

Newcastle University

## **Insta-Trainer**

The cultural and social impact of Instagram on the well-being,  
diet, and lifestyles of young Qatari women

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## Abstract

In my thesis, I introduce the term *Insta-Trainer* to describe a new paradigm of instantaneous training facilitated by visual-based social media platforms, particularly Instagram. This concept highlights how users—especially young women in Qatar—are trained to adopt self-disciplining practices in health, lifestyle, and diet through seemingly informal yet persuasive digital content. The idea of *Insta-Training* is central to understanding how platforms function as instant pedagogical tools.

I draw on Foucauldian (Foucault, 1977; 1978; 1991), postfeminist (Gill, 2007; 2017; Banet-Weiser et al., 2020), and neoliberal (Harvey, 2005; Berry, 2017) frameworks to analyse the interplay between platform design, algorithmic governance, and user behaviour. My research interrogates how Instagram’s multialgorithms influence users’ health choices, the negotiation of agency within these spaces, and the behavioural patterns shaped by micro-trends. I also explore how these practices shifted pre- and post-COVID-19.

Using Thematic Analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006; 2012; 2021; 2022), I analyse 41 survey responses and eight in-depth interviews to extract three core themes:

1. *The Healthy Qatari Citizen* explores biopolitical narratives of health and critiques how these are internalised and enacted through platform use.
2. *Curated Digital Manuals (CDMs)* examines three types of content curation on Instagram, addressing visibility labour, cultural erasure, and algorithmic bias.
3. *The New Wave of Online Consumption* investigates changing digital habits post-pandemic, including mass unfollowing of influencers and more intentional engagement.

Ultimately, this thesis contributes to Media and Cultural Studies and the literature on Arab Gulf women. The concept of *Insta-Trainer* offers a framework that future researchers can use to critically examine the influence of platforms on health, identity, and culture in digitally mediated societies.

## Key Words

Insta-Trainer, Bio-Pedagogy, Algorithms, Post-feminism, Biopower, Influencers, Diets, Well-Being, Self-Discipline, Micro-Trends, Neoliberalism

## Acknowledgements

In my acknowledgements, I want to acknowledge memories, milestones, hardships, and individuals who have supported me throughout this five-year journey. My PhD was a labour of love, stress, and a few too many tears.

My little family was formed around this PhD, with each chapter mirroring a different stage in its formation. I vividly recall writing the literature review amid the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak and submitting my first Annual Progress Report (APR) one week before my engagement ceremony to Ebrahim. I remember working on the pilot survey while preparing for my COVID-19 wedding.

The methods chapter was written during my first pregnancy. I remember when Tina and Deborah would do Zoom call check-ins to ensure I was doing okay and to check if I needed any additional support. I remember how the interviews were conducted while my baby girl, Moza, was crying in the background. I remember the participants being gracious and patient, waiting on the other end of the line while I soothed her before returning to our conversations.

I remember moving back to England full-time with four-month-old baby. Sometimes, my husband or mother would be with us, and most times, we were alone. In these lonely times, when my head was not where I wanted it to be, I remember being grateful for the guidance, detailed comments, and close readings that my supervisors have provided. I also remember feeling embarrassed as I knew they often had to put extra effort into making sense of what my post-pregnancy brain produced.

I remember nursery pick-up/drop-off while running under the Newcastle winds and rains... All this to get to campus or the postgraduate office on time. I remember promising myself to never to work after picking Moza up from nursery or on weekends (proud to say that I stayed true to that until today). I wanted to make sure I was dedicating that time to learning to be a mother and giving my child love, attention, and one-on-one moments she needed. They say a PhD is a lonely journey, we were indeed lonely, but lonely together in my journey.

I remember discovering I was pregnant with my second child, Dhaen, in the bathroom of the Armstrong Building. I remember crying as it was unexpected and scary... I still had my PhD to write, I still had a 15-month-old baby to care for, and I still had a few health problems related to

my previous pregnancy; I still had and had and had until he came along. And all the worries felt so small.

On 23 September 2024, I submit this labour of intense mixed emotions. Moza will be three years old, Dhaen will be nine months old, and my fourth wedding anniversary will be just three weeks away. I feel immensely proud of myself for getting this done.

Nothing stopped me—not moving houses in Doha, apartments in Newcastle, and countries (England and Qatar), not two pregnancies or two c-sections, not even raising two kids, and most importantly, not a global pandemic. I did it and dedicated this achievement to my children, Moza and Dhaen, and my husband, Ebrahim.

In thanking those who helped me reach the finish line, I first want to thank Allah, *alhamdulillah*. And I want to thank and acknowledge the role of my father, mother, sisters, husband, children, and most importantly, my supervisors, and everyone who have all supported me in my growth as a scholar, as a person, and as a mother.

Thank you all.

## Abbreviations

<b>Abbreviation</b>	<b>Term</b>
<b>CDMs</b>	Curated Digital Manuals
<b>ACDMs</b>	Algorithmically Curated Digital Manuals
<b>PCDMs</b>	Pre-Curated Digital Manuals
<b>UCDMs</b>	User Curated Digital Manuals
<b>UD</b>	User-Disjuncture
<b>AW</b>	Algorithmic Wardrobe
<b>QNV</b>	Qatar National Vision
<b>QF</b>	Qatar Foundation
<b>EC</b>	Education City
<b>TA</b>	Teaching Assistant
<b>QU</b>	Qatar University
<b>DDP</b>	Digital Defense Playbook
<b>AJL</b>	Algorithmic Justice League
<b>AI</b>	Artificial Intelligence
<b>APR</b>	Annual Progress Report
<b>PGR</b>	Postgraduate Researcher

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# Chapter 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Contextualisation

### *1.1.1 More Than a Dream...*

When I first joined Qatar University (QU) as a Teaching Assistant (TA) in 2016, there was a great deal of pressure to immediately pursue a doctoral degree. However, I knew I was not ready for that step yet. From 2016 to 2019, I tried to focus on self-development, particularly transitioning from my previous career in the Aviation Industry to a new field, academia. This delay allowed me to discover a deep love for teaching and writing. It was also the time where I developed a strong interest in producing work that centres the Gulf region.

Before this shift, I was also an independent, award-winning filmmaker, creating documentaries and avant-garde films as a hobby, which mainly highlighted the experiences of women in the Gulf region (Al Derham, 2015). This background fuelled my commitment to representing Gulf women, and it is no surprise that this passion has become central to my thesis. My research explores how Qatari women engage in self-discipline, self-regulation, self-monitoring, and self-management, particularly in relation to their health, wellness, and body image.

From the outset, I knew that my research would focus on Qatar or the Gulf states, and I was certain that I wanted to explore the experiences of women. However, I wasn't sure which specific aspect or approach I should take. In the Fall of 2018, as I began developing my doctoral proposal, I found myself grappling with an unhealthy relationship with food and body image. I vividly remember being at a family gathering, opening the Instagram app, and being bombarded with images of half-naked women with toned and 'perfect' bodies saturating my explore page. The embarrassment I felt at the thought that someone might glance over and see my phone screen was evident in my face. At that moment, it became clear to me why these specific types of images were dominating my feed—the algorithms were responding to my obsession with losing weight and maintaining a slimmer body.

Using Instagram as a primary source for weight loss and health advice had become second nature to me. As a filmmaker with a BSc in Media Industries and Technology and an MA in Critical Media and Cultural Studies, I was acutely aware of how inauthentic these images were—heavily

edited and far from an accurate representation of lived bodies. The irony? I was trained to create similar images. Yet, despite this awareness, I could not help but be deeply affected by them.

At that period, I was supplementing my breakfast and dinner with protein smoothies, eating only one real meal a day, which was lunch, delivered daily to my house from a restaurant that specialised in low calorie weight loss meals called Diet Café. I worked out for two hours a day, five days a week. I became malnourished, my hair was falling out, and I often felt dizzy. On one occasion, I almost fainted in the middle of an undergraduate lecture in front of thirty students. It was then that I realised something was seriously wrong. Despite this realisation, my social media consumption habits did not change<sup>1</sup>, all this while I was still trying to develop a PhD topic and proposal.

At some point, I considered writing about women in leadership positions in Qatar, women in politics, or even a chronological historical account of women's rights in the Gulf. Looking into social media and health was not even on my radar, despite the fact that my entire life outside of work revolved around these very practices—self managing myself and body as per the images I consumed on digital platforms while using the aid of wearable devices. Then, one day, I woke up from a dream. In the dream, I was telling my father that I had been accepted into a PhD programme, and the topic was about fitness trainers on Instagram and their role in shaping the lives of women like me.

As soon as I opened my eyes, I grabbed my phone and sent a voice note to my now-husband, detailing the PhD proposal I had dreamt about. And no joke, that is exactly what happened: I started my journey in Fall 2019, and here I am five years later in Fall 2024, reviewing the entire manuscript, written on the concept of Insta-Trainer framework, its components, functionalities and how the Insta-Trainer concept affects women like me, as a last step before submitting my thesis.

### ***1.1.2 Grand Discovery: Formulating a Hypothesis***

Initially, I developed my PhD proposal and was accepted under the prospect that I would be writing about fitness influencers and their role in changing lifestyle and diet habits of young women in Qatar. However, after producing the first draft of my 16,000-word literature review in 2020 for my

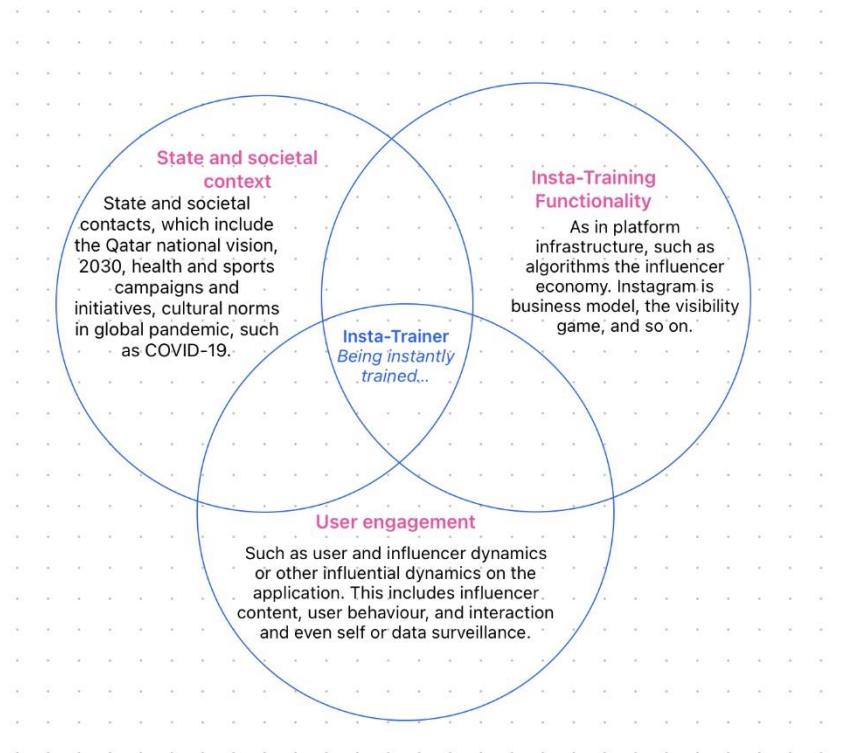
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<sup>1</sup> I uncovered what I now regard as one of the key findings of my study and a critical element of the entire Insta-Trainer Framework: the concept of 'User Disjuncture'. This refers to a dissonance between practices and beliefs resulting from social media consumption, which initially puzzled me. However, I soon recognised it as a form of negotiation and agency (see Chapters 5 and 6).

first Annual Progression Report (APR, of which only about 20% of this draft survived in the final cut of this thesis), I realised with the guidance of my supervisors, that the concept of the ‘Insta-Trainer’ extends far beyond Instagram influencers alone.

Through this realisation, it became clear to me that Insta-Trainer could be understood as a comprehensive concept and framework for exploring how individuals are instantaneously being trained, not just at the influencer level, but on a broader scale through the interplay of ever-changing algorithms, business models, and the influences of capitalism and neoliberalism. It was as if a whole ecosystem of multilayered factors unfolded before my eyes, revealing a much more complex and dynamic system than I had initially anticipated: my initial proposal was just a single thread in what has now become a rich and complex tapestry. At this point, I was faced with a significant problem. The initial issue I identified as a PhD proposal was the limited understanding of how fitness influencers alone shape the lifestyle and diet habits of young women in Qatar. However, this narrow focus failed to account for the broader, systemic influences at play that collectively train and mould individuals’ behaviours and perceptions.

Given this expanded perspective, my hypothesis evolved to explore how the concept of the Insta-Trainer serves as a framework through which individuals are systematically trained across multiple levels, influenced by digital platforms and technologies—both hardware and software—economic systems, and sociopolitical ideologies. This new founded hypothesis suggests that the Insta-Trainer is not merely a role played by influencers but is part of a larger ecosystem that orchestrates the self-regulation, self-management, and self-discipline of individuals in contemporary digital culture. While this framework could be applied to various technologies across areas and fields of study, cultures, and backgrounds, my research focuses specifically on its application within Instagram, on women, and in Qatar. Leading me to the title: *Insta-Trainer: The Cultural and Social Impact of Instagram on the Well-being, Diet, and Lifestyles of Young Women in Qatar*.



*Insta-Training Concept: the workflow*

This conceptual diagram presents the Insta-Trainer as an emergent phenomenon situated at the intersection of three interlocking forces: (1) state and societal agendas, (2) the infrastructural logic of Instagram, and (3) user engagements. Rather than being reducible to any one of these domains, the Insta-Trainer arises as a dynamic workflow shaped by and shaping each component.

The state and societal context comprises policies such as the Qatar National Vision 2030, cultural and tribal norms, and public health campaigns that define and promote ‘idealised’ visions of health and productivity. The platform infrastructure includes Instagram’s algorithmic structures (such as Explore, Saved Folders, and hashtags meaning the CDMs), influencer economies, and visibility mechanics that prioritise certain bodies, lifestyles, and modes of self-representation. Finally, the user–influencer dynamic or user engagement refers to content production and consumption practices: from curated fitness posts and sponsored wellness products to user interactions marked by aspiration, self-surveillance, and feelings of guilt or gratification.

It is within the entanglement of these three fields that the Insta-Trainer takes form as individuals are instantly training themselves. As such, the Insta-Trainer is not simply an influencer or a set of practices, but a conceptual framework through which one can identify and theorise broader

structures of discipline, biopower, governmentality, and postfeminist sensibilities. These Foucauldian and postfeminist concepts do not pre-exist within the model, but rather emerge analytically when applied through the lens of the Insta-Trainer and its constituent workflows.

This model is not only pertinent to the Gulf context but holds wider analytical relevance. When applied to other hypotheses—such as the role of influencers in Western neoliberal societies, the construction of digital motherhood, or algorithmic beauty regimes like my concept of the algorithmic wardrobe (see Chapter 10)—the workflow offers a transferable framework. It allows researchers to trace how platform mechanics, socio-political agendas, and user behaviours converge to produce specific subjectivities and moral orders. Thus, the Insta-Trainer is both locally grounded and conceptually expansive—indeed this offers a scalable method for interrogating digital cultures of health, wellbeing, and identity.

### ***1.1.3 Sections Outlines***

In the first section, titled ***1.2 RQs and Challenges: Amplifying Voices, Navigating Positionalities***, I introduce my proposed research questions (RQs), identify the gaps in existing research, and present my positionality as a researcher. I organise this into three distinct subsections. I begin by addressing the gaps in the literature, as these not only inform the development of my RQs but also guide me in formulating questions to address those gaps. I then outline the four RQs and their corresponding objectives. In the final subsection, I discuss my positionality, explaining how my background and experiences as a researcher shape the RQs and objectives. This ensures that they are grounded in both the gaps I aim to address and my unique perspective as a Qatari woman studying this phenomenon.

The second section, ***1.3 Guiding Theories and Methodological Approaches***, is divided into two subsections. In the first, I provide an overview of the key theoretical frameworks and literature guiding my study. I draw on Foucauldian concepts of biopower, biopolitics, and governmentality to explore how Instagram shapes self-discipline and behaviour, along with neoliberal and postfeminist theories that highlight the platform's role in reinforcing individual responsibility and market-driven ideals of health and empowerment. I also reference literature on parasocial relationships and influencer culture to explain how digital platforms influence lifestyle choices and self-perception, situating my research within broader discourses on digital media and identity in the Middle East. In the second subsection, I detail my mixed-methods approach, combining

quantitative and qualitative techniques such as surveys, semi-structured interviews, and multiple follow-up interactions to capture both the measurable impacts and personal experiences of Qatari women engaging with Instagram.

The final section before the closing remarks is titled *1.4 Significance of the Study*. In this section, I situate my study within the broader context of representation for women in Qatar, the Gulf, and the Middle East. I highlight the importance of my research in addressing underexplored areas concerning the impact of digital media on identity and well-being. I outline the key contributions, toolkits, and concepts I have developed throughout the study, with references to the chapters where I discuss them in more detail. Lastly, I reflect on how these contributions pave the way for future research, enhancing our understanding of how social media shapes cultural and health practices.

## **1.2 Challenges: Amplifying Voices, Navigating Positionalities**

Broadening the scope of my research presented several challenges. Initially, I had to expand my focus to encompass the entire ecosystem contributing to the Insta-Trainer concept—a shift I had not anticipated when drafting original literature review and submitting my first APR. This required moving beyond a narrow emphasis on influencers to a more complex and nuanced analysis. Additionally, I had to account for Instagram’s multidimensional impact on the well-being, diets, and lifestyles of young women in Qatar. The complexity of these influences made it difficult to isolate and analyse Instagram’s specific impacts, necessitating a multidisciplinary and mixed-methods approach that bridged media studies, cultural analysis, and social theory (see Chapter 4).

In the first subsection on challenges, *1.2.1 The Gaps*, I explore the underrepresentation of Middle Eastern, Arab, and Gulf communities in academic literature, particularly in terms of the representation of women. Alongside this, I faced the responsibility of developing analytical frameworks specific to the region, as Sabry (2010) emphasises. Scholars have increasingly called for more Arabised and localised voices in the field, and I found myself confronted with the daunting task of contributing to this body of work. This challenge required careful consideration of the cultural, linguistic, religious, and social nuances often overlooked in existing research (Sakr, 2004; Sabry, 2010; Sonbol, 2017; Al Fassi, 2007; 2017).

In this section, I also introduce *1.2.2 RQs and Objectives* and the reasoning behind their placement. I chose to position the RQs within the gaps section because they directly address the research voids

I identified. By placing them here, I underscore how these questions arise from the need to fill specific gaps in the literature. Furthermore, positioning the RQs before the discussion on my positionality enables me to illustrate how my positionality as a researcher shapes the way I approach these questions. My unique perspective not only informs the RQs but also guides how I address them and justifies the objectives I have set to tackle these gaps.

Building on this, another challenge explored in this section is **1.2.3 My Positionality**, which reflects on my own situatedness within the research. I also discuss the steps I took to ensure that my work remained flexible and methodologically rigorous. As a Qatari woman, I felt a deep responsibility to contribute meaningfully to this discourse, remaining mindful of how my own situatedness might influence the processes of surveying, interviewing, and analysis. To address these concerns, I employed a range of strategies, including reflexive practices, triangulation of data sources, and a commitment to ethical research practices (see Chapter 5). These efforts were aimed at ensuring that the voices and experiences of the women in this study were represented with care and authenticity, ultimately contributing to a more nuanced understanding of the challenges and opportunities faced by Arab women.

### **1.2.1 The Gaps: Khaleeji Voices, where you at?**

The existing literature on Middle Eastern and Gulf women has suffered from a lack of adequate representation of the diverse and subtle realities of their lives. Sonbol (2016), in the introduction of *Gulf Women*, addresses how much of existing scholarship has either overlooked or homogenised the experiences of Gulf women, often reducing them to monolithic stereotypes shaped by Western perspectives. Sonbol, Bint Nasser, and Al Fassi all collectively highlight within dedicated chapters in *Gulf Women* (2016), the need for more comprehensive studies that explore the rich histories, contributions, and everyday realities of these women. This gap in the literature calls for further research that centres on regional voices and perspectives, challenging the reductive narratives that have traditionally dominated the field.

The existing historical literature on Middle Eastern women is often biased, stereotyped, and exoticised (Sonbol, 1996; 2016), leading to homogenised representations. While there are many voices from the region striving to combat these tendencies, more work remains to be done (Al Fassi, 2007; 2016). Decolonising Middle Eastern studies and diversifying voices from the Middle East and Arab region are crucial steps in moving beyond the field's historical reliance on Western

frameworks (Sabry, 2010). This shift necessitates a critical reassessment of how these frameworks have shaped our understanding of the region. Edward Said's influential work *Orientalism* (1978) laid the groundwork for understanding how Western scholarship has often portrayed the Middle East through a lens of cultural superiority, stereotypes, and misrepresentations.

My research draws inspiration from the work of Arab scholars who challenge dominant narratives. Sabry (2010), for instance, critiques the dominance of Western theoretical paradigms in Arab media and cultural studies, emphasising the need to develop indigenous theoretical approaches that truly reflect the lived experiences and cultural realities of people in the region. This is precisely what I aim to achieve in my thesis by developing two conceptual frameworks—one of which includes a critical component—and a toolkit for analysis. While the tools I present in my thesis hold the capacity to be applied in other contexts, they were first developed to study Qatari women by an Arab, *Khaleeji*, and Qatari woman (myself!): with *Khaleeji* referring to individuals from the Gulf region, the *Khaleej*, and the term reflects a collective identity within the GCC countries (Mirgani, 2017).

Similarly, Sakr, despite being a British scholar, has a deep familiarity with Arab culture through her marriage to an Arab, raising Arab children, and her fluency in Arabic (Abdulla, 2005). Her semi-Arab life experience informs her advocacy for moving beyond Western-centric narratives that obscure the complexities of Arab women's lives, urging the elevation of local voices and experiences (Sakr, 2004; *ibid*, 2005). My thesis aligns with this perspective, as these voices and experiences are central to my study. The standalone report in Chapter 5, in particular, not only offers authentic voices of *Khaleeji* women from the datasets but can also support other scholars—whether from the region or elsewhere—in expanding relevant conversations.

Mernissi's influential work has been instrumental in challenging the orientalist stereotypes that have long dominated Western portrayals of Muslim women. She advocates for the recognition of their agency and recognition of the diverse ways they navigate their identities within Islamic societies (Mernissi, 1987; 1993). In response to the gaps identified by Mernissi, my thesis introduces the concept of 'User Disjuncture,' a critical component of the conceptual framework I develop. Through this framework, I explore how individuals exercise agency, freedom, and negotiation when engaging with self-discipling online content, which is often dominated by Western narratives.

Al Fassi's meticulous historical research has also been pivotal in challenging the Western-dominated narratives of Arabian history, particularly regarding women's roles. She advocates for the inclusion of regional perspectives in understanding the history and culture of the Arabian Peninsula (Al Fassi, 2007). This resonates strongly with the aims of my thesis wherein I incorporate regional voices and perspectives and seek to provide a more fulsome or rich representation of Qatari women's experiences, particularly in the digital realm.

Collectively, these scholars inspire my own efforts to contribute to the decolonisation of Middle Eastern and Gulf studies. My thesis, and the broader trajectory of my future work, seeks to actively *Arabise and Khaleejify* the voices within Gulf studies. By *Khaleejify*, I mean grounding the research in the experiences and perspectives of *Khaleejis*—people from the Gulf region. Although this field is still relatively new, it has often been explored by non-Arabs, non-Gulf Arabs, or scholars who may not be Arabic speakers whose work is important and while their efforts to remain authentic and unbiased are commendable, there are aspects of the lived realities of the region that might be more challenging to fully capture from an outsider's perspective. As a Qatari woman from the Gulf, I feel a profound sense of responsibility and a deep personal commitment to sharing our own stories in our own language<sup>2</sup>, ensuring that our experiences are accurately represented and conveyed.

In concluding this subsection, my study addresses critical gaps in the literature on Arab and Middle Eastern women by challenging the somewhat stereotypical portrayals that have historically dominated the field (Sonbol, 2016; Diaconoff, 2009). The focus on the diverse experiences of Qatari women offered in my research creates a robust representation of their lives, rooted in their unique cultural and social contexts. It represents an effort to *Khaleejify* studies on the Gulf region, prioritising regional voices and perspectives that have been historically overlooked or misrepresented. In alignment with scholars like Mernissi and Al Fassi, my study challenges the stereotype of the silent and passive Arab woman by showcasing the agency and negotiation Qatari women exercise daily in digital spaces (Diaconoff, 2009). Additionally, by developing and applying bespoke conceptual frameworks tailored to the specific realities of Gulf women, my research contributes to the broader effort to decolonise Middle Eastern studies, offering an alternative, locally grounded analytical approach that can complement and challenge the

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<sup>2</sup> I would like to highlight that, although the survey and interview questions were in English—the language of my thesis—the responses were bilingual, encompassing both English and Arabic.

dominance of Western theories, frameworks, and methodologies. Through these efforts, my study not only addresses existing gaps but also serves to advance research and the representation of Arab and Middle Eastern women.

### ***1.2.2 RQ and Objectives***

In this study, I explore the effects of Instagram's Insta-Training functionalities on young women in Qatar as a conceptual framework, guided by key research questions and closely aligned objectives:

#### **What specific role do Insta-Training functionalities play in the lives of young women from Qatar?**

My first objective is to investigate how Insta-Trainer features—understood as a comprehensive digital framework or workflow that trains individuals not just through influencer content, but also through the broader interplay of algorithms, business models, and the influences of capitalism, politics, and neoliberalism—are integrated into the daily routines and self-care practices of Qatari women. Through this exploration, I aim to address the gap in understanding how these modern social media functionalities influence both personal and cultural practices, particularly within the rapidly evolving digital landscape of the Arab Gulf.

#### **What is the nature and impact of the lifestyle, diet, and health-related decisions made by young women from Qatar as a result of consuming Insta-Training content? How are these practices productive and/or problematic?**

My second objective is to analyse the nature and impact of lifestyle, diet, and health-related decisions driven by Insta-Training content. I approach this content within the comprehensive framework of how individuals are instantly trained by the application's algorithms, business imperatives, and broader socio-political influences. This analysis aims to determine whether these practices yield positive outcomes or introduce new challenges by assessing their effects on the health and well-being of young women. In doing so, I aim to contribute to discourses on social media-driven health and lifestyle content, addressing gaps in research at the intersection of digital media and personal health.

## **How do these lifestyle, diet, and health-related practices affect culture, tradition, and identity/individuality?**

A critical aspect of my research seeks to understand the influence of Insta-Training content on cultural norms, traditional values, and personal identity among Qatari women. I aim to explore how the broader training mechanisms of the Insta-Trainer framework, including the impacts of capitalism, neoliberalism and broader cultural standards of health and beauty, reshapes cultural practices and affects identity formation. This investigation will provide insights into the broader cultural implications of digital trends and their interaction with traditional values, addressing significant gaps in the literature on culture and social media within the Middle Eastern context.

## **Is there a significant correlation between the time spent engaging with Insta-Trainer content and the time dedicated to physical and mental self-care?**

My fourth objective is to examine the relationship between time spent engaging with Insta-Trainer content and the time dedicated to physical and mental self-care. I aim to determine whether increased social media engagement, influenced by the broader Insta-Trainer framework, translates into practical improvements in self-care routines. Through this investigation, I hope to deepen the understanding of social media works as a bio-pedagogical tool for promoting well-being and self-care and contributing to research on the impact of digital media on health practices.

Overall, I aim to ensure that the study captures the intricate and unique experiences of the participants by achieving the objectives detailed above, leading to a more nuanced portrayal of their lives, which is one of my primary research goals.

### ***1.2.3 Navigating my Positionality***

Throughout my research, I was acutely aware of my position as a Qatari studying the lives and experiences of fellow Qataris with similar age and educational backgrounds. Recognising that my close cultural and social connection to the participants could impact my research, I made a concerted effort to use this positionality in meaningful ways.

In addition to this, I felt a strong responsibility to contribute meaningfully to the representation of women in the Middle East (See subsection above). To ensure both fairness and thoroughness in my study, I employed a mixed-methods approach that combined qualitative and quantitative

techniques. This approach allowed me to explore the research questions from multiple perspectives, providing a detailed and comprehensive view of the data.

The quantitative aspect of my study established a strong foundation, enabling me to identify patterns, trends, and connections among the participants. By integrating this with qualitative methods—such as in-depth semi-structured interviews and multiple follow-up interactions—I was able to gain a more profound understanding of the experiences of women interacting with various digital technologies to manage their health, well-being, and self-perception.

Moreover, I employed latent thematic analysis to mitigate potential biases within my data and uncover underlying themes that might not be immediately apparent. Latent thematic analysis goes beyond merely identifying explicit content; it delves into the deeper, often implicit meanings within the data without being shaped by the researcher's assumptions or preconceived notions (See Chapter 4). This method enabled me to explore the complexities and subtleties of the participants' narratives organically, ensuring that the themes emerged from the data as well as my interpretations were perspectives that matched the realities of the participants.

Additionally, I integrated diverse theoretical perspectives, including Foucauldian, neoliberal, and post-feminist frameworks. The Foucauldian lens allowed for an exploration of self-surveillance and health norms, while neoliberal theories emphasised individual responsibility within market ideals. Post-feminist concepts provided insight into how Instagram promotes empowerment while simultaneously reinforcing traditional gender roles (See subsection on theoretical concepts or Chapters 2 and 3). This multi-framework approach captured various dimensions of the data, reducing the risk of a single and narrow interpretation, while ensuring a more comprehensive and balanced analysis.

The combination of quantitative data with qualitative insights, along with the integration of diverse theoretical perspectives and the use of latent thematic analysis, was essential in developing an authentic understanding of the challenges and opportunities facing women in the Gulf region today. This approach not only addressed potential biases but also honoured the complexity and individuality of the participants, leading to a richer and more realistic representation of their experiences, which is one of my research goals.

### **1.3. Guiding Theories and Methodological Approaches**

### ***1.3.1 Snapshot: Concepts and Theories***

My study situates its analysis within several key concepts and frameworks, including biopower, biopolitics, governmentality, self-discipline, and the docile body (Foucault, 1977; 1978; 1991). I examine how Instagram functions as a biopolitical digital landscape, compelling users to conform to societal norms of health and beauty, as depicted in *Figure 2.1.2.1* in Chapter 2. Instagram's algorithms and business models reinforce these norms, shaping the decisions and behaviours of young Qatari women. This analysis directly addresses my second research question by exploring how lifestyle, diet, and health-related decisions are influenced by Insta-Training content (Heyes, 2007; Amigot and Pujal, 2009; Hoffman, 2014).

Instagram users often internalise these ideals, which can be both productive, promoting positive health goals, and problematic, reinforcing unrealistic standards. Users are transformed into self-disciplined, self-monitoring subjects, shaped by Insta-Training functionalities and Insta-Trainers who act as agents of biopower, subtly regulating life (Cotter, 2018; Larsen, 2024a). Instagram's promotion of the ideal, healthy body aligns with neoliberal and consumerist values, echoing Foucault's concept of the docile body, where individuals conform to societal norms through capillary forms of regulation (Foucault, 1977). Thus, Instagram functions as a modern apparatus of biopower, with Insta-Trainers shaping individuals into subjects who adhere to specific aesthetic and behavioural standards, addressing both my first and second research questions (DiBisceglie & Arigo, 2019; Prichard et al., 2020).

Furthermore, I draw on governmentality within the context of how states, particularly in Qatar, use digital platforms to encourage citizens to align their behaviour with national goals, as exemplified by Qatar National Vision 2030. The Vision promotes individual responsibility for health management as part of a broader citizenship project (Rose and Novas, 2005). This shift towards self-governance through digital platforms reflects neoliberal principles, where self-discipline and personal responsibility are paramount (Favaro, 2017; Berry, 2017). Instagram aligns with state strategies and governmental health management by promoting neoliberal values of self-regulation and personal responsibility, which reinforces societal norms and expectations around wellness and body ideals (Gillman, 2021). This analysis, detailed in Chapter 7, addresses my first research question by examining the role of Insta-Training functionalities in shaping behaviours and attitudes. It also responds to my third research question by exploring the impact of state involvement in culture, tradition, and identity formation. Through this Foucauldian lens, my study

provides a comprehensive understanding of how Instagram influences self-disciplinary practices and behaviours among young Qatari women.

Moreover, a crucial aspect of this thesis is my examination of Insta-Trainers within the influencer industry as agents of biopower and post-feminist ideals, and their significant impact on both mental and physical health. In the core chapters, I expand on this by analysing how parasocial relationships—where followers develop one-sided emotional connections with influencers—affect user engagement, trust, and ultimately, their lifestyle choices and health-related decisions (Horton and Wohl, 1956; Reinikainen et al., 2020). These parasocial relationships often lead followers to internalise the ideals and behaviours promoted by influencers, which can have profound effects on their mental and physical well-being. This analysis, grounded in existing literature (Rodney, 2019; *ibid.*, 2020; Bij de Vaate, 2022), is essential for understanding how Western digital influencers shape the perceptions and behaviours of women from different cultures, particularly in the Gulf region, where the pressures of rapid modernisation intersect with traditional norms (Zahlan, 2016).

In my analysis, I discuss how Instagram promotes self-optimisation and consumerism within a post-feminist, neoliberal, and capitalist framework, where influencers operating within this context contribute to the internalisation of neoliberal values, particularly through the regulation and commodification of the female body (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2009; Harvey, 2005; Berry, 2017; Gillman, 2021). In my literature review, I explore how digital platforms shape users' identities through both internal and external influences. I draw parallels between the historical feminisation of craft and traditional health manuals and their modern digital counterparts, which shape post-feminist identities (Buszek, 2011; Prichard, 2015; Cutter, 2023). The Insta-Trainer, like influencers, meticulously curate content that builds trust among followers, reinforcing societal norms around health and beauty (Abidin, 2015; Al Derham, 2023a). The curated digital manuals identified in my study serve as structured tools for health and lifestyle guidance, significantly influencing users' behaviours and routines (Gilman, 2021; Al Derham, 2023a).

This reflects how digital platforms adapt traditional health manuals to contemporary needs, disseminating post-feminist ideals from traditional media (Bartky, 1990; Heyes, 2007). Influencers, acting as agents of post-feminist ideals, encourage followers to adopt consumerist behaviours under the guise of empowerment and self-improvement (Gill and Elias, 2015; Favaro, 2017; Gill, 2023). In this dynamic, where post-feminism intersects with neoliberalism, beauty

practices are presented as forms of empowerment tied to consumerism, garnering high engagement (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Elias and Gill, 2018; Larsen, 2024a).

Further, I also explore algorithmic bias and cultural invisibility as critical components of this digital landscape. Multialgorithmic functionalities often amplify content that conforms to popular beauty and health standards, marginalising diverse voices and perpetuating inequalities (Buolamwini, 2018; Benjamin, 2019). This bias reinforces societal norms and affects cultural identity and values (Gangadharan, 2016; 2017; O’Neil, 2016; Noble, 2018). In the core chapters, I engage with algorithmic bias, algorithmic justice, and the algorithmic representation of trends that resonate with Qatari women, analysing how algorithmic bias influences content visibility and user engagement. In this analysis, found in Chapter 7, I highlight the need for inclusive algorithms that represent diverse expressions and values (O’Neil, 2016; Buolamwini, 2018b; Gangadharan, 2017). By exploring the intersection of algorithmic biases, neoliberalism, and post-feminism, I gain insights into the decisions influenced by Insta-Training functionalities.

Through the analysis of algorithmic control, parasocial relationships, and influencer impact, I am able to provide a nuanced account of how digital platforms craft users’ identities and influence their health and lifestyle choices (Cotter, 2018; van Dijck, 2013; Gilman, 2021). This study addresses my research questions by exploring these themes and trends, offering a thorough understanding of the impact of Insta-Trainers on young Qatari women, all contextualised within the theoretical frameworks outlined in the literature review.

### ***1.3.2 Research Methodology***

When I first began this journey, I envisioned a traditional, in-person ethnographic study, carefully designed to explore the nuanced impacts of Insta-Training on young Qatari women. However, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted those plans, necessitating a shift to a fully remote research approach. One of the most significant decisions I made was to adopt a mixed-methods longitudinal panel approach. This choice was driven by my desire to capture the evolving nature of my participants’ experiences with Instagram over time. This longitudinal dimension allowed me to track changes and establish relationships, providing a dynamic view of how digital engagement impacts health and cultural identity.

Initially, my research design relied heavily on in-person interactions, which are traditionally central to ethnographic studies. Since the pandemic required a shift to online methods, this adaptation became more than just a contingency plan. On the positive side, it opened up new avenues for data collection, allowing me to leverage digital platforms in ways that were both immersive and efficient. The use of interactive online surveys in 2021 enabled me to reach a broader and more diverse sample of young Qatari women than face-to-face methods might have allowed. These surveys, which yielded 41 participants, were designed to mimic social media interfaces like Instagram’s direct messaging feature, which resonated more with my participants, yielding richer and more nuanced data.

The transition to virtual semi-structured interviews in 2022 also brought unexpected advantages. Conducting these interviews via Zoom allowed for greater flexibility in scheduling and overcame geographical barriers as I frequently travelled between Doha, Manama, and Newcastle. More importantly, the virtual format seemed to enhance participant comfort, encouraging more open and honest discussions (eight interviewees<sup>3</sup>). The option for participants to turn off their cameras fostered a sense of anonymity, which often led to more candid insights. Multiple follow-up interactions between 2023 and 2024, including digital and in-person sessions, further enriched the data, capturing the evolving perspectives and experiences of the participants.

Ultimately, the challenges I faced and the adaptations I made have shaped the trajectory of my research and highlighted the importance of flexibility in academic inquiry. By embracing these changes and reflecting on their impact, I have crafted a research narrative that is as much about the process as it is about the findings. This experience has taught me that the methods we choose are not just tools for data collection (see Chapter 4), but integral parts of the story we tell about our research and the people we study.

#### **1.4. Significance of the Study**

This research is deeply significant to me, both personally and academically. As a Qatari woman, I have always been committed to representing the experiences of Gulf women, a passion that stems from my earlier work as an independent filmmaker, as narrated in the first section of this Chapter. This thesis is an extension of that commitment, exploring how young Qatari women navigate their

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<sup>3</sup> Originally, I had interviewed ten participants, but I ended up using only eight, and this was due to a withdrawal request from their side.

identities, health, and well-being within the digital landscape of Instagram. For me, this study has been more than just an academic endeavour; it has been a personal journey that allowed me to transform my own experiences and struggles into a critical inquiry aimed at understanding and empowerment.

On a broader scale, this research fills crucial gaps in our understanding of how digital platforms like Instagram influence the lives of women in the Gulf and the wider Middle East. Through this work, I introduce the **Insta-Trainer framework**, a theory of sorts that examines how social media platforms operate as a mechanism that shape user behaviour and societal norms. The framework's relevance is not limited to Instagram alone; it has broader applicability across various digital environments and technologies, as I outline in the key contributions section within Chapter 10.

I also developed the notion of the **User Disjuncture**, which is a critical component of the Insta-Trainer framework. It captures the gap between users' awareness of digital manipulation and their continued engagement with social media. This concept is crucial for understanding the complex relationship 'active' users of digital platforms have with online content, where they may critically recognise its manipulative aspects yet remain deeply involved with it (See Chapter 5 and 10).

Another key contribution of this study is the introduction of **Curated Digital Manuals (CDMs)**, a toolkit that categorises the types of engagement and content influencing users' health, lifestyle, and identity. CDMs are divided into Algorithmically Curated Digital Manuals (ACDMs), Pre-Curated Digital Manuals (PCDMs), and User-Curated Digital Manuals (UCDMs), each playing a role in shaping user behaviour and societal norms. This toolkit provides a structured way to analyse how digital content is organised and its impact, particularly in the context of non-Western societies (See Chapters 6, 7, and 10).

One of the most innovative contributions of my research is the concept of the **Algorithmic Wardrobe**. This concept emerged from my exploration into how digital platforms like Instagram influence users' choices and behaviours through algorithmically curated content. The Algorithmic Wardrobe refers to a metaphorical space where digital trends, much like items of clothing, are curated, tried on, and discarded by users. These trends, shaped by the platform's algorithms, guide users in shaping their identities and behaviours, particularly in relation to health, wellness, and lifestyle choices. The concept illustrates how algorithms subtly standardise and commodify personal expressions, much like how a wardrobe reflects the latest *'fast'* fashion trends.

Although I highlight the significance and potential applications of the Algorithmic Wardrobe in a section within Chapters 8 and 10, this thesis does not delve deeply into the concept through a dedicated chapter. I have reserved this for future research, where I plan to explore its implications in greater depth, particularly its role in shaping cultural identities and personal behaviours on social media platforms.

These theoretical contributions—**Insta-Trainer**, **User Disjuncture**, **Curated Digital Manuals**, and the **Algorithmic Wardrobe**—provide concrete ways to understand the lived experiences of women in the Gulf, particularly within discreet, hard-to-penetrate, and private communities. By focusing on young Qatari women, my research challenges the monolithic and stereotypical portrayals of Middle Eastern women, offering nuanced and rich representations rooted in Qatar’s unique cultural context. Moreover, my work addresses the significant underrepresentation of Middle Eastern, Arab, and Gulf communities in academic discourse of health, especially concerning women’s experiences. Through this study, I aim to amplify the voices of Qatari women, contributing to the broader effort to decolonise Middle Eastern studies and ensure that the diverse realities of the region are represented. As discussed in Chapter 10, this research serves as a valuable resource for scholars exploring the intersection of digital media, culture, and identity in the Gulf region.

### **1.5 Closing Remarks**

As I conclude this introduction, I am reminded of the profound significance this research holds, both personally and academically. What began as a personal encounter with the pervasive influence of social media has evolved into a thorough exploration of how platforms like Instagram shape the lives of young women in Qatar. This study not only reflects my academic journey but also my dedication to amplifying the voices of Gulf women and ensuring their experiences are represented in scholarly discourse.

This thesis is both the culmination of my research and a foundation for further inquiry. It sets the stage for a deeper exploration of digital media’s impact on cultural identity, health, and social practices, particularly through the frameworks and tools I have developed. I remain committed to contributing to the decolonisation of Middle Eastern studies and to advancing our understanding of the digital lives of Gulf women.

Overall, this thesis contributes to both academic knowledge and a broader understanding of the cultural and societal impacts of digital platforms in the Middle East. It highlights the importance of examining these influences through a locally grounded perspective, adding valuable insights to the global conversation about social media's role in shaping identities and behaviours. The concepts and frameworks I've developed represent a significant contribution to Gulf studies and to the growing body of work by Arab women in academia.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review Part 1.

### Insta-Crafting Users— Digitalised Internal and External Forces

#### 2.1. Introduction

##### 2.1.1. Preface

As outlined in the introduction of this thesis, the concept of the *Insta-Trainer* offers an original and culturally situated framework for examining the operations of social media platforms. The *Insta-Trainer* encapsulates the idea that advanced technologies—both in the form of software (such as Instagram’s algorithmic curation and engagement mechanisms) and hardware (including digital wearable devices and mobile interfaces)—can train users instantly through curated content shaped by intersecting political, economic, and social influences. When applied to the study of digital platforms, the *Insta-Trainer* framework enables a deeper understanding of how neoliberal self-disciplining and self-monitoring behaviours are cultivated in users, both consciously and subconsciously. Importantly, this process is not culturally neutral. In the context of the Gulf, and Qatar specifically, such practices intersect with gendered expectations, class distinctions, and religious and familial values that continue to shape women’s experiences of body image, health, and digital self-presentation. The *Insta-Trainer*, therefore, offers a lens through which to interrogate how cultural representation and state-endorsed health ideals—such as those promoted under Qatar National Vision 2030—are disseminated, reinforced, and normalised through social media. (See Section 2.1.2 for a visual and textual representation of this model.)

In the context of my thesis, this concept is specifically applied to Instagram, particularly within the realm of health and wellness. Instagram functions as an Insta-Trainer, creating, adjusting and manipulating algorithmic functionalities—or ‘Insta-Functionalities’—to curate, prioritise, and display content. These multilayered algorithms use machine learning, computer vision, and data analysis to tailor personalised, relevant, and platform-designated ‘safe’ content for users (Instagram, 2024d; 2024e). A more comprehensive and detailed understanding of the Insta-Trainer and Insta-Functionalities can be found further in this chapter or in the glossary (Appendix B).

Additionally, I consider individuals like influencers, brand profiles, and other entities in the influencer industry as Insta-Trainers as well. According to Glatt (2023), the influencer industry involves content creators navigating visibility, income streams, and algorithmic systems. This supports the view that profiles that have Insta-Training functionalities are key in shaping user

behaviour on Instagram, instantly influencing and training followers through their content. Abidin (2015) defines influencers as ordinary internet users who gain a large following by narrating their lives and lifestyles, engaging with their audience, and monetising their content. This highlights the influencers' (brand and company profiles included) ability to cultivate communicative intimacies and effectively 'Insta-Train' users on the platform.

**2.1.2. Insta-Training: Foucauldian Framework**

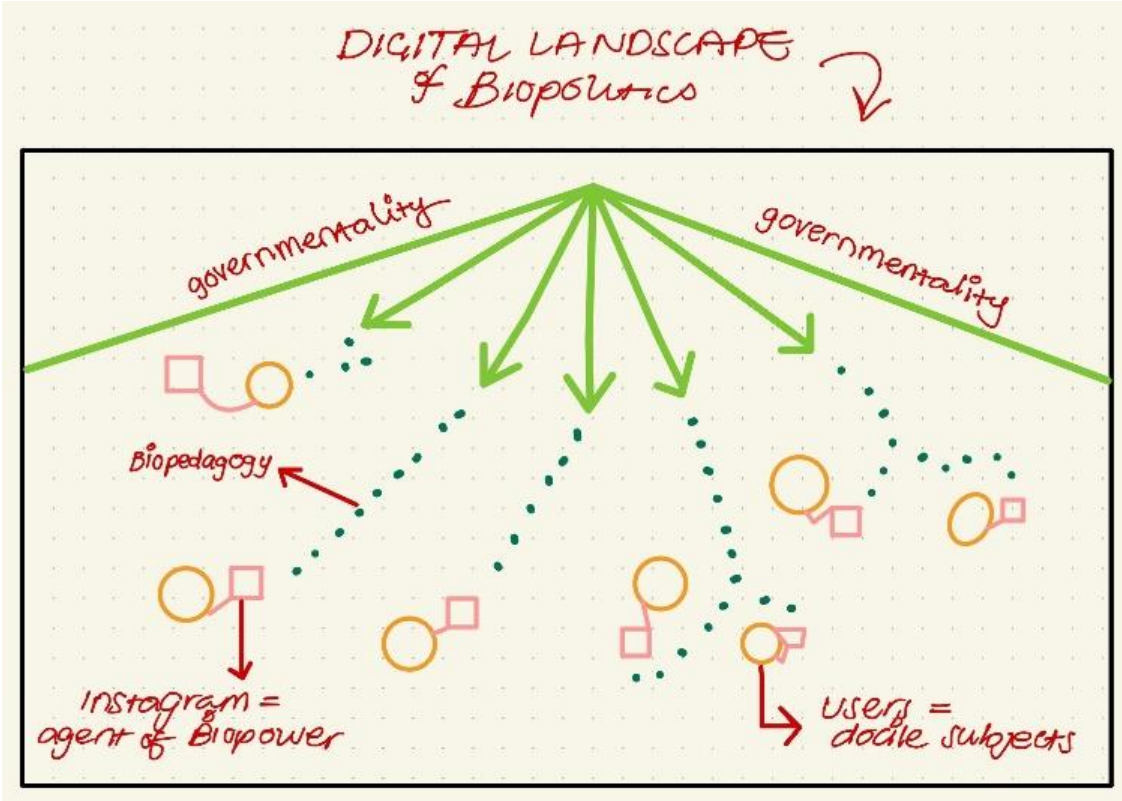


Figure 2.1.1 Digital Landscape of Biopolitics

In Figure 2.1, I visualise how individuals can be instantly trained, the process of Insta-Training, through internalised norms and pervasive messaging that shape behaviour and identity among the consumers of such content. Here, I visualise how Foucauldian concepts have emerged during my application of the framework on Qatari women. In the context of my thesis, I assert that young women from Qatar on Instagram are trained through these methods or this process, which I depict within a Foucauldian framework. Biopolitics can be imagined as a digital landscape, represented by the black rectangle. Within this landscape, online digital users exist as self-disciplined and self-monitoring docile subjects, symbolised by the orange circles. These users are influenced by Insta-

Training functionalities, directly representing biopower—either as functionalities themselves or as agents of biopower in the form of Insta-Trainers—and are symbolised by the pink squares connected to the orange circles. The pink squares can represent Instagram, an application, or a smart device.

The orange docile subjects learn from the content, influencers, and algorithms on Instagram, which are curated, employed, influenced, or hired by that which towers above the digital landscape of biopolitics—the overarching involvement of the government, or governmentality, as well as post-feminist and neoliberal ideals—represented by the green mountain disseminating arrows. These ideals and objectives disseminate their influence through methods of biopedagogy, represented by the dark green dotted paths from the mountain to the pink squares.

Overall, this visual description illustrates the educational and normative processes at play within the Insta-Training digital landscape, visually capturing the interactions and influences that instantly train user behaviour and identity. It complements the analysis provided in the thesis and summary in the literature review, making the abstract concepts more concrete.

### ***2.1.3. Overview of Literature Review Part I & II (for both Chapters 2 and 3)***

This first section of the literature review reflects a broader scope than the Insta-Trainer concept alone, highlighting how relevant literature, studies, and concepts work together in my analysis in ways that craft individuals on social media platforms through a combination of internal and external digital forces. This crafting process encompasses various factors that shape health, body image, and cultural norms among the users of such digital platforms. In this chapter, I use ‘Insta-Crafting’ instead of Insta-Training to emphasise the wider perspective of the literature review, showing how all these concepts come together to craft individuals, rather than just train specific aspects of their identities through one platform or device, as is the focus of my thesis<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> In this broader context, the historical feminisation of craft parallels how digital platforms like Instagram shape users’ feminine identities. Historically, crafts trained women to adopt ideals of femininity, just as Instagram shapes perceptions of health, beauty, and cultural norms through algorithms, curated content, and societal trends (Buszek, 2011; Prichard, 2015). This comparison helps us understand the continuity and evolution of identity shaping, highlighting how both traditional and digital crafts serve to reinforce specific ideals and behaviours.

The key concepts explored in this chapter include biopower, biopolitics, governmentality, self-discipline, and docile bodies (Foucault, 1977; 1978; 1991); biocitizenship and citizenship projects (Rose, 2005; Rose and Novas, 2005; Rose and Miller 2008); neoliberalism (Harvey, 2005; Berry, 2017); and post-feminism (Gill, 2007; 2017; Elias and Gill, 2015; 2018; Banet-Weiser et al., 2020). These concepts are defined, contextualised, critiqued, and compared in the context of digital technologies and social media platforms. Biopower and biopolitics are examined both in terms of their historical evolution and their contemporary application in digital spaces. Self-discipline and docile bodies are analysed with a specific focus on how Instagram perpetuates these dynamics. Governmentality and citizenship projects are explored to understand how national identity and health are intertwined, especially in the context of Qatar and the Qatar National Vision 2030. While neoliberalism and post-feminism are contextualised specifically in relation to Insta-training functionalities, these concepts permeate almost every aspect of the study and are addressed throughout both literature review chapters.

“Chapter 3: Literature Review Part II— Digital Dynamics: Navigating Coded Influences”, examines the technicalities of how algorithms operate in disseminating (mis)information and (in)genuine market-driven content, along with the biases surrounding them. It lays the groundwork for understanding these aspects in terms of visibility labour, and content consumption and curation—particularly content related to health, body image, diets, and culture. Chapter 3 also discusses concepts such as biopedagogy (Wright, 2009); parasocial relationships (Horton and Wohl, 1956; Reinikainen et al., 2020); algorithmic control and bias (O’Neil, 2016; Buolamwini, 2018; Eubanks, 2018; Benjamin, 2019); technological solutionism (Morozov, 2013); technological determinism (McLuhan, 1964; Logan, 2010); as well as themes related to fatphobia, fat studies, and meme factories in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic (Abidin, 2020). Each concept is not only defined but also critiqued, compared, and synthesised in relation to existing literature. Biopedagogy is explored in terms of how Instagram serves as a digital pedagogue, training and shaping users’ perceptions of health and body image. Parasocial relationships are analysed for their impact on user engagement and trust in influencers. Technological solutionism and determinism are critiqued for their roles in shaping users’ reliance on digital solutions for personal health management and cultural-societal norms. Fatphobia and fat studies are examined to critique societal pressures and biases against larger body sizes and productivity, particularly during the lockdown period.

A large portion of Chapter 3 focuses on the influencer industry, examining how influencers affect users mentally and physically, as well as how they labour and operate within the digital ecosystem. Additionally, there is a section on the impact of COVID-19, as data collection occurred during the lockdowns, which meant that many of the responses by participants were influenced not only by Insta-Training but also by its intersection with COVID-19-specific content. This section contextualises the unique circumstances of the pandemic and its effect on digital consumption patterns. In incorporating these detailed analyses, critiques, and contextualisations, the literature review not only explores and defines key concepts but also situates them within a broader framework, identifies gaps, and establishes the groundwork for my thesis.

#### ***2.1.4. Locating My Contributions***

My work is positioned at the intersection of media studies, cultural studies, health studies, and Gulf studies. This interdisciplinary approach allows for a comprehensive examination of the multidimensional influences of digital platforms on contemporary society.

Within media studies, my research contributes to the understanding of how social media platforms, specifically Instagram, function as tools for Instant-Training. By introducing the concept of the ‘Insta-Trainer,’ I highlight the technological mechanisms—both algorithmic and hardware—that facilitate rapid user training that leads to self-disciplinary and self-monitoring practices. This examination sheds light on the broader implications of media consumption, digital content creation, and the role of the influencer industry in shaping user behaviour.

In cultural studies, my work explores the intersection of digital media with traditional cultural norms and diet trends. This is particularly significant in the context of the Arab Gulf, where modern digital influences intersect with deeply ingrained Islamic and tribal values<sup>5</sup>. In analysing how Instagram’s content and functionalities align with and sometimes challenge these cultural norms, my research provides valuable insights into the evolving cultural landscape of the region. This contributes to the broader discourse on cultural appropriation, identity formation, and the negotiation of modernity and tradition.

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<sup>5</sup> Indeed, Gulf modern tribalism represents a unique socio-cultural phenomenon, where traditional tribal structures adapt to and coexist with the pressures and opportunities of modern urban life, economic development, and globalisation (Zahlan, 2016). This demographic serves as a case study for understanding the broader implications of digital technologies within a unique socio-cultural context.

Within the realm of health studies, my thesis addresses the impact of social media on health-related behaviours and self-discipline practices. The focus on the role of Instagram in the promotion of health, wellness, and body image standards, I contribute to the understanding of how digital platforms influence personal health practices and societal health norms. This includes examining the effects of biopower, biopolitics, biopedagogy, and governmentality on user behaviour, as well as the ways in which messages around health and wellness are disseminated, and the implications of the pursuit of becoming a virtuous healthy citizen.

My research makes a significant contribution to the fields of both Middle Eastern and Gulf studies by offering an in-depth analysis of the authentic experiences of young Qatari women. My work contributes to ongoing research similar to the *Media Use in the Middle East* project by Northwestern University in Qatar, an interactive dataset which offers comprehensive data and analysis on media consumption patterns across the region. This survey examines various aspects of media use, including preferences, habits, and the impact of digital platforms on Middle Eastern societies (Dennis et al., 2016; 2018). The field of Gulf Studies, while still emerging, is also experiencing rapid growth in active research, particularly at institutions like the Gulf Studies Center at Qatar University. *Gulf Insights*, a series of short essays released weekly by the Gulf Studies Center, is evidence of the rapid pace at which this field is expanding and publishing new insights. My research, which examines the impact of Instagram on the diet, lifestyles, and well-being of Qatari women, signifies a significant and deep contribution to this field from a digital media perspective.

Finally, as a Qatari woman researching my own demographic, I bring an insider's perspective that adds substantial value to this study and the field as a whole. I am researching my generation and my peers, and I understand the intricacies of their experiences because I am simultaneously living through them. This unique position allows me to grasp the implicit bilingual meanings and cultural nuances from the conversations in both the open-ended descriptive surveys and the interviews. My work provides a nuanced understanding of how these women navigate and integrate digital influences into their daily lives, thereby contributing to the literature on gender, self-perception, identity, and digital media in the Gulf region. This insider perspective strengthens my contribution, as I can interpret and analyse the subtleties of the linguistic and cultural contexts that shape their experiences.

In short, by focusing on Instagram's role as an Insta-Trainer in the lives of young women, I contribute to the understanding of how digital platforms shape self-disciplinary practices and behaviours. This research not only expands the theoretical framework within these fields but also provides practical insights into the implications of social media use, offering a valuable resource for scholars and others interested in the intersection of digital media, culture, health, and society in the Arab Gulf region.

## **2.2. Insta-Disciplining the Docile Self: Biopower and Biopolitics**

Foundational to this study are the concepts of biopower and biopolitics introduced by Michel Foucault (1978) to explain how power operates within societies to regulate bodies and populations. He coined the term biopower to refer to the practice by modern states to exercise control over the biological aspects of life, focusing on the administration of bodies and the management of populations. An example of biopower can be seen in the Qatar National Vision 2030, which outlines goals for improving public health and ensuring access to high-quality healthcare for all citizens. This vision includes specific clauses that promote a healthy lifestyle and preventive care, reflecting the dominant role of the state in regulating the health behaviours and outcomes of its citizens (this document will be discussed further in Section 2.4 on governmentality, biocitizenship, and citizenship projects). According to Rabinow and Rose (2006), biopolitics extends biopower by focusing on the strategies and mechanisms used to manage human life processes under regimes of authority, encompassing knowledge, power, and subjectivity. For instance, the national vision promotes modern healthcare and education systems while preserving cultural heritage and Islamic values, integrating unique initiatives for physical fitness and healthy lifestyles with community activities to reinforce traditional values. This approach ensures that progress in health and modernisation aligns with cultural objectives, illustrating how the state biopolitically manages the population's health and well-being, while also playing a role in the shaping of societal norms, trends, and expectations.

These dynamics are evident in the pervasive messaging around health and beauty standards on Instagram. Biopower manifests through Instagram's ability to disseminate and reinforce ideals of the 'perfect' body, often promoting images of health and wellness that align with neoliberal and consumerist values. The perfect body, as described by Gill in *Perfect Bodies* (2023), is often characterised by "a combination of extreme thinness, toned muscles, and flawless skin, embodying an unattainable standard of physical perfectionism" (p. 45). Aubrey Gordon (2020) further

describes this ideal as one that is both unrealistic and harmful, perpetuating a narrow standard of beauty that excludes the vast majority of people. These ideals are perpetuated by influencers and digital content creators who embody and promote these aesthetic norms, creating a pervasive culture of perfectionism and self-optimisation (Gill, 2023; Mackson et al., 2019). This process aligns with Foucault's concept of the docile body, whereby individuals are conditioned to conform to societal norms and expectations through subtle forms of control and regulation (Foucault, 1977). Instagram therefore functions as a modern apparatus of biopower, where Insta-Trainers and functionalities act as agents of biopower that shape individuals into docile bodies that conform to its aesthetic and behavioural standards. This process also ties into Foucault's notions of self-discipline and self-monitoring, where individuals regulate their own behaviours according to societal norms (Heyes, 2007; 2014).

I argue, however, that the operation of biopolitics on Instagram is evident in the curation and consumption of content, which is manifested throughout the digital landscape of the application. The algorithmic structures prioritise content that garners high engagement, often amplifying messages that align with mainstream beauty and health standards (Cotter, 2018; Larsen, 2024a; 2024b). For example, research by Abidin (2015; 2016a) and Cotter (2018) demonstrates how algorithms favour content that conforms to popular trends, thereby shaping user behaviour and self-perception. This curation not only influences individual self-perception and behaviour but also shapes broader cultural norms around body image, diet, and health, reinforcing mainstream standards of beauty and wellness (van Dijck, 2013; Mackson et al., 2019). According to van Dijck in *The Culture of Connectivity* (2013), "platforms like Instagram actively shape the way users interact with content, promoting certain ideals and behaviours through their algorithmic design" (p. 45). The ways in which the app privileges certain types of content contribute to a biopolitical landscape where users are encouraged to internalise and embody specific ideals of health and beauty. These points will be further explored in Chapter 3, with a focus on both algorithms and the influencer industry.

Indeed, biopower and biopolitics are concepts that, while closely related, differ in their focus. Biopower concentrates on the regulation of individual bodies, while biopolitics looks at the broader population-level management of life processes. Both are, however, instrumental in understanding how the content and messaging of the platform's insta-functionalities impact users. Biopower is evident in the individual pursuit of fitness and diet regimens promoted by Insta-Trainers. The

aesthetic of their profiles revolves around prescribing specific routines and dietary plans that users adopt in an effort to attain the perfect and idealised body presented on the platform. This phenomenon creates an online environment in which bodies are regulated through internalised norms and practices. A number of studies on the fitspiration community, which involves posting motivational fitness content by Insta-Trainers, have found that users are significantly impacted (Tiggemann et al., 2018; DiBisceglie and Arigo, 2019; Rodney, 2019; Prichard et al., 2020).

These studies collectively demonstrate how fitspiration activity on Instagram, while motivating followers, often results in increased pressure to conform to unrealistic body standards. Although fitspiration images can inspire exercise, such content also negatively impacts body image and mental health among young women (DiBisceglie and Arigo, 2019; Prichard et al., 2020). Insta-Trainers that are part of communities like fitspiration and thinspiration promote problematic health and body ideals, albeit in slightly different ways. These examples illustrate how biopower operates on Instagram to shape individual behaviours through the promotion of idealised body standards.

Biopolitics, on the other hand, is reflected in the collective trends and movements arising from these individual practices that shape societal norms around health and beauty. For example, the clean eating movement, which promotes the consumption of unprocessed and whole foods, has been critically analysed by scholars who found that while clean eating content promoted by Insta-Trainers can affect dietary intake, it also correlates with restrictive eating behaviours and the potential for disordered eating patterns (Allen et al., 2018; Ambwani et al., 2019). The studies also found similar results around food content on Instagram as did Henderson et al. (2021), who confirmed that Instagram influences young adults' food choices by promoting aesthetically pleasing and health-oriented content, impacting both positively and negatively on dietary habits.

Another example is Instagram's #orthorexia community. Studies have shown that while the platform can foster supportive communities for recovery, it can also contribute to the development of disordered eating behaviours by promoting restrictive diets and specific aesthetically pleasing health ideals (Santarossa et al., 2019; Valente et al., 2021). These studies collectively illustrate how biopolitics operates on Instagram to shape societal norms and expectations through the dissemination of popular health and beauty trends. Instagram not only regulates individual behaviours but also influences broader cultural standards, such as the contrast between cultural foods and those promoted by clean eating and other health trends. For example, Feldman (2021)

highlights that Instagram's visual and professionalised food representation can shift perceptions of 'good food' away from traditional cultural dishes towards more marketable and visually appealing options. This demonstrates the intertwined nature of biopower and biopolitics in the digital age and their persuasive effects on health, wellness, diets, and cultural norms.

### **2.3. Intersections of Insta-Training and Neoliberalism**

Neoliberalism, as described by David Harvey (2005) and Mike Berry (2017), is a political-economic philosophy that emphasises individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterised by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. Harvey (2005) defines neoliberalism as "a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills" (p. 2). Berry (2017) expands on this by examining how neoliberal ideologies are perpetuated through media discourse (chap. 4). Indeed, neoliberalism has profoundly influenced various aspects of contemporary society, including social media, health, beauty, and cultural lifestyle. The rise of social media has significantly intersected with neoliberal ideals, particularly through the emergence of social media influencers. While post-feminism is connected to this discussion, it deserves its own section and will be explored separately within this chapter. Digital platforms, like Instagram, serve as spaces where body politics are negotiated, reinforcing the neoliberal emphasis on individualism and personal agency. Multiple studies in the field have explored the intersection of neoliberalism and digital practices, particularly through the lens of social media influencers and digital activism (Abidin, 2015; Baer, 2015; Elias et al., 2017; Han, 2017; Archer, 2019).

Similar to some chapters within my thesis, the paper *Redoing Feminism: Digital Activism, Body Politics, and Neoliberalism* (Baer, 2015), which focuses on digital activism and body politics, highlights how neoliberalism influences feminist practices online. This study demonstrates that digital activism, while often rooted in feminist intentions, is also shaped by neoliberal ideologies, evident in the emphasis on personal agency, self-presentation, and the marketisation of feminist messages. Another study found that influencers operating within a post-feminist and neoliberal context promote individual responsibility and an entrepreneurial spirit (Archer, 2019). These personal branding and entrepreneurial activities of these Insta-Trainers on platforms such as Instagram reflect broader neoliberal ideals of self-optimisation and market-driven individualism. This is similar to Banet-Weiser (2017; 2018), who discusses how post-feminist rhetoric promotes beauty standards and consumerism by reinforcing neoliberal values. She states: "Post-feminism

often repackages feminist ideas to fit within a neoliberal framework, where empowerment is tied to consumer choices and self-branding” (2018, p. 23), aligning with the aforementioned studies. The collective findings illustrate how digital activism and influencers embody neoliberal values that present personal agency and self-presentation as marketed forms of empowerment, which in turn reinforces consumerist and individualistic ideals.

Other comparable works include Abidin (2015), who examines how influencers navigate and embody neoliberal values through their online personas and content creation, and promote neoliberal ideals of individualism, self-optimisation, and entrepreneurialism. For instance, influencers often present themselves as self-made brands, leveraging personal stories and aesthetics to engage followers and monetise their online presence (Davenport, 2021; Blomqvist, 2022). Neoliberalism also has a role in redefining beauty politics, emphasising the importance of aesthetic labour (Elias et al., 2017). This involves individuals engaging in continuous consumption-based self-improvement and body maintenance to meet societal standards of beauty (Elias et al., 2017; Gill, 2023), which results in the shaping and crafting of contemporary bodies through the promotion of self-discipline and personal responsibility in health practices (Guthman, 2009). This argument is echoed and expanded on by Han in *Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and New Technologies of Power* (2017), in which he discusses how neoliberalism extends into psychological realms, influencing personal well-being and mental health through digital technologies like Instagram. Han argues that “neoliberalism’s psychopolitics ensures that individuals internalize market-driven ideals and continually engage in self-optimization, leading to a pervasive culture of anxiety and self-discipline” (p. 15). Both Guthman and Han highlight the pervasive nature of neoliberalism in shaping individual behaviours and health practices, but from different angles; Guthman focuses on physical health, while Han emphasises mental health. This thesis examines both aspects.

Sikka (2017) extends the discourse on neoliberalism and physical health by delving into contemporary superfood cults, illustrating how nutritionism and neoliberalism intersect to shape dietary choices. These trends often place the burden of health on individual decisions, reflecting neoliberal principles. Building on these ideas is Feldman’s previously mentioned examination of how Instagram emphasises aesthetically pleasing and professionally curated food content can reshape perceptions of what constitutes ‘good’ or ‘healthy’ food choices (2021). Users gravitate towards visually appealing foods, thereby reinforcing the neoliberal values present in the

application, which aligns with Guthman's (2009) discussion on self-discipline in health practices. Both authors highlight the individualisation of responsibility for maintaining what is 'perceived' as good physical health. Sikka (2022) defines good health as "a co-constructed state of idealised expectations, performances, embodiments, and patterns of consumption dominated by gendered and technophilic knowledge regimes that reproduce regimented and coercive Western standards of health and beauty" (p. 1). This definition aligns with post-feminist ideals that tie individual responsibility and self-regulation to notions of health and beauty, which will be discussed in section 2.5. It also highlights how the pursuit of health, much like beauty, becomes a project of self-optimisation and consumerism, again reinforcing neoliberal values. In my study, the further perpetuation of these ideals is evident in how the Insta-functionalities of the Insta-Trainer promote continuous self-monitoring and self-discipline through curated digital content.

Tate's chapter in *Aesthetic Labour*, entitled *Skin: Post-feminist Bleaching Culture and the Political Vulnerability of Blackness* (2017, p. 119–213) examines post-feminist skin bleaching practices, showing how neoliberalism particularly impacts beauty standards among Black women. The political vulnerability of Blackness is intensified by neoliberal beauty ideals that promote skin bleaching as a form of aesthetic labour. Tate not only illustrates the diverse ways neoliberalism influences self-disciplinary practices across different demographics and cultures but also ties this influence to a notion similar to the concept of compensatory consumption, which is defined as "the purchase of goods and services to offset perceived deficiencies or inadequacies in one's life" (Laham, 2020, p. 45). Compensatory consumption underscores how individuals cope with pressures of self-discipline and societal expectations through consumption. The key term in this definition is 'perceived,' as users may internalise deficiencies or inadequacies shaped by Insta-Trainers and Insta-Training functionalities that they may 'perceive' to be negative or in need of correction, though this may not truly be the case (Morozov, 2013).

Moreover, Instagram influencers and algorithms promote products that aim to achieve idealised health and beauty standards, encouraging users to engage in compensatory consumption. This behaviour aligns with the neoliberal emphasis on individual responsibility and self-optimisation, often leading to confirmatory consumption patterns. Tate's (2017) piece highlights how Black women feel pressured to purchase skin-bleaching products to conform to neoliberal beauty ideals, reflecting deeper issues of racial and aesthetic conformity driven by market forces embedded

within social media platforms<sup>6</sup>. This pattern is mirrored among Middle Eastern and South Asian women, who may feel compelled to alter their appearance to fit Eurocentric beauty standards perpetuated by social media. Bahraini (2020) found that lighter-skinned Middle Eastern women with Eurocentric features are preferred in employment, highlighting how colourism and societal preferences impact opportunities and self-perception. Similarly, Widasmara et al. (2024) noted that social media significantly influences South Asian women's decisions to undergo dermatological procedures, with influencer and dermatologist accounts serving as major motivators.

To conclude, the main takeaways of neoliberalism in the age of Instagram include the reinforcement of individual responsibility and entrepreneurialism, the promotion of self-discipline in health and beauty practices, and the shaping of societal norms through digital platforms. Neoliberal values are prominently displayed and reinforced through Insta-Trainers and Insta-functionalities of the platform in ways that further promote aesthetic labour, body politics, self-normalising dietary trends, and psychological well-being, highlighting just how pervasive neoliberal influence is in contemporary society. Expanding on and contributing to the literature above, my study explores the multiple ways in which neoliberalism intersects with health, body, and digital technologies, offering a comprehensive understanding of its impact on Gulf and Arab women.

#### **2.4. Insta-Crafting Biocitizens: Governmentality and Citizenship Projects**

The concept of biocitizenship refers to how individuals are encouraged to take responsibility for their health and well-being, aligning with broader societal goals. Rose and Novas (2005, p. 440) describe biocitizenship as a form of citizenship where individuals are expected to manage their health through self-discipline and self-monitoring, promoting a form of self-governance. This process, known as 'responsibilization,' shifts the focus from state-provided healthcare to individual responsibility, reflecting neoliberal ideals of self-optimisation and personal accountability; it involves making individuals see themselves as responsible for managing their own health and well-being according to societal norms, moving away from state responsibility for public health. This concept is a product of governmentality efforts, where the governance of populations involves encouraging self-governance and personal responsibility through various techniques employed by

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<sup>6</sup> In my experience, and as reflected in the experiences of my peers, Gulf women with darker skin tones face similar pressures to lighten their skin. Conversely, women with lighter skin tones frequently engage in sunbathing, use tanning beds, or apply tanning sprays to achieve the desired *khamri* (golden) skin. Both practices are equally problematic, harmful, and dangerous.

governments or authoritative bodies, such as public health campaigns on social media, educational programmes, and partnerships with influential figures and organisations.

Introduced by Michel Foucault (1991), governmentality refers to the methods through which governments shape citizens to fulfil their policies. This concept extends beyond traditional state politics, encompassing the management of populations through institutions, procedures, analyses, and reflections. Such management involves the strategic guidance of citizens' conduct to align with specific political and economic objectives, often through indirect means such as social norms, education systems, and public health initiatives (Dent, 2020). In the Qatari context, the effects of governmentality are shaped by intersecting cultural dynamics, including class hierarchies, tribal affiliations, and differential access to resources and opportunities<sup>7</sup>—a theme that is explored in greater detail in Chapter 7. In the digital age, governmentality is reconfigured through platforms like Instagram, where individuals internalise societal norms and discipline themselves according to both digital and real-life expectations. The biopolitical design of the platform encourages users to monitor and regulate their behaviours to align with these ideals, effectively turning self-discipline into a form of self-governance (Davis and Gorman, 2018).

While the concept of biopolitics focuses on the direct control and management of populations' health and bodies, often framing issues such as the 'obesity epidemic' to enforce certain health norms and behaviours (Wright, 2009), biopower encompasses the exertion of power over individuals' bodies and lives, including both biopolitics and disciplinary practices. In contrast, governmentality involves broader techniques and strategies to shape citizens' behaviour through subtle, often voluntary, self-regulation (Oksala, 2013a; Dent, 2020). Essentially, the main difference between governmentality and biopolitics, as stressed in the section on docility, is that biopolitics operates at the level of population control and health optimisation, which can manifest through platforms like Instagram. Governmentality, on the other hand, guides individuals (with the involvement of a governing body) to become self-regulating subjects who conform to societal expectations, operating both within and above the digital landscape.

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<sup>7</sup> For example, tribal affiliation continues to influence employment, educational access, and socio-political mobility, with certain groups receiving preferential treatment in state resource distribution and public sector employment (Held and Ulrichsen, 2011).

Favaro (2017) further expands on the discourse of governmentality, social media, and neoliberalism by investigating the concept of ‘confidence chic’ as a form of neoliberal governmentality. This phenomenon emphasises self-governance through the internalisation of confidence and self-esteem—particularly among women—promoted heavily by digital and traditional media. Favaro (2017) explains that confidence chic “exhorts women to undergo intense, constant self-scrutiny and self-work according to knowledges and procedures specified by experts,” (p. 283) integrating self-regulation with capitalist forms of consumerism. The concept aligns with the broader principles of governmentality, wherein digital platforms like Instagram encourage users to internalise societal norms and self-regulate their behaviours—practices that reflect the neoliberal emphasis on individual responsibility and self-optimisation, further contributing to the pervasive culture of self-governance (Rose, 2007).

On Instagram, governmentality manifests as an overarching power within the digital landscape of biopolitics. Studies have shown that digital communications and interventions significantly shape citizens’ behaviours, illustrating how governmentality functions in the digital age (Dent, 2020; Gillman, 2021). These strategies encompass self-regulatory practices driven by societal expectations that intertwine with biopolitics. While biopolitics operates on a large scale to optimise health, productivity, and societal well-being, governmentality focuses on the techniques and strategies used by governments to produce certain kinds of citizens.

An example of governmentality, which I will investigate, is the set of policies and initiatives outlined in documents such as the Qatar National Vision 2030 that aim to produce a certain kind of citizen in Qatar. The National Vision emphasises the importance of health education and self-care as part of a broader strategy to enhance quality of life and ensure sustainable development. This approach aligns with neoliberal principles by promoting individual responsibility for health and well-being. The shift towards self-governance is evident in various initiatives aimed at improving public health, promoting healthy lifestyles, and encouraging personal accountability for health outcomes. These goals are achieved by influencing and managing the population’s health and behaviours through targeted interventions and digital communication as part of citizenship projects (Rose and Novas, 2007). These citizenship projects aim to foster a sense of national identity by promoting health and wellness as key components of being a ‘virtuous’ and ‘responsible’ citizen; they encourage individuals to adopt healthy lifestyles and engage in activities that benefit their personal health and the well-being of the nation. In essence, these citizen projects seek to create a

population that is not only physically healthy through laborious activities but that also aligns with the national vision of progress and modernity by promoting individual responsibility and self-governance.

This shift towards self-governance means that individuals are not only responsible for their own health but are also seen as contributors to the overall health of the population. As a result, social media influencers and digital content creators become key players in promoting these values, acting as role models and guides for healthy living. Sometimes in collaboration with prominent figures, official governmental profiles actively disseminate health and wellness information, encourage participation in national health initiatives, and set standards for a modern, healthy lifestyle. This illustrates how Instagram serves as a tool for state strategies and governmental health and population management, aligning with the principles of governmentality. The interplay between self-discipline and governmentality on Instagram highlights the complex ways digital content and social media influence individual behaviours and shape collective identities, reflecting societal standards and perceptions of the self (Gillman, 2021).

Additionally, in this context, the concept of such labour-intensive activity extends to embodying the role of a productive worker within capitalistic ideals. Neoliberalism promotes not only self-discipline in health but also in productivity and economic contribution, aligning with capitalist ideals of efficiency and output. Berry (2017) discusses how neoliberalism and media intertwine to perpetuate these ideals, particularly under conditions of austerity, where individuals are expected to shoulder the burdens of economic instability through personal responsibility and self-optimisation. This labour is often gendered, with women disproportionately bearing the brunt of aesthetic and emotional labour to meet societal standards, a concept explored extensively in the literature on aesthetic labour (Elias et al., 2017). Issues of austerity intensify these pressures, demanding more from individuals with less state support, thereby further embedding neoliberal principles into everyday practices and self-governance.

To conclude this section, it is crucial to highlight those studies on governmentality, biocitizenship, and citizenship projects on digital platforms demonstrate how neoliberal ideology in Western society encourages individuals to self-monitor their bodies as a means of controlling population health. These practices instil values of personal responsibility and self-discipline, emphasising the individual's role in contributing to the greater good (Szto and Gray, 2015; Dent, 2020; Gillman,

2021; Sheppard and Ricciardelli, 2023). This topic will be explored in detail through an analysis of the National Vision in Chapter 8 of this thesis.

It is noteworthy that each Gulf state has its own national vision that, through governmentality, creates health and wellness initiatives as citizenship projects. These initiatives utilise digital platforms and other strategies to promote self-discipline and personal responsibility for health, fostering virtuous biocitizens as a matter of national and patriotic duty. This phenomenon extends across the Arab Gulf states, demonstrating how the interaction between governmentality and digital platforms is a significant area of study within Gulf Studies. Just as this study examines these national visions and their implementation through digital media, it also sheds light on broader regional patterns of governance and public health promotion. Moreover, online platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter (X) play a crucial role in fostering public engagement and accountability, motivating individuals to adhere to their body project goals. This effectively turns them into docile subjects in need of constant self-regulation, providing valuable insights into how digital content and social media influence individual behaviours and societal standards.

## **2.5. Post-feminism: Insta-Track to Insta-Craft**

Postfeminism often emphasises individual choice and empowerment, theorising that “femininity is a bodily property,” which pressures women to constantly monitor and modify their appearance (Gill, 2007, p. 149). Social media platforms have become significant arenas for the propagation and contestation of postfeminist ideals (Gill, 2023a), one key ideal being that beauty practices and alterations can be seen as a form of empowerment rather than mere adherence to the male gaze. This perspective suggests that engaging in beauty routines, cosmetic procedures, and fitness regimens reflects self-expression and personal agency. On Instagram, *Insta-Trainers* often promote products and lifestyles that align with these postfeminist sensibilities, encouraging women to view their participation in beauty and wellness practices as a pathway to confidence and empowerment (Elias and Gill, 2018; Gill, 2023a). It is within this context that the concept of *Insta-Training* becomes particularly relevant, as it not only facilitates these postfeminist practices but also accelerates and intensifies their adoption through platform-specific mechanisms.

*Insta-functionalities* of the platform help popularise this high-engagement content, as it is often curatable and monetisable (Abidin, 2015; Larsen, 2024a; 2024b). Such ideals and practices are not merely about appearance but are also tied to deeper narratives of self-worth and autonomy (Heyes,

2007), aligning with broader postfeminist and neoliberal discourses that emphasise individual responsibility and self-regulation. These sensibilities reinforce how digital platforms and beauty discourses perpetuate the regulation of women's bodies and subjectivities, framing empowerment through consumerism and self-discipline. They further contribute to creating 'docile bodies' through self-surveillance, a concept rooted in Foucault's theories of biopower and governmentality (Heyes, 2007). The concept of *Insta-Training*, and its associated platform functionalities, thus represents a complex interplay between neoliberal logics, algorithmic curation, and postfeminist sensibilities. Through this process, *Khaleeji* women are persistently exposed to persuasive, aesthetically compelling multimedia content that seeks to guide, reshape, and regulate their lifestyle choices, cultural practices, and perceptions of self.

Further, Elias and Gill (2018) discuss how beauty apps transform the politics of appearance by offering digital self-monitoring tools that merge post-feminist and neoliberal sensibilities, creating an intensified regulatory gaze on women. These apps increase the surveillance of women's bodies through detailed, quantified scrutiny and extend this surveillance to the psychological domain, pushing women to constantly evaluate and modify their appearance (Lupton, 2016; Elias and Gill, 2018). This practice aligns with the notion of entrepreneurial subjectivity, emphasising personal responsibility and self-optimisation, and combining the pleasure and discipline of self-monitoring. My concept of the Insta-Trainer functions similarly but operates within the social media ecosystem, instantly training women on how to align their appearance and lifestyles with post-feminist ideals through curated content and interactive engagement. While beauty apps provide structured, quantified scrutiny, Insta-Trainers offer a more dynamic, socially engaging approach; both perpetuate the same ideals of consumerism and self-regulation, reinforcing the creation of 'docile bodies' through constant self-surveillance. Beauty apps, Insta-Trainers and Insta-functionalities serve as tools to make women entrepreneurial subjects, encouraging them to view self-regulation and continuous self-improvement as forms of empowerment.

In another study, Gill and Elias also explore 'love your body' (LYB) messaging within advertising campaigns, which encourage women to believe in their own beauty and take control over their appearance. They argue that engaging in beauty routines can be a form of self-expression and empowerment rather than mere conformity to societal standards (Gill and Elias, 2015). Such campaigns leverage social media to disseminate messages of self-empowerment that intersect with neoliberal ideals, promoting self-acceptance and confidence while tying empowerment to

consumption. Similarly, Always' #LikeAGirl campaign seeks to empower young girls by challenging stereotypes and encouraging confidence in their abilities (Dosekun, 2017). While both the LYB and #LikeAGirl campaigns promote positive messages, they are embedded within a framework that links empowerment with consumerism, further aligning with post-feminist ideals.

Banet-Weiser (2013) explores this dynamic by examining the market for self-esteem in neoliberal brand culture, where purchasing and using beauty products is framed as a pathway to empowerment. This is particularly relevant on platforms like Instagram, where beauty and wellness products are marketed not just for their functional benefits, but as tools for achieving self-empowerment and confidence. Banet-Weiser et al. (2020) discuss how neoliberal feminism commodifies feminist ideals, turning them into marketable products that promise empowerment through consumption. This perspective is consistent with the concept of compensatory consumption articulated by Laham (2020) and discussed earlier in Section 2.3. The constant exposure to idealised beauty standards and the promotion of consumerist behaviour contribute to a culture where online consumption is intertwined with identity and empowerment. This compensatory consumption highlights how engagement with beauty practices and products on platforms like Instagram is often driven by the desire to achieve social validation and self-worth through material means.

Bartky (1990) and Heyes (2007) discuss these dynamics in the context of televisual and tangible media. More recent work by Elias and Gill (2015; 2018), Lupton (2018), and Banet-Weiser (2017) includes the digital aspect of software and hardware, as discussed above. My work in this thesis expands on both of these perspectives via Insta-functionalities, coded algorithms, and influencers who are the embodiment of Insta-Training Functionalities. I expand on the idea that social media platforms, particularly Instagram, have become instrumental in disseminating health, beauty, and wellness ideals that support neoliberal values of self-regulation, individualism, and market-driven identities. These social media functionalities act as a software equivalents of hardware self-tracking devices, curating their own ideologies around health, lifestyle, and diet through the features of the apps. This expansion is detailed in my chapter on the user-generated curated digital manuals in FemTech and in Chapter 6, which explores how Instagram interacts with these self-tracking devices. This interaction reinforces continuous post-feminist ideals of self-monitoring and self-discipline through its unique platform features and influencer dynamics (Al Derham, 2023a).

Similarly, Gill (2023) elaborates that the pursuit of the ‘perfect body’ on social media is inherently linked to neoliberal discourses. This perspective aligns with Bartky’s (1990) discussion on how women have historically internalised societal norms and engaged in self-surveillance to conform to patriarchal standards of femininity through various media. She critiques the role of the media in constructing and perpetuating these ideals, stating: “The media relentlessly bombards us with images of the perfect woman, idealised standards of beauty that most women can never hope to achieve” (p. 65), which plays a role in triggering an internalised response such as compensatory consumption or the curation of digital manuals on Instagram (Laham, 2020). For example, in my own work (Al Derham, 2023a), I found that users are utilising pre-curated digital manuals (PCDMs), such as fitness and diet booklets created, marketed, and sold by Insta-Trainers to enable self-discipline in achieving the image of the healthy and perfect body seen on Insta-Trainers’ profiles. Two key points are evident here: firstly, the bodies of Insta-Trainers as influencers become the feminine and health standard, with the platform serving as a means for them to present their bodies as the product of their commitment to performing post-feminine ideals; secondly, the role of the Insta-Trainer involves using platform functionalities to disseminate PCDMs for users to consume and save as user-curated digital manuals (UCDMs) within the Saved Folder feature on Instagram or their devices. This example illustrates how the pursuit of health, much like beauty, becomes a project of self-optimisation and consumerism, thus reinforcing neoliberal values.

This internalisation of the panoptical gaze means that women constantly monitor and regulate their own bodies to meet societal expectations. Heyes (2007) further supports this view, asserting that “normalised feminised bodies are produced through practices of self-surveillance and regulation, aligning with societal standards of beauty and conduct” (p. 19). Lupton (2014a) explores the concept of the reflexive monitoring self, where individuals integrate self-tracking data into daily routines and decision-making, shaping their identities and behaviours. This practice influences perceptions of health, body, and self-management. Lupton (2016) also asserts how self-quantification technologies foster a culture of continuous self-improvement and optimisation. She identifies various modes of self-tracking (automated, manual, and hybrid) and examines how individuals use these forms of data to inform their actions and decisions. These practices promote individuals as entrepreneurial subjects to optimise appearance and health, aligning with post-feminist ideals as pathways to empowerment (Lupton, 2014b).

In *The Affective, Cultural, and Psychic Life of Postfeminism*, Gill (2017) explores how post-feminist dynamics permeate familial roles, focusing on women's responsibilities. Post-feminist discourses place significant pressure on women to maintain self-discipline, extending these expectations to their roles as mothers and caregivers. Women are seen as central figures responsible for instilling self-regulation within the family. Gill argues that, consistent with a post-feminist sensibility, women are positioned as primary agents of health, beauty, and wellness for themselves and their families. Mothers are expected to curate the image of their families based on social media platforms like Instagram, ensuring that their entire family embodies post-feminist ideals. This vigilant curation creates a cycle of self-surveillance, in which women constantly evaluate and adjust their family's behaviour and presentation to meet societal standards. As Abidin (2017) discusses in her analysis of family influencers, this extends to a practice she terms 'calibrated amateurism,' which is the curated yet seemingly spontaneous portrayal of family life on digital platforms. The concept of 'intensive mothering,' where mothers use digital tools to monitor and document their children's progress, further reinforces this rigorous self-discipline (Gill, 2017). The emotional labour involved adds to the affective burden on women, who must navigate post-feminist expectations while managing their families. Both Gill (2017) and Abidin (2017) highlight the cultural pressures, with social media amplifying post-feminist ideals and making the home a site of cultural reproduction.

The concept of the Insta-Trainer is relevant here, as influencers and digital tools shape the practices and behaviours of women, extending to their families, to promote lifestyles that demand constant self-discipline. Through the Insta-Trainers, I observe that women often serve as creators, consumers, marketers, and disseminators of post-feminist and neoliberal ideals, as exemplified in Archer's (2019) study, which explores how social media influencers, particularly mummy bloggers, embody these ideals through their 'playbour'—a blend of play and labour in creating content. Archer's work shows how mummy bloggers reshape public relations by using their platforms to engage in practices that reflect and reinforce self-discipline and market-driven identities, similar to the roles played by Insta-Trainers as influencers in my research. This highlights the pervasive nature of these ideals and the significant role influencers play in embedding these practices within family dynamics, complicating the narrative of empowerment that post-feminism offers. Furthermore, this illustrates how post-feminism and neoliberalism intersect, positioning women as both subjects and enforcers of a culture that prioritises appearance and self-regulation.

One of my findings, which I will discuss in detail within the core chapters, is how interviewees consistently reference their mothers and sisters, shedding light on a cycle of self-disciplining activities, continuous self-monitoring, and public display that extend beyond the individual, binding women to these practices within the family context as well.

Moreover, in connection with Gill's work and the concept of digital 'intensive mothering' (2017), a study I conducted (pending publication) highlights the concept of digital 'kin-keeping' through platformed pedagogies as a consequence of these concepts. Kin-keeping, as defined by Rosenthal (1985), refers to the work typically and primarily done by women to maintain and strengthen family ties. This includes activities like organising family gatherings, maintaining health, and communicating with family members. In the digital age, this role has evolved into digital kin-keeping, where women use social media platforms to learn methods to better kin-keep their families and to curate their family's digital presence, reinforcing a kind of digitised labour to pedagogically learn, maintain, and curate family bonds through online interactions. I presented on this topic at a conference on "TikTok and Children," hosted by TikTok Cultures (Al Derham, 2023b). While a comprehensive paper on this subject is still pending, it is crucial to highlight here that digital kin-keeping, calibrated amateurism, and intensive mothering are relevant concepts in need of active research in social media studies, as they underscore the role of women and familial cultural pressures. This digital extension of traditional kin-keeping practices further illustrates how post-feminist and neoliberal ideals shape family dynamics via social media platforms, reinforcing the importance of continuous self-monitoring and regulation within the family context.

In summary, these discussions collectively underscore how digital technologies and post-feminist discourses foster a culture of self-discipline and self-regulation, impacting individuals' daily lives, self-identities, and broader sociocultural perceptions of health and body management. The dissemination of post-feminist ideals through social media platforms like Instagram highlights the intersection of neoliberal and feminist discourses, where empowerment is often linked to consumerism and personal branding. Instagram serves as a powerful tool for circulating these ideals, with influencers playing a critical role in shaping societal norms around the consumption of health, beauty, and wellness. The intersection of post-feminism and neoliberalism on platforms like Instagram has profound implications for how health, beauty, and wellness are perceived and pursued. The emphasis on individual responsibility and care aligns with broader neoliberal principles that prioritise personal choice and entrepreneurial spirit. The digital age intensifies this,

as women are continually exposed to idealised images and narratives of perfection, often unattainable, leading to self-monitoring practices, negative self-perception, and mental health issues.

In conclusion, the interplay between post-feminism, neoliberalism, and digital platforms like Instagram illustrates a complex cultural landscape where health, beauty, diet ideals, and wellness are intertwined with market ideologies and individual responsibility. The works of Gill (2007; 2017; 2023), Elias and Gill (2015; 2018), Banet-Weiser (2012), Heyes (2007), and Bartky (1990) provide a critical framework for understanding how these dynamics shape idealised norms and the lived experiences of women in the digital age. This understanding of weight, health, and body image as both national and individual responsibilities is an area I expand on and explore further in the core chapters of my thesis, detailing how Qatari women are receiving, implementing, and adapting to the messages and responsibilities placed on them by Insta-Trainers, and the resulting outcomes.

## **Chapter 3: Literature Review Part II: Digital Dynamics—Navigating Coded Influences**

**Note:** In this chapter, I engage deeply with some concepts while only introducing and briefly defining others. Concepts not discussed in detail here are explored thoroughly in the core chapters, with clear signposts guiding readers to those chapters. This strategy serves two purposes: to avoid repetition of points, arguments, and literature when engaging with each concept; to help ensure that all necessary points are addressed, whether briefly or in detail, in order to provide a comprehensive breakdown and analysis while maintaining clarity and focus.

### **3.1. Insta-Trainers as the Influencer Industry**

#### ***3.1.1 Overview of the Influencer Industry***

The influencer industry has emerged as a powerful force in shaping global health, diet, and beauty standards. Through their vast reach and relatable online personalities, influencers play a pivotal role in defining what is considered desirable and attainable. This section analyses their role in shaping standards by exploring how their curated content influences followers' perceptions and behaviours. When I began my research, Instagram influencers collectively had access to up to one billion active monthly users worldwide (Statista, 2018). By 2024, this number had increased by 150%, reaching approximately 2.5 billion active monthly users (Statista, 2024). This significant growth underscores influencers' impact on shaping health and beauty standards globally, making their role in defining societal norms and expectations even more critical.

Influencers can be defined as “independent third-party endorsers who shape audiences' attitudes through blogs, tweets, and other social media” (Freberg et al., 2011, p. 90). More recently, they have been described as “everyday, ordinary Internet users who accumulate a relatively large following on blogs and social media through the narration of their personal lives and lifestyles, engage with their following in digital and physical spaces, and monetise their following by integrating ‘advertorials’ into their blog or social media posts” (Abidin, 2015, p. 1). These influencers meticulously curate their content, creating a digital catalogue that generates trust among followers (Martineau, 2019). This curated content often features carefully crafted and polished selfies, reflecting the value of self-representation in influencer marketing (Abidin, 2016a; Martineau, 2019; Fitzgerald, 2020). The labour involved in maintaining an influencer presence is substantial, encompassing the creation, curation, and constant updating of content (Glatt, 2023).

Influencers must navigate the demands of visibility by continuously maintaining their online presence to remain relevant and influential. Many employ teams of content creators, from photo editors to writers, to ensure their content appears authentic yet appealing (Davis, 2017; Reese & McVey, 2020).

In drawing a detailed image of the influencer, Abidin (2015) describes how they craft ‘communicative intimacies’ through strategic self-disclosure, building trust and market value by commodifying their personal lives. Further developing this image, she introduces the concept of ‘subversive frivolity,’ where seemingly trivial selfies are used as tools for self-branding and financial gain, aligning with neoliberal ideals of self-optimisation (Abidin, 2016a). Additionally, ‘visibility labour’ highlights the continuous and labour-intensive efforts influencers invest in maintaining their online presence and engaging with followers (Abidin, 2016b). These concepts collectively illustrate the neoliberal nature of Insta-Trainers and their functionalities within the influencer industry. Glatt further describes influencers as “jack-of-all-trades entrepreneurs” who handle various roles such as videographers, editors, photographers, brand ambassadors, and marketers (2023: 12). In the context of my thesis, influencers also act as digital mentors, bio-pedagogically guiding their followers through curated digital manuals (CDMs) that encompass fitness, health, beauty, and lifestyle practices—a mentorship that I argue is rooted in neoliberal and post-feminist ideals of self-optimisation and individual responsibility.

### ***3.1.2. Navigating Insta-(In)visibility***

Influencers or Insta-Trainers as ‘platformised creative workers,’ labelled by Glatt, navigate a precarious industry where visibility and relatability are paramount (Abidin, 2016b; Glatt, 2023). They must constantly engage with their audience by creating content that resonates with their followers’ desires and aspirations (Abidin, 2015; 2016a). This often involves creating and promoting health, diet, and beauty products, while subtly shaping perceptions of a desirable lifestyle among young users (Gardner and Davis, 2014; Elias and Gill, 2018; Gill, 2023). As a result of marketing products and services, influencers on social media platforms have the ability to impact health and wellness trends. They often promote various health-related practices, such as #fitspiration and #cleaneating, as previously discussed in Chapter 2, which can have both positive and negative effects on followers’ physical and mental health (Talbot et al., 2017; DiBisceglie and Arigo, 2019; Prichard et al., 2020). While promoting health and fitness, these trends also contribute

to unrealistic beauty standards and can lead to issues such as eating disorders (Allen et al., 2018; Ambwani, 2019).

Abidin (2016b) argues that the constant visibility of such ideals can increase the pressure to conform to unrealistic standards, impacting mental and physical health. This point is further supported by Gill (2023a), who discusses how frequent social media usage can detrimentally affect individuals' well-being—a phenomenon that also applies to influencers themselves. These perspectives align with Glatt's (2023) discussion on the precarious nature of the influencer industry and Cotter's (2018) analysis of algorithmic influences, adding a critical dimension regarding the personal costs of maintaining such visibility. Labelled the 'visibility game' by Cotter (2018), this concept details how the success of Insta-Trainers is intertwined with platform algorithms, leading to a homogenisation of health practices and beauty standards as Insta-Trainers reproduce labour-intensive strategies to stay relevant (Section 3.3 offers a detailed discussion on algorithms, visibility, and bias).

Often seen as gendered and feminine, influencer work is labour-intensive and involves managing multiple platforms and navigating algorithmic systems, all while facing taxing and uncertain conditions, such as the pressures of constant visibility in beauty, fashion, and lifestyle genres (Cotter, 2018; Glatt, 2023). This labour-intensive nature aligns with Abidin's (2016a: 16) observation that influencer self-representation is a tool for "self-branding, financial gain, and self-actualization pursuits," which appear effortless but require significant behind-the-scenes effort and strategic curation. Such gendered labour and visibility on social media platforms like Instagram reinforce traditional expectations of femininity (Duffy and Hund, 2019). The concept of feminine performativity is relevant here, as it describes how women internalise and enact societal norms governed by post-feminist sensibilities, which emphasise individual empowerment yet often uphold normative gender ideals (Bartky, 1990; Gill, 2007). Despite all the intensive labour required to achieve prominent and gendered visibility, female Insta-Trainers must navigate the pressures of appearing authentic while facing increased policing, scrutiny, and harassment for their adherence to gendered standards (Duffy and Hund, 2019). Furthermore, influencers are under constant pressure to retain and grow their follower base, translating these numbers into capital through brand partnerships and sponsored content. This pressure reflects broader capitalist dynamics, where visibility and follower metrics directly impact financial success, perpetuating a cycle of content production driven by market demands (Duffy, 2017; Cotter, 2018).

### *3.1.3. Insta-Professionalism: Talk Business to Me!*<sup>8</sup>

Davis (2017) joins the discussion on influencer labour by noting that many influencers employ teams of writers to craft their content, which helps maintain a consistent and engaging narrative. This professionalisation often constructs an illusion of authenticity, creating a dynamic where followers trust and aspire to the influencers' curated lifestyles (Davis, 2017; Reese and McVey, 2020). The ethical implications of this kind of influence are significant, as the lack of transparency and industry regulation can lead to misinformation and manipulation of consumer behaviour (Cutter, 2023). The constant endorsements of health and beauty products by Insta-Trainers are often driven by commercial interests, which can compromise the authenticity and reliability of their reviews and recommendations (Cutter, 2023). This critique adds complexity to the discussions by Abidin (2015; 2016a), Glatt (2023), Cotter (2018), and Duffy and Hund (2019), highlighting the potential ethical drawbacks in the quest for visibility and engagement. This issue will be further expanded upon in the upcoming section on biopedagogy and misinformation.

Insta-Trainers often leverage the power they gain from such visibility in monetisable ways, turning platforms like Instagram into professional spaces (Abidin, 2015; Reese and McVey, 2020). They are trendsetters who leverage their influence for personal gain, effectively shaping consumer behaviour to benefit their brand partnerships and personal enterprises (Reese and McVey, 2020). This ability to set trends and drive consumer behaviours underscores the capitalist framework within which these influencers operate, where the commodification of their persona and influence directly contributes to the market economy (Duffy, 2017). Insta-Trainers, well-known regionally and internationally, typically represent one or multiple international brands (Sokolova and Kefi, 2020). These brands, often high-end, use influencers as ambassadors to market their products and services (Reinikainen et al., 2020). Despite the unpredictability of return on investment, many brands prefer influencer marketing over traditional advertising methods (Habibi et al., 2014; Müller et al., 2018). The interdependent relationship between Insta-Trainers and brands continues to grow, which is driven by high engagement rates and the personal connections influencers cultivate with their audiences (Pilgrim and Bohnet-Joschko, 2019). This effectiveness stems from their use of

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<sup>8</sup> **Clarification:** When I use 'Insta' at the beginning of words in section and subsection titles, excluding Insta-trainer or Insta-functionalities, I am playing on the word in three ways: first, as a nod to Instagram, the platform of my study; second, as a nod to the conceptual tool of Insta-Training; and lastly, as a marker indicating how the words I connect it to have 'instant' effects or are 'instantly affected' by the context I am discussing. For example, terms like 'Insta-Professionalism' in this section allude to becoming instantly professional as an Insta-Trainer on Instagram. It is also important to note that I will only use 'Insta-' in titles and not in the body of the text to avoid confusion.

persuasive cues, brand insights, and parasocial interactions, which are proven methods to generate purchase intent among followers (Pilgrim and Bohnet-Joschko, 2019). By partnering with international brands, influencers can monetise their fame while extending their reach to a wider audience (Reinikainen et al., 2020). A notable example is the Qatari influencer @VogbyR, who collaborated with the Italian leather brand Scarosso to leverage her influence and encourage followers from the Gulf to purchase the brand's luxury products (Scarosso, 2024).

Influencers or Insta-Trainers can also create their own brands, capitalising on their heightened visibility and vast followings (Reese and McVey, 2020). High-profile examples include the Kardashian sisters with *SKIMS* and *Kylie Cosmetics*, and regional influencers like Qatar-based Haneen AlSaify, who launched successful make-up and headscarf brands in the Middle East. These examples demonstrate how women in the influencer industry can transition into the corporate world (Blomqvist, 2022; Davenport, 2021). The journey from online personality to business highlights the professionalisation of influencer work and its significant impact on young women. By transitioning their platforms into professional spaces, influencers not only showcase the complex labour they perform, but also bring light to the neoliberal entrepreneurial aspects of influencer culture. This shift underscores Duffy's (2017) argument that social media influencers operate within a capitalist framework where their personal brands and visibility are commodified. Influencers epitomise the neoliberal ideal of the entrepreneurial self, where success is achieved through individual effort and market-driven strategies. They further embed themselves in the capitalist economy by creating and marketing their own products. As a result, this reinforces the notion that personal and professional success is measured by the Insta-Trainer's ability to monetise visibility and influence.

In conclusion, viewing Insta-Trainers in the broader context of influencers reveals the significant impact the influencer industry has had on global health, diet, and beauty standards by leveraging their vast reach through relatable personas. With the user base of Insta-Trainers growing by 150% from 2018 to 2024, their social and cultural influence has intensified (Statista, 2018; 2024). Influencers, defined as third-party endorsers or everyday users who curate their lives for public consumption, meticulously manage their digital presence to generate trust and engagement. This entrepreneurial nature, particularly among women, frames them as professional entrepreneurs navigating a precarious industry. They face the dual pressures of maintaining authenticity and managing extensive visibility, often leading to policing and harassment. The constant visibility and

engagement required to remain relevant can lead to unrealistic standards and personal costs. The professionalisation of influencer work highlights the complex labour and the ethical implications of their endorsements driven by commercial interests, shaping consumer behaviour and establishing influencers as key players in the digital capitalist economy.

### **3.2. The Medium is the Mentor: Biopedagogy and Misinformation in Insta-Training**

This section, as the title suggests, plays on Marshal McLuhan's (1964) famous phrase, "the medium is the message," to emphasise how the platform (the medium) and its influencers (the mentors) shape the content and impact of biopedagogical practices and the spread of misinformation. I initially considered placing this section after "Insta-Trainer as the Platform" because it would logically follow the discussion of the Insta-Trainer and the influencer industry. However, since biopedagogical practices involve both the platform and the industry, I decided to place it just before to allow for a seamless integration of the Insta-functionalities of the platform and the influencer industry, highlighting the interconnectedness of these elements while also providing a more comprehensive analysis of their combined impact on users' perceptions of health, beauty, and lifestyle.

#### ***3.2.1. The Platform as a Pedagogue***

The term biopedagogy refers to educational practices that promote specific health and lifestyle norms that often intertwine with neoliberal ideals of self-optimisation and individual responsibility (Wright and Halse, 2013); it describes "the processes of learning and training bodies how to live" (Fotopoulou and O'Riordan, 2016, p. 2), and explores how these practices are mediated through technology and social networking platforms. In the context of my study, biopedagogy manifests through the dissemination of health and lifestyle content by Insta-Trainers, who use their platforms to guide followers towards adopting certain behaviours and routines. A biopedagogical approach involves the strategic presentation of health, fitness, and lifestyle practices as part of a personal brand, which further amplifies influence and aligns with biopolitical strategies in digital culture. Influencers act as agents of biopower that shape and regulate the behaviours and identities of their followers. Wright and Halse (2013) argue that web-based platforms play a profound role in educating young users about health norms. Similarly, Camacho-Miñano et al. (2019) explore how Instagram shapes young women's perceptions of their bodies and health through post-feminist biopedagogies, highlighting the educational role of digital platforms in promoting specific health

behaviours. Bailey et al. (2022) critiques biopedagogical Instagram yoga posts for reinforcing idealised body standards under the guise of inclusivity, noting that certain hashtags perpetuate a narrow image of the flexible, able-bodied yogi. Given that young, impressionable users learn from these platforms, the presence of constant patterns of exclusion, inauthenticity, and even misinformation within biopedagogical content is problematic.

Other studies on biopedagogy and social media, such as Rodney (2019), highlight that bloggers and influencers—referred to as “blogsperts” —offer health and lifestyle advice based on personal experience and lay expertise that specifically targets young women. Similarly, Rich and Lupton (2022) discuss how digital biopedagogies shape health practices among young users, emphasising the role of socio-material relations in these processes. These studies also highlight how influencer content is crafted to engage followers in ways that feel authentic and personal. Camacho-Miñano et al. (2019) emphasise that influencers create relatable content to engage their audience, sharing personal stories and practical tips to foster trust and reliability. By using parasocial cues such as direct address, personal storytelling, and behind-the-scenes content, influencers strengthen these relationships as followers feel like they are part of the influencer’s life, making the biopedagogical nature of their messages more influential (Sokolova and Kefi, 2020). Personal narratives and authenticity cues used by influencers reinforce the norms and ideals promoted in Insta-Trainer content, making the intersection of parasociality and biopedagogy on Instagram highly impactful (Camacho-Miñano et al., 2019; Bond, 2016; Conde and Casais, 2023). Recent studies on Instagram and other social media platforms further support this view (Rich and Lupton, 2022; Hoffner and Bond, 2022; Reinikainen et al., 2020; Venus Jin et al., 2021).

### ***3.2.2. PSRs and Genuineness: I Trust You, I Trust You Not***

The cultivation of parasocial relationships by Insta-Trainers is integral to the success of biopedagogical content on Instagram, as studies have found that such relationships influence the biopedagogical learning experiences of young users who perceive influencers as trusted friends (Bond, 2016; Conde and Casais, 2023). These relationships, first conceptualised by Horton and Wohl (1956), describe one-sided connections where an audience feels an intimate bond with a media personality despite having no real-life interactions. These bonds form through repeated exposure to celebrity content, leading the audience to perceive the personality as a reliable and trusted friend (Ballantine and Martin, 2005). These relationships mimic real social interactions, creating a sense of friendship and closeness (Bond, 2016). This phenomenon matches celebrity

culture, where fans develop similar parasocial bonds with traditional media celebrities. Just as audiences feel connected to film stars and musicians through media exposure, social media users form attachments to influencers through regular content consumption (Ballantine and Martin, 2005). A new form of celebrity culture, which is deeply embedded in digital interaction and algorithmically driven engagement, has been created. Algorithmic design on social media platforms promotes content based on user interaction, such as comments and likes, making it difficult for followers to disengage, while further reinforcing the perceived authenticity and trustworthiness of influencers (Bhargava et al., 2019; Reinikainen et al., 2020).

This authenticity, however, can also lead to the spread of misinformation. Since Insta-Trainers may lack professional expertise, their recommendations might not always be scientifically sound or safe (Rodney, 2019). This risk is compounded by the algorithmic promotion of popular content, which can amplify unverified and misleading information. In other words, while the personal narratives of blogsperts foster a sense of community and trust, the advice provided requires critical evaluation (Rodney, 2019). The challenge lies in balancing the authentic, relatable content that engages followers with the responsibility of ensuring that the information shared is accurate and beneficial. This is particularly important because, as Duffy (2017) notes, lived experience is often commodified and valued highly in influencer culture. The perceived authenticity in these parasocial interactions can often be superficial and contrived, raising concerns about the spread of misinformation and the genuine intent behind influencer endorsements (Cutter, 2023). The interplay of parasocial relationships and biopedagogy not only educates users about health and lifestyle practices but also has the potential to perpetuate unrealistic standards and problematic recommendations, impacting the mental and physical well-being of followers, particularly young women (Hoffner and Bond, 2022; Camacho-Miñano et al., 2019; Bailey et al., 2022).

A key parallel among these perspectives is the role of authenticity and relatability in biopedagogy. Insta-Trainers and blogsperts alike build trust through personal narratives and lay expertise (Rodney, 2019; Rich and Lupton, 2022). Biopedagogy on social media involves influencers using their platforms to promote specific health and lifestyle norms, leveraging authenticity and personal stories to engage followers. This process is mediated through algorithmically promoted content and CDMs, which often reinforce idealised standards. While these practices educate users about health and fitness, they also perpetuate normative ideals, impacting followers' perceptions and behaviours, particularly among young women (Camacho-Miñano et al., 2019; Bailey et al., 2022).

Cutter (2023) highlights how the algorithmic promotion of content on social media platforms can amplify misleading health information and endorsements, negatively affecting followers' well-being. This further highlights the importance of critically evaluating the authenticity of influencer content and the potential consequences of algorithm-driven visibility in spreading misinformation. A recent study on Insta-Trainers shows that 92% of analysed influencers generate misleading content, labelling them as agents of misinformation (Palacios López et al., 2023). It was also found that the platform's multialgorithmic functionalities amplify disinformation by promoting content based on user interactions, such as likes and comments, to increase the visibility of the posts (Palacios López et al., 2023; Bhargava et al., 2019). This algorithmic design has been shown to help political influencers reach a wide audience, particularly young people under 34 years old—which is the demographic of my study (Palacios López et al., 2023).

The rise of social media influencers has created an environment where misinformation, particularly concerning health and nutrition, can easily proliferate. Lofft and Limpitsouni (2023) found that unqualified influencers often spread unsubstantiated claims, profiting from meal plans and dietary guides, while high-quality scientific research is either oversimplified or misrepresented. The exposure to unverified information significantly shapes health beliefs and behaviours, and repeated exposure can increase the perceived validity of these claims, making them difficult to debunk (Lofft and Limpitsouni, 2023). Through their heightened visibility and cultivation of parasocial relationships, Insta-Trainers can disseminate both valuable insights and misleading information. This duality highlights the complex role influencers play in shaping public understanding of health, where the information shared is often a blend of personal experience and varying levels of scientific accuracy (Chan et al., 2017).

While a link between biopedagogy and misinformation is drawn throughout this subsection, the discussion dedicated to misinformation will be addressed in Section 3.4 on the COVID-19 pandemic.

### ***3.2.3. Parallel Practices: Traditional and Digital***

Before transitioning to Section 3.3, “Insta-Trainer as the Platform”, it is essential to explore the history behind contemporary diet and lifestyle manuals, like Instagram, which play a key role in influencing health behaviours, norms, and cultural appropriation in the digital age. My understanding of Instagram's role as a modern interactive biopedagogical manual is informed by

the history of traditional diet and health manuals, which, as detailed by Chima (2007) and Bitar (2018), provided expert advice on diet, exercise, and lifestyle, evolving from simple therapeutic guides to comprehensive, evidence-based practice manuals. Instagram functions similarly through the intersection of biopedagogical content, parasocial relationships, and the platform's multialgorithmic features. Influencers, or Insta-Trainers, disseminate health and lifestyle content to guide followers to adopt specific behaviours and routines. This platform acts as an interactive manual, offering real-time updates, personalised advice, and community support, paralleling the role of traditional diet manuals in providing structured health guidance. The CDMs algorithmically promote content on Instagram by reinforcing specific health and beauty standards, making it an engaging tool for health and diet education, a theme further explored in both Chapters 6 and 7.

Cutter's (2023) thesis offers an innovative and modern way of thinking about these regulatory manuals. She introduces modern hupomnēmata, a concept rooted in the ancient Greek practices of self-regulation and memory aid. Hupomnēmata were originally personal notebooks or records used to aid memory and guide self-conduct and served as tools for self-examination and ethical self-improvement. They were not just repositories of information but active elements in the cultivation of the self, providing material for reflection and a way to exercise self-control (Cutter, 2023).

Modern hupomnēmata have evolved into digital media and online platforms that serve similar purposes, such as storing extensive information, offering reminders, and guiding personal behaviours. These digital platforms have been enhanced by real-time updates and personalised recommendations, thus serving as external memory aids and tools for self-regulation. This modern take on hupomnēmata shares multiple parallels with the curated digital manuals (CDMs) introduced in my thesis. These CDMs provide structured, tailored, and interactive guidance on health and wellness. While modern hupomnēmata offer a continuous stream of diverse information and dynamic user interaction, CDMs deliver in-depth, comprehensive, and customised content, fostering self-learning through a more structured approach that considers external and internal algorithmic interferences.

Both modern hupomnēmata and the three types of CDMs (User Curated Digital Manuals, Algorithmically Curated Digital Manuals, and Pre-Curated Digital Manuals) influence user health and wellness practices by guiding behaviours through curated content and building communities around shared goals, thus extending the ancient practice of self-examination and ethical self-

improvement into the digital age. Their methods, however, differ. Cutter's modern hupomnēmata rely on broad, algorithmic personalisation and immediate interaction, while CDMs, particularly user-curated digital manuals (UCDMs), offer structured, self-curated, and bookmarked content specifically designed for self-learning, monitoring, and discipline. Ultimately, both contemporary-day practices shape how individuals learn about and manage their health and well-being through tailored, accessible, and interactive content that offers unique advantages for self-learning in the context of health and wellness.

With the advent of the digital age, the landscape of health education has dramatically transformed. Today, digital platforms, particularly social media and self-monitoring health devices, have revolutionised how individuals learn about health and nutrition. Insta-Trainers and Insta-Training functionalities now play a crucial role in disseminating health and lifestyle information, which I explore within this thesis. These digital methods incorporate algorithmic interferences, biopedagogical practices, and parasocial relationships, making modern-day health education more interactive and personalised. Unlike static traditional manuals, digital platforms like Instagram and wearable devices offer real-time updates, personalised advice, and community support, thus serving as modern, dynamic health manuals.

### **3.3. Insta-Trainer as the Platform**

The concept of the Insta-Trainer as a platform reflects the design and functionality of Instagram, which, in the context of my thesis, employs multialgorithmic features within its functions to guide and instantly train users in health, fitness, and cultural and lifestyle norms. This platform leverages data-driven algorithms to personalise content and provide recommendations. It curates user experiences through internal and external digital forces, aiming to influence users' behaviours and choices toward neoliberal practices and post-feminist ideals. Unlike the broader influencer industry discussed in the first section of this chapter, examining both the effects of Insta-Training influencers and their content on users simultaneously is crucial. This approach allows me to understand how the inherent design biases in social media platforms and influencer industry practices collectively impact user engagement and behaviour within the conceptual framework of Insta-Training.

#### ***3.3.1. Algorithmic Technicalities: Biases and (In)Visibility***

Algorithms on social media play a pivotal role in content dissemination and shaping user experiences. The concept of the coded gaze introduced by Buolamwini (2018a) highlights the

biases embedded in these algorithms by their creators. She argues that the biases of those who build these technologies often become encoded into the technology itself. This means that the preferences and prejudices of the predominantly white, male designers are reflected in the algorithms they create. Buolamwini (2018a) explains: “The coded gaze refers to the bias in AI systems that reflects the views of those in power, typically those who are designing these systems” (p. 15). In the context of Instagram, the coded gaze manifests in the preferential visibility given to content that aligns with mainstream beauty standards and cultural norms, often marginalising diverse voices. In *Weapons of Math Destruction*, O’Neil (2016) echoes this sentiment, noting that these biased algorithms not only misrepresent but also marginalise vulnerable populations. This bias is further explored in Benjamin’s (2019) concept of cultural invisibility, which explains how these algorithms embed and perpetuate racial and social biases, making it harder for marginalised voices to digitally be heard and seen—a phenomenon she labels the New Jim Code.

This inherent bias impacts the sort of health and wellness content that users see, shaping their perceptions and behaviours. This is intensified by the use of historically biased data. Algorithms often rely on large datasets to make decisions, and if the historical data is biased, the algorithms will recycle, perpetuate and even amplifying these biases. Research on online ad delivery by Sweeney (2013) and search engines by Noble (2018) demonstrates how algorithmic outputs can reflect and entrench societal biases embedded in historical data. Sweeney (2013) found that “ads suggestive of arrest records appeared more often with searches of black-sounding names than white-sounding names” (p. 44). Similarly, Noble’s investigation into search engines revealed that searches involving terms associated with Black girls yielded predominantly hypersexualised and demeaning content, whereas similar searches for white girls did not produce such results. Noble (2018) argues that “search algorithms create a material reality that reinforces existing racial hierarchies” (p. 148), illustrating how these biases are perpetuated and amplified through algorithmic processes.

Literature on algorithmic biases, as described by O’Neil (2016) and Noble (2018), highlights how these biases lead to unfair treatment and reinforce societal inequities both on and offline. Algorithms operate within ‘black box’ systems where decision-making processes are not visible to users or regulators. O’Neil (2016) explains that the internal workings of black box algorithms are hidden from scrutiny, making it difficult to understand how decisions are made and to challenge them. She defines black box systems as “algorithms that are so complex that even their creators

cannot explain how they arrive at specific decisions” (O’Neil, 2016, p. 15). This opacity can obscure the ways in which algorithms discriminate against certain groups, as the criteria used to make decisions are often hidden. Similarly, Noble (2018) points out that search engines and other algorithmic systems can perpetuate existing social hierarchies by embedding biases within what are seemingly ‘neutral’ operations. This lack of transparency and accountability means that harmful outcomes can be difficult to detect and address, allowing biased algorithms to continue reinforcing inequality.

Gangadharan (2016) further discusses the challenges posed by these black box platforms, emphasising the need for greater algorithmic accountability and the importance of regulatory measures to address the power and potential harm of predictive, automated technologies. She highlights the need for more conversations around regulatory issues to ensure that algorithms do not perpetuate existing biases and inequities. On Instagram, such issues result in the suppression or invisibility of non-Western content and content that deviates from mainstream trends. Instagram’s algorithmic curation often prioritises high engagement, which can marginalise diverse voices and reinforce societal biases, as noted by Cotter (2018). Cotter also discusses how algorithmic curation on Instagram ties visibility to engagement metrics, leading to the privileging of content that is likely to generate profit. In this context, (in)visibility refers to the way algorithms prioritise certain content while suppressing others, aligning with neoliberal ideals of profit maximisation and market efficiency embedded within the design of the application. This emphasis on efficiency, profit maximisation, and individual responsibility is a direct reflection of capitalist values, where the focus on generating profit often comes at the cost of social equity and justice. Consequently, the prioritisation of content that drives engagement and profit marginalises fewer mainstream voices, reinforcing existing power structures and economic disparities.

In *Automating Inequality*, Eubanks (2018) highlights the inequality perpetuated by digital technologies, noting that automated systems often reinforce social and economic disparities. Designed to be efficient, these systems can inadvertently penalise and marginalise the poor through the biases embedded in their decision-making processes. These algorithms do not merely reflect societal biases, they actively shape and reinforce them, resulting in a skewed representation of content that favours commercial interests. Zuboff’s (2019) work on surveillance capitalism further explains how personal data is commodified and used to predict and modify human behaviour for profit, reinforcing existing digital inequalities and power structures. These insights highlight how

digital platforms, through algorithmic biases and data commodification, perpetuate social inequalities and limit diverse representation. Together, Benjamin (2019), Buolamwini (2018a), Eubanks (2018), Noble (2018), O’Neil (2016), and Sweeney (2013) advocate for a more equitable digital environment grounded in justice, transparency, and inclusivity, aimed at dismantling structural inequalities perpetuated by current algorithmic systems. These scholars emphasise the need for systemic change in how algorithms are designed and implemented, calling for increased accountability and ethical considerations to ensure that technology serves all communities fairly.

### ***3.3.2. Explicit Resistance: Decode the Implicit***

Many scholars, like those mentioned above, have made critical contributions to combating injustices, biases, and inequalities in digital spaces, offering practical suggestions for creating more equitable and just technologies. These contributions and proposed solutions include advocating for the development and use of abolitionist tools to dismantle the New Jim Code by identifying, challenging, and rectifying biases embedded in technological systems (Benjamin, 2019). Some scholars have emphasised the importance of algorithmic auditing and increased transparency, urging the incorporation of ethical considerations into algorithmic design to ensure fairness and accountability (Sweeney, 2013; O’Neil, 2016; Lewis et al., 2018). Additionally, scholars have emphasized the importance of recognising and resisting these biases, advocating for greater transparency and accountability in algorithmic systems, and stressed the need for public awareness and critical engagement with how algorithms shape our understanding of the world (Buolamwini, 2018b; Eubanks, 2018; Noble, 2018).

It is important to note that these insights are particularly relevant to platforms like Instagram, which utilise algorithms that perpetuate biases and inequalities, making it crucial to address these issues to ensure fair and equitable representation on the platform (Cotter, 2018; Larsen, 2024a; 2024b). The algorithmic functionalities on Instagram often favour content that aligns with Western beauty standards, sexualities, and mainstream cultural norms, thus marginalising diverse voices (Gill and Elias, 2015; Cotter, 2018; Glatt 2023). This selective visibility affects societal perceptions and individual behaviours, significantly impacting the health, diet, and lifestyle practices of Qatari women. By promoting such content, Instagram contributes to a homogenised cultural narrative that diminishes the representation of non-Western and diverse perspectives. This, in turn, influences users’ self-image and health behaviours, potentially leading to negative impacts on mental and physical well-being. Addressing algorithmic biases on Instagram is therefore not just a matter of

digital justice but also essential for fostering a more inclusive and culturally sensitive digital environment that respects and represents all cultural backgrounds. Prioritising health and justice can indeed mitigate the adverse effects on mental and physical well-being on digital platforms, promoting a healthier and more equitable digital space for all users.

In the field of digital media, several critical works and active projects around algorithmic resistance and justice have emerged, such as The Digital Defense Playbook (DDP) and the Algorithmic Justice League (AJL)<sup>9</sup>. The DDP, created by the Our Data Bodies project, is a collaborative initiative focused on addressing data justice issues, particularly for marginalised communities. Developed by Tamika Lewis, Seeta Peña Gangadharan, Mariella Saba, and Tawana Petty in 2018, the playbook aims to empower communities to reclaim their data and protect their digital rights on online platforms. It provides practical tools and strategies for understanding and resisting the ways personal data is collected, stored, and used, encouraging collective action and solidarity to address data privacy and surveillance issues (Lewis et al., 2018). The playbook also emphasises educating users about data privacy, implementing practical tools for data security, and advocating for policies that protect digital rights (Lewis et al., 2018).

Founded by Joy Buolamwini in 2018, the AJL aims to combat the issue of the coded gaze, demonstrating that Artificial Intelligence systems often reflect the prejudices of their creators, which leads to discriminatory outcomes, particularly against marginalised communities (Buolamwini, 2018a; 2018b). The AJL seeks to address these issues by promoting greater transparency, accountability, and fairness in AI development and deployment. Through a combination of research, advocacy, and public engagement, the AJL raises public awareness about the impacts of biased AI, champions inclusive and ethical AI design practices, and drives policy changes to ensure algorithmic justice within technology (Buolamwini, 2018b). Efforts by the organisation have brought significant attention to the ethical challenges in AI, sparking discussions among tech developers, policymakers, and the broader public about the need for justice and equity in AI technologies.

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<sup>9</sup> Ruha Benjamin, author of *Race After Technology* (2019), and Tawana Petty, one of the authors of the Digital Defense Playbook (2108), are part of the AJL team. Virginia Eubanks, author of *Automating Inequality* (2018), is one of the contributors of the DDP. Their involvement highlights the commitment, credibility, interconnected efforts, and comprehensive perspective in addressing algorithmic biases and data justice.

In comparing both the DDP and AJL efforts within the context of Instagram, it becomes clear that the platform collects vast amounts of personal data, which results in biased and discriminatory practices through its use of personalised content and advertisements. The strategies in the playbook are highly relevant for Instagram users, addressing how data-driven systems can reinforce social inequalities, while also educating users about data privacy and advocating for policy changes. Similarly, the AJL promotes transparency and fairness in AI, which is crucial for platforms like Instagram that use AI to curate content and personalise experiences. Gangadharan (2016; 2017) further emphasises the challenges posed by these black box platforms, highlighting how digital inclusion efforts often fail to address issues of privacy and surveillance, leaving marginalised users vulnerable to data profiling and monitoring by state and corporate actors (2017). She also points out the inadequacy of current digital literacy programmes in addressing these privacy and surveillance concerns, suggesting a need for more comprehensive approaches that further protect users' rights and data privacy (Gangadharan, 2017).

In conclusion, the need to address biases, inequality, visibility, and representation on Instagram has been emphasised through critical methods of resistance. The calls for abolitionist tools to dismantle systemic biases, the importance of algorithmic auditing and ethical design, and the necessity for transparency and public engagement in resisting algorithmic commodification underscores the crucial need for strategies that promote data justice, mitigate algorithmic biases, and foster inclusivity in online spaces. The next subsection will examine the problematic reliance on inherently flawed technology to address complex social, health, and cultural issues through concepts such as technological solutionism, as proposed by Morozov (2013), and technological determinism (McLuhan, 1964; Logan, 2010), which suggests that technology shapes futures and how society is structured. This will further highlight the importance of resistance to prevent biased and flawed technologies from perpetuating inequalities, injustice, and cultural invisibility.

### ***3.3.3. One Tech Forward, Two Steps Back***

The concept of technological solutionism is crucial and highly relevant to the role of Instagram in shaping societal norms. I decided to include this concept within the literature review after discovering a thread amongst participants while writing the summary analysis in Chapter 5, which serves as a prelude to the core thematic chapters. This thread revealed that a technological solutionist mindset was prevalent among the cohort. This subsection highlights how technological advances, which many participants viewed as solutions, can in fact be harmful and problematic,

setting them back a few steps rather than moving them forward towards achieving their desired goals.

In *To Save Everything, Click Here* (2013), Morozov defines technological solutionism as the idea that all personal and societal issues can be resolved through technological means. He argues that this mindset is flawed because it overlooks the complexities of human behaviour and the inherent biases in technological systems (Morozov, 2013). Morozov critiques the notion that technological innovations can offer straightforward solutions to complex problems without considering their socio-political contexts and the potential unintended consequences. He highlights the risks of this approach, which can lead to overreliance on technologies and the neglect of more nuanced, human-centric solutions. This perspective is particularly relevant to Instagram, where algorithms originally designed to optimise engagement and provide safe learning environments for users have been found to perpetuate narrow beauty standards and cultural norms (Gill and Elias, 2015; Instagram, 2024c). These algorithms marginalise diverse voices and promote potentially harmful content that aligns with high engagement activity and marketable aesthetics (Glatt, 2022; Cotter, 2018; Instagram, 2024c).

This overreliance on technology not only fails to address underlying social issues but also intensifies neoliberal ideals by focusing on engagement and profit maximisation. Like issues related to algorithmic bias, this overreliance perpetuates inequalities and reinforces harmful societal norms, adding a second layer of concerns related to algorithmic curation, control, and engagement. This further complicates how consumer behaviour is influenced on Instagram, which is a result of how the platform facilitates and curates the prioritisation and visibility of products and services advertised as solutions based on search-bar queries and online engagement (O’Neil, 2016). The findings of Sweeney’s (2013) study on algorithmic outputs in online ad delivery systems, as mentioned earlier, reflect on how this can logically extend to Instagram’s multi-algorithms and how they influence consumer behaviour. Compensatory consumption, which occurs when individuals purchase goods or services to cope with perceived deficiencies or to conform to societal expectations (Laham, 2020), is also linked to this phenomenon.

Compensatory consumption and technological solutionism are fundamentally linked through the ways in which individuals seek to meet societal expectations. On Instagram, these two concepts intersect as users are influenced by algorithmic recommendations to buy products endorsed by

influencers or promoted through algorithms, believing that these purchases will not only solve their problems but also improve their lives. This behaviour is not only a response to social pressures but also a manifestation of technological solutionism, which reinforces neoliberal values of self-improvement and individual responsibility while promoting a cycle of consumption that often undermines genuine well-being and perpetuates existing biases and inequalities (Elias and Gill, 2015; Gill, 2023a). Although these purchases might appear to be a form of self-empowerment, they can lead to concerning outcomes that undermine genuine health and well-being, as discussed by Elias and Gill (2015), Elias et al. (2017), and other works cited in the first section of this chapter.

Furthermore, through technological solutionism and compensatory consumption, we see users not only being explicitly exploited by algorithmic messaging and the influencer industry, but also implicitly exploited through data capitalism. This double exploitation highlights the pervasive influence of digital platforms in shaping consumer behaviour. The concept of surveillance capitalism—defined by Zuboff (2019) as: “a new economic order that claims human experience as free raw material for hidden commercial practices of extraction, prediction, and sales” (p. 8)—further clarifies the economic complexities behind these online influences.

The concept of surveillance capitalism illustrates how digital platforms like Instagram exploit user data to generate profit while embedding neoliberal values in everyday life. Through its business model, Instagram sells and profits from users’ online activities, tracking their behaviours to personalise and target advertisements effectively (Larsen, 2024a) while also promoting self-discipline and individual responsibility as users modify their behaviours to align with algorithmic recommendations that prioritise marketable content (Abidin, 2016b; Rich and Lupton, 2022). Instagram therefore also intensifies the pressures of self-governance, as individuals are constantly aware of being monitored and thus more likely to conform to societal norms and expectations (Lupton, 2016; Cotter, 2018). This insight is crucial to my thesis, highlighting how the design and business model of the platform influence users’ self-perception and behaviour in ways that perpetuate inequality.

The concept of technological determinism, as proposed by McLuhan (1964), is also important here; it suggests that technology itself shapes societal norms and individual behaviours, further emphasising the need to critically examine the role of Instagram’s algorithms in influencing user practices and perpetuating existing inequalities. Logan (2010) expands on the concept by

explaining how media technologies extend human faculties, altering perception, consciousness, and societal organisation. This is problematic when considering the flawed and biased nature of the algorithms which, on platforms like Instagram, contribute to the perpetuation of misinformation, thus leading to distorted representations of reality. The reliance on these biased technologies means that societal values and individual behaviours are increasingly shaped by flawed systems, underlining the necessity of critically examining and resisting these technologies to prevent them from shaping a future characterised by injustices.

To conclude, this subsection illustrates the interplay of three elements on the platform. It links technological solutionism, which fosters dependence on digital platforms to address personal and societal issues (Morozov, 2013); with compensatory consumption, which drives users to seek post-feminist ideals through market-driven purchases influenced by algorithmic recommendations (Laham, 2020); and surveillance capitalism, which exploits users by taking advantage of their personal data for profit, reinforcing neoliberal values (Zuboff, 2019). Among Gulf-based users and young Qatari women, the long-term cultural impacts of technological determinism are profound and, as I will demonstrate, erode traditional values and practices within a modern, private tribal-based society.

### **3.4. The Eye-Opening Pause: Fatness and Misinformation in the Lockdowns**

This section explores the pivotal shift in online consumption attitudes towards health and wellness content on Instagram during the COVID-19 pandemic, setting the stage for Chapter 9, which explores a period inundated with mentally and physically harmful memes, content, and health advice. This period witnessed a surge of misinformation about health, intensified by widespread fatigue from both the pandemic and constant scrolling. The following subsections highlight how both the platform and its users played roles in spreading and combating fatphobia, misinformation, and unreliable health advice, ultimately transforming mentalities about health and wellness. This analysis provides a critical backdrop for understanding the broader implications of digital engagement on health perceptions during a global crisis.

#### ***3.4.1. Selfie, Selfie on the Phone, Why Am I the Fattest of Them All?***

Fatness is a concept, identity, and embodiment often stigmatised in contemporary society. Rather than being understood as a multi-layered aspect of human diversity, it is frequently reduced to a flawed physical state (Lupton, 2017). In *What We Don't Talk About When We Talk About Fat*,

Gordon (2020) describes fatness as an inherent part of human variation that is unfairly marginalised and stigmatised in societal discourse, often leading to significant personal and social ramifications. Societal prejudice against fatness manifests in numerous ways, contributing to the marginalisation and discrimination of individuals with larger bodies (Gordon, 2020). In *FAT*, Lupton (2018) discusses how fat bodies are often viewed through a lens of moral panic, where fatness is associated with laziness, lack of self-discipline, and poor health. She argues that this stigmatisation is deeply rooted in cultural narratives that value thinness and vilify fatness, contributing to widespread societal stigma. Hetrick and Attig (2009) also discuss how fat individuals face physical and psychological challenges in environments designed for thinner bodies. This marginalisation is compounded by media representations that often ridicule or demonise fat bodies, further spreading fatphobic attitudes in society (Mendoza, 2009). Manne identifies fatphobia in *Unshrinking: How to Face Fatphobia* (2022), as a significant social justice issue that restricts individuals' freedom, mobility, and potential.

Fatphobia, according to Hauke (2021b) in a blogpost on *Food, Fatness and Fitness*, is the irrational fear and hatred of fat bodies perpetuated by societal norms and amplified through various media, including social platforms like Instagram; "Fatphobia on social media has intensified due to the pandemic, as diet culture seized the opportunity to capitalise on people's anxiety about weight gain during lockdowns." This intensification of fatphobia can be attributed to the increased amount of time people spent online during lockdowns, where they were exposed to a barrage of diet and fitness content (Al-Rawi, 2021; Hermassi et al., 2024), which often promotes unrealistic body standards, thereby reinforcing societal prejudices against fatness. The impact of fatphobia on health perceptions is profound, influencing both societal attitudes and individual behaviours. Lupton (2017) reviews how digital media plays a significant role in shaping body image and health perceptions by promoting idealised body types and disseminating fatphobic messages. This digital perpetuation of fatphobia contributes to the internalisation of weight stigma (Lupton, 2017), where individuals on digital platforms internalise societal messages that equate thinness with health and moral virtue, leading to body dissatisfaction, eating disorders, and other mental health issues (Lupton, 2018; Gordon, 2020).

The pandemic worsened these issues in Qatar, as people turned to social media for community and support during lockdowns (Al-Rawi, 2021; Promodh, 2021). The overwhelming presence of fatphobic content led to a toxic online environment. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Qatar

experienced a significant increase in mental health conditions, with social media playing a dual role in disseminating both essential information and harmful content that intensified issues related to body image and weight gain (Al-Ibrahim et al., 2022). The neoliberal framework critiqued by Guthman (2009) highlights how contemporary societal structures worsen fatphobic attitudes by promoting individual responsibility for health and body size. This ideology, prevalent on platforms like Instagram, not only perpetuates societal prejudice but also reinforces the narrative that fatness is a personal failure rather than an interplay of genetic and social factors. Studies have shown that increased weight stigma during the pandemic led to unfavourable psychological and behavioural outcomes, further intensifying negative emotions during the public health crisis (de Macêdo et al., 2022).

The concept of productive labouring citizenship is also deeply intertwined with societal perceptions of fatness, particularly within neoliberal frameworks that emphasise individual responsibility. In this context, fat individuals are often viewed as less capable of contributing to the economy due to pervasive stereotypes that associate fatness with laziness and lack of discipline (Guthman, 2009; Manne, 2022). Neoliberal ideologies tie health directly to productivity, promoting the notion that maintaining a thin body is essential for being a productive citizen. Public health narratives that equate weight loss with health improvement reinforce the idea that thinness is necessary for economic productivity, further marginalising fat individuals (Lupton, 2018; Gordon, 2020). This ideology fosters the belief that there is a moral and civic responsibility to maintain our health to avoid becoming a societal burden (Hauke, 2021b).

Online media representations further intensify these neoliberal misconceptions by portraying thin, active, and successful individuals as ideal citizens, while depicting fat individuals as failing in their personal and professional lives (Mendoza, 2009; Wright and Halse, 2013). Manne (2022) emphasises that fatphobia impacts professional opportunities, as discriminatory attitudes and practices hinder fat individuals from achieving their full potential in the workplace and educational settings. The policies influenced by the notion of productive labouring citizenship, such as workplace wellness programmes that incentivise weight loss, disproportionately affect fat employees by reinforcing discrimination and exclusion in professional environments (Guthman, 2009).

The role of digital media in perpetuating fatphobia is further complicated by the phenomenon of meme factories on platforms like Instagram, which often normalise and trivialise harmful stereotypes and contribute to the spread of fatphobic content through humour and satire (Abidin, 2020). In other words, meme factories help create a culture where fatphobia becomes both widespread and socially acceptable. O'Hara et al. (2023) highlight the pervasive nature of weight-based oppression in Qatar, where individuals report being bullied and discriminated against in various social contexts, leading to negative health outcomes. This study shows that fatphobia is a global issue, impacting the mental and physical health of individuals worldwide. The social stigma attached to fatness has led to marginalisation and discrimination in Qatar, with severe consequences for individuals' well-being, especially during periods of increased vulnerability, such as lockdowns (O'Hara et al., 2023).

The overall perceptions of fatness and fatphobia constitute a deeply ingrained societal issue with significant implications for health perceptions and behaviours. In Chapter 9, I explore findings from participants who reported that fatphobic messages during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic not only led them to adopt harmful self-disciplining practices but also fostered fatphobic attitudes towards others. The pandemic saw a proliferation of fatphobic messaging within meme factories, underscoring the critical need to understand and address the impact of digital media on societal attitudes towards body size and health.

### ***3.4.2. Lockdowned, Tired, and Misinformed***

The COVID-19 pandemic created a critical need for pause across various sectors, significantly impacting physical activity, mental well-being, and societal behaviours. Richmond et al. (2020) emphasise the necessity of pausing to reflect on and adapt to the unprecedented changes brought about by the pandemic, particularly in education. They argue that this pause provides an opportunity to reconsider and reshape practices to better suit evolving circumstances. Indeed, this reflective pause is crucial across all sectors, enabling businesses to re-evaluate operations, healthcare systems to adapt to new challenges, and individuals to reassess lifestyles and priorities across various studies. Tandon et al. (2020) reflect on the impact of COVID-19 on physical activity, noting that the pandemic-induced pause led to both negative and positive changes in activity levels; while some individuals experienced a decline in physical activity due to lockdown restrictions, others found new ways to stay active, highlighting diverse responses to the challenges posed by lockdowns. Ardern et al. (2021) reveal that while the enforced pause disrupted routines, it also

offered a chance for reflection and mental recovery. In the business realm, there was a surge in health and wellness products available on social media during the pandemic (Staniewski and Awruk, 2021). This critical pause led to an increased focus on personal well-being and the consumption of related products, underlining the significant impact of the pandemic on consumer behaviour and social priorities.

Social media, particularly Instagram, became increasingly prominent during lockdowns as people turned to online platforms for information, support, and community engagement. During this time, Instagram played a significant role in shaping mental well-being. While some found positivity and community, others found that online platforms led to heightened anxiety and stress (Promodh, 2021; Lucibello et al., 2021; Swami et al., 2021a). This is corroborated by Hermassi et al. (2021), who found significant changes in physical activity, sedentary behaviour, and life satisfaction among university students in Qatar during the COVID-19 lockdowns. The increased screen time and reduced physical activity negatively impacted their mental and physical health (Hermassi et al., 2021). Similar conclusions are found in other studies (Knox et al., 2022; Swami et al., 2021b). The spread of misinformation on social media further compounds these issues by disseminating false health information, which fuels anxiety and confusion among users (Al Rawi et al., 2022).

Misinformation—defined by Tufekci (2019) as false or misleading information spread regardless of intent—was a critical issue during the COVID-19 pandemic. Digital dissemination of misinformation can be particularly dangerous when amplified by social media platforms, which exploit algorithmic biases to prioritise sensational or emotionally charged content (Larsen, 2024b). This creates an environment where misinformation spreads rapidly and widely, often outpacing factual information (Tufekci, 2019). The lockdowns also saw a rise in scrolling fatigue, where continuous exposure to overwhelming amounts of information led to decreased attention and increased anxiety (Suleiman, 2024). This phenomenon further complicates the battle against misinformation, as fatigued users are more likely to accept and spread false information without critical scrutiny.

The spread of misinformation on globally accessible platforms, as demonstrated during the pandemic, has profound social, political, economic, and cultural effects. It is important to revisit Abidin's (2020) research on meme factories and Lofft and Limpitsouni's (2023) work on the dissemination of unverified health advice on Instagram outlined in Sections 3.4.1. and 3.2.2.,

respectively. Socially, misinformation leads to increased anxiety and stress. A study in Qatar investigating COVID-19 misinformation in Arabic on X (formerly Twitter) identifies various forms of false information about the virus that circulated widely, contributing to public confusion and fear (Al-Rawi et al., 2022). Politically, misinformation is used as a tool by political influencers to manipulate public opinion and deepen political divides. Jones (2020) discusses the weaponisation of COVID-19 fake news in the Arabian Gulf and beyond, highlighting how misinformation on online platforms is strategically used to influence public opinion and aggravate political tensions. Palacios López et al.'s (2023) study on the spread of disinformation on Instagram by Spanish political influencers further illustrates how misinformation is utilised to shape public opinion and intensify political divides during the pandemic. Economically, misinformation about health products and practices influences consumer behaviour, driving a surge in sales of unverified health and wellness products. Norman (2023) examines the impact of health influencers on public health, noting that misinformation spread by influencers significantly affects public health outcomes.

The literature discussed above underlines the profound impact social media had in shaping perceptions during the COVID-19 pandemic. Continuous exposure to overwhelming information during lockdowns led to scrolling fatigue, making users more susceptible to misinformation. This phenomenon, coupled with the spread of false health information by influencers, significantly affected public health outcomes. Collectively, the studies demonstrate how social media platforms like Instagram facilitated the dissemination of both accurate and inaccurate information during the COVID-19 lockdowns across social, economic, political, and health domains, profoundly shaping public perceptions and behaviours.

### **3.5. Literature Review Conclusions**

#### ***3.5.1. Chapter 2: Insta-Crafting Users: Digitalised Internal and External Forces***

Chapter 2 explores the complex ways in which digital platforms, particularly Instagram, act as powerful agents of influence and control, shaping user behaviour through a complex interplay of internal and external forces. The concept of the Insta-Trainer is central to this examination, illustrating how advanced algorithms and influencer dynamics collectively shape user practices and perceptions. Through a detailed analysis of biopower, biopolitics, governmentality, and self-discipline, it becomes evident that Instagram not only perpetuates but also intensifies societal

norms around health, beauty, and lifestyle through Insta-Trainers and Insta-Functionalities (Foucault, 1977; 1978; 1991; Rose and Novas, 2005).

The pervasive nature of neoliberal ideologies in the digital realm is also emphasised, where personal responsibility and self-optimisation are paramount (Harvey, 2005). Insta-Trainers act as key agents of these neoliberal values embedded within capitalism, promoting self-discipline and individualism through their curated content. The role of Insta-Training functionalities in amplifying these messages is evident, as algorithms prioritise and widely disseminate content aligning with these ideals among users. This process of Insta-Crafting users into biocitizens involves internalising and acting upon these ideals, which is reflected in broader societal trends towards self-governance and personal accountability in health and wellness (Szto and Gray, 2015; Banet-Weiser, 2018; Sheppard and Ricciardelli, 2023).

The chapter also examines the critical role of post-feminist discourses in shaping perceptions of beauty and empowerment. Insta-Training functionalities and Insta-Trainer dynamics reinforce a culture of continuous self-monitoring and self-regulation, aligning with post-feminist ideals of empowerment through consumerism and self-branding (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Elias et al., 2017; Gill, 2023a). This convergence of neoliberal and post-feminist values on digital platforms presents a complex landscape where users continuously navigate societal expectations and personal aspirations (Gill, 2023; Elias et al., 2017; Bartky, 1990; Heyes, 2007).

Overall, the chapter provides a comprehensive analysis of the digital forces shaping contemporary health, beauty, and lifestyle norms. It sets the stage for further exploration of these concepts and theoretical frameworks in the core chapters, while also offering valuable insights into how digital platforms influence individual and collective identities in the modern age. The discussion on neoliberal ideologies and post-feminist discourses within a Foucauldian framework highlights the promotion of personal responsibility and self-optimisation, with Insta-Trainers serving as key agents. This analysis resonates with the experiences of young Qatari women, who navigate a unique blend of traditional values, global health standards, and digital technologies. These insights into how digital platforms craft identities provide critical context for understanding Instagram's specific impact on Qatari women's health and wellness practices, aligning with the goals of Qatar National Vision 2030 to balance modernisation with cultural preservation.

### ***3.5.2. Chapter 3: Digital Dynamics: Navigating Coded Influences***

This chapter delves into the intricate dynamics of digital influence, particularly focusing on how Instagram operates as a powerful tool for disseminating information and shaping user perceptions. It explores the technicalities of algorithmic control and the role of the influencer industry in curating and promoting health, beauty, and lifestyle content. The examination of visibility labour, biopedagogy, parasocial relationships, algorithmic biases, and technological solutionism provides a nuanced understanding of how digital platforms like Instagram affect user behaviour and societal norms (Morozov, 2013; O’Neil, 2016; Buolamwini, 2018; Eubanks, 2018; Benjamin, 2019). The role and significant impact of algorithmic functionalities in shaping the content users consume are highlighted throughout the chapter, as these algorithms favour content that garners high engagement. This often leads to the promotion of mainstream beauty and health standards that align with neoliberal and consumerist values, profoundly affecting user self-perception and behaviour, as individuals are constantly exposed to idealised images and narratives that encourage self-optimisation and conformity (Gill, 2023; Mackson et al., 2019).

Furthermore, the concept of biopedagogy is critical in understanding how Instagram serves as a digital pedagogue, educating users about health and body image through curated content (Wright, 2009; Halse, 2013; Rich and Lupton, 2023). Insta-Trainers play a pivotal role in this process, acting as digital instructors that shape user perceptions and behaviours through their posts and interactions (Camacho-Miñano et al., 2019; Rodney, 2019). The parasocial relationships that develop between influencers and their followers further reinforce these dynamics, as users often place high trust in their content, perceiving it as authentic and credible (Horton and Wohl, 1956; Abidin, 2015). Additionally, the challenges posed by misinformation and algorithmic biases—particularly in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic—are addressed to illustrate that the spread of false health information on social media platforms has significant public health impacts, intensifying feelings of anxiety and uncertainty among users (Abidin, 2020; Jones, 2020; Al-Rawi et al., 2022).

Overall, this literature review provides a comprehensive analysis of the digital mechanisms influencing user behaviour and societal norms on Instagram. It underscores the need for improved regulatory measures and educational initiatives to mitigate the harmful effects of misinformation and promote accurate information. The insights gained from this chapter regarding the influencer industry and algorithmic design are crucial for understanding the broader implications of digital influence on health, beauty, and lifestyle practices, laying the groundwork for more in-depth exploration in the subsequent chapters of this thesis. In Qatar, where social media plays a vital role

in public health communication, these dynamics are particularly relevant. The analysis of how influencers and algorithms promote health and beauty standards—often aligned with neoliberal and consumerist values—directly impacts the well-being, diet, and lifestyles of young Qatari women. This chapter emphasises the importance of mitigating algorithmic bias and the spread of misinformation while promoting accurate information dissemination. It underscores the need for regulatory measures and educational initiatives, which contribute to the overarching aim of my thesis: exploring the intersection of Instagram with health and cultural identity in the Arab Gulf state.

## **Chapter 4. Methodology**

### **4.1. Introduction**

#### ***4.1.1. Research***

This chapter provides a detailed outline of the research methodology, data collection strategy, and the planned methods for investigating and analysing the impact of Insta-Trainers and Insta-Training Functionalities on young women in Qatar. The chosen methods are designed to answer the research questions and identify various themes and trends related to the concept of the Insta-Trainer, as well as the impact of their content on young women in Qatar. The research questions are:

- **RQ1:** What specific role do Insta-Training functionalities play in the lives of young women from the Arab Gulf state of Qatar?
- **RQ2:** What is the nature of the lifestyle, diet, and health-related decisions and practices that young women from Qatar make by consuming Insta-Training content? Are these practices productive and/or problematic?
- **RQ3:** What is the impact of the above findings on culture, tradition, and identity/individuality?
- **RQ4:** Is there a significant correlation between the time spent engaging with Insta-Trainer content and the time dedicated to physical and mental self-care?

The significance of investigating these aspects lies in the transformative physical and mental impact of social media, particularly in shaping personal and cultural dimensions of life. This study aims to:

- Explore how digital interactions influence individual lifestyles, dietary choices, and health practices, assessing whether these effects enhance or complicate the lives of young Qatari women.
- Understand the broader cultural repercussions of digital engagement by examining their impacts on traditional values, personal identity, and communal norms.

- Evaluate the relationship between digital media consumption and well-being practices within this demographic, providing a comprehensive understanding of the intersection between digital technologies, media engagement, and personal health management.
- Offer significant insights into the nuanced integration of digital platforms in everyday routines, providing an essential perspective on their lasting influence on society.

#### *4.1.2. Sections Overview*

The upcoming sections will detail the methodologies used to investigate the aforementioned critical areas, detailing the strategies for analysing how digital platforms like Instagram are integrated into daily life. They will outline the specific data collection methods and analytical approaches employed to assess the impact of social media on both individual and collective experiences. A thorough analysis of these methods will be presented, highlighting both their strengths and limitations, ensuring a well-rounded understanding of how these methods contributed to the research findings.

Despite my original plan and research design for all activities to be held in person, the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated a semi-remote PhD journey and a full-time online approach for carrying out the work. This shift directly influenced the methodologies employed, from interactive surveys to Zoom interviews, which were adapted to maintain the integrity of the research. The entire study was planned, designed, conducted, analysed, and written remotely from various locations around the world. This transition to virtual methods proved to be a blessing in disguise, offering benefits such as increased flexibility, broader participant reach, and enhanced digital engagement. These advantages, thoroughly highlighted in the upcoming sections, underline the potential of digital platforms for immersive yet remote data collection, making it a valuable model for future research in our increasingly digital societies.

The first core section of the chapter, **4.2, Research Design**, highlights the appropriateness of employing a mixed-methods longitudinal panel approach to track changes over time among a young cohort of Qatari women. It delineates the methodological framework, focusing on the integration of both qualitative and quantitative data collection, including interactive online surveys and semi-structured interviews. The approach examines their engagement with Instagram and its impact on their diets, lifestyles, and well-being. By capturing the dynamic nature of participants'

experiences through repeated measures, this framework enhances the reliability and validity of the study's findings.

**Section 4.3, Data Collection Method**, is structured into several subsections that comprehensively outline the various stages and methodologies employed in this research. Section 4.3.1 begins with a justification of the chosen demographic, explaining the rationale for focusing on young Qatari women and the significance of this group in the context of the study. This demographic is not only pertinent due to its unique socio-cultural dynamics but is also critical for addressing the broader underrepresentation of women in digital media research. The pilot study, discussed in **Section 4.3.2**, served as a crucial preliminary phase in the research process. It revealed significant insights that necessitated a complete revision of the initial survey design, ultimately leading to the development of a new, interactive survey method discussed in **Section 4.3.3**. Semi-structured interviews were used as a complementary data collection method, designed to provide deeper qualitative insights and enrich the quantitative data obtained from the surveys, thoroughly outlined in **Section 4.3.4**. In conclusion, **Section 4.3.5** provides a critical reflection on the virtual methodological choices, assessing the strengths and limitations of each approach and their overall contribution to the study's objectives.

**Section 4.4, Thematic Analysis**, details the data analysis process used in this study, specifically focusing on the six-step process of thematic analysis by Braun and Clarke (2006; 2012; 2021; 2022). Each step is outlined in concise paragraphs, explaining how the data was familiarised, coded, and thematically categorised. A few examples from the data set are provided in addition to critical studies by Smith and Bell (2018) and Rodney (2019) to validate the method and address potential limitations.

#### ***4.1.3. Ethical Approval***

This study meets the terms and requirements put forward by the University Ethics Committee at Newcastle University. The ethics form for this project was completed and granted approval on December 14, 2019, and was valid until September 23, 2023. The reference number for the approval is: 18454/2019.

I would like to share a personal reflection about the unexpected gap and the turn my PhD journey took. A one-year delay, from September 2023 to September 2024, stemmed not from academic

challenges, but from profound personal experiences—maternity leave following two pregnancies. These pregnancies profoundly impacted me both physically and mentally, each culminating in caesarean sections, which demanded much longer recovery times than anticipated. The time away from my studies, though challenging, was deeply necessary. It allowed me to heal, regain strength and, most importantly, cherish precious moments with my babies. While unintended, the break enhanced my ability to engage with my work in a more reflective and profound manner.

#### **4.2. Research Design: Mixed-methods Longitudinal Panel Approach**

To achieve the objectives of this study—identifying various themes and their degrees of impact—a mixed-methods longitudinal panel study was employed. Characterised by repeated observations over time, this methodological approach is particularly beneficial for tracking changes and developments in behaviours and attitudes. It enhances the reliability and validity of the findings by maintaining consistent measures and a stable sample population (Menard, 2008; Laurie, 2013). This study utilises qualitative and quantitative data collection methods, including interactive online surveys and semi-structured interviews, which both provide a comprehensive analysis of the influence of Insta-Trainer content. Online surveys capture both qualitative insights and quantitative metrics, while semi-structured interviews offer deeper qualitative data essential for understanding nuanced effects.

The longitudinal aspect of the study significantly enriches the research by enabling the observation of participants over an extended period, facilitating exploration of evolving behaviours and attitudes, and identifying patterns of change and causal relationships (Menard, 2008; Creswell, J.W. and Creswell, J.D., 2017). On other words, longitudinal studies offer a nuanced understanding of temporal dynamics, making them particularly suitable for investigating the usage of Instagram by Qatari women. Data collection commenced between June and July 2021, before my first maternity leave, and continued in various interview sessions throughout 2022. A second phase, conducted both digitally and in person, took place between June 2023 to August 2024, which I categorise as follow-up interactions.

While the longitudinal design captures changes over time and provides a dynamic view as to how Instagram influences diets, lifestyles, and well-being, it also presents challenges, such as its resource-intensive nature and participant attrition. Regular contact with participants was maintained and robust data management systems were implemented in order to mitigate these

issues. The study also utilised digital platforms, offering flexible and cost-effective solutions for data collection and participant engagement, particularly in response to disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic (see Section 4.3.5) (Olliffe et al., 2021; Keen, Lomeli-Rodriguez, and Joffe, 2022).

The mixed-methods approach integrates qualitative and quantitative data, offering a comprehensive understanding of complex research questions through the combination of numerical data and detailed bilingual narrative accounts (English and Arabic), making it particularly valuable in public health and social research, where it reveals both broad patterns and individual experiences (Bryman, 2016; Pink et al., 2016; Creswell, J.W. and Creswell, J.D., 2017). This approach addresses potential challenges such as increased resource demands and the risk of imbalance between qualitative and quantitative components. Justification for employing mixed methods was clearly provided, ensuring that the complementary nature of both data types enhanced the study's overall integrity and depth. Transparency in the analytical processes was maintained by detailing methods and steps taken during analysis (see Chapter 5), explaining how results were interpreted and disclosing any decisions or assumptions that influenced the findings (Robson and McCartan, 2016; Flick, 2018).

The longitudinal panel design, combined with digital ethnographic methods, underscores the adaptability and effectiveness of this research approach. The use of interactive online surveys and semi-structured interviews highlighted the innovative use of digital platforms in data collection and qualitative research. As Pink et al. (2016) note: "Digital ethnography is not just about the internet; it is about understanding the ways in which the internet is intertwined with everyday lives." This study demonstrates the potential of digital ethnography to capture complex social dynamics in an increasingly digital world. Longitudinal design not only provided a robust framework for investigating the evolving impact of Instagram on the diets, lifestyles, and well-being of young Qatari women, it proved particularly effective in studying discreet and hard-to-reach communities through the use of online platforms. The shift to virtual methods ensured the continuity and quality of data collection despite external challenges, highlighting the feasibility and benefits of digital ethnography in researching health and well-being dynamics within such demographics.

### **4.3. Data Collection Methods**

#### ***4.3.1. Demographic: Young Qatari Women***

This study focuses on young women in Qatar, aged between 18 and 30, addressing a significant gap in research by exploring their roles in managing personal well-being through *Insta-Trainers* and the use of *Insta-Training* functionalities. The global underrepresentation of women across various sectors, as highlighted by Criado-Perez (2019), is similarly evident in Qatar and the wider Gulf (*Khaleej*) region, where historical narratives have often marginalised or omitted women's experiences. This absence reflects a broader pattern of erasure within the reconstructed histories of the Arab world (Bint Nasser, 2017; Sonbol, 2017). In particular, the historiography of Arabia—including the Arabian Peninsula—remains incomplete, with limited archival material and scholarly attention devoted to women's roles (Bint Nasser, 2017; Al-Fassi, 2017; Sonbol, 2017). Despite the critical contributions Gulf women have made to their states' social, political, and economic development, their stories remain underrepresented in both academic literature and public discourse. This scholarly oversight shows the importance of research that foregrounds the voices and lived experiences of young women in the region. In centring this demographic, the present study not only contributes to correcting the historical imbalance but also offers a culturally nuanced analysis of how young Qatari women engage with digital technologies, particularly within the framework of health, beauty, and lifestyle curation on Instagram.

It is important to note that, while not the primary goal, my study contributes to filling these documentation gaps by exploring how social media, specifically *Insta-Training* functionalities, influences the lives of young Qatari women (See Chapter 1). In particular, assessing the broader cultural impact of digital interactions and how they might transform traditional values, customs, and individual identities also helps address these gaps in the representation of *Khaleeji* women (RQ3). Additionally, an in-depth investigation into the correlation between engagement with *Insta-Trainer* content and time devoted to physical and mental self-care provides vital data on the potential benefits and drawbacks of such engagement, enhancing our understanding of the health implications of digital media consumption among this demographic (RQ 1 and 4).

This research is crucial for understanding how global digital trends and local cultural retention balance, offering insights into the coexistence and competition between modernity and tradition in a rapidly digitising world. For instance, a significant finding outlined in Chapter 8 is that women, particularly sisters and mothers, play a critical role in managing family well-being, leading to the exploration of intensive mothering within a postfeminist framework (Gill, 2017). This discovery serves as a prime example of how my work contributes to and enriches our understanding of the

nuanced roles women play in both public and private spheres. Thorough documentation and analysis of these roles are essential for gaining a deeper understanding of family dynamics and *Khaleeji* women's cultural and societal contributions, topics that will be discussed extensively in subsequent chapters.

Another reason for focusing on Qatari women is their notably high level of engagement on social media platforms like Instagram, which exceeds that of women from other neighbouring countries (Dennis et al., 2016; 2018). Young users are more likely to consume content rather than produce it, making them ideal subjects for this study (Dennis et al., 2016; 2018). These factors not only underline the relevance of the chosen demographic but also contribute significantly to bridging the gender data gap and providing timely insights into societal development. *Khaleejis*, especially women, often present a challenge for researchers due to their tendency towards privacy, a trait deeply embedded in the Islamic principles and cultural norms of the region (Abokhodair and Vieweg, 2016; Alabdulqader, 2017). This communal concept of privacy introduces unique challenges in accessing and understanding this demographic. My position as a Qatari woman researching my peers enables me to overcome this barrier, accurately represent their realities, and interpret the nuanced messages in their survey responses and interviews, thereby enhancing the value of my datasets for researchers who struggle to access and analyse information from this private and discreet group.

The specific demographic under study is distinctive in several ways. These are highly educated, ambitious young Qatari women, many of whom possess impressive professional credentials and have benefited from free education and world-class healthcare—privileges afforded by the state as part of its commitment to national development under the Qatar National Vision 2030. However, this demographic also faces a number of structural and socio-cultural challenges. Despite state-provided opportunities, access to them is often mediated by societal factors such as gender segregation in professional environments, class-based distinctions tied to tribal affiliations, and informal barriers to government-granted rights. In this context, access to resources such as healthcare, employment, and educational advancement is shaped by a complex interplay between the state, society, and family or tribal networks (Held and Ulrichsen, 2011). While these women enjoy considerable national privilege, this does not always translate into equal access or autonomy, creating a layered and often contradictory experience of empowerment.

From an external perspective, these women may be perceived as passive beneficiaries of a rentier state; however, their self-perception often differs (ibid., 2011). While maintaining a strong sense of privacy—rooted in Islamic values and local cultural norms—they are also deeply engaged with digital technologies, which have become interwoven into their daily lives and digitally present them as global citizens that can be perceived as being from anywhere.

This study, therefore, captures a significant moment in time in which digital practices are not only shaping health and lifestyle behaviours but are also becoming integral to how identity, self-worth, and wellbeing are negotiated and are being presented. It offers a rare and valuable opportunity to explore how digital technologies intersect with a uniquely complex cultural context—one marked by both privilege and constraint, modernisation and tradition (as referenced in the QNV).

The complexities of this demographic—navigating privilege, societal expectations, and digital engagement—render the *Insta-Trainer* framework particularly appropriate for this study. As a concept grounded in platform dynamics and shaped by political, economic, and cultural currents, the *Insta-Trainer* captures how Instagram’s curated content, influencer practices, and algorithmic functionalities operate as pedagogical tools. I demonstrate that these tools subtly but powerfully guide young Qatari women in instantly training themselves through the formation of health, beauty, and lifestyle routines.

In doing so, the *Insta-Trainer* makes visible the overlapping forces of neoliberal governance, postfeminist sensibilities, and local cultural norms, revealing how these women are simultaneously shaped by, and responding to, broader structures of power and meaning (See Figure 1.1.2). My positionality as a Qatari woman researching peers within my own cultural context further enables me to interpret these layered processes with cultural sensitivity and depth. While I share linguistic, religious, and social references with my participants—facilitating trust and deeper insight—I remain critically aware of my own biases, especially given the complexities of class, tribe, and education that nuance insider/outsider dynamics. By centring this demographic through both theoretical and reflexive lenses, this study offers a culturally grounded and context-specific reading of how digital technologies intersect with gender, wellbeing, and identity in the Gulf.

#### **4.3.2 Pilot Survey**

Before collecting the actual qualitative and quantitative data, an online interactive pilot survey was launched with the primary objective of improving the testing techniques while gauging whether the survey questions would yield useful answers (Babbie, 2011). The pilot survey, which I initially shared for a week in July 2020, was in a traditional format created on Google Forms. The main aim was to test the appropriateness of the questions and measurement methods and to identify which questions needed refinement, alteration, or removal (Creswell, J.W. and Creswell, J.D., 2017). This pilot phase significantly altered my entire approach, which is why I have included this section. With a brief description of the study written in both Arabic and English, the pilot survey was shared with 15 university-educated young women (between the ages of 18 and 30) in and from Qatar via direct messages on multiple social media platforms. Participants were chosen at random from the list of people I follow on both Instagram and Twitter.

The responses to the survey were overall positive, particularly regarding the wording of the questions. The feedback section of the survey revealed that 86% of the participants used a smartphone to complete it. This insight was one of the key factors that prompted me to shift the format to a smartphone-friendly version (Bryman, 2016), developed using Typeform, with multiple visual interface options resembling those found on social media platforms frequently used by these young women from Qatar (see Section 4.3.4). The interface I selected introduces a new method of surveying by replicating the social media experience of scrolling through a chat box or direct message conversation, akin to Instagram DMs, which are more familiar to my sample group than traditional online surveys (Dennis et al., 2016; Robson and McCartan, 2016).

The majority of pilot survey participants completed the 38-question survey within 15 minutes; only two individuals took between 30 and 45 minutes to finish. Despite the inclusion of multiple open-ended questions designed to prompt in-depth insights, the short completion time indicated that the traditional format did not sufficiently encourage detailed, thoughtful responses. The lack of in-depth engagement suggested that the survey format may have been too rigid or impersonal, failing to create an environment conducive to reflection and elaboration (Flick, 2018). This is a significant concern in qualitative research, as the richness of the data is crucial for the success of the study (Babbie, 2011; Flick, 2018). While efficient in terms of completion time, the traditional format appeared to encourage speed; participants might have felt rushed or uninterested in providing comprehensive answers due to the static and formal nature of the interface, highlighting the need for a more engaging and interactive format.

### *4.3.3. Online Interactive Survey*

As previously discussed, the decision to transition from Google Forms to Typeform was motivated by the need to elicit more detailed and nuanced responses from survey participants, as the traditional format lacked the depth required and risked compromising the quality of the insights gathered. Recognising this limitation, a new survey design mimicking Instagram's direct messaging interface was specifically implemented to create a more engaging and familiar experience for respondents, akin to having a conversation with a friend. This shift proved to be effective, as evidenced by feedback from participants like Miznah and Ghaya<sup>10</sup>, who found the new format more conversational and accessible.

The survey presented one question at a time, accompanied by informal, pre-written responses filled with emojis to enhance the chat-like feel, allowing participants to focus on each question without distraction from upcoming ones. This design adaptation not only significantly improved the overall quality and codability of the responses, it also unexpectedly and advantageously aligned with the digital environments the study aimed to investigate. The interactive survey format closely mirrored the social media experiences being studied, thereby enhancing the relevance and contextual accuracy of the data. I also believe that the interface played a significant role in lowering the abandonment rate. The pre-written responses, which mimicked direct messages with a friend, likely had a "do not bail on me" effect, encouraging participants to complete the survey.

Conducting the online survey aimed to pre-identify key behavioural themes related to well-being, body image, and participants' relationships with their cultural values and traditions. This initial phase provided a preliminary understanding of the demographic, facilitate initial coding, and set the groundwork for follow-up interactions. It also provided critical insight into the study's viability, helping to determine whether the research questions were substantively grounded or needed refinement. While some insights were drawn from the pilot study, they were fully realised with the interactive survey.

The responses from the participants were instrumental in shaping the subsequent interview questions, allowing for the customisation of queries tailored to specific respondents. For instance, Tala's survey response mentioned following an Insta-Trainer's diet plan without providing details

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<sup>10</sup> I would like to note that pseudonyms were used throughout the study to protect the privacy and anonymity of the respondents.

about the specifics or outcomes. This information helped formulate targeted questions for her interview, deepening the exploration of her experiences. In a follow-up in-person session in May 2024, I inquired about the various diet plans and trends she had followed in 2021. Interestingly, she could not recall them, humorously remarking that she had tried many and lost track, while currently following a boiled egg diet and practising wall Pilates, which were trends adopted from Insta-Trainers.

The data collected provided a benchmark for comparison with findings from other methods, highlighting key traits and trends for more focused analysis. Surveys are considered essential when sampling a large, culturally complex group, as they capture a comprehensive and accurate representation of the population under study (Babbie, 2011; Bryman, 2016). My initial aim was to obtain between 30 and 50 respondents, and the snowball sampling method was employed to recruit participants, mirroring the approach used in the pilot survey. This technique is particularly effective for accessing populations that are difficult to reach or belong to specific subcultures (Babbie, 2011; Flick, 2018). The process commenced with a random selection of at least 10 women from my social media following who met the inclusion criteria. These participants were then asked to share the survey with three to five women who also fit the criteria (chain referral system, see Babbie, 2011; Robson and McCartan, 2016), resulting in approximately 41 survey respondents, falling within the planned range. To mitigate potential biases or preconceived responses, individuals who participated in the pilot survey were excluded from the new survey distribution, as the questions remained largely unchanged. The interactive survey link was disseminated via Instagram and Twitter.

The snowball method proved particularly advantageous for several reasons. Firstly, it allowed access to a private and discreet population that might have been reluctant to participate through conventional recruitment methods (Abokhodair and Vieweg, 2016). Secondly, leveraging existing social networks increased trust and the willingness to participate in a relatively time-consuming survey, as initial participants could vouch for the legitimacy of the study to their peers (Babbie, 2011). This peer-driven approach was crucial in reaching young women in Qatar who might otherwise have been hesitant to engage due to cultural and social sensitivities. Additionally, it ensured a more representative sample, contributing to a broader range of perspectives from a typically underrepresented population (Sonbol, 2017).

One notable disadvantage of the snowball method was the tendency for participants to refer friends who were similar to themselves, resulting in somewhat homogenous responses. To mitigate this issue, I employed additional data collection methods, including semi-structured interviews tailored to survey responses (see Section 4.3.4), which allowed for a wider range of perspectives to be explored and provided a more nuanced understanding of participant experience.

In summary, the snowball method significantly enhanced the recruitment process, allowing for the inclusion of a diverse sample beyond my immediate social circle, while respecting cultural norms and leveraging social trust within the community. This aspect is particularly relevant in a culturally diverse setting like Qatar, where Qataris belong to various cultural, ethnic, and Islamic sect backgrounds. This diversity enriched my study by providing a wide range of perspectives and experiences.

Despite the general effectiveness of surveys as a data collection tool, several limitations emerged. Surveys tend to focus on common denominators, potentially overlooking issues that are particularly important to individual respondents. Babbie (2011) describes this limitation as “fitting round pegs into square holes” (p. 287), underscoring the challenge of capturing the full diversity of participants’ experiences through standardised survey instruments alone. To address this issue, open-ended questions were included to allowing participants to provide as much detail as they wished. However, privacy concerns might have limited some responses. To alleviate these concerns, a statement was included at the beginning of the survey, assuring participants of confidentiality and anonymity. Additionally, semi-structured interviews were introduced later in the study, in addition to follow-up digital and in-person interactions, balancing the breadth of quantitative responses with the depth of qualitative insights towards a comprehensive understanding of the data collected.

The potential for health risks was also considered, as open-ended questions could lead participants to share personal experiences that might trigger negative emotions. To prioritise participants’ well-being, especially those completing the survey in isolation, links to mental health resources and helplines were provided in the invitation message.

**Note:** See Appendix A for screenshots from a video demonstration of the interactive survey.

#### ***4.3.4. Semi-structured Interviews***

Particularly valuable for understanding the nuanced experiences and perspectives of individuals, semi-structured interviews were employed as a crucial method of data collection to enrich the data collected from the survey by balancing consistency across interviews with the flexibility to explore unique, individual responses (Babbie, 2011; Flick, 2018).

Compared with other data collection methods, semi-structured “interviewing is more of a guided conversation than a search for specific information” (Babbie, 2011, p. 329). This approach provided a flexible yet systematic way to delve deeper into specific topics while also accommodating unexpected but relevant insights from participants (Bryman, 2016; Robson and McCartan, 2016). Interview questions were prepared and organised in a flexible checklist format, incorporating standard questions with those tailored to participants’ survey responses. This approach ensure some guidance while maintaining an informal tone.

Initially, sixteen participants were selected based on their responses to open-ended questions in the survey and contacted for interviews. Efforts were made to balance positive and negative experiences, focusing only on those who expressed interest in being contacted for future research by providing their email addresses. Ultimately, I was able to interview ten participants, but only used eight interviews for my study. Two individuals did not attend the scheduled Zoom calls and failed to respond to follow-up emails, while another two, who were related, requested to be withdrawn from the study due to concerns about privacy, despite my assurances of anonymity.

During the interviews, a general direction was initially established after which questions emerged “in a conversational manner, offering participants the chance to explore issues they feel are important” (Longhurst, 2016, p. 105). Participants were encouraged to organically guide the discussion towards what they considered relevant within the current discourse on health, diets, body image, and self-surveillance on social media. This autonomy allowed them to feel more comfortable and in control of the dialogue, resulting in organic responses, a more nuanced exploration of individual experiences, and deeper conversation around specific issues. The conversations therefore enabled the recording of more descriptive and in-depth personal accounts that surveys alone could not adequately capture.

This interview approach was particularly useful for investigating emotions, behaviours, and sensitive opinions, as well as for collecting a diverse range of experiences from participants’ realities (Bryman, 2016; Flick, 2018). A notable strength was its effectiveness in exploring subtle

nuances in attitudes and behaviours, especially when examined over an extended period (Bryman, 2016). These insights were essential in capturing the complexities of the participants' lived experiences, especially regarding their engagement with digital media and its influence on their well-being and cultural identity (Pink et al., 2016).

While semi-structured interviews yielded richer qualitative data, they also presented challenges, such as variations in data quality depending on the participants' willingness to share (Flick, 2018). To mitigate any inconsistencies in the dataset, since not all participants are asked identical follow-up questions, I assured participants of their anonymity through the use of pseudonyms, which seemed to put them at ease and encouraged them to open up. Additionally, follow-up digital and in-person interactions further enriched the data and addressed gaps by allowing for clarification of certain responses and opportunities for deeper insights (Pink et al., 2016).

#### ***4.3.5. Going On-line: Virtual Methodologies in Digital Ethnographic Research***

Semi-structured interviews provided a metaphorically and literally safer environment for interviewees to share details of sensitive experiences. Metaphorically, they allowed participants to guide the conversation through open-ended questions, giving them control over what to disclose. Literally, the shift to virtual research during the COVID-19 pandemic facilitated social distancing, ensuring participants' physical safety while maintaining data collection continuity.

The transition to virtual methodologies has been recognised as an opportunity to explore new approaches and enhance participant engagement through digital means (Pink et al., 2016; Oliffe et al., 2021; Keen et al., 2022). While technical and internet connectivity were an unavoidable issue, they were generally manageable, given participants extensive experience with remote work and online interactions over the year in lock-downs. Interviews conducted via Zoom, each lasting between 60 and 90 minutes, proved particularly advantageous. Zoom provided flexibility in scheduling and overcame geographical barriers, accommodating my frequent travels between Doha, Manama, and Newcastle during that period (Keen, Lomeli-Rodriguez, and Joffe, 2022). The platform's audio capabilities likely facilitated a friendly, phone call-like interaction, potentially enhancing the depth of qualitative data collected.

The option for participants to turn off their cameras likely encouraged more open and honest discussions. Research suggests that anonymity can enhance honesty and openness by reducing

fears of potential consequences and social desirability bias, although this effect varies by context (Balamurugan, 2024). The absence of visual contact seemed to have provided a sense of anonymity and comfort akin to a confession booth, encouraging participants to share more freely, thus enriching the data collected, as supported by studies on anonymous online interactions (Carroll, 2017). I obtained permission to record the conversations in order to utilise the automatic transcription feature on Zoom, which streamlined the data collection process by eliminating often time-consuming manual transcription or the need to purchase transcription programmes. I did go over transcription to make sure they were consistent with the audio and to translate some Arabic phrases to English, to ensure accuracy in capturing participants' responses (Oliffe et al., 2021).

One notable drawback of online ethnographic research is the limitation in capturing non-verbal cues, such as subtle body language or facial expressions, which are often crucial for understanding the full context of participants' responses and interpreting meaning and emotion (Deakin and Wakefield, 2014). To address the absence of physical presence, I conducted a few follow-up in-person meetings after restrictions were lifted, which I believe compensated for the absence of non-verbal cues in the online interviews. Although these were informal meetings, I obtained permission to incorporate some of the insights from these interactions within my thesis, which helped to confirm and strengthen the findings presented in the core chapter.

Overall, the approach demonstrated the feasibility of virtual ethnographic research and contributed to the discourse on digital ethnography by showing how digital platforms can facilitate immersive, remote data collection, thereby expanding the potential for future research in increasingly digital societies. Integrating digital platforms broadens the scope of ethnographic research by making it more inclusive and accessible (Pink et al., 2016), while reducing costs, enhancing ethical standards through anonymity, and improving data quality (Pink et al., 2016; Carroll, 2017; Oliffe et al., 2021). Despite some limitations, digital ethnography proves to be a valuable tool in contemporary research due to its adaptability and effectiveness in new and challenging contexts. It expands the methodological toolkit for studying digital and globalised societies, offering unique advantages in understanding complex, digital environments (Deakin and Wakefield, 2014; Pink et al., 2016).

#### **4.4. The Analysis Technique**

##### ***4.4.1. Thematic Analysis***

The analysis of the data extracted from the methods above relies on the thematic analysis method (TA). I specifically adopted the flexible TA approach, originally introduced by Braun and Clarke in 2006, revisited in 2012, and further elaborated upon in their subsequent works (Braun and Clarke, 2021; 2022). They propose six steps “for systematically identifying, organising, and offering insight into patterns of meaning (themes) across a data set” (Braun and Clarke, 2012, p. 57). In this study, the three themes represent the main highlights from the findings, encapsulating significant patterns and recurring ideas:

- **The Curated Digital Manuals** explores how digital platforms are utilised by participants, providing insight into their online behaviours and interactions.
- **The Digitalities of Good Health** examines the perceptions and management of health, both in real life and digitally, as defined by participants while using digital technologies. It also discusses state involvement and the cultural and feminist aspects of health management.
- **The New Wave of Online Consumption in the Post-Pandemic Era** addresses the impact of the global pandemic, misinformation, fatphobia, and health, as these timely global circumstances coincided with the data collection phase and had a lasting effect on the participants, including changing the way they view and consume data from Insta-Trainers, as reflected in their responses.

The six-step method of conducting a TA analysis consists of familiarisation, initial coding, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming the themes, and finally producing the overall report (Braun and Clarke, 2012). This data analysis approach enabled me to “make sense of collective shared meanings and experiences” (p. 57) within the data set. As a method, TA offers a robust framework for identifying and analysing these complex patterns within qualitative data. Studies similar to mine—such as Smith and Bell (2018) on the content of health and fitness posts on Instagram and Rodney (2019) on the role of blogs in shaping health-related knowledge—demonstrate the utility of TA in understanding how media influences public health and personal wellness. Through this structured approach, I was able to define and name significant themes currently impacting various aspects of young women’s lives in Qatar.

The TA method—particularly suited for qualitative data analysis due to its flexibility in exploring and interpreting complex datasets—also allowed me to evaluate whether the identified themes were productive or problematic, contributing to a nuanced understanding of the participants’

experiences. One of TA's strengths is in its capacity for deep engagement with data, as demonstrated in Sakr's (2019) study on the influence of Instagram on students' creative processes. The reflective nature of TA enabled the researcher to spend considerable time understanding the data, facilitating a nuanced exploration of the subject matter. TA's adaptability as a method for qualitative analysis is further demonstrated in research on clean eating among young adults (Ambwani et al., 2019), where it was used to analyse open-ended survey responses. The study revealed the nuanced ways in which clean eating is positively framed, despite its potential links to eating disorders, illustrating TA's effectiveness in uncovering complexities and contradictions within participants' narratives. This highlights the method's ability to reveal subtle patterns in open-ended responses, similar to my surveying method. In another instance, Holmes et al. (2017) utilised TA for its suitability in analysing language-oriented data, particularly in contexts where language constructs social realities to investigate feminist perspectives on eating disorders and anorexia. The method's flexibility in dealing with transcribed interviews and its focus on thematic discourse analysis make it an ideal tool for examining how participants articulate their experiences and understand their social worlds.

It is crucial to acknowledge common pitfalls associated with TA (Braun and Clarke, 2022), such as the major risk of superficial coding, where themes are not sufficiently detailed or nuanced, leading to vague or overly broad themes that do not provide meaningful insights. This issue arose when I initially used NVivo; my codes were not as detailed and deep as I intended because I was simultaneously learning how to use the software, which hindered the quality of my output (see Section 4.4.4 on coding). To mitigate these challenges, Braun and Clarke (2022) emphasise the importance of reflexivity and transparency throughout the research process, highlighting that researchers must be explicit about their analytic decisions and engage deeply with the data to develop well-supported and coherent themes. I addressed this issue when reverting to manual methods to codify my work. Mindful of these pitfalls, I did what I could to ensure that the thematic analysis in my study was rigorous and provided a comprehensive understanding of the data.

Overall, thematic analysis stands out as an effective approach for qualitative data analysis. Its systematic process for identifying, organising, and interpreting themes enables researchers to capture the richness and complexity of participants' experiences. TA is particularly valuable in contexts where the analysis of language and narrative is critical, as it allows for a detailed examination of how individuals construct meaning and reality. This analytical method is

particularly fitting for studies similar to mine; as highlighted above, it not only accommodates the exploration of broad themes but also allows for the detailed analysis of specific language and concepts.

#### ***4.4.2. Latent Inductive Approach***

The thematic analysis (TA) approach adopted in my study was a latent inductive approach. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), the latent level of thematic analysis is used “to identify or examine the underlying ideas, assumptions, and conceptualisations – and ideologies – that are theorised as shaping or informing the semantic content of the data” (p. 84). Unlike deductive TA, which imposes predefined categories, this approach involves deriving themes directly from the data, allowing it to guide thematic development and uncover deeper, more nuanced insights. This method aligns well with the theoretical framework of my study, which seeks to explore the interplay between individual behaviours and societal norms. In contrast, deductive TA imposes predefined themes based on existing theories, potentially overlooking the nuanced and emergent insights from the data.

Braun and Clarke’s (2021) emphasis on reflexivity and transparency was crucial for my study. The latent inductive approach enabled me to prioritise the themes that emerged directly from the participants’ data, ensuring that the voices and experiences of the young Qatari women were central to the analysis. I drew methodological inspiration from Smith and Bell’s (2018) study, particularly their use of TA to uncover the latent and embedded meanings behind fitness images on Instagram. The approach allowed me to delve into the underlying assumptions and complex sociocultural influences that shape participants’ experiences.

The TA approach ensured that the analysis remained true to the participants’ authentic voices and experiences, which is crucial when studying discreet, private, and bilingual populations. It is essential to recognise that, in research involving peer populations where the researcher may share common experiences, there is a risk of bias—preconceptions or subjective interpretations that a researcher may bring into the study, potentially shaping data collection and interpretation—an issue extensively discussed in the context of reflexivity (Finlay, 2002; Riessman, 2008). Tracy (2013) emphasises the need to constructively manage these biases, as they can also be generative and provide unique insights and deeper connections to the subject matter. A researcher’s familiarity with cultural or social dynamics can facilitate a more nuanced interpretation of data, as long as

there is critical awareness of potential influences (Riessman, 2008). Allowing themes to emerge directly from the participants' data mitigates the imposition of the researcher's assumptions and ensures that the findings accurately reflect the participants' authentic voices (Finlay, 2002; Tracy, 2013). While bias in qualitative research is inevitable, it can be used constructively when acknowledged and managed transparently.

#### ***4.4.3. The Six-Step Process***

As earlier mentioned, the steps I applied to analyse the data set from the survey responses and one-on-one interview transcripts followed the six-step process, drawing upon the methodologies outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2012, 2021) and additional supporting research (Ambwani et al., 2019; Rodney, 2019; Smith and Bell, 2018).

Initially, the 'familiarisation' step involved thorough immersion in the data, enabling me to become intimately familiar with its content—a critical step in thematic analysis that lays the groundwork for accurate coding and theme identification by helping the researcher fully grasp the context and nuances of the data, as emphasised by Rodney (2019). Although I used the Zoom transcription feature, I meticulously reviewed the recorded audio to verify accuracy, translating any Arabic phrases that were missed or transcribed incorrectly to ensure no meaning was lost and no details overlooked. This dual process deepened my engagement with the participants' experiences and responses, allowing for a richer understanding of the subtle nuances in their responses, which is crucial for the subsequent steps of coding and thematic development (Ambwani et al., 2019).

During the 'coding' step—defined as the process of identifying and systematically labelling data segments with codes—I identified both minor and major codes within the overall data set (Braun and Clarke, 2006; 2012), which is vital for identifying key themes within the data sets (Smith and Bell, 2018). Highlighting significant patterns during this foundational stage captured the essence of the data. I initially used NVivo's Word Frequency Query feature to flag frequently repeated words yet later transitioned to manual coding (for more detail, see Section 4.4.4). The hands-on approach allowed for a more nuanced interpretation of the data, enabling me to identify connections and relationships within the data set more effectively.

The 'searching for themes' step required an in-depth examination of the initial codes to identify overarching patterns that signify broader meanings within the data set. This stage involved

interpreting how codes interconnect to form a cohesive narrative. Holmes et al. (2017) employed a similar approach in their study on feminist approaches to Anorexia Nervosa, demonstrating the importance of moving beyond surface-level descriptions to uncover deeper societal and cultural implications. For instance, in my study, the initial theme, “I need a rigorous routine to look like I fit in”, emerged through an iterative process of comparing and contrasting different codes, which highlighted participants’ intensive efforts to conform to particular beauty standards. This theme reflects a broader societal pressure, as illustrated by individual codes such as “permanent diets,” “intensive workouts,” and “minor surgery,” collectively demonstrating a pattern of behaviour driven by the desire to meet aesthetic ideals. During the manual coding stage, I used Excel to label and organise the codes with letters and numbers, which facilitated the identification of the themes. This process of searching for themes involves synthesising individual codes into meaningful clusters that provide a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the research subject (Holmes et al., 2017).

The ‘reviewing themes’ step involved a thorough re-examination of the data set, comparing emergent themes with survey findings and interview transcripts. Follow-up interactions, such as informal coffee outings, direct messages, and phone calls, were particularly beneficial at this stage, as they facilitated the verification of themes by presenting preliminary findings to the participants. This step, described by Ambwani et al. (2019) as crucial for refining and validating thematic categories, ensured that the themes accurately represented the data. Initial themes were reviewed and merged to create more comprehensive and overarching themes. For instance, the preliminary theme “I need a rigorous routine to look like I fit in” evolved into “Digitalities of Good Health”, which became the title and content focus of Chapter 8.

The ‘defining and naming themes’ process involved articulating the essence of each theme and the overall story it told about the data, while ensuring that the names chosen were concise and informative. This careful articulation—elaborated in Chapter 5, which provides a summary analysis of the data and serves as a standalone resource on Instagram usage among women in Qatar—enhanced the clarity and interpretative depth of the analysis.

The ‘report’ final stage involved synthesising each theme into an analytic commentary, supported by appropriate evidence from the data set. It was crucial to relate each analytic point to the literature review and research questions to maintain coherence and ensure strong alignment to the study’s

objectives. The report weaves together the analytic narrative and data extracts to present a coherent and persuasive story, situating the findings within the broader research context. This includes exploring how digital platforms reinforce or challenge normative cultural narratives, particularly around health, beauty standards, and social expectations. The themes also examine the framing of individual identity and the negotiation of cultural norms within a rapidly globalising digital landscape, revealing the complex interplay between personal agency and societal pressures. This report not only illustrates the broader implications but also situates the findings within the existing body of research, offering insights into the complex interplay of digital culture and personal identity (Braun and Clarke, 2006, 2022; Holmes et al., 2017).

#### ***4.4.4. Coding: NVivo Vs. Paper and Pen***

As previously mentioned, I initially used NVivo as part of the six-step method of data analysis. The software was employed to organise and analyse the text, images, and audio collected through the aforementioned methods. The programme provides a centralised platform to store and view the diverse types of data collected and is also compatible with the plug-in NCapture, which captures various forms of data from social media—features particularly suited to my research. The main feature I utilised within the software was the tool that allowed me to set up node structures based on my literature review, and run a Word Frequency Query on all imported data to identify the most recurring words within large datasets, such as the transcribed data from my interviews. This feature proved most helpful during the second and third phases of Braun and Clarke’s thematic analysis process. For example, the phrase “intensive workouts” frequently appeared in survey transcripts and interviews and was flagged nine times using the Word Frequency Query feature. I then coded the term as a major code in phase two and upgraded it to a theme labelled “Fitness and Health” in phase three of the TA analysis.

I did, however, encounter several issues with NVivo that led to its discontinuation in my analysis process. Although the university provided NVivo for free, licensing issues caused delays; renewal often took several days, requiring me to contact the relevant department and wait for a response, which disrupted the flow of my research. Moreover, licensing restrictions limited access to my documents to the one device on which NVivo was initially installed. This limitation made it challenging to work on university computers in the library or Postgraduate Research Office and to access my files when I travelled to Doha or Manama for extended periods. Frequent technical issues, such as software crashing, further hindered my ability to use NVivo effectively.

I reverted to traditional methods of data analysis, adopting a manual approach using colourful highlights, a letter filing system for trends, and a legend of numbers and letters to identify aspects, degrees, and types. This system was organised in Excel, with a primary sheet containing all the letters and secondary sheets detailing branches and corresponding numbers. Although this method was more time-consuming and labour-intensive, it offered greater flexibility, accessibility and adaptability—crucial during the unpredictable circumstances of my PhD research. By saving my documents on the university’s OneDrive, I could work on any device without relying on specific software. It is important to note that, despite the transition, I still used codes found with NVivo as a preliminary legend for the manual phase of coding.

The shift from NVivo to manual coding highlights both the challenges and unexpected benefits of adapting research methods to suit evolving circumstances. NVivo offered robust analytical tools, automated processes, and comprehensive data integration, which enhanced the efficiency and depth of the initial analysis. However, the technical and logistical issues I faced underscored the importance of having a reliable and flexible backup method. The manual approach, while slower and more prone to human error, fostered a deeper engagement with the data and provided a more nuanced and intuitive understanding of emerging themes.

Although established methodologies for manual coding have proven successful in qualitative research, I developed a unique coding method tailored specifically to the needs of my PhD thesis. For the surveys, I began by printing out all 41 responses and assigning each a unique number and anonymous name. Each survey, ranging from two to five pages, was stapled and placed in a transparent sleeve within a multipage transparent sleeved folder.

For coding, I used Excel to create a vertical key, assigning each letter from A to Z with frequently identified words (including their synonyms) such as “learning from Instagram”, “influencers are informative”, “I trust”, or “I distrust”. When multiple properties or dynamics were present, such as content related to fitness labelled as “Fitness/Physical Activity/Workouts”, I created a separate sheet in the same document with a corresponding letter. For instance, if fitness and workouts were assigned the letter F, specific details like “Intensive workouts” would be coded as F1, “Light workout” as F2, and “Fitness plan from Insta-Trainer” as F3.

This process was conducted simultaneously across all the printed documents. To ensure accuracy, I performed a second round of coding using the letters and letter-number combinations. In the final

sheets, I compiled the frequency of each letter code and letter-number combination—such as, “Fitness and Health”, which was mentioned 32 times, and F1 for “Intensive Workouts”, mentioned only 12 times—and calculated the percentage for each code combination. Additionally, I used neon highlighters to mark answers I considered quote-worthy for the core chapters.

Inspired by Braun and Clarke’s steps, manual coding not only facilitated my familiarity with the data but also enabled me to semi-memorise the content, enhancing the depth and accuracy of my analysis. It is important to note that I did not follow the same process for the interviews, since they were from the same pool of survey respondents. Instead, I review transcript summaries (one to two-page documents of notes and page number references) for quotes, which helped fill in gaps when, for example, a participant mentioned something in the interview that they had not mentioned in the survey.

This manual coding approach allowed me to learn about my respondents and identify themes. Physically going through the material provided a sense of normalcy that NVivo did not; in the context of the pandemic, with lockdown restrictions and the shift to working from home turning everything digital and online, engaging with pen and paper felt grounding and normal in an otherwise abnormal circumstance. Ironically, what I expected to be an in-person and manual process became remote and virtual, and what I expected to be digital became manual and physical.

This shift underscores the adaptability required in conducting a PhD thesis, where methodological flexibility can significantly benefit the research. Ultimately, the combination of NVivo and manual coding allowed for a comprehensive and nuanced analysis, ensuring the robustness and validity of my findings.

## **4.5 Conclusion**

This chapter outlines the research design, methodology, and analytical approaches employed to investigate the societal and cultural impact of Instagram on the diets, lifestyles, and well-being of Qatari women. The study employed a mixed-methods approach, integrating an open-ended interactive survey with semi-structured interviews to comprehend the influence of Insta-Trainers on Qatari women. The ethnographic component, which included various follow-up interactions such as phone calls, direct messages, and informal coffee meetings, played a crucial role in validating and enriching the findings. The semi-structured interviews with eight Instagram users

offered nuanced perspectives into their motivations, perceptions, and experiences regarding health content on the platform. A notable benefit of this approach was the ongoing engagement with these remarkable women, who I have continued to connect with since our initial encounters in 2021. These interactions, whether brief or extended, along with recorded, transcribed, and thoroughly analysed interviews, provided valuable insight. They facilitated a robust exploration of how Instagram influences their perceptions, practices, and choices concerning health, lifestyle, and well-being.

Thematic analysis was the primary analytical technique employed due to its flexibility and ability to provide a comprehensive account of the data. Braun and Clarke's (2006; 2012; 2021) thematic analysis method was pivotal in accurately identifying key themes, including shifts in cultural and social values resulting from participants' consumption of Instagram content related to health, wellbeing, and self-surveillance. This flexible and effective approach effectively detected changes in attitudes, habits, and overall dynamics within the targeted population, systematically extracting timely themes from the codes collected through surveys and interviews.

Ethical considerations were meticulously addressed throughout the study. Institutional ethical approval was obtained, informed consent was secured for recording conversations, and stringent measures were implemented to protect anonymity and confidentiality. The research adhered to established ethical standards for human participants, ensuring privacy, voluntary participation, and the right of participants to withdraw at any stage.

The research is not without its limitations. The qualitative nature of the study restricts the generalisability of the findings, though generalisability was not the primary objective. Additionally, the study's focus on a specific demographic and social media platform may limit the broader applicability of the results. To address these limitations, data triangulation from various sources was employed to enhance validity. While providing flexibility, the shift from NVivo to manual methods of coding introduced additional risks of human error and inconsistency, which were countered by implementing a rigorous double-checking process. This transition also required significant time and effort, impacting the overall efficiency of the data analysis process but ultimately facilitating a more nuanced and in-depth engagement with the data. Finally, potential biases may have arisen from self-reported data in interviews, especially considering that the participants were my peers, which may have influenced my analysis. The use of reflexivity and

maintaining critical awareness of my positionality throughout the research process helped mitigate any potential biases.

Given these considerations, it is evident that the combination of the longitudinal panel design and various data collection methods has provided a comprehensive understanding of these research subjects. In summary, the design, data collection methods, and thematic analysis approach have ensured the holistic representation of the sample population. The data set not only offers accurate accounts of the participants' realities and experiences but can also be re-interpreted in future studies and used to propose new insights around social media usage. These methods effectively worked together to produce data sets that can potentially contribute to the creation of safer online platforms for young, impressionable women. The documented shifts in attitudes and behaviour provide a snapshot of reality within a certain period, making the study relevant to current times and serving as a benchmark for comparison against similar future studies, both in Qatar and the region. The next chapter, Chapter 5: Summary Analysis and Insights, will present the insights and examples, along with the final themes and their definitions.

## **Chapter 5.**

### **The Report: Analysis and Insights**

#### **5.1. Introduction**

In this chapter, I provide an overview and analysis of the main themes that emerged from my research, summarise significant findings and insights, and offer preliminary answers to the research questions posed in this thesis. Core themes are identified, defined, and linked to the literature discussed in Chapters 2 and 3. As the final step in Braun and Clarke's (2006; 2012; 2023) thematic analysis, this chapter encapsulates the comprehensive findings and interpretations, serving as an introduction to the core sections that follow and establishing the foundation for a comprehensive examination of the interconnected aspects explored in this thesis. I present the empirical findings and briefly integrate them with theoretical insights, providing a cohesive analysis that sets the stage for the in-depth exploration of each theme in the corresponding chapters.

An important contextual factor that enhances the relevance of this study is the global COVID-19 pandemic, which led to a significant transformation of daily life and dramatically increased online activity as students, workers, and families transitioned to virtual environments for education, work, and social interaction. The impact of digital transformation was highlighted by the societal consequences of the pandemic. The world collectively engaged in what appeared to be a large-scale digital 'social experiment', with digital platforms and social media becoming essential for maintaining daily routines (Fuchs, 2021). The intensified reliance on online spaces, including Instagram, provided a unique context for this study, offering rich insights into the accelerated adoption of and adaptation to digital technologies between 2020 and 2022. However, the importance of my research extends beyond the immediate effects of the pandemic, as it delves into the roles, behaviours, and attitudes of young Qatari women towards health, diets, and social media usage.

The exploration of the derived insights is particularly significant within the fields of media and social media studies, as it addresses the complex interplay between technology, society, and governance. In the context of Gulf and Middle Eastern studies, especially within Qatar, my research offers valuable insights into the region's unique socio-political landscape. By focusing on young Qatari women, it provides a critical perspective on gender and digital culture in a rapidly changing

society, highlighting the intersection of global digital trends with local cultural practices and governmental strategies. The findings presented in these statistics and insights can also serve as a valuable resource for other researchers, providing a framework for understanding similar dynamics in comparable contexts.

## **5.2 Data Insights: Numbers and Percentages**

In this section, I examine the quantitative and qualitative data collected during my research, with the datasets providing both numerical and percentage-based analyses, allowing for contextualisation using the literature reviewed in Chapters 2 and 3. I have systematically divided the section into two subsections: the first presents the demographic insights and findings, while the second offers key statistics and insights derived from both surveys and interviews. The original round of data analysis was instrumental in identifying the key themes, and the longitudinal study played a crucial role in confirming that these findings were accurate and remained relevant over time. This holds particularly true for the themes identified both manually and through NVivo. I want to note that I did conduct a few follow-up interactions via various forms of communication, such as direct messages on Instagram, face-to-face gatherings, and even on WhatsApp. These follow-up interactions were particularly valuable in assessing whether participants' behaviours persisted, evolved, or changed, as well as for observing any outcomes resulting from their initial responses.

### ***5.2.1 Demographical Insights***

The demographic profile of the 41 participants in my study consists predominantly of women aged 25 to 30 (78%), with smaller groups aged 18 to 24 (15%) and those aged 30 and above (7%). A significant portion of this overall group holds postgraduate qualifications (56%), while the remaining 44% have undergraduate degrees; no one possesses only high school qualifications. Despite this high level of educational attainment, which might suggest a more critical approach to media usage, the reality is more complex. For instance, 75.61% of participants reported negative experiences triggered by engaging with Insta-Trainers and Insta-Functionalities, yet a substantial 82.93% continue to engage with these functionalities and have made purchases, including subscriptions, food and workout plans, or products. Additionally, the majority still find Instagram content helpful and informative (70.73%) and continue to follow and apply what they have learnt from Insta-Trainers and content (68.29%).

Despite negative experiences, this ongoing engagement with Instagram can be attributed to several factors. Many users value the platform for its wide range of what they perceive as informative content, from lifestyle tips to educational materials (73%). The inspiration provided by Instagram, particularly in terms of product recommendations and lifestyle choices, continues to resonate with users. Instagram also fosters a sense of community and connection by offering emotional support and a space for engagement with like-minded individuals, as highlighted in the survey by respondents Dhai and Hajar. The users' practical applications of the content—whether related to fitness, cooking, or professional advice—enhance its relevance to their daily lives (70%). The platform's convenience and accessibility, allowing users to easily find and consume tailored content, further contribute to its enduring appeal.

A key finding among this demographic, and one of the unique contributions of my study, is the concept of the user-disjuncture. This tendency, identified in 18 surveys (43% of participants), refers to the disconnect between the respondents' levels of media literacy, education, and knowledge, and the influence of Instagram's Insta-Training functionalities and Insta-Trainers on their thoughts and actions. User-disjuncture highlights a paradox: the gap between participants' understanding and awareness of the ways in which curated content on Instagram is algorithmically designed to influence users and how it shapes their own behaviours, including their practices and purchases. The term “user” is chosen deliberately over “follower” or “subscriber” because not all consumers of such content necessarily subscribe to or follow the Insta-Trainers.

The concept of ‘user-disjuncture’ is employed as a conceptual tool to underscore how Instagram's algorithmic priorities and influencer portrayals can shape users' decisions and self-perceptions, leading to practices and consumption patterns that may not align with their actual knowledge or beliefs. Despite users' negative experiences, the utility of Insta-functionalities—spanning information, inspiration, community, practicality, and convenience—continues to sustain its value and influence. Initially, I considered labelling this phenomenon ‘Insta-Paradox’ or ‘Insta-Disjuncture’. However, the term ‘user-disjuncture’ is ultimately more fitting and inclusive, as it encompasses the phenomena across various digital platforms and devices more effectively, reflecting the prevalence of this tendency not only on Instagram but also on platforms like TikTok or wearable devices, as mentioned by several participants during the semi-structured interviews.

All interviewees reported heavy screen time usage, averaged 4 hours per day, equivalent to 17% of their day. It is important to note, however, that the reported hours may be higher than the data suggests, as interviews were conducted at different times of the day, with some participants sharing their daily usage recorded by their device before the day had ended. Although a significant proportion of interviewees (44%) work in media industries and use social media for work purposes, the data nevertheless reveals that the majority of all participants' screen time is spent browsing Instagram. This finding aligns with a study by Northwestern University on social media use by young women in Qatar (Dennis et al., 2016), which found that 71% of young women used Instagram, with 51% engaging with the platform at least once a day. In my study, all interviewees engaged with Instagram at least once daily.

### ***5.2.2. Insights: Survey and Interviews***

I extracted both qualitative and quantitative demographic data using the online survey. The average completion time for the survey was 35 minutes per respondent. Although the survey did not explicitly inquire about COVID-19, seven respondents independently mentioned the pandemic in their open-ended responses, primarily discussing how they adapted to lockdown conditions by focusing on fitness and health, which highlights the significant impact of the pandemic on their lifestyle choices. This unexpected finding prompted me to reassess my research plans and design a chapter dedicated to the profound effects of COVID-19 on everyday life and health practices influenced by digital platforms. Additionally, I incorporated focused discussions on the pandemic into the interviews to gain deeper insights into how participants modified their use of digital fitness tools and adapted their overall health strategies during the pandemic. This approach also highlights the importance and effectiveness of employing a flexible approach to data collection and using mixed methods in research, as articulated in Chapter 4.

A preliminary review of the survey responses indicates that Instagram plays a significant role in how health and well-being are understood by the respondents. The platform, along with its Insta-Trainers, exerts a powerful pedagogical influence on how individuals perceive themselves through shaping their dietary, lifestyle, and exercise choices (Giroux, 2004; Camacho-Miñano et al., 2019). The responses to open-ended questions revealed a significant correlation between the consumption of Insta-Trainer content and the participants' own practices. Interestingly, some participants provided very concise responses to open-ended questions—either a single sentence or a simple yes or no—despite the survey's conversational tone encouraging elaboration. Although these brief,

unelaborate responses initially appeared less informative, they contributed valuable insights and proved crucial in quantifying aspects of user perceptions. For instance, 25 out of the 41 participants (approximately 61%) did not perceive Insta-Trainers as genuine or believe they provided reliable feedback when endorsing products and services. Among those who did provide further detail, 14 participants noted that many endorsed products were part of sponsored content, diminishing their trust in these reviews. This broader scepticism towards influencer sincerity and transparency was also reflected in the experiences of Hamda and Hayat, who encountered misleading advertisements and ineffective products, with one person even labelling them a ‘scam’.

A notable example of this scepticism comes from Ghaya’s negative experience with a diet meal service recommended by an Arab Insta-Trainer and self-proclaimed nutritionist, which led her to distrust Insta-Trainers from the Middle East. She mentioned that due to her negative experiences with Arab Insta-Trainers and content creators, she consequently began favouring Western influencers, specifically American and Australian ones. Her experience echoes a recurring theme of a perceived reliability gap between Western and non-Western Insta-Trainer content. While participants generally viewed Insta-Trainers as unreliable and insincere, this distrust was amplified towards regional content and influencers, reflecting a colonial legacy, where Western knowledge and expertise are often privileged over non-Western perspectives. Such dynamics not only perpetuate biases but also undermine the value and credibility of regional content and creators, while also raise critical questions about the digital divide and cultural dimensions of technological adoption.

As Young (2019) suggests, these findings are “not surprising, given that most digital technologies are designed for urban, Global North populations” (p. 1425). In other words, this colonial framework continues to shape perceptions in digital spaces, reinforcing the hierarchy of knowledge that places Western content at a higher status compared to non-Western alternatives. This predisposition results in biased visibility and content prioritisation on digital platforms, with certain types of content and creators being prioritised while others are marginalised (O’Neil, 2016; Noble, 2018). Issues of biased presentation styles that shape visibility and modes of authority in digital spaces not only affect user trust but also shape user engagement with digital content. These insights are elaborated in Chapter 7, where I discuss the role of algorithmic bias, visibility, and the concept of algorithmic justice in shaping content consumption and trust on digital platforms.

Despite the negative experiences of Hayat, Hamda, and Ghaya, they, along with 18 other respondents, continue to subscribe to, purchase, and follow Insta-Training content, as evidenced in their responses. This apparent contradiction is also observed among the remaining 20 respondents, implicitly indicating the earlier introduced use-disjuncture, in which they consistently displayed conflicting attitudes towards the content they consume, suggesting a complex relationship between user perceptions and behaviour and justifying the further exploration of factors driving users' continued engagement despite their negative experiences. This contradiction echoes the 'privacy paradox', a concept first identified by Susan Barnes (2006) and later explored by Hargittai and Marwick (2016). The privacy paradox describes internet users who, despite concerns about their personal privacy, continue to share personal information on social media platforms. Similarly, my findings reveal that participants acknowledge the duplicity of Insta-Trainers and the profit-driven nature of their content, yet persist in subscribing to or purchasing the advertised products and/or services. For example, Maryam continued to purchase products and follow health advice from Instagram to improve her gut health, despite expressing distrust towards Insta-Training content and repeatedly stating her awareness of the risks associated with relying on the application for health advice.

User-disjuncture repeatedly emerged throughout the interviews, confirming that the observed contradictions in user reactions were a common response to media consumption, not merely a by-product of survey design or question framing. The intention of my analysis is not to assign blame to the participants; rather, I propose that a form of user-disjuncture shapes user dynamics among the studied population. This phenomenon, where individuals support systems that might not serve their best interests, aligns with Foucault's exploration of power and knowledge (Foucault, 1980). He argues that the pervasiveness of power in everyday practices and knowledge systems subtly influences and shapes individual actions and perceptions, often inciting individuals to reinforce the very structures that may oppress them, without overt coercion. This concept, described as capillary power, refers to a network of power relations that "reaches into the very grain of individuals, touches their bodies, and inserts itself into their actions and attitudes" (Foucault, 1980, p. 39) and is particularly pertinent in understanding the influence of social media. Although seemingly free to make their own choices, users are often guided by content strategies and algorithms that reinforce prevailing norms and behaviours. Consequently, individuals may unwittingly participate in their own oppression, subtly conditioned to support and sustain dominant power structures under the illusion of autonomy.

The influence of Insta-Trainers on participants' lives persists, despite their recognition of the adverse impacts that such platform-related practices have on their mental and physical health. For example, Daniya repeatedly expressed her distrust in Insta-Trainers (both influencers and platform functionalities) throughout the survey and claimed she was not influenced to make any purchases. However, by the end of the conversational survey, she recalled purchasing workout outfits and the Kayla Itsines Bikini Body Challenge back in 2014, even reporting satisfying results. The inconsistency in her responses not only highlights user-disjuncture but also demonstrates the capacity of the platform's digital training functionalities to shape bodily perceptions remotely—a practice evident for at least a decade. This insight raises further questions about the extensive use of the application as a remote training tool and the propagation of fatphobic messaging during the lockdowns. It also justifies the inclusion of an unplanned COVID-19-specific chapter in my research plan (see Chapter 9). An intriguing observation is that Daniya has recently become an Insta-Trainer herself, achieving personal training certification and amassing a significant following by taking on clients through digital workbooks (PCDMs), further indicating the platform's perpetuating cycle of influence despite her earlier assertions to the contrary.

Notably, 17 of the 41 survey respondents (41%) reported that they conducted research before purchasing products advertised on Instagram, demonstrating considerable agency amongst a cohort that is not only media-savvy but also highly educated, with more than half (56%) possessing postgraduate qualifications. These users' commitment to rigorous research and fact-checking indicates a critical engagement with content, despite the pervasive influence of social media marketing. This proactive behaviour may stem from their awareness of user-disjuncture, which, in turn, prompts them to mitigate its effects through more informed decision-making (see Chapter 10 for follow-up discussion).

A noteworthy insight is that 31 out of 41 participants (78%) reported negative experiences with products and services procured through Insta-Trainers and other social media platforms. The same proportion of participants reported feeling compelled to conform to certain aesthetic standards in response to Insta-functionalities and content. This juxtaposition of users' informed scrutiny and continued negative experiences reveals the complex dynamics of platform influence and user decision-making in digitally framed consumer behaviour. Participant purchases included fitness and diet plans, weight-loss supplements, and fashion and body-altering products, such as waist trainers. Eight respondents mentioned using the hair growth supplement, Sugar Bear Hair,

suggesting a possible pandemic trend linked to long COVID-19 symptoms of hair loss, as two participants related it to COVID-19. Additionally, 17 respondents—who are also among the 25 who expressed distrust in the application’s sponsored content—explicitly stated that they regularly follow Insta-trends<sup>11</sup>, such as the Korean flat tummy trend, the Ketogenic Diet, and Diet Ninja Plans.

Twenty-eight respondents (68%) mentioned that they apply self-disciplining practices related to diet and food consumption, while 29 (71%) noted specific changes in their long-term and short-term diet habits due to Insta-Trainers. These participants also cited additional motivations, such as the need for self-validation, self-acceptance, and a desire to feel comfortable in their bodies. Heyes (2007) provides a critical analysis elucidating this behaviour in her exploration of the ways in which societal norms shape female body perception. She argues that women are “ideologically duped by an oppressive set of beauty ideals: being thin will make us (hetero)sexually desirable, aesthetically pleasing to ourselves and others, and better able to build an image that is appropriately feminine” (p. 2). This insight sheds light on the complex interplay between societal expectations and individual desires, while indicating that many women continue to be influenced by Insta-Trainers despite being politically aware, algorithmically literate, and technologically savvy.

Heyes’ analysis of how societal norms can oppress and manipulate women’s self-perception highlights a broader cultural predicament where the pursuit of an ‘ideal’ body is often framed as an empowering choice (Gill, 2023a). However, this post-feminist ‘choice’ is influenced by the beauty standards perpetuated through platforms like Instagram. The pressure placed on users to conform to these standards concerns not only aesthetics; it is also tied to deeper societal values and the promise of social acceptance and success. The contradictions that women face—being empowered to choose yet constrained by narrow definitions of beauty—reveal the subtle coercive power of certain cultural norms magnified by Insta-Trainers and the Insta-functionalities of Instagram. Thus, despite the apparent user empowerment implied by making informed choices about diet and fitness, underlying and pervasive beauty ideals continue to influence and sometimes dictate these decisions.

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<sup>11</sup> Insta-Trends reflect the rapid spread and influence of digital content, as users consume, follow, and often experiment with trends they see, driven by the desire to align with what’s popular or culturally significant at the time. These trends shape people's behaviours, particularly in health and fitness, and create a cycle where users, influencers, and algorithms all contribute to the continual promotion and reinforcement of such trends.

Additionally, 10 out of 41 respondents (24%) disclosed that they have either considered or undergone minor and major elective body-altering surgeries, such as lip fillers, Botox, rhinoplasty, and gastric sleeve surgery. It is critical to recognise that social media was identified as a primary influence for these procedures, as revealed by interviewees such as Nadiya and Ola. Eleven survey respondents explicitly expressed a desire to emulate the ‘perfect’ images seen online, while five expressed intense feelings of exclusion or of being ‘different’ and lacking. One poignant account involved Mahra, who underwent both minor and major body surgeries (shared in a follow-up interaction<sup>12</sup>) and expressed a yearning to emulate the ethnic identity of the content creators she follows, explicitly stating: “*I wish I had their ethnicity.*” This response highlights the profound physical and mental impact on users of engaging with Insta-Training content, clearly indicating a significant power asymmetry between Insta-Trainers and the recipients of their content. The type of content created by Insta-Trainers appears trustworthy enough to encourage participants to purchase overpriced items, self-monitor, adopt questionable health habits, and even opt for medical interventions to achieve what is assumed to be the ideal physical physique and facial features.

Many participants, such as Miznah and Ola, indicated that they follow Insta-Trainers to stay up-to-date with new trends in fitness, makeup, skincare, and fashion. This behaviour aligns with Bartky’s (1988) explanation and subsequent critique of femininity and modernisation, which suggests that a societal compulsion to remain informed emerges as a necessity. Insta-Trainers “may profess to ‘have it all’, wherein the post-feminist, neoliberal model depicts bloggers as making entrepreneurial, life choices” that begin to imprint their content (Archer, 2019, p. 155). This pursuit of “winning at life through [their] labours” is evident across the datasets (Archer, 2019, p. 154).

Ola disclosed during her interview that she “*ritualistically*” notes various products, from makeup to kitchenware, marketed by Insta-Trainers and featured on the explore page (ACDMs) in her iPhone’s Notes app. She dedicates Saturdays to purchasing these items, driven by a desire to emulate the happiness projected by influencers. She later admitted that she does not use half of the kitchenware she purchases, and some beauty products remain sealed.<sup>13</sup> It is important to mention

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<sup>12</sup> I had multiple interactions with Mahra, both at social gatherings and over the phone, as our children participate in the same activities. During these conversations, she disclosed having undergone several surgeries, both minor and major, since her last survey response. These included fillers, Botox, and gastric sleeve surgery in July 2022, the latter of which she described as life changing. Although she expressed feeling happier, she also mentioned experiencing low energy, frequent illness, and difficulty keeping food down, even more than a year after her surgery.

<sup>13</sup> I contacted Ola through Instagram direct messages in August 2024, during which she shared that her relationship with the platform changed significantly since post-COVID-19. She has become more cautious with her digital

that the datasets show that 83% of the cohort have purchased at least one item or service from Insta-Trainer recommendations and Insta-Training functionalities, such as Instagram Shop governed by algorithms.

Similarly, Miznah primarily uses Instagram to stay “*in the know*” about the latest fashion trends. During the interview, which reflected her survey responses, she stated: “*Because of my personality, I really like clothes. I like to wear the proper clothes for everything, and I like to see what is good quality and what is available in the market; sometimes influencers will post good outfits.*” She views the profiles of Insta-Trainers as a fashion look-book for her next purchases and organises her own personalised event-specific look-book by saving relevant posts under specific folders (UCDMs) in the Saved Post feature. This behaviour, observed in both Insta-Trainers and their followers, reflects a neoliberal moral framework that emphasises the creation, constant upkeep, and assessment of one’s personal brand (Banet-Weiser et al., 2013; Archer, 2019).

For Ola and Miznah, this moral framework is exemplified by their continuous monitoring of current fashion trends for the purpose of gaining and maintaining a specific appearance both for personal satisfaction and for public display. This resonates with the aforementioned evaluation by feminist scholars Banet-Weiser (2017; 2018) and Gill (2017; 2023a), illustrating how post-feminist values simultaneously engage with and critique these contemporary behaviours. Personal branding, often celebrated as empowering, may also reinforce traditional gender norms and consumerist pressure on users while simultaneously posing a challenge to the feminist ideals of autonomy and self-determination to which users aspire.

It is important to acknowledge that not all aspects of Instagram, Insta-Trainers, and Insta-Functionalities are negative with regard to their influence on users. Indeed, a significant majority of respondents (73%) reported that Instagram serves as a helpful and informative platform, despite the negative effects and feelings of distrust it may also generate. Among those who perceived the functionalities and the app negatively, a substantial number (70%) also recognised positive aspects. For example, during the interview, Ola expressed that she felt overwhelming pressure to use the lockdown conditions of the pandemic as an opportunity to improve her health. At that time, she

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footprint, primarily using Instagram to stay in touch with friends and to post on her private account. Ola has not engaged with recent trends and finds social media useful mainly for planning activities and managing work-related tasks through UCDMs. When I asked her about her weekly habit of ritualistically buying new products, she confirmed that she still maintains this routine.

relied on Instagram and TikTok for recipes and dietary guidance (PCDMs and ACDMs). Ola's reliance on this content, despite recognising its overwhelming nature, reflects how she used it informatively and as a biopedagogical tool to manage aspects of her daily diet.

One recurring topic of learning through Instagram mentioned organically by six respondents, was the care of children, mothering, and parenting. This theme underpins a comprehensive discussion on mothering within the framework of post-feminism in Chapter 8 (Gill, 2017; Abidin, 2017; Archer, 2019). Another crucial insight is how participants curated their health, lifestyle, and diet manuals on the platform. The use of Instagram as a means of learning, which has shaped one of the main themes of this research, illustrates a clear biopedagogical impact. This characterisation of Instagram as a biopedagogical platform is echoed in the findings of Camacho-Miñano et al. (2019), cited in both Chapters 2 and 3, which demonstrate how young women utilise Instagram to learn about body, health, and fitness. These observations are analysed in Chapters 6 and 7, focusing on the theme of Curated Digital Manuals: UCDMs, ACDMs, and PCDMs. Additionally, I connect these observations with the responses of participants like Miznah, Ola, and Daniya, which serve as examples in the statistical analysis.

The influence of biopedagogies is intrinsically linked to contemporary interpretations of biopower—how individuals subtly self-discipline themselves to self-regulate their health and bodies to cultivate ideal, productive subjectivities (Foucault, 1980; Heyes, 2007; Rodney, 2019). Insta-Trainer content, which instructs users on managing their appearance and bodies, aligns with the neoliberal values of individual responsibility and self-optimisation, as articulated in Elias et al. (2017). This system of values encourages individuals to conform to market-driven standards of beauty and health, thereby reinforcing the capitalist logic of continuous improvement and competitive self-enhancement. The primary beneficiaries of this system are the platforms themselves, activated through both the Insta-Training functionalities embedded within their algorithms, and the Insta-Trainers and self-proclaimed professionals who collectively amass significant social, financial, and socio-political power (Abidin, 2016a; 2016b; Beta, 2019; Davenport, 2021).

According to Elias and Gill (2018), platform users are positioned within a surveillance mechanism created by digital self-monitoring cultures that promote neoliberal values. Such values not only encourage users' participation but also their active endorsement of prevailing beauty and health

norms. While users engage with content under the guise of self-empowerment and personal growth, they are simultaneously integrated into a capitalist system that profits from their participation, thereby reinforcing dominant power structures (Elias and Gill, 2018). This neoliberal dynamic illustrates how biopower and capitalism intersect through the use of technology and social media as channels for sustaining and expanding capitalist power. Through the lens of Foucault's concept of biopower, my analysis shows how Insta-Trainers influence individual behaviours and perpetuate a culture where self-regulation aligns with broader neoliberal economic and social goals (see Chapter 8).

In summary, the survey data, supported by the interview responses, depicts a complex scenario in which educated young women exhibit both critical engagement with and compliance towards the media content on Instagram. For some post-feminist scholars, such compliance with Insta-Trainers might be interpreted as a form of empowerment, as empowerment encompasses the freedom to make personal choices (Gill, 2007; 2023; McRobbie, 2008). Post-feminist perspectives argue that empowerment can coexist with the consumerist and aesthetic pressures of social media, reflecting a nuanced interplay between agency and conformity (Gill, 2007; 2023). However, Foucault's analysis of power relations challenges this perception by revealing that power operates most effectively on those who believe themselves to be free, contending that this sense of freedom is intricately linked to the mechanisms of power that shape and influence individual choices (1982, p. 221). The apparent autonomy exercised by young women in choosing and supporting Insta-Trainers may therefore actually signify their deeper integration into a system of power that subtly dictates their decisions. What is perceived as personal freedom and empowerment may, in fact, be an indication of how power dynamics subtly constrain their choices, ultimately diminishing their actual autonomy. This analysis highlights the complexity of the relationship between agency and power and facilitates a discussion on agency and freedom in digital platforms explored in greater detail in Chapter 6.

### **5.3. Key Themes and Core Findings**

In this section, I outline the final two stages of thematic analysis that form the backbone of this thesis. I list, define, and situate the themes within the literature review, serving as mini-introductions to the forthcoming core chapters. The analysis is organised into four subsections, each corresponding to three identified primary themes: 'Curated Digital Manuals', 'The Digitalities of Good Health', and 'The New Wave of Online Consumption in the Post-Pandemic Era'. Curated

Digital Manuals (CDMs) is further divided into two subsections: the first examines user-generated manuals to explore the extent of user engagement and the curation of their lives; the second focuses on pre-generated and algorithmically curated manuals to highlight the sophisticated interplay between user input and algorithmic output in shaping digital content. This division reflects the multi-layered nature of digital content curation and consumption, while shedding light on the varying degrees of user agency and algorithmic influence.

### ***5.3.1 Curated Digital Manuals: UCDMs***

Curated Digital Manuals (CDMs) are the modern digital equivalents of traditional lifestyle, diet, and health manuals that have historically played a significant role in shaping societal norms and personal behaviours (Al Derham, 2023). Traditionally, such manuals were printed and offered guidance on various aspects of daily living, from nutrition and physical exercise to general wellness and aesthetic grooming (Bitar, 2018). They served as authoritative sources that people could turn to for advice on how to improve their lifestyles, enhance their health, and conform to societal ideals of beauty and success (Bitar, 2018). Since digital platforms like Instagram and TikTok have become central to daily life, these traditional print resources have transitioned into digital formats, making these manuals more accessible but also more interactive. Unlike their static predecessors, CDMs can be continuously updated, personalised, and expanded with new content that responds to the latest trends and research in health and wellness in real time (Al Derham, 2023a), allowing a broader audience to utilise and interact with the content in a way that was not possible with traditional printed manuals. In this subsection, I focus exclusively on User-Curated Digital Manuals (UCDMs), although this category also includes Pre-Curated Digital Manuals (PCDMs) and Algorithmically Curated Digital Manuals (ACDMs).

I define UCDMs as Instagram users' practice of personally gathering and categorising digital media content into bespoke folders (Saved Folders feature on Instagram or Collections on TikTok), which fosters a unique sense of accomplishment, self-gratification, and ownership and engagement (Al Derham, 2023a). For instance, when organising content into Saved Folders of Instagram, users like Tala often experience a sense of having acquired or emulated the content. During her interview, Tala disclosed that she would routinely revisit the folder she dedicated to fitness and workouts, attempting the exercises between online work meetings or during her free time while in lockdowns. Others, such as Reema, Wahaj, and Faten, expressed similar practices.

This type of practice, intricately connected to creating a digital manual, underscores the biopedagogical influence of Instagram content. Tala elaborated: *“If I’m interested in engaging in certain activities and require tips, I would revisit these saved posts in my exercise-focused folders for guidance”*. She further explained that her folders were not only focused on fitness but dedicated to lifestyle, home décor, and hospitality, illustrating how Insta-Trainer content evolves into an expansive archive for various needs and not just a personalised health and well-being manual. Many interviewees, such as Ola, Nadiya, and Ghaya<sup>14</sup>, cited comfort, validation, and satisfaction as key motivators in their proactive management of health, well-being, and broader life-style aspects through UCDMs.

As briefly mentioned in Section 5.2.2, users adhere to market-driven pressures to improve their lives, appearances, and what they consider ‘good health’ (see Chapter 8) by engaging in these self-disciplining practices, particularly through the use of CDMs, aligning with the neoliberal imperative of self-optimisation (Gill and Elias, 2015, 2018) and both confirming and reinforcing capitalist frameworks that valorise individualism over collective well-being. I argue that UCDMs are instrumental in perpetuating the economic and social dynamics of neoliberal capitalism by presenting certain normalised standards of health, well-being, and beauty as choices and autonomies within the digital realms of Instagram and similar platforms. Such manuals, therefore, serve to embed the intersection of personal agency and market imperatives in everyday health and lifestyle choices, thereby reinforcing the broader capitalist narratives that shape our lives.

These digital interactions not only influence user choices but also feed into a cyclical system of surveillance capitalism (Zuboff, 2019; Benjamin, 2019). Algorithms manipulate and exploit users’ engagement to enhance targeted advertising and content delivery, turning their personal preferences and behaviours into commodities (Noble, 2018). This cycle begins with users’ digital engagement, which algorithms analyse to create tailored experiences, leading to further interactions and more data, thereby perpetuating a cycle of monitoring and commodification (see Chapter 7).

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<sup>14</sup> I met with Ghaya in person in June 2023 and later reached out to her via direct messages. Although she still viewed Instagram and TikTok as digital guides, she admitted that she often forgets to check Instagram’s Saved Folders feature. The pandemic significantly increased her social media use, making her feel “chronically online”. Ghaya experiences internal conflicts when following influencers’ recommendations but tries to delay purchases to reassess their relevance to her needs. While she follows some trends, she consciously evaluates whether they suit her lifestyle. For instance, despite the recent popularity of Pilates classes, she has decided to avoid them, having tried Pilates before the pandemic and finding it unsuitable for her.

The act of curating personal digital manuals on Instagram, however, allows users to navigate and filter through a flood of media and assert control over their health narratives. Deeply embedded in a biopedagogical framework, this process serves as a critical lens through which users can scrutinise and interact with media, fostering a nuanced understanding of health, wellness, and self in the digital age (see Chapter 6).

### ***5.3.2 Curated Digital Manuals: ACDMs and PCDMs***

The remaining Curated Digital Manual categories are Pre-Curated Digital Manuals (PCDMs) and Algorithmically Curated Digital Manuals (ACDMs), which represent distinct methods of curating and disseminating digital content on Instagram, each with important implications for users and creators.

PCDMs are externally developed resources in various formats, such as PDFs, websites, or dedicated applications. These manuals are typically crafted by influencers who have established themselves as—often self-proclaimed—authorities within specific sectors such as fitness, health, wellness, and lifestyle. I refer to these influencers as Insta-Trainers, who leverage their expertise and online presence to create comprehensive guides and programmes for their followers, aligning with Rodney’s (2019) concept of blogsperts.

Many of PCDMs initially emerged as simple digital booklets, distributed as PDFs and covering a single programme. A noteworthy example of this evolution is the SWEAT programme by Kayla Itsines. Originally, SWEAT began as a PDF booklet offering a single fitness regimen (Gross, 2018). Due to its immense popularity and the strategic use of Instagram functionalities, the programme significantly expanded. Today, SWEAT is a sophisticated, multimillion-dollar application that hosts multiple fitness trainers and nutritionists, all of whom are also Insta-Trainers and thus prominent influencers on the platform (Gross, 2018; Sinha, 2018). These professionals offer a variety of fitness and nutrition programmes, catering to a diverse audience.

The success and visibility of SWEAT and other similar programmes rely heavily on the effective use of Instagram’s functionalities. The transformation from a single PDF to a comprehensive application with multiple programmes illustrates how these Insta-Trainers have adeptly harnessed the platform’s tools, such as stories, posts, and targeted ads, to maintain and expand their influence

(Abidin, 2015; 2016a; Rodney, 2019; Davenport, 2021; Blomqvist, 2022). The strategic integration of their products within Instagram's ecosystem is a critical component of their continued success. Each trainer associated with SWEAT, including Kayla Itsines, maintains both individual and collective profiles on Instagram. These profiles are not merely personal pages; they are meticulously curated marketing platforms where each trainer promotes their specific programmes while also contributing to the broader brand visibility of SWEAT. The interplay between individual and collective marketing efforts is a key factor in maintaining the programme's prominence on the platform.

Based on my analysis, I argue that the continued success and visibility of SWEAT and similar PCDMs are deeply intertwined with the use of Instagram functionalities, or Insta-functionalities. This intersection is where PCDMs and ACDMs meet. The platform's tools enable these Insta-Trainers to reach and engage with a vast audience while ensuring their products remain relevant and accessible through algorithmic visibility and the monetisation of the application (Larsen, 2024a), as I further elaborate in Chapter 7. By collectively and individually marketing their programmes on their profiles, these influencers create a digital presence that sustains and amplifies their commercial success. This integration of commerce, biopedagogy, and social media functionality exemplifies how modern Insta-Trainers operate within the digital landscape of Insta-Training functionalities to turn their expertise into a thriving business model (Davenport, 2021; Blomqvist, 2022).

Ghaya's experience exemplifies the evolution in biopedagogical practices as users transition from passive consumption of digital content to active engagement with structured app-based manuals. Initially, she followed fitness routines from Kayla Itsines' PDFs, which were a static format offering basic guidance. After discovering the SWEAT app through Instagram, she embraced a more interactive platform that provided real-time progress tracking and community support. This shift reflects a broader trend among users, like Ghaya, Daniya, Wahaj, and Dalia, towards a more critical and personalised approach to fitness. They engage deeply with the content, critique the ideologies it promotes, and actively participate in shaping their own health journeys. This transition exemplifies how PCDMs not only enhance user engagement but also embed biopolitical strategies that emphasise self-discipline and continuous self-improvement.

I define Algorithmically Curated Digital Manuals (ACDMs) as sites that encompass content within digital features, such as the Explore Page, Sponsored Ads (Stories, Posts, and Reels), Instagram Shops, and other features disseminated, prioritised, and controlled by Instagram's multi-algorithmic functionalities. In my datasets, approximately half of the interviewees (55.5%) mentioned the role and significance of algorithms without being prompted, reflecting a notable awareness of how these systems function. Within the survey, 6 out of 41 respondents also mentioned algorithms without being prompted. Interestingly, the respondents who mentioned algorithms in the survey were different from the interviewees, suggesting that a broader sample of participants demonstrates knowledge of how these algorithms influence content visibility on Instagram. This crucial awareness highlights how users are becoming increasingly conscious of the ways in which their digital experiences are shaped by these underlying technologies.

During her interview, Faten shared her insights on how Instagram is saturated with heavily marketed products and services, observing that the visibility of products is influenced by algorithms. She went on to describe how this process is akin to a digital cycle, where content circulates among interconnected profiles. Faten explained that when a post is 'liked' by someone, it is likely to appear on their friends' feeds, echoing Bucher's (2017) description of how certain Facebook posts are promoted while others are not. She also noted that following a specific gym on Instagram often leads to receiving posts from other gyms, illustrating how the algorithm favours similar content. Faten's level of awareness reflects a growing public understanding of the black-box nature of algorithms, though such an awareness is limited, particularly among those who are not coders or technically trained. Nevertheless, her description captures the observable effects of these algorithms and media coverage, indicating a pattern that the participants in my data set possess some knowledge of these processes and exhibit a degree of agency in navigating them.

Nadiya discussed how she attempts to use algorithms to her advantage, emphasising how she actively utilises every feature on Instagram to promote her artwork and maximise the algorithm's potential. Her belief that the quantity of posts can sometimes outweigh the quality guided her strategy. Faten also mentioned attempts to thwart the algorithm by 'muting' certain profiles, although she expressed doubts about their effectiveness. She began to actively follow accounts she would not usually follow in an attempt to receive a more diverse set of content from the ACDMs. All participants who discussed algorithms acknowledged the difficulty of controlling them. This

challenge is intensified by social media platforms' tactics of constantly updating and tweaking their algorithms to keep users engaged (Van Dijck et al., 2018).

It is important to note that the visibility and accessibility of platform resources are primarily determined by Instagram's multi-algorithmic functions, which prioritise and display content based on metrics such as popularity, user engagement, and monetisation potential (Bucher, 2012; Cotter, 2018; Larsen, 2024a; 2024b). While these algorithms are effective at boosting the visibility of certain content, they have been criticised for their inherent and historical biases, particularly their tendency to favour content that is highly monetisable and generates significant user engagement (Larsen, 2024a; 2024b). This emphasis on commercial viability can diminish the diversity of the user experience, as content that does not meet these profitability criteria may be deprioritised by the algorithm (Cotter, 2018; Glatt, 2022; Larsen, 2024a; 2024b). Such biases not only determine which content within ACDMs gains prominence but also indirectly affect the success and visibility of PCDMs. This marginalisation extends beyond economic viability and is deeply intertwined with cultural and racial dynamics. Algorithms often reflect the biases of the societies and industries that create them, as explained in Chapter 3, resulting in the prioritisation of content that aligns with dominant cultural norms and values (Buolamwini, 2018a; Benjamin, 2019). This dynamic profoundly impacts user agency and experiences with UCDMs, as users are subtly guided towards content that aligns with the algorithm's criteria rather than content that might best suit their needs or interests (see Chapter 7).

In her interview, Lulu discussed her extensive use of social media, spending around 6 to 8 hours a day on platforms like Instagram and TikTok. She explained the difficulty in controlling what one sees on these platforms, noting that it is both challenging to manage content consumption and nearly impossible to avoid encountering unwanted content. This observation underscores the limited agency users possess on these platforms, while also indicating an awareness of this limitation among respondents (Van Dijck et al., 2018). Lulu provided an example where a product, sent to her by a friend, later appeared as a sponsored advertisement on her feed. Although she had no intention of purchasing the product, she admitted that she would likely visit the website out of curiosity. This incident illustrates how the algorithm filters content for future advertisements based on past interactions. In an attempt to reclaim some agency, Lulu interacts with advertisements on her feed, often labelling them as 'uninteresting'. She also takes steps to protect her privacy by

avoiding sharing her smartphone location with apps, including Instagram.<sup>15</sup> While I explore these aspects in greater depth in Chapter 7, I have briefly addressed them here to provide context and highlight key insights.

To conclude this section, PCDMs and ACDMs represent distinct yet interconnected elements within the digital landscape of platforms like Instagram and TikTok. Crafted externally by influencers and marketers, PCDMs are strategically integrated into these platforms to guide user behaviour and consumption in specific areas such as fitness, health, and lifestyle. While providing structured guidance, these manuals reflect the commercial interests of their creators, embedding monetised content within the user experience. In contrast, ACDMs are shaped by the platforms' multi-algorithmic systems, which filter and prioritise content based on engagement metrics and other criteria determined by the algorithms. Although these algorithms enhance visibility and personalise user experiences, they also perpetuate biases that can limit diversity by subtly steering users towards specific narratives or products, ultimately affecting UCDMs. Both PCDMs and ACDMs highlight the complexities of navigating digital environments, where user agency is often mediated by underlying commercial and algorithmic forces. The interactions between CDMs and users underscore the importance of understanding how digital tools influence personal choices and behaviours, raising critical questions about autonomy, privacy, and the broader implications of algorithmic control in shaping digital lives.

### ***5.3.3. The Digitalities of Good Health***

The second theme of the thesis—an enquiry into the relationship between digital technologies and health practices, especially within the frameworks of governance and individual agency—is crucial for understanding how concepts of 'good health' are constructed, disseminated, and internalised by young Qatari women through digital platforms, particularly Instagram. In this subsection, I introduce the theme to explore the contrast between the personal perceptions of health held by participants and the idealised image of a healthy citizen as envisioned by Qatar National Vision

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<sup>15</sup> I reached out to Lulu via Instagram direct messages in August 2024, where she shared her internal conflict about using the platform. Lulu expressed feeling pressured to buy products recommended by influencers, even though she does not necessarily need them. She noted that her social media consumption increased after COVID-19, and she now feels more comfortable engaging with screens than with people. Interestingly, Lulu mentioned that she is very active on TikTok and enjoys making trend-based videos. She frequently uses Instagram's Saved Folders for travel plans and shopping but remains sceptical about health content on social media, recognising the influence of surgeries and weight-loss drugs like *Monjaro* on influencers.

2030 (QNV). I define ‘Digitalities of Good Health’ as the role of digital platforms as biopedagogical tools that shape health behaviours through the dissemination of health-related information. Instagram, in particular, functions as an instrument of biopower, encouraging individuals to conform to globally propagated, normative Western standards of health, beauty, and diet.

The platform’s pedagogic influence is evident, with 29 of 41 respondents (70%) viewing Instagram as a valuable learning tool. Among these 29 respondents, 8 reported gaining knowledge on health-related issues, 14 on food and diets, and 13 on fitness content in specific. These statistics indicate that young Qatari women are encouraged to actively manage their health through the multi-algorithmic functions of Instagram, often internalising pressures to align their bodies and lifestyles with broader global ideals. Notably, 14 respondents specifically mentioned adopting or following Western trends, influencers, and foods. It is important to clarify that the survey did not distinguish between Middle Eastern, Western, regional, or global content, trends, or foods in the open-ended questions presented; these respondents mentioned Western influences organically.

The Digitalities of Good Health theme provides a critical lens to explore biopower, biocitizenship, and the commodification of health and beauty for users of platforms like Instagram. This commodification often shifts the burden of health management onto individuals, which can intensify feelings of inadequacy and potentially lead to adverse health practices. Notably, 75% of participants reported feeling influenced and pressured by the content they consume on social media to conform to certain normalised standards, indicating the profound impact these platforms have on health-related decisions.

My analysis of this theme in Chapter 8 is guided by Foucault’s concepts of biopower and governmentality, which offer crucial insights into how societal norms and expectations around health are shaped by specific forms of power (see Chapter 2). I use the concept of ‘responsibilisation’ to illustrate how digital platforms shift responsibility for health from the state and community to the individual, aligning with neoliberal ideologies that emphasise self-management and personal responsibility (see Chapter 3). This theme is instrumental in discussing how the QNV constructs and promotes an idealised version of good health through both governmental and non-governmental actors, integrating both physical and mental well-being.

The Digitalities of Good Health serves as a critical framework for understanding the complex dynamics by which digital technologies influence health practices in Qatar. It sheds light on how platforms, while reflecting broader global trends, are also shaped by unique cultural and societal factors within the Qatari context. This theme not only provides a lens for analysing the intersection of digital media, gender studies, and Gulf studies but also offers valuable insights into the experiences of women in Qatar and the broader Gulf region.

#### ***5.3.4 The New Wave of Online Consumption in the Post-Pandemic Era***

The third and final theme—The New Wave of Online Consumption in the Post-Pandemic Era—captures significant shifts in digital behaviours and consumer patterns that emerged following COVID-19. The pandemic intensified existing online consumption patterns and introduced new dynamics driven by prolonged social isolation, increased digital reliance, and the heightened influence of online content on daily life. Understanding these changes is crucial for analysing the evolution of digital consumer behaviour, particularly in the realms of health, diet, and lifestyle. This theme highlights the growing awareness and critical engagement of users with the content they consume. I observe a noticeable shift from passive consumption to more informed interactions with digital technologies due to the pandemic, suggesting that users increasingly scrutinise the content they encounter, especially on social media platforms that significantly shape public perceptions, behaviours, and norms during a global crisis.

Exploring this theme of post-pandemic online consumption is essential for several reasons. Firstly, it provides a framework for analysing the intersection between digital media and consumer behaviour in a post-pandemic world, which enables an in-depth investigation into how Insta-Trainers and the Insta-Functionalities have navigated and capitalised on the pandemic to shape health-related discourses, often blurring the lines between genuine health advice and commercial exploitation. For example, Faten, who struggles with “chronic illness and chronic fatigue and depression”, shared that many Insta-Trainers she followed during the pandemic posted fat-phobic memes and content that indirectly shamed people who were not active or productive during the first phase of lockdown in Qatar. Faten later recounted how she “felt guilty, I felt like I should be working out... It was an insane amount of pressure”. This pressure led her to adopt the advice and methods of these Insta-Trainers, resulting in multiple emergency room visits and a 27-day hospital stay within the span of one month. She acknowledged that adopting this health-related advice without considering her chronic illness significantly contributed to her hospitalisation, highlighting

the risks of using Instagram as a tool to learn about health and wellbeing without proper research and understanding. This behaviour, rooted in a fear of “inevitable weight gains due to changes in eating, physical activity, and sedentary behaviours resulting from self-isolating”, was not unique to Faten (Pearl, 2020, p. 1; Wagner et al., 2020; Lucibello et al., 2021). Similar insights were shared by Nadiya and Miznah, who also mentioned the shaming of those perceived as unproductive in health, career, and social life during the pandemic.

The post-pandemic online consumption theme allows for the examination of the broader implications of these shifts on cultural and societal norms, particularly in the context of Qatar. By focusing on the experiences of Qatari women, this theme highlights how global trends in digital consumption intersect with local cultural practices and values. For example, during the early lockdown phase, many Qatari women, such as Nadiya and Ola, observed how certain foods were framed on Instagram as ‘good’ or ‘bad’, with a noticeable emphasis on promoting Western food as healthier and more desirable. This trend was particularly evident in the promotion of diets that aligned with Western ideals of health, often positioned as superior. In interviews, both Nadiya and Ola noted that Insta-Trainers frequently shared content promoting Western dietary practices, presenting them as essential for maintaining health during the pandemic. This framing, by categorising and rating foods, influenced individual dietary choices and contributed to a broader cultural shift, challenging traditional food practices and perceptions of health within Qatar. For example, 29% of survey respondents reported consuming more Western foods, with some even abandoning traditional foods altogether. The impact of this shift is explored further through Feldman’s (2021) study, which demonstrates how Instagram redefines food hierarchies and reshapes cultural practices, emphasising the interplay between global trends and local traditions during the pandemic.

Finally, the post-pandemic online consumption theme facilitates a critical exploration of biopedagogy within the digital landscape. It enables a nuanced analysis of how social media platforms contribute to the education and self-discipline of users through their Insta-functionalities. by repeatedly reinforcing neoliberal ideals of self-optimisation and individual responsibility with a specific focus on the COVID-19 context. This theme integrates various strands of my thesis, by offering insights into how digital media continues to shape and redefine consumer behaviours and societal norms during a global health crisis.

## 5.4 Conclusion

This chapter marks the culmination of Braun and Clarke's (2006; 2012; 2021; 2022) thematic analysis, providing a comprehensive report of the key themes identified throughout the study:

1. ***Curated Digital Manuals (CDMs)*** is categorised into three distinct types:
  - *User Curated Digital Manuals (UCDMs)*, where users personally select and organise content into bespoke folders.
  - *Pre-Curated Digital Manuals (PCDMs)*, which are externally developed resources by influencers, content creators, or professionals.
  - *Algorithmically Curated Digital Manuals (ACDMs)*, driven by the platform's algorithms to suggest and prioritise content. These categories demonstrate the varying degrees of user involvement and the influence of digital platforms in guiding health practices.
2. ***The Digitalities of Good Health*** examines the role of digital technologies and platforms in shaping and disseminating health norms, particularly through the lens of biopower and governmentality. This theme is significant in understanding how Instagram functions as a biopedagogical tool, subtly guiding users to conform to hegemonic Western health standards while also aligning with national objectives, such as those outlined in the QNV.
3. ***The New Wave of Online Consumption in the Post-Pandemic Era*** captures the shifts in digital behaviours and consumer patterns that emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic. This theme is vital for analysing how increased digital reliance has made users more critical and informed, transforming their interactions with online content, particularly in health, diet, and lifestyle contexts. It highlights the evolution of digital consumption, where users have become more sceptical of the content they encounter.

This chapter not only wraps up the thematic analysis but also lays the groundwork for the detailed investigations that follow, introducing the core themes to be explored in subsequent chapters. These themes significantly contribute to understanding the broader implications of digital consumption in the post-pandemic era, providing a critical lens through which to examine how digital media shapes societal norms and individual behaviours, particularly within the rapidly evolving context

of Qatar. The forthcoming chapters will build on the insights presented here, offering a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the complexities of digital engagement among young Qatari women.

## **Chapter 6.**

### **Curated Digital Manuals:**

### **Part I, UCDCMs**

#### **6.1. Overview and Background**

The first theme, Curated Digital Manuals (CDMs), and one category of that theme, User-Curated Digital Manuals (UCDCMs), will be discussed and analysed in this chapter, focusing on consumption patterns and their impact through the lens of personal autonomy; that is on their personal, social, and cultural implications. The subsequent two CDM categories will be explored in the next chapter, which examines technical aspects of these patterns in relation to Insta-Trainers and Insta-Training functionalities, including participants' interactions with technology, algorithmic bias and design, and concepts such as the coded gaze and technological solutionism. This structure ensures a logical division of themes, promoting readability and flow, while adhering to the submission's word count requirements.

Before going forward, it is essential to revisit some definitions outlined in the introduction. The concept of the Insta-Trainer encapsulates the idea that both software, such as social media platforms like Instagram, and hardware, including digital wearable devices, have the capacity to instantly 'train' users by delivering content that is shaped by political, economic, and social influences. Instagram's role in health and wellness is closely tied to this concept, as the platform functions as an Insta-Trainer, promoting self-discipline and self-monitoring behaviours among its users through its multi-algorithmic processes, which I refer to as Insta-functionalities—a collection of features that systematically curate, prioritise, and distribute content, thereby shaping the user experience (Instagram, 2024a; 2024b).

Moreover, influencer profiles on Instagram, which, like Insta-Training Functionalities, also serve as Insta-Trainers, play a crucial role in disseminating content that significantly impacts users' health and lifestyle decisions. As Insta-Trainers, influencers uphold neoliberal ideologies by emphasising individual responsibility, self-optimisation, and entrepreneurialism in the context of health and wellness (Abidin, 2016a; Lupton and Maslen, 2019; Gill, 2023a; Glatt, 2023). Through their curated content, they promote the notion that personal health and success are attainable through disciplined self-management and the consumption of specific products or services, often

blurring the lines between genuine wellness advice and commercial interests (Abidin, 2015; Mackson et al., 2019; Rodney, 2019). In this way, these Insta-Trainers actively contribute to the development and reinforcement of CDMs, whether these manuals are user-generated, pre-curated, or algorithmically curated.

Moving forward, CDMs will be defined as digital manuals on Instagram, comprising visual collages created through the meticulous bookmarking and curating of Insta-Trainer content, organised into folders. Additionally, CDMs can emerge from user engagement with Insta-Trainer content that influences Instagram's algorithm, leading to content appearing on the popular page or daily feed. This content acts as a guide for mentally and physically shaping oneself to achieve a healthy, feminine, 'normalised' sense of self—an image that is typically shaped and reinforced by societal norms presented on social media platforms, influenced by popular trends, health ideals, and diets which are promoted within the platform's community (Abidin and Gwynne, 2017; Al Derham, 2023a; Gill, 2023a).

The UCDMs category within CDMs focuses on user engagement and behaviour on Instagram, particularly how users navigate content from Insta-Trainers and content prioritised by Insta-Training functionalities to construct an influenced yet 'desired', socially accepted and 'normalised' version of themselves. I define this thematic category as the practice where Instagram users collect and categorise media content into personalised folders using Instagram's Saved Folders feature, similar to TikTok's Collections feature (Al Derham, 2023a). The term 'user-curated' aptly reflects the individual's active role in selecting and organising content, thereby fostering a distinct sense of ownership and engagement with the folders they create. When discussing this feature with the nine interviewees, they reported that it instils a sense of achievement and personal satisfaction. In essence, these digital manuals guide users in shaping their identities and behaviours according to ideals perpetuated by the platform.

The focus of the discussion on UCDMs primarily centres around the respondents' online practices that align with the principles of biocitizenship and preventative health management, exploring how these practices intersect with personal autonomy and freedom on digital platforms. Particular attention is given to the concept of the healthy Qatari citizen within the context of CDMs. This analysis intersects with the theme of 'Digitalities of Good Health'; however, this chapter specifically examines it within the framework of CDMs, intentionally reserving the broader

discussion for Chapter 8 to avoid redundancy. While certain points may appear to overlap across chapters and may lead to similar conclusions, they are explored from distinct angles and serve different purposes, offering new and unique insights that enrich the overall analysis.

## 6.2. User-Curated Digital Manuals

This section is divided into three subsections:

- **6.2.1. The Evolution of Self-Discipline: From Print to Interactive Digitality** provides a comprehensive summary of the history of manuals and handbooks related to health, diets, and well-being, tracing their transformation into CDMs. This section aims to explore how digital technologies have transformed traditional manuals into more interactive and customised formats, similar to the user-tailor-made vision board. It not only offers a new way of looking at online engagement, but initiates a discussion on the complex ecosystem that underlies the concept of the Insta-Trainer.
- **6.2.3. The Healthy Bio-Citizen of Qatar: Employing CDMs** explores how CDMs are utilised by the state, examining state-generated content created to guide and assist users in Qatar towards achieving the image of the healthy citizen outlined in the national vision. While this section parallels Chapter 8, it is situated within the specific context of CDMs, ensuring a thorough analysis of this thematic category. This section sets the stage for understanding biopedagogical practices and methods within the framework of Insta-Trainer functionality.
- **6.2.3 Freedom in Digital Bio-Pedagogical CDMs...?** is intentionally framed as a question to explore whether true freedom of choice and autonomy can actually exist when curating strands of knowledge, sources, and manuals. The analysis employs a Foucauldian perspective to examine the inherent contradictions and tensions between perceived autonomy and underlying societal constraints, reflecting issues akin to those found in post-feminism. The exploration asks: Do the options available within digital bio-pedagogical CDMs genuinely represent freedom of choice, or are they constrained by predetermined norms and expectations?

### ***6.2.1. The Evolution of Self-Discipline: From Print to Interactive Digitality***

Manuals and handbooks have historically been pivotal in the standardisation, codification, and revision of knowledge, considered “key tools in the making and managing of knowledge...[functioning] as a way of categorising and ordering the expanding amount of knowledge” (Creager et al., 2020, p. 1–3). Over time, their role has evolved. According to Cutter (2023), early twentieth-century diet manuals shifted from relying on individual discretion to enforcing rigid, algorithmic rules that function as externalised forms of memory and control, reinforcing specific standardising behaviours. This shift is further examined by Bitar (2018), who situates diet books within broader cultural narratives that intertwine individual health practices with concerns about civilisation and morality. Bitar argues that diet books function not merely as instructional guides but as influential tools that shape individual identities and collective cultural norms, both reflecting and responding to deep-seated societal anxieties. These texts often present dietary practices as moral imperatives and civic duties, suggesting that personal health choices contribute to social progress or decline. Thus, diet manuals have historically served as conduits for broader ideological messages, promoting specific visions of health, progress, and virtue aligned with cultural expectations.

The concept of CDMs is similar to the idea of hupomnēsic technology introduced by Cutter (2023) (see literature review). UCDMs on Instagram can be considered a modern version of hupomnēmata that help people internalise knowledge through active engagement. UCDMs involve users in curating, categorising, and personalising content that shapes their behaviour. Like hupomnēmata, which were used for personal reflection and self-care, UCDMs function in digital spaces where memory and decision-making are often influenced by algorithms. Much like the rigid algorithms described by Cutter (2023), this shift can reduce personal autonomy by making users dependent on platform-driven ideals and behaviours aligned with societal norms. As a result, UCDMs reinforce certain health and lifestyle standards just like how traditional manuals shaped individual and collective identities in the past.

Much like traditional manuals, digital and interactive manuals—CDMs across all categories—serve as guidelines, references, and instructions for physical and mental self-care. My datasets show that they have helped users transform themselves into or be perceived as idealised, prosperous, and healthy biocitizens in the context of Qatar. These digital and interactive health manuals embody biocitizenship—defined by Rose (2007) as the expectation that individuals

actively manage their health and bodies according to health norms and values—by framing health as a personal duty, where individuals are encouraged to engage in practices that align with societal ideals of wellness. This approach aligns with the medical narrative that personal actions and choices are key to achieving good health or, conversely, the cause of health problems (Gordon, 2020; Sikka, 2021). Historically and to this day, positive health has been closely associated with thinness and slenderness in discussions about women’s health. Conversely, the term ‘overweight’ has become synonymous with ‘unhealthy’, perpetuating the mistaken belief that losing weight automatically resolves health issues (Bartky, 1990; Heyes, 2007, p. 68; Gordon, 2020).

The negative discourse around health and women’s bodies has become a dominant narrative within diet, fitness, and wellness industries, generating billions of US dollars annually through diet and workout-related products (Bitar, 2018; Mehlman Petrzela, 2023). Driven by the substantial online presence of the diet and fitness industry on social media, this discourse also permeates digital platforms. Insta-Trainers leverage Instagram to market digital bio-pedagogical diet and exercise weight-loss booklets and products as solutions to health-related issues. Some of these hypermediated activities are accessible only within a hypermedia space—through monthly subscriptions to digital applications, scheduled live online sessions, and one-time purchases of digital booklets—created by Insta-Trainers who “often enjoyed these pursuits as consumers and realised a market opportunity for products and experiences that promised health, beauty, and happiness through the more culturally acceptable language of ‘wellness’ rather than weight loss” (Petrzela, 2023, p. 264).

SWEAT, thoroughly explored in Chapter 5, is a prominent example of this phenomenon. The application—heavily marketed on Instagram through various CDMs available to users through a monthly or annual membership subscription—offers a variety of content focused on health and wellness, including healthy eating and workout routines. This diversity likely contributes to the relatability and popularity of both founder Itsines’ personal Instagram page and the official SWEAT page. By sharing aspects of her daily life that relate to her products and services, she enhances her parasocial relationships with her followers (Liebers and Schramm, 2019; Reinikainen et al., 2020). Several survey and interview respondents, including Wahaj, Ghaya, and Daniya, reported satisfactory results from using Itsines’ manuals, whether they were traditional printable versions or the current digital and interactive formats. Daniya, in particular, mentioned that the

PDF manual was the only product she had ever purchased online. She has since become an Insta-Trainer herself, certified as a post-partum fitness instructor who creates her own health manuals.<sup>16</sup>

UCDMs function as contemporary self-disciplining tools with enhanced digital interactivity and algorithmic precision. Much like traditional manuals, they guide individuals in managing their health and wellness by providing an opportunity for users to curate the collection of content, which datasets show are often aligned with personal goals of the curator. The ‘friendly power’ of these technologies appears benign, fostering the belief that users are achieving the best version of themselves through features and content packaged as advice from a friend (Hans, 2017; Reinikainen et al., 2020). However, in the process of self-transformation, users may unknowingly become docile subjects as they normalise and internalise self-surveillance practices, potentially placing their agency in crisis (Foucault, 1978; 2017; Al Derham, 2023a).

While it could be argued that women who invest substantial sums in annual subscriptions to such digital manuals are exercising their agency, I contend that the mechanisms and design of these digitalised handbooks and interactive hypermedia spaces offer limited freedom. Intriguingly, Insta-Trainers as influencers also lose freedom in this process: “Social media didn’t just create fitness celebrities; it transformed ideas about how stars should share themselves...Fans deserved access to their ‘real,’ if not ‘private,’ lives” (Petrzela, 2023, p. 265). While influencers present an image of autonomy and control over their carefully curated digital identities, they are simultaneously constrained by the relentless demands for visibility and authenticity (Reade, 2020; Glatt, 2022; Glatt, 2023). Much like the consumers of their content, who internalise self-discipline through digital manuals, influencers are driven to continually create and share content that meets their audience’s expectations (Abidin, 2016b; Duffy, 2017). The need to perform and display their ‘authentic’ selves diminishes their freedom, subjecting them to the same mechanisms of control that influence their followers (Cotter, 2018).

In the end, both influencers and their audiences become trapped in a cycle of mutual surveillance; they strive to appear authentic, yet their true freedom is constrained by the digital platforms they

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<sup>16</sup> Although the primary focus of this chapter is on UCDMs, and these examples reflect the Insta-functionalities associated with PCDMs, highlighting the role of Insta-Training functionalities across all CDMs is essential to understanding how the themes interconnect. This broader perspective is necessary for grasping the full scope of their contribution to the landscape of digital self-discipline.

depend on (Marwick, 2015; Khamis et al., 2017). Although these digital spaces seem to offer empowerment, they reduce the control that both sides have over their own actions. Similar to post-feminism—where women are encouraged to feel empowered through personal choices and self-expression, but are, at the same time, pressured to follow societal expectations of femininity and success (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2009; McRobbie and Gill, 2015)—Insta-Trainers, as influencers, may seem to have independent control of their content but are also compelled to meet societal standards of health and beauty (Gill, 2016; Elias et al., 2017; Abidin and Gwynne, 2017). Despite appearing empowered, they are ultimately caught in a cycle that limits their true freedom (Banet-Weiser, 2018). Whether through the digital personas of Insta-Trainers or the post-feminist idea of the ‘empowered’ woman, perceived expressions of freedom often mask deeper controls that restrict real autonomy. What seems like empowerment can, in fact, lead to less freedom (Gill, 2007; Rottenberg, 2014).

UCDMs still offer a certain level of freedom for both content creators, like Insta-Trainers, and users who curate this content. Insta-Trainers can balance meeting audience expectations with maintaining their personal identity within their content; this flexibility can be considered a form a freedom. Users also experience a form of agency by carefully selecting and arranging content that aligns with their personal goals and values, actively shaping their own health and wellness journeys. This process of curation, although influenced by societal norms and digital algorithms, provides a sense of control and empowerment over self-discipline practices. Thus, UCDMs ultimately create a space where both influencers and users can exercise a degree of freedom and flexibility.

Despite the broader pressures of societal expectations, UCDMs offer a level of autonomy and self-expression that traditional renditions could not provide. This evolution of self-discipline—from the printed handbooks to interactive digital formats—demonstrates the enduring yet adaptable nature of self-regulation in the digital age.

### ***6.2.2 The Healthy Bio-Citizen of Qatar: Employing Insta-CDMs***

The historical narratives found in diet manuals have often linked the success, value, and reputation of a nation to the concept of good health, which is frequently associated with thinness, slenderness, and a particular feminised ideal for women (Bitar, 2018; Gordon, 2020). These narratives have shaped societal expectations and reinforced the belief that the health of citizens directly impacts

the nation's overall prosperity. Similarly, the Qatari government promotes a narrative that ties the population's health and well-being to the nation's success and societal development. The state actively engages in managing public health and has clearly articulated this goal in the Qatar National Vision 2030 (QNV). First published in 2008, the QNV<sup>17</sup> was widely disseminated both digitally and in print across governmental organisations, institutions, and websites, with the primary aim of transforming Qatar into “an advanced society capable of sustaining its development and providing a high standard of living for its people” (State of Qatar, 2008).

Within the QNV framework, good health is defined as a state of physical, mental, and social well-being that enables individuals to productively contribute to society. This concept extends beyond the absence of illness, encompassing the capacity of individuals to maintain a healthy lifestyle, supported by advanced healthcare systems, preventive measures, and accessible services (State of Qatar, 2008). Similar to historical narratives (Bitar, 2018), the QNV emphasises that being in good health is essential for achieving a prosperous society, as it empowers citizens to sustain their well-being in alignment with the nation's developmental goals.

This state-driven definition of good health is operationalised through modern tools such as Insta-Training functionalities and CDMs, used by both governmental and non-governmental entities in Qatar to disseminate health and wellness content aligned with national objectives. Through these digital platforms, the state encourages citizens to adopt behaviours that support the QNV's view of good health as a collective responsibility. CDMs, in particular, serve as guides that help individuals maintain the lifestyle standards set by the state, reinforcing the idea that a healthy population is crucial for societal development and, consequently, national success.

The definition put forth by the QNV contrasts with Sikka's (2021) critical view of good health, which is not just an individual or government goal but a “co-constructed state of idealised expectations, performances, embodiments, and patterns of consumption” (Sikka, 2021, p. 26). Sikka argues that societal pressures, often reinforced by knowledge systems and tools like CDMs, create strict and sometimes coercive standards for health and wellness. These standards focus on discipline, efficiency, personal responsibility, and self-care, reflecting broader neoliberal ideals

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<sup>17</sup> I first encountered this document in high school, when I was provided with a printed copy to take home.

that can be more restrictive than empowering. In this context, the QNV's emphasis on health to drive societal progress through CDMs might unintentionally contribute to pressures to conform, rendering health not just an individual duty but a product of wider societal expectations.

The datasets from my study further support this understanding. Aligned with the definitions provided by both the QNV and Sikka, the participants' perceptions of good health extend beyond the absence of illness into a multifaceted concept encompassing physical fitness, mental wellness, and the ability to maintain a balanced lifestyle; this concept involves achieving a harmonious state where one's body and mind align with societal expectations, particularly those promoted on social media platforms like Instagram. Within this neoliberal and capitalist framework, health is often structured around personal responsibility and self-discipline, leading individuals to adopt practices that align with normative standards of beauty and success. A more detailed discussion with examples from respondents is provided in Chapter 8.

The strategic use of Insta-Training functionalities and CDMs by governmental entities allows state-run profiles to curate and promote health and well-being content aligned with the QNV's vision as part of multiple citizenship projects. For instance, the Amir's 2012 decree, which established National Sports Day as a public holiday encouraging nationwide physical activity, serves as a recurring initiative that highlights the government's commitment to public health. This effort not only encourages individual participation in sports to reduce health risks but also fosters a sense of community and collective responsibility for well-being (Hukoomi, 2012). On this day, government-run profiles become particularly active, sharing health and wellness content through multiple CDMs. This coordinated effort transforms National Sports Day into a community-wide event, where digital platforms play a crucial role in disseminating state-endorsed health practices, thereby reinforcing shared values and collective well-being.

Such initiatives reflect what Rose and Novas (2005) describe as 'citizen projects', designed to "encourage certain ways of thinking, feeling, and acting" among citizens (p. 439). Through digital platforms, these projects contribute to 'biological citizenship', linking citizenship to beliefs about the biological existence of individuals, families, and communities (p. 440). As Rose (2006) further explains, strategies of biological citizenship not only shape citizens from above but also influence how individuals perceive themselves and their relationships with others. In this context, the QNV

aims to create healthy bio-citizens by 2030, fostering the image of the ideal Qatari bio-citizen—someone who is physically and mentally healthy and contributes to a prosperous society. Digital platforms reinforce this vision, particularly government-affiliated Insta-Trainer profiles that use bio-pedagogical methods to align citizens' practices with the QNV's goals.

The recurring citizenship project of National Sports Day showcases the government's efforts to promote public health. Citizens often save and organise state-promoted content, creating UCDMs that reflect the QNV's ideals of health and wellness. This process highlights how state-driven citizenship projects influence individual behaviours and self-discipline, as citizens actively participate in curating content that aligns with the broader goals of biological citizenship.

The official Instagram account of the Primary Health Care Corporation in Qatar (@phccqatar), under the Hamad Medical Corporation, provides a compelling example of how digital platforms are utilised to fulfil the QNV's citizenship project objectives. The content shared on this account, which ranges from nutritional advice to anti-smoking campaigns, is meticulously aligned with the principles outlined in the QNV, demonstrating the strategic use of CDMs to guide and normalise citizens' behaviours. The continuous engagement and frequent updates on such profiles highlights the bio-pedagogical approach that requires the consistent refreshing and reinforcing of knowledge—a process that exerts both pressure and discipline on Insta-Trainers and their followers (Creager et al., 2020, p. 13).<sup>18</sup>

### ***6.2.3 Freedom in Bio-pedagogical CDMs...?***

In line with Foucault's concept of 'technologies of the self', CDMs and UCDMs extend beyond guiding tools and function as mechanisms of self-regulation that externalise memory and control, shaping users into docile subjects who internalise disciplinary practices, becoming compliant and self-monitoring, under the guise of personal freedom. UCDMs, in particular, play a key role in standardising behaviours through algorithmic personalisation, diminishing users' agency while fostering the illusion of empowerment and transforming them into docile bodies. Like traditional

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<sup>18</sup> It is important to note that the exploration of bio-citizenship and citizenship projects in relation to the state's use of Insta-Functionalities, like CDMs, not only provides a broader context but also helps to better understand the points and arguments I make in Chapter 8, which is why I examine two examples from state-run pages in this short subsection—they help illustrate how these standards are communicated and reinforced by the objectives of the QNV. This examination also offers valuable context for understanding the ideologies and logics of the respondents in the upcoming chapters.

digital manuals, these tools serve as externalised forms of memory and control, reinforcing standardised behaviours under the guise of self-discipline and empowerment.

For Foucault, freedom is built upon four components, particularly in relation to the concept of freedom as an activity for creative self-transformation (Rainbow, 1994; Johanna, 2011; Gilson, 2014). Gilson (2014) summarises this activity as “the project of determining for oneself the facets of the self on which one will work, the form of relation one will take, the concrete practices in which one will engage, and the end to which these activities are oriented” (p. 81). The first Foucauldian component is ‘ethical substance’, which refers to the ‘feelings’ that drive particular actions (Foucault, 1987; Gilson, 2014). In my study, ethical substances are represented by the profiles of Insta-Trainers and the messages they convey, both explicitly and implicitly, through their content, which, along with its mode of representation, has been found to increase the desire to learn new skills, thereby fostering feelings of self-transformation and motivation.

The second Foucauldian component of freedom is the ‘mode of subjectivation’, which refers to the type of engagement governed by a set of rules or ideals toward which one strives (Foucault, 1987; Gilson, 2014). In my study, young Qatari women were found to actively engage with all forms of digital manuals for several hours a day as part of their routine. Similar findings were reported in a study on online usage across the Middle East conducted by Northwestern University, revealing that the most active social networking platform users in the region are in Qatar (Dennis et al., 2016; 2018). During data collection, I asked all eight interviewees to share their Instagram screen time. On average, they reported spending four hours on the app daily. This substantial engagement aligns with Northwestern University’s findings and a health report from the same institution, confirming the heavy reliance on digital platforms for health-related information, particularly among young women (Schoenbach et al., 2017, p. 10). Four hours constitutes 16% of an entire day on Instagram, not accounting for other, similar social networking platforms, such as TikTok, which suggests that the time spent engaging with such modes of subjectification may be even greater.

Out of the 41 young women surveyed, 36 (approximately 88%) shared their list of UCDCMs; their folders consisted of content related to healthy food, DIY videos, travel, weddings, cafés, beauty and food products, workout material, mental health, self-care, and childcare. Among the 29 participants who specifically use their UCDCMs to learn something new, 27.6% reported learning about health-related issues, 48.3% focused on food and diets (41.4% engaged with content related

to Western or non-traditional food), and 44.8% were drawn to fitness content; 37.9% followed beauty and fashion content, 13.8% engaged with educational content, and 20.7% focused on parenting-related content. These figures highlight the complex ways in which UCDMs are employed, demonstrating that the act of saving and curating content is not just passive consumption but active engagement with specific areas of interest, often aligned with societal norms and expectations. Only three participants (7%) reported not using the ‘saved posts’ feature when engaging with Insta-Training functionalities. However, given the pervasive nature of the Popular Page, which is universally accessible, all participants are still exposed to various digital manuals, including Algorithmically Curated Digital Manuals (ACDMs) and Pre-Curated Digital Manuals (PCDMs). This means that even if they are not engaging directly with UCDMs, their significant screen time ensures that they still interact with CDMs overall, reinforcing the idea that these platforms serve as powerful tools for disseminating and reinforcing cultural norms that guide user behaviour and expectations.

These types of CDM content encourage creative, self-transformative, and self-regulatory practices, confirming that the precise mode of subjectivation involves engaging with digital manuals, which young women in the study interact with significantly in terms of capacity and time. Such exposure not only transforms the body and mind but also impacts social norms and traditions, a topic that is discussed in Chapter 7. The findings above indicate that the Qatari women in my study rely on Insta-Trainers to engage in ethical practices that align with feminist discourses through biopedagogical methods, consistent with popular discourses on women and health. Moreover, the intensified exposure to Insta-Trainers and specific types of Insta-content generally targeted at young women suggests a pattern of narratives supporting self-regulated and self-disciplined bodies (Gill, 2007; Lupton, 2017; Lupton and Maslen, 2019; Rodney, 2019). This norm has been represented in various forms of print and digital media over time (Bartky, 1988; Heyes, 2007; Bitar, 2018).

This narrative underscores the notion that the female body is perpetually subject to efforts of improvement and transformation, promoting an image of femininity where a woman's body is seen as a symbol of good health, social acceptance, and personal achievement (Heyes, 2007; Amigot and Pujal, 2009; Bartky, 2020). Practices such as intense exercise, cosmetic surgery, and dieting are linked to the “tyranny of slenderness”, enforcing an ideal body type that represents self-discipline, controlled appetites, and appropriate feminine behaviour (Heyes, 2007, p. 63). These

practices align with Foucault's (1987) concept of freedom, particularly the idea that freedom involves the choice to engage in self-transformative actions, with the understanding that “we change ourselves in order to become ethical subjects” (Gilson, 2014, p. 81).

Instagram is often regarded as a platform centred around food, as evidenced by studies from the United States, Europe, Australia, and Japan (Buddle, 2022; Kish and Contois, 2022; Leer and Krogager, 2022; Okabe, 2022). These studies underscore the impact of food-related content, showing how it influences consumers to adopt lifestyles that reflect the images they see on the platform (Miller et al., 2012; Okabe, 2022; Tracy, 2022). In my study, food emerged as the top category among participants (48%) who reported learning from Instagram. Similar patterns have been observed with fitness-related content, further supporting the idea that users engage in self-disciplining behaviours as they internalise and act upon the Insta-Training content they consume.

To reiterate from Chapter 5, 68% of participants cited fitness content as part of their daily content consumption and exhibited systematic habits and practices, ranging from 3 to 7 exercise sessions per week in an effort to conform to the messages within the consumed content. For example, participants purchased expensive weight-loss products, meal plans, and exercise booklets promoted by Insta-Trainers, or opted for costly temporary and permanent body-altering procedures. This trend of consumerism in fitness culture echoes observations in Fit Nation, where fitness celebrities seize opportunities to “sell exercise-adjacent products” (Mehlman Petrzela, 2023, p. 265).

In her interview, Nadiya mentioned that she regularly engaged with several Insta-Trainer accounts specialising in health, fitness, food, and weight loss, revealing that she frequently purchased overnight oats from an Insta-Trainer who also served as an ambassador for the brand. The oats, marketed as a calorie-controlled and protein-based product, retailed at £43 for a two-week supply. The product was presented on the Insta-Trainer's page using product placement methods that leveraged the parasocial relationships followers had with influencers to gain their trust (Liu et al., 2015; Reinikainen et al., 2020; Wai Lai and Liu, 2020). Nadiya stated in the survey that she trusted the Insta-Trainers she followed, which is why she did not question the price point (Ballatine and Martin, 2005; Soklova and Kefi, 2020). Instances like these, where a meal is replaced with a costly diet product or an entire meal is skipped, have complicated Nadiya's relationship with food.

In the interview, she claimed she did not know how to “eat right” and often ate only one or two meals a day. She added that when she did eat, she felt “extremely guilty” and cited instances where family members were unsupportive, advising her “not to eat.” Notably, she mentioned labelling cultural food as “bad food” while associating Western foods with “good foods”. She stated: “I subscribed to a lot of ‘diet deficit’ plans and ‘keto’ but never went through with them since they felt overwhelming...It was satisfying at the moment, but now I feel like it was a waste of money”. One of the milder yet common instances among study participants, the above example reflects how women participate in self-transformative ethical practices based on the recommendations of Insta-Trainers and the result of the content they have curated for the betterment of their health on UCDMs. It exemplifies Foucault’s (1987) third component of freedom in action, showing how Insta-users participate in practices of change to become ethical subjects, striving to meet ideal images shaped by familial, societal, and governmental expectations.

Nadiya also opted for permanent body-altering surgery after what she described as “multiple failed attempts” to lose weight through fitness and diets promoted on CDMs. This decision was influenced partly by the constant health misinformation presented on Instagram, which often links fatness to illness in a direct, causal manner (see Chapter 9) (Bacon, 2010; Childers and Allison, 2010; Gordon, 2020; Morse et al., 2010). These messages combined with a lack of familial support, made her feel helpless, which ultimately prompted her to undergo gastric sleeve surgery in her early 20s in 2020. During the interview, she indicated that the images she saw on Insta-Trainer pages made her “feel bad and depressed”, but she later discovered that “many of [the Insta-Trainers] have done surgeries... and did not work as hard as” she did in her attempts to lose weight. This realisation seemingly justified her decision to resort to surgery as a means of maintaining ‘health’ despite not having reported any health issues when she was ‘fat’. Nadiya’s experience highlights the powerful influence of both digital misinformation and societal pressures embedded in CDMs regarding body image, ultimately pressuring individuals to undergo significant medical procedures in pursuit of a socially (mis)constructed ideal of ‘good’ health.

Nadiya’s gastric sleeve bypass surgery alone cost 50,000 QAR (approximately £11,505), excluding additional costs of aftercare, medication, and ongoing maintenance. Her mother not only suggested the surgery but also accompanied her to all appointments and offered to pay for it, illustrating Gill’s (2017) concept of intensive mothering—where the mother plays an active and potentially overbearing role in curating her daughter’s health, body-image, and well-being according to

societal standards (see Chapter 8). In this case, Nadiya's mother's actions aligned with the standards set by CDMs to help shape a healthier daughter and, by extension, a 'healthier' citizen. It is also important to note that the doctor who performed the surgery on Nadiya is an influencer/Insta-Trainer whose content promotes slenderness and weight loss within the framework of good health.

Nadiya confirms that the messages on Instagram, combined with familial and societal pressure, played a significant role in her decision to undergo surgery. She perceived bodily alteration surgeries as "justified as necessary because of the mental anguish a nonconforming body part can cause" (Heyes, 2007, p. 5). After the surgery, she continued to limit her meals out of fear of regaining weight, despite achieving her weight-loss goal. Although she did feel happier and cited the decision as "good for my mental health", she acknowledged that the pressure surrounding body image contributed significantly to her choice. This situation illustrates how intensive mothering, when aligned with digital standards and pressures embedded in various CDMs, can drive young women towards life-altering decisions like surgery in their pursuit of becoming the ideal biocitizen.

This example serves as a segue into Foucault's (1987) fourth and final component of freedom: what one aims to achieve through ethical practices of self-formation (Gilson, 2014). Participants in my study expressed goals such as becoming stronger, losing weight, reducing guilt, avoiding judgment, enjoying food, being healthy, and feeling good about themselves. These goals, rooted in practices that focus on the "ontological conditions that make ethics possible", reflect "the relationship of the self to itself" (Gilson, 2014, p. 80–81). Foucault's work on power relations suggests that "freedom, like power, is rethought and reconsidered... there will be a degree of freedom in practice, and with it, the possibility that points of resistance and their articulation in processes of emancipation will intensify" (Amigot and Pujal, 2009, p. 652). As Heyes (2007) points out: "Disciplinary power, while managing and constraining our bodies, also enhances our capacities and develops new skills. These capacities can contribute to a struggle for greater freedom...or they can reinforce the crushing effects of normalisation" (p. 7).

Nadiya imposed both mild and severe disciplinary practices on herself to achieve her weight-loss goals. Even after reaching her target, the fear of regaining weight continued to affect how she ate. This pattern is observed in Ghaya and Mahra, who continue to monitor and regulate their bodies even after achieving their goals. The women in my study exercise a degree of freedom, which

introduces a certain kind of agency, even if it is limited to ethical transformations (Hans, 2017). This freedom, however, does not equate with full autonomy, as there is an ongoing tension between subjection and agency. This tension creates forms of subjectivity that are shaped by external forces, without offering a space for absolute freedom from the historical and social conditions in which they emerge (Diamond and Quinby, 1988; Amigot and Pujal, 2009).

The audio-visual and textual messages from Insta-Trainers and biopedagogical digital manuals make use of Foucault's (1987) "ontological condition of freedom within the socio-political context, [urging and instructing individuals] to become a certain type of subject, thereby creating alternative ways of living and reshaping their subjectivity" (Rainbow, 1994; Gilson, 2014, p. 81–82). However, instead of using Insta-Training functionalities to escape the pressures of conformity, women in Qatar are more likely to find themselves confined by the features of digital functionality. "The fact that the techniques of the self are dependent on their socio-historical context highlights the limited agency of women under specific and multiple restrictions"—the very restrictions tied to ethical subjectivity and citizenship projects that turn them into docile bodies (McNay, 2000; Amigot and Pujal, 2009, p. 566; Hans, 2017; Schoenbach et al., 2017).

In the previous chapter, I detailed how Ola was guided by Algorithmically Curated Digital Manuals (ACDMs) to curate her weekly shopping list using UCDMs, drawing a clear parallel to traditional shopping catalogues that were once key tools in guiding consumer behaviour. In the context of digital interactivity, these once-static resources (printed shopping catalogues) have transformed into dynamic, personalised digital guides. Through ACDMs, Ola's shopping experience is shaped by algorithmic suggestions that reflect her previous preferences and consumption patterns, thereby influencing her choices in a highly targeted manner. Within a neoliberal and capitalist framework, this shift exemplifies how consumer autonomy is framed within the bounds of market-driven logic. Neoliberalism promotes the idea of individual freedom and choice, yet within a capitalist system, these choices are increasingly shaped by market forces and digital algorithms. In Ola's case, the ACDMs do not simply offer a variety of options—they actively curate her shopping list in ways that align with broader market interests, often nudging her towards products that maximise profitability for corporations. This dynamic reflects the capitalist strategy of creating a seemingly personalised consumer experience that, in reality, serves the interests of the market.

The use of UCDMs on Instagram vividly demonstrates how consumer behaviour is increasingly shaped by digital platforms operating under the logic of surveillance capitalism. These platforms collect and analyse vast amounts of data to create detailed consumer profiles, which are then used to steer individuals like Ola towards specific products. This process not only reinforces consumerism but also strengthens the power of capitalist structures by embedding market-driven decisions into the very fabric of everyday life (see Chapter 7). While Ola's use of UCDMs, which are often guided by ACDMs, may appear to enhance her autonomy in managing her shopping, this autonomy is constrained by the neoliberal and capitalist logics that govern digital platforms. These interactive digital manuals are not merely tools of convenience—they are mechanisms through which market forces subtly align personal choices with capitalist imperatives.

The overall analysis reinforces the earlier argument that CDMs can be used to influence individuals across political, economic, and social spheres. The data and examples provided in the subsections demonstrate how these dynamics manifest, effectively supporting the initial claim that CDMs widely impact various aspects of life. While the analysis in this chapter primarily focuses on CDMs as a whole and UCDMs as one of three specific categories, it successfully demonstrates the interconnectedness of all categories, highlighting how they function together to reinforce the broader influence of these digital tools on individuals' political, economic, and social behaviours in Qatar.

### **6.3. Conclusion**

This chapter has examined the impact of *Insta-Training* functionalities through the lens of Curated Digital Manuals (CDMs), only focusing in particular on User-Curated Digital Manuals (UCDMs), and their role in shaping the behaviours, choices, and cultural perceptions of young women in Qatar. Drawing from the findings presented in Section 6.2.1, the analysis has demonstrated that Insta-Trainers as influencers are perceived not merely as content creators, but as guides, teachers, and even friends—figures who subtly but powerfully influence how young women understand health, beauty, and self-care. Through the use of algorithmically curated content, these influencers promote normative, often Western, standards of wellness that users internalise and reproduce, frequently without conscious awareness. This process is most evident in the concept of *user disjuncture*, a component of the Insta-Training process, where participants believe they are exercising self-improvement and agency, yet in practice are conforming to externally imposed ideals that shape them into docile, self-monitoring subjects.

Participants' lifestyle, diet, and health-related decisions are often framed through this perceived sense of agency, though the data reveals these decisions are deeply influenced by the curated ideals disseminated through digital platforms. This dynamic results in both productive and problematic outcomes: while some participants find motivation and structure through these practices, others report feelings of guilt, inadequacy, and pressure. A key finding in this chapter is the shift in participants' perception of traditional foods and cultural practices, which are increasingly seen as incompatible with modern health ideals. This internalised hierarchy—where traditional foods are labelled as 'bad' and Western alternatives as 'good'—reveals a deeper tension between cultural identity and globalised wellness narratives, echoing Feldman's (2021) observations on the cultural politics of food.

In examining the correlation between time spent engaging with Insta-Trainer content and the intensity of self-regulatory behaviours, the findings indicate a strong relationship. On average, participants engage with such content for approximately four hours daily, a level of interaction that significantly influences their physical and mental well-being. This sustained engagement fosters self-transformation through exposure to persuasive, platform-curated routines and recommendations, contributing to the emergence of biocitizenship—an ideal deeply embedded in national health discourses.

Situated within the broader context of Qatar's socio-political objectives, particularly the Qatar National Vision 2030, these findings offer insight into how digital health discourses are intertwined with state ambitions. Government-led initiatives such as National Sports Day serve not only to promote collective wellbeing but also to reinforce ideals of self-discipline and responsibility that mirror the principles embedded in CDMs and Insta-Training functionalities. What appears as individual choice is often a reflection of broader strategies of governance that align personal health practices with national development goals.

Ultimately, this chapter has demonstrated that CDMs—particularly UCDMs—are not neutral tools of content organisation, but powerful instruments of behavioural influence. While offering users a sense of personalisation and empowerment, they operate within a framework that reinforces conformity and subtly governs self-perception and lifestyle. In the case of young Qatari women, these tools mediate a constant negotiation between cultural authenticity and aspirational modernity, raising important questions about agency, identity, and the socio-technical shaping of wellbeing.

In conclusion, these insights developed in this chapter lay the groundwork for a more nuanced exploration of the technological mechanisms underpinning Insta-Training. While the focus here has been on User-Curated Digital Manuals (UCDMs) and their role in shaping culturally embedded practices of health, identity, and self-regulation, the following chapter expands the analytical scope to include Pre-Curated and Algorithmically Curated Digital Manuals (PCDMs and ACDMs). By shifting to a more technical perspective, Chapter 7 interrogates how Instagram's underlying platform architecture, business model, and algorithmic systems further structure user behaviour. This transition enables a deeper understanding of how digital self-disciplining practices are not only culturally mediated but also technologically driven, offering a more complete picture of how young Qatari women are positioned within, and shaped by, the platform economy.

## **Chapter 7. Curated Digital Manuals, Part II: PCDMs and ACDMs**

### **7.1. Overview and Background**

In this chapter, I continue to explore Curated Digital Manuals (CDMs) as a toolkit for critical analysis developed within the broader Insta-Trainer framework. Building on Chapter 6, which centred on User-Curated Digital Manuals (UCDMs), this chapter shifts focus to Pre-Curated Digital Manuals (PCDMs) and Algorithmically Curated Digital Manuals (ACDMs). Adopting a more technical and algorithmic perspective, I examine how Instagram’s business model and platform design influence the behaviour and engagement of young female Qatari users.

Since all three categories of CDMs function similarly in terms of user engagement, response, and consumption, this chapter highlights the distinctions in how ACDMs and PCDMs are curated, prioritised, and presented through Instagram’s browsing experience. Unlike UCDMs, ACDMs and PCDMs are not user-generated. ACDMs consist of visual content automatically curated by Instagram’s algorithms for users to consume on their feeds, explore pages, stories, and reels. These algorithms prioritise content based on factors such as user engagement, location, relevance, and content freshness (Tufekci, 2015; Mosseri, 2021). PCDMs, on the other hand, are ‘pre-curated’ content, such as PDF booklets or software applications, created outside of Instagram by Insta-Trainers, influencers, governmental profiles, companies, or any other entities with an Insta-presence. This instructional content, often designed and edited externally, is posted or linked within the platform to resemble traditional health, diet, and beauty manuals in digital form. Multi-page posts and step-by-step tutorials also fall under PCDMs due to their detailed, instructional nature.

Colloquially and in daily conversations, we often hear others refer to ‘The Algorithm’, as if a single algorithm dictates user experience. In reality, social media platforms, including Instagram, are built upon and operate on multiple algorithms working in concert to create personalised experiences. Instagram’s official website clarifies that it “does not have a singular algorithm that oversees what people do and don’t see on the app. We use a variety of algorithms, classifiers, and processes, each with its own purpose” (Mosseri, 2021). I will therefore use ‘multialgorithms’ or ‘multialgorithmic functionalities’ for the various algorithms operating within Instagram and similar social media platforms to reflect the complex interplay of algorithms rather than implying a singular governing algorithm. When discussing the impact on study respondents—how they ‘Insta-trained’—I use the

term ‘Insta-functionalities’ to describe how multialgorithms influence their experience. While multialgorithmic functionalities and Insta-functionalities refer to the same black box algorithms, Insta-functionalities specifically address their effect on the participants in this study.

This chapter critiques the Insta-functionalities of UCDMs and PCDMs, focusing on how Instagram content influences social practices, cultural norms, and the attitudes of young women in Qatar towards health, diet, and well-being. The analysis is structured into three main discussion sessions:

- **7.2. Users: The Technological Solutionist and Optimist** examines how Instagram’s multialgorithm curated content encourage users to adopt technological solutionist mindsets. The section addresses the prevalent belief among participants (82% of survey respondents) that social media platforms can easily solve health and wellness issues. Drawing on Morozov’s (2013) critique of technological solutionism and McLuhan’s (1964) concept of technological determinism, supplemented by more recent works on the evolving impact of technology on society, this section offers a contemporary perspective on these enduring ideas. The psychological and physical effects of consuming such content are discussed, with examples from the study’s participants.<sup>19</sup>
- **7.3. Can Freedom Exist in the Black Box?** explores the constraints on user autonomy imposed by Instagram’s multialgorithmic functionalities. This section critiques the macro-level, systematic limitations on freedom imposed by these hidden processes, contrasting them with the micro-level discussion in Chapter 6, which focused on the individual experience of freedom within the context of UCDMs. It delves into how Instagram’s black box manipulate user behaviour and diminish autonomy on a larger scale, driven by profit motives and neoliberal ideologies. The section also addresses wider concerns regarding surveillance capitalism and the erosion of user agency. Drawing on theoretical frameworks and concepts by scholars such as O’Neil (2016), Buolamwini (2018a; 2018b; 2018c), Noble (2018), and Benjamin (2019), the discussion unpacks issues of cultural invisibility, representation, bias, and the lack of autonomy embedded within Instagram’s content and

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<sup>19</sup> For instance, Ghaya, recounted her dietary transition from traditional cultural foods to a Mediterranean diet; influenced by content popularised through Instagram influencers and self-proclaimed dietary experts, she perceived this diet as healthier and protein-rich. Nadiya shared a similar view, explaining that, before conducting further research, she subconsciously labelled all traditional and cultural food as ‘bad’ due to how food was presented on Instagram.

multialgorithmic functions, deconstructing the cultural and ethnic biases inherent in content related to food, beauty, and health.

- **7.4. Insta-Functionalities: Cultural Invisibility and Surveillance Capitalism**, critiques how Instagram's multialgorithmic functionalities contribute to cultural invisibility and the marginalisation of specific cultural practices. The platform's design and algorithms often replace meaningful cultural representations with dominant Western narratives, affecting users' identity, self-perception, habits, and overall well-being. The section also addresses the biases embedded in the core algorithms, such as content representation and built-in search functions, which perpetuate these issues. Instagram's multialgorithmic apparatus systematically disadvantages women from various ethnic backgrounds, particularly those from the Arab Gulf.

## **7.2 Users: The Technological Solutionist and Optimist**

Chapters 5 and 6 establish that Instagram carefully curates content through its multialgorithmic functions, creating psychological pressure on individuals to conform to unrealistic and unattainable body, beauty, and overall well-being standards (Abidin, 2016a; Abidin and Gwynne, 2017; Mackson et al., 2019). By consuming such content, users increasingly engage in labour-intensive and often costly forms of self-discipline and self-monitoring. They are continually encouraged to purchase and/or subscribe to beauty and health-related products and services to achieve a sense of belonging and normality, as depicted in PCDMs and ACDMs (Habibi et al., 2014; Liu et al., 2018; Camacho-Miñano, 2019; Pilgram and Bohnet-Joschko, 2019). The example of *#fitspiration* in Chapter 2 illustrates how users adopt trending health-related terminology as inspirational and educational material to maintain their fitness levels and body image, referencing images linked to the hashtag (Mackson et al., 2019).

While studies have determined that online communities can significantly and positively promote a sense of belonging, support, and solidarity, they can also promote feelings of dissatisfaction, low self-esteem, and mental pressure due to a desire to resemble the images perpetuated in certain popularised trends (Cramer et al., 2016; Lupton, 2017; Hunt et al., 2017; Reer et al., 2019; Fabris et al., 2020). Users' bodies and minds become docile objects that are constant sites for work, construction, and improvement (Heyes, 2007). Of all the survey participants, 75% indicated that they have experienced negative emotions while browsing through Instagram, though the majority of the respondents still affirmed that the content was beneficial, informative (73%), and allowed

them to learn new self-maintenance skills (70%). It is important to note that although a significant number of participants exhibited optimistic attitudes consistent with technological solutionism mindsets—which prioritises algorithmic curative content on Instagram—the user-disjunction of distrust remains observable (60%). The above-mentioned emotional responses have been confirmed by 31 out of 41 survey participants through statements such as:

“Sometimes the content inspires or motivates me to try something new, but sometimes it can have an opposite effect, especially when things seem too perfect, out of reach...It give me the feeling of ‘I’ll never be able to do that’ and can cause me to focus on all the areas I’m lacking in.”

– Biscooti

“I have tried everything from fad diets, to surveys, to giving up completely...These things include a workout plan by Nada...I felt like [my] body was crashing...Fast results but you can't maintain it...[I was also] influenced to do keto which didn't go well.”

– Sahar

“The content affects me a lot (negatively), especially on the fitness side, where I can’t reach my goals. It stresses me out and makes me think of my unachieved goals...I follow tips in terms of food, some healthy morning tips, stretching and recovery.”

– Wahaj

“I started doing this flat tummy Korean trend. It’s hard, but I’m getting there!”

– Tala

“I feel motivated sometimes when I see that I can do exercises similar to those in Instagram, and push my limits. Mentally, sometimes it does make me feel nervous, but I can get over it easily.”

– Reema

Bascooti and Reema’s testimonies illustrate the spectrum of emotional and physical reactions they experience when engaging with Instagram content, encompassing both negative and positive responses. Despite these mixed reactions, they continue to consume and apply the information presented by Insta-functionalities. This contradictorily underscores the interaction between ‘user-disjuncture’ and ‘technological solutionism’—while users are aware of the adverse effects of online content consumption on their overall health, they still seek inspiration and potential solutions from such content.

The term ‘technological solutionism’ was borrowed from the “world of architecture and urban planning, where it has come to refer to an unhealthy preoccupation with sexy, monumental, and narrow-minded solutions... to problems that are extremely complex, fluid, and contentious” (Morozov, 2013, p. 6). In broad terms, the concept critiques the tendency of technology-reliant individuals to address complex socio-political and personal problems without fully investigating the underlying implications or questioning whether the problems truly require solutions. Rather than critically and directly engaging with the root causes of these complex issues, digital solutionists rely on algorithms and technology for more straightforward solutions, which can sometimes create more harm than good. Technological solutionism recasts “all complex social situations either as neatly defined problems with definite, computable solutions or as transparent and self-evident processes that can be easily optimised – if only the right algorithms are in place! – this quest is likely to have unexpected consequences that could eventually cause more damage than the problems they seek to address” (Morozov, 2013, p. 5).

This ideology intersects with the responses in my study, more specifically, how technology is used to address specific mental and physical health issues that align with Instagram’s standards.<sup>20</sup> Morozov (2013) touches on this through his critique of self-disciplining practices performed using health monitoring devices and fitness trackers, particularly focusing on those that count steps and calorie intake. In short, he critiques their use as attempted solutions to what some perceive as problematic health concerns. Lupton (2016) builds upon the discussion of fitness trackers, offering further insights into the complex nature of wearable devices in managing individual health and fitness. She acknowledges the rising popularity and productivity of wearable devices, highlighting a concerning trend: these devices often serve as mechanisms for self-surveillance and self-discipline, placing pressure on users to achieve specific objectives, which can ultimately lead to heightened levels of stress and anxiety, as experienced by many of this study’s participants. Lena shared that she applies self-surveillance and self-disciplining practices on herself daily in order to complete her 10,000 steps a day goal, in accordance with advice from her wearable device.

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<sup>20</sup> For example, in section 7.3, Hajar states: “I even keep post notifications on if I really like their wellness content.” She enables the alerts on her phone to avoid missing out on any new content in order to self-learn, self-monitor, and later, mentally self-discipline.

Interestingly, ‘user disjuncture’, as observed in the examples above, aligns with Lupton’s findings on the impact of self-quantification on individuals’ mental and physical well-being. Multialgorithmic functions or Insta-functionalities may therefore offer both positive productivity and negative emotional reactions, similar to those experienced by users of wearable devices. This phenomenon also serves as evidence that users are active, rather than passive, participants in technology, and that such disjuncture and contradiction can be seen as a form of negotiation or agency. While it is true that these technologies, in the form of digital content, devices, and software applications, offer community, convenience, and valuable quantified insights into health-related issues, it is important to acknowledge their limitations and drawbacks (Lupton, 2016; Mackson et al., 2019; Rodney, 2019).

These drawbacks include the potential loss of autonomy and agency, increased reliance on technology, the promotion of harmful diets and eating disorders, anxiety, and other long-term health effects (Morozov, 2013; Turkle, 2013; Gill, 2017). Through his critique of technological solutionism, Morozov (2013) argues that users of technology must recognise the limitations and inauthenticity presented as normalised standards, and consider alternative perspectives for problem-solving rather than relying solely on technology (see also: Lupton, 2016; O’Neil, 2016; Boussard, 2018). For example, instead of instinctively turning to technology, users should seek human professionals who can provide meaningful support and tailored solutions that address individual health concerns, chronic illnesses, and disabilities (see the example of Faten below).

During the semi-structured interview, Lulu spoke about algorithmic resistance and agency when discussing her deliberate practice of searching for specific items or content within Instagram’s search engine. The main goal was to prompt the algorithms to recommend more relevant options. Tala mentioned that she would whisper the types of content she wanted to see into her phone in order to get a wider range of suggested options. Although the actual effectiveness of these practices is uncertain, they demonstrate some degree of agency in terms of manipulating Insta-functionalities for personal benefit. They also, however, reflect a continuing reliance on technology to search and curate, which can potentially eliminate opportunities for meaningful self-assessment and choice. A characteristic of technological solutionism is apparent, as technology can provide beneficial solutions to users yet simultaneously limit them. Given that these algorithms perpetuate biases by recycling historically biased data, the content they suggest is inherently non-neutral and often disadvantages users from diverse ethnic backgrounds (Nobles, 2016; Buolamwini, 2018c;

Benjamin, 2019). This implies that content with ACDMs and PCDMs tends to prioritise some content creators over others.

This prioritisation is influenced not only by the concept of the ‘coded gaze’ but also by the broader concept of computer vision<sup>21</sup> algorithms—an AI technology I tie to the monetisation features on Instagram. Computer vision algorithms are used by Meta to improve and enhance users’ experiences on Instagram (Williams, 2021; Instagram, 2024b). “This technology powers features like automatic tagging of friends in photos and provides visually impaired users with descriptions of images” (Balamurugan, 2023). A part of Insta-functionalities, this specific algorithm plays a significant role in moderating images and videos, as well as offering personalised recommendations that are essential to the success of monetisation features (Williams, 2021; 2023; Instagram, 2024b).

Instagram’s monetisation features facilitate business activities and revenue-generation for users and influencers by promoting certain products and services cleverly embedded within images and videos (Habibi et al., 2014; Liu et al., 2018; Instagram, 2024a). These features include influencer marketing, sponsored posts, and shoppable posts, to name a few. Computer vision algorithms play a critical role in ensuring that users are presented with appropriate, personalised content on the platform. However, they also serves to identify and flag certain medical images or health-related information, which raises concern about censorship (Instagram, 2024b; 2024c).<sup>22</sup>

One may perceive such Insta-functionalities as a helpful feature that serves to enhance the browsing experience. While these features offer convenience to Instagram shoppers, by blurring the line between authentic content and sponsored advertisements, they actually reveal broader concerns within the platform’s structure surrounding issues of agency, autonomy, and browsing freedom. Certain content and creators are disproportionately affected and are effectively rendered culturally invisible (Benjamin, 2019), resulting in a dual layer of disadvantage for both users and content

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<sup>21</sup> “Computer vision is a field of computer science that focuses on enabling computers to identify and understand objects and people in images and videos. Like other types of AI, computer vision seeks to perform and automate tasks that replicate human capabilities” (Microsoft, 2024). I adopt this framework as a comprehensive designation that encompasses Buolamwini’s notion of the ‘coded gaze’ (2018a; 2018c). While the coded gaze directly addresses cultural and ethnic biases in the technology’s perception of individuals depicted in visual media, computer vision provides a broader conceptual framework for understanding these phenomena, both in relation to people and objects. This term will be used when discussing aspects that are not directly related to culture, such as Instagram’s monetisation features (Instagram, 2024a).

<sup>22</sup> Recognising the significance of censorship and the freedom to browse, I will incorporate the theme into the discussions in the upcoming sections.

creators on the app.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, the features also reinforce the belief that Instagram can fully address health, beauty, and bodily concerns, thereby perpetuating technological solutionist ideologies.

Exercising agency on Instagram through the choices presented and recommended to users is influenced by both the coded gaze and computer vision algorithms, which, to some extent, may cause the application to prioritise profit over user experience. I found that these factors work together to shape users' content experiences on the platform. It is important to address agency limitations and autonomy loss by exploring their connection to technological solutionism, which will be discussed in the following section.

The above analysis highlights a prevalent trend in which the digital solutionist mindset tends to prioritise technological solutions over human-generated advice, perspectives, and interventions. A significant majority of survey participants (82%) expressed this tendency by favouring costly, unsupervised workout booklets, dietary plans, and instructional materials promoted on Instagram through PCDMs and ACDMs, which focus on improving body image, health, and mind. This inclination contrasts with seeking guidance from qualified and certified professionals, whether in person or through online consultations. This behaviour underscores a limitation of technological solutionism and the overreliance on technology.

While Instagram offers benefits in terms of productivity and information dissemination, its multialgorithms often generalise, rank, and prioritise certain content, potentially overlooking users' specific health concerns, such as chronic and mental illness, and perpetuating bias and misinformation within the solutions provided by these algorithms. This tendency illustrates Morozov's (2013) point on the limitations of technology in providing support and solutions. Human professionals are capable of offering more accurate advice and recommendations, leveraging their expertise and engaging in meaningful in-person interactions and dialogue with users.

In her interview, Faten shared that she followed workout and weight-loss advice from Instagram during the COVID-19 lockdown. With all the fatphobic content flooding social media and everyone

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<sup>23</sup> The argument that content creators are disadvantaged will be discussed in Chapter 8 as part of a broader analysis of influencers' role, influencer markets, femininity, trends, micro-trends, and finally what I term the 'algorithmic wardrobe'.

trying to stay fit at home, she adhered to prevailing trends, which led to major health complications that could have been fatal. One incident, compounded by its intersection with her chronic illness and disability, resulted in Faten being hospitalised for almost 40 days. Considering her situation, it would have been more beneficial to have consulted a professional, in-person or through an online appointment, for tailored plans with ongoing monitoring, rather than seeking algorithmically curated advice presented in the form of PCDMs advertised on Instagram.<sup>24</sup>

Several participants mentioned similar experiences of implementing health advice from Instagram that has subsequently backfired negatively (see Sahar's quote cited earlier in this section). The frequency of such instances detailed in the survey responses highlights the controversial outcomes of self-disciplining practices exercised in relation to health and wellness solutions provided on Instagram through CDMs.

While Faten has expressed distrust in Instagram in both the survey and interview, she also insists that Instagram content is helpful and informative. She mentioned how she learned about a tracking device through ACDMs that helps users track and monitor their chronic illness. The 'life-changing' wearable device allows her to perform her daily tasks stress-free and has offered her reassurance, peace of mind, and convenience from the continuous moderation and alerts on her phone, just in case anything goes wrong with her body. This example not only illustrates technological solutionist characteristics through her use of Instagram to search for help and knowledge, ultimately leading to the use of a wearable technological device for self-monitoring, but also highlights the user-disjuncture that I have emphasised throughout the thesis. Faten also continues to follow content creators with whom she shares a common link, expressing that their advice is helpful, informative, and life changing.

The advice from Instagram and ultimately, the quantification of data that such technology provides within the device itself, has offered a greater sense of control to Faten, allowing her to make informed decisions about her overall health and wellbeing. According to Morozov (2013), the "advantages gained through quantification is to make the problem at hand easier to handle; once it is expressed in numbers, we can discuss how it changes over time, measure how other factors might be influencing it, and so forth. Solutionism and quantification are thus inherently linked" (p. 254).

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<sup>24</sup> I would like to emphasise that this example is from 2022. In a 2024 follow-up interaction via Instagram Direct Messages, Faten mentioned that she now uses Instagram to learn about her disability, and the devices and technologies that can help navigate it more effectively.

In other words, the quantification of health-related information makes health easier to improve and/or maintain. Similarly, in *The Quantified Self*, Lupton (2017) stresses that quantified data can provide valuable insight that empowers users to adopt positive health habits; however, it must be met with caution due to the stress it can cause from self-surveillance practices.

In Faten's case, as well as with other participants like Nadiya, Sahar, and Tala, whom I have addressed in previous chapters, all have at certain moments relied solely on digitally generated content and algorithmically prioritised health advice without seeking input from a qualified professional, whether in person or online, during the pandemic—a point that underscores why Morozov (2013) cautions against the limitations of technological solutionism. Despite technology, like Instagram's multialgorithmic functions, serving as a valuable supplementary tool for learning about various topics around health and the body, it should not serve as a substitute for personalised advice and guidance from qualified professionals, whether in-person or online. Morozov's insights prompt a deeper consideration of the balance between technological assistance and individual agency and autonomy in decision-making processes.

### **7.3 Can Freedom Exist in the Black-box?**

In *Algorithms of Oppression*, Noble (2018) describes how search engine technologies, such as Google, reinforce biases and inequality, particularly in relation to race and gender. She argues that users' agency is limited since algorithms control how images and information are shaped and represented online, reinforcing certain stereotypes. For example, Google's search engines algorithmically prioritise certain images and "information about women and girls because it is profitable", as well as information related to race, thereby limiting users' ability to access different perspectives and information" (Noble, 2018, p. 130; Benjamin, 2019). In short, algorithmic control limits users' agency through the representation of images and information online, thereby restricting their access to diverse perspectives.

This algorithmic control shapes overall perceptions and experiences of body image, health, and beauty on digital platforms such as Instagram. While Noble (2018) focuses on the algorithms embedded within Google's search engine, it is important to recognise that Instagram's built-in search engine, ACDMs<sup>25</sup>, functions in a comparable manner; it "is exactly like Google's search

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<sup>25</sup> Fun fact: ACDMs is here used as Algorithmically Curated Digital Manuals; however, in this sentence the acronym can also mean 'Algorithmic Content Decision Making System' with regards to built-in search engines.

engine. The only difference is you're sifting through content on Instagram alone, while on Google, you're searching the entire Internet" (Zalani, 2023).

The prioritisation of content on platforms like Instagram reflects a profit-driven approach rooted in neoliberal ideologies and economic principles. Monetisation, rather than a commitment to showcase diverse perspectives, shapes Instagram's core infrastructure and Insta-functions, prioritising economic interests over societal wellbeing. As Benjamin (2019) argues that "private industry choices are in fact public policy decisions. They are animated by political [and economic] values" (p. 12); neoliberalism intensifies existing inequalities through technology, including Instagram's multialgorithmic functions. The nature of content on social media platforms not only align with neoliberalism but also shape infrastructural development—technology is reconstructed, improved, and updated with profit-driven objectives. This fosters surveillance capitalism and data commodification while reinforcing socio-economic injustices, demonstrating that technology is not neutral, (see O'Neil, 2016; Buolamwini, 2018b; 2018c; Noble, 2018). Benjamin (2019) and the cited scholars advocate for democratic approaches that prioritise social justice and collective wellbeing, emphasising that "abolitionist tool making must entail the democratization of data—both its design and its application... If we come to terms with the fact that all data are necessarily partial and potentially biased, then we need long-term approaches that optimise for justice and equity" (p. 188–189).

Through Benjamin's exploration of the intersections of race and technology, significant issues regarding power dynamics, visibility, and surveillance in relation to agency arises. Benjamin (2019) critically examines surveillance algorithms on digital platforms, emphasising their substantial influence on users' access to resources, information, and opportunities found online. While technology has the potential to empower individuals from diverse and marginalised communities, it also exerts a certain degree of control over them, constraining online autonomy and perpetuating already biased representations and power dynamics—a phenomenon Benjamin terms the 'New Jim Code'. Overall, in the context of my study, Instagram's influence perpetuates unrealistic beauty standards and unattainable health expectations, driven by self-surveillant practices. This influence, in turn, plays a role in shaping users' perceptions and actions, often limiting or controlling agency and autonomy. Instagram's multialgorithmic functions can shape user's perceptions and behaviours in ways that may not align with their cultural identity, values, societal norms, and even individual health concerns. For example, Faten's experience, which led

to weeks of hospitalisation and Ghaya and Nadiya's belief that traditional food is harmful to one's health, illustrate this issue.

Benjamin's ideologies are applicable to Instagram's representation of health advice, beauty standards, and content regarding users' overall wellbeing. Through its multialgorithmic functionalities, Instagram can control users' browsing experiences by prioritising specific biased content categories, as discussed earlier. While computer vision algorithms help ensure the visibility of appropriate and relevant content, they are also utilised to identify and flag graphic medical images or health-related information that violate Instagram's guidelines. According to Instagram's official website (2024b): "AI can detect and remove content that violates our Community Guidelines before anyone reports it. Other times, our technology sends content to human review teams for closer examination and decision-making. These reviewers worldwide focus on the most harmful content for Instagram users". Despite these measures, the platform, owned by Meta, has faced criticism for allowing politically motivated content to spread, such as external interfere in the United States' 2016 elections, despite its guidelines (Benjamin, 2019). Another pertinent example is Meta's systematic censorship of content about Palestine since October 7, 2023: "Meta's policies and practices have been silencing voices in support of Palestine and Palestinian human rights on Instagram and Facebook in a wave of heightened censorship of social media" (Human Rights Watch, 2023). These 'lapses' raise concerns about whether community guidelines are genuinely designed to protect users and ensure a positive, free browsing experience, or if they are simply driven by political and economic interests.

By connecting the aforementioned ideologies like those by Benjamin (2019) and Noble (2018) within the broader framework of technological determinism, it is apparent that users' agency and autonomy are intricately intertwined with the notion that technology shapes and directs social structures, values, and individual behaviours. When examining Insta-functionalities, it becomes clear that the design, reconstruction, and implementation of its multialgorithms embody the principles of technological determinism, especially noticeable in how the platform governs users' overall interactions and exerts significant influence over their online experiences. In other words, the biased multialgorithms inherent within how Insta-functionalities not only influence users' perceptions of health but also impact their capacity and agency to make well-informed decisions regarding their overall wellbeing:

“[I am] trying to finish my steps, trying to exercise more so I will finish my circles in Apple Watch. People have been posting photos of their watches [on Instagram].”

–Lena

“I drink hot water with lemon and ginger with a splash of turmeric and black pepper in the morning as a way to detox. A friend recommended this to me via a clip and recipe.

I follow some psychologists and mental health pages that help keep me grounded. So those have been providing me tips on ways to improve my life...I even keep post notifications on if I really like their wellness content.”

–Hajar

“I do use the [advice] I get from Instagram. With food I do for example try to eat more protein.”

–Meera

“Lumen was advertised [on Instagram] as a device that gives you the ability to hack your metabolism by understanding it better. It didn’t really help.”

–Hayat

“ I tried [intermittent fasting], subscribed to better help for my mental health, [ate] more food because of the ads.”

–Maysa

The common thread across these examples is that the participants derive health, beauty, and dietary guidance from technology, applying such practices to their daily lives through bio-pedagogical methods (see Chapter 6). For example, Lena is motivated to complete 10,000 steps daily to meet the goal set by her wearable device, illustrating how Insta-functionalities shape users’ perceptions of information and drive their actions in an intensified form of self-surveillance. Users reinforce and comply with the same images that inspire others to apply self-disciplining practices, such as posting images of their completed goals on social media, thus perpetuating a cycle of self-surveillance. Lena adds: “I don’t think anyone notices that we are all doing this by deciding what we share and don’t share. We are drawing an image for ourselves...Girls who are into fashion or luxury will only post aspects that show this part of their lives, to draw this image...People who follow them are actively [internalising] these images”.

There is a complex contradiction between the absence of agency during the browsing experience and the false sense or limited agency during the engagement experience. This ‘false sense’ arises

from the assumption that users have a choice in what to share or post, though their actual control is limited. The visibility of such content, despite informed choices, is heavily dictated by biased algorithms. Contrasting this with the first part of Hajar's quote above, it is clear that agency is indeed restricted on multiple fronts: firstly, by the inherently biased controlling Insta-functions of Instagram; secondly, by the way users are conditioned, or Insta-Trained, to absorb information and integrate it into their daily lives; and additionally, by the profound responsibility felt by some individuals to hold others accountable through sharing and endorsing content embedded with self-disciplining practices concerning health, wellbeing, and beauty. Hajar's friend felt a sense of responsibility to share a clip of a health drink with detailed guidance on how to prepare it, a PCDM, in an attempt to encourage her to better her health. Hajar consequently makes and consumes this 'health hack' daily, in an effort to self-discipline her body.<sup>26</sup>

Additionally, users' are conditioned to post certain content while refraining from posting others, as articulated by Lena, indicating how users are moulded, or Insta-Trained, to conform to what is deemed timely and socially Instagram-worthy. This creates a cycle of conformity that encourages users to hop on ever-changing monetisable trends promoted by the platform. Examples includes trends such as consuming labour-intensive health drinks, using self-surveillant wearable devices, and adopting celebrity endorsed fad diets, as reflected in the quotes by Meera, Maysa, and Hayat. This dynamic underscores how the algorithmic infrastructure plays an increasingly significant role in overriding users' autonomy, reinforcing the deterministic nature of technology.

The cycle extends beyond users' unknowing participation in the reinforcement of algorithmically prioritised content into the previously discussed systematic process of how these multialgorithms function by recommending content based on user history, including their circles of interaction. As long as users or their connections engage with specific content, they will consistently encounter it, with preference given to content with monetary value or that aligns with the platform's socio-political agenda. Once more, agency is restricted. Nevertheless, there are numerous instances of awareness among this study's participants that indicate a growing trend of algorithmic resistance, especially regarding content representation in their feed and methods to reclaim control:

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<sup>26</sup> I want to note here that this is an example that can be tied to the discussion on intensive mothering by Gill (2017) in Chapter 8, as I discuss the finding of how women feel the responsibility to not only self-manage themselves but those around them as well. Similar instances of this are found in multiple responses, where women manage other women's health and appearance through CDMs, but never managing men.

“Instagram is like the highlights reel of someone’s life. When that’s the only thing I see, I can only compare their highlights to my entire life, and I feel small and gross. It’s when I started following different people who posted honestly that I felt [that] go away.”

–Shamma

When answering a survey question on how Instagram affected the mental and physical wellbeing: “It is mostly the recommendations that pop up on their page, since they mostly recommend people who look the same and have the same body type. I had to force their algorithm to recommend me more body positive influencers and those who don’t put in that toxic mindset with a more diverse content page.

No matter how much I resist, the urge comes and goes.”

–Nadiya

“As a business graduate myself, we learnt a lot about the tips and tricks of marketing, and I feel like I see through a lot of the promotions and posts that are on social media. But they still have an impact on me at the end of the day, maybe subconsciously too. I think the impact might be first on how I feel about myself, which then would result on me making choices based on how I feel.”

–Bascooti

Through the perspectives shared previously by Lulu and Tala, and within this chapter by Nadiya, Shamma, and Bascooti, we observe a profound level of understanding regarding how the content circulation system works as understood by the participants. However, the prevalent user-disjuncture persists with respect to their emotional wellbeing. Although knowledge and awareness are present, they do not prevent the emergence of negative emotions or the adoption of certain self-disciplining practices to shape and reshape one’s body and identity.

In *Self-Transformation*, Heyes (2007) underscores the intricate dynamics between agency and external influences, including algorithmic frameworks like PCDMs and ACDMs, in shaping one’s self-perception and identity. She advocates for individuals to critically engage with the factors that help shape their individual identity while fostering awareness and actively questioning societal norms and digital representations of beauty, health, and wellbeing. Heyes (2017) asks individuals to actively shape themselves by “embracing a view of human beings as self-making while rejecting the sexist, normalising teleologies of beauty and virtue we are currently offered[.] I argue for a somaesthetics that diminishes suffering and opens the self to new and unpredictable becoming” (p. 37). She further argues, in a somewhat anti-techno-solutionist tone, that even with innovative and

advanced technology, individuals must accept and embrace their physical limitations instead of seeking technological ways to solve them; “our imperfect, vulnerable bodies cannot be overcome or left behind by any amount of technological innovation” (p. 133).

Heyes advocates for individuals to reclaim their autonomy, encouraging them not to rely on societal conventions or visual technological pressures to shape their identities (2007). Benjamin (2019) similarly advocates for reclaiming agency by challenging and resisting both technological systems and societal norms that perpetuate inequality and oppression. In contrast, Noble (2016) proposes that reclaiming agency entails advocating for increased transparency and accountability within algorithmic systems, while actively challenging biased and discriminatory data. She also stresses the importance of collective action against oppressive systems through communities, which involves critically examining and questioning the impact of technology on our lives. Similarly, Buolamwini’s (2018c) approach involves collective action, education, and advocacy to address the systemic biases inherent in the concept of the coded gaze.<sup>27</sup>

#### **7.4 Insta-Functionalities: Cultural Invisibility and Surveillance Capitalism**

“What we need to fear most is not what artificial intelligence will do to us on its own, but how the people in power will use artificial intelligence to control us and to manipulate us”.

– Zeynae Tufekci, TEDGlobal (2017a)

In a TED talk by Tufekci (2015; 2017a) on the role that artificial intelligence (AI) and data commodification play in shaping users’ behaviours, she highlights how users are unknowingly complacent in commodifying their own data to be sold by business brokers, using ‘persuasion architecture’ to discuss the phenomenon. The term was first popularised by Eric Schaffer in *Institutionalization of Usability* (1997), who used it to mean an intentional design approach focused on influencing user behaviour, often through elements like layout, content, and interactive features. Persuasion architecture aims to guide users towards desired actions or decisions while ensuring

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<sup>27</sup> I address reclaiming individual agency online in much more detail in Chapter 8, which focuses on a new type of content consumer that ‘woke up’ during the COVID-19 pandemic and changed the way they consume content, particularly how they let it physically and mentally affect them.

usability and user experience and may use principles of psychology and persuasion to exert influence.

In relation to AI algorithms, persuasion architecture is defined as the arrangement of technologies and information that “structure and filter human capacity for interpretation, decision-making, and action, with the intention of presenting the most relevant information to the most relevant individual(s) in order to achieve some desired (e.g. behavioural) outcome” (Rose and MacGregor, 2021). Whenever a user utilises services like search engines, social media platforms, e-commerce, customer support, and so on, the multialgorithmic functions of Instagram are actively gathering, organising, and scrutinising the data users unknowingly provide (Tufekci, 2015; 2017a; Benjamin, 2019; Zuboff, 2019; 2021). This process raises ethical questions regarding transparency, privacy, censorship, consent, agency, and data surveillance, especially in representations of health, wellness, diet, and cultural representation on Instagram. Through cultural determination, discussed earlier, these processes can directly influence and shape societal values by promoting broader cultural norms and popular trends.<sup>28</sup>

“Persuasion architectures can also be used for a variety of ethically dubious purposes, which may come to resemble abuse” (Rose and MacGregor, 2021, p. 31), including microaggressions, and are harmful because they exacerbate and perpetuate existing racial biases, stereotypes, and inequalities that promote discriminatory practices within the content and information architected on the screen (Noble, 2018; Benjamin, 2019). A much more illustrative example is Meta’s misuse of users’ personal data. The result of such data analysis extends well beyond what users on Facebook had consciously consented to share with the platform— “the vast majority of Facebook users did not knowingly consent to have their personal information used in certain data commodifying ways” (Kozłowska, 2018, p. X). Meta, the parent company of Instagram, has a history of employing algorithmic functions to extract individual personality traits from the data, surpassing the information that was voluntarily provided by users for profit-driven objectives (Kozłowska, 2018; Benjamin, 2019; Rose and MacGregor, 2021).

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<sup>28</sup>In my study, the dominant cultural narratives and preferences are shaped by Western or white-centric perspectives. Norms and trends are implicitly biased towards Eurocentric ideals, such as Western beauty standards, dietary preferences, and lifestyle choices (Tufekci, 2015; Noble, 2018; Benjamin, 2019; Bij de Vaate et al., 2022).

The concept of ‘behavioural future markets’ encompasses monetisation. The term was coined in Zuboff’s *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* (2019), which explores the emergence of a new economic logic driven by the collection and analysis of personal data. Zuboff writes that “surveillance capitalism unilaterally claims human experience as free raw material for translation into behavioural data” (p. 13) for the multialgorithmic functions of digital platforms, including routine application updates. Researchers caution that even if these predictions are inaccurate, they could nevertheless endanger users’ health, autonomy, and safety in significant ways (O’Neil, 2016; Tufekci, 2017a; Benjamin, 2019; Zuboff, 2019). Tufekci (2015) notes that “these decisions are increasingly central to social, political, and civic processes; consequently, the algorithmic harms that may arise from such computational form a brand-new category, including a spectrum of issues from libel to violence” (p. 205). Thus, decisions made by algorithms therefore have significant and harmful implications for individuals and communities as they influence important societal processes, underscoring how surveillance capitalism contributes to problematic cultural visibility or invisibility on Instagram, marginalising and isolating certain individuals, communities, and alternative viewpoints (Tufekci, 2015; Noble, 2018; Benjamin, 2019).

Our online lives are increasingly represented as data, whether through casual social media posts or personal searches, all of which serve the expanding system (Tufekci, 2017a). “The result is that both the world and our lives are pervasively rendered as information. Whether you are complaining about your acne or engaging in political debate on Facebook, searching for a recipe or sensitive health information on Google...all of it is raw material for this burgeoning text” (Zuboff, 2019, p. 176–177). The seemingly innocent online interactions directly, albeit unintentionally, result in content that is equally harmful and marginalising. The open-ended questions in the survey revealed mixed responses regarding the impacts of algorithmically curated content on participants’ mental and physical well-being:

“I love to see them, but then it’s when and how will I reach this?”

I need to fix [my body] to achieve a thinner figure and smaller waist.”

– Tala

“I don’t think that Instagram has shaped me directly but it did effect the people around me, which in turn did touch me in some way. Did I make any changes to my physical appearance

because of that? Nope. Did it have an effect on my mentality? I'd say slightly. Personally, I am not a sensitive person, but at some point, I was affected."

– Samar

"I feel a little consumed mentally. It has been influencing the way I view myself, my life and my body, so I try to limit the type of content that I consume online because it's repetitive and it's all pushing this very superficial narrative... I wanted that snatched waist and that Kardashian body for sure... I did buy the FitTea"

– Ola

"[They] make me feel bad for not going plant based."

– Maha

The above examples showcase how Insta-functionalities influence and impact women in Qatar, extending to their self-perception, mental well-being, and the dietary solutions to the 'visual bodily and mental problems' they encounter on the app. Although Tala enjoys browsing Instagram content, the images subtly trigger stress-inducing messages about her body, leading her to feel compelled to 'fix' her physical appearance in order to fit within the standards of popular trends. In Samar's case, there is clear user-disjuncture. The absence of physical impact from content consumption does not cancel out Insta-functionalities' overall influence. Samar acknowledges experiencing mental repercussions in two distinct ways: directly, yet does not act on it; indirectly, through the actions of the people around her who enact physical alterations prompted by similar content. Ola admittedly feels mental strain induced by the imagery she consumes on Instagram, noting the application's architecturally pervasive impact on various aspects of her life that mostly encompass both body image and overall lifestyle. She aspires to achieve a Kardashian-look, which is both culturally and racially problematic.<sup>29</sup> Ola mentions purchasing and consuming harmful products like, FitTea<sup>30</sup>, previously advertised by the Kardashians as a means to achieve a similar

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<sup>29</sup> The Kardashian body, aspired to by many young people, is racially problematic in ways that Adegoke (2019) best outlines. According to Sastre (2014): "Kardashian's body is at once complex and contradictory, concurrently reinforcing heteronormative structures of reproductive, privatised sexuality and historic racial dichotomies positioning white bodies as restrained and non-white bodies as overtly sexual, while exploiting the interstices of these taxonomies for profit" (p. 123). This statement highlights how the Kardashians capitalise on the tensions and contradictions within these societal norms and racial dynamics to generate profit, suggesting a complex interplay between individual agency, beauty standards, harmful marginalisations and the commercialisation of race, identity, and sexuality.

<sup>30</sup> "Companies like Teami, FitTea, and Flat Tummy Co (along with the celebrities endorsing them) have faced complaints from people who question not only the lack of scientific backing but the diet culture that promotes thinness as wellness and uses celebrities with access to plastic surgeon and personal trainers to promote expensive products that

look. Faten also highlighted using self-disciplinary methods to achieve the famous ethnically ambiguous Kardashian body by wearing waist-trainers daily.

Ola's experience highlights the repetitive nature of harmful content on Instagram, prompting her to limit her online usage, which reflects a level of awareness that then led to independent resistance against the algorithms. As previously mentioned, Instagram's multialgorithmic functionality ensures such repetition. The core mechanisms of ACDMs and PCDMs serve political, economic, and social objectives, perpetuating a cycle in which users' bodies and minds become docile subjects to continual refinement and improvement. Maha similarly reported experiencing negative emotions from content that often guilted her into adopting a plant-based diet. Many, if not most participants, mentioned that they adopted multiple fad diets as a direct result of content they consumed. It is essential to note that a fully plant-based dish is not inherent to traditional Qatari cuisine. While dishes can be adapted to be vegetarian or plant-based, authentic Qatari and Gulf Arab cuisine typically includes animal-based ingredients such as ghee, eggs, meat, and fish.<sup>31</sup> This shift towards plant-based, keto, and other fad diets influenced by Western trends can lead to disconnect from both cultural and culinary aspects, resulting in both cultural invisibility and lack of visibility in algorithmically curated content (Tufekci, 2015; Benjamin, 2019). Such dietary changes may inadvertently contribute to the marginalisation of indigenous food cultures and the erosion of cultural diversity. As a result, the cultural richness and diversity inherent in traditional Qatari cuisine may become obscured or overlooked in favour of dominant Western narratives and representations of food and health on Instagram.

Lulu expressed deep concern regarding the preservation of family values and traditions rooted in Islamic religious principles, believing they are being eroded and forgotten, particularly among young girls, due to the influence of Instagram mental health content that advocates for self-isolation under the pretext of self-care. Lulu states: "In our culture, we were a collective society turned to individualistic society...I don't like this, I think it's a very Western idea and the various [Instagram posts promote changing] our culture and I don't think it works here". The erosion of family traditions ultimately leads to the loss of cultural heritage and identity among individuals and communities. As younger generations become increasingly influenced by Instagram content

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are unlikely to produce the results customers are looking for. Often, the side effects of these teas include nausea, cramps, and diarrhea" (Ellis, 2020).

<sup>31</sup> Since there is no published history of Qatari cuisine, this information was fact checked through informal oral interviews with three women born between 1930 and 1950.

promoting isolation as care, there is a risk of disconnecting from cultural practices. As emphasised earlier, algorithms and content moderation practices allow Instagram to perpetuate biases and inequalities, including cultural invisibility (Tufekci, 2015; Benjamin, 2019). If Instagram functionalities prioritise content with Western-centric ideals of self-care and individualism, while simultaneously deprioritising or censoring content that celebrates Arab cultural traditions, food, and values, it contributes to the invisibility of Arab culture on the platform, reinforcing dominant cultural narratives and ideals in the digital landscape.

It is important to acknowledge that there has been positive feedback regarding content related to mental health, alongside instances of algorithmic resistance. Individuals who actively participate in reclaiming their autonomy over the type of content they consume have observed positive emotional reactions towards their mental and overall health:

“I am diagnosed with clinical depression, so when I have one of my sadness episodes, I carefully analyse the content I consume and find the content I get from my Insta account really helps me feel better.”

– Daniya

“It makes me feel like there’s a community that I can relate to and immerse myself in... The content is sometimes motivating and sometimes I just browse through it for a mental break, just for fun... I always do thorough research to weed out the ones who I feel like aren’t genuine.”

– Daliya

“Instagram is the last platform I check when I am looking for advice. I look up websites, I read books, and listen to podcasts. A lot of information I know is from experts sharing their experience.”

– Rana

“In the beginning, I followed the same content, but now I follow a more diverse group of people and blogs. It definitely affects me. I have a better understanding now and more knowledge about subjects like eating disorders and body positivity”

– Faten

Moreover, in light of these concerns, individuals have adopted various strategies to navigate their Instagram experience. Some, like Daniya, Dalia, and Rana, engage in careful analysis and dissection of the content they consume, seeking out relatable communities that offer motivation and inspiration, or simply using the platform as a means to take a break from the world. There

indeed is a growing awareness, as highlighted by Rana, Faten, Hana, and others, that Instagram may not be the most reliable source for health and wellness information. Instead, users have been seeking information elsewhere and actively fact-checking through various sources outside the application.

In addition, efforts have been made to diversify the profiles they follow, aiming for a broader understanding of topics related to diet and body image. This indeed reflects a trend of adopting a more proactive approach to consumption among young women in Qatar. A perspective that will be discussed further in Chapter 8 of this thesis.

Indeed, users are grappling with the intersection of algorithms, cultural (in)visibility, and their engagement with content related to food and health on Instagram. Algorithms that prioritise certain types of content may inadvertently contribute to the invisibility of diverse cultures, leading to a homogenisation of content that aligns with dominant cultural narratives, ultimately marginalising other traditions. Young women in Qatar are recognising the limitations of relying solely on Instagram, acknowledging the platform's ability to propagate misinformation and promote unrealistic standards. Navigating digital platforms like Instagram involves a complex interplay between algorithms, cultural representation, and individual agency, particularly in relation to topics such as food and diet. As users become more aware of these dynamics, they are taking proactive measures to broaden their understanding and challenge dominant cultural narratives surrounding health and wellness.

## **7.5 Conclusion**

This chapter has explored the role of Pre-Curated and Algorithmically Curated Digital Manuals (PCDMs and ACDMs) as central components of the broader *Insta-Trainer* framework, highlighting how Instagram's multialgorithmic structure exerts a powerful influence over the health, dietary, and lifestyle practices of young Qatari women. PCDMs—created by influencers and wellness entities—and ACDMs—shaped by Instagram's algorithmic learning—serve as curated streams of guidance that promote specific ideals and routines. These manuals reinforce a mindset of technological solutionism, encouraging users to trust in digital content as a pathway to self-improvement. While these functionalities may appear personalised and supportive, they operate within a broader system of surveillance capitalism, optimised not for well-being but for engagement and monetisation.

The analysis has shown that Insta-Training through these digital manuals fosters a dual dynamic: on one hand, promoting self-discipline, structure, and motivation; on the other, perpetuating unrealistic expectations and intensifying self-surveillance that could contradict with cultural values and teachings. This duality is reflected in participants' lived experiences—many report adopting healthier routines and increased awareness of well-being, yet simultaneously experience psychological pressures, feelings of inadequacy, and distancing from traditional cultural values. Indeed, ACDMs and PCDMs often prioritise Western-centric beauty and health ideals, subtly marginalising local practices and reinforcing biopolitical norms of conformity through historically biased algorithms. The tension between tradition and algorithmically promoted modernity reveals a form of cultural erosion, as users' identities are shaped more by digital prescriptions than by heritage and community norms.

Furthermore, the chapter demonstrates a strong correlation between time spent engaging with Insta-Trainer content and the extent to which self-care behaviours are adopted. However, this relationship is complex: prolonged engagement often leads to heightened health consciousness, but it also amplifies internalised pressures and challenges to cultural identity. These manuals are not passive content flows; they are dynamic tools of influence that mould bodies and beliefs under the guise of individual empowerment.

Crucially, a growing user awareness of these mechanisms marks a shift away from uncritical technological optimism. Informed by critiques such as Tufekci's (2017a; 2017b) work on algorithmic persuasion and surveillance capitalism, participants increasingly recognise the commercial underpinnings of Instagram's design. Many have begun to question the neutrality of algorithmically curated content and the platform's underlying profit motives—particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, which intensified digital dependency and exposed systemic inequalities in wellness culture (See Chapter 9). While some users attempt to reclaim agency, Instagram's monetisation strategies and continuous data-driven content personalisation present persistent barriers to resistance.

Ultimately, this chapter has demonstrated that PCDMs and ACDMs are not neutral health tools, but highly curated systems that embed neoliberal, postfeminist, and algorithmic logics into users' daily routines. Young Qatari women's interactions with these manuals reflect a broader struggle for autonomy within a digital landscape shaped by commercial imperatives and globalised beauty standards. Understanding this interplay is essential for addressing the deeper social and cultural implications of platform-mediated wellness and identity formation.

Building on this critical examination of ACDMs and PCDMs, the following chapter shifts focus from platform functionalities to broader questions of health, governance, and digital agency. While Chapter 7 explored how algorithmic curation shapes bodily practices and lifestyle decisions, Chapter 8 deepens this analysis by situating these behaviours within the ideological frameworks of state policy and digital

biopedagogy. Specifically, it investigates how young Qatari women's understandings of health are shaped by Instagram and other digital tools—such as wearable devices and wellness apps—in alignment with the state's vision of a 'healthy citizen' as articulated in the Qatar National Vision 2030. This next chapter introduces the concept of 'Digitalities of Good Health' to analyse how digital technologies, embedded in neoliberal and postfeminist values, serve as powerful instruments for promoting normative ideals of wellness, beauty, and self-regulation.

## **Chapter 8.**

### **Digitalities of Good Health**

#### **8.1. Introduction**

In this chapter, I explore how digital technologies intersect with health practices, governance, and individual agency in lifestyle choices. By analysing participants' perceptions of good health in contrast to the ideal of a healthy citizen in Qatar National Vision 2030 (QNV)<sup>32</sup>, I investigate how young women's views on health and wellness are shaped by focusing on Instagram use and other digital tools, such as wearable devices and health apps, as biopedagogical instruments that align with Western health and physical ideals. I define the theme 'Digitalities of Good Health' to argue that Instagram, driven by capitalist motives and inherent biases, is a key platform that utilises Insta-Trainers (influencers) and Insta-functionalities, to compel users to conform to globally dominant standards of health, beauty, and diet. Rooted in neoliberal and post-feminist values, these ideals illustrate the powerful role of digital platforms in defining and regulating contemporary concepts of health.

#### ***8.1.1. Key Theoretical Concepts***

External societal influences—particularly those shaped by images on Instagram—such as family, friends, and health messages endorsed by outlets like the QNV, exert pressure on individuals to conform to specific standards of health, beauty, and diet. For the participants in my study, these pressures often lead to significant bodily changes. For instance, Nadiya and Hayat mentioned feeling compelled to undergo gastric sleeve bypass surgery for weight loss and management, a sentiment also echoed by Mahra. Sahar and Hadiya noted pressures to make less drastic alterations, such as getting Botox and lip fillers. One participant even described being pressured by a male family member to change her lifestyle and appearance to enhance her marriage prospects. Similarly, another participant felt similar pressure from her husband, particularly after birthing their children. These examples illustrate how family members perceive idealised images of women from external visual sources, such as Instagram, as the epitome of femininity, health, and social acceptance. Consequently, they encourage their daughters, sisters, and wives to adopt these beauty and health standards, often prompting them to make lifelong, painful, costly, and permanent changes to their bodies and appearance, placing the full responsibility for health on the individuals

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<sup>32</sup> Full text from the Amiri Diwan of the State of Qatar can be accessed at: <https://www.diwan.gov.qa/-/media/Diwan-Amiri/Files/Qatar-National-Vision-2030-EN.ashx?la=en>

receiving this commentary (see Chapter 2, Section 2.4 on responsabilization) (Rose and Miller, 2008).

The overall analysis in this chapter situates Instagram as a pedagogical tool, drawing on Foucault's (1978; 2010) concepts of biopower and governmentality to explore how power regulates life and health within society (Oksala, 2013). In the context of Instagram and the QNV, biopower operates by enforcing health and societal norms, influencing individuals to conform to idealised representations of the self, as discussed in Chapter 2. This conformity is evident in population health management programmes and investments in healthcare infrastructure promoted through the National Vision and on official governmental Instagram pages, where Insta-Trainers—as both influencers and functionalities—act as agents of biopower. The concept of governmentality, which encompasses broader methods by which health policies are designed to influence behaviours through education and awareness, is utilised to analyse governmental health initiatives and their intersection with technologies like Instagram (Foucault, 2007). Both concepts—governmentality and biopower—aim to improve population health and well-being but operate through different mechanisms. Governmentality involves strategies aimed at creating a well-ordered society, while biopower focuses more directly on health measures to optimise individual health (Oksala, 2013). In other words, both strive to enhance population health in complementary yet distinct ways (Oksala, 2013).

The three concepts of biopower, governmentality, and biocitizenship can be used to explore responsabilization, where individuals are encouraged to take personal responsibility for their health within the digital landscape, and the broader societal impacts of digital health governance and biocitizenship (Rose and Miller, 2008). In the context of Instagram and the QNV, users are encouraged to adopt health and beauty standards promoted by influencers, aligning with the neoliberal emphasis on individual responsibility and self-management. Instagram plays a key role in disseminating health information and supporting the QNV's national health and wellness objectives, promoted through population health management and programmes, healthcare infrastructure investments, and education initiatives such as preventative care. However, its algorithmic focus on engagement can undermine realistic health outcomes. As Instagram operationalises the QNV's health pillars, it illustrates the complexities of modern digital influence on personal health choices and agency. Users exercise agency by adopting, adapting, or resisting the health norms and beauty standards promoted by Insta-Trainers, thus actively participating in

the construction of their subjectivity within the neoliberal framework (Rose & Novas, 2005). This interplay between societal expectations and individual actions highlights how responsabilization and biopower converge within these digital spaces, influencing identities and health behaviours.

Post-feminism—“the notion that femininity is a bodily property; the shift from objectification to subjectification; an emphasis upon self-surveillance, monitoring and self-discipline; a focus on individualism, choice and empowerment; the dominance of a makeover paradigm; and a resurgence in ideas of natural sexual difference” (Gill, 2007, p. 149)—aligns with the broader framework of governmentality and responsabilization, and is examined through a neoliberal lens. Drawing on Harvey (2005) and Berry (2017), I describe how political and economic practices advocate for human well-being by promoting individual entrepreneurial freedoms within a framework characterised by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. According to Harvey (2005), the state’s role is to create and maintain an institutional environment that supports these practices. In the context of this study, neoliberal principles exacerbate gender inequalities and limit social justice by shaping identities and responsibilities related to gender and health. Neoliberalism’s emphasis on individual empowerment and market-driven solutions intersects with post-feminist ideas of personal choice and self-empowerment, as discussed by Gill (2007) and Banet-Weiser et al. (2020). Post-feminism thus reveals how women are encouraged to adopt empowered identities through self-regulation and conformity to societal norms, integrating responsabilization into bio-citizenship, while ultimately limiting agency and rendering individuals as docile subjects.

Post-feminism is utilised to examine how familial pressures—particularly from mothers—play a dual role in shaping women’s identities and aligning their images with those seen on Instagram. This dynamic reinforces the belief that mothers are the primary health caretakers within the family, aligning with QNV guidelines that seek to preserve traditional family and cultural roles rooted in religious teachings (McRobbie, 2009; Gill, 2017; 2023a). This dual role perpetuates a cycle of self-surveillance, where mothers monitor their daughters, teach them to self-monitor, and encourage them to monitor others, highlighting the complexity of maternal influence in health and appearance as it reinforces traditional caregiving roles while perpetuating modern beauty standards (McRobbie, 2009; Nash, 2012). Drawing on Abidin’s (2017) concept of calibrated amateurism, this dynamic can also be seen as part of a broader trend where seemingly authentic and spontaneous caregiving practices are carefully curated and performed—both online and offline—to align with

societal expectations. Just as family influencers use calibrated amateurism to craft relatable yet commercially viable content, mothers may similarly navigate and perform their roles in ways that blend traditional values with modern aesthetics, subtly perpetuating these standards through everyday interactions and digital platforms.

The idea of carefully curated authenticity aligns with broader feminist critiques of social media’s role in commodifying feminist ideals around health, well-being, and body image. Banet-Weiser (2018) explores how empowerment is transformed into a marketable commodity, reinforcing existing power structures and inequalities—a trend particularly evident on Instagram. The platform markets health and beauty ideals as empowering products, driving women to self-monitor and consume in ways that align with neoliberal values. Gill (2023a) highlights how social media perfectionism exacerbates the pressure to meet idealised standards, intensifying self-surveillance and tying self-worth to consumption, thereby further entrenching capitalist values. Within this framework, Instagram's promotion of health, diet, beauty, and wellness narratives commodifies normalised standards of the self, compelling women to internalise and reproduce these ideals. Collectively, these feminist perspectives reveal how Insta-Trainers, as digital bio-pedagogical agents, influence health, diet, beauty, and wellness narratives, reinforcing the broader ideologies discussed in this chapter (see Figure 8.1 for a visualisation of how these elements interconnect to shape individual behaviours, societal norms, and health outcomes, influenced by the QNV’s objectives intersecting with digital technologies).

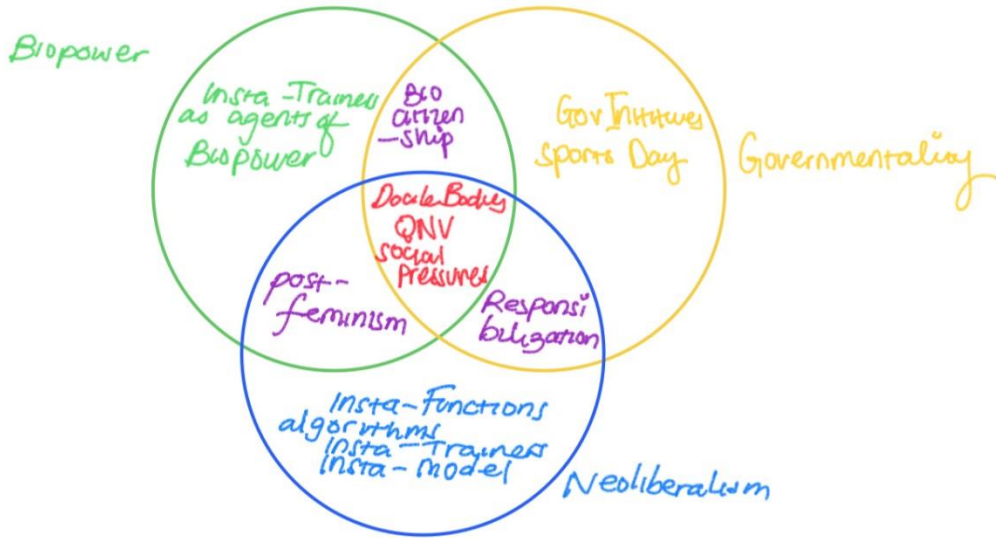


Figure 8.1

### 8.1.2. Sections Overview

The chapter interrogates the complex dynamics within Instagram's infrastructure, focusing on Insta-Trainers as 'biopowered' influencer agents operating within it. This analysis critiques the effects on young women's self-perception, illustrating how broader cultural ideals are mediated through influencers, reinforcing normative Western standards. These biopowered agents wield significant influence over their followers' bodies and health choices, shaping behaviours and self-images in alignment with neoliberal and post-feminist ideals (Mackson et al., 2019; Gill, 2023). This dynamic perpetuates existing power structures and inequalities, encouraging young women to internalise and conform to these constructed standards, ultimately impacting their sense of agency and self-worth through responsabilization as docile bodies (Foucault, 1982; Rose and Miller, 2008; Glatt, 2023; Gill, 2023). The analysis is divided into four sections:

- **Section 8.2. Power, Health, Responsibility, and a National Vision** establishes foundational concepts and illustrates how they connect to the national vision's 'good health' objectives. The use of Instagram is contextualised, highlighting its dual role as both problematic and complementary, especially in relation to the objectives of the QNV.
- **Section 8.3. Hardware/Software: The Makings of Good Health** explores how the concept of health is portrayed on Instagram and how participants negotiate these expectations against national, societal, cultural, and popular health norms, intersecting with the principles and guidance of the QNV.
- **Section 8.3. Role and Impact: Health, Nutrition, and Lifestyle Brands and Influencers** critically examines the influencer industry's impact on women using Instagram through a post-feminist lens. It investigates the role of influencers in perpetuating gendered norms and ideals that marginalise women from diverse class and ethnic backgrounds in Qatar.<sup>33</sup>
- **Section 8.4. The Digital Wardrobe and Performative Trends** introduces the Algorithmic Wardrobe to explore fast-paced trends and societal influences as a key contribution born from the exploration of this theme. Using Butler's (2004) concept of

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<sup>33</sup> While related to Section 7.2.3 Insta-functionalities, this section specifically analyses the goals of the influencer industry, distinct from the algorithmic objectives of Instagram, in fulfilling similar neoliberal and capitalistic aspirations.

gender performativity (2004) as a framework for clarity, micro-trends are likened to pieces of clothing that users can ‘try on’ before adopting. This section also addresses cultural representation and appropriation within the influencer realm<sup>34</sup>.

## **8.2. Power, Health, Responsibility and a National Vision**

*“Health has no fixed meaning. It is fluid.”*

– Alder-Bolton and Vierkant, 2022

The participants in this thesis perceive good health in various ways. For some, it involves physical fitness, following specific diets or workout routines, achieving a particular body image, or engaging in self-care and self-discipline (Mackson et al., 2019; Pilgram and Bohnet-Joschko, 2019). Others emphasise mental wellness, emotional strength, or a comprehensive approach to health that includes spiritual, religious, or social dimensions (Reer et al., 2019; Reade, 2020). Although the participants were not explicitly asked to define health in the context of Instagram's health representation, they indirectly expressed their views by discussing what it means to be healthy, effectively communicating their personal ideas of good health that align with the broader trends of focusing on physical fitness, dietary practices, and holistic well-being.

Based on the standards of the QNV, being a healthy citizen encompasses more than just physical health; it also includes mental well-being. This comprehensive understanding reflects both accessibility to healthcare services and the effective utilisation of these resources. These efforts aim to ensure that the healthcare system meets the needs of current and future generations, providing a healthier and long life for all citizens: “All health services will be accessible to the entire population” (QNV, 2008, p. 14). The QNV (2008) constructs an image of healthy citizens as those who proactively engage in preventive health measures, implying that individuals are responsible for acquiring health-related knowledge; this places significant emphasis on personal responsibility and self-reliance in maintaining one's well-being, supported by government-backed educational services and initiatives. These perspectives reflect neoliberal principles by assigning personal health responsibility to individuals while also highlighting the roles of governmentality

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<sup>34</sup> In Chapter 10, I discuss the broad flexibility of this concept by incorporating Benjamin's (1969; 1999) ideas on the reproducibility of culture to examine how digital media accelerates the spread of cultural symbols, often leading to their commodification and the loss of their original meaning.

and biopower, where government intervention significantly shapes health practices, life expectancy, and access to health-related information. As illustrated in Figure 8.1, all three theories intersect with the concept of responsabilization, which “in the context of health involves individuals being made responsible for managing their own health and well-being...This shift requires individuals to engage in self-monitoring, adopt healthy lifestyles, and seek out medical knowledge and resources on their own” (Rose and Miller, 2008, p. 84).

The national vision guidelines outline substantial government involvement in upholding public health standards while encouraging responsabilization among its citizens through the manifestation of biocitizenship—evident in its emphasis on health education and awareness. The QNV’s commitment highlighted investing in education, research, and infrastructure to enhance healthcare and equip citizens to be productive workers who effectively optimise their health through integrating both personal responsibility with government support. This approach, which promotes a holistic understanding of health that includes both physical and mental well-being, encourages proactive measures through government-supported initiatives, fostering a more health-conscious and informed population.

Though this strategy has the potential to improve overall public health outcomes in Qatar on paper, in reality it can lead to concerning outcomes by placing significant responsibility on individuals to maintain their health, intensifying inequalities for those who lack the resources or knowledge to do so. The ideologies present within the QNV reinforce a cycle where only those with sufficient means, media literacy, and socio-economical resources can achieve the prescribed standards of health, diet, and wellness. As Lupton (2016) notes: “Self-tracking practices and technologies are often only available to those with the financial means to afford them and the educational background to use them effectively, thus exacerbating existing social inequalities” (p. 85).<sup>35</sup> A clear example is the use of fitness trackers by participants to optimise their health. According to Tala, Lena, Roula, and Daniya, these devices are glorified on Instagram, with influencers and users frequently posting photos of their progress and health stats. As they are often visibility highlighted,

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<sup>35</sup> A notable example in connection to QNV, later illustrated in detail, is Qatar Foundation’s event endorsing WHOOP, a subscription-based wearable device that aims to optimise health. Those with higher socio-economic status can afford these resources (being ‘able’ to commit to subscription fees) and benefit from them (use them effectively), also demonstrating how digital health practices are integrated into everyday life.

the participants have expressed feeling the urge to participate in the same practices to not feel left out.

Many participants (17 survey respondents) were media literate enough to navigate Instagram's complex algorithmic landscape effectively and conduct further research outside of the application, enabling them to identify credible sources of health information and avoid misleading content. Conversely, individuals with fewer resources or lower media literacy (31 survey respondents) faced challenges in meeting health standards and interpreting messages on Instagram, which perpetuated health disparities, contributed to the spread of misinformation, and negatively impacted their physical and mental well-being. Notably, all participants (100%) were university or postgraduate level students or higher-education degree holders. While this level of education suggests a higher baseline of critical thinking and research skills, it does not necessarily immunise individuals against misinformation or perpetuated images on Instagram<sup>36</sup>, as marketing strategies have become increasingly sophisticated, curated, and hidden, making it difficult to distinguish between genuine and misleading content.

Manifesting from acts of governmentality and biopower, biocitizenship and responsabilization align with the narratives perpetuated by traditional diet manuals, as discussed extensively in Chapter 6, citing both Bitar (2018) and Cutter (2023). These narratives intertwine individual health responsibility with national prosperity, worth, and reputation, echoing historical associations found in diet manuals and historical practices of health management (Bitar, 2018; Cutter, 2023), reflecting a broader trend of neoliberal governance, where health manuals have propagated ideals of self-surveillance, setting the foundation for modern neoliberal health narratives. Viewing the QNV document as a manual reveals similar promoted ideals, emphasising individual health responsibility as crucial for national development. According to Cutter (2023), past and present narratives intertwine to shape current attitudes towards health, diet, and self-surveillance. The representation of historical health-based knowledge through traditional diet manuals parallels the current representation of health-based knowledge through curated digital manuals on Instagram (see Chapters 6 and 7).

### ***8.2.1 Echoes of Feminism: Instagram and a National Vision***

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<sup>36</sup> I myself am guilty despite the topic of my research!

Both past and present understandings of manuals place the burden solely on individuals to meet outlined standards, reflecting a post-feminist framework that emphasises personal responsibility and empowerment while often ignoring structural inequalities. This framework perpetuates the same societal pressures and expectations on women to be healthy, where health is linked to ideals of slenderness, enhanced beauty, and femininity (Bartky, 1990; Gill, 2007; 2023; Heyes, 2007; Gordon, 2020). Promoting the belief that women must continually work on their bodies to meet societal standards, post-feminism reinforces self-surveillance and self-regulation. Gill (2007) notes that “post-feminism entails the notion that femininity is a bodily property” (p. 147) which pressures women to constantly monitor and modify their appearance. As Figure 8.1 illustrates, post-feminist concerns, when intersected with concepts of biocitizenship and responsabilization, render individuals as docile subjects, where docility is characterised by individual compliance with societal norms and expectations, propagated both by historical diet manuals and contemporary technological tools such as health trackers and CDMs. Platforms like Instagram prompt users to regulate and discipline their own bodies, thus, rendering them as docile subjects for self-normalisation (Foucault, 1977).

In her interview, Ghaya revealed that even during the pandemic, multiple Insta-Training profiles attempted to sell one-hour Zoom workout sessions for £20; Maha and Lena echoed this experience, confirming that they purchased multiple sessions out of fear of gaining weight, underscoring the pervasive influence of post-feminist ideals.<sup>37</sup> These instances illustrate how Instagram reinforces post-feminist pressures, compelling women to conform to societal expectations of bodily perfection and good health, thereby transforming them into docile subjects. Insta-Trainers act as agents of biopower, further entrenching post-feminist ideals among users. While these examples are relevant to the current discussion, the themes of fatphobia, COVID-19, and misinformation will be addressed in greater detail in Chapter 9 of this thesis.

The coexistence of neoliberal principles with government intervention in healthcare, as evident in the QNV, suggests a potential alignment with broader feminist goals, such as those advocated by intersectional feminism, which promotes access to healthcare as a fundamental right (Collins and Bilge, 2020). This balance reflects a nuanced approach, acknowledging both the influence of neoliberal ideology and the government’s responsibility in safeguarding the well-being of all citizens, particularly non-Qatari women and those from diverse ethnic backgrounds who may be

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<sup>37</sup> Other interviewees, such as Tala, Maysa, and Ola, expressed similar feelings.

disproportionately affected by systemic socio-economic inequalities. For example, the government implemented new labour reforms, which include a mandatory minimum wage, subsidised healthcare services, and the abolition of the *kafala* (sponsorship) system, to protect vulnerable domestic workers, most of whom are women, from exploitation and abuse. The changes are part of the QNV's efforts to promote sustainable social development and enhance the quality of life for all residents, resonating with intersectional feminist principles—such as promoting greater equality and inclusion—by addressing the specific vulnerabilities faced by non-Qatari women and those from diverse ethnic backgrounds (Human Rights Watch, 2021). While these progressive labour reforms may not directly pertain to the core focus of my study, they illustrate how the QNV aligns with broader feminist ideals, a connection essential to the arguments in this chapter.

Despite feminist efforts to challenge gendered injustices, they have become intertwined with neoliberal structures and ideologies, particularly through the commodification of feminist ideals and practices on digital platforms (Fraser, 2013; Banet-Weiser, 2018; Banet-Weiser et al., 2022). Aligning with a post-feminism framework, the emphasis on personal responsibility and empowerment often masks the existence of structural inequalities, ultimately perpetuating traditional gender norms under the guise of modern feminist progress (McRobbie, 2009; Nash, 2012; Gill, 2023). This approach integrates neoliberal ideals into public health strategies like the QNV, which unintentionally reinforces systemic inequalities despite intentions to foster empowerment and equality. On platforms like Instagram, this process involves transforming feminist concepts into marketable health and beauty products and services, reducing complex social struggles to mere consumer choices (Fraser, 2013, p. 294–295; Banet-Weiser, 2018). As a result, certain inequalities and forms of oppression are reinforced (see section 8.4.).

Similarly, health, diet, and nutritional products that are marketed as healthy or as definitive ways to achieve good health have increasingly been repackaged as “progressive social movements” (Sikka, 2017, p. 91). This uncritical promotion of certain dietary practices fundamentally aligns with neoliberal ideals such as “consumer choice, value chains, and individual striving” (Sikka, 2017, p. 91). Although the QNV aims to address societal inequalities and improve overall health outcomes for all Qatar's citizens, the influence of neoliberalism and capitalist objectives has led to the commodification of health-related practices. This is particularly evident in how Instagram functions as a biopedagogical tool, promoting health solutions such as deliverable food

subscriptions and manual-like diet and workout regimes, including those offered by Almosak, Diet Market, and Dr Hanadi, as cited by participants.

The QNV's goal to balance individual responsibility with collective well-being conflicts with Instagram as a neoliberal biopedagogical tool that emphasises an individualistic approach to health. Influencer marketing and brands on the platform promote products, diets, and lifestyles (Habibi et al., 2014; Liu et al., 2018), highlighting personal accountability for health solutions. Examples include detox teas like FitTea (mentioned by Ola), restrictive diets like those of Dr Hanadi Al Bader (mentioned by Maha, Tala and Ghaya), or extreme fitness routines like SWEAT (mentioned by Daniya and Wahaj). These products and services align with neoliberal discourse, wherein women are often expected to take primary responsibility for managing their health and appearance, as well as that of their families.

From a post-feminist perspective, the responsibility extends beyond individual concern, subtly preparing women to assume traditional caregiving gender roles, thus fulfilling the “expectation that women are responsible for their own well-being and that of their families, reinforcing traditional caregiving roles under the guise of modern, liberated femininity” (Gill, 2007, p. 163; 2017). This view aligns with one of the QNV's pillars, which outlines the importance of preserving family values, religious beliefs, and traditions—inherently reinforcing women's roles within the family structure—while promoting ‘modernisation’. Thus, traditional roles are both sustained and redefined within the context of health management practices.

This dynamic is also evident in Abidin's (2017) findings, which highlight how family influencers, under the guise of ‘calibrated amateurism’, reinforce traditional family roles through curated content that appears authentic yet is meticulously staged. Similarly, young participants in this study, such as Nadiya, Sahar, Ghaya, Hajar, and Hayat, reported that their mothers, sisters, and female friends actively encourage them to pursue both major and minor health and beauty solutions. This illustrates how mothers, influenced by the same societal pressures, further shaped by Instagram's images of health and beauty, pass these expectations down to their daughters. This cycle reinforces the idea that women are the health guardians of their families and communities (McRobbie, 2009; Nash, 2012).

While focusing on family health and well-being may have positive outcomes, it also places significant pressure on women, reinforcing traditional gender roles under the guise of modern

empowerment (Nash, 2012). Additionally, it perpetuates cultural, racialised, and gendered expectations around body image, self-discipline, and self-improvement, while neglecting broader social and economic factors that influence women's health outcomes (Bartky, 1990; Gill, 2007; 2023). This dynamic, evident in both the QNV and family influencer practices (Abidin, 2017), underscores the complexities of how traditional gender roles are maintained and subtly recontextualised in contemporary society.

Nevertheless, the key point is that the QNV aligns with broader feminist goals, particularly in promoting fairness across ethnic backgrounds and genders, and improving access to healthcare and health information. However, Instagram, as a biopedagogical tool, along with the commodification of feminist empowerment, undermines these objectives and marginalises certain groups, thereby hindering women's empowerment as a whole. This phenomenon directly contradicts the QNV's efforts, perpetuating inequality and exclusion while complicating the pursuit of equitable health access. It is important to note that the QNV contains a contradiction regarding women's empowerment, as it simultaneously seeks to preserve family values and traditions, including traditional gender roles. From a post-feminist perspective, this is problematic because it highlights how gender intersects with other social categories like ethnicity and class, illustrating how traditional roles can undermine gender equality efforts. Understanding the cultural context is crucial, as it provides a nuanced view of women's empowerment in Qatar. Identifying such contradictions in policy and guidelines is essential for assessing the real impact on women's lives and highlighting areas in need of reform.

### ***8.2.2 Citizens as Health Projects***

Instagram serves as a platform where health norms and practices are disseminated and reinforced, reflecting biopolitical dynamics within its multi-algorithmic infrastructure (Rose and Novas, 2005; Rose, 2006). As illustrated in Figure 8.1, the intersection of biopower (represented by influencers) and governmentality (embodied by the QNV) contributes to the formation of biocitizenship, positioning individuals as projects. The platform shapes individuals' perceptions of culture, health, beauty, and well-being, influencing their behaviours, and it is essential to recognise that Instagram content and algorithms are shaped by diverse stakeholders, including government agencies, healthcare institutions, and commercial interests (see Chapter 7).

The objectives outlined in the QNV include elements of both biocitizenship and citizenship projects, particularly through initiatives aimed at shaping health-related beliefs and behaviours,

which exemplify the intersection of personal health management with broader societal goals. Campaigns promoting physical fitness and healthy eating habits align with the QNV's vision of fostering a healthier population, illustrating the interaction between individual health practices and national objectives. A prime example is Qatar National Sports Day, an annual event encouraging citizens to engage in physical activities and sports, reflecting the national vision of a healthy and active population. Participation is widely promoted and encouraged by various Qatari governmental and non-governmental Instagram pages, showcasing the integration of social media in advancing public health initiatives. The official page of the Amiri Diwan (@amiridiwan) features images of the Amir and his family participating in Sports Day activities, highlighting the importance of sports and self-care, while positioning the Amir as a role model to inspire others. Such posts align with national vision guidelines, emphasising health and well-being as national priorities, while also acting as digital citizenship projects by showcasing the participation of prominent figures in physical activities. The visibility of these activities on social media encourages the public to adopt healthier lifestyles, in line with the goal of enhancing the overall health of the population, while also helping to normalise and popularise health-conscious behaviours, making them more appealing and accessible to the broader community. This strategy effectively utilises Instagram's influence to disseminate health-related norms and practices, thereby contributing to the biocitizenship aspects of the QNV.

In the case of women in Qatar, the pressure to conform to idealised standards and adopt certain lifestyle trends associated with wellness culture reflects broader biopolitical processes that govern and regulate bodies according to neoliberal ideologies.<sup>38</sup> These intersections further intensify biopolitical power dynamics by exerting control over individuals' bodies and behaviours while also emphasising the platform's role in governing and regulating individuals' health-related experiences and choices due to the multialgorithmic functions of Instagram. This process highlights how both Instagram's objectives and the goals outlined in the QNV contribute to the perpetuation of biopolitical power dynamics within society.

Instagram influencers with large followings often share posts containing sponsored items that are cleverly curated or subtly integrated within their feed, sometimes accompanied by before-and-after

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<sup>38</sup> Foucault's (1979) 'biopolitical power', specifically how strategies are employed through technological mechanisms to 'manage' individuals, best elucidates this contextual process. The trends and posts on Instagram—the technological mechanism—along with their use by governments as part of citizenship projects, constitute strategies to manage and influence individuals' behaviour and perceptions.

photos and testimonials. The images and captions convey a narrative of personal transformation and empowerment, suggesting that by consuming certain foods or following a specific fitness regime, one can take control of their health and achieve an idealised body image (Habibi et al., 2014; Abidin, 2015; Liu et al., 2018; Mackson et al., 2019; Gordon, 2020). This narrative can have complex and sometimes negative impacts on individuals. While posts can inspire positive health behaviours, they also manipulate consumer behaviour through targeted advertising (Habibi et al., 2014; Liu et al., 2018), as reflected in Hamda's experience: "It motivates me to be healthy and in the best shape that I can physically be [although] I've been a victim to sponsored ads". Hayat similarly expresses: "I sometimes feel disappointed by the choices I make given the informative posts I see", highlighting the potential downside of the constant exposure to idealised health and lifestyle choices, in turn leading to feelings of inadequacy and disappointment when personal realities do not match these curated images. Maryam states: "[I'm angrier] because you can see they've clearly had work done... It's horrifying to see [because] I know younger girls are so affected by it". Both critiques by Hayat and Maryam demonstrate the problematic aspects of influencer culture, where the portrayal of unattainable health and beauty standards, often achieved through cosmetic procedures, can harmfully impact the self-esteem and body image of younger audiences. Influencers and their content can drive individuals to internalise normative standards, often through mechanisms that exploit insecurities, illustrating how biopower operates through Insta-Functionalities. Brands, companies, and influencers on Instagram act as agents of biopower, shaping individuals' perceptions of health and self through discourses and curated practices that prioritise individual responsibility and consumption. In other words, the narrative of personal transformation and empowerment conveyed by influencers on Instagram exemplifies how biopower functions by directly and indirectly encouraging individuals to internalise such standards.

The exploration of Instagram's role in disseminating health information bio-pedagogically through a biopower and biopolitical lens not only offers valuable insights into power dynamics within Instagram but how the objectives of national visions of governments, such as the QNV, fit into this discourse. This is particularly the case in relations to clauses that have significant impact on individual autonomy, health outcomes, and social justice, as detailed in both Chapters 6 and 7 where it was established that the platform's multialgorithms curate and prioritise content that shapes users' perceptions of health norms and practices.<sup>39</sup> This chapter builds on this argument by

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<sup>39</sup> The dissemination of such health information on Instagram is not neutral; it is based on algorithms that are influenced by broader socio-political factors and power structures. See Chapter 6 for more details.

examining how biopolitical governance is reflected, pinpointing where power is exercised through the regulation and control of individuals' bodies and health behaviours within Instagram.

### **8.3. Hardware/Software: The Makings and Optimisation of Good Health**

On 14th May 2024, as part of Qatar Foundation's (QF)<sup>40</sup> Education City Speaker Series, Will Ahmed, the founder and CEO of WHOOP, was invited to give a talk entitled, "Sports, Health and Tech: Building a Wearable for the Future", in one of Education City's halls, where a kiosk selling WHOOP wearable devices had been set up near the entrance. This event highlights the intersection of health, technology, and education within a neoliberal and biocitizenship framework, serving as a three-in-one example for this thesis: first, as a citizenship project; second, as an example encompassing all the interconnectedness of the concepts in Figure 8.1; and third, and most importantly, as a tangible example of how certain entities in Qatar are attempting to implement objectives from the QNV. In this particular instance, the QF hosted the creator of a wearable fitness tracker to discuss the benefits of using his technology. This seemingly straightforward event carries deeper implications, subtly endorsing practices that encourage self-surveillance and self-discipline as a way to maintain the normative definitions of good health above (see Section 8.2).

In his talk, Ahmed explained that his device works by collecting data on key physiological metrics such as resting heart rate and sleep quality. The device then analyses this data using accompanying software, which is accessed via monthly or annual subscription fees. The application provides wearers with analytics, coaching, and community support to help them understand their body's response to training and lifestyle factors. These features, as Ahmed put it, enable users to make informed decisions to enhance their health. He explicitly stated that he hopes WHOOP, in collaboration with OpenAI, could one day be "your online personal trainer, your online nutritionist, and your online doctor". However, the optimisation of health through such technology is already limited to certain socioeconomic classes due to the subscription fees. During the event, one person requested a free device but was not granted one, highlighting the accessibility issues inherent in such health technologies.

Ahmad's statements represent a troubling movement towards the commodification and outsourcing of healthcare and wellness, while emphasising individual responsibility for health, fitness, and diet

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<sup>40</sup> Qatar Foundation is a non-profit entity. While it does operate independently, it receives significant funding and support from the government, and its initiatives often align with the government's strategic objectives, including those outlined in Qatar National Vision 2030 (Weber, 2014).

through market-based solutions. This shift is achieved by positioning technological devices and software as comprehensive online health providers, promoting the idea that individuals can rely solely on technology and digital platforms, like fitness trackers and Instagram, for their healthcare needs, rather than seek professional medical advice or engage with well-funded healthcare, such as that which the QNV aims to provide. This approach exemplifies responsabilization—individuals are being encouraged to take personal responsibility for their health and well-being by using technology like WHOOP, which is not only heavily promoted on Instagram but is also endorsed by credible organisations like QF and public figures<sup>41</sup> consistently wearing them.

Similar to the experiences of Nadiya, Faten, Lena, Ghaya, and others discussed in detail in Chapter 7, this approach to achieving good health has proven to be physically, financially, and mentally challenging for many participants. The one-size-fits-all approach these technologies offer does not adequately address the diverse needs and preferences of individuals, which is why I argue that self-discipline and self-surveillance through technology, whether hardware, software, or both, highlights the risk that the algorithms and models used to deliver these services perpetuate existing biases and inequalities regarding access to healthcare. From a more socio-economic and class perspective, some people may lack access to certain technologies or have limited digital literacy, which could further marginalise them. Entities like QF should therefore clarify that the technologies they endorse should be utilised as supportive or complementary tools, rather than as a reliable personal trainer or doctor, as marketed in the event.

WHOOP's reliance on data collected by a screenless device suggests that users are entrusting their personal health data to a platform that has openly announced its collaboration with third-party entities during the event, raising concerns regarding data security, consent, ownership, and the risk of exploitation by companies or other parties, similar to recent apprehensions surrounding Meta (see Kozłowska, 2018 for details). The heightened exposure of such devices, especially when endorsed by influential entities attempting to implement the QNV, contributes to the normalisation of constant self-surveillance and data tracking in the name of health, wellness, and national responsibility, thus further exemplifying neoliberalism and enforced biocitizenship through data

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<sup>41</sup> The Amir of Qatar has been seen wearing WHOOP on multiple occasions, as seen on the official Amiri Diwan account on Instagram (see posts from 23 February 2023 to 2 May 2024). By showcasing prominent figures using WHOOP, Instagram posts function as digital citizenship projects, thus encouraging the public to adopt healthier lifestyles to align with the goal of enhancing the overall health of the population. This strategy subtly yet effectively leverages the influence of Instagram to disseminate health-related norms, thereby contributing to the biocitizenship aspects of the QNV.

capitalism and surveillance. The presence of a kiosk selling this technology outside the hall, supported by government-funded organisations, is a perfect example of the commodification of health and wellness by aligning it with neoliberal ideals of individual responsibility and consumer choice. The talk inside the hall implicitly enacts principles of biocitizenship by associating the technology with high-profile athletes like Cristiano Ronaldo, attempting to enhance the technology's credibility while also reinforcing the message that emulating him can transform individuals, effectively parading him as a product of a citizenship project.

The event promotes a culture of the 'worried well', where individuals feel pressured to constantly monitor and optimise their health metrics, reflecting notions of biocitizenship and potentially worsening anxieties and insecurities about health status. This phenomenon often referred to as the 'worried well', "those individuals who, despite being in generally good health, are preoccupied with their health and engage in frequent self-monitoring and medical consultations" (Lupton, 2016, p. 39), raising concerns about individual agency and autonomy, as the reliance on self-tracking technologies can undermine one's ability to make independent health decisions and foster a dependence on outsourcing health. Additionally, engaging with wearable devices highlights issues of privacy and the commodification of personal data, as individuals' health information is collected, analysed, and potentially exploited by third-party entities for commercial gain. All these concerns prompted me to address Will Ahmed during the Q&A session, to ask about the broader ethical concerns related to the intersection of health, wellness, and technology, and the implications for privacy and consent in an increasingly data-driven society:

**In what ways does WHOOP ensure that data collected by the company does not go beyond what the users' have consented to, in ways that violate their privacy and personal autonomy?**

**Ahmad:** We had to worry about data privacy at a stage so much earlier than other companies, like we have a hundred people on WHOOP and all the sudden we are dealing with, you know, lawyers for super high-profile athletes to make sure the data is secure, because it's so valuable.

So, we actually built this into our DNA very early on, this idea of data privacy and security. And we have also now published privacy principles, and one of those principles is that the consumer owns the data. You the individual are not the product. We are not putting something on your body that we can then sell to someone else.

... We also do analysis on data in a de-identified aggregated<sup>42</sup> way that allows us to do pretty powerful research, and also allows us the experience you all have with WHOOP to be better based on the fact that we have X number of people that look similar to you and we've learned certain behaviours and patterns that worked for them that can now work for you.

Ahmed's response to my question regarding ethical concerns was that all data is anonymised, which he claimed is a step towards better privacy protection. It is crucial to recognise the potential drawbacks of this approach, such as the fact that the generalisation of behaviours and patterns from similar user groups presents a risk of homogenising user experiences and prescribing one-size-fits-all solutions based on general data trends. This method may overlook the diverse needs and preferences of individual users, limiting their autonomy and potentially reinforcing stereotypes or biases present in the data. Additionally, anonymised data can still be cross-referenced to reveal more about individuals, compromising users' privacy (Brogan, 2019). It is also important to note that such monitoring can be considered free health labour performed by participants from which companies, like WHOOP, profit, raising further ethical concerns about the exploitation of personal data for commercial gain (Fuchs, 2014; Zuboff, 2018). In addressing these ethical concerns of data capitalism and the exploitation of digital labour, scholars like Fuchs (2014) and Zuboff (2018) propose creating digital cooperative platforms and implementing stronger regulations to protect user data, thereby allowing users to have a say in how their health data is used and ensuring privacy and fair compensation. This shift would counter the current model where Instagram and WHOOP commodify personal data for corporate profit, while addressing concerns about privacy, autonomy, and the ethical implications of surveillance capitalism.

I shared this interaction because it highlights how wearable devices, much like Instagram and Insta-Trainers, significantly influences the cultural dimensions, dietary habits, lifestyles, and general well-being of women in Qatar, illustrating how governmental agencies and corporations attempt to endorse initiatives that align with the objectives of the QNV. Such talks are meant to contribute to broader goals of enhancing public health and well-being through awareness and education; however, critical considerations must be made regarding autonomy and the protection of user data, while also considering that the adoption of these technologies may disproportionately benefit specific socio-economic demographics and widen existing inequalities, as earlier highlighted.

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<sup>42</sup> De-identified aggregation is a process commonly used to maintain privacy while still allowing for analysis of large datasets for research or statistical purposes.

It is important to note that, for the study, the connection between wearable devices and Instagram lies in their shared ability to influence and shape individuals' perceptions of health and wellness. Both platforms contribute to the construction of societal norms and ideals regarding health, fitness, and well-being, albeit in different ways. Wearable fitness trackers promote certain health practices and analyse behaviour data, whereas Instagram, as a social media platform, serves as a space where health and wellness trends are showcased and promoted by influencers, brands, and users. Almost half of the survey and interview participants stated that they use either an Apple or Garmin wearable fitness tracker, implying that citizens in Qatar view these devices as integral to their overall journey towards health optimisation.

Together, hardware and software form part of the larger cultural discourse surrounding health, diet, and lifestyle. They not only shape how individuals perceive and engage with these concepts in their daily lives, but also contribute to the exercise of biopower by influencing how individuals understand and engage with health-related ideologies, while also reflecting neoliberal principles inherent in these platforms.

#### **8.4. Role and Impact: Health, Nutrition, Lifestyle Brands, and Influencers**

In this section, I discuss the term Insta-Trainer, not merely in the context of Insta-functionalities as a platform, as previously explored in Chapters 6 and 7 and in the sections above, but also in relation to individual and company profiles that embody this function on the application.<sup>43</sup> Insta-Trainers, in this specific context, are individuals or brands that provide instant training and guidance on health, diet, and lifestyle through their social media presence, either as sponsored items or brand ambassadors (Reinikainen et al., 2020; Sokolva and Kefi, 2020). For this reason, I refer to them as instant training pedagogies—they offer immediate, accessible training and guidance through Instagram. Moreover, the concept of the Insta-Trainer is expanded to encompass the broader influencer industry, where influencers leverage and monetise their platforms to shape and influence followers' behaviours and perceptions (Habibi et al., 2014; Liu et al., 2018). Regulatory frameworks mandate that influencers be transparent when advertising products by clearly stating when content is a paid advertisement (Instagram, 2024c). However, influencers are now cleverly curating and indirectly marketing products and services on Instagram, which involves subtly

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<sup>43</sup> See the definition of Insta-Trainer in Chapter 1 or the glossary, where I discuss how the term can be used as an adjective to describe instantly training oneself through hardware/software related to social media platforms.

integrating them into their regular content, such as showcasing a brand in a lifestyle post without explicit advertisement markers (Abidin, 2015; Markerly, 2023; Mehlman Petrzela, 2023).

The majority of content circulated by Insta-Trainers constitutes the performance of hegemonic femininity—deeply rooted in Western ideals—that advocates for healthy living, normative diet habits, and perfectly sculpted bodies (Bordo, 1993; Mackson et al., 2019; Sikka, 2022; Streeter, 2023).<sup>44</sup> This narrow portrayal can undermine cultural diversity and traditional practices, marginalising non-Western ideals of beauty and health. For example, Ramadan and fasting, traditionally rooted in Islamic spirituality and worship, have been reframed by some participants as merely an intermittent fasting trend aimed at achieving a thinner physique (Lulu, Tala, and Ghaya exemplify this). In the survey, Bascooti stated: “[During Ramadan], we have a few Ramadan specials/traditional foods...[I] try to fill up on soup and salad at the beginning of the meal”. Other participants mentioned subscribing to ready-to-eat diet boxes delivered daily to avoid eating what is prepared at home. There is also a trend towards consuming more Western foods instead of traditional Qatari foods typically enjoyed during Ramadan, further eroding cultural heritage (Ghosh, 2021). These examples highlight how, even within cultural practices, there is a shift towards dietary habits that align more with normative standards (see Section 8.5 for a thorough discussion on the topic).

The performance of hegemonic femininity is closely tied to the principles of both neoliberal feminism and post-feminism (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Gill, 2023b), which influencers and brands capitalise on by promoting products, diets, beauty, and fitness regimes that align with neoliberal ideals of self-improvement and market-based solutions. For example, an influencer might post a picture of themselves using a luxury skincare product with a caption highlighting self-care and empowerment, implicitly suggesting that purchasing and using the product is a form of self-investment and personal enhancement (Banet-Weiser, 2018). Survey respondents such as Hadiya, Hayat, Maha, and Aliya have all confirmed that they have purchased skincare products to achieve a look similar to that of the Insta-Trainers. “A good example [of an influenced purchase is when] I bought VEVO barefoot shoes which my personal trainer promotes a lot on her page and in person

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<sup>44</sup> Hegemonic femininity and normative healthy promote Eurocentric standard of beauty and health, prioritising thinness, youthful appearance, and consumer-oriented fitness practices, marginalising diverse cultural and body types (Connell, 1987; Bordo, 1993).

when we train with her...A bad example would be Alo Yoga leggings, their fit and fabric were uncomfortable, I never ended up using them”; Bascooti’s testimony illustrates how fitness influencers promote specific workout gear, reinforcing the notion that achieving the ideal body is dependent upon consumerism. Sahar mentioned that this “can be triggering as they make it seem like the lifestyle they are promoting is the only lifestyle to exist”, which underscores the pressure exerted on followers to conform to these promoted ideals (Talbot et al., 2017; Banet-Weiser, 2018; Camacho-Miñano, 2019; Riesmeyer et al., 2019; Gordon, 2020; Gill, 2023a). Instagram is full of “images of ‘perfection’”, which are often “unrealistic and unattainable”, contributing to a pervasive sense of never being good enough, “not thin enough; not pretty enough; not cool enough” (Gill, 2023a, p. 101).

The promotion of products and services under the pretext of personal empowerment and improvement can also obscure the commercial interests at play, perpetuating standards that are often inaccessible to the average consumer. Ghaya and Faten highlighted the financial struggles that make certain products and services inaccessible to them, illustrating the previously mentioned economic disparities that influence the ability of individuals to participate in consumer-driven lifestyles promoted by influencers. Gordon (2020) states: “The relentless promotion of weight loss products and ‘ideal’ body standards creates a harmful cycle where people feel compelled to buy into these solutions, despite the often unrealistic and unhealthy nature of the expectations set by influencers” (p. 143). Mahra expressed significant dissatisfaction when asked about Instagram purchases: “I purchased weight loss plans and workout plans. [Insta-Trainers] ruined me, demotivated me. Unrealistic standards. Everything is just so expensive and unattainable”, which highlights the harmful impact of influencers promoting unrealistic standards, often intensifying feelings of inadequacy and financial strain among followers. Kaltham purchased “weight loss pills, energy bars... [because] the person promoting it has the body I want”, whereas Aliya purchased “skin care products [after] seeing the influencers’ results after using the products”, reflecting how influencers can create perceived effectiveness and trust in products through their curated portrayals that align with neoliberal and post-feminist ideals (Habibi et al., 2014; Banet-Weiser, 2018; Gill, 2023). The commodification of body ideals also drives unhealthy consumer behaviours. Like the others, Hanady also mentioned purchasing “workout clothes...It made them look good and I wanted to feel the same with my appearance”, further showcasing how the desire to emulate influencers affects purchasing decisions.

These excerpts highlight the diverse ways in which participants engage with the health, beauty, diet, and wellness products promoted by influencers, illustrating the significant role and impact of Instagram on their choices. While some participants, like Bascooti and Aliya, conducted their own research before making purchases, reflecting a degree of personal agency, others, like Mahra and Kaltham, felt pressured and ultimately demotivated by the unrealistic standards set by influencers. These response behaviours demonstrate how individuals navigate the consumer landscape shaped by the role of influencers and the impact of Instagram, exercising their autonomy while displaying a degree of awareness and ambivalence; they also speak to the persistent influence of neoliberal principles, prioritising personal responsibility as a way to improve the self. This dynamic illustrates the explicit and complex interplay between agency and pressure, as consumers make informed choices yet remain influenced by the idealised representations perpetuated by the influencer industry. This is another area where I locate user-disjuncture.

The influencer industry not only reinforces unrealistic standards of health and beauty but also places both influencers and followers in equally challenging positions. Influencers, particularly women, engage in labour-intensive content creation that is often undervalued and commodified within broader capitalist structures (Glatt, 2022; 2023). This dynamic creates a situation where the digital labour of influencers is exploited and their contributions to content creation are undervalued (Glatt, 2023). Meanwhile, their followers are pressured to conform to the same standards, resulting in cycles of self-surveillance and self-discipline that perpetuate existing inequalities and reinforce the very norms they seek to challenge (Gill, 2023a; 2023b). This is precisely where post-feminism and responsabilization intersect (see Figure 8.1), as the emphasis on individual responsibility perpetuated by the influencer industry aligns with the concept of responsabilization. The framework privileges certain body types, lifestyles, and consumption patterns, marginalising those who cannot conform, thereby perpetuating inequalities related to body diversity, socioeconomic status, and cultural background, diluting their original intent (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Benjamin, 2019; Glatt, 2022; 2023). As Figure 8.1 illustrates, this renders followers as docile subjects.

Having established that Insta-Trainers disseminate health and beauty information as normative standards, thereby contributing to internal and external social, familial, and cultural pressures for followers to conform, we can now examine how these pressures manifest in reality in order to understand their impact on followers. The following specific examples illustrate the various ways pressures affect individuals, highlighting the significant role Insta-Trainers play in shaping

behaviours and attitudes towards health and beauty, in order to comprehend the complex dynamics between influencer content and follower experiences:

“I’ve only gotten Botox and I actually like it... However, I only got it done because I was pressured by my mum.”

– Sahar

“I feel pressure to look like [Insta-Trainers] or even close to how they look.”

– Hanady

Sahar’s pressured decision to get Botox and Hanady’s feeling of needing to look like Insta-Trainers, reflect the profound impact of social and familial expectations perpetuated by Instagram, aligning with post-feminist ideals of self-improvement (Gill, 2017; 2023a), and the persistent influence of responsabilization—by promoting an idealised version of the self, Insta-Trainers reinforce these pressures and contribute to a culture where individuals feel responsible for achieving the images they see and judge themselves against (Gill, 2023a).

“I did feel pressure in the past like when people would buy something, I would feel left out.”

– Fula

“There is so much pressure on Qatari girls to look a certain way that I often feel dressed down. But when I talk to foreigners they say I look chic, so it’s confusing cause the standards in Qatari society on girls is so high it’s impossible. I don’t know anyone that didn’t have a little work done.”

– Maryam

Fula’s sense of exclusion when not purchasing popular items and Maryam’s confusion over conflicting beauty Qatari Western beauty standards highlight the powerful role of cultural norms and the influencer industry in shaping body image and self-perception. These examples echo Butler’s (2004) notion of performativity, where repeated performances of health and beauty rituals

construct a normative ideal. Hayat has also “always been pressured to look a certain way, ‘why don’t you follow this diet?’ Or things like ‘why don’t you get a gastric bypass?’”. This shared experience of feeling pressured to follow specific diets or undergo surgeries reflects the broader neoliberal framework, which again, emphasises individual and costly responsibility for health and beauty.

The role and impact of Insta-Trainers on Instagram highlight the performative nature of content that promotes neoliberal feminist ideals. These influencers shape normative standards that followers feel pressured to achieve, thereby marginalising those unable to conform and reinforcing social inequalities. This dynamic, rooted in post-feminism, emphasises individual empowerment through consumer choices while often ignoring structural inequalities. Consequently, followers become docile subjects, compelled to engage in constant self-improvement, perpetuating a cycle of self-surveillance along with cultural and societal pressure.

### **8.5. The Algorithmic Wardrobe and Performativity of Trends**

The Algorithmic Wardrobe serves as a method to underline the collection of trends and ideals circulating on social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok. This concept aligns closely with Butler’s (2004) theory of performativity, which suggests that gender and identity are not inherent but are performed through repeated actions and behaviours. In *Undoing Gender*, Butler (2004) challenges the notion of fixed identities, suggesting that this performance is continuously shaped by social interactions, popular trends, and cultural norms:

This means that local conceptions of what is human or, indeed, of what the basic conditions and needs of human life are, must be subjected to reinterpretation, since there are historical and cultural circumstances in which the human is defined differently. Its basic needs and, hence, basic entitlements are made known through various media, through various kinds of practices, spoken and performed (p. 37).

Butler highlights how individuals are trained to conform to cultural and societal ideals through diverse means, particularly evident in popular trends on social media platforms. Users not only learn to perform in certain ways but also undergo a form of ‘instant training’ facilitated by influencers. On Instagram, users navigate this Digital Wardrobe by choosing what promoted trends and ideals of health, beauty, and wellness to ‘wear’. These trends and ideals can be understood as performative acts that appear and disappear at a rapid pace. Historically, beauty trends followed a 20-year cycle; social media has revolutionised and expedited this process, introducing new trends every few months, such as Clean-Girl, Mob-Wife, and Y2K (Moreno, 2022). This fast-paced

phenomenon of adoption aligns with a sped-up understanding of Foucault's notion of the 'docile body', where individuals quickly internalise and self-regulate according to societal norms, constantly striving to achieve an idealised state of health and beauty (see Chapter 6).

The Algorithmic Wardrobe symbolises the digital platform and its algorithms; the 'clothes' are the fast-changing trends and normative ideals promoted by influencers and adopted by followers. Each trend, whether a fitness regime, dietary fad, or skincare routine, represents an item that users can adopt, embodying the ideals presented by Insta-Trainers. Through repetitive engagement, followers adopt and reinforce these normative standards, shaping contemporary notions of health, beauty, and fitness, thus also contributing to the neoliberal commodification of health and beauty. This interplay of user agency and conformity illustrates how individuality is expressed under the pressures of the influencer industry. Thus, the Algorithmic Wardrobe highlights how performative acts on social media define cultural identity and self-presentation, with influencers and followers playing crucial roles in this process.

The performative adoption of trends within the Algorithmic Wardrobe is concerning, particularly when elements of minority cultures are appropriated on social media without understanding the deeper meaning (Lockhart, 2021; Stevens, 2021; Moreno, 2022; Chumo, 2023). Influencers and users on platforms like Instagram often adopt cultural symbols, fashion, and beauty practices from various cultures, commodifying them and stripping them of their original context. Examples include the appropriation of traditional garments, hairstyles, and beauty rituals from marginalised cultures, often rebranded as 'exotic', 'aesthetically pleasing', or 'trendy' (Thompson, 2018; Moreno, 2022; Chumo, 2023). A prominent example is the Fox Eye trend—where one applies make-up or undergoes plastic surgery to make the eyes slant upwards—popularised on Instagram and TikTok in 2020, by non-Asian celebrities like Bella Hadid and Kendall Jenner. This trend was celebrated as beautiful when adopted by these influencers, yet it insidiously mocks and marginalises the same feature in Asian communities (Wang, 2020). Such appropriation is also evident in the actions of influencers who commodify cultural elements for personal gain. According to Steven (2021):

White Instagram models...were criticized for adopting what some have called digital blackface, altering their appearance with makeup and using Afrocentric hairstyles to build their personal brand and secure lucrative brand endorsements... an act of appropriation being deployed toward capitalist ends in the highly competitive and commercial context of social media influencing. (p. 1)

This practice not only commodifies cultural identities but also reinforces neoliberal principles by encouraging followers to engage in consumer behaviours that support these appropriative trends, perpetuating harmful cultural insensitivity and exploitation (Lockhart, 2021).

Some trends initiated by women of colour have later been credited to white women on social media platforms, participating in the erosion of the cultural heritage and significance associated with these trends (Moreno, 2022). For instance, the revival of Y2K fashion, which has roots in Black culture, has been attributed to white celebrities like Paris Hilton and Britney Spears (Fisher Akins, 2021; Moreno, 2022). This perpetuates problematic racial inequalities by allowing influencers and brands to benefit from the cultural expressions of marginalised groups. It reinforces the commodification of cultural elements by stripping them of their historical and social significance and reducing them to mere fashion trends and commercial opportunities (Lockhart, 2021; Steven, 2021). The Algorithmic Wardrobe not only offers a framework for understanding performative cultural identities on social media but also highlights the ethical responsibilities that come with engaging in digital cultural trends. As Moreno (2022) notes in an online article: “Participating in these different fads as they arise gives many users a sense of identity. But that comes at the price of feeding into a toxic culture of overconsumption and the appropriation of POC cultures”.

Social media platforms serve a dual role in cultural appropriation: enabling trends to be rapidly popularised without proper context and commodifying cultural identities (Wang, 2020; Moreno, 2022; Chumo, 2023). The Algorithmic Wardrobe<sup>45</sup> thus becomes a site of both opportunity and conflict, where the potential for cultural exchange is constantly at risk of being overshadowed by neoliberal principles, appropriation, and the pressure to conform to normalised ideals. This dual capacity highlights the importance of mindful and informed participation in digital spaces, where both the potential for harm and the opportunity for positive cultural exchange are significant. Through the concept of performativity, influencers can play a crucial role in shaping cultural narratives positively on their platforms. They have the opportunity to challenge and subvert dominant cultural norms and, through responsible usage, leverage their platforms to educate audiences about the significance of cultural practices, promote respectful engagement, and reduce

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<sup>45</sup> While I explore the concept of the Algorithmic Wardrobe within the framework of feminine performativity, addressing cultural appropriation and inequality, this concept has broader implications and applications, which I outline in Chapter 10. I also plan to extend this research in future works, examining the homogenisation of culture and the decline in authenticity through the lens of Walter Benjamin.

the risks of appropriation. Examples include Gulf influencers like Ascia AlShammari and Sadaf Beauty, who use their platforms to educate followers about the significance of Middle Eastern cultural elements related to beauty, fashion, and representation.

## 8.6. Conclusion

This chapter has examined how digital technologies intersect with governance, health practices, and individual agency, using the theme of *Digitalities of Good Health* to unpack the complex role of Instagram in shaping the lives of young Qatari women. Through the lens of Insta-Training functionalities, the chapter has shown that Instagram is not a neutral platform but in fact as an active biopedagogical tool that promotes normative standards of health, beauty, and self-care. Influencers, or Insta-Trainers, function as agents of biopower, reproducing postfeminist ideals of self-improvement, responsibility, and bodily regulation, while platform algorithms and governmental visions—particularly the QNV—reinforce these ideals through institutional frameworks.

In this digital environment, Pre-Curated and Algorithmically Curated Digital Manuals (PCDMs and ACDMs) work in tandem with state-endorsed narratives of wellness to encourage individual responsabilization and biocitizenship. Young Qatari women are encouraged to adopt specific health routines and lifestyles not only through visible influencer content but also through algorithmically tailored messaging that reinforces capitalist, Western-centric wellness ideals. While these practices can be productive—encouraging physical activity, self-care, and health awareness—they are also problematic, often fostering unrealistic expectations, self-surveillance, and internalised pressure to conform (quantifying the self!). This has significant implications for mental well-being, particularly when young women perceive themselves as falling short of algorithmically defined ideals.

The impact of these dynamics extends beyond individual health behaviours to affect cultural norms, traditions, and identity. The promotion of globalised standards of beauty and wellness marginalises traditional practices, reshapes cultural perceptions, and contributes to the homogenisation of diverse expressions of health and femininity. Moreover, the influence of Insta-Trainers and the commodification of empowerment narratives illustrate how feminist ideals have been co-opted into marketable commodities, perpetuating systemic inequalities under the guise of choice and self-care. These digital performances encourage aspirational lifestyles that are often costly, exclusionary, and socially stratified.

Instagram's multialgorithmic design, what I call Insta-functionalities, entrenches neoliberal and postfeminist ideologies, pushing users—particularly young women—towards continuous self-optimisation and discipline, creating what this thesis refers to as the *Algorithmic Wardrobe*. Here, identity is constantly curated, aligned with platform logic, and negotiated within a capitalist framework that privileges aesthetic performance and consumption. Yet, as this chapter has shown, there is also a growing awareness among users of the limitations and biases embedded in these systems. The COVID-19 pandemic served as a pivotal moment that exposed the tensions between platform profit motives and individual wellbeing, prompting some users to critically re-evaluate their relationship with digital health content.

Ultimately, this chapter contributes to a nuanced understanding of how digital platforms shape subjectivities in highly specific cultural and political contexts. It highlights the importance of fostering digital literacy and critical engagement with health messaging, especially in societies where state, culture, and technology intersect so powerfully (such as the example of the state's investments and promotion of Will Ahmed's Whoop).

Finally, while here I focused on how digital platforms and state-driven biopedagogies shape health ideals and practices among young Qatari women, the following chapter extends this inquiry by examining the shifting patterns of content engagement in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. As users become increasingly critical of the normative and often exclusionary standards promoted through platforms like Instagram, Chapter 9 explores how themes such as fatphobia, misinformation, postfeminism, and neoliberalism inform the consumption and creation of content. It highlights a growing reflexivity among participants, who are beginning to resist harmful narratives and instead seek out media that affirms their well-being, values, and identities. This transition reflects a critical turn in users' digital literacy and agency—one that challenges dominant discourses and opens up new spaces for empowerment and self-definition.

## Chapter 9. The New Wave of Online Consumption in the Post-Pandemic Era

### 9.1. Introduction

#### 9.1.1. Context

The COVID-19 pandemic has taken a profound and lasting toll on the physical and mental health of people worldwide (Mahbub et al., 2020; Masciantonio et al., 2021; O'Connor et al., 2021; Knox et al., 2022). Significant studies show that mental health outcomes, such as depression, anxiety, and loneliness, were particularly worse for women and young adults, who fall within the demographic focus of this study (O'Connor et al., 2021; Knox et al., 2022).

Since the pandemic's onset, a surge of social media content, especially on Instagram, has emerged offering preventative health measures and general health advice. This visually based content often focused on weight loss and dieting, frequently containing weight-stigmatising attitudes, misinformation related to health, and fatphobic messaging<sup>46</sup> (Abidin, 2020; Lucibello et al., 2021; Swami et al., 2021a). Idealised body images and unrealistic beauty standards on Instagram have intensified pressures to conform to these norms, leading to detrimental mental and physical health outcomes (O'Connor et al., 2021; Knox et al., 2022; Swami et al., 2021b). As discussed in this chapter, the exposure to such content has contributed to harmful behaviours—such as eating disorders, crash dieting, the use of unsafe weight-loss supplements, and the adoption of extreme fitness regimes without professional guidance—among respondents.

In response to these challenges, researchers have advocated for a 'pause'—a deliberate break from productivity and routine activities in order to thoughtfully consider and address the unprecedented educational, mental health, and social challenges brought by the pandemic (Richmond et al., 2020; Tandon et al., 2020; Ardern et al., 2021). This period of reflection is seen as crucial for developing solutions to mitigate the pandemic's negative impacts on individuals and communities.

Instagram and other social media platforms have played an essential role in disseminating health-related information during the COVID-19 pandemic and connecting people, particularly during periods of social isolation (Olusegun, 2021). In Qatar, the situation was no different; platforms were instrumental in shaping public perceptions and behaviours. Instagram helped residents

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<sup>46</sup> In the context of my thesis and across the studies cited in the introduction, fatphobic messaging refers to visual messages that promote stigmatising attitudes towards body weight and that emphasise weight loss and dieting as necessary for health, ultimately perpetuates misinformation about health and body size, and reinforcing negative stereotypes (Abidin, 2021; Lucibello et al., 2021; Swami et al., 2021a).

overcome isolation, maintain social ties, access support networks, and share critical health and safety information, mitigating feelings of loneliness and anxiety, which contributed to better mental health outcomes (Al-Rawi et al., 2021; Promodh, 2021). However, increased social media usage also led to the spread of misinformation and negatively impacted mental health (Al-Rawi, 2021; Hermassi et al., 2024). A key issue emerging from this increased usage was ‘scrolling fatigue’—mental and physical exhaustion experienced due to prolonged engagement with digital content, leading to negative emotions (Cramer et al., 2016; Suleiman, 2024). Furthermore, weight-stigmatising content during the pandemic heightened body image concerns, reducing self-esteem and increasing instances of eating disorders among young women in Qatar (Abed Alah et al., 2021; Hermassi et al., 2021; O’Hara et al., 2023). Recent qualitative research indicates that even three years since the pandemic’s onset, these issues persist, exacerbating feelings of inadequacy and undermining young women’s long-term psychological well-being (O’Hara et al., 2023).

This chapter examines the shift in attitudes towards Insta-Trainer content and functionalities among young women in Qatar following the COVID-19 global pandemic. By comparing past and present consumption patterns, I explore how participants’ lives and interactions were heavily influenced by Instagram after moving online for over a year. While the chapter title is broad and does not specifically mention Qatar, the analysis centres on the experiences of women from Qatar, supported by regional and global scholarly commentary; this makes the chapter both timely and relevant to Qatar while also reflecting global trends that align with my findings (Mahbub et al., 2020; Masciantonio et al., 2021; Lucibello et al., 2021; Swami et al., 2021a).

In January 2021, government-funded reports indicated that Qatar had 2.88 million internet users, with 2.87 million of them active on social media, indicating that 98.8% of the total population in Qatar used social media during the lockdown period (Olusegun, 2021). This extensive usage suggests that almost the entire internet-connected population was exposed to various types of content, including fatphobic and weight-stigmatising messages, false advertising for health products and services, and other health-related (mis)information. The pervasive presence of such content influenced public perceptions and behaviours, exacerbating body image concerns and promoting unhealthy behaviours (Abed Alah et al., 2021; Al-Rawi et al., 2021). The high engagement with social media platforms like Instagram during this period underscores the profound impact of digital content on mental and physical health, highlighting the responsibility of these platforms in moderating harmful content and promoting positive health messages. Despite

Instagram's attempt to address these issues, its prioritisation of high-engagement, profit-driven content has largely undermined these efforts, rendering them ineffective (see Chapter 7).

Collected between 2021 and 2022, as mentioned in Chapter 4 and 5, the survey and interview datasets for this study coincided with the COVID-19 lockdowns, confirming that 100% of survey respondents had internet access. All respondents reported accessing Instagram at least once a day, if not more frequently during a period of heightened online activity and isolation. Many survey responses and interview discussions often referenced experiences specific to the pandemic, further justifying the relevance of a chapter focused on COVID-19.

### ***9.1.2. Sections Overview***

This chapter delves into fatphobia, misinformation, post-feminism, and neoliberalism, illuminating the complex dynamics surrounding content consumption and creation. It highlights how, post-pandemic, young women have become more reflexive, critically analysing content that once perpetuated harmful stereotypes. They now actively seek out and engage with supportive, empowering narratives, rather than passively consuming media that reinforces negative ideals. This shift demonstrates a growing self-awareness and a desire for content that aligns with their values and well-being. Chapter 9 is organised into two sections, each further divided into subsections:

- **9.2 Insta-Trainer: The Influencer and the Platform:**

**9.2.2. *Influencers: Pseudo-Expert Advice and Fatphobic Messaging*** examines how influencers capitalised on increased online activity during lockdown by posing as health professionals in a time where, as interviewee Miznah put it: “Everyone was suddenly an expert”. Influencers created content such as memes and informational posts that, despite claiming to promote fitness and mental health during a time of inactivity, often disseminated misinformation and fatphobic messages, ultimately increasing anxiety, stress, and harmful behaviours.

**9.3.3. *Instagram: The Marketplace of Health*** explores the multi-algorithmic role of Instagram in amplifying these very behaviours. The section primarily focuses on how the platform's core business model commercialised health and wellness information, products, and services during a critical time.

- **9.3: The Post-Pandemic Conscious User:**

**9.3.1. Navigating Fatphobia and Body Image** examines how Instagram influencers, termed ‘meme factories’ by Abidin (2021), adapted their content during the pandemic to engage audiences. The mental impact of fatphobic images created a double pressure dynamic, as both influencers and regular users shared such content that fostered anxiety and harmful behaviours. Insta-Trainers exploited these trends for profit, often compromising their integrity. The pandemic saw a surge in panic-buying influenced by fat-shaming messages, highlighting classism in access to health activities. The socio-cultural implications of post-feminism are evident, with social media promoting self-discipline and monitoring as markers of worth, intensifying pressures during the pandemic.

However, many users have developed a critical awareness and resistance to harmful content, leading to a shift towards more selective media consumption on Instagram. This change is particularly noticeable among young women who now seek out supportive and empowering narratives.

**9.3.1. Awakening: Research and Resist!** discusses how user behaviour on Instagram shifted during the COVID-19 pandemic, characterised by an increased awareness and astuteness in resisting influencer content. Insta-Trainers, often viewed as credible despite lacking expertise, amplified misinformation and fatphobic messaging that promoted stigmatising attitudes towards body weight, leading to anxiety and unhealthy behaviours. The findings reveal a significant trend of users embarking on an ‘unfollowing’ spree, rejecting manipulative content and reclaiming their online spaces. This trend represents a move towards more critical media consumption and autonomous health choices, with women in Qatar becoming more resistant to manipulative marketing tactics on social media.

## **9.2. Insta-Trainer: The Influencer and the Platform**

### **9.2.1. Influencers: Pseudo-Expert Advice and Fatphobic Messaging**

During the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns, marked by extensive online activity and continuous digital content consumption, social media influencers significantly shaped global perceptions of health, beauty, and wellbeing (Abed Alah et al., 2021; Hauke, 2021a). Influencers on Instagram disseminated pseudo-expert advice, fat-shaming content, and promoted negative body image perceptions, which rested on stereotypes and that fostered harmful weight loss habits, and the spread of health misinformation (Abidin, 2020; Hauke, 2021b; Al-Rawi et al., 2022). This

contributed to the perpetuation of unrealistic standards and disordered eating behaviours, further intensifying body dissatisfaction, anxiety, and stress related to weight gain (Abidin, 2020; *ibid.*, 2022). Hauke (2021a) notes that the algorithmic amplification on Instagram worsened the spread of such misinformation, making it harder for users to escape negative messaging. The stay-at-home measures also led to increased exposure to weight-stigmatising content, further impacting diet, physical activity, and body weight perceptions in Qatar (Abed Alah et al., 2021), effectively trapping individuals in a social media bubble that challenged their self-perception and views on health, beauty, and cultural norms (Abed Alah et al., 2021).

In this bubble, Insta-Trainers and online food delivery services leveraged hashtags like #SupportLocal on Instagram and other social media platforms to engage users and promote sponsored products, which played on users' emotions during a stressful time for both local businesses and individuals, with many respondents later realising that these tactics seemed to exploit the circumstances (Francisco et al., 2021). This strategy involved encouraging support for local businesses while marketing their products as healthy 'solutions' to various health-related 'problems'. These dynamics, related to health, diet, culture, and beauty, underscore how respondents were exposed to, tested by, and challenged during the 'great pause' of COVID-19. This unique experience resembles a worldwide social experiment that seems utopian, creating an almost utopian scenario where the convergence of digital influence, personal health, and societal values were intensely scrutinised and transformed.

One of my interviewees, Tala, discussed how in Ramadan of 2020, Manuka honey was heavily marketed by Insta-Trainers. Despite recognising that the content was scripted—due to the repetition of the same vocabulary and catch-phrases among different influencers from the Gulf region—Tala ended up purchasing five jars. Manuka honey was dually advertised as an immunity-boosting item (a trend I address in the following section) and vitamin-enriching, compensating for nutritional losses during Ramadan's 30-day fast, enhancing its appeal. This example illustrates user-disjuncture, where Tala knew the influencers were being disingenuous yet still purchased the product; it also shows how Instagram content serves as a biopedagogical tool for learning about health and nutrition (see Chapter 6). Significantly, Tala, who holds a degree in practical and theoretical media studies and has a career in media content creation, still fell for the allure of the Insta-Trainer despite her career that depends on understanding and seeing through such social media and public relation tactics.

This case illustrates the neoliberal nature of influencer marketing, where health anxieties are exploited for profit. As Lupton (2016) discusses in *The Quantified Self*, self-tracking technologies and health marketing often amplify users' anxieties by promoting a narrative of constant self-optimisation and responsibility for individual health. Insta-Trainers, driven by commercial incentives, prioritised market-driven content over genuine health information during the pandemic, commodifying health and wellness. This practice illustrates how health data is used to predict and shape user behaviour for profit in order to ultimately turn users into data points designed to exploit their vulnerabilities, further intensifying health anxieties and driving the demand for health-related products and services (Zuboff, 2019).

Throughout the core chapters, neoliberalism emphasises individual responsibility and self-optimisation, aligning perfectly with the marketing strategies seen on Instagram (Harvey, 2005; Berry, 2017). Influencers promote products that promise to enhance personal health and well-being, capitalising on the neoliberal ethos of self-care as a marketable commodity, creating a cycle that encourages consumers to continually purchase products to better manage their physical and mental health, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic (Elias et al., 2017). This trend not only reinforces the commodification of health and wellness but also promotes harmful diet culture, as highlighted throughout the thesis. Such emphasis on individual responsibility and self-optimisation reflects post-feminist sensibilities, where empowerment is often equated with consumer choice and self-discipline. Post-feminism suggests that women are empowered through their consumption choices and self-regulation, aligning closely with neoliberal ideologies. Insta-Trainers on Instagram exemplify this by marketing health and wellness products as tools for self-empowerment, thereby exploiting health anxieties that target women's bodies and well-being under the guise of self-improvement and empowerment.

This scenario subtly intertwines with Abidin's (2020) concept of meme factories, where content creation and dissemination on social media platforms like Instagram have become industrialised. Insta-Trainers and meme creators produce and circulate content that leverages health anxieties, using humour and relatable imagery to engage users while subtly reinforcing consumerist behaviours. This process highlights how digital cultures perpetuate postfeminist and neoliberal ideals, turning self-care and wellness into commodities marketed through carefully crafted and widespread memes. From the first lockdown phase until the complete lifting of restrictions, Instagram saw a rise in anti-fat content and memes created and disseminated by influencers using

photoshopped images to mock weight gain during quarantine, labelled as #Corona15 (Hauke, 2021b; Lucibello et al., 2021). These memes promoted a sense of self-optimisation without consideration for users' mental health, physical abilities, or financial capabilities, further perpetuating body-image issues and supporting problematic health-related practices in Qatar (Al-Rawi et al., 2021; Abed Alah et al., 2021). Such content also created a sense of urgency to solve these impending issues, further strengthening and adding value to influencer marketing industry (Gill, 2023a). This not only fostered feelings of exclusion among some users but also portrayed health maintenance as both a necessity and a luxury—not everyone had a home gym or had access to fresh produce and wholesome foods during the lockdowns.

The memes featured exaggerated before-and-after quarantine images, thin-to-fat jokes, and other content stigmatising weight gain, promoting unrealistic beauty standards and contributing to an already existing culture of body shaming online (see Figures 9.3.1.1. and 9.3.1.2. for a visual example) (Abidin, 2020; Baer, 2015). Faten, who struggles with chronic illness, fatigue, and depression, noted that many Insta-Trainers she followed shared fat-phobic memes and indirectly shamed those who were not physically, academically, or professionally productive during the first lockdown phase in Qatar. Nadiya and Miznah echoed this sentiment, reflecting similar findings in Australia, Canada, and UK (Clarke et al., 2021; Lucibello et al., 2021; Swami et al., 2021a). Faten shared that productivity influenced her mental health, highlighting that in the early days of quarantine she “felt guilty...like I should be working out...It was an insane amount of pressure”. Multiple studies concluded that this pressure was rooted in heavy online activity, and a fear of “inevitable weight gains due to changes in eating, physical activity, and sedentary behaviours resultant from self-isolating” (Pearl, 2020, p. 1), further indicating this was a global issue affecting users irrespective of their ASL<sup>47</sup> (Wagner et al., 2020; Lucibello et al., 2021).

Abidin's work on meme culture during the pandemic also discusses how influencers and meme creators adapted their content to disseminate public health information and manage the social anxieties of their followers. Abidin (2021) defines meme factories as entities that “create original meme content and incorporate advertising” (p. 24), stressing on their role in shaping public discourse (p. 24) and involved a complex interplay between promoting health and wellness products and navigating the ethical considerations of their influence on public perception. However, it is important to highlight that not all content during this period was negative or poorly

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<sup>47</sup> “ASL is an internet slang acronym for age, sex, location” (Grace, 2024)

received. Some Insta-Trainers and social media movements online indeed promoted body positivity, self-acceptance, and mental well-being (Clark et al., 2021; Promodh, 2021). The dissemination of such values provided positive online spaces for building solidarity, reducing social isolation in the lockdowns, and also encouraging healthier attitudes towards body image and self-worth (Clark et al., 2021; Promodh, 2021).

Of the 41 survey respondents, 73% found content related to health, diets, and lifestyle curated by Insta-Trainers helpful and informative. While 70% described them using terms such as inspiring, motivating, and positive, 75% of respondents reported negative experiences, including anxiety, stress, and feeling pressured to conform to Western standards of health and beauty. Notably 60% expressed distrust towards the health content from Insta-Trainers, 41% acknowledged significant changes in their eating habits directly influenced by the content they consumed. Furthermore, 68% mentioned engaging in physical activity, ranging from moderate to high intensity, as a result of the images they viewed on Instagram.

Collected during the height of the pandemic, the data from my study confirms that while many respondents turned to Insta-Trainers for health guidance, their methods of verifying credentials and fact-checking varied widely. Seventeen (17) respondents meticulously checked the backgrounds, certifications, and information of Insta-Trainers, while more than half of the respondents (24) accepted the information at face value. This lack of consistent verification is alarming, as the findings indicate that such exposure led to misinformation and inaccurate health advice, resulting in negative outcomes. Respondents who relied solely on unverified information from Insta-Trainers were put at risk, as repeatedly illustrated by the experiences of Sahar, Maha, and Faten detailed in previous chapters.

My data also reveals that while many of the surveyed women found Insta-Trainers' content empowering, aligning with ideals of self-improvement, an equally significant number experienced pressure to conform to broader global beauty standards, highlighting the contradictory nature of post-feminism (Gill, 2007; 2023a). Coinciding with conclusions in other core chapters, the tension shows how post-feminism can advocate for personal empowerment, while reinforcing restrictive beauty standards. It is essential to understand how Instagram as a platform facilitates and amplifies this by exploring the role of influencers in shaping health perceptions and practices during the pandemic.

### ***9.2.2. Instagram: The Marketplace of Health and Misinformation***

This section delves into the multialgorithmic functionalities and design of Instagram, highlighting how the platform prioritises high-engagement, market-driven content, thereby reinforcing the neoliberal commodification of health and wellness. It sheds light on the broader structural factors that influence health behaviours and beliefs among women both globally and in Qatar. This section, which focuses on Insta-Training as the functionalities of the platform itself, and the one above, on Insta-Trainer as the influencer industry, have multiple parallels. While some points may seem repetitive, it is crucial to partly restate certain statements throughout the sections to ensure that the parallels are clearly drawn and thoroughly engaged.

As mentioned earlier, while some respondents meticulously fact-checked information provided by Insta-Trainers, others accepted it at face value, leading to misinformation and inaccurate health advice. A lack of verification of Insta-Trainer claims resulted in negative outcomes, with 24 of the 41 survey respondents who relied solely on unverified information being put at risk. In response to the spread of misinformation during the pandemic, Instagram introduced measures to try to ensure users felt safe, informed, and supported. The platform attempted to remove false claims about COVID-19 and vaccines and also partnered with health organisations to promote accurate information and implemented new educational resources and notifications to direct consumers to reliable health authorities, such as hyperlinking posts to the official website of the World Health Organisation (Instagram, 2024c).

Bond (2021) found that the ‘suggested posts’ feature continued to contribute to the spread of misinformation, thereby propagating false claims about COVID-19, vaccines, and other topics. This algorithmic functionality highlighted the challenge of balancing user engagement with the dissemination of accurate information (Bond, 2021). These algorithms, which tend to prioritise certain content in line with the platform’s core business model, resulted in the perpetuation of the very falsehoods that the measures aimed to eliminate, since Instagram relies heavily on user engagement and the time a user spends on the platform (Larsen, 2024a; Bond, 2021). This prioritisation is driven by the monetisation practices on the application and algorithmic biases that favour high-engagement content, even if it is misleading or harmful (Cotter, 2018; Larsen, 2024b). Despite efforts to curb misinformation, Instagram’s revenue model inherently conflicts with its public health initiatives. As previously discussed in Chapter 7, algorithmic biases can indeed amplify misinformation. Designed with commercial incentives, the algorithms often overlook the social impacts of their recommendations (O’Neil, 2016), intensifying the spread of misinformation.

Visually appealing and curated content tends to attract more engagement and visibility, which undermines public health efforts and, in turn, affects vulnerable communities, particularly those who lack the resources to verify information independently (O’Neil, 2016; Resolute, 2021).

As highlighted earlier, influencer marketing during the pandemic capitalised on health anxieties for profit by prioritising market-driven content over genuine health information. This commodifying approach exploits user vulnerabilities to drive demand for health-related products and services, similar to wearable devices and health tracking software (Lupton, 2016; Zuboff, 2019). In the context of my research, Instagram and Insta-Trainers can be considered self-tracking technologies, particularly with the use of UCDCMs (see Chapter 6), which highlight how women use multialgorithmic technologies and features on the application to self-discipline and self-monitor their health and bodies through the Saved Folders feature on Instagram or the Collections feature on TikTok (Al Derham, 2023a), similarly to wearable devices. As noted in *FemTech*: “The relationship between women’s health technologies and social media is growing increasingly close, with platforms such as Facebook and Instagram being used not only to market products but also to manage a consumer base and serve as a medium for the sharing of health data accumulated by other FemTech applications” (Al Derham, 2023a, p. 145).<sup>48</sup> This convergence exemplifies how anxieties related to health and body image are cleverly exploited through various technologies that work both interchangeably and hand-in-hand. Users of FemTech are not only marketed health products by Insta-Trainers on the application but are also subtly encouraged to monitor and regulate their own behaviours through the embedded features of the platform, enhancing the effectiveness of such features (Al Derham, 2023a) while further perpetuating patterns that encourage self-surveillance and the continuous commodification and consumption of health solutions.

In all the lockdown phases, Instagram as a platform increasingly served as a tool to disseminate COVID-19 related information while prioritising profit-generating material, much like the influencer industry highlighted in the section above—a fact eventually realised and acknowledged by many respondents of the study and by users globally (Niknam et al., 2020; Larsen, 2024a). This model allowed the platform to become a prominent marketplace for health products, preventative care services, and methods to maintain fitness (Jia et al., 2021; Staniewski and Awruk, 2021). The

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<sup>48</sup> I would like to clarify that while finalising the *FemTech* chapter in the first quarter of 2023, the additional data sets from follow-up interviews and interactions were not yet available. Although these data sets were later included and updated, they did not significantly affect the conclusions or findings.

multialgorithmic functionalities of Instagram enabled it to shape health norms and practices by leveraging its reach to commercialise health and wellness information, products, and services (Jia et al., 2021). Notably, 84% of survey respondents reported that Instagram’s design prompted them to purchase products and services directly through the application. Additionally, despite efforts to curb misinformation, the success of marketing trends such as #SupportLocal, #ImmuneBoosting, and #Corona15 illustrates how platforms reflect and perpetuate neoliberal values, turning health into a lucrative marketplace at the expense of more robust forms of well-being (Cassa Macedo et al., 2020; Lucibello et al., 2021; Petrzela, 2021). The neoliberal practices of Insta-Trainers mentioned in the section above, which emphasise individual responsibility and self-optimisation as means of empowerment, similarly mirror Insta-functionalities of the platform, reinforcing the vicious cycle where health anxieties are exploited for profit under the guise of promoting self-care and wellness, thereby adding supplemental pressures on the content consumers of the application.

Ola mentioned that following a significant COVID-19 outbreak after the first lifting of lockdown restrictions, OX Fitness—a renowned gym and spinning studio in Qatar—activated the delivery of immunity-boosting care packages containing products with affiliated businesses. Recipients of these packages, many of whom were infected with COVID-19 because of the gym, posted about them on Instagram, tagging OX Fitness. This created a sense of online exclusivity while simultaneously fostering a sense of loyalty and community for customers, implying that the gym’s failure to provide a safe and well sanitised space had been absolved. Indeed, such “chic, pricey gyms have an outsize influence on our collective mentality around fitness” (Petrzela, 2021, p. 115). This exclusionary environment became even more pronounced when access to clean and well sanitised gyms was crucial. The emphasis on the client-friendly environment of elite fitness spaces on Instagram perpetuated social inequalities and highlighted disparities in access to essential health resources during a public health crisis.

Ghaya and Miznah also mentioned that the same spinning studio rented out their bikes for home delivery and personal use during the lockdown at unaffordable prices, which did not include access to the online live-streaming classes provided by the gym trainers on Instagram. Ghaya remarked that the online classes were, “problematic because there are no levels. They look trendy and are expensive on Instagram, but [with] no supervision, [meaning that the] form could be wrong. They could get injured. Some leave [the class] without stretching”, emphasising the potential harm of unregulated fitness content promoted on Instagram (see Faten’s experience in Chapter 8). The

commodification of health and wellness on social media platforms most often benefits those with financial means while marginalising those without. This neoliberal approach to fitness turns health into a marketable commodity, making access to safe and sanitised workout spaces—at a vulnerable time like the COVID-19 lockdowns—a privilege rather than a right, further exacerbating social inequalities by endorsing exclusive and often unattainable standards of health and fitness (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Lupton, 2016; Petrzela, 2021). According to Banet-Weiser (2012), a veneer of accessibility is created, which reinforces socio-economic divides due to the way wellness is branded on social media platforms.

At around the same time, the term ‘immunity boosting’ or the hashtag #immunebooster was trending on Instagram and was often used for marketing purposes, by appearing alongside the offer of speculative cures, treatments, and preventive strategies (Wagner et al., 2020). Another instance of this trend was seen with a local business, Société, which sent out free samples of “immunity boosting bread” to those who contracted COVID-19. Following positive feedback, the business began marketing their gourmet bread on Instagram and home delivery platforms like Snoonu and Talabat. This incident was discussed by Ola, Nadiya, Miznah, and Lulu during their interviews, and by survey respondents such as Hadiya and Reema. Reminiscent of Tala’s Manuka honey experience, they explained that the term ‘immune boosting’ was widespread and effective in promoting products during the lockdown period in Qatar, further illustrating how maintaining good health became desirable, while also reinforcing the intensification of socio-economic disparities as a result of the pandemic.

The tactic of fostering support for local businesses, combined with the claim that diets were essential for thriving during the pandemic, effectively influenced consumer behaviour (Wagner et al., 2020). This claim underpinned a trend on social media that capitalised on the idea that diet and weight loss were the ultimate solutions to health issues, reflecting a pervasive marketing strategy that illustrates the widespread commercial activity of consumable goods and products on Instagram. Health-related hashtags, such as #immunebooster and #corona15, served both as promotional tools for health products and as rhetorical devices to drive engagement in the online attention economy (Cassa Macedo et al., 2020; Wagner et al., 2020). Participation in these trends was seen as a means of maintaining health and containing the virus, aligning with the concept of the virtuous biocitizen who acts in the best interest of both personal and public health (see Chapter 8).

Survey respondents, such as Mahra, purchased immune-boosting pills that were also marketed as weight-loss supplements, while Bascooti and Hayat took gummy bear vitamins advertised on Instagram to combat post-COVID-19 symptoms of hair loss. In a neoliberal food environment, individuals are ideologically driven to make consumption choices that mitigate risk, where purchasing medications, supplements, and foods is perceived as an act of self-protection and societal responsibility (Cairns and Johnston, 2015). In Qatar, the hype surrounding food products marketed as health solutions, such as gourmet honey and sourdough bread, are a prominent example. This trend intertwines with a sense of capitalist nationalism, where supporting local businesses at risk of shutting down became a patriotic act. Neoliberalism, combined with a sense of nationalism and biocitizenship, further encouraged individuals to see their consumption choices as contributions to the collective health and economy of the nation, thereby reinforcing both personal and public health responsibilities.

The literature on fatness, health, and productive, labouring citizenship provides a critical framework for understanding these dynamics (see Chapter 3). Societal attitudes towards fatness often marginalise individuals who do not conform to idealised body standards, reinforcing normative ideals that equate thinness with health and moral virtue (Lupton, 2017; Gordon, 2020). Neoliberalism constructs contemporary bodies through a market-driven approach to health and fitness (Guthman, 2009). This marketisation, evident in the promotion of immune-boosting and weight-loss products on Instagram, exploits anxieties related to body weight and health to drive consumer behaviour, aligning with Rose and Novas's (2005) concept of biological citizenship, wherein individuals are expected to manage their health and body in ways that meet societal expectations of productivity and responsibility (see Chapter 8). Wright and Halse (2013) further highlight how web-based health promotion bio-pedagogies, such as those created and disseminated through hashtags during the COVID-19 pandemic, construct the 'healthy child citizen', a concept that can be extended to young women in the context of my study. Marketing immune-boosting products on Instagram underscores the intersection of digital media, neoliberal health ideologies, and the production of biocitizens who are expected to continually optimise their bodies and health in line with market-driven standards (Cassa Macedo et al., 2020).

In summary, these dynamics enabled influencers and brands to successfully promote fitness programmes, diet products, supplements, and wellness routines through algorithmically driven features on the applications such as live streaming, posts, reels, and stories (Francisco et al., 2021).

The algorithms governing these features amplified content to attract high engagement, favouring curated and visually appealing yet often misleading health advice, thereby intensifying the visibility and spread of commercial health content (Hauke, 2021a).

### **9.3. The Post-Pandemic Conscious User**

Promoting products and services on Instagram to persuade users to manage their physical and mental well-being is a strategy incited by neoliberal values that turn personal health into a marketable commodity. This section, divided into two parts, explores how users navigated such messages, became aware of these tactics and resisted them, and finally, how their consumption patterns changed in response.

#### ***9.3.1. Navigating Fatphobia and Body Image***

The concept of ‘meme factories’ described how influencers adapted their content to engage audiences and spread public health (mis)information while simultaneously navigating the ethical implications of their influence (Abidin, 2020). On platforms such as Instagram, the algorithmic ranking amplified these memes, especially those that elicited strong emotional responses, by prioritising visually appealing content over scientifically accurate health advice, thus negatively influencing health behaviours and beliefs among users globally and within Qatar (Jia et al., 2021; Abed Alah et al., 2021; Larsen, 2024a; 2024b). Miznah noted that “quarantine will either make you or break you”, highlighting how deeply fatphobic images mentally affected many users during that time. Fatphobia led to various harmful behaviours and mindsets. Some participants internalised fatphobia, putting significant physical pressure on themselves and other family members to avoid gaining weight. Others invested large sums of money into purchasing home gym equipment and diet plans for themselves and their relatives. These actions fostered an environment where self-worth was, and arguably still is, tied to body size and appearance, promoting unhealthy behaviours and financial strain in an effort to conform to unrealistic standards of health and beauty.

Indeed, fatphobic content on Instagram, especially during the pandemic, intensified all these issues. Repeated exposure to images and messages that shamed weight gain or idealised extreme thinness contributed to anxiety, stress, and body dissatisfaction. Ironically, non-influencers and typical everyday users participated in the sharing of fatphobic information and memes, mimicking influencers while also being negatively impacted by the content at the same time. Mimicking influencers, seen as close friends or sisters from parasocial relationships fostered between the

influencer and follower, is not new (see Chapter 2) (Abidin, 2015; Berryman and Kavka, 2017). Aliya mentioned that she often mimics influencers because she feels like she is receiving advice from a friend. However, she admitted that following their advice added pressure and negative emotions, indicating a troubling dynamic of double pressure where both peer and self-imposed pressure have compelled individuals to recirculate such content while simultaneously engaging in self-disciplining practices as an emotional and physical response to the images. This dynamic can be understood through the lenses of surveillance, biopower, and governmentality, where individuals regulate their behaviour based on perceived norms and pressures (see Chapters 7 and 8).

Interviewees further emphasised how Insta-Trainers capitalised on this fatphobic and body-shaming trend, which gained increased traction and popularity during the first phase of lockdown. Some influencers even launched personal businesses to profit during the pandemic, as mentioned by Tala, Miznah, and Nadiya. Miznah also mentioned that some influencers, having lost their jobs in other careers, accepted any advertisement or product endorsement to survive. This practice is problematic: it compromises the integrity of the influencers who may promote products without acknowledging their endorsement; it can mislead followers into purchasing ineffective or harmful products, highlighting the significant socio-economic impact of influencer culture and meme factories during COVID-19 on both influencers and their followers. The financial burden of purchasing diet plans and home gym equipment during a time of economic uncertainty further highlights the exploitative nature of these practices. Influencers, through their content, play a significant role in shaping public perceptions and behaviours, and their influence during the pandemic has illustrated the need for more ethical considerations and accountability in their content creation and dissemination (Abidin, 2020).

Faten explained that many sports, such as outdoor cycling in semi-remote areas, online spinning classes, and padel—only played if you owned a court at home or had the financial means to book an entire court due to social distancing restrictions—became trendy during COVID-19. She observed that some people panic-bought equipment like bicycles in response to Instagram content, which promoted the idea that the pandemic was a chance to become healthier and fitter. This panic-buying, driven by Insta-Trainers' fatphobic messaging, illustrated the problematic nature of influencers accepting any advertisement to gain income. This trend also indicates a certain level of classism, as only those with sufficient financial means could afford to engage these health and

fitness activities. Once again, this practice demonstrates how health has become a luxury rather than an accessible right for all.



*Figure 9.3.1.1: Barbie to Carbie*

Ghaya also discussed the ‘panic-buying craze’ during the first lockdown. She disclosed that an Insta-Trainer recommended a shop for workout equipment in Qatar, which she ended up purchasing from. Despite benefiting from this recommendation, she believes that “it is still unhealthy that there are people who are still promoting [health this way]. Not only did it open a market, but many people became famous due to the pandemic...Many influencers promoted their programmes, products, and workout clothes,” resonating with Miznah’s comment that some Insta-Trainers took advantage of the pandemic to launch and promote their personal businesses.

Faten, Nadiya, Miznah, and Ghaya elaborated on the impact of these fatphobic memes, explaining that they often featured exaggerated before-and-after pictures, such as a thin Barbie juxtaposed with an overweight Barbie or Carbie (derived from merging Barbie and Carbs), or a slim Mona Lisa followed by a larger version (see Figures 9.3.1.1. and 9.3.1.2, respectively). This pandemic-induced fatphobia affected Ghaya to the extent that she exhausted herself by consistently working out to avoid losing muscle mass, illustrating how the pervasive fat-shaming content on social media not only perpetuates harmful stereotypes but also promotes unhealthy behaviours and places undue pressure on individuals to conform to unrealistic body standards.

These fatphobic images predominantly target women or depict women, reflecting broader societal issues related to gender and body image (Nasreen and Habib, 2021). This aligns with feminist critiques highlighting how women's bodies are often subjected to public scrutiny and regulation, perpetuating gender inequalities (McRobbie, 2007; Pruchniewska, 2017). The focus on women's bodies in fatphobic memes serves to further entrench patriarchal norms and expectations, marginalising those who do not conform to these narrow standards and negatively affecting self-worth and mental health among women, as seen among study participants (Caldeira, 2018; Camacho-Miñano et al., 2019).

#### Four Stages of Quarantine



*Figure 9.3.1.2. Stages of Quarantine*

Ghaya noted that the fatphobic memes made her feel fatphobic, prompting her to adopt fitness practices and encourage other women around her, such as her mother and sister, to do the same. While she stated this in her interview, her survey response indicates that her mother and sister also recommended a diet plan to her, indicating that they influenced each other's personal health and diet practices in their everyday lives. Nadiya also mentioned that her mother encouraged her to have gastric bypass surgery, and Sahar noted that her mother urged her to get Botox (both examples are discussed in detail in previous chapters). Such impacts are deeply implicated in post-feminist values. The pursuit of perfection through self-disciplining and monitoring practices is often motivated by social media use, as described by Gill (2023a). This is exemplified by the way Instagram influencers promote fitness and health products, subtly reinforcing the idea that personal health is a woman's responsibility and a marker of her worth, as well as her duty to maintain the health of other women around her (see Chapters 2, 3, and 8 for details) (Gill, 2007; 2017).

The pandemic indeed intensified these pressures, with influencers capitalising on the heightened anxiety around health and fitness to promote their products. As Gill (2023a) states: "The unique

context of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown gave it a particular urgency” (p. 24), intensifying the already existing pressures on women perpetuated by content similar to that of Insta-Trainers. These postfeminist values not only promote individual empowerment, exemplified by Ghaya’s engagement in physical activity to ‘maintain’ her muscles and figure, but also reinforce traditional gender norms and societal representations of health and beauty. During this period of increased sedentary behaviour, the interviewees expressed that they physically exhausted themselves to ensure they maintained their weight or achieved a certain standard of beauty, a sentiment shared by 75% of survey respondents.

Additionally, these dynamics not only foster fatphobia and self-monitoring, but also a form of internalised sexism, where women are expected to self-monitor and police the bodies of other women in their families. In my study, there is an absence of male counterparts being advised about body image. Among the 41 participants and interviewees from the same pool, no woman gave advice to a male. Daniya was the only person to mention a male counterpart, receiving unwarranted advice from her brother to conform to certain looks on Instagram in order to increase her marriage prospects. This gendered expectation reinforces the sexist notion that women’s bodies are public property to be managed and disciplined, further establishing gender inequalities and perpetuating a cycle of self-surveillance and control among women in Qatar.

While many participants claimed they benefited from such self-disciplining practices and were satisfied with the results, they were also cynical about Insta-Trainers’ advertising. This cynicism grew when they began to research and resist rather than take information at face value, indicating a shift in how content is consumed while also reflecting a broader awakening among users, suggesting that they became aware of the manufactured allure of Insta-Trainers on social media. This indicates not only a user-disjuncture but also a gradual rise in user resistance to the values promoted by Insta-Trainers. Such responses were complicated by a new wave of users and their approach to consuming content on Instagram post-pandemic, which will be discussed in the following section.

### ***9.3.2. Awakening: Research and Resist!***

Several key insights emerged during the interviews regarding users’ shifting behaviours and their increased awareness of implicit messaging in advertisements and misinformation related to influencer content on Instagram. Nadiya, Ghaya, and Miznah observed changes in behaviours within their communities, including a notable shift from consuming vlogs to podcasts, an increase

in online shopping, and a rise in Instagram businesses related to health and fitness. This surge in digital activity was partly related to people spending more time online, where influencers' personal opinions and misinformation were often circulated as facts. Studies have shown that social media significantly influences public attitudes towards health and COVID-19. For instance, misinformation on social media platforms has been shown to lead to increased vaccine hesitancy and poor preventative practices against the virus (Biswas et al., 2022).

In Qatar, social media users often struggle to distinguish between information and disinformation, which increases feelings of fear, anxiety, and stress among users (Galal and Auter, 2023). Moreover, a study focusing on Arabic speakers on X, previously known as Twitter, identified three main topics of misinformation—infringement on civil liberties, vaccine conspiracy theories, and calls for action—with many tweets spreading mistrust in vaccine efficacy and promoting false claims about vaccine risks (Al-Rawi et al., 2022). Disinformation around COVID-19 has been weaponised in the Gulf to attack rivals and bolster regimes' legitimacy (Jones, 2020). These findings highlight the pervasive impact of social media on public perceptions and behaviours related to health.

In her interview, Nadiya highlighted the problematic nature of influencers who, despite lacking expertise, were perceived by followers as credible. She mentioned an anti-vaxxer influencer in Qatar, who she did not name, gaining popularity for exposing alleged misconduct at a beauty clinic. This influencer with a large following, normalised several questionable views about health and wellness. Nadiya observed that the online community discourse in Qatar was increasingly leaning towards anti-vaccine sentiments after this influencer gained popularity. This example and insight aligns with the findings of studies around misinformation and social media conducted in Qatar (Al-Rawi et al., 2022; Galal and Auter, 2023). It illustrates how Insta-Trainers can amplify misinformation, posing a significant challenge to heavily funded public health efforts, like those cited in the QNV 2030.

Nadiya's initial response to the Insta-Trainer content she consumed was purchasing a meal plan from Diet Market, a popular restaurant and diet food delivery service in Qatar, during the first Ramadan of the 2020 lockdown. Influenced by Instagram advertising that emphasised the convenience of maintaining health, losing weight, and avoiding the hassle of cooking while fasting, she opted for a Western-influenced diet over traditional foods already being prepared at home, indicating the ways in which influencers can sway personal choices towards seemingly healthier

options, even during culturally significant periods. Additionally, the promotion of fat-phobic memes and body-shaming content by Insta-Trainers influenced her decision, further intensifying her trauma. She explained that terms like ‘COVID-fat’ were used to stigmatise weight gained during the pandemic, which aimed to shame individuals and contributed to a negative body image. Nadiya’s responses to Insta-Trainers indicate that the use of harmful and stigmatising terminology on the platform is predominantly targeted towards women, thereby perpetuating body shaming and reinforcing gendered expectations around appearance (such as the negative connotation surrounding the term baby-fat). The act of marketing and selling solutions to these illustrates "problems" on Instagram are overwhelmingly directed at women to capitalise on their insecurities (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Petter, 2017; Laham, 2020).

This set of practices not only perpetuates harmful body image ideals but also exploits followers’ vulnerabilities for commercial gain. As Heyes (2007) argues, the commodification of self-improvement and body image can lead to the internalisation of neoliberal ideals, further embedding gendered expectations and societal pressures on women. This is problematic because it fosters a toxic culture where women’s sense of self-worth is heavily tied to their physical appearance (Petter, 2017; Laham, 2020). The barrage of body-shaming messages on Instagram can generate severe mental health issues among followers, such as anxiety, depression, and eating disorders; 31 of the survey respondents confirmed such experiences. Moreover, by predominantly targeting women with these ‘solutions’, the influencer industry not only reinforces harmful gender norms but also perpetuates a cycle of dependency on consumerist solutions for self-worth and validation. This phenomenon, described by Laham (2020), as ‘compensatory consumption’, involves individuals purchasing products to overcome feelings of inadequacy, thereby maintaining a perpetual cycle of dissatisfaction and further consumption (p. 34). This targeting undermines feminist efforts to foster values based on body positivity and self-acceptance rather than physical appearance.

Moreover, Nadiya observed that influencers promoted clinics and medical interventions to address problems that they claimed were caused by COVID-19, using rhetoric such as: “Get rid of fat from food consumed during lockdown.” She believed that “[Insta-Trainers] essentially lead their followers on a wild goose chase” for health and wellbeing. Insta-Trainers in Qatar promoted body-altering clinics and surgeries post-pandemic, which contradicted their previous endorsements of restaurants and food reviews during lockdown. It was during this time, as restrictions were easing, that I pinpointed the beginning of a shift in users’ attitudes and consumption patterns. Insta-

Trainers' extensive advertisements coincided with users' scrolling fatigue, which made them more alert to and critical of the information and products being advertised. This growing critical awareness is exemplified by Hajar's remark in the survey: "I don't think most influencers are honest in their feedback as their main priority is to make profit first at the expense of their followers". Such growing scepticism suggests that the women in my study became aware that Insta-Trainers' economic incentives took precedence over the sincere concern for their followers' well-being. The platform's tactics align with the broader neoliberal trend of commodifying health in the influencer industry, further revealing the need for greater social accountability and the calling out of misinformation by Insta-Trainers. As Miznah succinctly put it, "Would [influencers] review [products] if they weren't getting paid? Nope".

Lulu expressed doubt towards immune-boosting products, such as the immune booster bread offered by Société, immediately recognising them as advertisements rather than genuine preventative health solutions. Despite this awareness, she still participated in panic-buying by purchasing items advertised by Insta-Trainers such as a phone sanitising machine—of which she bought three but never used. This demonstrates user-disjuncture, signified by a disconnect between user awareness and actions. In an act of resistance, however, Lulu attempted to manipulate the algorithms by responding with incorrect answers to various sponsored posts and by following random influencers mainly for entertainment and to 'hack' the multi-algorithmic functionalities of social media platforms. This behaviour reflects Cotter's (2018) analysis of how influencers play the 'visibility game' by leveraging algorithmic preferences to gain visibility, while users, like Lulu, attempt to subvert these systems. This level of understanding and manipulation of social media algorithms can significantly affect content reach and engagement, which Lulu tried to exploit by engaging with social media in unconventional ways (Shearer and Larsen, 2022).

Nonetheless, Lulu noted that influencers often augmented her desire for unnecessary items and promoted unrealistic lifestyles. In the interview, she said that her screen time on Instagram averaged 2.5 hours a day, concluding that "the more time you spend, the more you realise influencers' bullshit". Lulu's insights further reflect a growing scepticism, scrolling fatigue, and critical awareness among users who gradually recognised that "information shared during COVID-19 was shared because influencers were paid to share it", and not because they came from genuine concern for the followers, which Miznah echoed. This case illustrates conflicting user tensions of both user-disjuncture and active user resistance. Despite Lulu's awareness of the manipulative

nature of influencer promotions, she still engaged in behaviours that were influenced by them. Yet, at the same time, she actively resisted such pressure by attempting to disrupt the algorithms by viewing influencer content primarily for entertainment rather than as well-informed advice.

In a follow-up interview in 2024, Lulu shared that the pressures she felt during the COVID-19 pandemic to buy products recommended by influencers still lingered, despite her awareness that she did not truly need them. She noted that her social media usage had continued to increase since the pandemic, with her preference for screen-based interactions over face-to-face communication becoming more pronounced. Lulu has remained active on TikTok, particularly enjoying the creation of trend-based videos, and still frequently uses Instagram's Saved Folders to organise travel plans and shopping. However, she remains sceptical about health-related content on social media, citing concerns over the influence of surgeries and weight-loss drugs like Monjaro in shaping influencers' posts.

After spending more time online and experiencing scrolling fatigue, Ghaya decided to “unfollow any account that posted even one triggering or toxic post” in response to fatphobic memes and misinformation on the platform. She mentioned a popular Insta-Trainer based in Kuwait who promoted various diets, such as Vegan and Keto, along with hastily designed fitness programmes during the first lockdown phase for financial gain. Initially, Ghaya would have followed this influencer's methods but, as she spent more time online—averaging five hours on Instagram daily, with a peak of nine hours in one day—she found it suspicious that he did not follow any of the diets he promoted, prompting her to question his credibility. During a period when people were constantly fearful of gaining weight, such behaviour can be considered a health scam, as it involved promoting untested and unverified methods. Her scepticism extended to questioning the credibility and efficacy of diet plans and fitness programmes, reflecting a broader distrust of influencer-promoted health advice, which is also evident in Maysa, Lulu, Dalia, and Miznah. Ghaya also highlighted that even online streaming exercise classes lacked proper guidance, leading to injuries among participants (see Chapters 6 and 7 for Tala and Faten's experiences). This indeed indicates the potential harm of unverified health content on content consumers.

The promotion of health practices and information by Insta-Trainers has been found to fill the void left by public health provisions (Zdru, 2024). With reduced access to reliable, in-person healthcare professionals and facilities during the lockdowns, the survey respondents and residents of Qatar were more likely to turn to these unverified online sources for health advice, increasing the risks

and harms associated with misinformation and commercial exploitation (Biswas et al., 2022; Al-Rawi et al., 2023). Nearly half of the respondents in a recent study on public health information, 47%, indicated that social media is their main source of health information (Zdru, 2024). While Insta-Trainers can encourage healthy behaviours, their lack of expertise can lead to the spread of misinformation and harm, making it essential for social media platforms to implement stricter regulations and fact-checking measures unaffected by the core business model of the application.

Due to issues like these, Ghaya mentioned that she unfollowed certain influencers whose content was “bluntly consumer-driven”, criticising those promoting natural remedies and diet practices without basic scientific or cultural knowledge of what they are endorsing. This highlights the cultural appropriation of traditional medical remedies and cultural foods and recipes for commercial gain, which undermines their cultural significance and raises ethical concerns about authenticity and safety (Sikka, 2017). This behaviour exemplifies the broader neoliberal trend of commodifying almost every aspect of life, including health and wellness, often at the expense of cultural integrity and consumer safety. Realising that Insta-Trainers were promoting untested products and methods, Ghaya identified these practices as health scams, highlighting the ethical issues of commodification and profit-driven advertising of unverified content during vulnerable times, but user resistance exposes the limitations of these tactics.

The insights offered by my participants in response to Instagram’s algorithmically steered marketing practices illustrate a significant shift in user behaviour from susceptibility towards more mindful and critical consumption of social media content. User moves towards more informed and independent health choices reflect a growing awakening, characterised as a mode of platform resistance to the superficial and often misleading health and wellness advice promoted by Insta-Trainers. The period during which I pinpointed user resistance showed changes in user consumption patterns resulting from their awareness of the untrustworthy nature of influencer content. This revealed a significant trend, with all the interviewees and several survey respondents noting that they engaged in a mass unfollowing of Insta-Trainers. This mass unfollowing is significant as it represents users’ collective shift towards critical media consumption and a rejection of misleading and untrustworthy content. In the act of unfollowing Insta-Trainers who promote unrealistic lifestyles and unwarranted products, users in Qatar are taking active steps to reclaim their online spaces and mental well-being. This behaviour reduces exposure to manipulative marketing tactics, transforming the act of unfollowing into a form of digital resistance. It empowers

users to curate content that aligns more closely with positive values and realistic standards. As Faten mentioned in the survey, “I started following certain people to get the content I want”—a statement that encapsulates how the women in this study feel: more awake, alert, and ready to resist on Instagram.

#### **9.4. Conclusion**

This chapter has critically examined the heightened role of Insta-Training functionalities during the COVID-19 pandemic, demonstrating how influencers and algorithmic platforms shaped young Qatari women’s perceptions of health, wellness, and beauty at a time of increased digital dependency. During this period, Instagram amplified emotionally charged and visually compelling content over credible health information, perpetuating misinformation and reinforcing fatphobic, body-shaming narratives. Influencers capitalised on heightened health anxieties by promoting diet plans, fitness routines, and health supplements—practices that commodified wellness under the guise of empowerment and often led to harmful mental and physical outcomes.

While some participants embraced healthier habits and exercise routines, others reported increased anxiety, depression, and disordered eating, stemming from the pressure to conform to idealised body images and unattainable wellness standards. These pressures intensified during culturally significant times such as Ramadan, where traditional foods and practices were displaced by Western wellness ideals, signalling a shift that undermined cultural authenticity and reinforced gendered expectations of self-presentation and discipline. The association of access to elite health products and services with privilege further exposed socio-economic disparities embedded within influencer culture.

The convergence of postfeminist ideals, neoliberal consumerism, and algorithmic amplification positioned Insta-Trainers as both role models and agents of docility. Their curated portrayals of health and success often aligned with the commodification of personal wellbeing, transforming empowerment into a marketable aesthetic and fostering self-surveillance among followers. As participants became more aware of how algorithms promoted content for profit, many began resisting these dynamics through digitally subversive behaviours—unfollowing influencers, seeking more diverse content, and engaging in critical content consumption. These actions reflect an emerging wave of reflexivity and resistance in the post-pandemic digital landscape.

Importantly, this chapter reveals a shift in user agency. While user-disjuncture remains present, with some participants still navigating internal contradictions between awareness and action, others demonstrate a clear move toward reclaiming their mental wellbeing and digital spaces. The post-pandemic period has ushered in a more critical form of media engagement among young Qatari women, marked by growing resistance to manipulative influencer marketing, neoliberal health messaging, and algorithmic pressure. This evolving reflexivity not only challenges dominant discourses but also reconfigures how health, identity, and empowerment are negotiated within digital environments shaped by global capitalism and local cultural values.

## Chapter 10. Conclusion

### 10.1 Recap and RQs

This thesis has examined the significant role that Instagram plays in shaping and actively training its users through the content it delivers, focusing on the themes of health, diet, beauty, and wellbeing. Central to my study is the concept of the Insta-Trainer, which to put it simply, describes software and hardware used to instantly train users. This concept can be applied broadly, encompassing modern interactive technologies—such as social media platforms and digital wearable devices—that train users by inscribing political, economic, and social relations of power, leading to the adoption of neoliberal self-disciplinary and self-monitoring behaviours, often at a subconscious level (the user disjuncture, see Chapter 4 or subsection 10.2.2 in this Chapter).

My research on the use of Instagram by young Qatari women reveals how the platform functions as an Insta-Trainer, an ecosystem where its multi-algorithmic capabilities—referred to as Insta-functionalities—train individuals in making health, wellness, and lifestyle choices. These Insta-functionalities are embedded in various features of the platform, such as content recommendation algorithms, notifications, and interaction prompts, all of which collectively shape user behaviour. Similarly, applications on smartphones and wearable devices, which possess Insta-Training functionality features, can also be considered part of this Insta-Trainer ecosystem.

While the term ‘Insta-Trainer’ might initially seem to refer to an individual, it actually characterises a broader set of algorithmic processes that independently guide and steer users’ training practices. Within this ecosystem, influencers on Instagram play a crucial role as agents of Insta-Training functionalities. These influencers, by systematically curating and delivering content, act as Insta-Trainers themselves, shaping user behaviour, perceptions, and decision-making processes. Furthermore, the concept of Insta-Trainer extends beyond individual influencers to encompass various social media profiles, including those of brands, governmental entities, and businesses. These profiles leverage Insta-functionalities to promote content aligned with specific ideologies and objectives, thereby contributing to the overarching Insta-Trainer ecosystem. I discuss these dynamics further as I address the research questions in the following chapters.

I began this longitudinal study in September 2019, gathering data across multiple years—2021, 2022, and 2023—with follow-up interactions with some participants in 2024. Although initially

planned as a four-year study, the timeline extended to five years due to several interruptions. These included the global COVID-19 pandemic, two maternity leaves, marriage, and moving between apartments, houses, and countries. These life events, while challenging, also enriched my study by providing deeper insights into the evolving context of Instagram's influence while giving me time to observe and reflect on between the data collection phases, analysis periods, and the writing of my work.

This concluding chapter draws on the research findings of the study and analysis to offer a reflection on the implications of Insta-Trainer as a concept and set of technological procedures that guide user practices, to assess its wider cultural and social impacts. In this chapter, I summarise how the research questions were addressed, highlight the key contributions to knowledge of this research, and discuss the limitations and potential directions for future research. Here are the research questions is followed by a summary of how the core chapters answer each one:

- RQ1: What specific role do Insta-Training functionalities play in the lives of young women from the Arab Gulf state of Qatar?
- RQ2: What is the nature of the lifestyle, diet, and health-related decisions and practices that young women from Qatar make are making? by consuming Insta-Training content? How are these practices productive and/or problematic?
- RQ3: What is the impact of the above on culture, tradition, and identity/individuality?
- RQ4: Is there a significant correlation between the time spent engaging with Insta-Trainer content and time dedicated to physical and mental self-care?

For **RQ1**, in Chapters 6, 7, 8, and 9, I examine the role that Insta-Training functionalities play in the lives of young Qatari women. Chapter 6 on Curated Digital Manuals Part I, illustrates how Insta-Trainers are perceived by and guide users as mentors, instructors, and friends by promoting Western standards of health and beauty. I also explore the role of User-Curated Digital Manuals (UCDMs), showing how extensive engagement with these CDMs often incites users to internalise certain normalised values and standards of conduct. I have argued that the promotion of these values and standards can limit personal autonomy and contribute to the development of compliant individuals, or docile subjects. Building on this argument in Chapter 7: Curated Digital Manuals Part II, I examine how the Algorithmically Curated Digital Manuals (ACDMs) and Pre-Curated

Digital Manuals (PCDMs) curated by influencers further entrench these values and standards through personalised content. These manuals foster a mindset of technological solutionism that frames users' daily lives, particularly around diet, fitness, and wellness. The findings in Chapters 6 and 7 also demonstrate how the different categories of CDMs are interconnected. I developed an analytical toolkit from these findings, a mechanism of data analysis I explore in greater detail in the subsection on CDMs.

In Chapter 8 which addresses *The Digitalities of Good Health*, I extend the discussion by examining how Insta-Training functionalities perform as life tools that promote postfeminist and neoliberal ideals for citizenship projects. This chapter focuses on how these ideals are reinforced by government initiatives and Instagram's algorithms to shape users' individual behaviours and wider societal norms. The self-surveillance and individual responsibility for health and beauty promoted by Instagram aligns with neoliberal ideals, while the platform's emphasis on empowerment through consumer choices reflects postfeminist narratives. And finally, in Chapter 9: *The New Wave of Content Consumption*, I explain how, during the COVID-19 pandemic, Insta-Training functionalities such as algorithmic amplification shaped and prioritised visually appealing content over more robust and trustworthy health advice, thereby shaping health perceptions and behaviours during a period of heightened vulnerability by prioritising visually appealing content over scientifically sound health advice, thereby. Across all the core chapters, I conclude that women in Qatar are being 'Insta-Trained,' instantly trained, by these functionalities that is to say: Insta-Trainers and Insta-Training functionalities play a prominent and intrusive role in multiple aspects of Qatari women's daily lives, extending beyond health, beauty, and wellness.

Furthermore, an examination of how Insta-Training content influences the lifestyle, diet, and health-related decisions of young Qatari women involve both productive and problematic aspects, as revealed throughout the core chapters. In addressing **RQ2**, I begin in Chapter 6 by detailing the nature of the decisions made by Qatari women, which are influenced by Insta-Trainers. The platform content that often aligns with the normalised standards promoted through CDMs are saved, managed, and referenced through UCDMs. While this alignment can generate positive self-improvement among users, it can also result in negative outcomes due to societal pressures. In Chapter 7, I introduce a further complexity by acknowledging that, although ACDMs and PCDMs offer users beneficial bio-pedagogical practices, they also reinforce unrealistic and culturally biased standards among users. These standards can impose significant psychological and physical strain

on users, particularly due to algorithmic interference and design, which, as established in Chapter 3 and 7, are inherently biased. This bias is characterised by a systematic privileging of Western-centric ideals and the marginalisation of local cultural practices, as the algorithms perpetuate content that aligns with profit-driven objectives, often at the expense of cultural diversity and individual autonomy.

I continue to explore this duality in answering **RQ2** through Chapter 8, by demonstrating how Insta-Training content encourages active health management among users while simultaneously setting unattainable standards that may lead to problematic behaviours. In Chapter 9's examination of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, I reveal how the commodification of health negatively affected individual users, and explained that this process can lead individuals, such as those whom I interviewed, to mental and physical outcomes such as anxiety, depression, and disordered eating. And even though some users noted that they adopted healthier practices, they still faced these negative emotions due to the content that they interacted with. Collectively, the core chapters answer **RQ2** by illustrating that the lifestyle, diet, and health-related decisions of young Qatari women were shaped by Insta-Training content. The data sets show a combination of productive and problematic practices among users who are/were heavily influenced by societal and algorithmic pressures.

Moreover, the impact of Insta-Training content on the culture, traditions, and identities of young Qatari women has been both complex and overwhelming—not just for the users, but also for me as a researcher. As I described in Chapter 1, The Introduction, as part of this community I found the research process deeply personal and challenging. One example that I found challenging is in relation to Mahra's experience. She described undergoing multiple aesthetic procedures to resemble the ethnic features of the women featured in various CDMs. This deeply troubling example demonstrates the powerful and problematic influence that Insta-Training can have on users' identities, particularly regarding self-perception within a cultural and ethnic context.

In addressing this specific question **RQ3**, I explore how engagement with Insta-Trainers often shifts cultural, traditional, and self-perceptions. For instance, traditional regional foods are increasingly viewed as 'bad,' as in unhealthy or fatty, while Western foods are perceived as 'good,' as in desirable or healthier, among the participants. This shift, along with the platform incentives towards self-transformations, reflects a deeper platform influence on users' cultural identities,

norms, and practices. In Chapter 7, I delve further into these concerns by analysing how ACDMs and PCDMs marginalise traditional norms and cultural values by promoting Western ideals, often rooted in colonial histories. These biased algorithmic functionalities can homogenise identities, eroding cultural diversity in favour of a more uniform, Western-centric standard.

Building on this theme, Chapter 8 explains how Insta-Training reinforces gendered expectations. The chapter describes how the individual responsibility and normative standards promoted by the platform often align with traditional gendered practices such as guiding women's gendered management and monitoring of their health and that of other women around them through intensive mothering or sistering practices). Further, within Chapter 9, I explain how the platform encouraged users to adopt Western-influenced diets and health practices during culturally significant times, such as Ramadan, further eroded cultural integrity and intensified societal pressures. This tendency was particularly evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, a period during which users were isolated and susceptible to platform suggestions.

Collectively, the core chapters demonstrate that Insta-Training content profoundly influences the cultural, traditional, and individual identities, values, habits, and norms of young Qatari women. This influence often encourages users to shift away from local values by embracing more globalised, Western ideals that, in turn, reshape their sense of self and community. As both a researcher and a member of this community, grappling with these findings has been particularly challenging, especially in the context of self-perception, cultural, and ethnic identity. The pervasive influence of Instagram content, underpinned by postfeminist and neoliberal ideologies, reflects a broader trend of colonial capitalism, where Western ideals are commodified and exported globally. This connection underscores how capitalism, intertwined with post-feminism and neoliberalism, promotes a homogenised identity that often comes at the expense of local traditions and cultural diversity.

Finally, in answering **RQ4**, Chapters 6 to 9 collectively shed light on the intricate relationship between young Qatari women users' heavy engagement with Insta-Trainer content and their self-care practices. In Chapter 6, I identify a strong correlation between the time users spend interacting with Insta-Trainer content and their behavioural changes, noting that prolonged user engagement often leads to self-transformative practices. Chapter 7 reinforces this by demonstrating how ACDMs and PCDMs encourage participants' adherence to structured wellness routines, even

though these routines can sometimes perpetuate unrealistic standards and problematic outcomes. Chapter 8 acknowledges the dual nature of this tension, where increased user engagement fosters both positive habits and harmful social pressures. However, this duality is not clear-cut since even with positive physical health outcomes came negative ones also. Chapter 9 focuses on the negative mental health impacts for users of the platform during the COVID-19 pandemic, a period when constant exposure to idealised body images and unverified health advice led to scrolling fatigue among users and their growing resistance to manipulative marketing tactics.

Despite these challenges, platform users have begun to reclaim their mental well-being and adopt more critical approaches to media consumption, as evidenced by a widespread unfollowing of Insta-Training profiles among the participants. This trend of mass unfollowing, noted in all the interviews, is highlighted as a significant finding within Chapter 9. Participants reported unfollowing content that negatively impacted their mental and physical health, illustrating a growing awareness and resistance to harmful online influences. The core chapters collectively address RQ4 by demonstrating a strong correlation between the time users spend engaging with Insta-Trainer content and their commitment to physical and mental self-care. This reveals the dual impact of digital engagement, which can both positively and negatively influence users' well-being and adherence to traditional norms.

These tendencies are further illustrated by the diverse levels of online engagement observed among participants during follow-up interactions. Some participants maintained a limited online presence, while others described themselves as constantly or 'chronically' online. Additionally, some felt more comfortable communicating and engaging with the wider world from behind a screen rather than in person interactions. Regardless of the amount of time spent online, all participants confirmed that their self-monitoring and self-management practices were influenced by the content they consumed, highlighting the pervasive impact of digital media on their daily lives.

### ***10.1.1 Sections Outline***

This chapter, like the ones that follow, is organised into sections to provide a comprehensive conclusion to my research:

- **Section 10.1 Recap and Research Questions:** In this initial section, I revisit the primary research questions that guided my study. I summarise how each research question was

addressed in the core chapters (6 to 9), emphasising the connections between my findings and the broader cultural and social impacts of Instagram on young Qatari women. Within this section, there is a subsection titled **10.1.2 Statistical Findings at a Glance**, where I present key statistical findings from my study. This offers a quantitative overview of participants' engagement with Instagram and its influence on their behaviours and perceptions. The statistical snapshot reinforces the insights from the recap and sets the stage for the discussion on contributions and limitations that follows.

- **10.2 Contributions and Future Works:** This section is divided into four subsections. Here, I outline the main conceptual contributions of my thesis and discuss their potential to inform future research and contribute to ongoing discussions in the field. The contributions include the development of the **Insta-Trainer framework**, the identification of **User Disjuncture** as a critical component, the introduction of **Curated Digital Manuals (CDMs)** as a toolkit for digital analysis, and the concept of the **Algorithmic Wardrobe**—a concept I discovered in my exploration of self-management and health in Chapter 8, which I plan to develop further in future work.
- **10.3 Limitations and Reflection:** In this final section, I address the limitations and challenges I encountered during the research process, including those posed by the COVID-19 pandemic and the transition to manual coding methods. I also reflect on the limitations of the conceptual frameworks and tools I developed, acknowledging the need for further testing and refinement in different contexts. This section concludes with a short subsection titled **10.3.2 Closing Remarks**, where I offer personal reflections and suggest potential avenues for future research.

### ***10.1.2 Statistical Findings at a Glance (2021)***

The statistical findings of my study, based on the responses of 41 participants, offer significant insights into how Insta-Training functionalities influence consumption and behavioural patterns, particularly among young Qatari women. A considerable portion of respondents reported positive experiences and learning outcomes from Instagram, with **73.17%** finding the content helpful and informative, and **70.73%** gaining knowledge from Insta-Trainers and other content on the platform. These findings suggest that Instagram functions as a bio-pedagogical tool, where content not only educates but also shapes users' behaviours and self-perceptions. This aligns users with specific

health, wellness, and lifestyle norms, indicating that the platform plays a significant role in the biopolitical regulation of users, subtly guiding them towards certain prescribed ideals.

Instagram's commercial influence was also notable, with **82.93%** of respondents influenced to make purchases based on content they encountered on the platform. This highlights Instagram's operation within a neoliberal and capitalist framework, where consumerism is heavily promoted through Insta-Training functionalities. The platform associates individual identity to consumption patterns, commodifying personal identity and reinforcing a market-driven self-concept. The significant commercial influence stresses how Instagram facilitates a consumer-oriented self-image, where purchasing behaviour is often equated with self-improvement and empowerment.

However, the pressures associated with this consumer-driven model are evident, as **75.61%** of respondents felt compelled to conform to certain appearance standards, with an equal percentage reporting negative experiences from the content they consumed. This reflects the inherent tensions within neoliberalism, where the pursuit of an idealised self—often dictated by market-driven standards—can lead to dissatisfaction and the commodification of personal identity. The pressure to conform to specific beauty and lifestyle ideals suggests that Instagram reinforces narrow standards of social acceptability, which can negatively impact self-perception and mental health.

The influence of Instagram on physical activity and health management was also significant, with **68.29%** of users engaging in exercise 3 to 7 days a week, and **70.73%** altering their diet based on Instagram content. Additionally, **41.46%** of respondents followed specific health and wellness trends promoted on the platform. These statistics indicate that Instagram fosters docile subjectivity, as users internalise and conform to the platform's prescribed behaviours and norms. The high levels of engagement with exercise and diet content suggest that Instagram acts as a digital disciplinarian, encouraging users to regulate their bodies in accordance with the platform's health and wellness narratives.

Trust in Instagram and Insta-Trainers was notably low, with only **19.51%** of respondents expressing trust in the platform's functionalities and Insta-Trainer profiles, while **60.98%** expressed distrust. This distrust highlights a paradox in user behaviour: despite their scepticism, many users continue to engage with the platform's content. The low levels of trust, coupled with continued engagement, embody the concept of user disjuncture, where users are critically aware of the platform's manipulative potential but still rely on it for guidance. This complex relationship

between agency and scepticism reflects the conflicted nature of user engagement within the Insta-Training ecosystem (see section 10.2.2 on the User-Disjuncture).

Unprompted observations from the open-ended questions revealed additional layers of user engagement. For example, **14.63%** of respondents expressed concerns about algorithms, **17.07%** noted pandemic-related content, and **14.63%** engaged with parenting and children-related topics. These observations indicate that users are not only aware of the broader implications of algorithmic influence but are also actively engaging with content that reflects their immediate social environments and responsibilities. The engagement with parenting content, in particular, led me to explore the concept of intensive mothering and family management within the context of Insta-Training functionalities, showing that Instagram's influence extends beyond individual health and wellness to encompass broader social roles.

Finally, **19.51%** of respondents mentioned using *Sugar Bear Hair* gummy supplements as a response to long-COVID, exemplifying how a health and beauty trend can be promoted to address specific concerns. On one hand, this indicates that users are taking an active role in managing their health and beauty, demonstrating a form of agency. On the other hand, the act of purchasing these supplements also reflects a desire to conform to prevailing beauty standards, even at a significant financial cost. The widespread participation in this costly trend highlights the powerful influence of Insta-Training functionalities, which drive users to adopt practices that align with the platform's commodified ideals.

## **10.2 Contributions and Future Works**

### ***10.2.1 Insta-Trainer: A Conceptual Framework***

The Insta-Trainer concept was developed as a framework to offer a comprehensive and innovative approach to understanding the role of digital technologies—particularly social media platforms, self-management applications, and wearable devices—in shaping user behaviour, identity, and societal norms. Central to this framework are the Insta-functionalities or multi-algorithmic functionalities, which are critical components. These functionalities include the algorithmic processes and features that curate, personalise, and deliver content, driving mechanisms such as Curated Digital Manuals (CDMs) and frameworks like the Algorithmic Wardrobe that influence user behaviours and identities.

The Insta-Trainer concept encompasses various elements that collectively explain how digital technologies shape user behaviour, identity, and societal norms. A key component of this concept is User-Disjuncture, which refers to the disconnect between users' critical awareness and their actions on social media platforms. This disjuncture highlights the complexities of user engagement, demonstrating that individuals may recognise the manipulative aspects of digital content yet continue to engage with it.

Complementing this, the concept of Insta-Trainers also introduces CDMs, which function as the primary tools or mechanisms of analysis within the Insta-Trainer framework. CDMs are the curated content delivered to users, shaping their behaviours and reinforcing the standards promoted by the platform. These manuals are further categorised into ACDMs, which are personalised through algorithmic predictions; PCDMs, which are pre-packaged by influencers or brands; and UCDMs, through which users themselves curate and manage content (both User-Disjuncture and CDMs will be explored in greater detail below). Together, these analytical components and tools provide a comprehensive understanding of how the Insta-Trainer concept operates as a whole, influencing user behaviour in both overt and subtle ways.

A key strength of the Insta-Trainer concept is its broad applicability across various forms of technology. The relevance of this conceptual framework are as follows: first, it extends beyond the traditional focus on individual influencers to include an analysis of the software, hardware, and digital devices that steer users' engagement with platforms. This aligns with scholarship that recognises these technologies as active agents capable of instantly 'training' users anytime and anywhere. Thus, by broadening the scope of analysis within social media studies, the notion of Insta-Trainers employed in this thesis allows for a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of how digital environments influence user behaviour.

Second, the Insta-Trainer concept provides a critical lens through which to examine the intersection of technology and behaviour, applicable beyond the realm of health and well-being: this was done by assessing the role of platforms' technological functionalities in shaping users' behaviours, this concept enabled me to identify and explain how multi-algorithmic functionalities guide decisions related to health, wellness, and lifestyle. Moreover, this framework illuminates how social media platforms promote neoliberal self-disciplinary values and self-monitoring behaviours among users. While particularly relevant to discussions of neoliberalism and post-feminism, the Insta-Trainer

concept is not limited to these frameworks. Throughout my thesis, I have demonstrated its applicability across a range of theoretical perspectives, including Foucauldian notions of biopower and governmentality, McLuhan's technological determinism, and critiques of black-boxed algorithms.

Third, the Insta-Trainer framework provides valuable insights into the formation of cultural identity, norms, and practices, particularly within specific socio-cultural contexts such as Qatar: by extending the analysis beyond the individual to consider the broader technological and cultural forces at play, this concept offers a comprehensive approach to understanding how online consumption patterns are shaped. It highlights the strategic and systemic influence of platforms, algorithms, and digital devices on individuals' values, social norms, and behaviour. The use of the Insta-Trainer concept in dissecting complex algorithms that intersect with digital consumption confirms its value as a versatile tool for analysing how social media platforms and digital technologies influence and regulate behaviours, identities, and societal norms across various contexts, educational backgrounds, and cultures. This approach advances understanding of the intersecting global and local dynamics that shape online behaviour through offering a critical perspective on how digital content acts as a form of training that instils specific behaviours and ideologies.

Fourth, the Insta-Trainer concept has significant implications for policy and practice: by understanding how platforms like Instagram function as Insta-Trainers, this framework can guide and inform policies aimed at mitigating the negative impacts of social media, such as promoting digital literacy and critical consumption. The concept's relevance extends beyond social media studies to include fields such as digital humanities, cultural studies, public health, and media psychology, making it a versatile and robust tool for interdisciplinary research. Through the Insta-Trainer concept, I have positively contributed to scholarly discussions on the role of social media in shaping contemporary behaviours and identities, contributing to a deeper understanding of the pervasive influence of digital technologies in our lives.

Finally, the Insta-Trainer concept can effectively support, add to, and expand upon existing scholarship by notable researchers such as Abidin (2015; 2016a; 2016b; 2017; Abidin and Gwynne, 2017; 2020), Gill (2007; 2017; 2023a; 2023b; Gill and Elias, 2015; Elias and Gill, 2018; Elias et

al., 2017), Duffy (2017; Duffy and Hund, 2019), Banet-Weiser (2012; 2013; 2017; 2018), and boyd (2014).

Abidin's work on influencer culture and visibility labour aligns closely with the Insta-Trainer framework, particularly her exploration of how influencers curate their online personas to train and influence followers (Abidin, 2016a, 2016b). The concept can broaden this focus by extending the inquiry to how technologies themselves—through multi-algorithmic functionalities—act as trainers. This approach complements Duffy's examination of gendered visibility and aspirational labour on social media, where users are encouraged to self-monitor and embody neoliberal ideals (Duffy, 2017; Duffy and Hund, 2019). The Insta-Trainer concept adds depth to these discussions by highlighting how features like Curated Digital Manuals (CDMs) embedded within Instagram instil these self-disciplinary practices into users' daily routines, often under the guise of empowerment and authenticity.

The concept also aligns with the work of Gill and Elias on neoliberalism and post-feminism, particularly their analyses of beauty surveillance and aesthetic labour (Elias and Gill, 2018; Elias et al., 2017; Gill, 2023a). The Insta-Trainer theoretical framework extends these ideas by examining how the 'training' function of Instagram (and other digital technologies) operates to distribute and enforce the neoliberal and postfeminist ideals that shape users' identities and behaviours. Moreover, Banet-Weiser's research on the intersection of empowerment and commercialism is echoed in the Insta-Trainer concept, which explains how Instagram functions as both a platform for empowerment and a site of commodification (Banet-Weiser, 2012, 2018). The technological dimension added by the Insta-Trainer framework demonstrates how Instagram's algorithms and functionalities reinforce postfeminist ideals, such as the pursuit of the "perfect body," perpetuating commercialised and often unattainable standards (Gill, 2023a).

Finally, this concept also resonates with boyd's insights into youth engagement and identity construction on social media (boyd, 2014; Marwick and boyd, 2014). While boyd's work primarily focuses on how youth navigate and construct their identities online, the Insta-Trainer concept can extend her analysis by showing how social media platforms actively 'train' young users by embedding specific ideologies and behaviours into their lives. Through this lens, the Insta-Trainer concept not only aligns with but also significantly extends the existing research literature, offering

a rigorous framework for future research in online behavioural patterns and social media's cultural impact.

### ***10.2.2 User-Disjuncture: A Critical Component***

The concept of User-Disjuncture, developed from a key finding in my study, is a critical component of the overall Insta-Trainer framework and represents a significant contribution to the fields of digital media and behavioural studies. This concept offers a nuanced understanding of how users engage with online content, particularly in environments shaped by complex algorithmic functionalities and influencer dynamics. User-Disjuncture captures the disconnect between users' levels of media literacy, education, and knowledge, and the powerful influence that Instagram's Insta-training functionalities and Insta-Trainers exert on their actions and thoughts. This disjuncture highlights a critical gap between users' awareness and their behaviours, which often do not align with their actual knowledge, values, or beliefs, as demonstrated in various examples throughout the core chapters.

The User-Disjuncture concept can be compared to similar ideas, such as the privacy paradox—where users express concerns about privacy yet engage in behaviours that compromise it (Barnes, 2006). However, User-Disjuncture expands the discussion beyond privacy to encompass broader behavioural contradictions in digital media engagement. While the privacy paradox focuses on the tension between valuing privacy and compromising it through online practices, User-Disjuncture illustrates how users can be aware of the manipulative potential of social media content yet still conform to the behaviours it promotes. This concept has allowed me to explore and explain how users navigate and negotiate their autonomy and agency in digital spaces, even when confronted with content that may conflict with their personal values or knowledge.

Second, I find that User-Disjuncture is valuable in revealing the complexity of user engagement, where contradictions in their choices and desires are not merely points of failure but indicators of active negotiation and critical reflection. As users interact with curated content, they often exhibit flexible behaviours, attitudes, and patterns, adjusting their responses based on a combination of external influences and internal reflections. This dynamic tension illustrates the role of user autonomy in digital environments and challenges simplistic models that portray users as passive recipients of content. Instead, it positions users as active participants in the digital landscape. This aligns with more sophisticated understandings of digital agency, as exemplified by scholars like

Marwick and boyd (2014), who explore how social media users manage their online identities and navigate the pressures of visibility and influence.

To conclude this subsection, the concept of User-Disjuncture serves as a significant theoretical tool in digital media and behavioural studies, providing valuable insights into the complexities of user engagement in algorithmically driven environments. This concept enables the exploration of adaptability and agency within digital media by highlighting the coexistence of contradictory behaviours and the active negotiation of content. It particularly shows how users modify their attitudes, habits, and norms in response to the shifting demands and influences of digital platforms. Overall, User-Disjuncture offers an innovative and valuable framework for advancing scholarly discussions on the interplay between technology, content, and user behaviour.

### ***10.2.3 Curated Digital Manuals: Toolkit for Digital Analysis***

Curated Digital Manuals (CDMs) are introduced in this thesis as a crucial toolkit for analysing user engagement on social media platforms, particularly within the broader Insta-Trainer framework. CDMs serve as interactive digital counterparts to traditional lifestyle, diet, and health manuals, providing researchers with a structured yet flexible approach to understanding how digital content is curated, prioritised, disseminated, and engaged with on platforms like Instagram. Categorised into User-Curated Digital Manuals (UCDMs), Algorithmically Curated Digital Manuals (ACDMs), and Pre-Curated Digital Manuals (PCDMs), each type offers unique insights into how users interact with and consume content online.

As a research tool, CDMs enable scholars to analyse how users engage with digital content to self-discipline, manage their health, and shape their identities, reflecting broader socio-political and economic forces. This adaptable toolkit facilitates a more organised and nuanced exploration of user behaviour, helping researchers identify patterns and trends in content consumption. Unlike static print manuals that provide a one-way flow of information, CDMs offer dynamic, interactive, and deeply personalised content. Users can tailor UCDMs and ACDMs through their online engagement and revisit content through PCDMs and UCDMs, creating a rich source of pre-collected data that is varied yet highly structured for analysis.

The interactivity of CDMs introduces dynamic and multilayered dimensions to the content, as users continually curate and engage with material that evolves with their interests and needs. The

categorisation of CDMs further enhances data organisation, allowing researchers to effectively track and analyse patterns of engagement. This structure enables clearer differentiation between user-driven interactions, algorithmically suggested content, and externally created manuals, providing insights into how each type contributes to the overall user experience. Those using CDMs as an analytical toolkit can choose to focus on one or a combination of two categories, as they are not co-dependent. However, using all three categories in an interconnected manner can offer a stronger analysis and help reduce bias.

Moreover, the non-linear nature of CDMs means that content evolves alongside user engagement. This evolution creates a layered dataset where researchers can observe shifts in user preferences over time, repeated engagement with content, and the influence of both personal choices and external algorithms. This dynamic interaction between user and content enriches the data, allowing scholars to explore the interconnectedness between the CDM categories. Thus, CDMs not only organise data more effectively but also introduce a depth of analysis that captures the complexities of digital consumption in a structured and adaptable manner.

The introduction of CDMs as an analytical toolkit makes a significant contribution to the field of digital media and behavioural studies. By offering a comprehensive framework for studying contemporary digital consumption and identity formation, CDMs build upon existing research, similar to the digital or modern *hupomnēmata* discussed by Cutter (2023)—see Chapters 3 and 6. This approach enhances and expands existing theories, providing a new lens through which to examine the influence of digital platforms. It introduces innovative and structured methods for understanding the impact of digital technologies on everyday practices, making CDMs a valuable addition to research on social media platforms and online engagement.

#### ***10.2.4 Algorithmic Wardrobe: A Conceptual Framework***

The Algorithmic Wardrobe, introduced in Chapter 8, explores the concept within the framework of feminine performativity, addressing issues such as cultural appropriation and inequality. However, its applications extend further, serving as a metaphorical online space and a modern digital iteration of the cultural phenomena Walter Benjamin critiqued in his discussions of the arcades and the decline of aura (Benjamin, 1969). Benjamin argued that the aura—the unique essence and authenticity of a work of art—diminishes when it is mass-produced and commodified. In today’s digital age, this critique is strikingly relevant as algorithmic trends on platforms like Instagram

similarly erode individuality and cultural richness, leading to cultural homogenisation (Schiller, 1976; Bij de Vaate et al., 2022).

Benjamin's analysis of the arcades—a precursor to modern shopping malls—highlighted how these spaces symbolised the commodification of culture, turning unique objects and experiences into mass-produced commodities. The arcades, much like today's digital platforms, were sites where consumer desires were shaped and manipulated, leading to the loss of the original, unique value of objects. Similarly, the Algorithmic Wardrobe represents a space where digital identities and personal expressions are commodified and homogenised through algorithmic curation.

Participant Ola's observation during our follow-up interaction highlights this modern form of homogenisation. She noted, *“Yes... It turns into a whole lifestyle aesthetic too, which I find super interesting. There is that feeling that individuality is also being erased... Everyone is doing the same thing at all times.”* Ola's insight reflects how ordinary behaviours and personal expressions are transformed into mass trends through social media marketing and algorithmic curation, mirroring the loss of aura Benjamin described.

Tala's experience further illustrates this phenomenon. During our follow-up interview, she admitted that she didn't remember some of the trends she had once followed. This forgetfulness shows how vast and ever-changing the wardrobe of trends has become, making it difficult for users to recall individual trends as they seamlessly move from one to the next. This behaviour is reminiscent of 'fast fashion,' where clothing items are quickly cycled in and out of style, often forgotten as soon as the next trend arrives.

Similarly, in the digital realm, trends are rapidly adopted and discarded, leaving little lasting impact on the user's identity, while contributing to broader cultural and environmental impacts. Moreover, Tala's practice of paying for each new trend highlights the classed nature of the digital wardrobe. Rather than purchasing physical clothes, users like Tala are buying into trends, each one serving as a tool for self-discipline and identity crafting. This behaviour reveals a shift from acquiring material goods to investing in temporary, yet commodified, digital identities.

Much like fast fashion, where the constant pursuit of the latest style comes at a financial, human, and environmental cost, the Algorithmic Wardrobe encourages a cycle of continuous consumption, where the value lies not in the lasting quality or significance of the trend, but in its immediate

appeal and social currency. The impact of this algorithmic curation is further evidenced by the statistic that 19% of participants were simultaneously taking the *Sugar Bear Hair* supplement, a trend heavily advertised through CDMs by Insta-Training functionalities and promoted by influencers, brands, and the company itself. The fact that such a significant portion of users adopted the same trend at roughly the same time demonstrates the powerful influence these curated manuals have on user behaviour, solidifying the concept of the Algorithmic Wardrobe as a digital space where trends are tried on and discarded, much like clothing in a physical wardrobe.

This modern version of Benjamin's arcades, facilitated by algorithmic curation and Insta-Training functionalities, perpetuates the same critiques Benjamin raised: the commodification of culture, the erosion of individuality, and the creation of a homogenised public. Just as Benjamin observed that mass production leads to the decline of the unique aura in art, we now witness how digital platforms contribute to cultural imperialism and the homogenisation of cultural practices and norms. These platforms create environments where personal authenticity declines as everyone begins to engage with the same trends, often unaware of the original, unique essence of their choices. The fact that users like Tala, Ola, and Mahra invest financially in these trends, not just to wear but to self-discipline and shape their identities, underscores how deeply ingrained this commodification has become in the digital age. The statistic regarding *Sugar Bear Hair* highlights the extent of this influence, showing how users are not merely following trends but are collectively adopting and internalising them, often at significant personal cost (Schiller, 1976; Bij de Vaate et al., 2022).

While the concept of the Algorithmic Wardrobe is not limited to Instagram alone, platforms like TikTok, which share similar features, can also be understood and analysed through this framework. The concept's applicability extends beyond these platforms to any that incorporate Insta-Training functionalities, making it a valuable framework for studying other and forthcoming platforms in relation to various aspects beyond health, diets, and lifestyles. I intend to advance this concept by expanding on this brief analysis in future work. Even though this brief analysis is not addressed in detail within the core chapters of this thesis, demonstrating its validity here highlights its significance and positions it as a key contribution within research in the field.

### **10.3 Limitations**

The discussion in this section is divided into two parts. The first part briefly discusses the limitations I encountered during the research process, which I have detailed extensively in Chapter

4, including delays and challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic and technical difficulties with NVivo, which ultimately led me to transition to manual coding methods. I will summarise these challenges here. The second part addresses the limitations resulting from multiple factors related to the conceptual frameworks, components, and analytical toolkits in this study.

### ***10.3.1 Research Process Limitations***

One of the most significant challenges was the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, which necessitated a shift to a semi-remote PhD journey. Originally, I had planned to conduct all research activities in person; however, the pandemic required a complete adaptation of the study to an online format. Although I initially viewed this shift as a limitation, it offered several unforeseen advantages, such as the ability to conduct virtual data collection through various platforms and programmes.

A major technical challenge I faced was related to the use of NVivo for data coding. NVivo was initially employed to organise and analyse the diverse types of data collected, providing a centralised platform for storing text, images, and audio. However, issues with licensing, software crashes, and accessibility—especially when traveling—hindered the efficiency of the coding process. These technical difficulties, combined with the need for a more hands-on approach, led me to revert to manual coding methods. While the shift from NVivo to manual coding was more time-consuming and labour-intensive, it allowed for greater flexibility and deeper engagement with the data. As detailed in Chapter 4, this manual approach, involving colourful highlighting pens, a coding legend, and Excel for systematic organisation, ultimately enhanced the depth and accuracy of my analysis. Despite the benefits of manual coding, the transition did introduce slight delays in the research timeline.

The manual coding method also presented challenges related to scalability and efficiency. Manual coding is time-consuming and labour-intensive, making it impractical for larger datasets or studies requiring extensive coding. Although the manual method facilitated a nuanced interpretation of the data, it also introduced the possibility of human error and inconsistencies, despite the rigorous double-checking procedures I implemented.

### ***10.3.2 Conceptual Framework Limitations***

Another limitation pertains to the customisation and adaptability of the concepts and tools of analysis employed in this study. The bespoke concepts, tools, and components developed—introduced earlier in the key contributions section—represent significant theoretical advancements. However, their novelty also presents a limitation. As these tools and concepts are being applied for the first time, their effectiveness has yet to be extensively tested across different contexts and studies. While they provide valuable insights within the specific framework of this research, they may require further refinement and adaptation to be broadly applicable. The initial success in this study does not guarantee that these tools will be equally effective in different cultural, social, or technological environments.

The highly customised nature of these tools means that they were specifically tailored to the unique characteristics of the research questions, thesis, and Instagram as a platform (although mirroring many of TikTok's functionalities). As such, their adaptability to other social media platforms or cultural contexts may be limited. Future research will need to test these tools in varied settings to determine their generalisability and explore how they might need to be adjusted or expanded to accommodate different user behaviours, content types, and social dynamics. The process of testing, revising, and potentially reconfiguring these tools is essential to establishing their broader utility and ensuring that they can serve as reliable instruments in the study of digital media and online behaviour. While the introduction of these bespoke tools in the earlier sections represents a key contribution to the field, the need for further validation and refinement also highlights their current limitations.

Finally, the temporal relevance of my findings is a challenge that cannot be overlooked. Social media platforms like Instagram are constantly evolving, with new features, algorithms, and user behaviours emerging regularly. The conceptual frameworks and themes I identified in this thesis are grounded in data collected during a specific period (2021 to 2024), which may affect their long-term relevance. As trends, platforms, and user interactions evolve, my frameworks may require ongoing refinement to remain accurate and applicable. This temporal limitation suggests that my conceptual contributions may need periodic updates to accurately reflect the dynamic nature of digital media, similar to how Braun and Clarke continually update and refine their thematic analysis method over the years (2006; 2012; 2022; 2023).

#### **10.4 Closing Remarks**

This body of work has really opened so many avenues for me to explore, like the idea of the algorithmic wardrobe across different platforms, the concept of intensive mothering on TikTok, and how the frameworks I've developed could be applied to new digital technologies. While these frameworks aren't perfect and might need some tweaking after my PhD, I'm excited about the potential they hold. They offer a solid roadmap for future studies and analysis.

As I move forward in my career as an academic in Qatar University, I already have a list of projects I can't wait to dive into after submitting my thesis. My PhD journey has been such a rewarding experience, and I genuinely love the work I have developed and presented here, especially knowing that it doesn't end here.

This thesis is just the beginning, and I'm looking forward to building on these ideas and expanding my research in the future, particularly in bridging the gap on data and representation of women in scholarly work within the GCC. The evolving cultural and traditional aspects of this region are incredibly important and still need to be recorded, documented, analysed, and engaged with. This thesis is just the beginning, and I'm excited to continue building on these ideas and contributing to the ongoing conversation.

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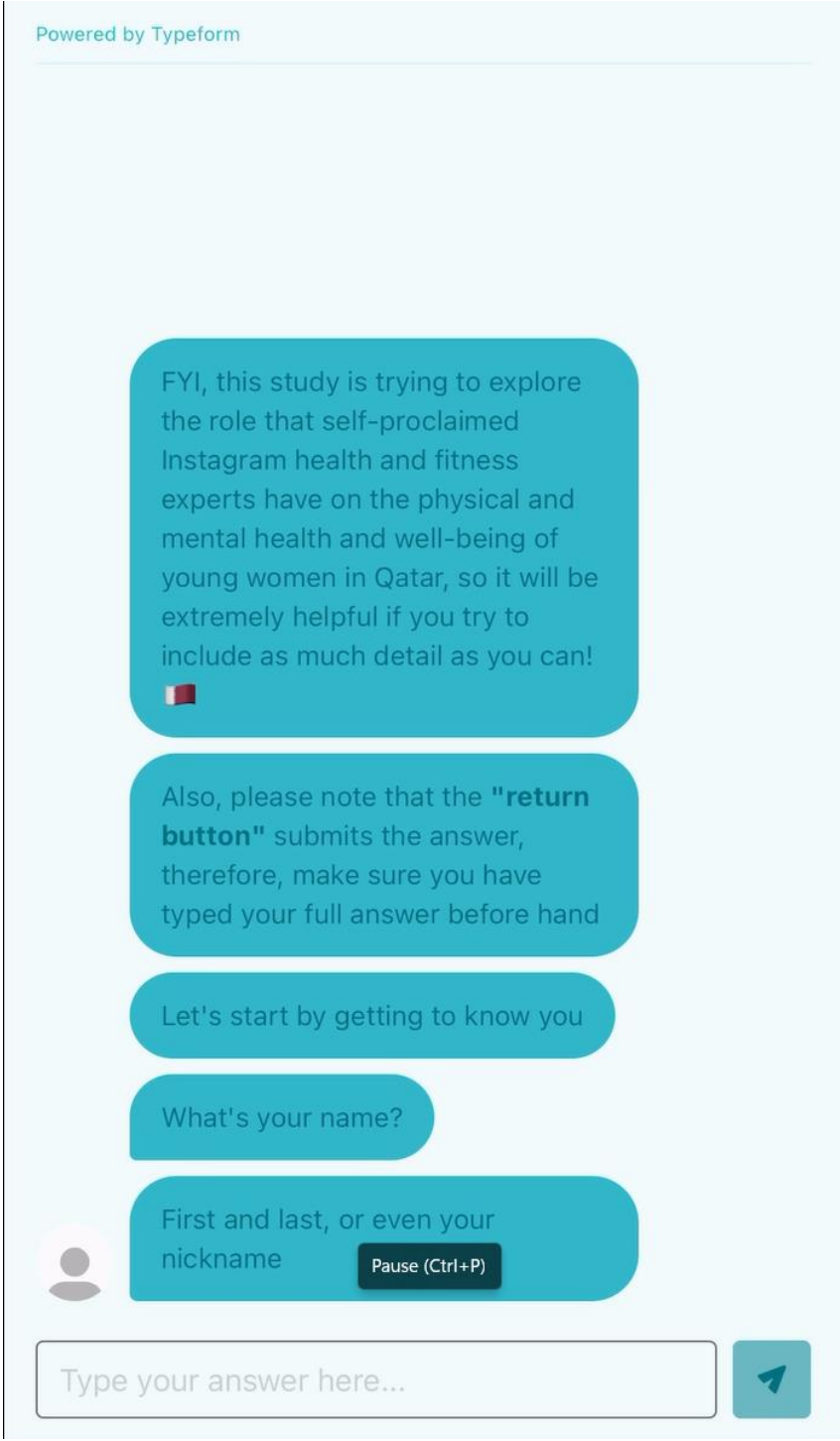
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## Appendix A: Screenshots of Interactive Survey

Screenshot	Description
 <p>Powered by Typeform</p> <p>FYI, this study is trying to explore the role that self-proclaimed Instagram health and fitness experts have on the physical and mental health and well-being of young women in Qatar, so it will be extremely helpful if you try to include as much detail as you can!</p> <p>Also, please note that the "return button" submits the answer, therefore, make sure you have typed your full answer before hand</p> <p>Let's start by getting to know you</p> <p>What's your name?</p> <p>First and last, or even your nickname <span>Pause (Ctrl+P)</span></p> <p>Type your answer here...</p>	Start of the survey

Powered by Typeform



Also, please note that the "**return button**" submits the answer, therefore, make sure you have typed your full answer before hand

Let's start by getting to know you

What's your name?

First and last, or even your nickname

Test



How old are you?

Under 18

18 to 24

25 to 30

Over 30

Multiple Choice

Test

Okay, I'm intrigued and I think I'll get into your business a little 🙌!

Can you give examples of purchases you've made that was marketed by experts on Instagram?  
🙌

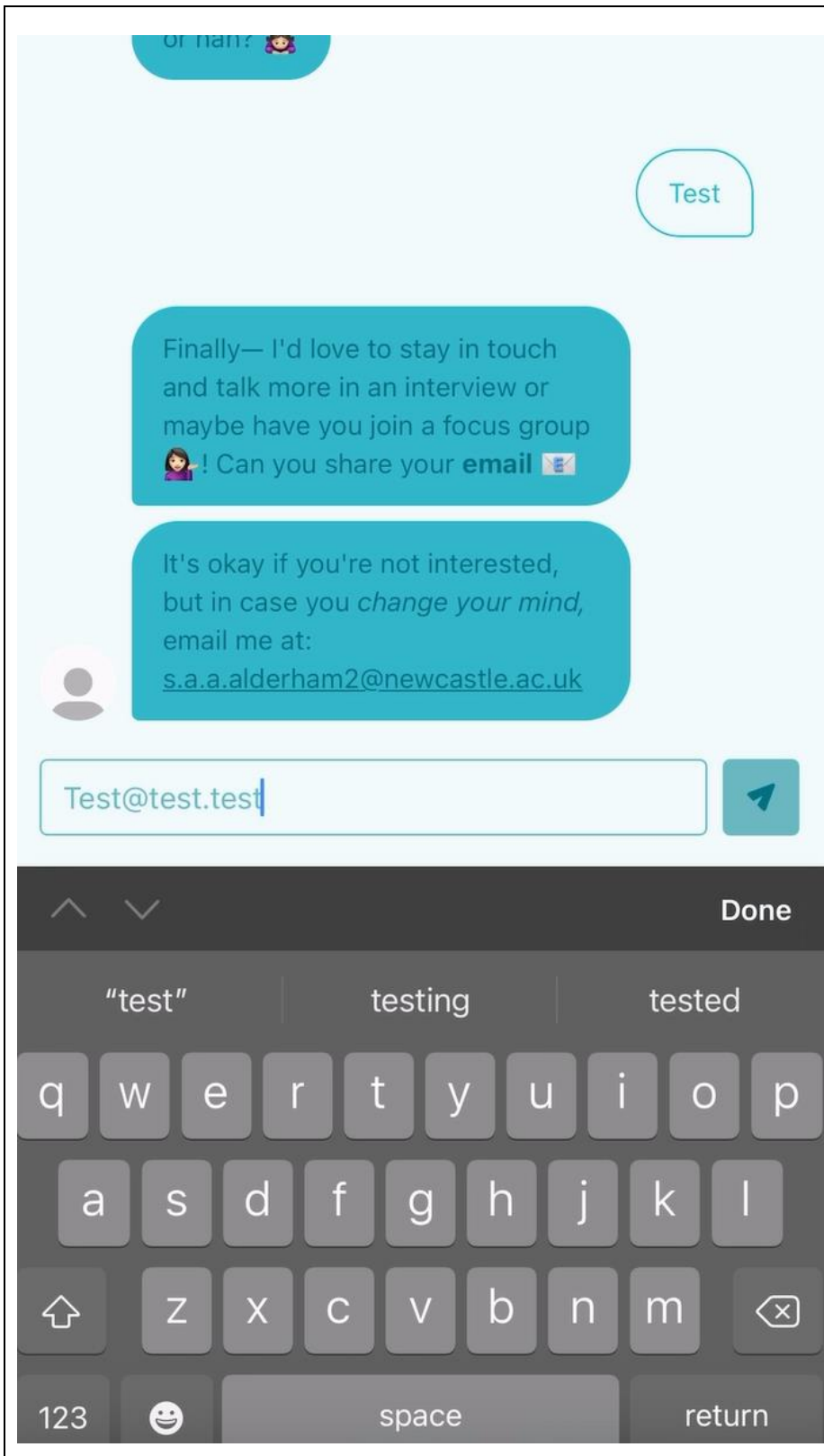
Test

Why, though? I mean, what compelled you to purchase them?  
🤔

Test



End of the survey



## **Appendix B: Glossary**

### **Insta-Trainer**

A conceptual framework that embodies the idea that innovative technology—both software (such as social media platforms) and hardware (such as digital wearable devices)—can instantly train users through content influenced by political, economic, and social factors.

In the context of my study, I have found that Insta-Trainers have the capacity to both consciously and subconsciously instil neoliberal self-disciplinary and self-monitoring practices and behaviours on their users. My thesis has applied this framework to Instagram through the lens of health and wellness, where I have found that Instagram functions as an Insta-Trainer, with its multi-algorithmic capabilities serving as Insta-functionalities.

Indeed, influencers on Instagram are also considered Insta-Trainers, as they have the ability to instantly train users. The term can also refer to various profiles on social media, including influencer accounts or brand and business profiles, which frequently share content aligned with similar ideologies and objectives.

### **Insta-Functionalities**

Insta-Functionalities, can also be referred to as multialgorithmic functionalities, are the multifaceted algorithms employed by Insta-Trainers (hardware and software) to curate, prioritise, and display content to users. These functionalities leverage machine learning, computer vision, and data analysis to determine the relevance, popularity, visibility and engagement potential of content, thereby shaping users' experiences and interactions on the platform.

In analysing users' behaviours on Instagram, preferences, and engagement patterns, Insta-Functionalities have been developed for the purpose of delivering personalised, relevant, and safe content on the feeds of users (Instagram, 2024a; 2024b; 2024c).

### **User Disjuncture**

This is a critical component related to the Insta-Trainer paradigm, it refers to the disconnect or paradox found among the respondents of the study, particularly between the levels of media literacy, education, and knowledge and the influence of Instagram's Insta-Training functionalities and Insta-Trainers on their actions and thoughts. This disjuncture highlights the gap between the

participants' understanding and level of awareness in comparison to their actions. This includes what they choose to practice, purchase, and how they self-discipline.

In the context of my thesis, this critical component illustrates the potential for Instagram's Insta-Functionalities to shape users' decisions and self-perceptions, often leading to practices and consumption patterns that may not align with their actual knowledge or beliefs.

I believe that the disjuncture is actually a sign of agency, negotiation, and active engagement with content rather than it is symbolising a loss of agency or platform control. It signifies that the users are actively engaging with the content and are not passive as it seems. In short, the disjuncture would not exist if participants were not actively engaging, negotiating, and self-reflecting on the content in a critical manner.

### **Algorithmic Wardrobe**

This concept emerged from the consumption patterns of the study's participants. It provides a framework for understanding the various trends on digital platforms and their algorithms, with the 'clothes' symbolising the fast-changing trends and normative ideals promoted by Insta-Trainers and Insta-Training functionalities, which are subsequently adopted by their followers.

Each trend, whether it be a fitness regime, dietary fad, or skincare routine, represents an item users can adopt or purchase, embodying the ideals presented by Insta-Trainers. Through repeated engagement, followers adopt and reinforce these normative standards, shaping contemporary perceptions of health, beauty, and fitness. This dynamic between user agency and conformity illustrates how individuality is expressed under the pressures of the influencer industry.

The rapid and performative adoption of trends within the Digital Wardrobe raises concerns, particularly when elements of minority cultures are adopted on social media without an understanding of their deeper meaning and context, potentially leading to various levels of cultural appropriation and erosion.

### **Theme 1: Curated Digital Manual**

These are interactive curatable contemporary digital counterparts to static traditional lifestyle, diet, and health manuals, available on platforms like Instagram. I categorised them into three types in my thesis and discuss them across two separate chapters:

1. **User Curated Digital Manuals (UCDMs):** These are personalised collections of content compiled by Instagram users using the platform's saved folders feature. Users create these manuals to self-monitor and self-discipline, tailoring them to their individual preferences and goals (Al Derham, 2023).
2. **Pre-Curated Digital Manuals (PCDMs):** Created outside of Instagram, these manuals are hyperlinked within the app and come in the form of PDFs, websites, or applications. Influencers in the fitness, health, wellness, and lifestyle sectors produce these manuals and market them for profit on their Instagram pages. An example is the SWEAT programme by Kayla Itsines. The term "pre-curated" indicates that these manuals are prepared externally but marketed and utilised through Instagram (Al Derham, 2023).
3. **Algorithmically Curated Digital Manuals (ACDMs):** Determined by Instagram's multialgorithmic functionalities, these manuals prioritise, and display content based on factors such as popularity and engagement. These algorithms are somewhat problematic as they are inherently biased and favour monetisable content with high engagement rates, which can influence users' experiences and interactions in negative ways.

In the context of my study, the CDMs on Instagram represent a blend of user-generated, externally created, and algorithmically determined content that guides users in their health, wellness, and lifestyle choices. They are part of the broader Insta-Functionalities and can be seen as a toolkit for analysis in future studies.

## **Theme 2: Digitalities of Good Health**

This theme explores how digital platforms, especially Instagram, act as tools of biopower, influencing health behaviours by distributing health-related information. Instagram, influenced by capitalist motives and inherent biases, serves as a bio-pedagogical device that pressures users to align with globally prevailing standards of health, beauty, and diet. These standards are anchored in neoliberal and postfeminist ideals, demonstrating the significant role digital platforms play in defining and controlling perceptions of health.

## **Theme 3: The New Wave of Online Consumption in the Post-Pandemic Era**

The theme captures the profound shifts in digital behaviours and consumer patterns that have emerged following the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic not only amplified existing online consumption patterns but also introduced new dynamics driven by prolonged periods of social isolation, increased digital reliance, and the heightened influence of online content on daily life. The theme addresses the ways in which digital consumption has evolved, reflecting broader societal shifts towards increased online engagement. More importantly, it highlights how users have become more aware, alert, knowledgeable, and questioning of the content they consume.