allow users to engage, bond and affiliate themselves with ideologies shared by online communities (Zappavigna, 2011: 15). For instance, hashtags such as #noexcuses or #fitnessmotivation enact interpersonal relations via commands, statements and requests prompting users to engage with given values (Zappavigna, 2015: 11). Thirdly, they have a textual function because they help organise discourse using the tag #. This is one of the most basic yet relevant functions of a hashtag as it permits users to navigate social media resources in search of topic-specific content. This is what Zappavigna has termed ‘searchable talk’

(2011; 2018): a practice that renders discourse a click away for users to engage in online communities. Zappavigna's study on hashtags is relevant because it evinces how metadiscursive resources, like hashtags, enable content creators to expand their social influence within online communities. They are also key tools for influencers to build digital communities (Zappavigna, 2018: 28; Wang et al., 2024: 15) and disseminate fitness-related values through the language they use.

Community members in SM bond through sharing personal experiences and advice, and by finding support in others (Ratwatté & Mattacola, 2019: 14). The fitness community is formed by fitness-content consumers and content providers that disseminate nutrition and exercising advice to achieve health goals. This interest has increased due to the emerging culture of fitness, contemporary identity based on body image, and SM (De Kock, 2021: 1). This is particularly relevant on YouTube due to its increasing popularity since its foundation in 2005 (Welbourne & Grant, 2016:2; Bärtl, 2018: 22). With a community of around 8000 fitness channels in 2020 (qtd. in De Kock, 2021: 52), consumption and dissemination of fitness content has grown ever present with the addition of Shorts (Roberts & David, 2024: 1). They are gaining in popularity due to its fast content delivery in an ever-expanding digital network. This highlights the importance of offering concise and impactful communication, in which hashtags play a key role in making information readily available while amplifying community values and practices.

In social platforms such as YouTube, content is mostly user-generated (Welbourne & Grant, 2016: 2); content consumers can become content creators and promote themselves as influencers. They can be grouped based on the number of followers they possess and the

content they upload, e.g., micro-, mega, or macro-fitness-YouTubers (Schultz, 2025: 224). Fitness influencers take on the task of generating fitness-, health- and dietary-related advice which may (not) be evidence-grounded (Ratwatte & Mattacola, 2019: 13). Even though some fitness content creators may be experts providing informative content (Chovanec, 2024: 202), other influencers legitimise their content through different discursive strategies, one of which is self-representation. Through such strategies influencers shape how their audience perceives them by presenting themselves as specific individuals (Tewatia and Majumdar, 2022: 54). Influencers offer curated information of their personal lives and, (un)consciously, they strategically establish a public identity to create the illusion of being relatable, authentic (Tewatia and Majumdar, 2022: 55; Khamis et al., 2016: 6; Bergs et al., 2023: 2) and knowledgeable (Wang et al., 2024: 15). For instance, by sharing ‘no filter’ pictures, beauty influencers present themselves as genuine and vulnerable (Tewatia and Majumdar, 2022: 67); they connect with their audience through displays of emotions of questionable authenticity (Chovanec, 2024: 222).

Influencer discourse comprises a strategically constructed reality of influencers’ life for viewers to consume. This is particularly concerning within the fitness community because it is populated by individuals who seek support, health information and to readily engage in health practices. Influencers can affect the decisions followers and fitness-content consumers make regarding their health practices, either by positively affecting users’ exercising intentions (Lavoie et al., 2025; Durau et al., 2024), or negatively by promoting idealised physiques (Von Polheim et al., 2023). These values are present in the images, hashtags and captions fitness influencers disseminate. In their study, Von Polheim et al. (2023) revealed

that visual and oral discourses on Instagram endorse healthy eating oriented towards attaining a specific body image. Images displayed before and after transformations, promotion of foods and sports brands, while captions and hashtags identified weight loss and muscle gaining as main goals. Thus, fitness influencers disseminate and promote detrimental behaviours by endorsing idealised physiques based on fatphobic behaviours (Ratwatte & Mattacola, 2019: 9). In their study, Ratwatte and Mattacola (2019) identified these values to be not only pervasive in influencer discourse, but also in YouTube comment sections. Apart from discussing body dissatisfaction and sharing personal achievements (weight loss) or failures (weight gain), influencers were regarded as inspiring role models (15). Like Instagram beauty influencers, fitness YouTubers aim at building trust by presenting themselves as relatable and knowledgeable; they legitimize their content and their online identity by sharing their own fitness journey and personal experiences.

Influencer discourse has been regarded as unreliable due to the so-called “celebrity economy” (Chovanec, 2024: 223). This economy is spurred by social outreach (Tewatia & Majumdar, 2022:67) and measured via views and likes (Ten Hove & Van der Meij, 2015: 49; Khamis et al., 2016: 6) which are monetised through brand promotions. Because influencers occupy high status within their community, their language (e.g., promoting products and lifestyle advice) has persuasive weight, thereby shaping users’ fitness and dietary behaviours. For instance, commentaries around weight loss and muscle gain can negatively influence nutritional habits such as overexercising, eliminating certain foods and abiding to caloric restrictions (Ratwatte & Mattacola, 2019: 17). This is particularly relevant in the context of

YouTube Shorts which display health messages in more persuasive visual formats that blur the line between personal advice and expert-informed content.

The literature review has highlighted some of the values that fitness consumers and fitness influencers on SM endorse and navigate on a daily basis. The emphasis on body transformation evinces how attaining a specific appearance (slim but muscular) has become a sign of cultural and social status and identity. While several studies analyse influencer discourse on YouTube videos (Ratwatte & Mattacola, 2019; De Kock, 2021) and Instagram (Von Polheim et al., 2023; Tewatia & Majumdar, 2022), little research on linguistic strategies, like the use of hashtags, has been carried out in YouTube Shorts. Existing studies on Shorts focus primarily on algorithmic bias (Cakmak & Agarwal, 2025) or Shorts affordances (Robert & David, 2024) leaving a gap in understanding how hashtags function as communicative tools in this digital context. This dissertation addresses that gap by examining how fitness influencers use hashtags in YouTube Shorts to negotiate fitness-related values. Hashtags are central to this analysis because they enable affiliative practices within online communities (Zappavigna, 2011; 2018) and may shed light on the negotiation of health values circulated in fitness discourse.

3. Theoretical Framework

By adopting a Social Media Critical Studies (SM-CDS) perspective, this dissertation integrates a critical study of language in use while also considering the social and technological affordances of digital platforms (KoshraviNik, 2023: 3). This threefold

approach is essential due to the way digital spaces have transformed communicative and social structures (Esposito & KoshraviNik, 2024: 1) and discourses. The new media dynamics have shifted from a traditional top-down dynamic of a one-to-many interface to a bottom-up relationship, where users engage in both interpersonal participation (KoshraviNik, 2023: 2) and mass communication (qtd. in Kopf, 2025: 7). This redistribution of communicative power facilitates amplification and circulation of discourses that perpetuate or challenge dominant ideologies, e.g., social advocacy (Esposito & KoshraviNik, 2024: 1 & 2). In this context, “prosumers” (consumers and producers) can directly impact production, framing and consumption of information (Esposito & KoshraviNik, 2024: 3). This is grounded on the notion that language is never neutral as speakers project ideological goals through the linguistic choices they make (Fairclough, 1989: 20). In a digital context, Esposito and KoshraviNik (2024) argue that digital tools are “inherently ideological” as it enables other- and self-representations to be reproduced, sustained and challenged, and shape our social realities (4). A SM-CDS approach allows the analysis of hashtags not only as technological affordances but as tools with discursive functions. In the case of fitness influencers, hashtags facilitate discourse formation and are used in self-representation practices to legitimise certain values and identities. By legitimising power, social actors propound practices and beliefs that become socially endorsed or “naturalised” (Fairclough, 1989: 33) while obscuring how they contribute to sustain power relations (Machin & Mayr, 2012: 25).

4. Data and Methodological Procedure.

To carry out this study, a YouTube account was created to ensure user data would not provide biased content. A corpus of 60 YouTube Shorts, produced between 2021 and 2025, was collected by typing the tag #workout on the YouTube search engine. This search word was chosen aiming at objectivity by focusing on exercising rather than highlighting specific community values, e.g., body positivity. The option “Shorts” was selected to ensure only short-format videos were proffered by YouTube. The Shorts were manually selected in two days following a popularity criterion: only influencers with more than 10,000 followers were considered (see table 1). This was facilitated by the YouTube algorithm as it locates highly influential accounts (qtd. Welbourne & Grant, 2016: 2). Thirty accounts were selected trying to achieve balance between female and male users (15 of each type) all of whom produce their content in English. A second selection process included collecting the Shorts with the highest popularity rates. This was done by selecting the option “popular first” on the feed of each account. Some videos were not considered because they lacked hashtags. As such, data was manually cleaned before any item was incorporated into the dataset. Thus, the content selected were the most popular Shorts containing hashtags.

Metadata about the Shorts and accounts were recorded on an excel sheet. In accordance with ethical parameters outlined by the Association of Internet Researchers (AOIR), this dissertation applies anonymization to protect the identity of the content creators (Franzke et al., 2020). Usernames and channel names were replaced with alphanumeric codes (e.g., YTS_F001_1) and no direct links, video titles or identifiable profile elements were included. However, it should be noted that, given the public nature of the influencers under analysis, person-specific content that is directly relevant to the discussion has been quoted in

full. Additionally, screenshots of the Shorts were collected. To avoid biases in visual representation, the Shorts were paused at 0:00 to capture the initial frame. This decision was made to prevent the changing thumbnails from influencing the screenshot, thereby ensuring a standardised method across all samples. Thumbnails are preview images that serve as visual summaries before users watch the Short (Can Cakmak & Agarwal, 2025).

Table 1. Participants in both groups.¹

Female Participants	Followers	Country	Male Participants	Followers	Country
YTS_F001	410K	N/A	YTS_M016	1,88M	Belarus
YTS_F002	428K	USA	YTS_M017	32,2k	USA
YTS_F003	128K	N/A	YTS_M018	367k	UK
YTS_F004	1,36M	USA	YTS_M019	42,9k	UK
YTS_F005	746k	USA	YTS_M020	4,45M	Malasya
YTS_F006	49,9k	New Zeland	YTS_M021	32k	Germany
YTS_F007	700k	Australia	YTS_M022	1,3M	USA
YTS_F008	267k	N/A	YTS_M023	1,65k	France
YTS_F009	360k	USA	YTS_M024	964k	USA
YTS_F010	847k	United Arab Emirates	YTS_M025	23,7k	N/A
YTS_F011	7,58M	Germany	YTS_M026	466k	USA
YTS_F012	2,34M	USA	YTS_M027	11,07k	USA
YTS_F013	695k	Slovakia	YTS_M028	37,2k	USA
YTS_F014	404k	N/A	YTS_M029	165K	USA
YTS_F015	65,1k	Canada	YTS_M030	179k	N/A

¹ The dataset used in this dissertation can be accessed via hyperlinks attached to the tables or found in Appendix A.

A total of 240 hashtags were manually grouped into four major categories based on their semantic content: FITNESS, WORKOUT, TARGET, PLACE and OTHER. Hashtags were classified according to the theme or purpose they convey. For instance, FITNESS contains subcategories with hashtags referring to fitness culture and motivation. The WORKOUT category comprises subcategories identifying the type of exercise performed (#fullbodyworkout, #abs). TARGET displays subcategories that signal intended goals to be achieved with specific exercises (#mobility, #sixpack). The PLACE category contains hashtags that indicate the location of the workout (#homeworkout or #gym). Finally, OTHER comprises hashtags that appeared infrequently or did not fit into the four main categories (#humour, #viral).

The dataset was analysed following a mixed method approach to measure hashtag use and uncover detailed patterns of use (Page et al., 2014: 52) while considering the technological and social contexts (Esposito & KoshraviNik, 2024). To determine which categories were most prevalent overall, a quantitative analysis was carried out in which the rate of hashtag use was calculated across the whole dataset. Subsequently, hashtag rates were calculated separately for male and female groups to pinpoint any gender-related differences. Following this premise, the frequency of hashtags in each subcategory was analysed in both groups to reveal gender-based patterns in hashtag use. Finally, a qualitative analysis examined words and hashtags frequently co-occurring (referred to as ‘collocates’) to pinpoint hashtag functions and fitness-related values within fitness discourse. This qualitative analysis approach revealed hashtags to serve three main affiliative functions: self-representation, community membership and self-branding; and highlighted values related to body image and

well-being. The process began with examination of the subcategorical hashtags and their collocates to gain an overall sense of meaning. Hashtags were subsequently grouped based on their semantic content and discursive function. For instance, hashtags related to aesthetics (#shredded, #summerbody, #weightloss), community (#gymbros, #gymrat) and branding (#growwithjo) were grouped separately. These groupings were reviewed to identify recurring patterns and highlight values in the language used. Hashtags like #growwithjo, #fitnessgirl clustered around themes of self-branding and self-representation, while hashtags like #gymbros reflect group membership; and tags such as #weightloss or #shredfat were identified to carry values of body image and well-being.

5. Results

The analysis of hashtags revealed some differences and similarities between both groups displayed in table 2 below. First, both groups differ in FITNESS, WORKOUT, OTHER and TARGET categories. Male participants showcase subcategories related to *nutrition* (FITNESS), *overloading* and *high intensity* (WORKOUT), *humour* (OTHER), and *muscle gain* and *health* (OTHER). On the contrary, female influencers do not present nutrition-related hashtags, focus on low intensity training (walking and stretching), resort to viral and affective tags and target lower body training. These differences display gendered practices where male influencers seem to value a higher competitive- or performance-oriented focus, entertainment-oriented goals (humour), well-being interests (nutrition and health), and project a body image based on muscle growth. Conversely, female

participants seem to emphasise body shaping with emphasis on lower body and seek emotional engagement.

Similarities spring in the categories of PLACE and TARGET. Both groups present similar subcategories of *gym* and *home* suggesting no gender differences. Similarly, both groups use subcategories that reference weight loss and display a focus on abdominal definition, thereby revealing a shared aesthetic goal.

Table 2. Categories and subcategories of hashtags across both groups.

Male influencers		Female influencers	
Category	Subcategory	Category	Subcategory
FITNESS	fitness	FITNESS	fitness
	motivation		
	nutrition		motivation
WORKOUT	workout	WORKOUT	workout
	overloading		running
	bodyweight		bodyweight
	full body		stretching
			walking
	high intensity		sports
TARGET	abdomen	TARGET	abdomen
	weight loss		weightloss
	health		aesthetics
	aesthetics		
	arms		biceps
	muscle gain		quads
PLACE	gym	PLACE	gym
	home		home
OTHER	shorts	OTHER	shorts
	branding		branding

	humour		viral
	other		affect

The analysis of the overall hashtag use identifies WORKOUT as the most prevalent category (30,83%), that is, the most recurrent type of hashtags used across the groups are those related to describing the type of exercise being performed or promoted (see table 3). For instance, #bodyweightworkout and #cardioworkout. These results are coherent with the initial search prompt ‘workout.’ The second highest category is TARGET. This implies that a 25, 41% of hashtags used are aimed at describing the goal of the exercises being performed, e.g., #weightloss, #sixpacks. The third highest category is FITNESS (19,58%). This category comprises tags containing the words ‘fitness’ and ‘motivation.’ These two subcategories were grouped together as both are likely to co-occur, e.g., #fitnessmotivation. Also, fitness is referred to as a movement rather than merely a state of physical performance and appearance. This is grounded on the basis that #fitness is a high frequency tag that is present in/co-occurs with multiple tags across categories. For example, #fatloss, #nutrition, #bodyweightworkout, #beginnerworkout, #runningmotivation, #gymmotivation, #mobility, etc. These examples showcase the wide range of concepts within FITNESS that serve to identify the community of affiliation forming via sharing dietary and physical habits.

Table 3. Overall rate of hashtag use in the whole dataset.

Category	Number	Rate
fitness	47	19,58%
workout	74	30,83%

target	61	25,41%
place	21	8,75%
others	37	15,41%
Total	240	

The analysis of hashtag use in each group (table 4) revealed that male influencers display a higher rate of hashtags used (66,66%) than female YouTubers (33,33%). As for each category, male influencers present higher rates of tags in WORKOUT (31,25%) and TARGET (28,12%) than female influencers, with FITNESS-related tags being the third highest group (18,12%). On the other hand, female YouTubers showcase WORKOUT (30%) and FITNESS (22,50%) as the two highest categories while TARGET is the third highest (20%). However, the difference in WORKOUT is not significant as there is only a 1,25% difference between both groups. The high number of WORKOUT tags might be affected by the prompt ‘workout’ seeing that the algorithm proposes information relative to the search word. Secondly, the high use of TARGET-related hashtags by male YouTubers may differentiate male influencers as promoters of goal-oriented discourse, further explained in the discussion.

Table 4. Rate of hashtag use in both groups.

Category	Female Influencers		Male influencers	
	Number	Rate	Number	Rate
fitness	18	22,50%	29	18,12%
workout	24	30,00%	50	31,25%
target	16	20,00%	45	28,12%
place	7	8,75%	14	8,75%

others	15	18,75%	22	13,75%
Total	80	33,33%	160	66,66%

5.1. FITNESS Subcategories

The quantitative analysis of the subcategories within FITNESS revealed that male YouTubers displayed more hashtags related to *fitness* than to *motivation* and *nutrition* (tables 5 & 6). The former tended to co-occur with specifiers such as #mensfitness, #fitnessjourney, #fitnessmovement and #fitnessmotivation which supports the above claim that fitness is regarded as a movement than involves motivation to adhere to physical practices and behaviours. The fact that fitness is referred to as a journey underscores the metaphorical value of consistency, effort and the attainment of a goal. On the other hand, the subcategory *motivation* showcases instances of empowerment to carry out any physical activity contained within WORKOUT. For instance, #gymmotivation, #bodybuildingmotivation and #workoutmotivation are encouragements to keep fitness-consumers motivated throughout their journey towards self-improvement. *Nutrition* scored the lowest. This might have also been influenced by the search word ‘workout’ which seems to be oriented towards physical exercise rather than to dietary content.

Table 5. Rate of sub-categorical hashtags in FITNESS used by male influencers.

FITNESS
Male influencers

Subcategories	Number	Rates	Collocates
fitness	20	68,96%	UK (1), men's (1), motivation (4), journey (1), circuits (1)
motivation	8	27,58%	gym (1), workout (1), no excuses (1)
nutrition	1	3,44%	

Table 6. Rate of sub-categorical hashtags in FITNESS used by female influencers.

FITNESS			
Female influencers			
Subcategories	Number	Rates	Collocates
fitness	12	66,66%	motivation (2), tips (1) journey (1), girl (1), addict (1)
motivation	6	33,33%	running (1), gym(1)

As for female YouTubers, they displayed higher rates of hashtag use in the *fitness* subcategory. Like male influencers, female YouTubers also perceive fitness as a journey (#fitnessjourney). Other collocates expose that the fitness content is targeted to other women (#fitnessgirl), and it is about providing advice (#fitnesstips) to other ‘fitness addicts.’ Finally, the subcategory *motivation* is used in a similar fashion of male influencers. Both groups aim at motivating followers to continue their practices or follow their exercises. This may be a form of self-representation, presenting themselves as cheerleaders to affiliate with the audience. These types of hashtags perform an interpersonal function for they help build relationships and engage with others (Zappavigna, 2015: 11). Female influencers are addressing and targeting a female audience by offering advice and support which transmits a sense of care; and by encouraging followers they adopt the role of a friend or a coach.

5.2. WORKOUT Subcategories

The analysis of the subcategories contained in WORKOUT (table 7) indicate that male YouTubers use three types of subcategories in higher rates: workout (36%), bodyweight (18%) and high intensity exercises (14%). *Workout* is the general subcategory that encompasses multiple training routines. The second highest subcategory is *bodyweight*. Exercises in this category are practiced without using other tools such as dumbbells or machines (Werenkiewicz et al. 2025: 5). Examples in this subcategory promote specific types of training, e.g., #calisthenics and #streetworkout, which refer to a specialised form of strength training. Calisthenics involves only body weight load and has evolved from traditional Artistic Gymnastics (Rodriguez-Redondo et al., 2024: 345). This aligns with the use of hashtags referring to acrobatics (#handstand). The hashtag #streetworkout reiterates this specificity as it suggests outdoor settings and emphasises the roughness of the training which involves progressive, more challenging practices over time. This type of training not only focuses on strength building but on improving flexibility, mobility, muscle endurance and cardiovascular health (Werenkiewicz et al., 2025: 5). The use of these types of hashtags reveals a formation of self-categories within the fitness community that underscore how users align themselves with particular disciplines and practices rather than to general fitness trends.

The third subcategory, *high intensity*, refers to exercises of endurance done at maximum effort in short time sequences. These exercises are also referred to as ‘cardio’ since the heart rate increases due to the intensity of the workout. These workouts, usually practiced with only body weight, can be more challenging by adding dumbbells which emphasises the

physical demand of the training. This emphasis on intensity and endurance may contribute to influencer self-representation as disciplined and highly performing individuals, thereby becoming role models. This aligns with the use of tags like #noexcuses in table 5.

Table 7. Rate of sub-categorical hashtags in WORKOUT used by male influencers.

WORKOUT			
Male influencers			
Subcategories	Number	Rate	Collocates
workout	18	36,00%	routine (1), exercise (2), training (1)
bodyweight	9	18,00%	workout (3), calisthenics (3), streetworkout(1), handstand (1), training(1)
high intensity	7	14,00%	dumbbell(1), cardio(1), hardstyle (1)
overloading	6	12,00%	weight training(1), strength training (1), kettlebell (2), dumbbell (2)
full body	3	6,00%	workout (3)
kegel	3	6,00%	exercise (1), workout(1)
yoga	3	6,00%	stretching(1)
beginner	1	2,00%	workout

On the other hand, female participants display higher rates of usage in *workout* (33,33%), *running* (25%) and *body weight* (20,83%). Unlike male influencers, female YouTubers seem to prefer cardiovascular training, e.g., running, over calisthenics. This seems to be focused on building endurance and speed as suggested by the collocates (#endurance, #speed). Similarly, in this group calisthenics is further associated with acrobatics. It emphasises how bodyweight training serves the purpose of developing muscle groups' strength to also perform physical feats (e.g., handstands). In both groups, the subcategories

running and *high intensity* can be directly linked to the subcategory *weight loss* in next section; it emphasises a fat-loss-driven goal.

Table 8. Rate of sub-categorical hashtags in WORKOUT used by female influencers.

WORKOUT			
Female influencers			
Subcategories	Number	Rate	Collocates
workout	8	33,33%	training(2)
running	6	25,00%	speed(1), endurance(1), drills(1), sprint (1)
bodyweight	5	20,83%	calisthenics (2), acrobatics (1), handstand (1)
overloading	1	4,16%	progressive (1)
stretching	1	4,16%	
walking	1	4,16%	
sport	1	4,16%	
full body	1	4,16%	

5.3. TARGET Subcategories

The category TARGET comprises the goals which workout routines aim at. In the case of male YouTubers, they show higher rates in the use of subcategories aiming at losing weight (31,11%), fixing or improving physical issues (26,66%) and developing abdominal muscles (17,77%). Results are shown in table 9 below. The first subcategory, *weight loss*, aims at fat-burning goals. It is relevant to highlight the use of the slang expression ‘to be/get shredded’ as it emphasises a physical state of highly defined musculature and extremely low percentage of body fat. The collocates ‘summer body’ and ‘aesthetics’ underscore a superficial drive to attain a certain body image. In contrast, the subcategory ‘improve/fix’

targets pain relief and improved mobility and flexibility. This highlights workout assisting people who struggle with physical issues. The third subcategory is closely related to *weight loss*. *Abdomen* displays the desire for achieving visible abdominal muscles through loss of belly fat. The specifier ‘six packs’ further emphasises this goal.

Table 9. Rate of sub-categorical hashtags in TARGET used by male influencers

TARGET			
Male influencers			
Subcategories	Number	Rates	Collocates
weightloss	14	31,11%	fat loss (2), burn fat(1), body fat(1) shred fat (1), weigth loss (3), summer body(1), shredded (2), aesthetic (1)
improve/fix	12	26,66%	posture (2), mobility (4), back pain (1), pain (1), flexibility (2), movement (2), posture (2)
abdomen	8	17,77%	sixpack (1), workout (4)
health	5	11,11%	healthy living (2), UK (1), men's (1), healthy (1),
muscle gain	3	6,66%	Body building (2), maxxng (1)
arms	3	6,66%	forearms (2), wrestling (1)

In the case of female YouTubers (table 10), the subcategory *abdomen* presents the highest rate of use (43,75%) followed by *weight loss* (37,50%). The rest of the categories present only a single instance of use in each case. Like male participants, female influencers target the abdominal area to attain visible ‘abs’ and lose weight. It is worth noticing that workouts are aimed at a specific female public, as revealed by the collocates ‘postpartum’ and ‘for women.’ Still, these findings are not conclusive, and further data would be necessary to confirm their validity.

Table 10. Rate of sub-categorical hashtags in TARGET used by female influencers.

TARGET			
Female influencers			
Subcategories	Number	Rate	Collocates
abdomen	7	43,75%	sixpack (1), crunches (2), core (1), post partum (2)
weightloss	6	37,50%	for women (1), with me (1), transformation (1)
biceps	1	6,25%	
quads	1	6,25%	
mobility	1	6,25%	

5.4. PLACE Subcategories

The category PLACE comprises the locations where people carry out their training, at the gym or at home. Both groups present similar rates of use, 57,14% for *gym* and 42,85% for home workouts (tables 11 & 12). Both groups reflect a higher preference for gym environments. This may be due to the type of exercises practiced. As shown in tables 7 and 8 above, two of the most frequent workouts are high intensity and calisthenics which may require specific equipment, e.g., treadmills or aerial rings. It is important to highlight the use of tags such as #gymbros and #gymrat as they introduce the gym as a community or brotherhood where bonds are formed through shared goals and routines. Its association expands beyond being a place for merely training to perform an affiliative function that reinforces a collective fitness identity. This is further addressed in the discussion section.

Table 11. Rate of sub-categorical hashtags in PLACE used by male influencers.

PLACE			
Male influencers			
Subcategories	Number	Rates	Collocates
gym	8	57,14%	bros (1), workout (1)
at home	6	42,85%	workout (6)

Table 12. Rate of sub-categorical hashtags in PLACE used by female influencers.

PLACE			
Female influencers			
Subcategories	Number	Rate	Collocates
gym	4	57,14%	rat (2)
at home	3	42,85%	workout

5.5. OTHER Subcategories

OTHER contains subcategories with rates of use that are too low to form a category of their own. It also contains seemingly unrelated tags such as #gravity or #anime. In both groups the tag #shorts reach the highest rate of usage, 40% for male participants and 73,33% for female influencers (see tables 13 & 14 below). This self-referential use of the tags underscores the significant role YouTube shorts play in the diffusion of fitness content. A second subcategory worth discussing is *branding*. Both groups present instances in which influencers would employ their usernames as tags as a form of self-branding. For instance, #bernardorebeil or #growwithjo. Male influencers show a higher tendency of using this type of tags (30%) over female participants (13,33%).

Finally, in the case of male YouTubers, a subcategory of *community* displays instances of tags such as #anime, #ricebucket, #gravity and #manga. Despite being seemingly unrelated

to fitness discourse these hashtags allude to calisthenic training. Hashtags like #manga and #anime reference scenes of popular Japanese comics in which characters adhere to extreme training. The influencer focuses on recreating these specific bodyweight-training scenes. Similarly, #gravity refers to the context of acrobatic feats characteristic of advanced calisthenics. Overall, these hashtags reflect a community of fitness-oriented practitioners that has formed around other topics of interest (comic fans) creating a subcultural form of identity. Members of these subcultures reflect shared commitment to physical training and appreciation for anime storytelling. This may also reflect an affiliative purpose that reinforces group belonging while expanding influencers' outreach beyond conventional fitness audiences.

Table 13. Rate of sub-categorical hashtags in OTHER used by male influencers.

OTHERS			
Male influencers			
Subcategories	Number	Rates	Collocates
shorts	8	40%	fitness(1), youtube (1), gym(1)
branding	6	30%	Jim (2), David Laid, Bernardo Rebeil (2), crockfit.
community	4	20%	anime, rice bucket, gravity, manga
humour	2	10%	
other	2	10%	one piece, for your page

Table 14. Rate of sub-categorical hashtags in OTHER used by female influencers.

OTHER			
Female influencers			
Subcategories	Number	Rate	Collocates
shorts	11	73,33%	feed (1), video (1)

branding	2	13,33%	grow with jo (2)
viral	1	6,66%	
affect	1	6,66	childhood memories

6. Discussion

The analysis has revealed that fitness influencers use hashtags to perform an affiliative function (Zappavigna, 2011). They do so through self-representation strategies (Chovanec, 2024) that help them construct an authoritative public persona, and position themselves within specific communities of practice, e.g., gym community or comic fanbase. From these functions values related to body image and well-being emerge and are reinforced within the community.

Affiliation refers to how influencers seek to bond with the audience to increase engagement online via follows or likes, and offline through shared values. They achieve this through self-representation strategies (Chovanec, 2024; Tewatian & Majumdar, 2022; Lavoie et al., 2025) such as self-branding, e.g., presenting themselves as supportive and authoritative figures, or aligning themselves with a specific fitness subculture, more specifically, the gym community. First, self-representation practices enable influencers to construct a trustworthy image, thereby increasing their likelihood of gaining followers (Tewatia & Majumdar, 2022; Chovanec, 2024; Lavoie et al, 2025) and securing income. The data has revealed that the participants try to affiliate with their audience by presenting themselves either as encouraging (Lavoie et al., 2025) or as pragmatic. This affiliative function, however, seems to differ across genders.

On the one hand, female YouTubers showcase values based on women supporting women. This can be observed in the higher rates of FITNESS tags used by female influencers (22,50%) in table 6. This is evident in the use of tags such as #fitnessgirl (table 6), #weightlossforwomen and #postpartum (table 10) which addresses experiences specific to women while building a supportive identity. Conversely, male participants promote more goal-oriented discourses, e.g., #weightloss, #muscle gain and #painrelief, (table 9). While motivational hashtags are present in both groups, male influencers seem to rely more on TARGET-related tags (18,12% over 28,12%, table 4) and general *fitness* tags (68,96% over 27,58%, table 5). This suggests a higher focus on physical transformation and performance. Both groups address their respective audience through gender-specific tags such as #menshealth, #weightlossforwomen and #postpartum. However, female influencers seem to use highly specific tags (#weightlossformwomen) whereas men use more generic tags (#menshealth). This difference may suggest that female participants use more gendered fitness discourses that address women via specific body image goals, and men through performance-oriented and general well-being language. It is noteworthy that gendered tags are not highly frequent in the dataset; this may occur due to influencers' tendency to prioritise content relevance and outreach over gender differences as suggested by Wang et al (2024: 11). Affiliation is further showcased in the formation of the 'gym community' in influencer content. Both groups promote gym-based practices over home-based training despite the latter being more accessible to fitness practitioners (see tables 11 & 12). This gym-focused content underscores the gym as a social and symbolic space, thereby obscuring the boundary between offline and online identities (Esposito & KoshraviNik, 2024: 2).

Offline practices, e.g. training and socialising at the gym, are edited to project specific values that align with online groups to “remain visible and successful” (Bergs et al., 2023: 19). Attitudes, practices (hashtag use) and language (projected values) become affiliative identity markers. By using tags such as #gymbros or #gymrat (tables 11 & 12), participants identify themselves as members of the fitness community and reinforce group identity via shared values like weight loss or muscle building. This is further reflected on visual and oral discourse (see figures 1 & 2 below²). Figure 1 depicts a group of young males walking shirtless in a public place; it reflects a sense of physical confidence and shared identity linked to the body building subculture. In this context, musculature does not only signal physical achievements, but it is related to group belonging (Molloy et al., 2010: 5). From another viewpoint, the caption in figure 2 (“when a cross-fitter goes to a normal gym”) establishes an in- and outgroup relationship. By using the term cross-fitter with “normal gym,” this influencer is distancing himself from the crossfit community while legitimising traditional gym practices as well as reinforcing his authority and alignment with that community. Therefore, group alignment is a self-representation strategy through which influencers adjust and validate their identity through interaction with others (Bergs et al., 2023).

Figure 1. Visual example of the sense of the gym community (participant YTS_M025_1)

² Usernames and faces have been edited to preserve participants’ identity in line with AOIR anonymisation codes.

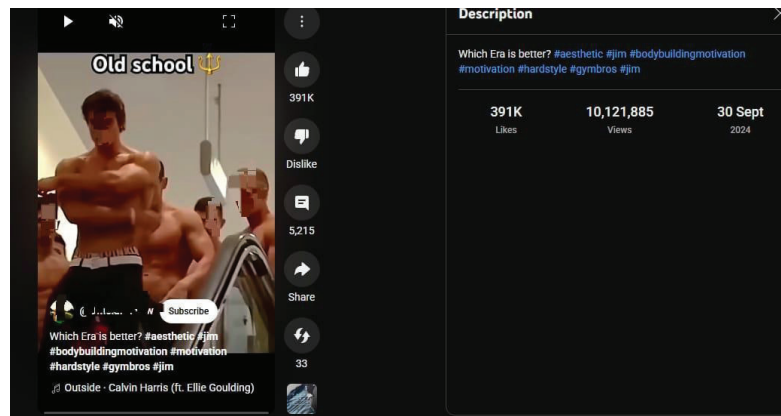
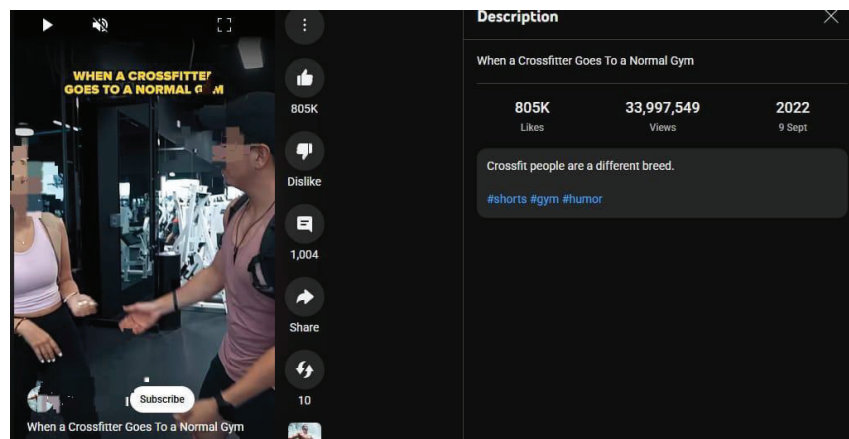


Figure 2. Gym behaviour shared via humoristic representations (participant YTS_M022_2).



As discussed above, fitness YouTubers rely on self-representation and group affiliation to secure social and economic success. These practices are a form of self-branding, further reinforced through the use of self-referential hashtags, e.g., #bernardorebeil or #growwithjo (tables 13 & 14). Such tags function not only as a form of recognition, but as strategic tools for asserting authoritative identities. Because SM is a profit-driven space with overabundance of content, self-branding becomes essential for asserting distinctiveness,

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gaining prominence and securing advertising opportunities (Bergs et al., 2023: 19; Khamis et al., 2016: 5). This commercial imperative, in turn, shapes how influencers negotiate their online personas (Khamis et al., 2016: 6): they position themselves as experts offering unique and exclusive knowledge, thereby encouraging followers to align with their fitness goals and practices. In this way, self-representation becomes a mechanism of power, reinforcing the legitimacy of fitness influencer discourse and asserting its ideological position through increased visibility and outreach.

Apart from functioning as affiliation tools, hashtags in both groups also underscore weight-loss-focused and physical well-being-oriented values negotiated within the fitness community. This is evinced through preference of workout types (*body weight* and *high intensity*) and the targets, e.g., *weight loss*, *abdomen* and *fix/improve* (tables 7 & 8). While male influencers seem to prefer body weight training more than cardio, the contrary is true for women. This focus on body weight has gained popularity worldwide due to calisthenics (Rodriguez-Redondo et al., 2024: 345), a practice that emphasises not only muscle growth but also flexibility and endurance. These values of functionality and body mobility seem to be more frequent in male influencers' discourse who use hashtags such as #backpain, #mobility and #flexibility (table 9). Conversely, female participants' discourse rarely use hashtags oriented towards well-being or corrective referents, with a single instance of #mobility in the whole dataset (see table 10).

However, these health-oriented goals are overshadowed by appearance-driven goals where weight loss remains a dominant theme, e.g., #burnfat, #shredfat and #fatloss (see table 9). For instance, while *improve/fix* represents a 26,66% of usage, weight-loss-related tags

occupy a higher 31,11% rate (table 9). Female influencers in particular seem to target visible abdominal muscles; this reflects a body image ideal focused on fat loss and muscle definition (Ratwatte & Mattacola, 2019; Von Polheim et al., 2023). This is evident in collocates such as #sixpack, #transformation (table 10), #summerbody and #aesthetic (table 9). In this way, hashtags not only function as visibility tools and identity formation but also as key mechanisms through which discourse is negotiated and amplified.

7. Conclusion

On addressing the objectives proposed, the quantitative analysis has revealed that the most prevalent types of hashtags are those related to specific routines (e.g., body weight and cardio), goals (weight loss) and motivation. Even though hashtags related to gym spaces and branding were less prevalent, their role as affiliative tools deserved some consideration. The qualitative analysis highlighted the interpersonal functions of these hashtags. Through motivation and target-oriented tags (e.g., #noexcuses, #weightloss) influencers attempt to build intimate relations with their audiences by adopting supportive, goal-oriented and inspirational figures. There are some gender differences in this respect: female participants tend to gravitate towards providing support while men emphasise goals. In a similar vein, influencers align themselves with values of specific group memberships (the gym community) that together with self-promotion contribute to achieve profitable social success. Overall, it seems that affiliative striving has a main economic basis product of a capitalist

society (Bergs et al., 2023; Khamis et al., 2016; Tewatia & Majumdar, 2022; Chovanec, 2024).

This is of particular importance because profit-driven individuals are responsible for the (re)production and consumption of health content which leads to the third inquiry: fitness values. This paper has found some evidence of well-being-focused content (Ratwatte & Mattacola, 2019) in men's discourse, e.g., nutrition and health. However, the main narratives still remain aesthetically driven, with weight loss as the main goal (Von Polheim et al., 2023; Ratwatte & Mattacola, 2019).

From a SM-CDS perspective, this paper highlights the discursive (values), societal (identity) and technological (hashtag use) implications derived from SM communicative practices (Esposito & KoshraviNik, 2024; KoshraviNik, 2023). Hashtags function as ideological affordances that consolidate self-representation practices and amplify values that may (potentially) become consolidated in the psyche of fitness content consumers. In other words, technology and online communicative practices can shape our perception of well-being as oriented towards a set physical image, thereby motivating the formation of an aligning identity with real-life repercussions.

This dissertation has examined the discourse of fitness influencers by analysing hashtags as discourse markers, thereby contributing to the study of online communities within Critical Discourse Studies. This paper has left one piece of evidence unaccounted for related to why male participants use more hashtags than females. Future work could operate in this line to shed some light in this matter. Also, further research could study accounts with fewer than 10,000 followers to determine whether their discursive practices differ from those

of more prominent influencers. This focus could be pertinent, as macro- and mega-influencers operate on the fringes of mainstream, thereby reflecting widespread practices.

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Appendix A

Links to the dataset are provided below in sequential order.

Table 1. Participants. [Link](#).

Table 2. Categories and subcategories of hashtags in both groups. [Link](#).

Table 3. Overall rates of hashtag use across both groups. [Link](#).

Table 4. Rate of hashtag use in both groups. [Link](#).

Table 5, 7, 9, 11 and 13. Rates of subcategorical hashtags used by male influencers. [Link](#).

Tables 6, 8, 10, 12 and 14. Rates of subcategorical hashtags used by female influencers. [Link](#).