

Turning likes into lifts: Understanding how adolescents experience fitfluencer content and the opportunities it offers them

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ABSTRACT

Current research on fitfluencers and fitspiration content is mostly quantitative and emphasizes its negative impact, overlooking its opportunities. Adolescents, who are undergoing an important and delicate developmental period, are largely understudied in research on fitfluencers and fitspiration. Combined with more than 80% of the world's adolescents not being sufficiently physically active, more research is needed on how fitfluencers may positively impact adolescents' mental and physical health. Through 20 semi-structured in-depth interviews with adolescents (aged 14–18), this study explores their lived experiences with fitfluencers and the role these play in their mental and physical health, and which opportunities fitfluencers offer to positively impact adolescents. Adolescents reported minimal negative consequences of fitfluencers and experience more motivation than demotivation. Four main opportunities—information, authenticity, actionable content, and entertainment—incited motivation to exercise and make fitfluencers' appearance and lifestyle more attainable and relatable. These results can guide future research on how fitfluencers can positively affect adolescents.

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Introduction

The “*bulking and cutting*” trend is a widely known practice among adolescents. This trend gained substantial popularity in the past years, thanks to the more than 600,000 TikTok videos endorsing #bulking content (TikTok, n.d.). Bulking entails a period focused on a high intake of calories and proteins, coupled with intense weight training to gain muscle mass. The subsequent cutting phase involves a period of weight loss where calorie intake is restricted, while muscle mass is preserved and muscle definition is enhanced (Ganson et al., 2022; Lavender et al., 2017). This fitness trend defined a new way to reach a body ideal of athletic and muscular bodies and already motivated many adolescents to engage in fitness activities by offering them a clear fitness and nutrition programme. The “bulking and cutting” trend exemplifies the great potential fitfluencers offer to influence adolescents' nutrition and exercise behaviour, turning their “likes” into “lifts”. This potential is crucial given that more than 80% of the world's adolescents are not physically active enough (WHO, 2022), and this lack of physical activity can have detrimental effects on adolescents' physical and mental health (Mammen & Faulkner, 2013; Schuch et al., 2016; WHO, 2018).

Fitfluencers can be defined as niche influencers (i.e., social media users with a large network of

followers who are seen as an expert in a certain niche; De Veirman et al., 2017) who post fitness-related content. The content of fitfluencers is often referred to as (#)fitspiration content (Bell et al., 2019; Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2018), a collective name for content that involves workout instructions, posing and showing off muscular and athletic bodies, content on nutrition, and so forth (Angrish et al., 2024; Curtis et al., 2023; Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2018). This content is very popular on social media. For example, on Instagram, more than 18 million posts contain the hashtag “fitspiration” (Instagram, n.d.). Additionally, previous research has reported an increase in fitspiration content since the COVID-19 pandemic (Godefroy, 2020; Kim et al., 2022).

Research exploring the impact of exposure to this fitspiration content consistently reveals a negative impact on body image among young adults. Indeed, a recent systematic review of fitspiration content showed that exposure to fitspiration leads to more body dissatisfaction, physical appearance comparisons, and a more negative mood (Jerónimo & Carraça, 2022). At the same time, with regard to motivation to exercise, Nuss et al. (2023) conclude in their systematic review that most studies show no significant impact of fitspiration content on exercise, and only a small number of studies indicate a (mixed)

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positive impact. The authors claimed that the unattainability of the bodies in fitspiration content may limit its impact on exercise behaviour. In line with this, several content analyses have demonstrated that fitspiration content predominantly features thin and toned bodies for women and very muscular bodies for men, thereby promoting one idealized body type (Deighton-Smith & Bell, 2018; Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2018).

With this study, we aim to explore adolescents' lived experiences with fitfluencers, how these experiences play a role in their mental and physical health (exercise and nutrition), and identify, according to adolescents, which opportunities fitfluencers offer to positively impact them. In particular, we focus on middle and late adolescence (14–18 years old), a developmental phase that has been largely overlooked in past fitfluencer research but in which individuals are highly susceptible to the influence of models in the media (Martin & Kennedy, 1993; Xu, 2023). Performing research among adolescents is imperative, as they are in a transitional phase where they have a higher preoccupation with their body and appearance due to the bodily changes they are undergoing, leading to numerous insecurities (Jackson & Goossens, 2006). Moreover, health-related attitudes and habits are formed during adolescence that can endure throughout one's life (Bröder & Carvalho, 2019). Thus, it is vital to understand which opportunities fitfluencers offer for adolescents' mental and physical health in order to perpetuate a healthy lifestyle in the long run.

To our knowledge, few qualitative studies thus far have focused on adolescents. Bell et al. (2019) organized focus groups examining young adolescents' (aged 12–13) perspectives on fitness and fitspiration. Adolescents in this study labelled fitspiration as demotivating and inciting low self-esteem. Frühauf et al. (2024) conducted in-depth interviews among adolescent girls (14–19 years) examining how they use and perceive fitspiration content. Their results revealed that, although the participants experienced some negative effects, they mainly mentioned a positive impact of fitspiration content on, for example, their motivation to exercise and eating behaviours (Frühauf et al., 2024). Our study builds on these insights by incorporating young and middle adolescent boys as well. Although often ignored in past research, boys also follow fitfluencer content, and some studies have already shown the popularity of fitspiration content among young adult men (Easton et al., 2018; Mayoh & Jones, 2021), making it important to study both male and female adolescents. Additionally, while these previous studies focused on fitspiration content in general, this study investigates lived experiences with and opportunities fitfluencers offer to positively impact adolescents' mental and physical health. An important characteristic of

influencers is that followers often develop a parasocial relationship with them (i.e., a sense of connection, closeness, and even friendship with an influencer; Horton & Wohl, 1956). Consequently, fitspiration content of fitfluencers can have an even stronger impact than the fitspiration content of other social media users because fitfluencers are perceived as peers (De Veirman et al., 2019), and peer influence is very strong among adolescents (Erikson, 1968; Jackson & Goossens, 2006). In addition, a single exposure to fitspiration content can create a distorted perception, as it does not provide users with a comprehensive understanding of the full exercise or nutrition plan. In contrast, following fitfluencers may offer more context and continuity, further explaining this stronger impact. However, an in-depth exploration identifying the specific opportunities fitfluencers offer to produce positive effects is lacking; this study aims to fill this gap.

In sum, this interview study contributes to prior literature on fitfluencers and fitspiration and fills the identified research gaps by 1) focusing on adolescents rather than on young adults, 2) qualitatively investigating the experiences of female and male middle and late adolescents, and 3) identifying which opportunities fitfluencers offer to positively impact adolescents' mental and physical health. The results of this study offer practical guidance for fitfluencer content to produce positive effects on adolescents. Two research questions are put forward:

RQ1: What are middle and late adolescents' lived experiences with fitfluencers and what is the role these experiences play in adolescents' mental and physical health?

RQ2: Which opportunities do fitfluencers offer to positively impact adolescents' mental and physical health?

Theoretical Framework

Social comparisons with fitfluencers

According to social comparison theory, individuals have the tendency to compare themselves with others to evaluate their appearance and behaviour (Crusius et al., 2022; Festinger, 1954). While these comparisons were initially, before the rise of media and social media, with targets from one's environment, people increasingly compare themselves with media models, celebrities, and more recently influencers on social media (Crusius et al., 2022; Myers & Crowther, 2009). Social comparison theory distinguishes between downward comparisons (with those perceived as inferior) and upward comparisons (with others who are perceived to be better off; Festinger, 1954). These comparisons can make people aware of

a gap between oneself and the comparison target, referred to as self-discrepancy (Higgins, 1987). On social media, comparisons are most frequently upward as people present an idealized version of themselves and their appearance (Verduyn et al., 2020). Thus, comparisons with fitfluencers are mostly upward appearance comparisons as fitfluencers show off their idealized bodies on social media (Deighton-Smith & Bell, 2018; Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2018).

While social comparison serves as the overarching theoretical framework of fitfluencers' impact on their followers, attainability and pressure are also important concepts in this regard. Fitfluencers seem to set and reinforce "norms" for the ideal body in society (Mayoh & Jones, 2021), but viewers often perceive their bodies to be unattainable. Observing this social norm and then failing to live up to that ideal standard may produce negative effects on one's mental health and motivation to exercise. In addition, comparing oneself with content of fitfluencers can create pressure to comply with this ideal (Barlett et al., 2008; Pryde & Prichard, 2022; Xu, 2023), called ideal-internalization (Fatt et al., 2019). Thus, appearance comparison, attainability, and pressure can be seen as underlying mechanisms of fitfluencers' impact on body image and physical health (exercise and nutrition).

However, based on social comparison theory, positive effects of fitfluencers may be expected as well. Smith (2000) states that upward comparisons can elicit two types of outcomes: assimilative and contrastive comparison feelings. While contrastive comparison feelings are more negative (depression, envy, and resentment), assimilative comparison feelings are more positive (inspiration, optimism, and admiration). The perceived attainability of the comparison target is crucial in determining one's feelings following upward comparisons (Hoyt, 2012; Smith, 2000). When the gap (i.e., self-discrepancy) between oneself and the comparison target seems impassable, contrastive social comparison feelings may be evoked, while assimilative comparison feelings can arise when the comparison target appears to be attainable (Smith, 2000; Tian et al., 2023). Thus, while contrastive comparisons lead to negative feelings because of the heightened self-discrepancy they cause, assimilative comparisons may be more motivational and inspire individuals to decrease self-discrepancy by, for instance, exercising more. The motivational theory of role modelling is used to explain how fitfluencers can have these positive (assimilative) effects.

Fitfluencers as inspirational role models

The motivational theory of role modelling outlines how fitfluencers can have a positive impact on viewers by acting as role models. Role models can

impact on others' behaviours, motivations, and goals through three important functions: model behaviour, inspiration, and show what is possible (Morgenroth et al., 2015). According to the motivational theory of role modelling, people can learn by observing the behaviours and experiences of role models. This creates expectations of the potential outcomes of those behaviours, which can motivate people to adopt those behaviours (Morgenroth et al., 2015). O'Donnell et al. (2023) identified five strategies that role models apply on TikTok: inspiring others, modelling behaviour, revealing the possible, sharing personal stories, and sharing expert opinions.

Similarly, social cognitive theory posits that observational learning (i.e., learning by observing the behaviour of others; Bandura, 1986) can lead to a higher confidence in one's ability to perform a behaviour (i.e., self-efficacy). This is crucial for behaviour change as people are more likely to adopt new behaviours if they feel confident in their capacity to carry them out successfully (Bandura, 1977; Kim, 2022). Thus, based on the motivational theory of role modelling and the social cognitive theory, this study explores whether and how fitfluencers can function as role models who stimulate adolescents' mental and physical (exercise and nutrition) health.

Gratifications sought in fitfluencer content

To better understand fitfluencers' impact on adolescents, it is important to understand why adolescents consume content of fitfluencers, which we explore through the lens of uses and gratifications theory. According to uses and gratifications theory, people actively use media to satisfy certain wants and needs (Katz et al., 1973), such as desires for information, entertainment, social interaction, or identity development (Ruggiero, 2000). Uses and gratifications theory distinguishes between sought gratifications, which are gratifications people wish to obtain, and obtained gratifications, or gratifications that they actually obtain from media use (Katz et al., 1973; Palmgreen et al., 1980). Importantly, not all sought gratifications are obtained. While previous research already determined that gratifications of following influencers include, among other things, information sharing, entertainment, companionship, and escapism (Croes & Bartels, 2021), it remains unclear which gratifications are specifically linked to fitfluencers. As fitfluencers focus on a niche, this study seeks to explore which (obtained and sought) gratifications adolescents derive from fitfluencers to better understand the

opportunities fitfluencers offer to positively impact adolescents' mental and physical health.

Materials and methods

Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with a constructivist approach. The main idea underpinning this epistemological orientation is that people actively construct their own knowledge and meaning through interaction with their environment (James & Busher, 2012). Accordingly, adolescents' knowledge on fitfluencers and fitfluencer content was treated as constructed through one's own experiences rather than as fixed or objective. The reporting of this materials and methods section was guided by the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ; Tong et al., 2007).

Sample

The study sample consisted of 20 Flemish adolescents between the ages of 14 and 18 years old. We used a purposive sampling approach to recruit these adolescents who actively follow one or more fitfluencers on social media and aimed for a balanced number of boys and girls. Participants were recruited through the social networks of the researchers, social media, posters, and flyers, and through a teacher at a secondary school. Adolescents were invited to participate in a study where they would be interviewed about fitness influencers on social media. The sampling procedure was terminated when data saturation was reached (see Table I for an overview of participants).

Procedure

The semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted in person between July and November 2023

and lasted on average 49 min. The first author of this study (female full-time PhD researcher with moderate experience in conducting in-depth interviews) conducted the interviews at a location chosen by the participant from the following options: interviewer's home, participant's home, or participant's school. Ethical approval (reference 2021–40) was obtained for this study by the ethics committee of the Faculty of Political and Social Sciences of Ghent University. As participants were minors, specific ethical measures were taken. Before participation, written informed consent was obtained from adolescents' parents and from participants themselves before starting the interview.

At the beginning of the interviews, participants were put at ease, asked for permission to record the interview, and were reminded of their rights for the interview (e.g., the possibility to stop participation at any moment). They then completed a form about their gender, age, the social media channels they use, and how many hours of exercise they perform weekly. Next, introductory questions about fitfluencers were asked (i.e., definition of fitfluencers, how many fitfluencers they follow, on which platforms and how often they see fitfluencer content). Subsequently, adolescents' motives for following fitfluencers were probed, followed by questions about their past experiences with fitfluencers. Lastly, adolescents were asked which opportunities they identified from fitfluencers. The questions on adolescents' motives for following fitfluencers and their perceived opportunities together inform the results on the opportunities fitfluencers offer to positively impact adolescents. The interviews ended with a debriefing aimed at addressing any emotions or concerns that may have arisen during the conversation. Participants were reminded about the importance of self-acceptance and that their worth is not tied to their appearance, while being provided with supportive

Table I. Overview of the interviewed adolescents.

Participant	Age	Gender	Sports	Hours of exercise/ week	Amount of fitfluencers they follow
P1	17	Male	Fitness activities	8–9	10–15
P2	17	Female	Running and fitness activities	3	2
P3	15	Female	Competitive swimming	12	2–3
P4	18	Male	Fitness activities	12	3–4
P5	17	Male	Fitness activities	3	10–20
P6	17	Female	None	2	1
P7	17	Male	Basketball and occasional running	5	4–5
P8	17	Female	Badminton and attends a secondary sports school	4	3
P9	16	Female	Volleyball	7,5	10
P10	17	Male	Fitness activities	7	50
P11	15	Female	Dancing and occasional workout	3	2–3
P12	14	Female	Dancing and occasional running, workout and squash	4	3
P13	14	Female	Dancing	3	3
P14	14	Female	Rope skipping, paddle and occasional running	5	15
P15	14	Female	Dancing, horse riding and occasional running	6	2–3
P16	17	Male	Fitness activities	15	5
P17	16	Male	Fitness activities	9–10,5	>100
P18	16	Male	Soccer and fitness activities	6	Doesn't know but sees content every day
P19	17	Male	Soccer and occasional fitness activities	3	1
P20	17	Male	Fitness activities	12	2

resources for further reflection or assistance if needed. By using a semi-structured list of questions (see Appendix A), the goal of the in-depth interviews was to facilitate a natural conversation and leave room for flexibility and open-ended exploration. Moreover, this allowed the researcher to elaborate more on certain topics of interest.

Analysis

All interviews were transcribed verbatim using Sonix.ai software, double-checked for accuracy, and corrected where needed by the first author. After transcription, audio-recordings were deleted, and transcripts were pseudonymized to comply with GDPR. NVivo 12 software was used by the same researcher to code all interviews. Specifically, thematic analysis was employed to analyse the data, with both inductive (data-driven) and deductive (theory-driven) approaches used to identify themes, sub-themes, and sub-theme categories (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Initially, the researcher familiarized themselves with the data, after which deductive codes were applied based on the theoretical framework and previous research. Inductive codes were then generated, and the data were coded into these initial codes or into newly created (lower level) codes derived directly from the data. Once the initial coding was completed, themes were identified, and sub-themes were established to capture more specific aspects of the data. Some of these sub-themes were further refined into sub-theme categories to provide a deeper

understanding. The usefulness and accuracy of the themes, sub-themes, and sub-theme categories were discussed and refined with the second and third authors to reduce potential bias in the interpretation.

Results

The aim of this study was to explore adolescents' lived experiences with fitfluencers and how these play a role in their mental and physical health (exercise and nutrition; RQ1) as well as the opportunities fitfluencers offer to positively impact adolescents' mental and physical health (RQ2). Our coding process revealed four general themes (in bold and italicized in the paragraphs below) from the interviews: (1) the consequences of fitfluencers for adolescents' mental and physical health, (2) strategies to cope with fitfluencers' negative consequences, (3) underlying mechanisms driving the influence of fitfluencers, and (4) the opportunities of fitfluencers to positively impact adolescents' mental and physical health. The first three themes relate to RQ1 regarding adolescents' lived experiences with fitfluencers, while the last theme relates to RQ2 regarding fitfluencers' opportunities. Moreover, several themes have sub-themes (in bold in the paragraphs of each theme below) which further deepen the general theme. These are further elaborated on in the results below. Additionally, in the fourth theme, all sub-themes were further divided into sub-theme categories (italicized in the paragraphs of each sub-theme below) that specify how these sub-themes manifest in practice. [Figure 1](#)

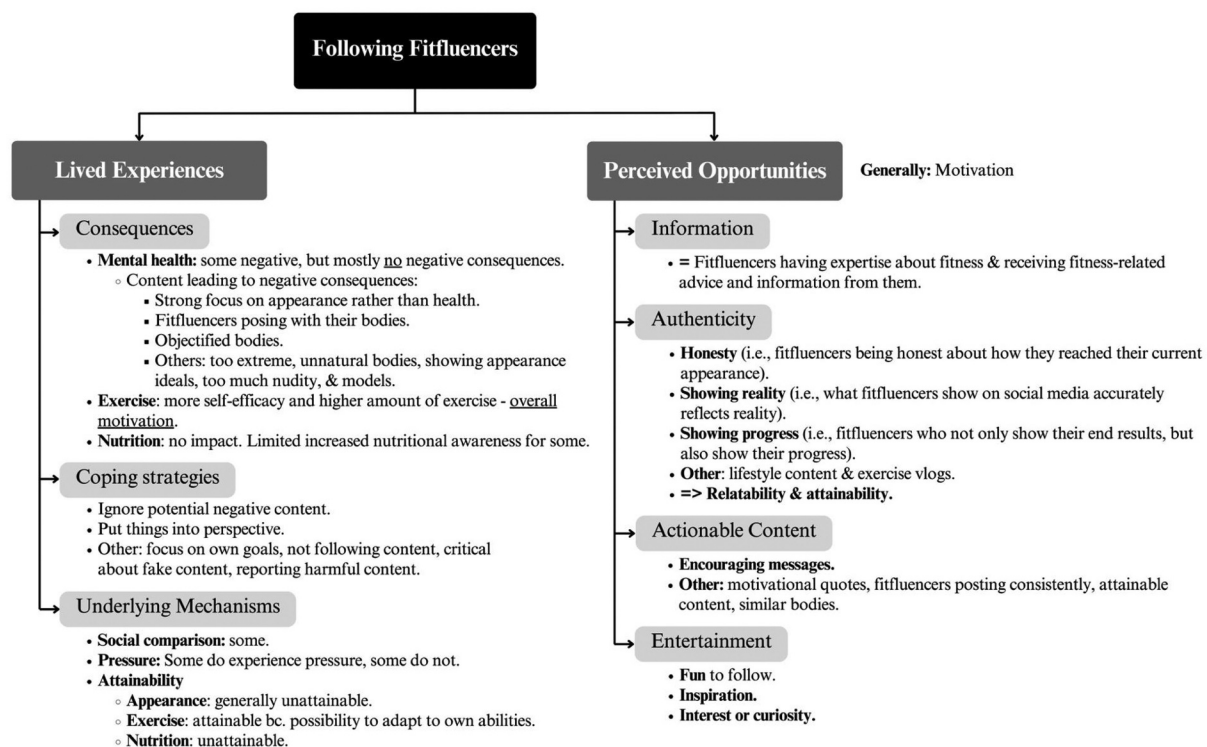


Figure 1. Visual summary of interview results.

provides an overall visual summary of the results of the in-depth interviews.

Adolescents' lived experiences with fitfluencers and the role these experiences play in their mental and physical health (RQ1)

Adolescents in our sample reported following fitfluencers mostly on Instagram (all participants) and TikTok (14 participants). A smaller number of participants also followed fitfluencers on YouTube (5). Though there was some variation in the number of fitfluencers that participants followed (see Table I), generally, male adolescents followed more fitfluencers (they follow on average 22 fitfluencers) than female participants (they follow on average five fitfluencers). Male participants also exercised more on a weekly basis (on average 8.13 h) compared to their female counterparts (on average 4.95 h). The main reasons for adolescents to exercise were for their health, to gain muscle, to have fun, and to stay on the move.

Theme 1: consequences of fitfluencers for adolescents' mental and physical health

The majority of adolescents reported that they did not experience any consequences from fitfluencers on their **mental health**. They did indicate that they could imagine peers experiencing negative implications for their mental health. Only a small number of the participants mentioned some negative mental health consequences from fitfluencers, such as feelings of jealousy, guilt, disappointment, and especially feelings of uncertainty and a negative mood. Participants noted several types of content can cause negative consequences. The most important of these content types were a strong focus on appearance rather than health, content where fitfluencers pose with their bodies, or where their bodies are objectified. For example, regarding fitfluencers posing, P12 stated:

I honestly consider that very unnecessary, because people already know that they are muscular, and it

feels like they want to emphasize that even more. It sort of feels like they are acting all high and mighty like: "You should look at me now". So yeah, I find it quite unnecessary, actually.

Other things that were mentioned included that the content is too extreme, includes unnatural bodies, shows idealized appearances, exposes too much nudity, and features fitness models.

Regarding **exercise**, almost all participants indicated that fitfluencers help them believe in their ability to reach their exercise-related goals. Those who did not feel that fitfluencers impacted their self-efficacy explained that, in their opinion, self-efficacy and motivation should come from themselves rather than from others. Moreover, most adolescents indicated that they exercise more because of fitfluencers, stating that fitfluencers played a significant role in starting exercise regimens and maintaining consistency. Others indicated that their levels of exercise remained the same before and after following fitfluencers. One participant also indicated that they exercised less because of fitfluencers, but this was a positive trend in their case: *"In the beginning I trained every day, but then I started to realize that you need to take rest days too. So, that's better"* (P10). The majority of participants stated that following fitfluencers has benefited the quality of their workouts and the exercises they perform as they felt like fitfluencers gave them inspiration on which workouts they can do, tips on how to do an exercise correctly, and so on. Overall, most participants felt that fitfluencers lead to motivation rather than demotivation.

In contrast, a small number of adolescents indicated that fitfluencers can lead to demotivation to exercise for several reasons. For instance, some participants felt discouraged when *"an exercise is succeeding with them and not with me."* (P20) or if they were unable to replicate an exercise demonstrated by a fitfluencer. Others mentioned receiving bad advice or observing fitfluencers perform dangerous activities.

Concerning **nutrition**, most participants claimed that fitfluencers did not impact their nutritional

Table II. Theme 1: Consequences of fitfluencers for adolescents' mental and physical health.

Sub-theme	Results	Participant quotations
Mental health	Negative for peers but not for self	<i>"Not necessarily with myself [experiencing negative effects], but I do suppose with friends, that they become so insecure about their bodies or start eating less or something. Things like that."</i> (P13)
	Experienced negative consequences	<i>"Sometimes it's kind of challenging to see those bodies or to see that they have so much time to exercise or that they can run so beautifully perfect, without a single drop of sweat. Because when I run it does not look nearly as 'Instagrammable,' to put it that way."</i> (P2)
Exercise	More exercise self-efficacy	<i>"They can do it, so I think to myself: 'You have to be able to do that too!' and then I'll go for it."</i> (P3)
	Workout inspiration	<i>"Yeah, they help with consistency, that I keep it up. Before, I did it one week but then stopped the other week, so I wasn't consistent. Also, my exercise is more science-based now. Instead of doing what I want and only doing the heavy things, now I do things that are useful too. I look at what day it is and what I can do that day instead of being reckless and doing whatever."</i> (P4)
Nutrition	Demotivation	<i>"I often get demotivated if an exercise is succeeding with them and not with me."</i> (P20)
	No impact	<i>"Nutrition is more something I do by myself. Not really by following people or anything."</i> (P7)
	Increased nutritional awareness	<i>"Yes, fitfluencers increase my awareness of nutrition. But not only on supplements, also in terms of intake of certain food sources, proteins, vitamins and so on."</i> (P1)

behaviours. Those who did see an impact said they have mainly become more aware of what they eat, the number of calories they take in, and so on. In addition, several male participants mentioned being inspired by fitfluencers to do bulking and cutting. Table II provides a summary of the results of the first theme and its sub-themes along with supporting quotations of the participants.

Theme 2: Strategies to cope with fitfluencers' negative consequences

When talking about the negative consequences adolescents or peers might experience from fitfluencers, many participants simultaneously mentioned coping strategies they already applied to protect themselves against negative effects. For example, P2 explained, *"Because I feel it is excessive, that's really a bit to protect myself mainly, so that I don't start eating extremely healthy or feeling extremely guilty. Especially with TikTok, because I find it so dangerous."* The most important coping strategy was to just ignore the content that may elicit a negative impact (e.g., *"I immediately scroll that away."* (P2)). Furthermore, a lot of the participants also indicated that they try to put things into perspective. For example, P14 shared, *"Sometimes I see people that have gorgeous bodies and then I think to myself 'Maybe I should look like that too', but then I'm like 'no, actually I shouldn't!'"* Other coping strategies that adolescents applied included focusing on their own goals, not following specific content, being critical about which content is fake (i.e., photoshop or steroid use), and even reporting harmful content.

Theme 3: Underlying mechanisms driving the influence of fitfluencers

Most participants indicated that they sometimes **compare** themselves to fitfluencers. However, some noted that they only compare themselves with fitfluencers whose appearance is somewhat attainable and not with extreme fitfluencers, despite following extreme fitfluencers as well. Others alternately claimed to not really compare themselves with fitfluencers, stating that they instead tend to compare themselves to peers or to compare their current self with their past self to track their progress.

While some participants indicated that they do not feel any **pressure** to attain a muscular body type, others said that they sometimes feel pressure to look a certain way. However, most participants tried to deny or minimize this pressure: *"Sometimes I do think I shouldn't be too big or fat and that I need to do something to exercise, but in general I suppose it's not all that bad"* (P3). In addition, several participants mentioned that they do not mind feeling some pressure to attain a certain body as it motivates them. Many of the adolescents indicated that this

pressure is mainly caused by following fitfluencers. P20, for example, commented, *"The more fitness content you see, the more muscular you want to look."* However, multiple participants minimized this somewhat by saying that this is not always the case: *"Sometimes fitfluencers do create pressure for me, but other times they don't. It depends on what mood I'm in"* (P3). Additionally, participants made a point that not all fitfluencers cause pressure: *"If people are really exercising and giving tips and stuff, not really. But if they do these super crazy workouts, then maybe they do [cause pressure]"* (P14). Other mentioned factors that create pressure are their peers, social media in general, or even themselves (e.g., *"Maybe that pressure comes more from myself, out of dissatisfaction somehow. For example, when I haven't put any work into fitness activities for a while and I notice that I'm ruining the progress that I've already made"* (P5) or *"You do want to look better than you looked a few years ago"* (P20).

In terms of **attainability**, all adolescents indicated that the bodies of fitfluencers are unattainable or that only some of them are attainable. Generally, adolescents specified that unattainable fitfluencers are those who are perceived to be too extreme in what they do and how they look. Fitfluencers are also perceived as unattainable because they seem to have the perfect life or have become extremely muscular due to substance use; adolescents referred to these individuals as "unnatural" fitfluencers. Only male participants referred to the use of steroids. In addition, participants were asked to indicate their ideal body appearance and what the fitfluencers they come across look like using visual body scales (Ralph-Nearman & Filik, 2018, 2020). All participants designated fitfluencers' bodies as much more extreme in muscularity compared to their ideal appearance. Hence, the bodies of fitfluencers were not a goal that they wanted to achieve. However, although participants recognized that the bodies of fitfluencers are oftentimes unattainable, they did express great respect for these bodies: *"They have done a really good job achieving such a body, but for myself that's not really attainable I guess"* (P7). P3 explained, *"I just think it's very admirable that people want to and can do that [engage in fitness activities so much]. I also have enormous respect for them for putting time into that. If they want to look like that, I think that's okay, yes"*.

Concerning fitfluencers' exercise routines, participants' opinions were mixed, but the majority felt that the exercises and workouts fitfluencers perform are attainable for them. However, they did mention that they mainly perceived these routines as attainable because they can adapt the exercises and workouts to their own abilities. When adolescents perceived fitfluencers' exercises as unattainable, this was mainly because fitfluencers promise unrealistic results or because engaging in fitness activities is their job, meaning that they do it all day, every day.

Participants also reported that the nutritional habits of the fitfluencers are unattainable for them. This was mainly because “people like that [fitfluencers] actually eat a lot of meals in a day, so I don’t really think that’s attainable, no” (P18) or “some really starve themselves. I think that’s useless because that’s really stupid” (P7). Additionally, participants were not the ones cooking at home. Table III provides a summary of the results of the third theme and each of its sub-themes along with supporting quotations.

Theme 4: Fitfluencers’ opportunities to positively impact adolescents’ mental and physical health (RQ2)

Adolescents mentioned **motivation** as the main opportunity of following fitfluencers. Moreover, coding revealed four sub-themes covering aspects of fitfluencers that adolescents perceived as opportunities, all of which lead to motivation to exercise: (1) information, (2) authenticity, (3) actionable content, and

(4) entertainment. Several sub-theme categories (italicized in the following paragraphs) are identified that further specify how these opportunities manifest.

Information

Information mainly involves fitfluencers having *expertise* in fitness and adolescents receiving *fitness-related advice* and information from them. Almost all participants stated that they appreciated gaining inspiration regarding exercises and workouts they can perform or tips and instructions on how to correctly perform an exercise to avoid injuries and how many times they should do an exercise. Participants perceived this information as motivating. Additionally, most adolescents did not feel it was necessary for fitfluencers to have a *degree* for the content they post. Adolescents mainly judged fitfluencers’ expertise by their appearance. In fact, according to the participants, fitfluencers’ muscular bodies were proof that what they claim works. For example, P7 observed, “A degree is not

Table III. Theme 3: Underlying mechanisms driving the influence of fitfluencers.

Sub-theme	Results	Participant quotations
Social comparison	Occasional comparison with fitfluencers	<i>“I occasionally compare myself to fitfluencers I guess, but it’s not that I’m really going to compare a lot, it’s more the feeling that it’s a shame that I don’t look like that, or I think ‘that’s pretty’. I’m, however, not really going to look at them into a lot of detail.”</i> (P3)
	Comparison only with attainable fitfluencers	<i>“I do sometimes compare, but of course that’s with the attainable ones and not the extreme ones.”</i> (P15) <i>“When I already see them working out with heavy weights and all, I know I’m never going to do that. So then, for me, that doesn’t do anything.”</i> (P8)
	No comparison with fitfluencers	<i>“No, I actually really never do that [compare with fitfluencers].”</i> (P18)
	Comparison with peers/past self instead of fitfluencers	<i>“For example, a friend who also goes along [to the gym], he has a six-pack and all that, and when you see that, you think to yourself: ‘Yes, actually I want that too’, because it looks good and then you want to work on that too.”</i> (P18) <i>No, I don’t [compare to fitfluencers], just more with myself in the past.”</i> (P1)
Pressure	Pressure by fitfluencers to look a certain way	<i>“Yeah, somewhere I do feel pressure. Especially now with Reels, you only see people with slim bodies or something. It’s a bit too much of showing off beautiful bodies in my opinion.”</i> (P12)
	No pressure by fitfluencers	<i>“Absolutely not [experiencing pressure to attain a certain body type].”</i> (P4)
	Deny/minimize pressure	<i>“Sometimes I do think I shouldn’t be too big or fat and that I need to do something to exercise, but in general I suppose it’s not all that bad.”</i> (P3)
	Pressure as motivation	<i>“Perhaps ultimately, I don’t mind so much because that pressure is a kind of discipline or motivation. But it is a bit difficult sometimes. Pressure works a little against me and a little in favor in the end.”</i> (P5)
Attainability	Fitfluencers’ bodies	
	Unattainable (too extreme, perfect life, substance use)	<i>“What he has is not something I can compare myself to, that’s beyond my goals. It’s extremely admirable what he has achieved but yeah, for me and for what I want to do in life, that’s actually beyond it. That’s becoming too extreme.”</i> (P4) <i>“But that’s [extremely muscled fitfluencers are] all steroids. That instantly triggers the reaction: ‘They use steroids, so: unattainable.’”</i> (P5) <i>“Yes, it’s attainable if you use steroids (laughs). But if you want to achieve that naturally, then no, it’s impossible. For example, this one here, you can never get there naturally. You just can’t.”</i> (P18)
	Some attainable and some unattainable	<i>“Some are attainable, but others aren’t. For example, this one, I follow her because her body is attainable. But of others I think ‘That’s really unattainable.’”</i> (P3)
	Fitfluencers’ exercise	
	Attainable (because adaptable)	<i>“You can adjust the weight you do exercises with, which means I suppose basically anything is possible in terms of exercises.”</i> (P5)
	Unattainable	<i>“They then promise instant results or something but that’s completely wrong. It was a five-minute video on gaining abs or something, and then she said: ‘Do this for seven days and that’s going to help right away!’ but it’s definitely not.”</i> (P11)
	Fitfluencers’ nutrition	
	Unattainable	<i>“[Fitfluencers] actually eat a lot of meals in a day, so I don’t really think that’s attainable, no.”</i> (P18) <i>“Some really starve themselves. I think that’s useless because that’s really stupid”</i> (P7) <i>“When I come home then dinner is already prepared, so I don’t have to do that. Were I to prepare everything myself, it could be more attainable.”</i> (P5).

really necessary, because I can see that they already have a muscular body and trained well for this."

In terms of workouts and exercises, the interviews revealed that participants who already have a weekly workout routine mostly do not follow full workouts from fitfluencers (anymore). While they may have followed these routines in the past, they now prefer using this content for inspiration and potentially add one or two exercises to their existing routine. These are mostly people who already engage in fitness activities often and have been following fitfluencers for a long time. P5 explained, *"I'm not really looking for changes in my routine. But if I come across a workout and it contains a useful exercise for a certain muscle area, I'll save it. But yeah, that's pretty rare."* Conversely, participants who engage less in fitness activities, or want to start doing so, appreciated full workouts from fitfluencers more as these provide guidance on what to do and let them easily imitate these workouts.

Authenticity

Participants repeatedly emphasized their strong preference for authentic fitfluencers. They brought up a variety of possibilities for fitfluencers to achieve authenticity, the most important being honesty, showing reality, and showing their progress (i.e., sub-theme categories of authenticity). *Honesty* involves fitfluencers being truthful about how they reached their current appearance. This includes, for example, being honest about their substance use, as substance use significantly impacts one's muscularity. *Honesty* helps adolescents gain a realistic image of what is attainable for them and how fitfluencers attained their bodies. Male participants in particular mentioned how important it is for them to be able to make a realistic estimation of what is achievable without substance use.

Second, *showing reality* refers to the idea that what fitfluencers show on social media accurately reflects reality. Participants praised fitfluencers who show their lives as they are, without making things better or only showing the good things and that this can lead to motivation. Participants highly appreciated when fitfluencers share their setbacks and struggles, do not pose with their bodies, or show that they are exercising themselves, including sweat and messy hair. However, many participants indicated that most fitfluencers barely do this at the moment.

Third, the majority of participants also appreciated fitfluencers who not only show their end results but also *their progress*: "What did they have to do to get where they are now?" and "How long did it take?" are questions that adolescents wanted to know about fitfluencers for motivation. This type of content gave them a clear idea of how much effort they should put into their fitness activities and what is

attainable for them. Some participants highlighted that showing progress through before- and after-pictures is not enough because they struggle to trust this type of content and fear that it can imply that fitfluencers' bodies and lifestyle are achievable without much effort. Seeing what fitfluencers have achieved and how they are working for it was highly appreciated and motivational among participants. Other things that enhanced participants' perceptions of authenticity were lifestyle content and exercise vlogs, which gave them insights into fitfluencers' daily activities.

In general, numerous participants cited authenticity as very important, especially since it makes the fitfluencers feel more relatable and attainable. Relatability and attainability were a common thread throughout the answers around authenticity. For example, P15 shared, *"I think authenticity is very good and positive, because then you can relate with them, and then you know that you're not alone and that everyone has a hard time sometimes, but that you just must persevere a little bit, and then it gets better."* Moreover, adolescents preferred videos over images, as this enhances fitfluencers' authenticity. In their opinion, pictures can be manipulated much more easily (e.g., through Photoshop) than videos. In addition, most participants declared that they do not or barely read captions as they trust visual information more.

Actionable content

A third perceived opportunity participants highlighted is actionable content (i.e., content that encourages them to take action), which they claimed fitfluencers achieve through *encouraging messages*. These are messages where fitfluencers *"say that you should keep exercising, don't give up, that it's not always easy, but you should never give up"* (P12). However, P13 cautioned, *"I like that [encouraging messages], but they also shouldn't overdo it or anything because you can also just sit lazily on the couch sometimes. They shouldn't always make you feel guilty about it"*.

Participants further mentioned motivational quotes and the fact that fitfluencers post consistently (which is a repeated reminder to exercise) as types of actionable content. Some participants further stated that fitfluencers who post content that is attainable to them can motivate them more. Others, however, indicated that this attainability is not important to their motivation as even unattainable fitfluencers can motivate them. In addition, some participants commented that fitfluencers with similar bodies to their own can activate them more as this increases relatability. Still, other participants explained *"that everyone is just their*

own and that you should just make your own idea of what is attainable" (P7).

Entertainment

Participants also declared that they follow fitfluencers for entertainment and that this entertainment helps with their motivation. Main entertainment-related reasons for following fitfluencers were because it is fun, inspiring, and out of interest or curiosity. Many participants mentioned that they find it *fun* to follow fitfluencers, for example, because they use humour or post challenges. *Inspiration* can be both from the activities themselves and from the environment the fitfluencer is exercising in. For instance, some adolescents like to watch bodybuilder competitions or a fitfluencer running during sunset. Participants also reported being *interested* and *curious* to know more about fitfluencers' personal lives. As such, vlogs and lifestyle content were popular among the participants,

especially among female adolescents. Table IV provides a summary of the results of the fourth theme, its sub-themes and sub-theme categories along with supporting quotations.

Discussion

This qualitative study conducted in-depth interviews among middle and late adolescents (14–18 years) to shed light on adolescents' lived experiences with fitfluencers and the role these play in their mental and physical health (RQ1) as well as the opportunities adolescents identify from fitfluencers (RQ2). Our results reveal three major findings.

First, the majority of interviewees reported having predominantly positive experiences with fitfluencers, indicating minimal negative consequences for their mental health. Most participants felt motivated rather than demotivated to exercise. Additionally, most adolescents employed various coping strategies to avoid

Table IV. Theme 4: Fitfluencers' opportunities to positively impact adolescents' mental and physical health.

Sub-theme	Sub-theme category	Participant quotations
Information	Expertise and fitness-related advice	<p>"Expertise and advice are, to me personally, very important because you can learn things from them—for example, how you train a certain muscle group and so on—and I find that interesting to know how to do that myself." (P7)</p> <p>"If they really explain step by step in workout videos what to do, I think people would really be like 'Alright I'm going to try that here', that can really motivate people, that they really explain how to do something, and not just that they're working out themselves." (P12)</p>
	Degree	<p>"Gosh, a degree, I don't think that's really necessary. If they know what they're talking about, that's more than enough." (P12)</p> <p>"I usually look at their appearance. If they've succeeded in achieving it, it suggests that they possess the necessary know-how. To me, you don't need to have a degree or be smart. If they are interested [in fitness], I believe they have the capacity to explain it." (P8)</p>
Authenticity	Honesty	<p>"Sometimes they don't say anything about those steroids and then you think it is achievable by just doing those things that they do talk about, but actually, they just leave out the most important part. So [being honest about substance use] is kind of very important." (P5)</p>
	Showing reality	<p>"I think that they don't always have to show the good things, and I think it's good that they say if they're feeling uneasy in their own skin. I have a lot of respect for that because that's the way it is. You can't always feel and do great, so I think it's very good that they do that." (P12)</p> <p>"Those people who are really pushing themselves to their limits, you see that they really must work hard to reach their goal and it's not just doing a little bit of exercise and then done. That really motivates me." (P3)</p> <p>"You get a better idea of what it's really like. That way you get motivation because you know it doesn't always go well with them either, and then you can recognize yourself in them." (P13)</p>
	Showing progress	<p>"People showing their transformation (progress), that sparks motivation and at times when I don't really feel like exercising, that's when I get the motivation to go to the gym anyway. That gives me the extra push and on difficult days that's some of the best content I can come across." (P4)</p> <p>"If they really show how it was done, you get a better understanding. If they just put before and after photos, you haven't seen how hard they worked for it or how long it took." (P12)</p> <p>"They show their results of their body that they work for, so, then I really want to work for that as well—to have a beautiful body and to stay healthy. So yeah, that's kind of where I want to work towards." (P12)</p>
Actionable content	Encouraging messages	<p>"They give you the confirmation that even if you feel down, you have to push through, that you will be happier the next day after you have kept going than if you would give up now. Also, they say that you're doing good and ask, 'Why would you give up now?'. Those are the most important ones." (P4)</p> <p>"I think that's very important. It gives you even more motivation because those messages are specifically directed to you as a viewer and then you feel addressed by them. So that does help." (P5)</p>
	Attainability & relatability	<p>"Fitfluencers with extreme looks, I don't follow those because I just don't find that interesting, but if it seems attainable and I feel like I could attain it myself, I usually do follow that." (P8)</p> <p>"It's always more fun when you recognize yourself a little bit in people because then it supports me more or encourages me more. They are kind of a better version of yourself, and then that is also more fun to watch or to follow." (P15)</p>
Entertainment	Fun	<p>"This guy for example, he mostly does challenges, and this was a video where they had to lift a total of 100,000 pounds or so in a day. So, every time they did an exercise, for example bicep curls, that weight was added. I watch a video like that purely for entertainment, but it still has to do with fitness which makes it informative." (P5)</p>
	Inspiration	<p>"She [fitfluencer] had gone running during a beautiful sunset and that motivated me the most. I love beautiful skies and nature and those posts kind of romanticize exercising outside and going for a run. Then I'm like, 'I'm going for a run, it's a beautiful day.' So those things really motivate me." (P9)</p>
	Interest or curiosity	<p>"I am curious about other people, their lives and so on." (P13)</p>

negative experiences. These coping strategies may explain why our findings differ from the broader body of experimental and survey studies among young adults, which highlight the negative impact of fitfluencer and fitspiration content on mental health. Supporting our findings, the interview study of Frühauf et al. (2024) among adolescent girls also identified predominantly positive experiences with fitfluencer content.

Still, several participants attempted to minimize or deny fitfluencers' negative impact on their mental health while suggesting that their peers may experience such effects. This perspective may be attributed to the third-person effect, a phenomenon whereby individuals believe media messages have a greater influence on others than on themselves, particularly when it comes to negative effects (Davison, 1983). Consequently, it is essential to be critical about these results, acknowledging the possibility that negative effects on adolescents may be stronger than they recognize.

Second, participants acknowledged that most fitfluencers are unattainable due to their perfect bodies and extreme fitness routines and that fitfluencers' appearance is, therefore, not a goal they want to pursue. While they valued relatable and attainable fitfluencers more, they noted that such individuals are less common. Paradoxically, this unattainability did not evoke contrastive comparison emotions. In other words, this unattainability did not negatively impact adolescents' mental health nor hinder their uptake of fitfluencers' fitness advice. Adolescents still derived value from unattainable fitfluencers, even as they sought more relatable ones. This paradox can be better understood through the lens of uses and gratifications theory. As participants indicated that attainable fitfluencers are less common, they may represent a sought but not obtained gratification. Consequently, the gratifications adolescents currently obtain from fitfluencers, such as motivation to exercise, are primarily obtained through unattainable fitfluencers, as they are more prevalent.

Third, adolescents viewed fitfluencers as a significant source of *motivation* for adopting a fit and healthy lifestyle, and they identified four opportunities that increase this motivation: authenticity, information, actionable content, and entertainment. While this study is the first to explore the opportunities offered by fitfluencers, the importance of authenticity has already been demonstrated by Reade (2020), who identified practices used in fitness cultures on Instagram for authenticity that closely align with those found in our study. Although participants primarily emphasized the opportunities fitfluencers provide for exercise, these opportunities may extend to mental health. Authentic fitfluencers, for example, could promote mental well-being by being

attainable and relatable. Additionally, the entertainment provided by fitfluencers may gratify a desire for escapism, offering a mental health benefit through distraction and relief.

Theoretical implications

Social comparison theory serves as the overarching framework for understanding fitfluencers' impact on adolescents. Our results reveal that most of the interviewed adolescents only occasionally compare themselves to fitfluencers. However, an important question raised here regards the subconscious impact of fitfluencers. Social media's algorithms create a continuous flow of images and videos, often repeatedly exposing adolescents to fitfluencers and their idealized bodies. This may lead adolescents to internalize these ideal bodies and algorithms pushing them towards even more extreme fitness content. In line with this, participants pointed out how watching one video of fitfluencers on TikTok could make the algorithm show them many more such videos, ultimately resulting in them only seeing videos about fitness. Thus, even when they believe they are unaffected by viewing these idealized bodies, the volume and consistency of these images and videos can subtly influence how they perceive themselves. Comparisons may occur automatically, without deliberate intent. This is in line with Crusius et al. (2022), who state that comparisons often take place subconsciously. Consequently, it is important to consider the impact of the repeated and longitudinal exposure to fitfluencer content on social media, and one should be aware of its potential subconscious impact on adolescents.

An important contribution of our study to social comparison theory is the finding that unattainable comparison targets can also lead to positive effects, contrary to the belief of Festinger (1954) and Smith (2000) that comparisons with unattainable targets lead to negative (contrastive) effects. In the light of this, adolescents in our study can be considered active media users who give meaning to fitfluencers' content and who actively use fitfluencer content in a positive way. For instance, adolescents mainly reported experiencing motivation to exercise as they could adapt fitfluencers' tips and demonstrations to their ability to make them more attainable. In addition, many participants mentioned already applying strategies to cope with potential negative effects. It is possible that the application of coping strategies helps adolescents to convert following fitfluencers into a positive experience, which motivates them and does not cause harm. This is an important addition to the study of Frühauf et al. (2024), who reported that adolescent girls experienced negative effects and were lacking the cognitive skills to protect themselves against these effects. Adolescents in our study used the

coping strategies to protect themselves against potential negative effects and create positive experiences with fitfluencers, which may indicate the presence of the cognitive skills that participants in Frühauf et al. (2024) were lacking.

Moreover, our coping strategies tie in with what Evens et al. (2021) call “protective filtering”. They argue that, when exposed to images exemplifying beauty ideals, people with a positive body image engage in protective filtering behaviour to protect their positive body image. They identified four main themes of protective filtering: criticizing beauty ideals, focusing on appreciating one’s own body, focusing on the personality rather than appearance of those in the image, and linking negative past experiences to beauty ideal imagery. Our coping strategies add to this understanding by demonstrating that adolescents not only filter and reinterpret beauty ideals (as in protective filtering tactics) but also take proactive measures to challenge and manage the content they encounter; this further underscores adolescents’ active role as consumers of fitfluencer content.

Our findings also contribute to uses and gratifications theory by demonstrating that fitfluencers can satisfy four key gratifications, corresponding to the four opportunities identified in this study. Information, actionable content, and entertainment emerged as gratifications that adolescents derive from current fitfluencer content (i.e., obtained gratifications). In contrast, authenticity is better categorized as a sought but unsatisfied gratification. Participants placed high value on authenticity as it enhances fitfluencers’ relatability and attainability. However, they noted that authentic content is scarce among fitfluencers, underscoring their desire for this in the content they consume.

These findings also provide useful insights for motivational theory of role modelling by confirming that fitfluencers act as role models for adolescents. The four opportunities participants identified from fitfluencers in our study align closely with the three functions of role models by Morgenroth et al. (2015). Fitfluencers model behaviour by offering information and actionable content, which adolescents can use in their own fitness routines or imitate (i.e., observational learning). Second, they inspire adolescents through authentic and entertaining content. Finally, fitfluencers reveal the possibilities by presenting realistic portrayals of their fitness journeys, emphasizing effort, honesty, and attainability so that adolescents can create realistic expectations of what is attainable for them.

Practical implications

The findings of this study offer several practical implications for fitfluencers and for policymakers, health

professionals, and societal actors. First, fitfluencers should thoughtfully curate the content they create and share, as certain content types can have positive effects on adolescents. This includes sharing their struggles, setbacks, and fitness journeys, showcasing their progress, but also offering practical tips and workout routines, encouraging messages, and entertaining messages like challenges or vlogs. As authenticity was mentioned to be an important sought gratification that is currently not obtained, fitfluencers can put extra effort into this. Second, policymakers, health professionals, and societal actors should focus on empowering adolescents to actively engage with fitfluencer content in a mindful and proactive manner. Teaching adolescents to critically assess and interact with such content can help them derive positive experiences while mitigating potential negative effects on mental health and well-being. For example, equipping adolescents with coping strategies may protect them from harmful impacts, fostering a healthier and more contrastive engagement with fitfluencers.

Limitations and recommendations for future research

The fact that participants lack negative effects from fitfluencers may be due to several limitations of this study. First, post-rationalization bias may be at play (Lind et al., 2017). Adolescents may justify following fitfluencers and their potentially harmful content on social media by minimizing the negative effects they experience. Second, this finding may be attributed to social desirability. It is possible that adolescents do experience negative effects but did not want to admit this or that any negative impact is subconscious. Third, it is also possible that there was selection bias whereby only adolescents with positive experiences with fitfluencers agreed to participate. Future research could benefit from investigating the impact of fitfluencers through other methods, such as, ecological momentary assessment.

In addition, the current study only qualitatively investigated the influence of fitfluencers. Although the results show that fitfluencers cause motivation rather than demotivation, the question remains whether this translates into actual exercise behaviour, urging more quantitative research in this area. Further, as adolescents are considered a vulnerable group and research among them is limited, more research is needed on the impact of fitfluencers on adolescents’ mental and physical health. For instance, experimental studies could investigate the potential of the four identified opportunities of fitfluencers to elicit positive effects on followers’ mental and physical health.

Conclusion

Through semi-structured in-depth interviews with middle and late adolescents, our study determined that

fitfluencers' influence may not always be perceived as negative as previous experimental studies among young adults have suggested. Participants reported experiencing only a limited number of negative consequences from fitfluencers and shared that fitfluencers mainly motivate rather than demotivate them. They did mention six coping strategies they use to avoid negative effects from fitfluencers: ignoring harmful content, putting things into perspective, focusing on one's own goals, being critical about which bodies are fake, not following specific content, and reporting harmful content. Adolescents further identified four main opportunities of fitfluencers, all of which motivate them: information, authenticity, actionable content, and entertainment. Attainability and relatability are described as very important for this positive impact. Future research can quantitatively investigate the (positive) impact of these opportunities on adolescents' mental and physical health.

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Data availability statement

Data are not available due to privacy considerations for the individual participants.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Semi-structured list of interview questions

Information regarding fitness influencers

- When I say the word “fitness influencer” or “fitfluencer,” what do you think of? Who or what exactly do you think fitness influencers are?
- Do you follow any fitness influencers?
 - How many fitness influencers do you currently follow?
- On what social media platforms do you follow them?
- How often do you come across posts from fitfluencers? Do you see a lot or not?

We define fitfluencers as individuals who have a lot of followers and post fitness content.

Theme 1: Motives

Characteristics fitfluencers	<p><i>Sorting exercise (sort from most important to least important)</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For you, what are important characteristics of a fitfluencer that make you follow them and keep following them? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Expertise/advice <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do they require a degree for their expertise? • How do you assess their expertise? ◦ Parasocial relationship ◦ Relatability/recognizability ◦ Honesty/authenticity ◦ Instagram vs. reality (sharing less beautiful/good things too) ◦ (Social) support—fitfluencer supports you in achieving your own goals <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is social support and encouragement from others, such as a fitness influencer, important for you to achieve your goals? ◦ Attainability ◦ Wishful identification
Outcome expectations (SCT) —Goals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When we talk about your own exercise behaviour: what goals or outcomes do you want to achieve through exercise or fitness? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ How do you try to achieve this? ◦ Does content from fitfluencers help you to do so? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For what outcomes do fitfluencers help? • For which ones not? • What outcomes have you already achieved by following this content?
Entertainment education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What type of content (cf. <i>screenshots</i>) is most useful in achieving your goals? Which content helps you the most? Why? • If you look at these screenshots that you took, what is the reason you are following them? • Is there certain content that you prefer? Why? • What kind of content is especially useful to you in reaching your goals from earlier? How do you use that content? • For the following content types, indicate the extent to which you use this to reach your goals. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Imitating workouts (<i>observational learning</i>) ◦ Using workout instructions ◦ Tips on nutrition ◦ Tips on how to perform exercises correctly ◦ Before and after photos that motivate you ◦ Personal stories ◦ Difficult moments the influencer is going through
Self-efficacy (SCT)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Has following fitfluencers had an impact on... <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ The way and extent to which you exercise? ◦ The way you perform certain exercises? ◦ Your eating habits/nutrition?—Do you follow certain diets promoted by fitfluencers? (Bulking, Cutting) ◦ The kind of workouts you do? • How do fitness influencers affect your confidence in yourself to achieve your exercise-related goals? • How do fitness influencers affect your confidence in yourself to become more muscular/lose weight? • How do fitness influencers affect your confidence in yourself to become healthier? • Is there content that increases or decreases this confidence?

Theme 2: Negative consequences of fitfluencers

Perceived attainability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are the fitfluencers in the screenshots you took attainable to you? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Are their exercises attainable? ◦ Is their diet/nutrition attainable? ◦ Is their body attainable? • Is this attainability important to you when you follow fitfluencers? • Which examples (cf. <i>screenshots</i>) are attainable to you? Which ones are not? • Those unattainable examples, which consequences do they have? What does that do to you?
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Body image concern/body dissatisfaction/ ...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have you ever experienced negative effects by following fitfluencers/seeing content from fitfluencers? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ What were they? (physical or mental negative consequences?) • Are there certain types of content (cf. <i>screenshots</i>) that incite these negative effects that you experience? • For the following types of content, indicate whether or not they cause negative effects. • Posing vs. exercising content <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Posing to make their body look better ◦ Focus on specific body parts (objectification) ◦ Focus on appearance rather than health ◦ Captions (do you read them? Can they cause negative effects?) • What impact did these negative effects have on your fitness- related behaviours? • What impact did this have on your mental well-being?
Ideal body pressure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Show visual body image scale <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ What does your ideal body look like? What would you like your body to look like? (<i>Important message: this can also be how your body already looks right now!</i>) ◦ What type of body do most fitfluencers that you follow have? • Do you sometimes feel pressure to have a certain body? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Where does this pressure come from? ◦ Do fitfluencers reinforce this pressure? ◦ Do you feel like you need to look like the fitfluencers you follow? ◦ What does this pressure do to you? How does it make you feel? ◦ Are there certain <i>screenshots</i> that enhance this pressure? Or reduce it?
Social comparison	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you often compare your own body to that of the fitfluencer? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ What does that do to you? How does it make you feel? ◦ What screenshots are you comparing yourself to in particular? And to which ones not?
Demotivation to exercise	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have you ever felt demotivated to exercise because of content from fitfluencers? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Is there any content from the <i>screenshots</i> that specifically causes this? ◦ What is the reason that you felt demotivated?
Trustworthiness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have you ever had the feeling that a fitfluencer spread certain messages or posts that were harmful for your mental health? Please explain. • Have you ever had the feeling that content of fitfluencers or information that they give to their followers is not reliable? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ If so, what does that do to your trust in that fitfluencer?
Theme 3: Opportunities to avoid negative effects and promote positive effects	
Mental well-being	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Now we've talked about the potential negative effects of fitness influencers. What is, despite these effects, the reason that you keep following fitness influencers? • Can you think of ways for fitness influencers to avoid negative effects on their followers' mental health? • <i>Sorting exercise (sort from most effective to least effective to avoid negative consequences for mental health)</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Portraying their bodies realistically (instead of posing) (Katebi, 2022) ◦ Picturing/following similar bodies as your own (Katebi, 2022) ◦ Showing that all body shapes are healthy/diversity of body shapes (Katebi, 2022) ◦ Focus on personality rather than appearance? (Katebi, 2022) ◦ Body positivity/self-compassion/self-love (Katebi, 2022)—reminder that you don't have to look like the fitfluencer ◦ Body neutrality/body functionality ◦ Posts about accepting yourself ◦ Share setbacks/negative experiences as well ◦ Instagram vs. reality pictures ◦ Show full process/progress and not just end result ◦ Captions vs. visual? ◦ Videos vs. images?
Exercise intentions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can you think of ways for fitfluencers to avoid demotivation to exercise? • <i>Sorting exercise (sort from most effective to least effective to avoid demotivation to exercise)</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Exercise for non-appearance-related reasons (e.g., exercise for pleasure or depicting achievements not related to appearance). (Katebi, 2022) ◦ Exercise for physical health (Katebi, 2022) ◦ Exercise for mental health (Katebi, 2022) ◦ Show fitness progress (Katebi, 2022) (full trial) ◦ Transformation images (before and after) (Katebi, 2022) ◦ Images showing that they have exercised (sweat, tousled hair) (Katebi, 2022) ◦ Acknowledge that it is also difficult and inconvenient at times (Katebi, 2022) ◦ Messages to encourage followers (Katebi, 2022) ◦ Giving (exercise) instructions (Katebi, 2022) ◦ Body functionality ◦ Captions vs. visual? ◦ Videos vs. photos?
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Did you already see certain content that works positively for you? (cf. <i>screenshots</i>) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ For your mental well-being ◦ For your exercise intentions ◦ Do you consciously follow certain content for this? • What do you think are the ultimate ways for fitfluencers to encourage and promote exercise while ensuring good mental health?

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Closing

Closing	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Are there any issues not covered that you would like to share?
Debriefing	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Thank you for your time and participation in the interview! I now have a better idea of how you view content from fitness influencers on social media. As a thank you for your participation, here's another 30-euro gift card from bol.com.• Finally, I would like to share the following: The conversation we just had, as well as posts from fitness influencers on social media, can make you feel down. I would like to remind you that it is perfectly okay to have a certain weight or body shape, even if it doesn't look like that of fitness influencers. Fitness influencers often go through massive workouts and spend more time in the gym than out of it, so their bodies are often unattainable. Also remember that your value does not depend on how you look or how much you weigh, but on who you are as a person and what you do. So be sure not to be influenced by the opinions of others or standards from the media. So be kind to yourself and your body and remember that accepting yourself is a process. It is natural that it can be difficult at times but know that you are valued for who you are, and not for how you look. <p>If you have any questions about this or are in need of a conversation, visit www.watwat.be.</p>
