

## FITNESS AND BODY IDENTITY: SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

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**Abstract:** In modern times, body image has become a criterion for social validation, and the fitness industry and social networks contribute to the formation of body identity and the shaping of ideal body patterns. The body has become a symbol of discipline, work, and even social status. In addition, fitness can be seen as a form of social differentiation or resistance to gender stereotypes, especially among women, who choose not to conform to traditional clichés of „femininity”. In turn, the fitspiration phenomenon gives a digital dimension to identity construction, as a motivating factor and as a mechanism of social pressure and comparison. The present study critically synthesizes the existing literature, integrating sociological and cultural perspectives, with a focus on identity, fitness, body image, gender differences, and social networks. We conducted a comprehensive search based on the PRISMA model on PubMed, Frontiers, ResearchGate, and JSTOR to find relevant articles published in the last 10 years. 44 articles were included in the study, meeting the eligibility criteria. Content analysis in this case proves useful for theoretical clarifications and for the field application of various sociological research techniques.

**Keywords:** Fitness, body image, identity, physical activity, fitspiration.

**Résumé :** À l'époque moderne, l'image corporelle est devenue un critère de validation sociale. L'industrie du fitness et les réseaux sociaux contribuent à la formation de l'identité corporelle et à la définition de modèles corporels idéaux. Le corps est devenu un symbole de discipline, de travail et même de statut social. De plus, le fitness peut être perçu comme une forme de différenciation sociale ou de résistance aux stéréotypes de genre, notamment chez les femmes qui choisissent de ne pas se conformer aux clichés traditionnels de la « féminité ». De son côté, le phénomène de fitspiration confère une dimension numérique à la construction identitaire, en tant que facteur de motivation et mécanisme de pression sociale et de comparaison.

La présente étude synthétise de manière critique la littérature existante, intégrant des perspectives sociologiques et culturelles, en se concentrant sur l'identité, le fitness, l'image corporelle, les différences de genre et les réseaux sociaux. Nous avons mené une recherche exhaustive basée sur le modèle PRISMA sur PubMed, Frontiers, ResearchGate et JSTOR afin d'identifier les articles pertinents publiés au cours des dix dernières années. 44 articles ont été inclus dans l'étude, répondant aux critères d'éligibilité. L'analyse de contenu s'avère ici utile pour des clarifications théoriques et pour l'application concrète de diverses techniques de recherche sociologique.

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**Mots-clés :** Forme physique, image corporelle, identité, activitate fizică, fitspiration

**Rezumat:** În modernitate, imaginea corporală a devenit un criteriu de validare socială, iar industria fitness și rețelele de socializare contribuie la formarea identității corporale și la conturarea unor tipare corporale ideale. Corpul a devenit un simbol al disciplinei, muncii și chiar al statutului social. În plus, fitnessul poate fi privit ca o formă de diferențiere socială sau de rezistență la stereotipurile de gen, în special în rândul femeilor, care aleg să nu se conformeze clișeele tradiționale ale „feminității”. La rândul lui, fenomenul fitspiration conferă o dimensiunea digitală a construirii identității, ca factor motivator și ca mecanism de presiune și comparație socială.

Studiul de față sintetizează critic literatura existentă, integrând perspective sociologice și culturale, cu accent pe identitate, fitness, imaginea corporală, diferențe de gen și rețele de socializare. Am realizat o căutare cuprinzătoare pe baza modelului PRISMA pe PubMed, Frontiers, ResearchGate și JSTOR pentru a găsi articole relevante publicate în ultimii 10 ani. Au fost incluse în studiu 44 de articole, îndeplinind criteriile de eligibilitate. Analiza de conținut în acest caz se dovedește utilă pentru clarificări teoretice și pentru aplicarea în teren a diverse tehnici de cercetare sociologică.

**Cuvinte cheie:** Fitness, imaginea corporală, identitate, activitate fizică, fitspiration.

## Introduction

Exposure to images in the media, whether traditional sources such as television and magazines or social networks, has long been investigated, particularly in the field of body image, with a negative impact observed on people's perception of their own bodies. Dissatisfaction with one's own body leads to disorders such as bulimia, obesity, depression, and low self-esteem, and can even lead to suicide (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2021). Studies have shown that young people are generally more affected by body image disorders than older people, people with higher incomes, and people who are not part of ethnic minorities. In terms of gender, women seem to be more affected by body image disorders than men (Botta, 2003). A major impact of the emergence of these body image disorders is the fitness subculture, which is increasingly present on social media and affects the image of masculinity or femininity and beauty ideals for both sexes (Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015).

### 1. Theoretical framework

The fitness subculture can be better understood by analyzing sociological concepts and theories about the body as a project of identity and social capital.

#### 1.1. The social dimension of fitness and bodily capital – Pierre Bourdieu

The body is seen by Turner (1996) as a „place of power” or an „instrument of social control,” arguing that to understand society, we must analyze the body as a cultural, social, and political object.

Individuals end up consuming all kinds of products to improve their image, products for health, beauty, rejuvenation, fitness, and building an identity that

transcends that of the group. P. Bourdieu theorizes that if someone belongs to a certain group with which they identify, then they will make choices as a consumer that reflect the habitus of that group, also called class habitus (Bourdieu, 1994). These choices are most often made with the conviction that they are personal, „natural,” and derived from the uniqueness of the individual. Bourdieu analyses the relationship between the body and sport and argues that the care given to the body through sport and healthy eating varies according to the social class to which the individual belongs. In the same vein, he suggests that the sports practiced may vary according to class, with the working class being more oriented towards soccer, boxing, and bodybuilding, while the upper classes appreciate golf or polo. The choice of these sports again highlights the instrumental relationship that the working class has with its own body, choosing sports where physical activity is more intense in an attempt to create a distinctive body. The working class's view of the body is instrumental, considering it a means to an end. Meanwhile, the upper class views the body as an end in itself, an identity project (Bourdieu, 1994).

Bodybuilding has been researched in this regard, and it has been found that excessive physical masculinity denotes discipline and self-control. Bourdieu suggests that strength is the demand of the working class, which can be satisfied through sports such as boxing and bodybuilding, while the bourgeois class is more oriented towards having a healthy body, a demand that can be satisfied through athletics, swimming, or gymnastics (Fayaz, n.d.).

This gives rise to the concept of „body capital,” introduced by Bourdieu to describe how the body becomes an instrument of social distinction. Individuals invest in their bodies through clothing style, physical training, diets, or cosmetic surgery, thus expressing their social status or belonging (Fayaz, 1991).

Shilling (1993) argued that modernity has led to an „individualization” of the body, which has become a source of symbolic capital in consumer society, as Bourdieu called it (Bourdieu, 1986).

From this perspective, the body can be seen as physical capital because athletes can earn income from „sculpting” it. Shilling also offers another example of treating the body as physical capital, referring to prostitution (Shilling, 1997), to which newer industries such as OnlyFans and Videochat can be added, where people use their bodies for material gain.

### **1.2. Anthony Giddens and the body as an identity project**

Anthony Giddens' theory (1991) approaches the body as an „identity project” for individuals who shape their own lifestyle through physical exercise or clothing.

Giddens considers the body „increasingly less an extrinsic given, functioning outside the internal reference systems of modernity, becoming itself reflexively mobilized.” Our body expresses who we are, becoming „the means of expressing our individuality and aspirations, as well as our group affiliations” (Giddens, 1991). Giddens sees body cultivation as a profound concern with

constructing and controlling the body, and not just as a tendency to cultivate bodily appearance.

By focusing on our bodies and working on them for competitions that focus on physical appearance, such as beauty pageants or bodybuilding and fitness competitions, we turn our bodies into our own „projects” (Nettleton, 1998).

There is a growing concern with building healthy bodies, as evidenced by the large sums people pay for gym memberships, dietary supplements, diet plans, and healthy food. Chris Shilling points out that in a global world that increasingly threatens individual health through various dietary practices, pollution, and other destructive factors, maintaining health and taking responsibility for caring for one's own body is the only solution to protect it (Shilling, 1997). At the same time, individuals are not only concerned with their physical health but also with their mental health, with feeling good in their own bodies both in relation to themselves and to others. Body maintenance projects „can be seen as a way for individuals to express themselves, feel good, and gain some control over their lives” (Shilling, 1997). Although we consider ourselves free in terms of our own bodies, the influence of our society or culture unconsciously limits our freedom.

Body maintenance projects could also be seen as a way to express one's individuality and overcome societal ideas of the „ideal body” or „normal body.” Individuals try to overcome these barriers and prejudices by celebrating their uniqueness through a series of body modifications, such as bodybuilding, tattoos, or piercings (Holland, 2004). Aesthetic procedures, fitness training, and diets are „social decisions related to the desire to bring individual bodies as close as possible to the social and cultural standards, norms, and expectations of the moment” (Vlăsceanu, 2011).

According to data provided by the American Society for Plastic Surgery, the number of cosmetic procedures increased by 10%. Thus, in 2023, 1,561,385 procedures were recorded, of which 93.4% were performed on women and 6.6% on men. The most common procedures among women were liposuction, tummy tucks, breast augmentation, and eyelid surgery, while the most common procedures among men were gynecomastia treatment, chin augmentation, and rhinoplasty. The highest number of procedures was recorded among people aged 35-50 (40%). The results show differences in procedure preferences depending on the age of the individuals. Breast augmentation is the preferred procedure for people aged 18-34, while liposuction is the most common procedure among people over 35 (Aesthetic Plastic Surgery, 2023).

Body projects give meaning to physical activity and can be seen as a form of expression for individuals who do not wish to conform to society's standards of what a „normal body” should look like. Thus, bodybuilding can be seen as a way to overcome these stereotypes, especially among women who do not conform to ideals of „femininity, as stated by a female bodybuilder: „When I look in the mirror, I see someone who has found herself, who has said once and for all that it doesn't really matter what role society has said I should play” (Rosen, 1983, cited in Shilling, 1997, p. 71). Shilling (1993) considers bodybuilding to be a true example of

the body as an identity project because the size and quality of the muscles achieved by athletes is different from what society considers normal and natural for both sexes.

## **2. Methodology**

The systematic review was conducted using the PRISMA (Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) method, a guide for authors to conduct systematic, appropriate, and comprehensive reviews. The PRISMA method involves a checklist of 27 items, which has been approved by health science organizations and journals and is applied in systematic analyses.

The search was conducted on several platforms, such as PubMed, Frontiers, ResearchGate, and JSTOR, and 128 articles in English were identified. To be included in the analysis, the articles had to analyze one of the research subtopics: fitness - social and identity capital, body image and mental health, identity related to physical exercise and gender differences, social networks, and Fitspiration. Opinion articles and studies without empirical data were excluded (n=75). We removed duplicates (n=9), then read the abstracts of the articles, and following this analysis, 44 empirical studies were included in the research. This review includes studies from many countries because we wanted to gain a global understanding of the fitness subculture and the formation of body identity. We present in Table 1 a sample of our analysis.

## **3. Results**

### **3.1. Fitness – social resource and identity capital**

Membership in a fitness club, training group, or other types of sports communities can generate social capital through the relationships that form within them or the opportunities that may arise for athletes. In this way, through sports networks and communities, fitness can become a source of social capital. In general, practicing fitness, the associated discipline, physical condition, and developed musculature are socially valued, functioning as forms of symbolic and identity capital. Musculature has been identified as a versatile form of identity capital that can influence other types of identities, such as occupation or status of athletes. For example, weight training has been considered a tool for self-promotion and personal development among fitness trainers (Cranswick *et al.*, 2024). Fitness thus becomes a resource for validating and defining the self.

Table 1. Samples from a thematic analysis.

No	Author(s) Year	Objective/purpose	Methodology	Sample/ Participants	Main results
II. Fitness and identity capital					
1	Cranswick, I., <i>et al.</i> (2024)	Exploring the role of muscularity and weight training as capital in people's identities in various contexts.	Qualitative	11 fitness trainers	Weight training was considered a tool for self-promotion and personal development among fitness trainers.
2	Golaszewski, <i>et al.</i> (2022)	Exploring how positive relationships in exercise groups can represent forms of social support—informational, emotional, validation, companionship, and identity.	Quantitative	506 adults	Membership in an exercise group is associated by individuals with forms of social support that reinforce exercise identity, emotional support ( $\beta = 0.36$ ), informational support, validation ( $\beta = 0.25$ ), and friendship.
3	Skilbred A, Strandbu A, Loland S. (2024)	The study explores athletes' presentations of athletic identity.	Qualitative	24 young	Athletes justify practicing sports and achieving performance through the need to distinguish themselves within their group. "Personal and cultural values surrounding uniqueness play a significant role in athletes' presentations regarding their athletic identity."

No	Author(s) Year	Objective/purpose	Methodology	Sample/ Participants	Main results
<i>II. Identity related to physical exercise and gender/age differences</i>					
4	Geary, <i>et al.</i> , (2025)	Exploring important athletic transitions in the formation and development of athletic identity in elite athletes.	Qualitative	9 elite athletes	Initiation and mentoring in sport play an important role in athletic identity formation. The formation and development of athletic identity is influenced by associated external validation, perceived competence, and personal commitment.
5.	Zhang R., <i>et al.</i> , (2024)	The study analyses the correlation between body image, physical activity, and the feeling of achieving an athletic physique, as well as the feeling of adapting to social norms.	Quantitative	835 students	The study showed that physical activity determines the feeling of achieving an athletic physique among students, while also contributing to the feeling of social adaptation.
<i>III. Body image</i>					
6.	Rojó-Ramos J., <i>et al.</i> (2022)	Identifying potential associations between self-perceived physical fitness and body image, and analyzing possible gender differences.	Quantitative	278 students	The study highlighted a correlation between perceived physical fitness and body image, with clear differences between genders.
7	Sánchez, C., <i>et al.</i> (2024)	Exploring how body image concerns and emerging disorders, such as muscle dysmorphia ("bigorexia"), are presented in online discussions.	Content analysis	46 Reddit forums	Online communities dedicated to diet and fitness Express negative emotions and toxicity, while communities focused on muscular ideals express less negativity and more motivation.

No	Author(s) Year	Objective/purpose	Methodology	Sample/ Participants	Main results
IV. Social media and Fitspiration					
8	Easton S, <i>et al.</i> (2018)	Exploring how individuals perceive fitspiration posts.	Qualitative	20 adults	Subjects identified negative effects of consuming fitspiration content, such as promoting unrealistic and unattainable ideals, frustration, guilt, but also positive effects, such as motivation or promoting health.
9	Limniou M, Mahoney C, Knox M. (2021)	Exploring the effects of viewing fitspiration photos on body image and the internalization of body ideals.	Quantitative	109 British students	Exposure to fitspiration content on social media resulted in a significant reduction in self-esteem and internalization of body ideals (with men showing a greater proportion). Even a small amount of exposure can negatively influence self-esteem.



Practicing sports and achieving performance has been justified by athletes' need to distinguish themselves within their group. The need for uniqueness is a powerful motivator in the context of sports, where „personal and cultural values surrounding uniqueness play a significant role in athletes' presentations of their athletic identity” (Skilbred *et al.*, 2024).

The identities that athletes form allow them to define themselves, influencing the behaviours they adopt based on their established identity (Traugutt, *et al.*, 2018). The formation and development of athletic identity depends on several factors, such as the importance of the sport in the individual's life, the perceived level of performance that contributes to increased self-esteem, the culture of the sports club, the environment, the characteristics of the sport, initiation and mentoring in sport, and the expectations of others, associated external validation, and personal commitment (Geary *et al.*, 2025; Traugutt *et al.*, 2018; Verkooijen, Bruijn, 2013). Shaping an identity related to fitness also includes less positive aspects such as social comparison, internalization of ideal patterns, or excessive fitness training regimes (Greyling, Naudé, 2023).

Fitness is valued for its benefits to physical and mental health, relaxation, socialization, and personal identity formation (Greyling, Naudé, 2023). Powerlifting has been seen as an act of rebellion against gender stereotypes and norms, rejecting body ideals and the objectification of women (Kell *et al.*, 2022).

### **3.2. Identity related to physical exercise and gender/ age differences**

Building identity involves the continuous construction of self-awareness and adaptation to the obstacles and opportunities that arise in their ever-changing social life (Côté, 2016).

The body has become a place for „producing and displaying the self” and an important aspect of identity and self-expression (Erikson, 1968). Fitness is a sport in which individuals can „work” their bodies and muscles as part of building bodily identities.

Changing or improving body aesthetics through weight training is „body work” (Shilling, 1993), which becomes part of a body project (Giddens, 1991).

Identity can be seen as „a modifiable target for behaviour change interventions that can support long-term behaviour change” (Caldwell *et al.*, 2024). Exercise-related identity has been considered both a result of personal behaviour and sustained behaviour (Husband *et al.*, 2019).

A growing number of studies have claimed that physical activity promotes physical, mental (Zartaloudi *et al.*, 2023), and spiritual (Luo *et al.*, 2003) well-being, body image, and has a positive effect on reducing loneliness (Zhou *et al.*, 2025).

Strength training has been associated with significant improvements in several areas such as body image, self-esteem, quality of life, health, satisfaction, and comfort (Seguin, 2015; Yao *et al.*, 2021).

Studies have shown that belonging to an exercise group is positively associated with self-esteem (O'Connell, n.d.) and with social support, emotional

support, informational support, validation, and friendship, reinforcing one's identity with exercise (Golaszewski *et al.*, 2022). Exercise identity has been positively correlated with self-assessment of body image, with no association with anxiety caused by external evaluations by other individuals (Liardi *et al.*, 2022).

### **3.3. Body image**

Body image refers to individuals' perceptions, evaluations, and emotions about their own bodies, which are determined by several social, psychological, and cultural factors (Zhou, 2025). Studies have shown that physical activity can improve body image by increasing individuals' satisfaction with their physical appearance, along with weight loss, muscle mass gain, or muscle toning. The results reveal that body image also influences involvement in physical activities, with individuals with a negative self-image having certain reservations about going to the gym, while a positive body image has been associated with self-esteem, physical and emotional well-being, quality of life, and lower rates of anxiety and depression (Slevec, Tiggemann, 2011).

Significant differences were identified between actual and ideal body shapes in individuals who do not exercise, while in individuals who engage in resistance or strength training, this difference was not significant, showing that exercise can increase satisfaction with one's body image (Rica *et al.*, 2018).

However, some studies have not identified a correlation between self-esteem and body image dissatisfaction (Schmidt, 2014; Asanoh, 2024). Instead, self-esteem generated by men's concern about how their physical appearance is judged by others leads to dissatisfaction with their own bodies (Schmidt, 2014). Negative body image perception occurs when there is a discrepancy between the body image perceived by the individual and the one they consider ideal (Tey, 2024).

### **3.4. Social media and Fitspiration**

In recent years, social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter have been analysed in several studies to determine their impact on body image and personal identity. Social media is increasingly being used by influencers, athletes, and fitness trainers to inspire people to lead a healthy lifestyle through content created in the form of images and motivational messages. This type of content is called „fitspiration” (Alberga, 2018).

More and more researchers have analysed fitspiration content on social media, finding that posts focus more on appearance and attractiveness than on health. An analysis found that women showed more of their bodies in the photos they posted (Carrotte *et al.*, 2017). Another study identified gender differences in the influence of fitspiration on the self, as women seem to be much more concerned with attractiveness, while men evaluated their bodies more positively (Kamps, Berman, 2011).

Individuals seem to be aware of the negative effects of consuming fitspiration content, including the promotion of unrealistic and unattainable ideals, frustration, guilt (Easton *et al.*, 2018), eating disorders (Christensen *et al.*, 2021), a

significant reduction in self-esteem, and the internalization of body ideals (Limniou *et al.*, 2021). Exposure to content promoting diets and weight loss methods has been associated with negative physical appearance ratings and eating disorders. (Reilly *et al.*, 2023). The results indicate that both content creators and users experience these positive and negative feelings as a result of fitspiration images, with content users and women registering a higher proportion (DiBisceglie, Arigo, 2021), while men internalize the body ideals present in the media to a greater extent (Limniou *et al.*, 2021). Even a small amount of exposure to fitspiration content is enough to negatively influence an individual's self-esteem (viewing just five fitspiration images) (Limniou *et al.*, 2021).

Online communities dedicated to dieting and fitness were perceived as toxic by individuals, while communities focused on muscular ideals were associated with less negativity and more motivation (Sánchez *et al.*, 2024).

Some studies have linked time spent on social media to body image and eating disorders (Holland, Tiggemann, 2017), while other studies have shown that there is no correlation between time spent and a negative body image; on the contrary, more time spent on Twitter has been associated with increased motivation to exercise (McColgan, Paradis, 2022).

#### **4. Discussions**

This section aims to present the convergences and contradictions identified in the systematic review, proposing further directions for future research on fitness and body identity. The purpose of this systematic review was to explore how physical activity and fitness contribute to the formation of body identity. The study critically reviewed the existing literature, integrating sociological and cultural perspectives, with a focus on identity, body image, physical activity, self-esteem, gender differences, and social networks.

The results reveal that fitness can contribute to personal development and the construction of bodily identity, representing a form of symbolic capital, but also a subtle mechanism of social control. Strength training and muscle mass growth represent tangible capital that empowers individuals and increases their intangible capital—independence, self-confidence, and a positive body image—facilitating performance across multiple identities (Enverga, 2025; Seguin, 2015; Yao *et al.*, 2021). Other studies have identified the negative effects of fitness on identity formation, such as social comparison, internalization of ideal patterns, or excessive strength training regimens (Greyling, Naudé, 2023). This contradiction may arise due to the way fitness is approached, as a sport that promotes health or as a sport practiced to improve body image. Fitness cannot be reduced to a simple sport, but must be analysed as a social, cultural, and ideological phenomenon.

Body identity is not seen as a static construct, but as a dynamic process of modelling based on social and cultural interactions, experience, and individual work. The body is seen as a „means of communication and symbolization of masculinity and a form of physical capital that embodies the skills and abilities to establish and validate masculine identities and their value” (Cranswick, 2024).

The results indicate gender differences in body identity and approach to fitness. Among women, strength training induces a sense of liberation and empowerment to challenge essentialist and oppressive feminine ideals (Kell *et al.*, 2022; Enverga, 2025). By overcoming limitations of the body and muscle strength, women can renegotiate and redefine the body „as a personal process rather than a social object” (Enverga, 2025), while men internalize body ideals more, associating muscle with status and power of control.

The phenomenon of fitspiration adds a digital dimension to identity construction, playing both a motivational and a negative role. Contradictions have been identified regarding the influence of fitspiration on body image and identity, as some studies have indicated that exposure to „fitspiration” content increases dissatisfaction with one's own body and comparisons between an individual's physical appearance and the idealized bodies conveyed in the media, especially among young people (Limniou *et al.*, 2021; Jerónimo, 2017; Christensen *et al.*, 2021). Viewing fitspiration images on social media has been associated with a high degree of internalization of physical ideals, which increases the tendency to make body comparisons (Jeronimo, 2017), and some studies have associated fitspiration with motivation (McColgan, Paradis, 2022; Sánchez *et al.*, 2024).

## **5. Limitations and future research directions**

This review has several limitations. Firstly, very few empirical studies address fitness from a social perspective; or this reason, most of the studies found analyze the role of physical activity in general in shaping identity. Secondly, there is also a relatively small number of qualitative studies on this topic, and most of them have a sample consisting of women or students. Thirdly, only English-language publications were included, which may have led to a language bias. We have identified a need for critical gender studies addressing masculinity and body image, or for longitudinal studies to identify the effects of fitspiration on body identity formation.

Future research could explore generational and cultural differences in body identity formation or analyze how the fitness industry's discourses on health and discipline conceal toxic positivity language.

## **6. Conclusions**

This research highlighted the need to approach fitness from a social, cultural, and identity perspective.

In today's society, where physical appearance is super important, the body has become a symbol of discipline, hard work, and even status. From Bourdieu's perspective, doing physical activity, strength training, and being part of sports communities can be seen as forms of symbolic and identity capital. However, there is a tension between autonomy and conformity in the construction and redefinition of identity, as individuals tend to reproduce the body ideals promoted by the fitness

and beauty industries, which produce a standardization of „acceptable” or „ideal” bodies, limiting the expression of individual uniqueness.

Exposure to the standards promoted by the fitness industry on social media creates social pressure, dissatisfaction, frustration, and a negative body image, especially among young people and those who fail to achieve those ideals.

Fitness can also be viewed from another perspective, as a form of social differentiation or resistance to gender stereotypes, especially among women who choose not to conform to traditional clichés of „femininity.”

Future research should empirically analyze the influence of fitness in shaping body and self-identity and propose programs that support a positive body image and self-esteem.

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