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"I feel proud when I close all rings on my Apple watch"

A qualitative study on gender differences, digital landscape, and late Millennials personal health within the fitness culture

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Abstract

During the past years, fitness has seen a shift in trends, moving from collectivistic to individualistic reasons to exercise. Some researchers even go as far as describing the concept of "healthism" as an ideology of modern society, emphasizing the subordinate value of a fit and slender body as a metaphor for a successful life. This has led to the establishment of athleisure, the combination of fashion and sports in clothing that are designed to be worn both in and outside of the gym. Simultaneously, there is a tremendous growth of technology, with Millennials being the first generation to be fully globalized online. In the era of digitalization, where social media is used as a means to construct a social and personal sense of health, the pressure on the individual increases.

This thesis aims to investigate gender differences for late Millennials within the Swedish fitness culture in order to further develop upon the idea of why these differences occur. The digital landscape will be looked into as well as the personal health issues of late Millennials to understand how they come into play within the fitness culture and how the culture is consumed. Valuable insights will be gathered through qualitative in-depth interviews with late Millennials, which together with the theoretical framework will lay the foundation for the abductive approach used in this study. In terms of findings, hegemonic masculinity seems to capture the differences found between females and males, evolving around the idea that females are perceived as passive objectives whereas males are judged based on their performing body. Further, expectations from parents seem to be of importance. One may even argue that the competitive and result-oriented characteristics of Generation X may cause a perception among late Millennials that they need to prove themselves worthy of love and respect from their parents. Managerial implications include the importance for brands to focus their marketing on contributing to a long-term health perspective, and how athleisure can be adapted for males.

Acknowledgment

Prologue

"Today I'm pouring my heart out a bit [...] It might not raise your eyebrow, but for me it's BIG. And to you who's like "Shit, this is me" - You're not alone.

In today's society, comparison is a big part of our everyday life. And it's made even easier due to social media. That's no surprise, right? But unfortunately, comparison is also the thief of joy. Which I got very well aware of a couple of years ago.

I believe a lot of us have either been there, are still there or know someone who has. So what am I talking about?[...]The voice inside which makes you hate yourself and your body, but at the same time is your BFF. Yup, true mindfuck. And no, you don't have to be weighing 40 kg to be considered having an eating disorder.

With this I just want to send a reminder out to the world that you are not your weight and not your body. You are you: an amazing fucking person who is loved by family and friends. But it's sure easy as hell to forget that while scrolling through social media. Might sound lame AF, but it's true. It was for me a least. And it still is sometimes. But you know what? Unfollow or mute those MTF's who don't give you any joy! You do you.

It's not worth missing your life for the sake of being skinny or "healthy". It really isn't. And let's be honest, all of these insta-models with a "high metabolism"? YEAH RIGHT. When I was slowly realizing this, a friend of mine said: "No one will talk about your weight or how skinny you were at your funeral. They will talk about you and your person." When I compare myself to then and now, it's like looking at two completely different people. I'm HAPPY now! Of course, every day doesn't include sunshine and puppies, and I do struggle some days. Life's Yin and Yang. Just like it's supposed to be [...] And let's compliment each other for what's on the inside, not only for what's on the outside."

- Extract from Instagram, Olivia*

*Olivia is a fictional name

Table of Content

1 Introduction

The introduction section aims to lay a conceptual background for the purpose of this study. Starting off with describing the growing fitness trend and how that has formed a new ideology and culture. The context of this report is Sweden and local sources will therefore be used when available and combined with statistics and facts from other western cultures and worldwide when necessary. Based upon the concept of Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) the problem discussion and definition aims to formulate the research questions and purpose of this study.

1.1 Background

During the past years, there has been a shift in trends within health, going from collectivistic reasons for exercising to more individualistic. It is each individual's responsibility and duty to improve or maintain their personal health and well-being. The trend has become visible through the increase of gyms and fitness studies during the last decades (Lindwall, 2004).

The growth in the availability of gyms and fitness studios has moved the "bodybuilding culture" from a hidden subculture to a more visible and generally common and accepted way of working with your body. This cultural switch may have started during the 1980s with the role models Arnold Schwarzenegger and Jane Fonda. The new fitness culture is more about constructing your body and manipulating each body part with the perfect diet and exercises (Faskunger & Sjöblom, 2017).

As the fitness culture expands to reach more people, it has become more of a business for both genders, from muscles being a masculine attribute, females are now also supposed to use fitness to shape their body into perfection. Recent research goes as far as describing "healthism" as a new ideology in modern society. An ideology that describes health as the fit and slender body as a subordinate value, a metaphor for a successful life, discipline, and morals (Faskunger & Sjöblom, 2017).
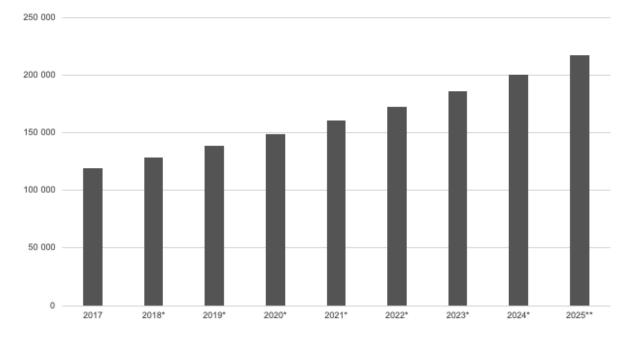
In order to further elaborate and get a better understanding of the phenomena of the fitness culture, one must first understand what fitness is and what the fitness culture looks like.

Fitness is defined as "the ability to carry out daily tasks with vigor and alertness, without undue fatigue, and with ample energy to enjoy leisure-time pursuits and to meet unforeseen emergencies". Health and athletic ability are two factors that contribute to an individual's physical fitness (Caspersen et al., 1985; Park, 1989). The fitness culture, in general, is created by communities focused on health and fitness. In terms of the online fitness culture, this could for instance include different fitness communities on healthy living and well-being blogs, and various social networking sites such as Facebook and Instagram. Even though the specific goal for each individual or community might differ, the general focus that is communicated touches on the concepts of health and fitness. Attention can be given to inspiration, diet and food, exercising, and the representation of fit bodies. The created fitness culture is conveyed and maintained through communications such as videos, images, and comments online as well as offline through word of mouth (Smith & Stewart, 2012; Andreasson & Johansson, 2013).

To further elaborate on the topic, the idea of Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) by Arnould & Thompson, could be used. CCT aims to describe and conceptualize a certain set of information that groups use in order to make a collective sense of an idea, forming practices, identities and meanings for a group of people. It further describes how the global media landscape can interpenetrate a local culture and thereby assemble global connections and extension of the culture. CCT also describes a marketplace ideology which in turn frames certain behaviours, feelings and ideas more likely than others to occur, and sets a heterogeneous schema of resources from which individual and collective identities are formed (Arnould & Thompson, 2005).

The growth of the fitness culture in the context of CCT implies not only a growing relevance and interest in achieving a healthy lifestyle. The retail industry for fitness is also facing a positive trend that is anticipated to continue growing in the upcoming years. Figure 2, describes the growth for female fitness apparel to exemplify this reasoning. As can be seen in

the figure, there is a noticeable growth trend from 2017 and onward.

Figure 2, the figure shows women's activewear market value growth worldwide in million U.S. dollars.
Source: Worldwide; Allied Market Research; 2018
*Figures from 2018 to 2024 are estimates based on a CAGR of 7.7 percent provided by the source.
**Forecast.

Another interesting trend with regards to fitness apparel, spotted by Svensk Handel in 2020, is that customers to a greater extent shop directly from the brand when it comes to purchases within the sports segment. This trend is said to be a strategic move by the brands as a way to tie customers closer to the brand and their brand values. The phenomenon is called "controlled space" and is made possible due to digitalization as brands integrate digital solutions and platforms into their product offering (Svensk Handel, 2020).

With a growth of technology, the global distribution as described by CCT is increasingly important in order to understand its impact. Millennials, who will be the focus group for this study, is the first generation to be fully globalized online. This in turn makes them more aware of the world around them, they communicate and interact with people from all over the world with the use of their smartphones (Abdulreda & Giba, 2017). For example, Jong and Drummond (2016) found that young females of today tend to use social networking sites (SNS) as a means both for "reducing uncertainty regarding health status" as well as to "construct a social and personal (cognitive) sense of health". The rise of sharing and gathering of health information through SNS has evoked the establishment of a set of online

3

movements, where one of the most common is "fitspiration". Fitspiration portrays a woman with a certain body shape that is toned but at the same time thin. The portrayal of fitness motivation in the concept of appearance rather than health, leisure or enjoyment, could be related to a perceived negative body image among females (Jong & Drummond, 2016).

1.2 Problem Discussion

The difference between the fitness culture today and the one that existed back in the mid 20th century is that back then it was more focused on the individual and health. The culture back then was less systematic and played a smaller part as a social factor. Today, everything has become more commercialized and behind this phenomenon is an industry full of products. It includes everything from different detoxing products to plastic surgery. A steady stream of health and fitness articles leads to high exposure to various "fitness advice" for the individual leading to the risk of losing control of what fitness really is about. Göran Svedsäter, professor at Högskolan Gävle, states *"If an individual tries to follow all the fitness advice out there, you become almost close to schizophrenic. In the long run, it creates a sort of neurotic state that risks breaking down a person's self-esteem."* (Högskolan i Gävle, 2014).

The fitness culture has become a trend-based industry that reflects the anxiety many people experience today. The focus tends to become on shallow aspects such as if people experience they are enough, pretty enough etcetera. The social factor becomes more important between individuals to explain one's training habits, that you are a person who exercises and that you have a fit body (Högskolan i Gävle, 2014).

As the health trend becomes more and more extensive, the everyday exerciser signs up for extreme challenges such as ultra-marathons and ironmans, they break the traditional health norms. This in turn makes the borderline between a healthy and unhealthy behavior more blurry. To exemplify in an interview one personal trainer states *"Behaviors associated with Orthorexia Nervosa and unhealthy behaviors in general outside of elite sports can be regarded as ideal within elite sports."* In general, healthy behaviors are considered to be unhealthy for the normal exerciser when it reaches a point of stage where exercising and eating is better explained as extreme, addictive, and obsessive (Håman et al, 2017).

It reached a point where the person's own body image correlates to the sociocultural environment, having the ideal body is associated with being a sign of self-control, discipline, and success. Achieving societal norms and ideals thereby becomes desirable for both females

and males (Jobsky, 2013). As also evidenced by previous literature, (such as Frederick et al., 2007; Andreasson & Johansson, 2013; Lindwall, 2004) gender differences have been found in terms of what these societal norms and ideals are within the sphere of online fitness culture, gym culture and social media culture. Not only are the expectations on gender roles and body image differing, but also females' and males' physical self-perception. However, fewer studies have been performed with regards to different *drivers* behind the gender differences within the fitness culture. Therefore, this study will take its stand based on previously discovered gender differences to further investigate potential drivers behind these occurrences.

In order to deepen the understanding of potential drivers, this study will integrate the perspectives of the impact of the digital landscape and how personal health issues within the fitness culture are addressed. The digital landscape perspective is relevant to look into as Millennials, compared to previous generations, grew up witnessing the expansive growth of technology which has developed their ability to become quick adapters of change with regards to technology. They therefore possess intuitive knowledge of technology, are multi-taskers with short attention spans, and are the first generation to be fully globalized online in early adulthood (Indeed, 2021; Karlsson & Medenilla, 2012) Furthermore, as the fitness culture is emerging quickly in today's globalized community, personal health issues have become even more apparent, as previously mentioned. This makes it an important perspective to bring into the study to investigate how the different health issues are addressed and how they might influence the potential drivers behind the seen gender differences within the fitness culture.

1.2.1 Problem Definition

There are multiple reasons as to why it is important to understand how Millennials are shaped and thrived by the fitness culture. First and foremost, by 2025 Millennials are likely to correspond to 75 percent of the labor market. Secondly, Millennials are said to be one of the most value-driven generations, meaning that they continuously search for a designated purpose and personal context, hence they are likely to be adapted by things around them. This makes it important for companies to understand their values, both in order to be perceived as a relevant employer but also to be taken into the consideration set at the point of purchase (Henriksson & Grunewald, 2020).

Several studies have been conducted within topics such as gym culture, social media culture, online fitness culture and its effect on body image, gender roles, and physical self-perception. However, no study has yet been performed in terms of different drivers related to fitness and its relation to gender. Therefore, this study will take its stand based on previously discovered gender differences to further investigate potential drivers behind these occurrences. In order to deepen the understanding of potential drivers, this study will integrate the perspectives of the impact of the digital landscape and how personal health issues within the fitness culture are addressed.

1.3 Research Questions

Based on the problem discussion, three research questions have been defined. The first is the primary, whereas the other two aim to support and develop the reasoning and scope further.

> **What forms the gender differences within the fitness culture among late Millennials?**
> - In what way has the digital landscape affected how late Millennials consume the fitness culture?
> - In what way are the personal health issues of late Millennials within the fitness culture addressed?

1.4 Purpose

The purpose of this study is to investigate gender differences for late Millennials within the fitness culture in order to further develop upon the idea of why these differences occur. Moreover, the study will look closer into the digital landscape in order to investigate how it has played a role in the individual's way of consuming fitness. Additionally, the purpose of this study is to understand how the personal health issues of late Millennials come into play within the fitness culture. Finally, this thesis aims to gather valuable insights for fitness brands with regards to how their marketing can have a positive impact on the individual's personal health, as well as understanding how to adapt for gender differences and values among Millennials.

2 Literature review

The literature review aims to construct a theoretical framework for the analysis of this report. To give insights to the chosen generation of the report, it will first describe the four cornerstones of this report namely; Training & Societal Norms, Nutrition, Consumption, and Inspiration & Information. It will later describe some characteristics of Millennials in order to get a broader understanding of the findings.

2.1 Training & Societal Norms

In modern societies, the human body has become a project. The reflection of oneself has gradually moved towards the body as the narcissistic pursuit of the self (Johansson, 1996). Previous research has investigated reasons for exercise and quality of life between genders. Women tend to in general exercise more than men, and they also indicate exercising for toning and weight-related reasons more than men while men stressed enjoyment reasons more. The same study also showed that exercising for the sake of weight loss or for fitness, was correlated with lower quality of life, and the opposite was true if exercising with the aim of improving mood or health. Additionally, men engaging in higher levels of exercise reported higher psychological wellbeing and self-esteem, while especially young women in their early 20s experienced lower levels of self-esteem the more they reported exercising (Craft et al., 2014).

Studies have shown that gender is a significant predictor of physical self-perception and that women often perceive their body image and physical self more negatively than men. One explanation for this lies in the objectification theory and the body objectification process for women. Women may experience that it is more difficult to adopt and use self-enhancing strategies than men due to the often concrete and inevitable negative feedback associated with a woman's passive body as an object, than the vague and often subjective criteria and feedback related to the performing body often associated with men. The feedback associated with the passive body is concrete in the sense that either the woman fulfills the ideal or not, and inevitable in that it is hard for a woman to shield herself from it due to the great extent of its reach in media and everyday conversations. However, there is strong evidence that regular exercise for six months or more can reduce the negative impact of the objectification theory. This can be due to the participant feeling more competent and in control of their lives, as well

as focusing more on the performing body instead of the objectified body. Another factor is the potential positive physiological effect resulting from exercise, which can make the participant perceive their own body as more attractive as a consequence of their own body shape being closer to the sociocultural ideal (Lindwall, 2004).

Moving on, a historical pattern of hegemonic masculinity has played a great role in how fitness and gym culture has been defined. Hegemony in this context points towards ways of legitimating men's dominance over women in different domains in society (Connell & Messerchmidt, 2005). Hegemonic masculinity, however, does not have to necessarily mean brutal oppression of women as both some men and women experience hegemonic patterns to be manageable in the sense that they are familiar and natural. In other words, some women might willingly oblige with the desires and interests of men (Theberge, 2000).

In the 1990s, female bodybuilders could be seen challenging hegemonic masculinity in several ways. There was a clear split between female bodybuilders as part of a grotesque subculture, and fitness women are seen as feminine and desirable. In the 2000s the boundary between bodybuilding and fitness was clear. Yet, fitness women are seen gradually becoming more muscular than before although the focus often is on certain areas of the "female" body such as thighs, bum, and breasts (Andreasson & Johansson, 2013).

In contrast to women who often feel the pressure to be slender, a study on men showed that failure to live up to the concept of "manhood" such as becoming muscular build and lean, could lead to body dissatisfaction (Frederick et al., 2007). Prestigious men who are represented in big magazines are often muscular and lean which can increase body dissatisfaction and men's desire for increased muscularity (Baird & Grieve, 2006). Further, from an evolutionary perspective, men achieving a muscular body type may be desirable for many reasons. Possessing this body type likely helps men in intrasexual competitions in which more muscular men achieve a higher status among males. It has also been suggested by evolutionary scientists that women are especially attracted to men who show secondary sexual characteristics such as broad shoulders, facial muscularity, etc. These characteristics seem to be of great importance for women as they serve as cues that the man must be in a good condition to be able to generate these metabolic traits. It further gives benefits that may include the woman feeling increased protection from other males and assistance with regards to onerous physical tasks (Frederick et al., 2007).

2.2 Nutrition

How to eat and what to eat has been the focus in several studies over the years, many with a focus to understand the nutrient function at a molecular level as well as interactions between different types of nutrients. It can be hard to define a definite truth, but some prudent guidelines for healthy eating practices can be drawn. For example; Match your food intake with your level of physical activity, Eat a diet with a wide variety of nutrient-rich food, Chose a diet that is low in saturated and trans-fat but moderate in total fat, Choose beverages and food that allows to reduce or moderate the intake of sugars, and Consider both potential risks and benefits of food additives and dietary supplements (Williams et al, 2017, p.15). In a national Swedish survey, it was found that women reported higher intakes of food such as vegetables, fruit, water, and sweets, while men reported a higher intake of food such as bread, pizza, sausage, coffee, and alcohol (Edberg et al., 2012). Bärebring et al. (2020) also found that women had more negative views on alcohol, sugar, dairy, white flour, red meat, gluten, and food additives, and were more likely to avoid the latter four compared to men. Women were also more prone to diet-health-related anxiety compared to men. Both men and women, however, reported more negative views on food additives than saturated fat, alcohol, and salt which is believed to lie in recent trends in Sweden toward eating clean and eating more unprocessed, whole foods (Bärebring et al., 2020).

2.3 Consumption

In recent years it has been trending with fashionable training clothes. Even though activewear is designed for the purpose of sport and physical exercise, many brands have chosen to utilize the athleisure concept and unveil their own collections. Athleisure integrates fashion and different stylish features into training clothes and is believed to be the game-changer due to the considerable increase in sales. In 2017, fashion-inspired training clothes sold for $9.6 billion representing an increase in sales of 17% (Cheng, 2018). Furthermore, female consumers are believed to play the major role behind the athleisure surge. The CEO of Nike, Mark Parker, once stated that "leggings are the new denim" referring to many women integrating training clothes into their wardrobes (Zhou et al., 2021).

Even though athleisure has become popular, several brands have faced challenges with integrating the concept into their own collections. Consumers who do not feel connected with a product will not buy into it, and this has especially been the case for female consumers

(Kempf et al., 2006). Fashion as a non-athletic concept can make it difficult for a consumer to feel connected to sports brands as the brands traditionally have been focused on serving the sports market. Nike for instance has a strong history of focusing on sports performance which has made it difficult for them to reach the athleisure market (Zhou et al., 2021).

Athleisure can be seen as an embodiment of a lifestyle that is achieved through discipline, that builds upon the pleasure of displaying that you have a fit and healthy body. Among the first brands to challenge the traditional big actors within sport such as Nike and Adidas are the Australian-based Lorna Jane. The Lorna Jane brand creates a commercial and cultural connection between sport and fashion where the modern portrayal of the body is in focus, the brand creates a direct link to the idea of oneself being an object for continuous improvement (Horton et al., 2016). One can even argue that "the body is clearly an object of crucial importance in consumer culture and[...]sports, together with fashion, eating and drinking outside the home, cooking dieting, keeping fit therapy [...] are deployed in a constantly elaborating program whose objective is the production of the new normalized individual" (Hargraves in Breward 2008, p.17).

2.4 Inspiration & Information

A cultural shift is seen towards using the internet to gather information and communicate about health. People tend to seek information to be able to reduce the uncertainty of health status while at the same time build a social and personal sense of health (Hesse & Shneiderman, 2007; Tardy & Hale, 1998). While there is an indication from research that the Internet does not replace the important role of trusted health professionals, adults, or peers, the Internet provides people with a forum where health information is disseminated (Percheski & Hargittai, 2011). Further, the fast adoption of different social networking sites such as Instagram and Facebook have led to these sites becoming increasingly important platforms in which young adults source information about health (Feng & Xie, 2015).

Previous research has studied issues faced by many consumers in seeking health information online. Key factors have been found including concerns regarding the credibility, evaluation and accuracy of the health information found on the internet. Additionally, other issues were found regarding difficulties in comprehending information, trustworthiness, and feelings of being overwhelmed by information (Gray et al., 2005; Rice, 2006).

2.5 Characteristics of Millennials

Researchers have different interpretations of who to include when speaking about Generation Y, or Millennials. However, the most widely accepted range is referring to those born between 1981 up until 2000 (Deal & Levenson, 2016). Compared to previous generations, Millennials grew up witnessing the expansive growth of technology which has developed their ability to become quick adapters of change with regards to technology. They therefore possess intuitive knowledge of technology, are multi-taskers with short attention spans, and are the first generation to be fully globalized online in early adulthood (Indeed, 2021; Karlsson & Medenilla, 2012). Due to this, most Millennials live a fast-paced lifestyle in which they are willing to trade high pay for fewer work hours, have flexible schedules, and a better balance between work and private life. In this sense, they differentiate themselves from Baby boomers (1946-1964) who find it important with long workdays, show loyalty to employers and be reckless in order to become successful. Millennials look up to Baby boomers and their competence, but think they are workaholics (Lindgren et al., 2005). As the majority of Baby boomers today have retired, they have been replaced with the less competent Generation X (1965-1980), the parents of most Millennials. However, Generation X possesses important qualities such as being competitive and always being one step ahead. This makes them work hard, have big dreams, and be relentless planners. They embrace change and are result-driven but are afraid to fail. This makes them experience much stress (Karlsson & Medenilla, 2012; Rosen, 2001).

Although many Millennials are ambitious, confident, and achievement-oriented as a result of their upbringing, they tend to crave feedback and guidance from managers and peers in order to stay motivated (Abdulreda & Giba, 2017). Millennials value teamwork as a consequence of participating in team sports and other group activities while growing up and want to be included and involved. Adding to the fact that they have been exposed to a globalized community from an early age, Millennials value meaningful motivation and become motivated by helping others and work toward improving a community or a worldwide issue. It appears that their identity is connected with their professionalism which is why they are eager to contribute and experience meaningfulness at work (Lee, 2017). Even though Millennials are true individualists, they are not self-seeking. However, they tend to feel confident to freely make their own decisions and focus on what is most important for themselves. Baby boomers and Generation X can think Millennials behave spoiled and

sometimes lazy, but for themselves, this is a result of freely living their lives (Lindgren et al., 2005).

Money is not the most important factor for Millennials when choosing a job, as it is for many people from Generation X. Instead, for Millennials it is all about creating opportunities. They have high expectations with regards to their employers, wanting to seek new challenges at work as they strongly dislike being bored, and are not afraid to question authority which can sometimes lead to strained relationships. Further, Millennials value health and wellbeing, friendship, and freedom to do what they want. They can therefore appear fearless and often chase "what's next", and it is not surprising to see them work as entrepreneurs to be able to follow their dreams (Karlsson & Medenilla, 2012; Abdulreda & Giba, 2017).

3 Methodology

The methodology will describe the chosen research approach, the procedure of interviews, selection of participants, motivation of ethics as well as chosen procedure for assembling findings from the interviews.

3.1 Qualitative Research

For the purpose of this qualitative research, in-depth interviews were chosen as the preferred method. These types of interviews are preferred when wanting people to talk about their personal experiences and feelings and are often preferred by participants when talking about sensitive topics, as they feel more comfortable speaking the truth. In order to capture societal norms from a wider perspective, focus groups could have been useful. However, talking about training, body image, and diets are considered sensitive topics, and since the main focus of the research is to understand ideals and grasp details, in-depth interviews were considered to be the most suitable choice (Milena et al., 2008). In-depth interviews are often appreciated by participants as they get a platform for expressing their feelings and opinions in an anonymous matter, many even feel flattered that someone is interested in their personal experience which invites them to speak freely (Mack et al., 2005). As sample sizes for in-depth interviews are limited and not chosen randomly, generalizations are usually not possible (Boyce & Neale, 2006). The findings from in-depth interviews are still valuable as they give insight into how people interact and interpret the world (Mack et al., 2005; Milena et al., 2008). Further, they may for example give market insights and could work as a tool to assemble marketing guidelines.

3.2 Research Approach

When connecting theory and research, there are traditionally two different approaches to use; the deductive- and the inductive approach. While the deductive approach uses quantitative means to be able to test a theory, the inductive approach uses qualitative means to develop a theory based on the results from the data analysis. A third alternative is the abductive approach which uses both inductive and inductive reasoning (Alrajeh, 2012). This approach allows the researcher to move back and forth between the empirical world and theory, which enables a deeper understanding of both. Since this paper is both using theoretical

explanations, and empirical observations from interviews of late Millennials, the abductive research approach is considered the most suitable. Furthermore, conducting case studies using the abductive approach, also called systematic combining, uses insights gathered from the empirical world to develop theory and theoretical frameworks. As a starting point, theory consists of articulated "preconceptions" which over time are developed following what empirical data is discovered through the field work, analysis, and interpretation (Dubois & Gadde, 2002). Hence, this study is further favored by the abductive approach since it is argued that theory cannot be completely comprehended without gathering empirical data and vice versa. Moreover, the process of using the abductive approach means matching theory with reality. The process of matching has no obvious patterns and therefore greatly dependent on the way in which the researchers think (Dubois & Gadde, 2002).

3.3 The interviews

The interview consisted of 15 main questions, divided into four different focus areas. The chosen focus areas were; Training Habits, Nutrition, Consumption and Societal Norms & Emotional Aspect of Training. The focus areas were used to obtain a structure of the interview, based upon the previously discovered fields of interest for the study, and to be able to gather as much information as possible that could be relevant. These focal areas are aligned with the theoretical framework used in this report. However, Societal Norms & Emotional Aspects of Training were covered separately from Training Habits as these topics deemed too personal to start off the interviews with. Also, Inspiration & Information did not have an explicit interview focus area and was instead addressed continuously throughout the interviews. Aside from the main questions were an initial question:

What does the word fitness mean to you?

The question was chosen to act as a control question, but also to get a better understanding of the participants' interpretation of the term in order to be able to compare it with existing theory on fitness. All participants were also asked to assess their own level of involvement and expertise in fitness. This assessment was chosen to build a further knowledge base for the analysis, which could be used to assemble subgroups among the participants if potential deviations were to be found in the responses collected:

Which one of the following statements suits you the best?

1. I would consider myself being a beginner within fitness. I do train, but not always regularly. I would gladly turn to others for advice and inspiration.	2. I like fitness and I most often train regularly, but I would not consider myself to be an expert in the area and therefore turn to others for advice and inspiration.
3. I really like fitness and I do train regularly. I would consider myself being well versed within fitness and have trained regularly for many years. I do not feel a need to turn to others for advice and inspiration.	4. Fitness is an important part of my life and I would consider myself being an expert in the area. It happens that I give advice and inspiration to others.

Additional interview questions were formed to be open ended and complemented with probes (see Appendix 1). Questions were designed to start off as factual and then become more opinion based as suggested by Boyce & Neale (2006).

Interviews were conducted during the period February - March 2021. Due to the Covid-19 situation, interviews were held online using Microsoft Teams which allowed for the recording of both video and sound. Even though the digital format may come with certain limitations such as noticing body language, this solution was anticipated as good enough and the most responsible choice considering the circumstances. The interviews lasted for about an hour each, ranging from 47 minutes to an hour and 10 minutes. An hour was found to be the right amount of time to go through all questions without a rush while keeping the interest and engagement going for both parties.

3.4 Participants

Participants of the study were chosen from within a second-tier acquaintance. The relevance of the participants was evaluated based on two boundary conditions:

1. In the age of 20-30 (born in the '90s), to represent late Millennials.
2. Experience in, and possibility to relate themselves to a certain behavior of fitness/exercising.

The mentioned boundary conditions were chosen to ensure that participants were as representative as possible for this study. Participants had to be within the same age-group in order to be able to draw connections to their behavior and childhood. By having participants be part of the same generation, chances are that they share both childhood experiences and values formed by societal preconditions, forming a basis for discussion. Also, the generation is the future consumer and employee base which, all in all, made the choice motivated.

New participants, both females and males were added up until themes and topics from the interviews were repeatedly emerging implying theoretical saturation. The final sample size ended up being 13 people, 7 females and 6 males, with an age range of 23-28. A possible limitation with using second-tier acquaintance as the base for participants is the risk of similarities among respondents with regards to habits and opinions. This in turn could have the potential of leading to false feelings of theoretical saturation.

Alias*	Gender	Age	Occupation	Type of exercise	Number of sessions a week	Self-assessed knowledge and involvement
Anna	Female	23	Student	Running, Gym	6-8	4
Peter	Male	25	Employed	Powerlifting, Running, Climbing	5-6	3/4
Erik	Male	25	Employed	Badminton, Climbing	3-4	3
Terese	Female	23	Student	Gym, Walking, Horseback riding	~7	3/4
Karin	Female	23	Student	Crossfit	~5	4
Christoffer	Male	24	Employed	Running, Calisthenics, Cheerleading	~7	2/3
Nils	Male	26	Employed	Bodybuilding	7	3/4
Adam	Male	26	Employed	Crossfit	5	3
Sofia	Female	27	Employed	Gym, Running, Cheerleading	4-6	3/4
Maja	Female	24	Student	Gym, Padel, Running	1-2	3
Felicia	Female	28	Student	Gym	5	2
Lisa	Female	24	Student	Gym, Cheerleading	4-6	4
Filip	Male	25	Employed	Football, Gym	2-4	2

Gym = classes at gym, treadmill and general strength without a particular focus to build muscle volume

*All participants are given fictional names in order to obtain their anonymity in this report

3.5 Ethics

When conducting interviews, the researcher is able to connect with the interviewees on a personal level. However, ethical considerations, including the principles and moral values that affect the researcher, may occur in the process of gathering and analyzing the data (Merriam, 2009). Further, moral dilemmas can occur in studies that touch upon sensitive

topics, and it is therefore a matter of utmost importance that the researcher takes responsibility to avoid different types of discomfort, such as embarrassment, during the interview (Ghauri & Gronhaug, 2010). Aside from acting professionally and with integrity, four principles are brought up by Denscombe (2010, p.7) that a researcher should conform to in order for the research to be conducted in an ethical way. These include:

1. "Data will be treated as confidential"
2. "Participants will remain anonymous"
3. "Participants voluntarily consent to being involved"
4. "Participants understand the nature of the research and their involvement"

For the purpose of handling the matter ethically in this study, all respondents were informed about the purpose of the study and in what way we believed they could contribute to this study. In this way, they were given the choice of whether they wanted to participate or not. Furthermore, all interviews started with an introduction to the subject where the participants were told that whenever they felt uncomfortable, that a question was too personal or tough to answer, they could say so without further questions asked. They were also asked for consent to being recorded during the interview. At the end of the interview, participants were asked if they wished to add or clarify anything with regard to their answers. All materials were treated as confidential and handled carefully, and upon publishing of this thesis, all interview materials will be deleted.

3.6 Strategy for analyzing the results

All interviews were transcribed and translated into English, then the transcribed text was divided into groups based on the themes of the theoretical framework. Each theme was then divided into subgroups based on the responses of the participant. Within the subgroups, recurring words and phrases were highlighted to describe conceptual behaviors of females and males. Female and male behaviors were found different for eight different areas. Quotes and insights from questions, where female and male opinions overlapped, were analyzed as an overall purpose for engaging in physical activity. Areas that differentiate as well as the overall purpose are described in detail in the analysis section of this report.

4 Empirical Findings

The empirical findings of this study are primarily described by quotes collected from the in-depth interviews with the participants. The findings aim to describe the participants' definition of what fitness is, to then further dig into the purpose for engaging in physical activity, as well as a comparison between the genders within different areas. Findings will be presented as follows; a short summary for the findings of each theory section followed by a selection of quotes to exemplify.

4.1 What is fitness?

As previously mentioned in the method section, participants were asked to reflect upon the question "What is fitness to you?", in order to get a better understanding of how the participants see the term fitness compared to identified previous research on the subject. The participants mentioned that there to some extent is a difference between the concept fitness and training, fitness is more to be seen as a culture that involves aspects such as looks and nutrition, while training in general is more about staying active. This in turn correlates well to the described theory and sets a base for analysis according to the participants' definition.

"I would say that fitness is more like both nutrition and training, a typical culture. While training is more about doing something for your wellbeing, on the inside and such. Fitness is more shallow." - Karin

"[...]they are related, but fitness is more this..this huge trend surrounding it, the fitness culture and so on. While training is less sexy, it's more well you train, the physical exercise. Fitness is more like an interest, a hobby." - Christoffer

4.2 Why do we train?

When asked why one does engage in physical activity, the participants all listed numerous reasons, but trying to grasp the bigger picture it could be brought together into two different themes. The first being that it has been a part of one's life and identity for as long as one can remember and the other one being that exercising comes with many positive side effects that are desirable for the participants. Interestingly enough the purpose and idea of training are very much alike no matter if you are female or male in this case.

4.2.1 Always been a part of my life

The fact that training has played an important part in the childhood of our participants seems evident, participants mention how they have been playing football in the backyard or skiing during holidays since an early age. Many of them say that they can not even imagine a life today without training.

"It has always been a natural part of my life. I have been standing on skis for as long as that has been possible, since my legs were strong enough for it. So yes, it has always been natural for as long as I can remember." - Maja

"I've just always done it. It is… Yeah, it's my parents who said we all should go work out and then we just did" - Erik

"In my family…we have been going skiing during the holidays and you know…done that kind of things. And then it becomes natural to train if everyone in your family does it." - Terese

"I've always been a football player, my entire life, so training has always been there in some way or another." - Nils

4.2.2 Positive side effects

When asked to explain what is so great about training and why participants would not be willing to give up the habit of training, several positive side effects were listed. Everything from having the energy to perform at work or in school to become a better friend, but also aspects such as being healthy and able to play with your kids and the ability to have kids were also mentioned. It is much about being the best possible version of yourself.

"[…]overall I'm very satisfied. I feel… I often feel that if I get a training session in, during the morning, I have much better focus and energy throughout the day." - Anna

"It is fun and you feel good. And yeah, then it becomes a habit. It's a sort of addiction too, to go to the gym every day." - Sofia

"Yeah several reasons. I would say my mental health becomes better when I work out. Partly because you get energy so you have energy to do other things throughout the day, but also because you release stress." - Lisa

"[..] I mean, if you wanna live a long happy and healthy life, avoid catching different diseases and all that, and just feel great. Then you gotta make sure you train" - Filip

"I need to train to perform at my best and be… yeah and for my body to feel good, so it's out of health aspects, to keep in shape. So health, look good and feel good" - Christoffer

4.3 Training & Societal Norms

It is already mentioned that both females and males tend to have the same reasons for training, they emphasize the positive side effects and the why in similar ways. Going deeper

into the interviews with the aim to find underlying intentions and goals with training, differences were found between the two genders. Males want to perform and "do good" while females are more into "being good", wanting to live up to certain expectations.

FEMALES Performance - *Being good*	MALES Performance - *Do good*
"I feel proud myself when I close the rings on my apple watch" - Terese "It's fun to train and you feel that you have accomplished something. I get a good feeling overall when I train." - Lisa "[...]I feel that it's about, you know I want to prove myself being good, you want to perform well and I guess it comes from myself..my own expectations on myself." - Anna "You are used to always working out, it becomes a part of yourself and then you feel that you have done good when you've trained." - Lisa	"I must train in order to maximize my performance." - Christoffer "I gotta make sure to have a good partner that can challenge me in order to get a good game going so it doesn't become lame. It's only good to lose as it motivates me and makes me wanna win" - Erik "I do team sports, because I like to win" - Filip "[...] the main focus in my training has always been to become better all the time."- Peter "I have a general problem with failing. It is something I have carried since my childhood, for me accomplishment is associated with love. I have to be good at what I do, so I always try to do good." - Christoffer

When asked how it would feel to miss a planned practice there were also differences between the genders. Females seemed to have more anxiety and an emotionally charged relationship to missing practice, while males tended to be harsher looking at it from a disciplinary perspective and a matter of prioritization.

FEMALES Missed practice - *Anxiety*	MALES Missed practice - *Discipline*
"[...]I would definitely say that I feel bad when I fail to do something I have planned to do. I then have to reach out to others for affirmation. I want to hear that it's fine that I didn't train today." - Anna "If it's like an entire week and training hasn't been according to plan, then I can feel anxious about it, I can accept that I have that and realise that it ain't good. It's not good that it's so emotionally charged." - Felicia "If I experience pain somewhere which keeps me from exercising as I use to, I can easily become quite low" - Karin	"Well that was unnecessary that I got a cold, I should have been able to avoid that" - Adam "[...]you treat yourself well if you have good discipline. And that's why I find it important and become annoyed if I bail on discipline… but it's not like I cry about it" - Filip "[...]then I think about it quite a lot, like okay, how can I make room for a workout in my schedule? So I would say it's highly prioritized" - Peter "It's more like, people that don't train are bad people, you know, or rather irresponsible. It's irresponsible not to train and take care of yourself, or at least try to. Then of course it's different for each person, but you should at least try." - Erik

The interviews also investigated the obtained results of training and how that could affect the appearance of both yourself and the other gender. Many of the interviewees mentioned that there are norms in the society on how you should train and what they expect from the other

gender in terms of looks. Females mentioned that it is a trend to look and be perceived as fit, while they considered themselves to be quite forgiving towards how males should look. Males, on the other hand, mentioned that it is important to achieve certain masculine attributes and therefore build muscle volume, it seemed equally important for them that females remained feminine, meaning that they should not have too much muscles.

FEMALES Appearance - *Look fit and healthy*	MALES Appearance - *Be strong*
In terms of themselves	
"There are norms on how you should look, but recently there are strong norms on how to train, that you should be healthy." - Sofia "[...] today, it's nicer to be fit than to be thin" - Felicia "You should look good, you know look healthy or what to call it"- Maja "I would say that the trend has become better over time, it's not all about being super skinny anymore. It's more that you, you should be more fit." - Lisa "[...] now that I've reached a certain age, I've distanced myself in a way. I believe younger girls suffer more issues [...]. I exercise for my own sake while others might do it to achieve a certain look." -Felicia	"[...] a guy should be big and strong and be able to lift pretty much anything" - Filip "[...] to get girls. I wanna believe it's because you become fitter and more handsome and such, but I think the real case is that your thoughts about yourself change and you become more confident, and then yeah also more attractive" - Nils "But I should also be honest and say that if I was not as fit, I would probably care more about what others think, but now that I've reached a certain level it's rarely something I pay attention to" - Adam "I think when I was younger, I was always interested in you know like bodybuilding, that kind of training" - Peter "[...]during high school, everyone was like 'abs was so cool'" - Christoffer "[been affected by] the equivalent of today's 'social media' when I was younger such as TV, comics and children's program. It was important then for the characters to be strong." - Nils
In terms of the other gender	
"I would say there is a delicate balance for females, you should be fit, but not too fit. As soon as girls become too muscular, then suddenly it's not nice anymore, it's not the norm. But men can be how big they want and it doesn't matter at all." - Lisa "[...]there are way more ideals on how a girl should look than a guy. Guys also get away with it more easily I think." - Sofia "There are many guys who have an idea on how their girl should look, while I don't think girls... I think girls are more likely to accept a guy the way he is.." - Felicia	"She shouldn't look too fit, you know so she almost looks a bit manly" - Filip "[...] the girls should be shaped like an hourglass, and have a small waist. I rather think she should look symmetrical. You know, having trained all parts of the body. That's what I think look the best" - Nils "A girl should have more of an hourglass shaped body" - Filip "[...]a girl who is too fit, for example if she has huge biceps. I find it rather unsexy" - Christoffer

4.4 Nutrition

Going into the aspect of dietary habits it was found that females were very keen on dividing food into "healthy" and "unhealthy" to obtain a balance in their diet, while males' primary concern was how to ensure that you eat enough each day or week.

FEMALES Diet - *Eat right*	**MALES** Diet - *Eat enough*
"It's not healthy to just eat broccoli. It's not healthy to only eat pizza either, but one can eat some pizza and some broccoli." Maja "[...]but if I would eat a pizza, then I would think 'fine, so I will train harder tomorrow to ensure I balance it up'. So in that way, I think a lot about it." - Lisa "I train because you feel better when you don't gain weight, I love to eat all the junk food there is in this world, so then I need to compensate a bit" - Sofia	"[...] it could be that I eat a billys-pizza just to eat 500 calories as I know their pizzas contain 500 calories" - Filip "I'm using Huel, a meal replacement, that I have instead of lunch quite often that contains pretty much all important nutrients you need" - Christoffer "[...] what do I need to eat to drive the engine? And then just trying to make it as simple as possible, use as few rules as possible. I discovered that I increase my well-being when I avoid setting so many rules." - Peter

4.5 Consumption

Talking about consumption, clothing seemed to be the biggest cost item, as few of the participants were engaged in purchasing their own equipment and instead mainly using what is available at their gym. Females mentioned that the design and brand of the clothes are important, they dress to match a certain image or personality, many mentioned that they buy new clothes quite often to match ongoing trends. The males mentioned that functionality comes before everything else and they do not want to spend too much money buying clothes all the time.

FEMALES Clothing - *Image*	**MALES** Clothing - *Functionality*
"I think they have an attractive brand image. But also the fact that others at my gym use Nike" - Karin "talking about clothes, then the design is more important, that the clothes look good...but still functional. But the decision is made on looks." - Anna "you wear gymshark-clothes, coming in with a Nocco in your hand, you wanna be sponsored by Barebell, and then you post it on Instagram. Shallow if you know what I mean. Every time you're at the gym, you need to show others on social media. But yeah, much of this shallow aspect when it comes to training I would say. I would say that's the typical fitness-girl" - Karin "[...] that it looks good and that I like it. The most important factor is that it looks good!" - Sofia	"you buy workout clothes that suits the basic needs and then you use it until it basically just falls apart" - Peter "most important really is that I think they are functional" - Adam "It's never that I think that ah, this garment is so functional so I'll buy it if it looks shitty. I'd never do that" - Erik "I ran the Stockholm marathon in a pair of shoes that was all torn down, my toes were peeking out. But I still used them for the simple reason that they still worked" - Christoffer

4.6 Inspiration & Information

When it comes to finding inspiration and information about training, such as diets and tips on exercises, a great majority of the female participants said that their main source was Instagram. However, some did emphasize that there are risks associated with that as social media such as Instagram do not always showcase the truth, as people tend to publish certain things that they in particular want others to see. The male participants of the study said that they turn to their friends or other people at their gym, while some say that they depend heavily on evidence-based research. In short, females search for inspiration while males search for information. Similar patterns could be found looking into giving inspiration and information to others, the males preferred to give advice when they have something concrete to say. While the females found it fun if they would be able to inspire or motivate someone else around them.

FEMALES Inspiration & Information - *Inspirational*	MALES Inspiration & Information - *Informational*
Receiving	
"Every time you are at the gym, you are supposed to show that on social media. Like all the shallow aspects of training" - Karin "I follow some accounts where you can get some tips on..you know home workouts and such, and then you learn, or learn.. You get some inspiration on what to do"- Terese "[...] social media has a great impact. It seems like everyone is training all the time, because its much easier to showcase that." - Anna "I choose not to follow that many fitness accounts as I feel that training should be focused on oneself instead of achieving someone else's ideal" - Karin	"I try to read as much research as possible within different training subjects" - Adam "I have blind trust in my friend!" - Filip "[...]you talk to friends… it's not something I have just come up with. It's just something you know" - Erik "I'm a bit critical in the sense that I know there's much 'bro-science' out there, that people sometimes believe things are in a certain way without having facts" - Peter
Giving	
"I am very keen to be outspoken with regards to my values when it comes to nutrition and exercising." - Karin "I would definitely say that I want to share with others the things that I have learnt" - Sofia "I think that group training is a lot of fun. You can gain inspiration from other around you and hopefully also be a source of inspiration to someone else" - Terese	"It happens that people approach me and ask for help and then I try my best to give a good answer" - Peter "[...] my colleague has an injured shoulder, so I gave him some rehab motions that he can do everyday" - Nils "I wouldn't actively strive to give advice online and such, but if I train together with someone and a question comes up I would help" - Adam

5 Analysis

This analysis aims to describe and establish connections between the theoretical framework and the empirical findings of the interviews. The analysis will be structured into five different areas; Gender-Related Expectations, Performance, Athleisure, Exchange of Knowledge, and Taking a Distance. This in order to fully capture what is needed to later give an answer to the research questions.

5.1 Gender-related expectations

Lindwall (2004) brought up the differences between genders in terms of ideals, that women are often judged on their passive body as an object while men more often are judged based on their performing body. When interviewing the male participants in our study, it was found that they seemed to put emphasis on being strong. Their expectations of themselves related more to having muscles, which could be seen in the light of being strong and the performing body, rather than having specific goals in terms of achieving a specific body per se. Although some of the male participants mentioned the importance of being fit and having abs as a way to attract women, this did not seem to be crucial but more of a "bonus". The focus on the performing body and being strong as a man is probably an effect of several underlying factors. One probable reason could be seen in the typical masculine characters portrayed in Comic Books and Television in the '90s. As Nils states it comes from "*the equivalent of today's 'social media' when I was younger such as TV, comics and children's program. It was important then for the characters to be strong.*". That there is an impact from media is also suggested by Baird & Grieve (2006), who mention that the representation of muscular and lean models tends to increase men's desire for increased muscularity.

When interviewing the female participants in our study, all participants found it important to look good and healthy although no one stated what this would mean more specifically. Both Lisa and Felicia, however, mentioned that the trend of looking skinny or thin has decreased, and they perceive the trend becoming "better" as it moves towards being more accepted to be more muscular also as a woman. This is in line with the trend described by Andreasson & Johansson (2013) with muscular women becoming more common. Even though no one of the female participants expressed a specific body type related to women, several of the male participants expressed that a woman's ideal is that she should look fit, but not too fit and that

she should be shaped like an hourglass. Although the ideal that exists of a woman's appearance was not necessarily synonymous with their expectations of a partner, the ideal is still there which confirms what Lindwall (2004) brought up on the passive objective body. When discussing the expectations of men in terms of ideals, several female participants expressed that they feel more judged by men than they themselves judge men. Perhaps, this could imply that the female participants are more likely to also oblige with the desires and interests of men, as suggested by Theberge (2000). Further, this could be seen in relation to Connell & Messerchmidt (2005) and the historical pattern of hegemonic masculinity, as most times, the judgment on the female body stems from men. Even though no female participant mentioned potential reasons behind this ideal of women, some researchers have suggested that for example the unrealistic body shape of the original Barbie dolls - that was a part of most Millennials' upbringing - can negatively affect the body image of young girls (Nesbitt et al., 2019). Compared to previous generations, Millennials have also witnessed the expansive growth of technology from an early age and seen the development of becoming fully globalized online (Karlsson & Medenilla, 2012). In other words, compared to their parents, Millennials have through connectedness online to a greater extent been exposed to other people's opinions and values. Therefore, one could argue this to be a reason for ideals to spread quickly thus creating a bigger impact on Millennials.

Another interesting aspect with regards to the two gender ideals, as described by Lindwall (2004), are translated into behaviors in association to dietary habits. It could be argued that females strive to fit into a certain role while men want to boost their performance. This is exemplified in our study, as we found that the female participants cared more about eating a balanced diet, labeling food as healthy and unhealthy. For example, if eating something considered to be unhealthy such as a pizza, they mentioned the need of compensating for it though adding an extra training session. The male participants on the contrary seemed more concerned about eating those extra calories in order to drive the engine. This could explain why the male intake of food such as bread and pizza is higher among men as found by Edberg et al. (2012). Although some male interviewees emphasized eating a balanced diet, the focus on healthy and unhealthy did not seem to be as important. For example, as Filip expressed he could eat a billy-pizza just to eat those extra 500 calories. This is also in line with Bärebring et al. (2020) who found women having more negative views on food such as sugar, dairy, and white flour compared to men.

5.2 Performance

Abdulreda & Giba (2017) stress that Millennials are ambitious and achievement-oriented as a result of their upbringing. Both male and female participants in our study expressed the importance of performing well when training, even though men focused more on *doing good* in terms of performance, while women focused more on *being good* as a part of their identity. Further, there was also a tendency of men stressing the value in being disciplined and thinking it was unnecessary if things did not turn out as planned, such as Adam commenting on having a cold could have been avoided, while women tended to feel a rather hit on their identity of being good and more negatively emotionally affected if things did not turn out as planned. Why these differences occur are yet unclear. Perhaps, this can build on Craft et al.'s (2014) discussion on differences in wellbeing between men and women related to exercise. Exercising for the sake of fitness was found correlating with lower quality of life than if exercising for the sake of improving health. This could potentially explain the hit on women's identity if their focus tends to be more on being good performance-wise as an "identity-measure", while men in the present study seemed to be more focused on improving mood and health. Another aspect is that of Theberge (2000) bringing up the case that some women willingly might oblige with the interests of men. If a woman connects exercising with achieving a specific ideal, while at the same time learning from the upbringing the importance of being achievement-oriented, one could argue this could play a role in why these differences occur. Craft et al (2014) also mention that women that engage in physical activity tend to experience lower levels of self-esteem compared to men the more they report exercising, which in turn could explain why the female participants of our study take it more personally when missing out on a practice.

As the participants of this study are all late Millennials it is fair to assume that most parents belong to Generation X. This generation is very competitive and strives to be one step ahead at all times. They are result-driven and work hard to achieve their goals, which in some cases result in high levels of stress (Karlsson & Medenilla, 2012; Rosen, 2001). That these characteristics have an impact on the emotions of Millennials is shown multiple times throughout the interviews, as parents, families, and upbringing is mentioned several times. Christoffer even mentions how he feels that his performance is associated with his worthiness of love: *"I have a general problem with failing. It is something I have carried since my childhood, for me accomplishment is associated with love. I have to be good at what I do, so I*

always try to do good." Why do late Millennials such as Christoffer feel that he needs to do good in order to earn love? Maybe it could be explained through what was previously mentioned with regards to their parents being competitive and result-oriented. One could also argue it has to do with the perception of Millennials, Lindgren et al (2005) mention that Baby Boomers and Generation X perceive Millennials as lazy and spoiled. This preconception could actually put Millennials in a position where they find the need to prove themselves worthy of respect and love from their parents. However, this is an area that needs further research in order to give a definite answer.

5.3 Athleisure

According to Svensk Handel there is a growing trend of purchasing directly from the brand which they argue is a matter of digitalization. While more brands become present on social media, their "controlled space" with the customer increases as well as the control of their products (Svensk Handel, 2020). It could be argued that it is also a matter of brand actualization where the brand becomes associated with certain attributes and personas. This is often done through the use of "user generated content" and influencers. Our study found that the female interviewees tend to shop training gear to achieve a certain image. For example, Karin described how she associates the typical fitness girl with numerous brands that together form a certain image. When describing her own consumption habits, she mentions how she purchases all clothes from the same brand, as that brand is what most people at her gym use. Hence, it could be argued she also strives to fulfill a certain image. This is further stressed by Kempf et al. (2006) who found it especially important for female consumers to relate and feel connected with the brand they purchase from.

Further, many of our female participants mention the looks and style of the training gear to be particularly important. Maybe the importance of looking good while you train combined with the value that the brand brings is the root cause of the establishment of the athleisure trend. According to Cheng (2018) athleisure strives to integrate fashion into the functionality aspects, thereby making the training gear more fashionable and trend based. Zhou et al, (2021) argue that it can be tricky for traditional sports brands such as Nike to enter the athleisure segment as their brand values are very tightly connected to sports, which instead has allowed for the establishment of a new segment of fitness brands. One example is Lorna Jane, founded in Australia back in 1990, working with the combination of fitness and fashion to embody the trend of showcasing your body in a way that showcases a healthy lifestyle

(Horton et al., 2016; Hargraves in Breward, 2008). The trend has made its way to Sweden as well, with brands such as Aim'n and Stronger. These brands have experienced tremendous growth in the past years using influencer marketing as their main marketing strategy. Both brands focus on enhancing the empowerment of the female body and an active lifestyle, which is done by designing clothes that can be used at the gym, at home, or when having a coffee with a friend (Boström, 2019; Boström, 2020; Allhorn, 2017; Wahlqvist, 2020). Both these brands were mentioned by female participants of our study, and it seems as if they succeed in fulfilling the desire to be perceived as healthy and fit in the eyes of others, which was indeed important to the participants. Athleisure brands often use social media to enhance the feeling for consumers that they are part of a culture when they use their products. Through the use of influencers and user generated content (UGC), an identity is connected to the items sold. This idea is further supported by the concept of CCT, that forming a culture, or making your brand match an already existing culture, increases the relevance to consumers within the culture.

It seems like the athleisure trend is mostly targeting women, why is that? An answer could be gendering, which according to Alreck (1994) would mean that you assign attributes that are stereotypically associated with a sex, to later develop your marketing around these elements. One possibility is that brands such as Aim'n and Stronger have chosen to take on the gendering strategy, assigning their brands with feminine attributes in order to stand out from the big players within sports. As sports for many years has been a masculine and male dominated area, this tactic has for sure the potential to stand out. Assigning male attributes such as functionality, would not simply create a unique position in this case as that is what is normally used for sports apparel.

5.4 Exchange of Knowledge

Previous research has found that both females and males today browse the internet when they are in need of motivation and ideas about fitness (Hesse & Shneiderman, 2007; Tardy & Hale, 1998). This seems to allow for a greater platform for the exchange of information, even though some information is still shared in person. The findings of our study suggest that the motivation when it comes to collecting information varies between the genders. The male participants mentioned they turn to research, close friends or people at the same gym. What they hold in common is that they primarily search for *fact-based information* such as a specific diet or exercises for a particular muscle group. This could imply that male

participants want to diminish the risk of fake information shared online by turning to someone they perceive as trustworthy (Gray et al., 2005; Rice, 2006). On the contrary, female participants were on the hunt for *inspiration*. For instance, they mentioned that they follow particular influencers online that give them motivation, and that they look at others at the gym to get inspiration on the latest athleisure trends. Using influencers and people around you as a source of inspiration calls for the possibility of accessing relevant information at the right point in time (Percheski & Hargittai, 2011; Feng & Xie, 2015). That participants of our study depend heavily on input from their surroundings in decision-making or search for information might not come as a surprise, as the generation they belong to tends to look for feedback and guidance from people in their close surroundings in order to stay motivated (Abdulreda & Giba, 2017). This is further exemplified with this quote from one of the participants: *"...I would definitely say that I feel bad when I fail to do something I have planned to do, then I reach out to others for affirmation. I want to hear that it's fine that I didn't train today."*

Aside from the fact that Millennials may feel the need to reach out to others for feedback and guidance, research has also found that Millennials value meaningful motivation and that they may feel motivated by helping others by contributing to a bigger cause (Lee, 2017). Looking into the findings of this study, these tendencies were indeed confirmed. However, we found differences between the male and female participants. The male participants said they could give specific advice if asked about something, but that they would not share it spontaneously. While female participants to a greater extent enjoyed or perceived it as important to share their knowledge with others, even if simply for the sake of inspiration. Once again this highlights the difference found between men emphasizing informational while women emphasize inspirational aspects.

5.5 Taking a Distance

In conducting this study, differences were found between our female and male participants, and both parties expressed being exposed to the fitness culture - which was further found to be a result of reasons such as the technological upbringing and expectations by parents. It was also found that most participants seemed to want to distance themselves from the negative impact it could generate. For example, Karin mentioned *"I choose not to follow that many fitness accounts as I feel that training should be focused on oneself instead of achieving someone else's ideal"*. Perhaps females chose not to express their perceptions of the female

ideal as a way to distance themselves from the pressure it brings. This can explain why the male participants had a clear perception of the female ideal while the female participants were more cautious in expressing them.

Furthermore, all participants mentioned the fun aspect of exercising, but is this really the truth? As Christoffer expressed *"I think that there is something good that everyone wants to highlight about fitness and that you train for your health. Like mental and physical health, to feel good. But I think that behind those arguments is the will to be attractive, I would say that is a great source of motivation for many, but it is not as dignified as the health aspect. It's more shallow, and I don't think people dare to admit how crucial that motivation factor actually is. It's like a norm that you should train because it makes you feel good, not because you want to look good. "*. In other words, it might be a hidden agenda behind all the expressed positive effects of exercising. However, it might also be that some of the participants do find exercising fun and are less concerned by the expressed ideals. Either because they already have seemed to fulfill them or that they have reached a certain maturity stage where appearance is less relevant. Adam stated *"[...] but I should also be honest and say that if I was not as fit, I would probably care more about what others think, but now that I've reached a certain level it's rarely something I pay attention to."* which relates to Lindwall (2004) who found that people can feel more attractive as a consequence of their own body shape being closer to the sociocultural ideal. Further, Adam claims that he would be more concerned about the opinion of others if he was less fit. One probable explanation could be seen by Frederick et al. (2007) who suggests that a failure to live up to the idea of "manhood" could lead to body dissatisfaction. In terms of reaching a maturity stage, Felicia stated *"Now that I've reached a certain age, I've distanced myself in a way. I believe younger girls suffer more issues [...]. I exercise for my own sake while others might do it to achieve a certain look"*. This could emphasize how a certain stage of maturity allows them to distance themselves from the negative consequences the fitness culture can bring.

6 Conclusion

The conclusion aims to give an answer to the research questions. In doing so, it will initially look at gender differences in relation to the digital landscape. Secondly, it will discuss the matter of personal health within the scope of this study. It further aims to gather valuable insights for fitness brands on how to adapt their marketing as well as offering to the climate and values of Millennials. Finally, it will discuss ideas for possible future research within the field of fitness.

6.1 The Digital Landscape and Gender Differences

In order to understand what actually forms the gender differences among late Millennials, the historical pattern of hegemonic masculinity seemed evident (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). It further evolves around women being judged on their passive body as an object while men more often are judged based on their performing body (Lindwall, 2004). In the context of our study this was showcased through a series of themes; *look fit* vs *be strong*, *eat right* vs *eat enough, be good* vs *do good, dress for an image* vs *dress functionally*, and *inspiration* vs *information*. In order to gain insights on the impact of the digital landscape, themes are examined in the context of late Millennials.

The male participants in our study had a clear perception of the ideal of the female body, similar to that of an hourglass, and that men should *be strong* and have muscles. On the contrary, the female participants stated it was important for a woman to *look fit* and healthy although no one stated what this would mean more specifically. Furthermore, they expressed being more forgiving towards the appearance of men while not feeling men were as forgiving in terms of women. As Millennials have witnessed the expansive growth of technology from an early age and seen the development becoming fully globalized online, this could partly explain the quick spread of the fitness culture and the big impact it has on Millennials. In relation to CCT, it can be argued that the digital landscape has the potential to interpenetrate local cultures and extend it to a global movement. This implies that opinions and ideas from individuals can have an impact on people within the culture across the globe.

In terms of diet, it was found that female participants are more likely to *eat a balanced diet,* but being able to compensate for something unhealthy through adding an extra training

session. This relates to them being judged on their body as an objective and therefore wanting to fit into a certain role. The male participants were more concerned with *eating enough* calories to drive the engine even if it meant eating something unhealthy. This relates to men being judged on their performing body and the importance of being strong as a man.

Furthermore, Millennials are ambitious and achievement-oriented as a result of their upbringing. Although the female participants were more concerned with *being good* performance-wise as an "identity-measure", the male participants were more concerned with *doing good* in terms of performance. Craft et al. (2004) state exercising for the sake of fitness correlates with lower quality of life than if exercising for the sake of improving health, which could explain why these differences between the genders occur. Another explanation lies in understanding that also the parents of Millennials are competitive and result-oriented and perceive Millennials as lazy and spoiled. This preconception could put Millennials in a position where they find the need to prove themselves worthy of respect and love from their parents

With regards to consumption, many of our female participants mention the looks and style of the training gear to be particularly important, which brought us into the discussion of the athleisure trend and how it manages to capture fashion trends and translate it into the concept of sports. Trying to understand why the trend is less evident for males, we realized it is most likely due to their great interest in the functional attributes of training gear, which is simply not what the athleisure trend is trying to capture today. One reason why the trend is popular among females might be that it helps them to *dress for a certain image* that fulfills the desire of being perceived as healthy and fit, while males do not feel the same need to match expectations in terms of looks and therefore *dress based on functionality.*

Lastly, the female participants of our study were on the hunt for *inspiration,* and feel happy sharing their training knowledge with others. On the contrary, the male participants primarily search for specific *information.* If someone asked them, they could share their knowledge with others but were not as keen on inspiring others as sharing exercise-specific information. It could be argued that the female participants have a greater need to inspire to enhance their fitness identity, whereas men want to be precise in the exchange of information to enhance their image of the performing body. Previous research has also found that Millennials look for feedback and guidance from people around them, while also valuing meaningful motivation and feel motivated by helping others by contributing to a bigger cause. In the

context of CCT, being an active participant through helping others may then strengthen the position of relevance within the culture. Looking into the findings of this study, these tendencies were indeed confirmed.

6.2 Personal Health

All participants mentioned the fun aspect of exercising, but is this really the whole truth? One of the participants in our study, Christoffer mentions that there might be an alternative truth aside from the fun and positive benefits to why one trains. He says that even though it might not be as socially acceptable to admit it, the aspect of becoming attractive is an intrinsic motivational factor. Some participants also stated that they may unfollow fitness accounts that cause them to feel bad about themselves, they also mention how social media builds up the impression that everyone is eating healthy and exercising all the time.

It seems like the impact on one's personal health is substantial for women, our analysis indicates that they feel anxious about not complying with societal norms. This is shown through their way of talking about food, clothing, and training habits, as there seems to be a constant strive to achieve an ideal as healthy and fit. Research has found a tendency for lower levels of self-esteem for females that report high levels of physical activity, which in turn could explain why the females feel that their personal identity gets a hit if they do not fully comply with the fitness girl image they are trying to portray.

6.3 Managerial Implications

As noted throughout this study there seem to be some issues correlated to the fitness culture, and as it revolves around so much more than simply regular training it becomes an ideology. Hence, it is something to live up to in order to prove your position within the culture. Defining yourself as "someone who exercises" is not just hitting the tracks every once in a while. You also need to eat, dress, perform and build the right type of muscles. Understanding the person behind the screen, results, or active minutes tracked in an app will be crucial to building onto a long-lasting positive health trend. Also recognizing the digital landscape and the pressure the "polished Instagram lifestyle" adds to the real life of people.

In the context of brands within the industry, this could be thinking about well-being and wellness rather than fitness, emphasizing the mental aspects and importance of being proud of who you are. Recently some brands have started to use models of different sizes to

showcase their clothing. Even though this might decrease sales and inspiration in the initial phase, as it will not be what people are looking for, in the long run it has the potential of helping people understand their true values and neglect the pressure on appearance. Other things to consider in the light of this is what values companies emphasize in marketing, do they tell people to "enhance their assets" or to "hide their imperfections"?

Our study has found many interesting insights with regards to the athleisure trend in the light of a female perspective. The next step for upcoming brands would be to figure out how to translate this trend into a male context. Is there a way to combine fashion and sports into a more masculine offering? Athleisure for females is aimed to challenge the male-dominated sports segment by incorporating inspirational attributes from fashion. Then maybe athleisure for males should challenge the more female-dominated fashion segment by incorporating informative attributes from sports. In other words, making fashion more accessible for a bigger group of males, by emphasizing the functionality aspects of training gear.

6.4 Future Research

The purpose of this study was to investigate gender differences for late Millennials within the fitness culture in order to develop upon the idea of why these differences occur. It further aimed to bring in the perspectives of the digital landscape and the personal health issues of late Millennials to investigate if it has played a role in the individual's way of consuming fitness.

Our study found, among other things, that gender differences occur as a result from females being judged on their passive body as an object and males being judged on their performing body, which came into expression through a series of themes. However, we identified some areas that are in need of future research in order to be able to give a more definite answer. One area of research would be to conduct a similar study on the parents, in this case primarily Generation X but to some extent Baby Boomers. This would be necessary in order to get a deeper understanding with regards to what aspects and ideas of the Millennials that are transferred from their parents and what aspects are built upon their own experiences. Another area in need of clarification is the idea that Millennials seem to associate performance and being good as a way of earning love and appreciation from their parents. Additionally, while partly addressed by this study, exactly why some late Millennials feel the need to distance

themselves from the societal norms and ideals that originate from the fitness culture still remains unclear, it would therefore be of interest to investigate this further

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Appendix

Interview Guide

Remember to include probes for capturing inspiration and information seeking. Such as:
- *Where have you heard about that?*
- *Where did you learn that?*
- *Why is that inspiring?*

Introduction:

What does the word fitness mean to you?

Which one of the following statements suits you the best?

1. I would consider myself being a beginner within fitness. I do train, but not always regularly. I would gladly turn to others for advice and inspiration.
2. I like fitness and I most often train regularly, but I would not consider myself to be an expert in the area and therefore turn to others for advice and inspiration.
3. I really like fitness and I do train regularly. I would consider myself being well versed within fitness and have trained regularly for many years. I do not feel a need to turn to others for advice and inspiration.
4. Fitness is an important part of my life and I would consider myself being an expert in the area. It happens that I give advice and inspiration to others.

Training Habits:

How would you describe your training habits?
- How often do you train?
- What type of exercise?
- Why do you train?

Why did you first start training?

What is important to you when you choose a type of exercise?

Do you prefer to train alone/in group/in team/with PT/with a friend or partner?

    Why?

Do you have a fitness membership?

    YES

        What is important when you choose membership?

    NO

        Why not?

Do you train with your mind set towards a specific goal or do you follow a set training-plan?

    Can you evaluate further?

    Have you made up the plan/goal yourself?

Nutrition:

Do you follow a certain diet?

      Why?/Why not?

Do you consume any dietary supplements?

      Why?/Why not?

      Any specific brand?

Consumption:

How often do you purchase dietary supplements/fitness apparel/fitness equipment?

What is important when you choose dietary supplements/fitness apparel/fitness equipment?

      Why is that?

      Any specific brands? If so, why?

Societal Norms & Emotional aspects of training:

How do you feel when working out?

      How do you feel after a session?

      How much would you say that you think about fitness when not working out?

How do you feel/react when you miss out on a planned workout session?

      Why?

Do you consider others' opinions about your training/clothes/diet/technique/knowledge?

      What does your thinking look like?

      Does it affect your choices?

Do you experience any specific norms or ideals in the society when it comes to fitness?

      Do you think there is a difference between the genders?

Do you follow any forum or accounts on social media that are fitness related?

      How do you feel about these?

      If not, why?