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Instagram and #Wellness: Uncovering Gender and Body Patterns

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Abstract

The concept of "wellness" and its associated representations have become key aspects of modern culture, with social media platforms like Instagram playing a significant role. Not only do these platforms serve as spaces for the public expression of wellness-related topics, but they also influence public perceptions. This becomes particularly meaningful when these expressions are linked to gender. Our research explores how wellness and gender are depicted in popular Instagram posts. By analysing 300 public Instagram posts tagged with #wellness from 2023, we investigate whether traditional notions of gender and bodies are challenged or reinforced. Wellness is a multifaceted process, but our findings show that users often adhere to a narrow concept. To understand these representations, we focused on posts tagged with #wellness, particularly those in the physical category. The study employed a digital methods approach (Rogers, 2013) and thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021), uncovering three primary themes: Practices & Workout, Body & Expressions, and Clothing & Adornment. Predominantly, all themes in the context of wellness depict gender in a binary form and bodies as thin or athletic. These traditional gender and body norms are perpetuated on Instagram, reinforcing societal standards of beauty and body image. Instagram's engagement logic preferentially promotes content conforming to dominant societal norms, strengthening these patterns. Alternative or counter-narratives, while they exist, often face challenges in gaining visibility due to both algorithmic biases and cultural predispositions. Although Instagram has the potential to offer a platform for such counter-narratives, our findings indicate that normative content continues to dominate in terms of visibility and engagement.

Keywords

app studies; gender norms; gender representations; hashtags; Instagram; social platforms; wellness

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1. Introduction

The term "wellness" has become a prevalent part of everyday discourse, with wellness-related posts on Instagram serving as a means of self-expression and shaping perceptions of well-being (Chinn et al., 2023). Wellness culture encourages individuals to take responsibility for their health, promoting a holistic approach that connects lifestyle choices with well-being (Baker, 2022). Contemporarily, Instagram plays a crucial role in disseminating these ideas, not only as a source of information but also by shaping societal notions of wellness (Ahrens et al., 2022; Pelletier et al., 2020). Prior research has explored the relationship between wellness and gender on Instagram, revealing how digital platforms can both empower users and perpetuate traditional stereotypes (Conor, 2021; Tiusanen, 2022). These studies have concentrated on specific hashtags, user accounts, or particular dimensions of wellness. The findings highlight the need for a more nuanced understanding of how wellness is constructed and experienced in digital spaces. This is especially relevant to the ongoing negotiation of gender identities. A critical next step involves examining broader forms of expression, enabling a deeper analysis of users' wellness expressions.

This article addresses this gap, aiming to explore and characterise wellness-associated representations on Instagram, particularly with gender and body narratives. The article builds on a multidisciplinary understanding of wellness as a process encompassing several dimensions, with the physical one being the most prevalent in social media portrayals. It focuses particularly on how the platform serves as a space for the performance and visualisation of wellness practices on Instagram. Our primary research question is: What narratives about gender and inclusivity emerge in users' portrayal of wellness in Instagram posts? By analysing popular posts tagged with #wellness, we investigate how visual and textual narratives reinforce or challenge gender norms, especially within the context of neoliberal feminism and gender performativity. The article is structured as follows: First, we present the theoretical foundations, situating the study within wellness, social media, and gender research. Next, we detail our methods, including data collection and analysis procedures. Section 3 presents our findings, discussing key themes identified through thematic analysis and positioning them to existing literature. Section 4 restates the main points, emphasising the gendered dimensions of wellness portrayals. Finally, we address study limitations and propose directions for future research.

1.1. Approaching Contemporary Wellness

Wellness, as the pursuit of personal fulfilment and an idealised self-involving physical health practices, mental and emotional balance, and healthy choices (Baker, 2022), is an indicator that can be measured by individuals' perceptions of what benefits them (Adams et al., 1997). Defined as "an active process through which people become aware of, and make choices toward, a more successful existence" (Stoewen, 2015, p. 983), wellness involves a set of multidisciplinary practices among several dimensions of life. As a multidimensional concept (e.g., Adams et al., 1997; Dolan et al., 2008; National Wellness Institute, n.d.), wellness encompasses physical aspects, emotional and psychological elements, social dimensions, intellectual components, spiritual details, environmental considerations, economic factors, and vocational concerns, among other widely agreed components. Such dimensions are interconnected, with one influencing the others (Stoewen, 2017). They play a crucial role in shaping an individual's overall wellness, and their balance is essential for achieving holistic health. Although often used as a synonym for well-being, wellness is conceptualised with a focus on the processes or pathways the individual takes to achieve optimal

health goals and not on the outcomes themselves, as is the case with the concept of well-being (Rachele et al., 2013). Among the several dimensions of wellness, the physical one is particularly prominent among authors' contributions and is objectively conceptualised (e.g., Bak & Priniski, 2020; Chinn et al., 2023; Moreno et al., 2023). It relates to caring for a healthy body through nutrition, revealing an awareness about food choices, nourishing the body through diet and engaging with physical practices which are often the most visible and accessible aspects of wellness in society. The widespread nature of physical wellness practices makes them a significant area of study. While "fitness culture" and "physical wellness" are often used interchangeably, they represent distinct concepts. Fitness culture is driven by societal standards of beauty and performance and focuses on aesthetic goals like body shape and muscularity, which can lead to a limited view of health in which appearance is seen as the main indicator of wellness (Grogan, 2021). In contrast, physical wellness aims to promote a more inclusive approach and recognises diverse body shapes, fitness levels, and health practices, supporting the idea that wellness is personalised to an individual's needs and preferences (Myers et al., 2000). In contemporary society, wellness is increasingly viewed as a choice and a cultural phenomenon, which is integral to a modern identity. This shift views wellness not only as a health objective but as a lifestyle choice, where people adopt wellness-oriented behaviours and practices to enhance their lives. Wellness can also be seen as a rhetorical tool for personal improvement and disease prevention, which places responsibility on individuals for their health outcomes (Derkatch, 2022). Consequently, there has been a surge in investment in wellness-related products and services, from programmes and retreats to apps and supplements, transforming wellness into a trillion-dollar industry (Callaghan et al., 2021). Focus on physical wellness content has gained prominence on Instagram (e.g., Ahrens et al., 2022; Chaudhary & Dhillon, 2021; Chinn et al., 2023), one of the most used social media platforms worldwide (Chinn et al., 2023). Such can be attributed to several interrelated factors that reflect broader cultural and technological shifts and their interactive and communal aspects, contributing to its dissemination and promotion while being a source of wellness-related information (Sidorova, 2019). On Instagram, users can share, like, and comment on visual content and interact with other users, be they ordinary people, influencers, professionals in specific fields, experts, brands, companies, or institutions. Through the main affordances of the visual-based platform, users share photos and videos, report personal experiences or thoughts, use hashtags, and associate them with products or services, reflecting possibilities in engaging with wellness posts (Moreno et al., 2023). Previous studies on Instagram have highlighted the influence of fitspiration on women's communities (Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2021), body and gender discourses in sports (Krieger et al., 2022), and user participation in fitness culture (Schöps et al., 2024). Research also explores how masculinities are negotiated through hegemonic male bodies (Marshall et al., 2020), gender display (Baker & Walsh, 2018), and gender stereotypes (Plasencia & León, 2021). Research focusing on fitness-related hashtags, communities, and influencers reveals strategies such as fitness challenges, sharing milestones, and peer feedback (Goodyear et al., 2021; Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2018) to engage audiences (Lupton, 2021) and have access to how credibility is implemented to relationships flourish and grow wellness businesses (Wellman, 2024). This content cycle ensures that physical wellness remains prominent on social media.

1.2. Wellness, Social Platforms, and Gender

The intersection of wellness discourse and gender representation on social media platforms has garnered increasing attention from scholars and practitioners alike (Lee et al., 2015), reflecting a broader societal shift towards online spaces as influential sources of information, inspiration, and identity formation.

Instagram's visual and interactive features promote wellness practices that frequently embody neoliberal feminist ideals, emphasising individual responsibility and self-optimisation. These representations often align with Butler's (2006) concept of gender performativity, where users engage in repeated acts that visually assert their gender identities through posts tagged with wellness-related hashtags. Such gendered performances reflect and perpetuate broader cultural norms on the platform. According to Butler (2006), gender is not an innate trait but a socially constructed and performative act. This idea suggests that gender identities are formed through repeated performances that conform to societal expectations. On Instagram, these performances are visually articulated through curated wellness portrayals, reinforcing conventional gender norms. Women are more likely to engage online with wellness content due to a combination of social, psychological, and content-related factors (Chinn et al., 2023). However, this engagement is often passive, with women typically scrolling rather than posting, reflecting their consumption habits and motivations for seeking inspiration (Mayoh & Jones, 2020). This involvement is shaped by their interests, motivations, and the nature of the content itself. Younger and more liberal women, in particular, actively seek wellness content on platforms like Instagram, which reflects a broader cultural trend towards health and wellness (Chinn et al., 2023). Posts that resonate emotionally and offer relatable experiences tend to garner higher engagement, particularly among women who seek validation and community (Chou, 2021). The nature of the content, such as personal stories or real-life images, strongly affects engagement, with women often identifying more with authentic wellness portrayals (Kim, 2023). Gender depictions usually emphasise slenderness and flexibility for women and muscularity for men (Rose et al., 2012), and this reinforces traditional gender roles in wellness discourse. These representations are shaped by dominant ideologies in digital media (Popa & Gavriliu, 2015), with Instagram playing a pivotal role in promoting wellness practices (Moreno et al., 2023; Nadobnik, 2019). Social media significantly influences perceptions of a "healthy" and "desirable" lifestyle, perpetuating idealised standards that shape gender norms and expectations (Rounsefell et al., 2020). As users navigate the curated landscapes of social media, they may strategically present aspects of their identities in alignment with dominant norms or resist and subvert traditional gender roles. Understanding these dynamics through the lens of neoliberal feminism and Butler's (2006) concept of performativity offers a deeper insight into the complex interplay between wellness, gender, and identity on Instagram. This approach allows us to explore how wellness, particularly in the physical dimension, perpetuates or disrupts gender norms and expectations. The literature on gender portrayals on social platforms reveals a range of theories and findings that highlight the persistence of gender stereotypes and their implications for users (e.g., Caldeira et al., 2018; Li, 2023). Digital platforms, including social media, search engines, and other online spaces, have been shown to reflect and reinforce gender stereotypes, particularly in portraying occupations (Singh et al., 2020).

Instagram content can perpetuate gender stereotyping (Pramaskara, 2022) through large audiences, allowing for lasting consequences for such content. The literature collectively indicates it through various mechanisms, including stereotypical representations (Bailey et al., 2013), algorithmic biases (Fosch-Villaronga et al., 2021), and user-generated content (Jain & Kaur, 2023; Rose et al., 2012). For instance, in 2015, Instagram blocked the hashtag #curvy, sparking backlash from users and body positivity advocates. Instagram claimed the hashtag violated community guidelines on nudity and pornography. Critics argued that the move unfairly targeted users promoting body positivity and diversity. The incident raised concerns about algorithmic bias and content moderation's impact on marginalised communities. Instagram later reinstated the hashtag, acknowledging community concerns and emphasising its commitment to allowing users to express themselves while maintaining a safe environment (Webb et al.,

2019). This case exemplifies social media platforms' challenges in balancing content moderation with inclusivity and free expression.

In this sense, any digital platform has the potential to be an online arena for the creation of alternative communities and a space for countering oppression and promoting well-being (Perera et al., 2021). These platforms offer a social environment where traditional barriers to visibility and representation can be challenged. Scholars such as Nancy Fraser (1990) have argued that digital spaces enable the formation of what she terms "subaltern counter publics"—arenas for alternative discourses where groups with less social power can organise, articulate their interests, and gain visibility. Similarly, boyd (2014) argues that social media platforms facilitate the reorganisation of social ties and amplify voices often excluded from mainstream media. Through these digital networks, minority groups can build communities that not only foster solidarity but also create new forms of visibility and influence within the broader public sphere, challenging dominant cultural narratives and promoting inclusivity. In the context of wellness, particularly concerning the physical dimension, and considering previous studies' contributions, we question: What narratives about gender and inclusivity emerge in users' portrayal of Wellness in Instagram posts? We aim to identify and characterise wellness-associated representations. We sought to identify how the human body manifests in the content users share, paying particular attention to gender and narratives. Previous studies have primarily focused on specific hashtags, influencers, or particular communities, shaping their field of observation and consequently guiding their findings. However, they have not examined gender narratives linked to more general hashtags such as #wellness. This study seeks to address this perspective. Drawing on the insights from prior research, this study proposes to analyse and describe gender narratives associated with a broad form of expression, which encompasses multiple dimensions and may lead to diverse manifestations. This approach can contribute to the discussion on gender construction and representation on social platforms from a wellness-specific perspective. The literature reveals several pivotal dimensions of social media, particularly Instagram, and how it shapes perceptions of mental health, wellness, and identity (Utter et al., 2020). LGBTQ+ youth benefit from social media platforms like Instagram, which offer crucial spaces for connection, the construction of identity, and social support. However, these benefits can be undermined by the discrimination and victimisation these youth may face online (Berger et al., 2022). Instagram's visual focus has been linked to increased comparisons of appearance and lower body satisfaction, particularly among young women, driven by idealised body images that can harm mental health (Engeln et al., 2020; Pedalino & Camerini, 2022). Gender differences also emerge in the perception of food-related content, with males more likely than females to consider unhealthy foods healthy. In contrast, females' food choices are strongly influenced by their perceptions of food healthfulness, reflecting societal gender norms in health behaviours (Nelson & Fleming, 2019). Within wellness culture, the #womenswellness community on Instagram encourages women to express emotions such as honesty, gratitude, and empowerment, which aligns with feminist principles of self-love and vulnerability. This represents a shift from traditional post-feminist discourse towards a more collective, emotionally supportive narrative (Tiusanen, 2022). Studies show that the wellness industry is heavily dominated by women entrepreneurs, professionals, and consumers (O'Neill, 2023). As such, wellness culture can be understood within the framework of neoliberal feminism, which emphasises individual empowerment and self-optimisation within a market-driven society (Rottenberg, 2014). Wellness is often portrayed as a way to self-improvement, aligned with neoliberal ideals that prioritise individual success and bodily control over collective or systemic change (Tiusanen, 2021). The feminised aspects of wellness culture are also evident in how wellness is marketed to fashionable young women, who shape wellness trends and narratives

intertwined with societal expectations of femininity (O'Neill, 2020). Concepts of femininity and masculinity, socially constructed and shaped by cultural, social, and political forces, vary across cultures and history. These gender roles are complex, context-dependent, and enacted through social practices rather than being fixed (Butler, 2006; Connell, 2005; Kimmel, 2009). Instagram has also proven effective in promoting sexual health education, especially among black male adolescents and young adults. However, X (formerly Twitter) and YouTube are more popular sources for this information, which highlights the range of media preferences (Burns et al., 2020). Moreover, for Western women of South Asian heritage, Instagram serves as a platform to express and share gendered ethnic identities, enabling them to resist oppression and enhance well-being through intragroup dialogue and alliance-building (Perera et al., 2021).

By applying the theoretical approaches of neoliberal feminism and Butler's performativity, this study brings the "physical wellness" dimension to the discussion. This approach offers new insights into how Instagram posts reinforce or challenge traditional gender norms. The justification for doing so lies in the fact that wellness has established itself as a relevant topic in the context of health, currently representing a multimillion-dollar industry, and in which social networks have played a significant role by providing a stage for communication and promotion. The focus on the physical dimension is explained by individuals' perception of wellness as physical health, as discussed by Stoewen (2017).

2. Methods and Research Design

2.1. Data Collection and Sample Selection

The study employed a digital methods approach, exploring digital media for research, focusing on born-digital content and repurposing web-native techniques to study cultural phenomena—such as gender within wellness-related Instagram posts. This methodology emphasises the unique data generated by digital platforms while also acknowledging the challenges posed by the medium itself (Rogers, 2013). Using PhantomBuster, a tool that collects public data through Instagram API, we extracted publicly available Instagram posts identified with #wellness during March, April, and May 2023. The choice of the hashtag is justified by its popularity at the time of data collection (more than 50 million posts associated with #wellness), by the fact that it is a more general expression when compared to hashtags used in other studies (e.g., #fitsinspo, #instasad, #mentalhealth) and helped us to obtain a broader sample. Collecting data at three different points in time enabled us to meet the goal of obtaining such a heterogeneous sample.

Each month, the 500 posts with higher engagement (considering it as the sum of likes and comments) were collected, composing an initial dataset of 1,500 posts. Instagram uses a complex algorithm to determine the order of posts in users' feeds. The algorithm is designed to maximise user engagement by showing content that is likely to interest them. Likes and comments are key indicators of such interest. When a post receives a high number of likes and comments shortly after being published, it is more likely to appear higher in users' feeds, increasing its visibility (Leaver et al., 2020).

Our proposal acknowledges the contextual nature of social media platforms, allowing us to analyse metrics (e.g., likes, shares, comments) and native digital objects (e.g., hashtags). Hashtags can be used for content labelling, categorising, organising discourse, and adding context to posts (Zappavigna, 2015) while having a collective framing potential (Meraz, 2017). The engagement metrics offer valuable insights into the complex

interaction of algorithmic design, social validation, visual appeal, influencer culture, and cultural norms. While Instagram's algorithm is constantly evolving and not fully transparent, it still influences user behaviour by favouring content that meets specific engagement metrics, even though it does not solely dictate them (Cotter, 2019; Register et al., 2023).

The full dataset ($N = 1,500$) was first classified through eight wellness dimensions (Adams et al., 1997; Stoewen, 2015, 2017): Physical, Intellectual, Emotional, Social, Spiritual, Vocational, Financial, and Environmental. The Physical dimension was the most common, representing 73% of posts in the initial sample. We isolated the Physical category and selected the most popular 300 posts from the 90 days. The Physical category emphasises the corporeal dimensions of wellness, such as exercise, weight management, and body image. These elements are inherently linked to culturally constructed gender norms, as the expectations that dictate how individuals of different genders should behave are perpetuated through social institutions and cultural practices (Kimmel & Aronson, 2017). These norms can be observed in how they are portrayed and discussed in social media posts that employ the hashtag wellness. By narrowing the focus to the physical dimension, this research can look in detail at the exploration of one key aspect to address a dominant impression of the current wellness discourse. This focus not only reflects the priorities of contemporary wellness practices but also provides a critical lens through which to examine the cultural and societal implications of this emphasis on physical health and gender. This facet will allow a comprehensive analysis of how gender representations are either reinforced or challenged through visual content related to the physical component of wellness posts. The final dataset that unified 300 public Instagram posts published in 2023 tagged with #wellness from the Physical category was analysed through interpretive thematic analysis to qualitatively explore it for identifying recurrent themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It should be noted that the unit of analysis was the published post, i.e., both images and captions were included to conduct the study. Figure 1 summarises the process.
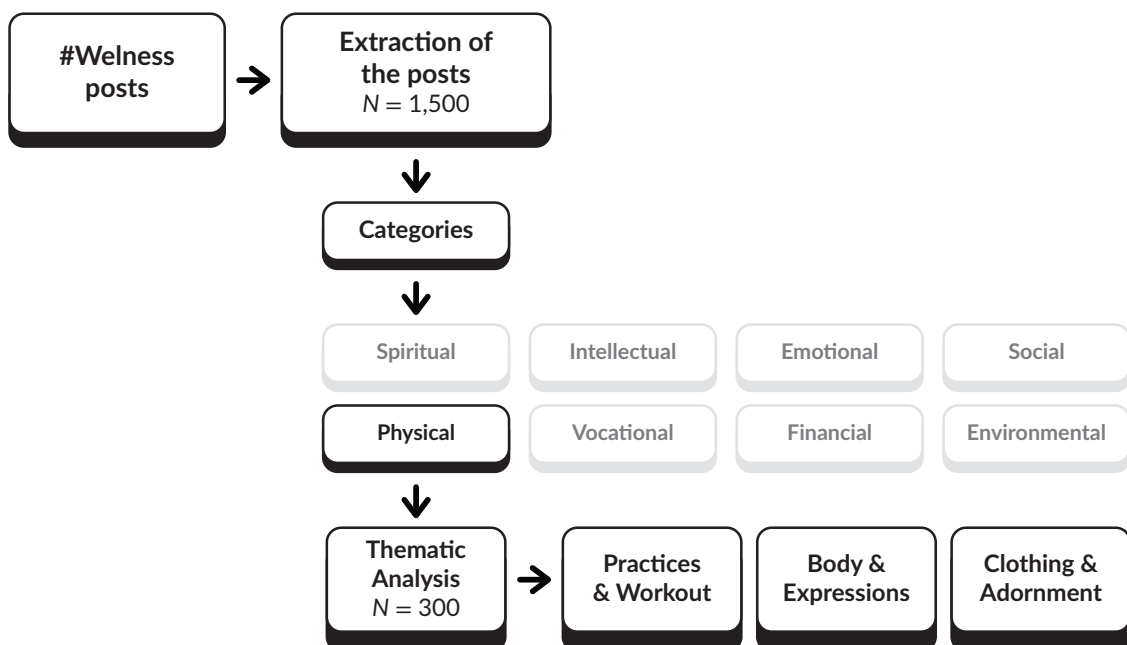

Figure 1. Research design protocol.

2.2. Data Analysis

To examine #wellness posts, we employed thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021) alongside an inductive coding approach, whereby codes were developed during the dataset analysis. While the primary focus was on the visual components of the posts, the captions were also analysed to gain a deeper understanding of the content and context. This dual approach provided a comprehensive examination of the visual and textual elements. Comments on the posts were excluded from the analysis as our focus remained solely on the posts. The thematic analysis process consisted of the following steps. First, the dataset was organised into a spreadsheet file, allowing coders to familiarise themselves with #wellness posts individually, observing the images and reading the captions to discern meaning and narrative, within the context of Instagram's platform and the #wellness hashtag. Initial contact with the data was accompanied by qualitative notes, which served to identify potential codes. We began by noting aspects of gender performance, including body language, posture, facial expressions, clothing, and exercise routines. Second, building on this initial step, we proceeded with the first round of coding, which involved combining raw data with interpretative insights. At this stage, we aimed to refine the posts' semantics and meanings using keywords or key expressions.

A second coding round was conducted to consolidate the codes by merging those with significant overlap and removing those lacking coherence (Saldaña, 2015). The codes were not mutually exclusive; therefore, multiple codes could be applied to a single post, reflecting the complexity of the study subject (i.e., images and text). For instance, a post depicting a person at the gym could simultaneously convey information about the type of exercise performed and body display. Third, the review and consolidation of the codes led to the development of the codebook. Each code was labelled and its definition was conceptualised. Additionally, guidelines for the appropriate application of each code were provided, along with examples of posts. The purpose of the codebook was not to measure data accuracy objectively but rather to encourage reflection on coding decisions and assess the accuracy of labels, definitions, and examples (Braun & Clarke, 2021), thereby enhancing clarity during the analysis. Throughout this process, the two coders involved collaborated to resolve ambiguities and refine the coding framework. And finally, following this process, the codes were grouped into themes that theoretically explained the physical dimension of #wellness. This involved examining the relationships between codes and how they collectively contributed to a narrative about the posts, thus forming a cohesive theme (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

2.3. Ethical Considerations

The data collected for this study originates from Instagram public accounts and was collected through the Instagram API, respecting the platform's terms of service. Following recommendations that help researchers decide whether the information available on the internet is public or private (Franzke et al., 2020), we decided that if the data was available for collection, it was included in the analysis corpus. Images were described to illustrate findings without including personal information to prevent content from being traced back.

3. Findings and Discussion

The dataset analysis revealed three key themes: Practices & Workout, Body & Expressions and Clothing & Adornment. Our results uncover a landscape entrenched in traditional gender and body stereotypes.

3.1. Practices & Workout: Gendered Performances

This theme captures the diverse ways that users display how they physically work their bodies. Posts generally describe body care and images of physical exercise as an "everyday" practice. Through post captions, users reinforce to their audiences that training is part of their daily routines. Workout-related posts with training methods are popular Instagram content that users share and engage with (Nadobnik, 2019). Three types of sports were identified when focusing on practices: yoga, running, and functional training, which are readily linked to physical activities in the understanding of Instagram users for pursuing wellness. As the following analysis presents, most typologies were binary-gendered on many levels.

Yoga was predominantly associated with women through posts portraying several popular yoga postures (asanas). It is often depicted in domestic indoor settings such as bedrooms or living rooms with clean, neutral decor, rugs, and plants or candles. Previous research has identified that the practice of yoga has undergone a process of feminisation, Americanisation, and commercialisation, transforming it into a Western exercise regimen that is progressively influenced by neoliberal ideology (Markula, 2014). At the same time, outdoor representations typically show women practising in gardens with clear skies and green grass. These depictions most often show individual practice rather than group activities. Analysis of captions on these posts revealed efforts to dispel the notion that yoga is exclusively for women, with some highlighting the benefits of yoga for muscle strengthening, directing their posts to a male audience. Despite the potential benefits for anyone, social perceptions and pressures related to gender remain barriers for men in practising yoga (Cagas et al., 2020).

The running posts consistently depicted individuals engaged in outdoor activities, whether in organised running events or during their daily training. The analysis of the posts did not reveal any significant differences based on gender. Both male and female figures were portrayed visually, focusing on running. The textual descriptions also mentioned the benefits of running and offered techniques for improving performance without any gender-specific language. The captions underscored the importance of motivation and discipline in reaching fitness goals, conveying a sense of triumph over challenges. These aspects underscore the holistic nature of the concept, showing how specific dimensions, such as the emotional aspect, can impact overall wellness (Stoewen, 2015, 2017). Notably, none of these approaches emphasised gender distinctions.

Posts featuring functional training, which focuses on improving athletic performance and increasing muscular strength, were the sample's most common type of physical practice. These posts often showed individuals participating in exercises such as squatting, pushing or pulling objects, or jumping. The training occurred in a gym, using equipment like kettlebells, dumbbells, and ropes. It was presented as an individual practice in open gym spaces rather than studio classes.

Considering the whole dataset, the analysis revealed that both men ($n = 80$) and women ($n = 220$) were depicted, and there were differences in the exercises based on gender. Among the creators and users studied, the images predominantly reflected gender presentations that corresponded to the gender assigned to the creators at birth. Women were often shown focusing on lower-body workouts, such as squats, lunges, and leg lifts, while men emphasised upper-body training. It is worth noting that this evidence has been associated with fitness practices on Instagram (Carrotte et al., 2017) but not necessarily within the realm of wellness.

Additionally, some posts showed support from personal trainers, with a pattern emerging that men's coaches were typically men, while women's coaches could be both men and women. The observation raises essential questions about male individuals' preferences when seeking training advice from a female personal trainer. These perspectives may impact those who engage with such content and, consequently, what they understand and reproduce as wellness, perpetuating gender stereotyping (Pramaskara, 2022).

3.2. Body & Expressions: Binary Insta-Bodies

The analysis of photos and videos associated with #wellness revealed a common theme: The body displays the impact and result of training. Through various poses, users not only showed themselves practising exercises as a means of achieving wellness but also showed their body physiognomy. The images reveal the frequency of the thin and/or athletic body associated with the practice, praising body flexibility. Posts also confirmed yoga as a common practice, mostly among young white women. Presenting the whole body suggests reinforcing yoga as a holistic outlook, favouring bodily and emotional wellness. Functional training posts portray bodies as central characters by posing in front of a mirror at the gym. In this type of post, we could find images of the user's entire body, half the body, or specific parts portraying physical exercise as a fraction of the wellness process. Users highlight the ongoing results through physical shape achievement. In the full-body photos, the emphasis was, in women's case, on the slim and athletic shape and, in men's case, on the muscular shape. We discovered that men frequently exposed the upper part of their bodies, standing in different positions, in which they tensed their muscles and bent their arms to make them appear muscular. In addition, photographs were taken to highlight the abdominal muscles, showcasing this well-defined part of the body. Women created wellness and body-related content, showcasing different lower-body poses in their images. They accomplished this by strategically flexing their legs to display their muscle mass and definition, accentuating their glutes by shifting their hips back or in a specific direction. These were not casual or everyday poses but carefully choreographed positions designed to showcase their muscles.

Nonetheless, one counter-narrative challenging established gender norms emerged, particularly in posts where women engage in activities traditionally associated with masculinity, such as bodybuilding contests. Fitness studies on Instagram have discussed the effects of the athletic body, observing a shift from the thin ideal towards the athletic ideal of a healthier body, revealing and reinforcing pressure to achieve and maintain an athletic figure (Bacon, 2010; Thompson et al., 2004). The representation of non-athletic or overweight bodies was showcased in before and after posts, specifically in the "before" pictures, reinforcing the pressure to change and conform to a certain body type. It can be inferred from these results that wellness is a process and that its most prominent and evident manifestation is through the body and its transformation. It is as if users realise that it is not enough to seek wellness but to perform wellness through a supposedly standard-beauty body. The analysis also revealed differences regarding body and expressions in constructing gender representations. The gender-related aspect is evident in posts showing specific body parts, especially in posts related to weight management. These posts commonly feature body transformations through collages or Instagram carousels—a type of post that allows users to upload and share up to 20 photos or videos in a single post—documenting weight loss progress and showcasing physical changes. Posts of men who had undergone such a process show them without shirts, focusing on the muscular definition achieved. However, in the case of women, the body was shown as a whole, and weight loss was praised with a focus on thinness. The impact that Instagram posts related to body image and appearance have on shaping ideals of body image and appearance has been identified (Tiggemann et al.,

2020). Our study highlights how this is also reflected in gender norms on wellness content. Evidence from our research demonstrates that the collective narrative of #wellness on Instagram contradicts the definition of wellness itself. As for the variety of body types, these appear predominantly in "before and after" posts, referring to the "before." That is, in some instances, a derogatory interpretation of the overweight body that needs to be improved to achieve wellness.

Regarding facial expressions, men were typically portrayed with serious expressions of dominance and control. This visual language aligns with traditional notions of masculinity. It is important to note that in many selfies, women intentionally cover their faces with a smartphone. This strategy aims to direct the audience's attention towards the body rather than the face. When the women's faces show, their expression tends to be friendlier, smiling and displaying lighter energy. This reinforces the stereotype of femininity associated with approachability and submissiveness. Previous studies have already identified that images often perpetuate gender stereotypes on social media, portraying men as active and dominant while females are depicted as attractive and dependent (Rose et al., 2012). This observation aligns with broader academic discussions about the limitations of a binary framework for understanding gender. Traditional gender binaries, which categorise individuals strictly as male or female, exclude the complexity of gender identities and expressions beyond these categories (Butler, 2006; Liesen, 2001). The posts analysed and the gender performances do not always represent an individual's gender identity. However, for the creators and users studied, the images they shared generally reflected gender presentations consistent with their sex assigned at birth. Notably, the sample exclusively features individuals identifying as male or female, overlooking representation from non-binary, transgender, or agender individuals. This gap underscores the need for broader inclusivity and representation in discussions about gender and wellness online.

3.3. Clothing & Adornment: A Visual Reinforcement of Stereotypes

Most of the clothing featured in the posts was sportswear. In posts where women were the primary focus, the clothing showed some diversity by featuring women of various body shapes and sizes. Form-fitting workout clothing is preferred over loose attire in posts depicting women. This type of clothing accentuates the body, focusing attention on a more fitted silhouette and highlighting curves and muscular shapes. The variety included leggings, tight shorts, crop tops, and sports bras. Athletes' use of high-waisted designs provided additional support and coverage. However, the variety of clothing choices in Instagram posts does not genuinely reflect inclusivity, as it is still gender specific.

In posts where men were the central focus, t-shirts, compression tops, sleeveless shirts, and lightweight shorts were showcased. Unlike women, men did not wear leggings or prefer tight clothing. In contrast, the focus was on men's clothing choices, prioritising functionality and performance, reflecting societal expectations of athleticism and physical prowess. This positions men's preference for clothes as a more relaxed fit, providing roomier cuts through the torso and shoulders. The adoption of sports attire can be seen as a lifestyle choice. It was a recurring representation associated with pre- or post-workout activities, embodying the athleisure concept. Athleisure combines athletic and leisure in a fashion trend defined by sporty clothing that is not only comfortable but also visually appealing, signifying that activewear has moved beyond the confines of the gym. However, although this concept refers to comfort, tight leggings were typical among women. Top clothing revealed hoodies and sweatshirts, a common element between different users. The results also indicate a lack of gender-neutral or unisex activewear, one of the trends in the fitness industry. Designed to be inclusive

and accessible to individuals of all genders, it challenges traditional binary distinctions in clothing and aims for a diverse range of body types and preferences. The study highlights how men typically wear clothing that accentuates their upper body musculature, emphasising the physical traits associated with the dominant masculine ideal (Lefkowich et al., 2017). In contrast, women were more likely to be seen in leggings and tight tops, with more significant variation observed. However, this variation often remains within the confines of conventionally feminine attire.

In terms of clothing colour, black was the predominant choice across different garments (e.g., tops, t-shirts, shorts) and was consistent across genders. However, women more frequently wore clothing in a variety of other colours. Neutral tones, such as light green and white, were preferred in yoga practice, though not exclusively, while more vibrant colours (e.g., red, pink) were favoured in other activities. Among both female and male bodybuilders, especially when displaying their physiques, there was a tendency to wear skimpy bikinis in bright and vibrant shades.

4. Conclusion

Our research focuses on understanding how wellness and gender are represented in popular posts. The collective narrative indirectly built through hashtags on Instagram (Amaral & Flores, 2023; Meraz, 2017; Zappavigna, 2015) can demonstrate if and how the traditional notions of gender and bodies are challenged or reinforced. Considering wellness as processual and multidimensional, our results reveal that users may respond to a limited idea of the concept. To pinpoint and further explore how people are depicted concerning #wellness, we isolated the posts classified in the physical category. While one may expect that results were necessarily connected to physical activities, the scrutinised posts underscore the predominance of fitness-related content in three themes. Practices & Workout, Body & Expressions, and Clothing & Adornment emerged from analysing the 300 most popular posts tagging #wellness. Our study results show that popular content is not only associated with hashtags or accounts related to fitness culture and communities, as observed previously (Mayoh & Jones, 2020; Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2021), but also with a holistic topic such as wellness.

Practices & Workouts refer to the representations of routines associated with physical exercise. For women, the focus is predominantly on yoga and lower-body workouts. Despite the visibility and resonance of the counter-narrative of women bodybuilders, our findings suggest that the discourse surrounding gender and physical wellness on Instagram remains predominantly aligned with normative expectations. Ideas about body image and appearance are influenced by gender norms (Mahon & Hevey, 2021), which are particularly important in the context of wellness. Such can also impact health-related behaviours, dictating societal expectations regarding how individuals should look and behave based on gender. These gendered expectations can influence individuals' attitudes towards physical activity, with some feeling motivated to exercise to meet societal standards. In opposition to this, others may feel discouraged or intimidated by unrealistic ideals or social judgement. For instance, societal pressures such as Yoga being perceived as feminine may keep men from practising it (Cagas et al., 2020).

Connecting the notion of wellness represented on Instagram in the dataset, especially on women, we may associate it with neoliberal feminism, a form of feminism that aligns with neoliberal ideologies and values, emphasising individual empowerment, self-improvement, and personal responsibility within a market-driven

society (Rottenberg, 2014). Unlike traditional liberal feminism, which critiques systemic inequalities and advocates for structural change, neoliberal feminism focuses on individual success, self-optimization, and achieving equality through market mechanisms. Neoliberal feminism often promotes ideas of "leaning in" to corporate structures, entrepreneurship, and self-branding as pathways to gender equality while downplaying the need for broader social and economic reforms. Additionally, such representations may create barriers to participation in physical activity for individuals who do not fit traditional gender norms.

Body & Expressions addresses the portrayal of bodies in shape, size, and photo or video framing. Female bodies are often depicted as thin and white, with facial expressions that are either hidden or smiling. Male bodies, as opposed, are typically muscular, with facial expressions that convey seriousness, dominance, and control. Literature has illustrated how conventional gender norms have linked physical strength and athleticism more closely with masculinity than femininity (e.g., Best & Williams, 2019; Connell, 2005). This association comes from traditional gender roles where men undertook physically demanding tasks while women were assigned domestic chores (Thébaud, 2010). The perpetuation of these traditional gender norms can be observed among Instagram users through their wellness-related posts.

The study's findings underscore the pervasive reinforcement of binary gender norms. This observation aligns with broader academic discussions about the limitations of a binary framework for understanding gender. Traditional gender binaries, which categorise individuals strictly as male or female, exclude the complexity of gender identities and expressions beyond these categories (Butler, 2006; Liesen, 2001). While the platform can be a space for challenging and subverting traditional gender norms, it can also play a role in sustaining prevailing social norms related to gender and beauty (Caldeira et al., 2018). Our study's findings further support this conclusion, which examined a generic hashtag that was not initially expected to be gendered. Gender norms influence societal body image and appearance standards, impacting individuals' attitudes towards physical activity, particularly in wellness contexts. Societal expectations of femininity may prioritise slimness and body shape, leading some women to concentrate on activities that aid in weight loss or toning rather than strength training. In this context, encouragement through positive and motivational messages that promote "confidence culture" places the burden of success on individuals and highlights that while seemingly positive, they fail to tackle structural oppression (Orgad & Gill, 2021). Conversely, traditional ideals of masculinity may prioritise muscularity and athleticism, influencing men's preferences for specific forms of physical activity.

Clothing & Adornment examines the representations of clothing and equipment choices in exercise contexts. Women are generally shown wearing body-hugging activewear, accentuating physical attributes and adhering to societal standards of femininity. Men are depicted in relaxed-fit sportswear, prioritising practicality and efficiency. Our discoveries highlight the enduring conventional binary divisions in attire, indicating a missed chance for all-encompassing representation. Clothing choices in wellness posts further reinforce these stereotypes, limiting the representation of diverse gender expressions.

These findings underscore the existence of gendered norms and stereotypes perpetuated within the context of wellness on Instagram. Considering that the sample is focused on the most popular public posts, it is essential to mention that the engagement structure on Instagram privileges content that aligns with prevailing aesthetic and societal norms (Caldeira et al., 2018). The interplay of algorithmic design, social validation, visual appeal, influencer culture, and cultural standards is a reinforced cycle where content that

fits these norms is more likely to receive high engagement and become more visible and influential (Cotter, 2019). As a result, alternative or diverse narratives that challenge these norms may need help gaining visibility and support, as they receive a different level of algorithmic and social backing. This raises the question of whether the platform's logic influences or favours the type of content that gains visibility and engagement. When given the chance to create parallel or alternative narratives, users either do not do so, or their content does not become part of the collective narrative. Moreover, the rise of intersectional feminism and LGBTQ+ activism within digital spaces has contributed to the proliferation of counter-narratives that intersect with issues of gender and wellness on Instagram. Counter-narratives on social media may offer alternative viewpoints that challenge mainstream discourses, empower marginalised communities, redefine identity, promote inclusivity, and highlight underrepresented experiences (e.g., Stryker, 2008; Tiggemann & Slater, 2014). Although the visibility and resonance of these counter-narratives underscore a shifting paradigm within the discourse, our results show the dominance of content related to normative patterns regarding gender and bodies. Although Instagram may catalyse dialogue, advocacy, and social change, it is necessary to recognise its usage limitations in the transformative potential regarding gender norms and fostering a more inclusive and affirming landscape.

This research engages with existing literature on the concept of wellness, particularly its physical dimension, even though previous studies have often focused on fitness rather than wellness per se. Specifically, this research concentrates on the physical aspect of wellness due to its prominence and visibility in Instagram users' expressions of wellness. The study aligns with research that views Instagram as a platform for observing wellness-related expressions and analysing content published by users who employ specific hashtags, engage with fitness communities, or are identified as fitness influencers. However, unlike studies that explore content creators' perspectives, strategies, or goals, this research examines the presentation of wellness content from the viewpoint of Instagram users, specifically exploring how visual narratives are formed through posts rather than user interactions such as comments. It does so by analysing wellness performances and expressions, particularly those that garner significant engagement, to understand their implications for users seeking content through wellness-related hashtags. This study goes beyond merely examining specific workouts, body performance, or gender representation by integrating these themes with other factors, such as the locations chosen for exercise, the types of clothing worn, and the overall presentation of wellness. It employs a qualitative approach to capture nuances, details and underlying meanings that quantitative methods might overlook. The themes identified contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of wellness and offer insights into the other dimensions of wellness beyond the physical. This research is positioned within the broader field of wellness studies, particularly those focusing on Instagram and the physical dimension of wellness. It adds value by highlighting that, despite wellness being defined as a multidimensional concept, it is predominantly represented through physical expressions on Instagram. This suggests that other dimensions of wellness are mainly invisible on this platform.

Furthermore, wellness on Instagram tends to be portrayed in a "one-size-fits-all" manner and disregards individual differences and experiences. It illustrates how wellness is represented within dominant media cultures, with the hashtag manifesting this phenomenon. For example, the content often reflects gender representations that align with the creators' gender assigned at birth. This homogenised representation is further characterised by a binary view of gender, with little room for expressions that transcend traditional masculine and feminine norms among the most engaging posts in the sample.

5. Limitations and Future Research

The corpus consists solely of public Instagram posts, thereby excluding private expressions and potentially omitting a significant portion of wellness-related discourse. Given that Instagram users do not constitute a representative sample of the broader population, the findings are not generalisable to the general population or other social media platforms. Furthermore, data collection was confined to a specific time frame, which may not adequately reflect the evolving nature of wellness discourse over time. Only posts from the physical category were analysed, which limited our findings' generalisability. The study does not specify who posted the content and so does not provide a breakdown of how many of those 300 posts are by individual or brand. Despite these constraints, the method is valid for this study's objectives. Further exploration is needed to understand the impact of other post elements, such as comments. A comprehensive understanding of gender in #wellness requires a study of different dimensions. Instagram reinforces traditional gender stereotypes in wellness culture, but a movement is challenging these norms, especially regarding female representation. This raises critical questions about how gendered representations on Instagram affect self-perception and behaviour, particularly body image and wellness practices. Addressing these questions will help determine if the platform can empower a broader range of experiences in wellness culture.

Conflict of Interests
The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Data Availability
Due to the sensitive nature of the data, the access is restricted to researchers under request to the correspondence author.

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