

# **Documenting YouTubers and Female Empowerment:**

A study of Female Fitness Vloggers' influence on female audiences

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## Documenting YouTubers and Female Empowerment

### ABSTRACT

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*Vloggers* became exponentially popular within the last decade, due to their trustworthiness and their status of “celebrities chosen” by the population. The fitness industry has seen a shift brought on by the new exposure to these same vloggers; between rising popularity of sportswear, of fit expositions, of fitness vlogs and athletes, a new audience became visible. As a matter of fact, these new communicators became leaders of positive and empowering movements for many, embracing female liberating movements.

Few studies focus both on female empowering movements and the role of female fitness vloggers as communicators. Platforms such as Instagram and written blogs have been investigated thoroughly in relation to female empowerment and sports, in contrast to YouTube which has not been related to female liberating improvements. Therefore, it has been decided to research the influence of Female fitness vloggers on the empowerment and positive liberation of their female audience.

To do so, twelve semi-structured interviews were conducted in a time frame of 40 days, allowing an in-depth qualitative research. Convenience sampling was used to acquire the respondents. Indeed, reaching out to women adequate for the research was interesting due to their very low visibility; making it difficult to locate and contact potential respondents. No age limit was determined, even though all respondents were aged between 18 and 26 years old and were women.

Many theories such as empowerment, opinion leaders and influencers, uses of internet and online participation, uses and gratifications, online communities as well as ‘edutainment’ and ‘infotainment’ were used to guide the data analysis. Five main dimensions of fitness vloggers’ positive influence on their female audience have been uncovered by the research. Firstly, vloggers establish a community of support for their followers by being the front runner of a group. Secondly, vloggers increase awareness and recognition for fitness as a sport, by offering their viewers new knowledge about the topic and a more feminine perspective on it. This new awareness and knowledge induces a social change within the community of viewers which is significant for empowering movements. Finally, vloggers affect their viewers by prompting personal gratifications such as increased self-esteem and confidence for instance, of their audience. Each one of these findings demonstrate the positive power of influence female fitness vloggers hold on their female public, triggering female empowering growth.

**KEYWORDS:** *Female empowerment, Fitness vloggers, YouTube, Social change, Femininity, Influencers*

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

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<b>ABSTRACT .....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>1    Introduction .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>2    Theoretical Framework .....</b>	<b>10</b>
2.1    Vloggers as influencers.....	10
2.2    Female Fitness Vloggers as communicators for social change .....	12
2.3    The millennials and social media uses.....	15
2.4    A World-wide-web community.....	18
2.5    YouTube as entertainment and learning tool.....	18
<b>3    Method.....</b>	<b>21</b>
3.1    Operationalization.....	21
3.2    Units of analysis and Sampling .....	22
3.3    Interview progress and data collection .....	24
3.4    Data Analysis.....	27
<b>4    Results .....</b>	<b>30</b>
4.1    Set a foundation .....	30
4.2    Increased awareness and recognition.....	32
4.2.1    Visibility and recognition.....	32
4.2.2    Raise awareness about sports and fitness.....	35
4.2.3    Raise awareness about stereotypes.....	36
4.2.4    Raise awareness about women's femininity .....	37
4.3    Deliver knowledge.....	38
4.3.1    Free service .....	38
4.3.2    Increase knowledge.....	40
4.4    Induce a change .....	43
4.4.1    Social change .....	43
4.4.2    Individual change.....	46
4.5    Carry gratifications .....	47
4.5.1    Increasing self-esteem: confidence and strength.....	47
4.5.2    Motivation.....	49
4.5.3    Courage .....	51

# Documenting YouTubers and Female Empowerment

4.6	Critical acknowledgment .....	52
4.7	Overview of findings .....	53
<b>5</b>	<b>Conclusion.....</b>	<b>55</b>
	<b>References.....</b>	<b>62</b>
	<b>Appendix A .....</b>	<b>66</b>
	<b>Appendix B .....</b>	<b>71</b>

## 1 INTRODUCTION

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The society's media consumption has changed in the past few years, substantially influencing the evolution of the fitness industry. Undeniably, many companies have been required to adapt to new needs and behaviors in order to remain competitive. For instance, Gymshark is a sportswear brand that managed to grow their business by taking into account the social media behaviors of their audience. They have been ranked among the fastest growing companies in United Kingdom in December 2016 and became one of the most recognizable brands in fitness within three years of creation ("Gymshark", n.d.). The business was founded in 2012 by a group of high school friends, and within three years of creation, the company became one of the most recognizable brands in fitness. By using 18 ambassadors (representatives or promoters), the brand gathered more than 20 million followers in total for their social media accounts, reaching customers on every part of the globe. Gymshark managed to reach an international brand recognition, becoming a direct competitor of the giants Nike and Adidas (Rannard, 2016). As a matter of fact, the marketing strategy using already established fitness *Instagammers* and *vloggers* allowed them to reach customers in more than 131 countries in the world ("Edge Magazine", n.d.). *Instagammers* and *Vloggers* are people who document their life or lifestyle on Instagram and YouTube respectively. They are actively posting videos or inspirational photos, and building up an active community of followers. Their status of *influencers*, due to an established online celebrity, and role model in large online communities (from 500,000 to several millions of followers) gave a considerable advantage to the Gymshark brand and recognition. The brand has grown organically in about three years to more than 3 million of subscribers (across all social media channels) thanks to its ambassadors and the audience's exposure through social media ("Gymshark", n.d.).

Gymshark is not a singular case. The sport industry has seen changes happen, with a rising popularity of sportswear as fashion, of fitness blogs, vlogs and fit exhibition, the industry needed to adapt to a new audience (Ko, Taylor, Sung, Lee, Wagner, Navarro & Wang, 2012; Rigby, 1995). Thus, companies do not only use superstars to represent their brands, but have also started to use Web 2.0 as an advantage. Since the internet has altered the consumer-product-brand interaction, businesses have progressed to the point where they invest in social media activities (Zauner, Koller & Fink, 2012; Bergström & Bäckman, 2013). The inclusion of social media shaped the new marketing strategy, thus helping to boost the brand perception and recognition by customers; athletes or fitness models wear and promote products from the brand for instance. Social media stars, fitness representatives who became popular thanks to social media, became a great tool for marketers in the sports industry to promote their products. Some primary advantages of using interned personalities as brand endorsers include the fact that

## Documenting YouTubers and Female Empowerment

they also appraise the values supported by the brand and shared by the users and that they ground to the users' reality. They retain a certain level of credibility and trustworthiness that mainstream stars no longer have (Zauner et al., 2012). While traditionally spokespersons or representatives of sports brands were mostly male (Shuart, 2007), the number of female brand ambassadors has also increased dramatically due to the surge of a new class of real-life-online-brand ambassadors (Andreasson & Johansson, 2013).

The Gymshark Company is one example of the new marketing and communication environment, where YouTube and its *vloggers* are not overrated, but represent the new generation of fitness representatives among consumers, particularly females. Forbes recently published the first-ever ranking of the highest paid YouTube stars (Berg, 2015). This ranking demonstrates how significant *vloggers* have become in the online world, and how much they are being watched by audiences all over the world. The recent increase of popularity of vloggers created a new path among social media celebrities, showing how considerably YouTube is slowly taking over the rest of user-generated content websites, where 'normal' people participate in the creation of posts, and therefore expansion of Web 2.0 (Schafer, 2011). The internet has evolved to a place where pages are designed for users to be creators and participants on the net (Bergström & Bäckman, 2013). According to Schafer (2011), with the rise of this Web 2.0 and the principle of participatory audiences, social media became overly popular and used all over the world. This participatory audience users finally play an active role by collecting, exposing, investigating, commenting on and spreading content (Schafer, 2011). Internet is used to connect parts of the world within a couple seconds, but also changes the way interactions happen. As O'Reilly and Botelle (2009) mentioned, the Web is now the world. Social media directly affects all aspects of life, making it easier to find information, share and react to content due to the exacerbated interaction between consumers. We 'live online' as the Internet offers more features than a basic source of information. Web 2.0 gives the chance to ordinary individuals to generate their own content, and own community, becoming social media influencers. Indeed, everybody can contribute to online content, whether they are explicitly participating by posting articles, pictures reviews or simply watching and implicitly participating in hidden features such as views (Schafer, 2011).

The growth of Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Instagram facilitated the emergence of a new genre of celebrity: the ones chosen by the audience. While once film stars, singers or super models chosen by the industry itself were 'celebrities', the term now denotes any 'influencer', understood as persons who influence opinions or behaviors and who are renowned on the world-wide-web (Saul, 2016). From beauty gurus to technology enthusiasts or sports addicts, many people developed a fan base that helped them become famous. Not only do these influencers share their passions and lifestyle, but they also connect with their audience on the everyday, "ordinary" and reliable aspect of their lives (Blank & Reisdorf, 2012). The interpersonal interaction available on *vlogs*, since the users record personal moments of their

## Documenting YouTubers and Female Empowerment

days, is allowing viewers to participate in the comment section, and hence to connect on a deeper level (Gordon, n.d.). Ultimately, the new social media celebrities are not chosen by the industry, but by the population itself, thanks to the connection they create with the viewers. Their reliable appearance, normality and easy reach is what make them appreciated more and more in society. Video blogs with their content in video format, similarly to television, “make a difference because it is in its nature to bring things closer to its viewers” (Aksoy & Robins, 2003, p.94). Many Instagrammers and YouTubers (*Vloggers*) developed a professional career thanks to their followers’ support, allowing them to reach opportunities inaccessible to ‘ordinary’ people in the past. As a matter of fact, many of these social media celebrities are nowadays being sponsored by big brands and have displaced traditional icons like personalities in music, arts or cinema as preferred spokespersons with their normality. Many companies such as Gymshark took advantage of this trend, and integrated social media celebrities in their marketing strategies to maximize profits (Zauner, Koller & Fink, 2012). Body Engineer, Under Armour and even Puma are other companies which, similarly to Gymshark, endorse their brand by using social media influencers (Kell, 2016).

In a world where weightlifting and fitness has always been promoted as a men’s lifestyle, female role models became more and more popular via diverse social media platforms. As a matter of fact, blogging and *vlogging* became the main way to get exposure for many women trying to be heard in a men’s industry (Andreasson & Johansson, 2013). While blogs were at first described as online diaries, *vlogging* took the sharing of personal experiences to another level. YouTube and its vloggers (video-bloggers) gained popularity over time among athletes, fitness bloggers and their audiences. The visual format allows the recording of tutorials, therefore making it easier both for fitness professionals to share information and tips and for users to access and visualize the content (Jong & Drummond, 2016). The video presentation also helps viewers and vloggers to connect to connect with one another on a deeper, more personal level. Given the fact that vloggers document their own lives through video, communities have started to form around these leaders chosen by the population, similarly to ‘traditional’ bloggers who have no video content but document their lives (Blank & Reisdorf, 2012). Many female fitness *vloggers* documented their own transformation, fighting against stereotypes in the perception of what a female (body) can, should or should not do (Andreasson & Johansson, 2013). Female fitness vloggers created a shift within the sports industry by showing to many other people that sport is empowering. Their role has been at the center of recent debates concerning their influence on constructing a false body inspiration and focus on appearance rather than health, while other popular opinions promote the opposite thesis (Stover, 2014; Jong & Drummond, 2016; Tang, 2016).

It has been proven in the past already that fitness content gained popularity over time, having an impact on viewers, whether it is on a mental aspect or behavioral traits (Jong & Drummond, 2016;

## Documenting YouTubers and Female Empowerment

Madge, 2014; Stover, 2014; Harrison, 2000). The intensive exposure to fitness material has been upheld many times to affect consumers' body image. Moreover, countless communities appeared on social media, gathering persons seeking for a different lifestyle, often gathered around one or more fitness influencers acting as role models (Davis, Waycott & Zhou, 2015). The cultural expectations related to femininity slowly change through the rise of female fitness vloggers. Female fitness *vloggers* created a big change in the sports industry. Not only do they try to challenge the cultural expectations given to female bodies and identities, but they also show that sports can be empowering for whoever loves it. The role of influencer they hold, thanks to their ability to influence behaviors or opinions of others, causes us to wonder how the messages sent by *vloggers* help audiences to feel empowered, or if on the contrary audiences assign their videos a different perspective than what was intended.

Therefore, this research will attempt to identify the personal perception of fitness vloggers' audience. Are these messages really empowering? Are they inducing a social change? Are they trusted or positively impacting the viewers? Are the audiences really influenced in their consumer behavior? Did vloggers really impact the business success of companies like Gymshark? This is what this research will intend to discover. Therefore, the research will attempt to answer the following question:

*How do female fitness vloggers influence the empowerment of their female audiences?*

In order to answer this research question, some important sub-questions will be used:

1. *How do audiences and vloggers make use of YouTube as a social instrument?*
2. *Which role do female fitness vloggers play in liberating their female audience from a sole identity?*
3. *How do female fitness vloggers influence the self-development of their female audiences?*

By answering these sub-questions, it will be possible to form an explanation to the main research question previously introduced. The first sub-question will focus on the use of videos and YouTube as a social media platform, both by vloggers and audiences. Sub-question two will address directly elements of empowerment that help female audiences of female fitness vloggers challenge the status quo, and influence the level of awareness female viewers reach. Finally, sub-question three will address the self-growth or personal growth of female audience members and how vloggers guide them towards a greater-self. The consecutive answers given to each one of these sub-questions will give a precise insight on certain elements of empowerment. Consequently, all essentials will be collected and will give an answer to the research question.

## Documenting YouTubers and Female Empowerment

A clear definition of empowerment is challenging to form, despite the theory of empowerment being advanced by many researchers and studies. As a rather recent concept, there is yet no agreement on what exactly is empowerment. Wilkinson (1998) takes a managerial approach of it, defining the term as a technique used to influence workers' behaviors within the corporation. Zimmerman's, Rappaport's and Seidman's (2000) theory understands empowerment as a process to endeavor a form of control or influence over decisions that affect one's life. Mechanic (1991), on the other hand, details a process where one acknowledges the link between goals and achieving the aimed results. These definitions all represent diverse components of more recent definitions of empowerment: influence, understanding and awareness. For the sake of this study, the definition of empowerment that will be followed and that encompasses the previous aspects discussed is formed on the most recent lines given by Tang (2016) and Bianchi and Dirkx (2012). In their understanding, empowerment represents a positive development of a community as a whole, derived from equal opportunities, educational content and rise of consciousness both on an individual and communal levels. Female empowering movements are considerably increasing with the expansion of feminist engagements, thus researching it in a context where social media are the main source of expression is pertinent.

Within the academic sphere, female fitness blogging has been researched thoroughly with studies focusing on platforms such as Instagram (Stuart-Madge, 2014) and blogging websites (Antunovic & Hardin, 2013; Stover, 2014). As *vlogging* has seen a recent expansion, other researches focused on the use of YouTube as a platform for enabling the video-blogging trend. However, its use has not been narrowed down to specific domains such as female liberating movements or fitness. Whether it is only blogging or fitness blogging, the topic has been significantly studied within the academic sphere despite its contemporary status. With YouTube's success and the recognized status of YouTube celebrities, it is interesting to study the way fitness *vlogging* is being received by the audiences, this would add a certain contribution to the study of social behaviors. A novel aspect of this study is examining the impact that the visual format, in contrast to written content, has on positive movements, since this media has rarely been studied in this context. Additionally, it is acknowledged in many studies that fitness vloggers and social media in general may induce negative impacts and effects on internet consumers (Stover, 2014; Jong & Drummond, 2016). However, this study will focus mainly on the elements of empowerment and positive influences on viewers, since it is an area which lacks investigation. Feminism is more than ever a heated topic, due the multiplication of female empowering movements; thus the topic of female empowerment through fitness *vlogging* current and relevant in the academic and social sphere.

## 2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

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Many aspects of *vlogging* and its social influence will be addressed in the following section. *Vloggers* are not only influencers; they are also the voice of many, the leaders of online communities. However, what the audience does with the messages received will depend on how the consumers use the internet. Therefore, we will study both the *vloggers*' aspects of the job and the audience's role. Many theories are relevant to the research, but the main topics that need to be remembered for the resulting research are the following. First, the role held by vloggers that lies between model, representative and influencer is extremely important when it comes to the transformative messages they transmit. In fact, the influence they exert on such a wide range of viewers can influence many fundamental social changes. Whether they concern the revolution of a gender identity, or raising the awareness on diverse social issues every individuals face, the role of vloggers as leaders of a collectivity needs to be kept in mind. The second element that may affect their power over thoughtful audiences is their personal usage of internet. As a matter of fact, the reasons behind the use of mass media can have a significant meaning on how consumers will be affected by the visualized content. With the growth of a generation of digital natives, online life can be considered as a social sphere as important as real life social networks. For this reason, it is crucial to study the role of online socializing on empowering movements. And finally, the internet offers more and more features to an ever growing, never satisfied population. The new increase of self-educating actions increases the prominence of internet on activities such as learning and global knowledge. Empowerment in general, but more notably the empowerment of a female audience rely on as many specificities as the internet gathers.

### 2.1 VLOGGERS AS INFLUENCERS

*Vlog* is the short term for video-blogging; instead of writing like in a diary, explaining step by step their work, vloggers film themselves and document their lives throughout the day. In his research, Martin (2012) develops the principle that any social actor in the online world holds two different roles: the role of opinion leader or, influencer, and the role of communicator. Vlogs, due to the standard of original content for each video, are constantly growing, therefore their audience keeps evolving and increasing. The role of communicator can be associated with the principle of word of mouth. Due to their normality, or sense

## Documenting YouTubers and Female Empowerment

of reality, vloggers have the aptitude to create conversations or debates among their fanbase, but also to initiate feedback or to influence a specific direction in an ongoing debate within the online public (Martin, 2012; Behmer & Bazlova, 2013). This last point is directly related to the role of opinion leaders held by vloggers. An opinion leader, or influencer, can be defined as an influential member within a group (Katz & Blumler, 1974). In general, these influencers have the trust of their audience, or are held in high esteem by the community. According to Martin (2012), fitness *vloggers*, due to their knowledge and experience, are expected to be reliable and trustful role models. The information they transmit through their videos should be trustworthy enough to help the viewer decide or act (Martin, 2012). What is more, the principle of community helps the spread of a message from peer to peer, extending the circle of influence and thus also the credibility of the influencer. *Vloggers* try to cultivate as much attention as possible and use social media to brand themselves by creating an authentic self for the camera.

Goffman (1959) developed a theory of the presentation of the self, explaining how individuals try to present an idealized version of themselves. This theory is more relevant than ever with the growth of online interactions. In addition, Ellison, Hancock and Toma (2012) developed their own idea of how online features, as well as virtual interactions, allow a presentation of the self that has been carefully calibrated to the expectations of both broadcaster and audience. On the web, individuals show a self that reflects both the culture and qualities that are appreciated by the audience (Behmer & Bazlova, 2013). *Vloggers* create an image their viewers will look up to, and will aim to emulate. This portrayal is fully controlled and is part of the role of an influencer. Rocamora (2016) advanced the idea that the technologies a vlogger uses, such as webcams, phone or cameras, to record himself/herself, play a role of mirrors. They use these tools to keep in check their image and project themselves, while projecting a consciously curated image to their viewers. The author defines computer screens as “technologies of the self” (p.11). Indeed, she explains the idea that the image portrayed by vloggers for the viewers is an image that has been practiced and that is destined to the online social network. *Vloggers* give a portrayal of themselves that has been constructed especially for their online audience, thus corresponding to the definition of ‘mediatized self’. Rocamora (2016) justifies how users portray themselves for their audience, using diverse techniques both to improve their physical appearance and to promote values and beliefs by showing implicit behaviors. By trying to alter their imperfections on camera, they create another self that has been planned and rehearsed.

In a similar vein, Gössling and Stavrinidi (2015) develop the idea that social media users face the pressure of making a respectable impression correlated with the fact that they are exposing themselves to the scrutiny of other users. Every social media network is divided in two main parts: a strong core that gathers family and close friends and a wide circle of acquaintances and occasional companions, which further extends to include influencers such as vloggers. This larger part of a social networks influences

## Documenting YouTubers and Female Empowerment

the way people present themselves; due to this feeling and experience of surveillance, users adjust the personality they expose (Gössling & Stavrinidi, 2015). This selective self-presentation online affects not only simple users but also creators of content. Vloggers are highly affected by this behavioral change. Indeed, self-presentation involves conveying a certain image of the self to others, but also and more importantly influencing other individuals to respond in desired ways (Ellison, Hancock & Toma, 2011). The desired influence is what helps vloggers to determine the personality they show; therefore, they will adapt according to their audience's reactions to ensure an increasing follower community, but also views and positive feedback. This form of computer mediated communication between vloggers and their followers may be double-edged, giving the opportunity to be entirely real and to communicate freely or to secure one's self behind a modified or improved self to fit into the norms and values established by the global society (Ellison et al., 2011).

Nowadays, technology allows individuals to create different versions of themselves, but also to become better versions of themselves. New media and new media technologies have also altered individuals' 'offline' practices and experiences. For example, a real-life meeting with viewers would probably result in video or photographic footage of the meeting, helping with the self-branding of the vlogger (Rocamora, 2016). The mediatization of these influencer can also help building a change of social reality, or inducing the transmission of messages through audiences.

### 2.2 FEMALE FITNESS VLOGGERS AS COMMUNICATORS FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

In a society where populations teach themselves and teach others through the internet, online fitness ambassadors produce and share content for audiences to understand and create a change by themselves (Wright, 2009). Moreover, female fitness *vloggers* can be considered as messengers of social change within the society. They represent the strong femininity, showing that sport, particularly fitness, is not a man's world (Andreasson & Johansson, 2013). Women's femininity rely on what is conventionally regarded as the quality or attributes accorded to the female gender. As they take part in *masculine* sports, women alter the cultural stereotype associated with being a female, showing they can also be extremely active and have more self-confident behaviors. In fact, this challenges the typical gender theory that categorize which sports are adapted for women or not (Gill, 2005). Many articles still treat men and women differently in the fitness industry, often assimilating women with the role of 'eye candy' compared to a masculine leadership (Asp, 2012). Similarly to many other sports, where it is part of the culture to be implicitly hostile to women and reinforce stereotypes about gender identity, females in bodybuilding keep being reduced to superficiality (Andreasson & Johansson, 2013). While body building is presented as a difficult sport, requiring mental discipline and commitment for men to become strong, it

## Documenting YouTubers and Female Empowerment

is associated in the case of women with shallowness, men's physique or simple aesthetic issues (Gill, 2005; Andreasson & Johansson, 2013; Antunovic & Hardin, 2013). Femininity is socially constructed, therefore by sharing their stories and experiences, female fitness vloggers help people realize that anyone can achieve anything, provided they act with diligence and determination.

Female fitness models are not only the representation of female empowerment; they also represent the *ordinary* people who changed their social life 'surprisingly' (Antunovic & Hardin, 2013). This empowerment through sport has not always been acknowledged or accepted. For many years, sports and physical activity in general have been associated with masculinity. For years, women faced a form of discrimination accompanying their body's capacities and limitations. Theberge quotes Hargreaves' (1994) explanation of empowerment through sports by stating, 'The acquisition of strength, muscularity and athletic skill has always been empowering for men, whereas for women it is valued far less and in some cases is denigrated' (2000, p.323). Indeed, the representation of the female body has often been a source of stigmatization, relating femininity with a sexual and sensual perspective, rather than an athletic one (Bianchi & Dirkx, 2012). According to these authors, the spread of the stereotypes prevented young girls from participating in sporting activities, due to the fear of losing sensuality or being associated with a sexual minority. This sexism in sport and fitness led to a demonization of female athletes. As a response, many empowering movements started to promote the benefits of sports in women's life, aiming at making women feel more confident about their physical abilities, as well as more powerful and less alienated in a patriarchal industry (Bianchi & Dirkx, 2012; Liimakka, 2011). The wave of feminist movements diffused through social media and popular fitness vloggers helped the normalization of women athletes and the introduction of physical activities in femininity. Liimakka (2011) presents a different and newer perspective concerning the role of sports as empowering for younger girls and women. In her view, increased physical activity gives women and girls a new perspective on the capabilities of their own body, but also brings along recognition and valuation to what the female body can do or not. This acknowledgement helps women know and accept their bodies, leading to their personal empowerment (Liimakka, 2011).

The digital space creates a comfort zone where everybody is allowed to tell their stories (Antunovic & Hardin, 2013) and to state their opinions. However, this also allows negative comments to be posted. Female fitness *vloggers* are often seen supporting one another as a way of developing their own female empowering movement. By doing so, they strive not only for a better self, but also for the better self of their viewers, by giving them a feeling of power. Indeed, Smith and Sanderson (2015) defend the fact that social media provide women with opportunities to feel empowered. According to Bianchi and Dirkx (2012), female empowerment relates to the positive development of the female

## Documenting YouTubers and Female Empowerment

community as a whole. Since the lack of empowerment often results from unequal opportunities or from a deficiency in educational content concerning sport and female capacities (Tang, 2016), making information available through videos allows the audience to gather the evidence they need to decide what is best for them.

Collins (2000) in her book, claims that the development of individual empowerment is facilitated through the rise of consciousness of both individuals and groups within a society. The author maintains the fact the individual and group consciousness are not only complementary, but also influence each other. The process of self-development promoted by fitness vloggers presents their audiences with other ways of feeling empowered through sport (Bianchi et al., 2012). Topics such as personal growth, improvement of skills, and discovery of new abilities all bring a new dimension of awareness to individuals, allowing them to discover what they are capable of and to develop a more positive self-perception. By inspiring other women thanks to their personal journey, by educating them, but also by denouncing behaviors and trends that may be harmful for them, fitness vloggers strive towards a development of other females (Bianchi et al., 2012; Tang, 2016). Therefore, the transformative powers of the messages transmitted by *vloggers* cannot be ignored (Rocamora, 2016). Many programs and challenges have been created by these fitness *vloggers*, solely destined to their community of viewers and challenging the traditional norms given to the female body. On the other hand, their empowerment does not come solely from the support they receive from another *vlogger*, but it also comes directly from their online communities. The way they engage with the audience, the compliments and advice they give or receive, the questions they are being asked, the sharing of their own experiences, all these elements are reinforced by the interaction with their online communities. This feeling of recognition and common beliefs helps strengthen the feeling of belonging among online communities, and therefore the relations between participants (Van Dijk, 2013).

On the other hand, it has been recognized that mass media may be harmful for its users. As already mentioned before, *vloggers* show a rehearsed self to their audience occasionally restricting the details they share with the viewers (Rocamora, 2016). By selecting the content of their videos, vloggers do not show the “behind-the-scenes”, which would offer a more complete view of the downsides of a fitness lifestyle (Stover, 2014). Many authors developed the idea that the credibility acquired by these fitness vloggers may push people to blindly mirror their behaviors, enhancing the risk of dangerous behaviors (Tang, 2016). The fit inspirations they represent helps promoting a thin/fit image of women, encouraging using restrictive diets and fitness to reach an ideal appearance, rather than promoting a healthy and happy lifestyle (Stover, 2014; Jong & Drummond, 2016). By promoting a specific appearance rather than a real healthy mindset, fitness vloggers may encourage desperate behaviors very similar to ‘thin ideals’ and

many skinny trends promoted by mainstream media (Harrison, 2000). It has been demonstrated that the intense exposure to “fitness beauty ideals” in mass media may trigger eating disorders and dysmorphophobia tendencies; also called body dysmorphic disorders (Jong et al., 2016; Harrison, 2000). If this fitness motivation content may inspire women to start their own journey, it can also trigger negative body image, demotivation and depression among viewers (Harrison, 2000). This social comparison has been triggered by an extended visibility and easy access to socially accepted norms, values and practices on the internet (Ellison et al., 2011). The constant scrutiny of social media can easily push audiences to compare themselves to socially successful individuals. By doing so, audiences create a false image of the “perfect self” but also a distorted idea of success and happiness, forbidding them from presenting a “non-conform” self or from participating in larger body positive movements that are fighting against stereotypes (Ellison et al., 2011; Gössling & Stavrinidi, 2015). This digital space that has been created turns into a network where each one will learn how to share a part of the self.

### 2.3 THE MILLENNIALS AND SOCIAL MEDIA USES

A question remains: why are social media so popular and how are they used by the young generation? And why do vloggers, and video blogging in general, appear to be among the favorites on social media? Three important elements have been highlighted by Ballano, Uribe and Munté-Ramos (2014), directly related also to Hart’s findings (2008). On one hand, social media are simply the outcome of surfing in the internet and looking for information. With social media being central on the web, these platforms are unavoidable. On the other hand, young consumers use social platforms to create, construct and sustain social contacts with peers. Likewise, social media are used as a place to create closer relationship with persons sharing the same recognition and beliefs, establishing a form of mutual trust and hierarchies among users. Similarly, YouTube as a social platform displays this phenomenon with the relation between *vloggers* and *subscribers* but also within the fanbase. Individuals do not only share values and beliefs, but are also brought together within the community created over the vlogger they support. A mutual recognition occurs between supporters, and between the vlogger as a role model and subscribers as fans.

The concept of *digital native* developed and promoted by Prensky (2001), explains how the spread of technologies affected a new generation of people. Digital natives are ‘native speakers’ of the language of technologies and online platforms, but also more recently called millennials. It did not only change the way young people think, but also how they seek and consume information. This radical change compared to previous generations is mostly due to the digital and media environment in which they grew up. Older generations may recognize that social media is purely virtual, but for digital natives it

## Documenting YouTubers and Female Empowerment

is a new form of reality. Hart (2008) also established three different types of users on social media, distinguished by their level of commitment and their typical activities on social networks. (However, the three groups are not mutually exclusive, since users may vary their consumption practices based on moment and social network.) The first type is the passive user, or what Schafer (2011) would call implicit type of participant, the reader. Readers take part in online activity only by surfing different web pages, looking, watching with no more involvement than subscribing to feeds. In brief, they consume the content but do not take any explicit part into its modification or creation. The viewers or subscribers to *vloggers*' channel would be represent this type of user, as long as they don't participate more. The second kind of consumer is the explicit participant one. Such consumers also read and watch online content but, as active contributors, they also share content, comment and connect with other people within the social platform. This is the fan production on already existing content (Jenkins, 2004). This form of online participation also relies on the editing of online content such as blogs, or any user-generated content that requires editing from consumers. In the case of *vlogs*, participants would be the video consumers who both watch and comment on the *vloggers*' channels. The comment section in YouTube allows to give thumbs up or down on comments already posted, but also to reply and discuss directly on the web page. Finally, creators form the last type of users that has been identified. Within this set of consumers, two levels can be distinguished. On the one hand, it is possible to differentiate those users who directly create content by posting or sharing any kind of media online. *Vloggers* are creators in the sense that they create and share their videos through their channel. On the other hand, they also represent the second level of creators by engendering diverse types of cooperation. By creating their channel, they generate a possible collaboration between themselves and the viewers, opening a discussion thanks to comment section for instance.

The uses of internet and media in general tend to be influenced by the needs and gratifications one needs to fulfil, as with other media previously. Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch (1974) argue in their numerous studies that audiences actively use mass media to satisfy human needs. The authors identified four types of needs: socialization, entertainment, self-actualization or self-seeking and information. YouTube, and more globally social media, increased in popularity in relation to the multiple needs it fulfills at once. The numerous features offered by YouTube as a platform, whether it is watching videos, interacting with others, sharing, finding information, learning; make this media outlet one of the favorites among audiences due to its completeness. Audiences decide on the influence their media consumption will have on them by deciding which use they will make out of it. In addition, there are as many reasons for using media as there are consumers, and one consumer might engage with one medium or piece of content in order to fulfill several needs simultaneously (Katz, Blumler & Gurevitch, 1974). This theory

## Documenting YouTubers and Female Empowerment

discussed above reinforces the belief that viewers seek different elements when following female fitness vloggers. But to fully understand which elements influence female viewers, the discussion needs to include a basic reminder of human needs and motivations.

Actually, Maslow's well known pyramid of needs and motivations describes the process an individual follows to develop a psychological well-being (Maslow & Lewis, 1987). This pyramid is divided in 5 categories of needs: physiological, safety, love and belonging, esteem and self-actualization. To start with the physiological needs and motivations, it is simple to explain that they are related to any human needs to satisfy in order to survive; for instance, breath, eat, sleep, go to the bathroom. The next motivation called "safety" concerns the need to feel safe in one's daily life such as economically safe, security of the body, security of health, security of family. Then, love and belonging is a need to will be particularly interesting for this research. This third level of human needs concerning the social need for belonging. It concerns the ability to create and retain emotional and social relations (Maslow & Lewis, 1987). Indeed, the creation of new communities and social groups online help fulfilling this need for acceptance among social groups, without regard to the size of the group, or whether they are online or in real life. Therefore, many users feel the satisfaction of being accepted or feeling the belonging to online communities. In addition, the fourth level of motivation developed by Maslow is tightly related to the need for love and belonging. Esteem may be only the fourth level of need, yet it is a rather important one online. All individuals have the desire to be respected and feel valued by others. This need for social recognition gives one the sense of esteem and contribution within a social sphere. Vloggers, due to their online recognition and visibility, feel respected and valued by the community of followers they developed, due to a sense of contribution in the empowerment of other individuals.

On the other hand, viewers themselves will take part in communities, maybe comment, share, and participate in order to feel esteemed. This psychological need is extremely relevant in a sense where the need for social acceptance is exacerbated by the online life the new generation leads. Self-esteem and self-respect relies on the fulfillment of this need, therefore, confidence and self-love also do. Finally, the fifth and last level of Maslow's pyramid is called self-actualization (Maslow & Lewis, 1987). This level of need represents the realization of one's potential. Indeed, this level describes the realization by one's of what they can do, and therefore, become the best they can be by reaching this full potential. In this case, by being exposed to female fitness vloggers, other women will discover their potential and therefore reach towards this best version of themselves. This self-development motivation is extremely important for one's empowerment, and therefore needs to be researched in the following study.

## Documenting YouTubers and Female Empowerment

### 2.4 A WORLD-WIDE-WEB COMMUNITY

Many debates have contrasted the digital natives (young generation born with new media) and digital immigrants (parents and teachers for instance). The use of social media and diverse digital technologies are understood by the older generation as leisure and waste of time, while the younger generation recognizes that online skills are acquired and necessary as a new professional and social proficiency. Recent studies found out that globally, more than 42% of internet users have watched a *vlog* or more during the previous month (Mander, 2015). As a matter of fact, this trend has been known to be particularly popular among the 16-34 years old, demonstrating the influence digital natives have on online trends. On social media, people are brought together by a sense of recognition, belonging, which is an important human need for one's happiness (Maslow & Lewis, 1987). These communities are based on values, beliefs and/or dreams that are shared among the users (Van Dijk, 2013). The birth of online communities via social media created a new space where people can come together, support one another and participate. Nonnecke, Andrews and Preece (2006) advanced the belief of another type of community member called the 'lurker' (p.8). This lurker does not take actively or publically part into the community, but 'lurks' for information and even considers himself as community member due to its observation of the group. Actually, this implicit member of the community indirectly takes part online just by observing, but still profits from the benefits of the online group. The study shows that they do profit from less benefits than active member, but their sense of belonging and recognition is still triggered (Nonnecke, Andrews & Preece, 2006). This kind of attitude online can shows how a sense of community can be felt as long as one recurrence brings every member together. On YouTube, many fitness communities gather around one individual or brand who represent the role model. One fitness vlogger leads to another and to another, thus forming a community of viewers interested in a certain subject, in the case of this research, fitness. Many of these *vloggers* even support one another, both to extend their own network, but also to bring something different to the audience. For instance, they feature one another on their channels, organize common meet and greets with fans, organize collaborations. By empowering each other, they also empower their entire community. Whether it is promoting a healthier lifestyle, new techniques, clothing brands or the feminist, body positive movement as a whole, fitness vloggers use these communities to share their experiences with the rest of the world (Antunovic & Hardin, 2013; Jong & Drummond, 2016).

### 2.5 YOUTUBE AS ENTERTAINMENT AND LEARNING TOOL

YouTube, since its creation in 2005, has become the favorite video sharing platform on the web. As already mentioned before, Web 2.0 introduced a new generation but also new learning processes. The new learning supports offered by the internet changed drastically the way digital natives educate

## Documenting YouTubers and Female Empowerment

themselves (Duffy, 2008; O'Reilly, 2005). YouTube among other new platforms allows to create a new approach mixing entertainment with education and work. Indeed, the fast pace of information assimilation pushes millennials to look for the fastest and easiest way to access the information needed, from as many perspectives and sources as possible. (Duffy, 2008). According to the same author, YouTube gives access to millions of videos, where it is easy to research, select and instantly access the content that best suits the learning needs of users. Therefore, the “on-request” option that the video platform offers is an advantage in a society where edutainment masters (Jones & Cuthrell, 2011). Edutainment denotes the thin line that exists between education and entertainment. The abundance of content on YouTube impacts the role that the platform plays in facilitating learning (Lee & Lehto, 2013). The learning process is not only affected by the availability of content, but also by the satisfaction offered by consumption. Indeed, YouTube videos (Lee & Lehto, 2013). The clear understanding and awareness of the learning outcomes increases the users' interaction with the content and other users. In fact, these two criteria determine viewers' assessment of the presenter, the likelihood of subscription but also the trustworthiness and reliability of information given by the video. All these elements are crucial for vloggers' credibility among their audiences.

The growth of YouTube's also led to the emergence of a new form of culture, called the “amateur” culture (Jones & Cuthrell, 2011). This cult of amateurs defines the principle where all individuals, professionals or amateurs, are capable of posting content that will be viewed by thousands of people. Fitness vloggers prove that amateurs can make careers out of their personal knowledge and start to be perceived as professionals due to this knowledge. Fitness *vlogging* is not only a way of documenting a lifestyle and the evolution of some individuals. In reality, much of the content is entertaining as well as instructive. Many fitness vloggers show the workouts they do, explaining in detail how to reproduce the exercise and how the muscles are activated, for instance. In the end, fitness *vlogs* are not purely entertainment, they also educate viewers thanks to the diverse elements of fitness that are included in videos; thus, it can be said that they produce edutainment, or infotainment. Singhal and Rogers (2002) defined 'edutainment' as “the process of purposely designing and implementing a media message to both entertain and educate” (p.127). Vloggers try to mix both videos of pure entertainment with games, challenges, and instructive content about fitness and healthy eating. It is important to consider this relation between entertaining and educating, from Curran's (2011) perspective. The author gives sense to this educational facet by highlighting the balance between entertainment and information. The author considers that teaching the audiences by attracting their attention with an entertaining format is an efficient way to educate viewers. The educative content will be smoothly assimilated if it is mixed up with divertissement. *Vlogs* allow both visualization and dynamism of edutainment; the content delivers information assorted with music or animations for instance (Curran, 2011). These channels play the role

## Documenting YouTubers and Female Empowerment

of intermediary between the *vlogger* and the participant, who want to access health and fitness information delivered on these fitness *vlogs* for instance.

However, Crane's (2002) reception theory focuses on the different responses audiences may have to the same message. Indeed, one's cultural background will influence his immediate reception and reaction to the message, creating heterogeneous responses within a large public. Consumers make their own interpretations that may be different from the one that was anticipated. Therefore, the learning may differ from individual to individual. It demonstrates how the users approach the usage of social media; information seeking still competes with online socialization for the primary use of new media. This different perception of content is where the debate about the influence female fitness vloggers lies. Whether they are supported by many or not, the way vloggers' words and contents are perceived will change the feelings viewers sense towards it, and thus their impact.

### 3 METHOD

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This research will be based on a qualitative study, since we intend to grasp and interpret the meanings and motives of audiences while watching the videos from female fitness vloggers, but also their feelings and outcomes from this action. The study uncovers how the audience perceives these videos, how they interpret the content shown, but also if the female fitness vloggers have any kind of influence on their viewers. We are wondering what is empowerment for the viewers, if they feel empowered by fitness vloggers or not. Therefore, it is determinant to answer the three sub-questions defined previously to be able to answer this question. As already shown, empowerment has a different definition for many, this is why answering questions such as the ones following is crucial for the research: Are they changing their habits along the habits they notice in the videos? Do they really exercise based on these fitness vloggers' recommendations? Do they see themselves through a more positive lens due to the encouragement within the viewer community? Do they feel stronger thanks to the community surrounding the fitness vlogger they follow? In clear, the study's purpose is to provide an overall view of the phenomenon, but also strong bases for further analysis, even more focused on different female fitness vloggers. Attention will also be paid to whether the name of the fitness vlogger matters, or if all vloggers are perceived as a unitary phenomenon. These in-depth interviews with the audience will help determine if female fitness vloggers are actually perceived as empowering. A thematic analysis will be used to find some common themes and disparities among the interviewees, and therefore answer sub-questions and research question. Therefore, we will first discuss the set-up of the research, then the participant selection and conclude the chapter with an overview of the analysis method and steps used throughout the data study.

#### ***IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS OF AUDIENCES***

##### ***3.1 OPERATIONALIZATION***

The method of the interview has been chosen because this allows the researcher to dive into personal experiences for a greater validity of the results (Legard, Keegan & Ward, 2003). We intend to gather findings that truly represent a comprehensive answer to our research question. Since we would like to discover if the audience perceives fitness vloggers and their videos as empowering or not, it is necessary to explore their personal feelings and perceptions. The research targets an in-depth understanding of personal motivations and experiences. As mentioned by Strauss and Corbin (1998), a qualitative research corresponds a 'research about persons' lives, lived experiences, behaviors, emotions, and feelings as well

about organizational functioning, social movements, [and] cultural phenomena' (pp. 10-11). Therefore by not using a method of quantification, but rather talking directly with respondents about opinions, personal knowledge, emotions, we will be able to answer the research question. Boeije (2010) expressed the need of interpretation that results from a qualitative analysis. In the case of this research, the interpretation will results in discovering and gathering features that trigger a feeling of empowerment.

A total of 12 qualitative interviews of viewers have been conducted, with a duration of 43 to 68 minutes. These interviews with viewers as respondents give the possibility to study the elements that determine which *vloggers* they follow, but also what makes them believe and keep following them for instance, or even if they feel empowered by the messages hinted at them, what are their motives for watching it for instance, what is empowerment for them. All questions aimed at answering all sub-questions and research question defined previously. Other questions that have been asked are, for instance: How did they chose the vloggers they follow? For how long have they been following them? Do they feel motivated by the results achieved by the vloggers? Do they feel connected to vloggers thanks to the sharing of their personal journey? Do they connect more with fitness vloggers thanks to the personal dimension of the videos? Do they feel empowered by the fact that female fitness vloggers make accessible to women a masculine sport? Do they feel encouraged by the motivating speeches coming from fitness vloggers and their community? The interview guide (Appendix A) gathers all the potential questions prepared before and while conducting the interviews.

In terms of data privacy and usability, the participants have been asked to sign a consent form before completing the interview, ensuring them that their responses will be anonymous if wanted to and transcribed exactly the way they have been said (Legard et al., 2003). At the same time, this will guarantee that the data is useable afterward. The meetings have been audio-recorded to ensure a good transcription. It needs to be considered as well that interviews via Skype and phone calls have been conducted, due to the method of sampling that was used.

### 3.2 UNITS OF ANALYSIS AND SAMPLING

Concerning the sampling, respondents for in-depth interviews have been selected directly from the criteria that they are followers of a female fitness vlogger, or that they at least watch such videos. As mentioned before, a total of 12 qualitative in-depth interviews have be arranged. Ritchie and Lewis (2003) specified that 10 interviews are already sufficient for a valid sample and a sufficient level of diversity among respondents, adding that any additional interview would strengthen the analysis. Deciding to focus on a minimum of 10 reinforces the diversity of answers we are looking for, still preserving the advantages of a small number of interviews. Indeed, the small sample guarantees a good quality and richness of the data, yet conserves the possibility to gather a diverse range of personal details

## Documenting YouTubers and Female Empowerment

necessary to a research (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). The sampling started with no predisposed idea, so it gave the opportunity to gain a diversity in the female fitness vloggers' audiences. This freedom helped finding respondents who follow many different vloggers and some who do not, but also respondents who do sports and others who do not. To ensure finding respondents willing to participate in the study, the initial design was purposive sampling, but technical limitations of the social media platform (YouTube) made it impossible to contact potential participants. That is why, after more consideration, it has been decided that interviewing any woman who already watched female fitness vloggers (despite not necessarily following specific vloggers) could give us insight on a wider range of implications and watching patterns among viewers. Hence, we tried reaching out to any woman who ever watched fitness vloggers and who would be interested in talking about her experience. This decision was reinforced by the awareness about active participants being the only visible respondents on the video platform, while it is crucial to have the insight of implicit users as well for the research (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981). Without both perspectives, the risk of bias would have increased consequently, and thus, altered the quality of sampling. To do find these different perspectives, we used the social media platform Facebook to post in 3 random English speaking groups a message calling for volunteers. The message was the following:

“Hey everybody! My name is Jade and I'm currently writing my Master thesis, I need some help... I am looking for girls who are following, or already watched female fitness vloggers on YouTube and who would be willing to help me out by answering an interview. Of course coffee and muffins will be offered as a compensation!

Please contact me if there is anyone willing to help me out! Have a great day. “

This message received a lot of attention; many likes and comments spreading the message to a wider network, but only few women actually agreed to participate in the research. A total of 7 women contacted us within a week, volunteering to participate in the study, but just 5 actually went through. Lacking respondents, we decided to try contacting my immediate network by posting a similar message on my personal profile, both in English and French, hoping that we would find new volunteers the following week. 3 new women contacted me, willing to be interviewed and participate into the research. And finally, to find the missing respondents, we used the technique of snowball sampling. This technique allows to use an already established network to find more respondents. We asked each previous respondent if they could recommend me to someone else, and this way we found our final 5 respondents. According to Biernacki and Waldorf (1981), the difficulty of a researcher results in obtaining access to the kind of population he or she is looking for. Indeed, defining where to look for is not the problem. As a matter of fact, the type of population adequate for the research (women who follow or watch female

## Documenting YouTubers and Female Empowerment

fitness vloggers) have a very low visibility, making it difficult to locate and contact potential respondents (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981). Therefore the use of referrals to access the last respondents was necessary. A specific conversation with a respondent put in perspective the fact that the message posted may have involuntarily created a screening of respondents. The screening due to a specific wording is a risk and may reveal too many criteria of eligibility (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981). As a matter of fact, using the word “following” made several respondents doubt about their ability to answer my research. These women who answered the post demonstrated some doubts concerning their relevance in such study, showing that such a word may have been too strong and screened away other potential respondents.

Due to the difficulty of finding respondents, no other initial criteria aside from gender and previous experience with female fitness vloggers was required to participate into the research. On the base of a convenience sample rather than only accidental, 12 women volunteered. However, it has been noticed that a natural sampling selection occurred; 12 women between 18 and 25, all practicing sports on a regular basis and watching fitness videos on a regular basis as well. This interesting pattern may be the result of a bias created by the use of Facebook as a recruitment base, combined with the requirement to watch YouTubers. The age range falls in the category called nowadays ‘millennials’ which also correspond to the digital natives described previously. This generation grew up with internet and social media, therefore their regular use of YouTube is an interesting element to take into account during the data analysis. Even though the age range indicates that the respondents will most likely be students, several of them are already active and work, giving a wider range of personal background. The decision to focus on a female audience rather than male is based on the assumption that women will most likely follow and be influenced by a female figure in their everyday life. The audience of female vloggers is mainly composed of other women, therefore selecting women was a better fit for this research based on empowerment, and female empowerment.

### 3.3 *INTERVIEW PROGRESS AND DATA COLLECTION*

The initial idea was to lead interviews lasting between 45 and 60 minutes, but in application the interview were about 43 to 72 minutes long, depending on the pace and flow of each respondent. The length guaranteed enough time to explore in-depth perspectives, but at the same time was short enough not to hinder any willing respondent. The pilot interview gave the indication that the time frame would be just sufficient enough to lead the interviews properly. However, two interviews that respectively lasted 43 and 45 minutes were due to a certain time limit they gave beforehand.

It has been decided that leading semi-structured interviews would condense the good aspects of structured interviews; guarantee that the main aspects of the research are addressed, while also giving

## Documenting YouTubers and Female Empowerment

more freedom concerning the order and potential topics that may appear. Structured interviews were considered too restrictive due to the fact that all the questions need to be identical and asked in the exact same order (Gilbert, 2009). With semi-structured interviews, the order can be altered to fit the current conversation, but additional questions can also be asked if a new topic seems interesting and relevant for the research. The topic guide provided a general outline, listing different themes and topics to approach if the conversation slows down. The different themes that have been approached include the respondents' opinion on the content, the motives for watching, but also the feelings aroused by the viewing of the videos (before, during or even after). Several questions aimed at determining the respondents' opinion on fitness before and after they started watching vlogs. We expected to discover the difference between the intended message and the reception of it. Open-ended questions have been prepared as well as probing questions. Following the advice of Legard, Keegan and Ward (2003), a listing of different probes have been edited as well for a meaning-making oriented interview. The authors put an emphasis on the fact that by probing at the right moment, the respondent may tell more personal stories or experiences that would be relevant for the research.

Even though an interview guide has been prepared (see Appendix A), the interviewer adopted an active strategy to remain flexible and grasp relevant elements during all interviews. Indeed, this active approach is based on the co-construction of knowledge (Broom, Hand and Tovey, 2009). This emphasis on the roles both interviewer and interviewee shows the interviewer must use the answers to dig further in the potential directions given by the respondent, which only semi-structured interviews allow. Since no particular demographic categories, except for gender, were defined in advance, this type of interview allowed us to take a more personal approach. The interviews have been planned during a convenient time for each respondent, on a four weeks schedule, from end of April to end of May

After the pilot interview and first couple of interviews had been led, it was noticed that the actual interviews were between semi-structured and unstructured since some questions were reformulated. The order changed for every single one of them, and even though the general topics were always addressed, some were removed or transformed to fit the respondents' answers. The interview guide was still used as a reference list since most answers given by respondents were logically leading to another theme or question that had been prepared previously. It also helped talking about more themes such as the "cult of physique" and comparison between YouTube and other social media platforms for instance. The flow was generally uninterrupted, and followed a clear logic that would not have been allowed with structured interviews. All examples gathered and feelings expressed assured the relevance of all data collected, even though some questions have been forgotten or removed due to irrelevance or time constraint. The only major impact it this type of interviews had concerned the systematic data collection. Indeed, because all

## Documenting YouTubers and Female Empowerment

themes and questions were not discussed identically, the data collection couldn't be apprehended automatically.

All interviews have been recorded using a computer voice recorder or the iPhone voice recorder. All interviewees gave their consent both for participation and recording, ensuring the validity of all data collected. They have been explained what the recordings were used for as well, and allowed a written transcript of it. Most of the interviews have been conducted in person, except for three interviewees who were unreachable; in those cases Skype has been used. Most of the interviews took place in locations chosen by the respondent; parks, cafes, gyms and university sports centers were the main ones. However, using two recorders simultaneously allowed to grasp only the voices rather than background sounds. All places did not interfere in the interview process, actually, no perturbation occurred, allowing valuable information to be gathered. The respondents chose the location to ensure they were comfortable enough, putting them at ease to talk freely. Concerning the Skype interviews, all conversations went surprisingly smoothly, with no interruption due to connectivity issues. While one interviewee was fully dedicated to solely answering the questions, the two others were cooking or eating simultaneously. According to Gillham (2005) interviews conducted thanks to a phone call or Skype risked to end up shorter due to the drop of the interviewee's attention. In practice, the interviews lasted longer than the face-to-face dialogues, due to the multi-tasking opportunity and the comfortable set-up phone calls were offering.

At the beginning of each interview, the respondents were given a short introduction to remind them of the research topic, but also to remind them they were allowed to refuse answering a question or could ask to skip any at any time. By doing so, it allowed to set the mood and to put in perspective each one of them. As a starter, they have all been asked to give a short introduction of themselves, stating their name, their age, place of origin and current occupation. Gathering demographic information can show a form a significance further in the analysis of data. The second element they have been directly asked concerns if they currently pursue any physical activity or not, helping to determine their relation with sports and fitness in general. This question facilitated the introduction of the first personal experiences, and helped loosen any potential tension. Some of them explained how involved they have always been with sports since they were young, others explained how they got into sports and what they like about it. But in all cases, the participants all practice sports on a regular basis, which is an interesting point to notice.

The transcriptions have been done using the website <http://otranscribe.com/> which allowed an easier data entry. Then were configured into Word to have similar formats. The interviews were transcribed in the original language; two of them in French, then translated in English if quotations were needed. In addition, I offered each interviewee the possibility for their names to be transformed, and

preserve the respondents' identities (Kvale, 2011), but they all declined the offer. Therefore, the names used for the results are original.

### 3.4 DATA ANALYSIS

Once the transcription of data was completed, the method of thematic analysis has been used to analyze the collected data. This method is convenient for identifying and analyzing common behaviors within the data, which is according to Braun and Clark (2006) appropriate for interview data and for drawing general patterns.

To begin the analysis, two sort of data have been used as the base for the analysis. The aim was to use both empirical data and concepts defined from the theoretical framework. These concepts were all related to the notion of empowerment explained previously; awareness, strength, confidence, change and information. These concepts have been supplemented with new ones, found from observations, based on the interview transcripts. As a matter of fact, mixing both perspectives nurtures a wider approach of the entire data collected (Braun & Clark, 2006). Thematic analysis by definition is not based on any theoretical framework; however, it is necessary for this research to have an insight on what empowerment is, to facilitate the fragmentation of all data into core themes and to remain in the main focus of the study. The three sub-questions have been used as a tool to facilitate the formation of general themes. Actually, the interviews gave a wide range of information that could be used for many different researches, yet the focus needs to remain on positive influence, and therefore, needs to be bridled. This method offers a flexibility that can be both favorable and detrimental to a research if the focus is lost (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Many elements given by the respondents could form new combinations outside the theme of empowerment, however, they won't help answering the research question. This is why it has been decided beforehand to keep in mind the concept of empowerment and its definition.

A first reading of the interview transcripts has been executed, and first notes have been taken, helping the researcher to be more familiar with the data written (Boeije, 2010; Braun & Clarke, 2006). Rereading the transcripts several times and taking initial notes ensured a smoother development of the analysis, which is why these steps are recommended to qualitative researchers. The next step is open-coding, dividing the data into categories or keywords described as codes (Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Boeije, 2010). We aim to find whether the audiences feel empowered in any way by vloggers and their videos, and any similar feeling that expresses a positive impact induced by vloggers. Therefore, finding themes and feelings related to these vloggers or motives could help answering our question. For instance, any feeling related to self-love, strength and confidence are very attention-grabbing.

## Documenting YouTubers and Female Empowerment

During this step, the creation of initial codes was systematic. The 12 transcripts have been read and studied several times, words, lines, quotes were coded. For instance, feelings such as confidence, awareness and motivation quickly appeared in several interviews. Some specific quotes have been highlighted, in order to be further studied and then used during the next steps of the analysis. All interviews have been studied first individually, and then together to identify identical patterns. Several readings have been realized to label more elements that have been ignored during the first rounds (Boeije, 2010). The next step was gathering a list of codes, whereby the method of axial coding helped define the core concepts or points issued from the interviews (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This list of axial codes determined the primary findings concerning feelings, influences and motives of the viewers, but also the different positive impacts of these vloggers on them. Therefore, fragments will be merged together and a hierarchy of codes and sub codes started appearing. The list was shortened to fewer main categories or themes (Boeije, 2010; Braun & Clark, 2006). Several mind maps have been necessary to conclude this step, resulting in a coherent collection of related codes.

The final step was what is called ‘selective coding’. This selective coding helped defining core concepts or core themes to findings (Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Boeije, 2010). These core themes are used to answer each one of the sub-questions, and thus, the main research question of this study. In fact, they allow us to draw conclusions concerning the female fitness vloggers’ influence on their female audience, and these viewers’ attitude concerning the content and person who is presenting it. For instance, from the initial codes “Skills” and “Information” that have been found during the first transcripts readings, we finally created the axial code “Knowledge” (See Appendix B). After reviewing them several times, it has been found that they both belonged to a bigger theme, but most importantly that their internal codes also fitted within the same theme without overlapping each other, as Braun and Clarke (2006) advise. However, going through the process of each step helped find more categories to gather and turn into themes, rather than staying in the superficial perspective of a single reading. During this last step, all the core themes found throughout the interviews have been defined and named accordingly. The final concepts were the following: Increased awareness and recognition, deliver knowledge, induce a change, set a foundation and carry gratifications. The results section that follows is a report of the data found during the research, that will help answer the sub-questions within the conclusion chapter.

Strauss and Corbin (1996), along with Braun and Clark (2006) use a very similar approach of thematic analysis. For this reason, the steps that have been followed during the data analysis form a consistent and dependable base for the analysis (Golafshani, 2003). Additionally, the use of consent agreement, voice recorder and the verbatim transcription of each one of the interviews ensures the validity of data used to lead the research. By voice recording and transcribing exactly what has been said, the data will reflect as closely as possible the words spoken by the respondent, proving the trustworthiness of the

## Documenting YouTubers and Female Empowerment

data (Golafshani, 2003). Since none of the interview has been interrupted, and each one has been a one-to-one interviews, no external influence impacted the data gathered. On the other hand, it can be argued that the Skype interviews may have been slightly altered by the setup. During these interviews, some respondents were multi-tasking, or the quality of the sound may have been altered on their side, and therefore, not have been paying fully attention to the questions asked. This minor element may have not altered drastically the data, but only slightly. Since we cannot talk about reliability in a qualitative research, it is possible to say however that the dependability of the research has been minimally touched by this element (Golafshani, 2003). Nevertheless, the sampling process is the only part that may impact the validity of the data. As mentioned before, using social media and personal network to find respondents may have influenced the selection of respondents. However, it needs to be kept in mind that all respondents volunteered to answer by answering online posts or by recommendation. To conclude, it is possible to say that the method allowed to gather all the data necessary to answer the research question. Even though several issues have been encountered to access respondents, an adequate number of participants have been assembled and the type of information that was targeted has been discovered and gathered. The core themes and patterns found can be considered as valuable and representative of the sample selected, making the research valid and dependable (Golafshani, 2003). The full coding frame can be observed within Appendix B.

## 4 RESULTS

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As mentioned previously, the analysis of interviews transcripts through the method of thematic analysis resulted in five main categories. Each one helps answer our questions concerning the elements of influence vloggers have on their audience. Increased awareness and recognition, delivery of knowledge, induced change, set a foundation and carry gratifications are the main themes that will be discussed in the following chapter. They will be separated into sections, will be described and discussed in relation to the data found during the semi-structured interviews, in relation to the theoretical framework that has been acknowledged previously and to the sub-questions developed ahead. How they help answer the sub-questions will be approached first, then a last section will be dedicated to combining these answer, and thus, answer the main research question. This chapter will answer the research question by defining categories of findings, then lead to the conclusion where the research question will be directly and concisely answered.

### 4.1 SET A FOUNDATION

The theme foundation implies support and community solidarity. This theme, which was predicted at the beginning of the research, actually proved to be extremely important and answer the first sub-question. Vloggers give a sense of support and encouragement to their viewers through their videos. The comfort of being part of a group is brought by a sense of belonging and recognition in relatable situations. The fact that the respondents feel part of “something bigger” (Interviewee 10, 26, p.90) shows how viewers are brought together thanks to similar interests, experiences and dreams they share both with the vlogger and other followers (Van Dijk, 2013). Even though most of the respondents do not directly participate online, several of the interviewees express the sense of belonging to a family. Interviewee 9 explains, ‘I feel like I’m part of a family or something like that. [...]I felt like we were kinda on the same boat’. This sense of familiarity makes the viewer feel accompanied and makes it easier to identify to the vlogger or even other followers.’ (p.79)

In fact, more than half of the respondents confessed to reading the comments, whether for fun, because they are bored or because they are simply curious “I’m curious what people say. I curious what people comment and I figured out some people actually have relevant questions...” (Interviewee 10, 26, p.90). Many noticed that other followers would share experiences or react to the content shown within the video, in order to find the confirmation they are not alone in this. This ‘lurking’ behavior help respondents find validation and recognition (Nonnecke, Andrews & Preece, 2006). This togetherness empowers

## Documenting YouTubers and Female Empowerment

individuals by making them feel understood and encouraged. A sense of solidarity between viewers exists within the audience, often influencing the creation of support groups on other social media. Interviewee 6 talks about her experience with one of them, to explain the solidarity and mutual assistance they give each other, but also how the solidarity can help people in trouble:

‘It’s for the people who are supposed to follow the program. So it’s to say, “hey I’m doing the program, who’s doing it with me?”. To show the results, to ask about the program and all. [...] It happened I reacted a lot to some of the posts [...], and you are like “nooooo it’s dangerous to eat just this...” (Interviewee 6, 23, p.57)

The encouragement, advices and solidarity that appears within these online communities shows how audiences get a strong and supportive foundation in their passion. The support comes from the community in itself, but also by the reassurance coming from words of others and from the vloggers themselves. In addition, this sense of familiarity brought by the vlogger brings a new dimension of connection to the audience. Vloggers play the role of core within a group; by showing their everyday life, their bad and good experiences, they create a form of intimacy with the followers who feel like they “know her, she is a friend and I am part of something” (Interviewee 9, 22, p.78). By sharing these experiences with the rest of the world, they create a movement bringing closer people from all over the world (Antunovic & Hardin, 2013; Jong & Drummond, 2016). It has been expressed both in theory and by the participants the fact that a relation of trust appears between vlogger and follower. Vloggers play the role of model, with followers acting as students and supporters, both parties empowering one another. By representing a mentor figure, vloggers bring together audiences who share the same beliefs, but also encourage viewers to continue both watching vlogs and doing sports.

Interviewee 6 is the only respondent who already directly participated online by commenting on videos. She expressed the need to do so, to encourage in her own way the vlogger she appreciates, in the same way that she feels encouraged. The interaction happening between vloggers and viewers confirms the feeling of support and that a special relation has been established. She explained:

‘I feel connected because I react a lot also, I comment a lot on the videos and she gives a lot of likes on my comments. Or she responds to them. [...] I like to react because she puts efforts in offering us a free service, so I think it’s the least we can do.’ (Interviewee 6, 23, p.51)

This connection established between vloggers and followers is beneficial for both parties and helps the empowerment of the audience. As mentioned by a majority of the respondents, the motivation comes from oneself first, but the will to keep going is enforced by the feeling of support and encouragement

coming from the videos. Followers trust vloggers to regularly post relevant content; in exchange, audiences try to reward the vlogger by commenting, liking or engaging in other kinds social manifestations, thus strengthening the relation between participants (Van Dijk, 2013). As shown by interviewee 6's experience with support groups, young consumers nowadays use social media platforms much more to construct and sustain contacts with others (Hart, 2008). The link tying her to this support group, pushing her to participate and also to encourage vloggers she follows shows this use of social media for interactions. However, she is the only respondent who explicitly participates online; other interviewees justified their lack of direct participation by arguing that they think the vlogger is out of reach, but also that they do not want strangers to read their personal comments. They feel part of community; even though none of them takes an active part online, showing that observation and 'lurking' may be enough to make one member of an online community (Nonnecke, Andrews & Preece, 2006).

The regular schedule of videos also helps the audience to stay on track with their progress. Regular posts act as a 'reminder', according to a majority of interviewees. A clearly structured, diverse and regular content helps them stay on track with their own healthy journey, which is a great source of support for many. The content delivered follows the vlogger's journey, but also brings the audience further in their own journey. Therefore, vloggers help empowering their audience by giving them a strong foundation; both thanks to their personal words and presence but mostly by building a supportive and consolidated community growing due to its new recognition (Antunovic & Hardin, 2013; Jong & Drummond, 2016). The use of YouTube and videos as a social instrument highlights this constant need for social interactions and acceptance, as well as the new role online communities play in users' life.

### 4.2 INCREASED AWARENESS AND RECOGNITION

By definition, awareness is the perception or recognition of a situation or fact. Throughout the interviews it has been discovered that not only female fitness vloggers raise awareness among their viewers, but that they also use their visibility and recognition to do so. As previously discussed, awareness of a situation is one of the elements that define an individual as empowered. Sub-question one will get more insight with this section. However, this is sub-question two which will be approached within this section, since it treats openly about femininity in relation to sports, stereotypes, gender inequality within the fitness activity.

#### 4.2.1 Visibility and recognition

It is common sense that our current society evolves more and more around the use of internet and social media as social intermediary. As a matter of fact, a short research done about the vloggers who

## Documenting YouTubers and Female Empowerment

have been named by the respondents showed that all of them possess social media accounts on different platforms, even though their main activity remains on YouTube. This quick research helped confirm a recurrent element noticed throughout the interviews; the majority of respondents mentioned that YouTube was complementary with other social platforms, and therefore, they do not only follow them on YouTube, but also on Instagram and Twitter for example. Their normality, and the fact that they have been chosen by the population is what make vloggers the new influencers within our society. Although the role of social media influencer is rather recent, this constant growth of social media platforms increases the visibility and power of vloggers among a wider range of people (Martin, 2012). With a quick and easy spread of messages, the peer to peer effect is simplified and creates popular content overnight. Some interviewees such as interviewees 5 and 3 talk about mediatization of fitness, explaining how popular this topic became thanks to new media and how their recognition constantly increases through multi-platform usage. The rise of YouTube and fitness vloggers also influenced the visibility fitness receives. Their role of influencers and role models is directly related to their highly extended communities (Martin, 2012), and this need of social interactions whether it is online or in real life. Often degraded and perceived as a superficial activity (Andreasson & Johansson, 2013), fitness has received a brand new image and reputation thanks to fitness athletes all over social media. Actually, many new marketing and advertising campaigns turned towards the use of fitness for promotion. As interviewee 2 stated:

‘The vloggers [...] became really famous and all. [...] I think that these companies who use fitness vloggers for their promo have a really good idea. [The vloggers] have huge communities, they are everywhere now [...] But by being promoter of the company the vlogger also gets more renown and transmits even more this messages about her own sport.’ (Interviewee 2, 24, p.21)

She expresses how not only companies profit from this notoriety, but also how vloggers get to expand their sphere of influence and change the recognition of fitness. This hyper mediatization is later confirmed also by interviewee 1 perspective: ‘You see it everywhere. [...] you are going in the streets, there are ads with women for the gym, or ads for gym clothing, ads for better lifestyle. [...] I’m watching music videos and the girls are exercising.’ (p.1). This recent visibility of fitness attracts consumers’ attention to a sport that is less mainstream than ‘classical’ sports such as football or basketball. Interviewee 11 gives an interesting perspective on this new mediatization, stating the advantages of sportswomen’s exposure to media much more by amplifying:

‘They give another image to sports on the other hand. Women’s sport which is mediatized does not show the best sides of sportswomen in general.’ (Interviewee 11, 23, p.111)

## Documenting YouTubers and Female Empowerment

The respondents have been asked how they discovered or first tried fitness, and many of them actually stated the fact that a relative or an acquaintance recommended videos and vloggers to watch. This peer to peer influence is one of the main influencing powers of vloggers. The word of mouth and peer-to-peer processes are highly popular, due to the implicit trust between peers that makes the spread of content easier. This perspective is highly challenged by the role of followers and views into the decision making process. The majority of respondents mentioned views and number of followers as an indicator of quality and social relevance. Interviewees 5, 1, 11, 10 and 6 are the respondents who discussed the fact that a larger community formed around a certain vlogger impacts the trust they give that vlogger. “Popular”, “followers”, “famous” and “renown” are the words repetitively used during the interviews, confirming the importance attributed to social recognition and popularity.

YouTube's algorithm also plays an important role in this new visibility. It has been well explained by interviewee 7, stating that once you found one vlogger, the platform would update the recommendations, leading the user to follow a chain of suggested videos and channels. Interviewee 9 explained that she found many of the vloggers she follows through other vloggers. The network established in the industry makes it easier to link influencers with each other. As explained previously, the sports brand Gymshark acquired a certain notoriety thanks to the use of influencers. The pattern has been noticed by three of the respondents, who briefly mentioned the brand, but also confessed to discovering new vloggers to follow thanks to the brand. Once again, this proves that mixing business and social media works wonders in increasing social recognition. The social network formed by all female fitness vloggers also increases their reach and female positive movements to spread on social media. The use of vloggers and social media influencers by sports brands also triggers the interest of many. As interviewee 2 explained, brands allow vloggers to get recognition and, therefore, attract the attention of an audience who is not aware of fitness vloggers. Half of the respondents also explained discovering fitness through videos, pushing them to rediscover a forgotten sport.

It has been noticed that many of the respondents expressed a form of excitement towards the idea of women being considered equal, and being able to perform such a sport. As they said, many people already do it. But it was not recognized as a sport as such before the recent recognition it received. They help the democratization and normalization of fitness as a real and extended sport, but also of women who are professional within the same industry. This recognition however helped uncovering many preconceived ideas, whether it is about sports, about fitness or about gendered hierarchy, ultimately helping to raise audiences' awareness concerning current societal issues. The use of YouTube as a social instrument for social networking, validation and word of mouth gives a significant insight on sub-question one.

### 4.2.2 Raise awareness about sports and fitness

Many interviews pointed out the fact that vloggers actually raise their awareness concerning sports in general, but also fitness as a real sport. Indeed, they help changing the perspective of their female audience on sports. Several respondents pointed out the fact that vloggers showed them that sports was first of all accessible for all, but also accessible from everywhere, contrary to their personal perception that to do sport, it is necessary to have a gym membership or to be part of a sport association. The way digital natives have been affected by the spread of media and technologies is also noticeable on their habits (Prensky, 2001), as they want to make everything as easy to access as possible. Therefore, by making their videos and workouts accessible online, vloggers demonstrate that sports can be done anywhere and anytime. Martin (2012) explained the role of opinion leaders as trustworthy and convincing enough to influence the viewer into forming an opinion. In the case of fitness vloggers, it is clear that their extended communities influence people's awareness about the role of sports in health, for instance. The preconceptions related to sports being a form of diet, or allowing you to eat anything at any given time without gaining weight, changed drastically. Sports is more and more praised as a lifestyle, rather than a dietary plan. This normalization due to the increasing exposure to sports and fitness content help spread this new view of a lifestyle. As a matter of fact, interviewee 1 talks about normalization of sports, comparing it to eating breakfast 'It's something normal, like "hey, I went to the gym" exactly like "yeah I just had breakfast.'" (p.10). She explains that doing sports is nowadays as common as eating, it has been normalized and included in many people's everyday healthy routine. Interviewee 11 expresses the idea very clearly:

'You see, before I thought that you needed to do sports to stay skinny, and guys were doing it as an activity like that. I was not picturing sports as a real lifestyle that could change your life. [...] After starting living on my own, I was eating junk. [...] [I] thought that sports was gonna counterbalance all the alcohol I was drinking. [...] I started watching videos to do sports from home and they explained that it was more about... about like a full way of living than just burning calories.' (Interviewee 11, 23, p.98)

This idea was reinforced by interviewee 3 as "healthy mind in a healthy body"; she stated that she discovered how sports could make one feel energetic, rather than feeling tired but looking good. This perspective on sports is different from what had been shown for years: 'Sports is as much mental therapy as it is physical.'(Interviewee 3, 23, p.29). She explains that, unfortunately, for many years, sports has been presented as a means to a purely aesthetic goal, leading too many people to misunderstand its full benefits. Yet the mediatization and social spread of vloggers definitely helps on a certain level to initiate a new understanding of sports and fitness.

### 4.2.3 Raise awareness about stereotypes

It has been addressed that fitness has long been presented as a masculine sport. For decades, two types of stereotypes have predominated: that fitness transforms women into manly figures and that fitness was only for men willing to take performance- and figure-enhancing drugs. The exposure to progressively more fitness content appeared in a society where women fight against established gender roles. This fight to liberate themselves from stereotypes associated with femininity and to find equality in a patriarchal system is the main focus of the last decade. As addressed previously, women still suffer from gender inequality in sports. Whether it concerns their role in society or what they should do to fit in, the inequality that exists in general is also noticeable in the fitness industry. The respondents were asked if they had any ideas on the topic prior to starting fitness and watching fitness content. Without any exception, all interviewees confessed picturing women as ‘bulky’, ‘buff’, ‘manly’, ‘muscular in a ugly way’, ‘one among all men’. They also expressed how being exposed to feminine figures practicing such a sport on social media in general, but mostly on YouTube, helped them change their minds and realize that fitness was a sport like any other. As a matter of fact, all women interviewed said they had never considered fitness a feminine sports, before being exposed to it:

‘-Did you have a specific image of women in the fitness industry?

- Yeah, the same. Like with really big muscles, like really muscular and bikinis, and super fake tanned. But now I’m like, well many girls do that, many girls go to the gym and this is not something they brag with. [...] It’s something normal like hey I went to the gym exactly like yeah I just had breakfast.’ (Interviewee 1, 25, p.10).

‘Now it is recognized that women do weight training, that women do physical performances as much as men [...]. This is not something reserved only for men. [...]. People realized that women who do fitness are not buff, super muscular, that they are actually really feminine. [...] You see, there is more a normal women aspect’ (Interviewee 3, 23, p.32)

‘Guys were really happy, girls were not interested [about doing weight training at school]. I thought I was gonna become like her, big, buff and not really feminine. She didn’t have any curves. [...] Well... this is bullshit. Pure bullshit. [...] they are curvy, strong, they don’t look like men at all. They developed their bodies the best they could though.’(Interviewee 9, 22, p.84)

The use of masculine adjectives to qualify women practicing fitness shows the results of a gendered bias correlated with this sport. Women are usually confronted with the socially determined definition of femininity, giving a detrimental image to any who has an ‘abnormal’ behavior. Many of those who do not follow the criteria associated with femininity, and therefore go against the social codes, are not considered

as good role models. What has been expressed by these three respondents is the fact that femininity used to be associated with delicate features and bodies, and that any other body type was considered extreme, undesirable or even manly. Vloggers as communicators helped spread the idea that women do not have a universal shape and that furthermore, different bodies do not make some women more feminine than others (Martin, 2012). Their normality helps them create a sense of awareness concerning the inequalities that are touching women in the sports sector, but even more in fitness (Martin 2012). The sense of normality and reality is what makes them efficient communicators, and participate into the clarification about the wrong body images that is being spread within the society (Behmer & Bazlova, 2013). As interviewee 1 mentioned, ‘We think that doing fitness and weightlifting is making you look a certain way, but it’s not necessarily true.’, (p.10) accentuating this increasing awareness concerning the wrong body image spread in other media for years. Their extended audience and constantly growing follower base triggers debate and enlightenment about gendered stereotypes as well, driving towards a form of emancipation of women. Some interviewees confessed being aware of a clear separation of genders within the gym; ‘the cardio area where you have all the girls, and then the weight area where all the guys are’ (Interviewee 8, 23, p.73). However, this dimension of normality is being challenged by the content which female fitness vloggers spread online. Their content helps viewers understand that fitness stereotypes, such as the suitability of different areas in the gym for different genders, are no longer current:

‘They contribute to the normalization of girls weightlifting, of course. Which I think is great, because so many girls do it and we are not aware about it. Yeah, they totally change the perspective, they give it a new vibe which is really cool.’ (Interviewee 5, 25, p.49)

### 4.2.4 Raise awareness about women’s femininity

Their communicator role also opens debates about the difference of perception between the dedication of women and men who practice fitness. While weight training is often represented, for men, as a sport requiring daily commitment and mental, it is still associated with superficiality, aesthetics and shallowness for women (Gill, 2005). This difference is remarkable and has been pointed out repeatedly by vloggers, and is a matter approached by most of the respondents such as interviewee 5:

‘[Vloggers] kinda help spreading this new normal image, but I’m not sure it’s already on people’s minds like it should be. It’s okay to be a girl and do weight-lifting. It’s not weird.’ (Interviewee 5, 25, p.49)

Many gendered characteristics are still transmitted from peer to peer; therefore, the global recognition from interviewees that vloggers are increasing the recognition of women’s abilities is consequent. Indeed, the term ‘normal’ or ‘normalization’ has been used by more than half of respondents to depict which role

these female influencers play within the sports industry. They also helped many girls accept their own different interests, without being categorized as masculine.

‘They helped showing that this is a wrong image that people have. [...] And seeing these girls, their journey, I realized that... yeah it made me accept myself much more. And it made me realize that everybody is different, but it’s not bad.’ (Interviewee 9, 22, p.85)

‘I mean, everyone is on YouTube, young girls and older girls and... young girls especially now, you know, they see people like these doing it, so you know... [...] they see okay this is a good thing to do, it’s healthy and it’s not only for guys. [...] it’s good to do fitness. It’s normal.’ (Interviewee 7, 19, p.66)

‘I think that indeed the vloggers extremely contributed to democratize it for women.’ (Interviewee 3, 23, p.32)

Each one of these quotes shows how the definitions of women and femininity progressed in the participants mind. This new recognition of what femininity is and represent is determinant for freeing women from social pressures. Therefore, a veil has been lifted from a predefined identity, and permits to transform norms associated with being a woman. This segment perfectly answers a part of sub-question two. In fact, this new awareness and consciousness vloggers convey to women shows how they influence their liberation from social pressures. The status quo established about femininity and women in sports is challenged by the wide visibility female fitness vlogger benefit from.

### 4.3 *DELIVER KNOWLEDGE*

This section draws the difference between awareness and knowledge. Although closely related, they also are clearly different and the data collected from these semi-structured interviews shows it. Knowledge refers to being accustomed or understanding someone or something thanks to information, facts and skills that have been acquired. On the other hand, awareness indicates a state of consciousness of a given situation for instance. The practicality is what disconnects one from the other, and thus, it needs to be stated that knowledge can be received through education or experience. This segment helps answering both sub-question two and three.

#### 4.3.1 **Free service**

The Web 2.0 and the generation of digital natives (O'Reilly, 2005) completely changed the way the new generation uses the internet to learn and educate themselves (Duffy, 2008). This is why vloggers

## Documenting YouTubers and Female Empowerment

have been associated giving their viewers the choice whether to follow them or not, to watch their videos or not. The principle of YouTube being a free service platform emphasizes the free access idea (Jones & Cuthrell, 2011). As a matter of fact, it has been described by many respondents as a service “on-demand”, as a resource which is available whenever they need information in a society where self-education and edutainment are important. It has been explained previously that empowerment is happening whenever one has the knowledge necessary to decide what is best for him or her (Tang, 2016). On the contrary, the lack of empowerment often results from a deficiency in educational content. The fact that fitness has been targeted by many stereotypes and suffered a clear lack of visibility for years reinforces the idea that offering educational content such as fitness vlogs, gives the evidence necessary to the audience to decide what is best for them (Tang, 2016). This ‘on-demand’ concept has been touched upon by a majority of the respondents, including interviewee 3, who compared YouTube to a book she can open whenever she wants information. Actually, vlogs allow individuals to follow step by step and get the experience from practicing the information given by vloggers, which is why it is often preferred to written guides or books by the respondents.

Vloggers give the audiences the keys to make an educated decision, and to build their own personal opinion on the matter. As explained by the respondent interviewee 2:

‘I was quite uneducated in terms of which sports to do. And vloggers were the first ones who started using these terms and show these sports. They became really famous and all, showing what a lot of people don’t know about these sports.’ (Interviewee 2, 22, p.21)

The visibility and recognition discussed previously are part of a new form of consciousness. Indeed, the education delivered by vloggers provides people the knowledge necessary to make their own personal judgment. Consciousness and knowledge are strongly correlated; therefore having access to facts and information gives one the control to decide how he or she will be affected by it. Understanding and having a grasp on information are two major elements of empowerment. By relaying knowledge, vloggers give the freedom to others to free themselves and to decide what is best for them (Tang, 2016).

Interviewee 3 expressed this freedom by affirming: ‘Choose what you wanna take of the videos and what you wanna leave.’ (p.33). Female fitness vloggers keep instructing their audiences with the help of videos, always reaching new audience members. However, experienced viewers may reach the saturation point where the content does not introduce them to new elements of knowledge. In this situation, their needs shift and transform the viewing purposes. Interviewee 10 expressed how she felt she reached saturation. She used to watch videos to fulfil a need for instructions and knowledge, and stopped needing it from the moment she felt she had the competences to do it on her own:

'I used to watch a lot of videos [...]. Now I stopped. [...] I think at one point I was "Yeah I kinda know how to do that so..." so... [...] I stopped needing to watch.' (Interviewee 10, 26, p.89)

Interviewee 9 expressed a similar point, saying that she used videos from vloggers as support to help her improve in the areas she was lacking knowledge. She stopped paying too much attention to instructions when she reached saturation, but found that videos could be used for other purposes. It needs to be highlighted that all respondents have been watching female fitness vloggers for a certain amount of time, yet even the ones who now consider themselves sufficiently knowledgeable keep watching these vloggers, 'in case there is a topic really interesting [them]'. The main result of using vlogs to learn is the ability to make a personal and conscious decision about the information delivered. Under this frame, vloggers play only the role of intermediary between the audience and the information they are looking for. They influence a possible emancipation of women by giving them access to needed information. The viewer has to be willing to access health and fitness information, to properly assimilate the knowledge delivered (Curran, 2011). The vlogger do not force its audience to follow the recommendations; instead, they give the awareness and skills necessary for viewers to have their own experience and adapt the information to their personal goals and interests.

### 4.3.2 Increase knowledge

In a society where populations teach themselves and teach others through internet, the online fitness ambassadors not only produce, but also share content for audiences to understand and create a change by themselves (Wright, 2009). Knowledge can be divided into two distinct sections: information delivered and skills acquired. The following section demonstrates the difference between theoretical and practical information delivered, as well as how important they both are.

#### 4.3.2.1 Deliver Information

'They give me the information I need to keep going. They give me the keys to do all of this.' (Interviewee 9, 22). YouTube, since its creation in 2005, became the favorite video sharing platform on the web. As already mentioned before, Web 2.0 introduced a new generation, but also new learning processes. YouTube quickly became one of the favorite ways for digital natives to educate themselves, and the role of vloggers as communicators and teachers is more and more significant. As a matter of fact, female fitness vloggers use their own personal knowledge and experiences to teach their audience. The video formats help first of all to mix education with entertaining content (Jones & Cuthrell, 2011). Indeed, the words 'entertaining', 'funny' are recurrent in all 12 interviews. All interviewees explain that the videos are somewhat entertaining, but also provide direct, easy to remember information. Interviewee

4, explains she gets ‘inspiration from [the vlogger]’ and also ‘find some other tips, but at the same time she describes the videos as ‘entertaining... because it’s fun to watch’. Interviewee 5 drew a very similar conclusion by stating that she uses all videos to learn but concluding ‘even though I claim I don’t watch it for entertainment but for learning purposes, the videos need to be funny’. Lee and Lehto (2013) explained that YouTube videos are assessed by their perceived utility, but also by the satisfaction that results from their viewing.

When asked why they watch or follow certain female fitness vloggers, the respondents’ answers vary. First, it has been explained that vloggers answer unspoken questions. Used as an ‘on-demand’ encyclopedia the videos are used by the respondents to answer their questions about fitness and food. Interviewee 9 gave the example of ‘If It Fits Your Macros’, also called IIFYM, which is nutritional program she was exposed to thanks to female vloggers. She explained that she witnessed many vloggers chatting about this dietary program, and became interested in it, since she has been battle with eating issues. Actually, all respondents declared they changed their eating habits after beginning to follow female fitness vloggers. They mostly voiced the idea that they learned to have a new, healthier relation with food, or simply acquired insights on bad eating habits they had. Interviewee 4 clarified the attachment she formed with a specific vlogger due to the vegan lifestyle the influencer presented, which interviewee 4 also aimed to follow:

‘She is vegan, and I’m more vegetarian trying to be vegan. [...] she is talking about her food choices, and about how this is difficult for her to eat with friends sometimes. [...] it’s reassuring that people also struggle with that and show how you can deal with it and stuff like that.’  
(Interviewee 4, 20, p.38)

This quote establishes how consumers tend to be attracted to influencers who can satisfy their needs for information. Very similarly, interviewee 9 described why she became committed to a vlogger in particular. She explained how they both went through break ups during the same time, and felt like the videos this vlogger was posting about overcoming a breakup were helping her, giving her suitable tips and advice. Interviewee 8 elucidated that videos help her replace a gym while she is away from home. Vloggers provide her the opportunity to keep exercising by teaching her exercises that could be reproduced from home, without any gym equipment. These three specific cases expose how viewers assess their satisfaction and level of helpfulness of videos through the lens of specific material that they seek out. They tend to feel more connected or positively influenced by a vlogger they can relate to, or who can answer their main questions and challenges.

## Documenting YouTubers and Female Empowerment

YouTube, like Google, gathers extended archives, permitting the access to any kind of video (Lee & Lehto, 2013; Jones & Cuthrell, 2011). Interviewee 3 articulates the similarity of YouTube to an encyclopedia about any topic, but mostly about fitness for her, allowing her to reach and answer any question she would have on any topic related to sports. By listening to a ‘normal’ and ordinary woman clarifying facts about fitness, all data is simplified and within the reach of any and all spectators. Unlike scientific documents, which necessitate a certain educational background and a wide knowledge of specific vocabulary, vloggers help other ‘amateur’ women progressively acquire abilities and understanding. As Curran (2011) explained, vlogs add a form of visualization and dynamism to education. Many of the respondents confessed watching older videos in order to grasp some sort of evolution of the vlogger, reinforcing the belief that the instructions given by the influencer are working and therefore worth following. A specific focus has been placed on the fact that fitness is a journey. A majority of interviewees agreed that vloggers taught them to be patient, and gave them a realistic estimation of the duration of process, thanks to older video content. Female fitness vloggers are more and more popular because they embody average people, who are farther in their personal development and fitness journey than others, yet share their growth. The progress and time schedule offered by many vloggers benefit the audience, let them acquire patience and comprehend that it takes dedication to achieve noticeable results.

### 4.3.2.2 Skills

YouTube gives all viewers the possibility to follow real-time tutorials. By using a video format, the vloggers deliver a step-by-step visual documentation of their journey, exercises or food diary, allowing viewers to watch and copy the same moves (Martin, 2012). The success of the video format results in a so-called ‘mirroring effect’; the respondents spoke about learning the exercises, following them and reproducing them at home. With Web 2.0, millennials’ education drifted away from the traditional one followed by generations before, due mainly to the fast assimilation of information (Duffy, 2008). Therefore, the use of videos and step-by-step documenting is what makes fitness vloggers so popular, but also what helps the audiences learn faster. They pick up exercises, learn new moves and replicate the correct form – ultimately, audiences walk in the vlogger’s footsteps to learn new skills. Interviewee 7 highlighted this difference between a paper guide and a video:

‘You see a print-out of what to do, you just keep checking and you don’t know what’s going on or what time, like you don’t know how long you’re doing it. While when it’s a YouTube video you do it with the person, so you kind of know your pace, and what needs to be done, and you know exactly how moves need to be done, for example. [...] when you see a video of someone

doing it exactly, it's live, it's an action. [...] it makes it easier to follow and learn.' (Interviewee 7, 19, p.63)

Interviewee 4, on the other hand, talked a lot about how tutorials and videos help to prevent injuries. The same principle applies: she reproduces the moves exhibited by the vlogger and listens to the additional advice. The mix of nice editing, with music, and a visual tutorial highlights the key balance between entertainment and instruction which Curran (2011) defended in various studies. The prominence of entertaining formats in educative content about health and fitness are contributing to a good assimilation of information and to a greater satisfaction of the audience. We observed a difference between interviewees who watch only videos to exercise and the ones watching more complete lifestyle content, in terms of which criteria they use to assess the quality of video content. Respondents who only exercise with these videos expressed their appreciation for a nice setup and music for instance, while amateurs of lifestyle vlogger focused significantly more on the vlogger herself, the way she presents and the events and phases of her life which she chooses to display. This documentation of different elements by vloggers increases this will to design and implement both educative and entertaining messages within video content (Singhal & Rogers, 2002). Vlogs, thanks to the norm of a new content for each video, are constantly growing, therefore their audience keep evolving and increasing accordingly. They offer a possibility of emancipation from a socially established female identity, by also the knowledge and skills necessary for other women to grow into a greater self.

### 4.4 *INDUCE A CHANGE*

The change that is discussed in this section can be evaluated on two levels: personal change and general opinion. Vloggers as opinion leaders and communicators have an important role in the transmission of knowledge, but also of messages. It is these messages which are transformative, due to their wide reach and influence on wide audiences (Rocamora, 2016). This segment creates a bridge between social revolution and self-growth, which are directly answers to sub-question two and three.

#### 4.4.1 **Social change**

For years, women have been required to respond to a socially constructed image and role. First, they have been exposed to the 'perfect' image of models in classical media such as magazines and television, nourishing the envy for a body type unreachable to many women. As a matter of fact, many researches showed the negative impacts media exposure has on body image and self-esteem (Stover, 2014; Jong & Drummond, 2016). The cult of skinniness, along with trends such as the thigh gap, the collarbone ideal and waist challenge as indicators of beauty drastically increased the risk of an unhealthy

## Documenting YouTubers and Female Empowerment

relationship with body image and food among both teens and adults. Fitness became more and more visible in the media, encouraging viewers to target a healthy and active lifestyle instead of a perfect body. The role of opinion leaders helped the spread of new messages within media platforms (Rocamora, 2016). As interviewee 9 expressed, 'This is not about a diet anymore, this is about a full lifestyle', showing how fitness rather than promoting an exceptional diet promotes a healthier lifestyle. Interviewee 7, one of the youngest respondent, actually confessed:

'I feel like now we are more encouraged to live a healthy lifestyle rather than having a body image of being really skinny [...]. [Vloggers] helped change this.' (Interviewee 7, 19, p.67)

This statement strengthens the idea that female fitness vloggers played a part in the introduction of a new body positive movement, instead of exposing their audiences to unreachable 'perfect' bodies. More than just working out for a dream body, vloggers show how fitness can help on a mental aspect, by increasing body satisfaction and body acceptance. Interviewee 12, the youngest respondent, emphasizes this point of view by clarifying the role of media in this new movement, by qualifying it as a new trend within the society:

'I think that because of all social media, all the exposure that we have for fitness, for women at the moment, it becomes an ideal. So that the modern woman workouts and she looks like that, but in a healthy way. So the healthy lifestyle becomes the ideal, rather than only being skinny.'

(Interviewee 12. 18, p.105)

Interviewee 9 actually introduced us to a recently popular movement that appeared for the first time on Instagram and has been spread throughout YouTube, under the hashtag #gainingweightiscool. She explained that this movement was based on self-acceptance of the body, clarifying that women's weight do fluctuate but that it was not something to be ashamed of. In her view, this trend actually spread the message that women should love themselves rather than aim for the impossible body types seen in magazines: 'She was trying to prone the acceptance of your own body.' (Interviewee 9, 22, p.85). Interviewee 3 underlines this idea, that 'a healthy body and mind' is what is being mostly promoted through fitness and vloggers, as opposed to striving to reach celebrities' bodies. According to her, it helps with suppressing what she calls 'cult of physique' (p.100) and with focusing on a healthy state of mind and healthy relation with our own bodies.

As already mentioned, when asked, all respondents confessed to having negative image of women who practice fitness, before being exposed to female fitness vloggers and starting their own fitness journey. The recurrent words used to describe female fitness athletes were for the most part

## Documenting YouTubers and Female Empowerment

negative: 'bulky', 'buff', 'manly'. Interviewee 10, 26 years old, recounted an anecdote from her younger years, demonstrating how much opinion towards women practicing fitness has changed in recent years:

'I didn't even know what a squat was and this is a true story, that I heard from a guy when I was 18, is that when you squat, you need to be careful with it. Because if you squat your hips will widen and you will have a huge butt and this is really bad. This is what I heard. Interesting right? So yeah, these guys advising you against it.' (Interviewee 10, 26, p.93)

This episode exemplifies the preconceptions alive and perpetuated in society. The stigma lingering around women committed to sports or lifting has been taken for granted for many years, preventing them from doing many sports (Bianchi & Dirkx, 2012). The expectations related to female identity slowly evolve thanks to the high exposure and recognition of women athletes. Women's abilities and athleticism is increasingly being praised. Therefore, it represents a form of liberation for all women who perceive a new sense of reality. This societal growth occurs gradually, strengthened and popularized, among others, by female fitness vloggers' popularity and their repetitive advertisement. Interviewee 8 uncovered how being exposed to female vloggers helped her realize the reality about fitness:

'No, women never look men-shaped, it is not really the true thing. Hmm... There are lessons where you see that the woman trainer is good, she is in shape, she is not like a man with huge back of something like that, or with masculine features yep. Minds changing.' (Interviewee 8, 23, p.73)

As explained previously, interviewees 3 and 1 both used the term 'democratization' and 'normalization' to characterize this gentle change in public mentality. The association of women and sports is gradually more accepted by audiences, giving a new status to women within the fitness industry. To relate to sub-question two, this transformation from women being denied legitimacy and femininity to being recognized and even cheered on by supporters, shows clear social progress. Interviewee 5 is somewhat more critical concerning this new normalization, explaining: 'But I still think that the perception of girls weightlifting, for men is less normalized than from a girl's perspective' (p.49). This concern shows how women feel more empowered among other women, but how the change did not yet reach the global population to include men. However, a sense of equality rose among the participants. Throughout the interviews, half of the respondents confessed to discovering gyms as a place of equality, where boys and girls can work together, where beginners and athletes meet, where all ages, all shapes as well can go. This community effect is what interviewee 6 talked about in her story of support groups gathering women from all over the globe, who are following one vlogger and who decided to show their own progress. Everybody is different, but everybody is in this together. This feeling of equality is an important feature

of empowerment and of liberation from a sole identity. As mentioned previously, Tang (2016) explains that the lack of empowerment comes from a lack of equal opportunities. In relation to sub-question two, female YouTubers show how women, whether they correspond to the socially defined femininity or not, should be able to feel confident within the gym, but also outside of it. This point has already been developed previously within the “Induce a change” section, therefore it will be concise. The gratification coming from a sentiment of social equality is inimitable, even less in world where women have been reduced to inferior to men. The exposure to equal opportunities triggers in women their desire to celebrate an empowered community of females.

### 4.4.2 Individual change

This worry also highlights the clear difference which the interviewees established between their personal outlook and what may be true for others. Maslow’s need for esteem is more relevant than ever in this situation. If women find value and recognition among other women, men are still ignorant of women’s real identity and ability. Thus, it causes issues while aiming at fulfilling this need for esteem. The social and societal change slowly operating thanks to media is a result of women’s self-actualization of their own potential and reaching out for it (Maslow & Lewis, 1987). Vloggers produce content for audiences to create a change by themselves (Wright, 2009); they demonstrate which potential other women have, and therefore work for the best version of themselves.

In a direct link to the previous section on knowledge, almost all interviewees said that vloggers triggered their interest for fitness. As a result, many started making more enquiries, whether by using YouTube or other sources of information. Indeed, an increased theoretical knowledge helps improve the practical knowledge, which is extremely important in fitness. The change from ‘uneducated’ (Interviewee 2, p.21) to researching more demonstrates a shift in the audience’s minds, connected to the indispensable role that plays in personal change and improvement. Interviewee 5 talks about ‘falling in love with the process’ (p.45) of learning more and trying new exercises. The challenge of learning also engenders a personal evolution on a psychological level. Following a vlogger, watching her videos, becoming more educated and applying the new elements in their daily life are all elements that improved the respondents’ perception both of sports and female fitness amateurs.

Another interesting elements is that 10 respondents actually noticed a change in their relation with food after watching more videos published by fitness vloggers. They explained that they learned to eat ‘better food’ and to know what kind of nutrients they put in their bodies. Interviewees 9 and 1 both confessed to having had a troubled relation with food, one that they learned to manage more successfully once they started practicing fitness and watching more vloggers. Interviewee 9 stated that she had

significant self-esteem issues, idealizing runway models and striving towards a body type she didn't have. Interviewee 1, similarly, explained the process as a way to accept that she is not perfect, but she is conscious that no one is. Once again, knowledge and awareness created a significant change, whether it is personal or social, answering parts of both sub-questions two and three. Katz et al. (1974) mentioned how mass media such were being used by users for information, but also self-seeking. It is possible to draw the parallel with both of these points by stating that the respondents show perfectly how, as members of a viewing community of fitness vloggers, they accessed relevant information to find themselves.

## 4.5 CARRY GRATIFICATIONS

Maslow's hierarchy of needs contains several layers that have been addressed in previous sections. However, this section will focus more deeply on the strong relation that can be noticed between his theory and the gratifications discovered through the interviews. Despite being on top of the pyramid of needs, esteem and self-actualizations are far from superfluous, being necessary in order for people to feel empowered in their everyday life. Throughout the interviews, several elements indispensable to self-empowerment have been discovered; which are significant in answering sub-question three about the role of vloggers on their audiences' self-growth.

### 4.5.1 Increasing self-esteem: confidence and strength

Self-esteem is one of the gratifications mentioned most often by interviewees. It has been expressed how important vloggers and their messages are for the audience's confidence and self-love. As discussed previously, female vloggers, like all other women, have been exposed to disparities and labels within the sports sector. The new trends of body positivity and self-acceptance, which are currently growing exponentially popular on social media, are transmitted through their vlogs. Interviewees described how, by watching vloggers and gaining knowledge about sports, they are able to be more accepting of their own bodies. Because they know how to make their body work, because of the acquired knowledge and awareness, they feel capable of loving and accepting their own bodies much more. As stated by interviewee 9:

‘They helped showing that this is a wrong image that people have. [...] And seeing these girls, their journey, I realized that... yeah, it made me accept myself much more. And it made me realized that everybody is different, but it's not bad.’ (Interviewee 9, 22, p.85)

The mediatization of someone else's journey, complete with challenges and self-doubt, helped the interviewees accept and love their own flaws. Witnessing real evolution and progress, rather than a

## Documenting YouTubers and Female Empowerment

flawless route, helped increase the viewers' self-esteem by showing that they are as valuable as famous fitness vloggers. The point is not to imitate girls in magazines, but to reach a certain level of happiness with oneself; a level of self-satisfaction.

On the other hand, without any exception, all interviewees described an increased awareness and understanding of who they are, due to their new practice of sports. This element is extremely fascinating since Hargreaves (1994) mentioned that acquiring strength, confidence and athleticism through sport could be considered as empowering for men, but failed to discuss a similar effect for women. Empowerment through the practice of sports sends a powerful message concerning women's identity in a patriarchal society. The fact that vloggers help their audience with discovering and appreciating sports for what they are facilitated the respondents' evolution and improvement, who therefore find the liberation necessary to feel more confident in their daily routine. The fear associated with practicing a stigmatized sports is being assuaged by the vlogger-supported belief that everybody can do it. As interviewee 1 states:

'They were also beginners and stuff [...] So they kinda already use their own mistakes to help you out. [...] They are there to kinda share their story and help you with their own experience'  
(Interviewee 1, 25, p.4)

This states how the influencer was once a beginner, proving that everybody can reach the same level. The realization that these women are standard, they are like any other person and also started somewhere increases the belief that everyone can do it, including the viewer. Once again, the concept of self-actualization (Maslow & Lewis, 1987) becomes significant interviewee 10 talked about how watching vloggers gave her 'the confidence' to face the 'boys' area'. The demonstration and visualization of exercises increases the confidence and belief of women that they are legitimate in the 'boys' area'.

Vloggers emphasize on femininity in sports to attract more women into it. The legitimacy vloggers instill in their female audience increases drastically the women's belief in their own strength and judgment. By transmitting affirmations of self-love, self-confidence and comfort, female influencers help women to grow more powerful and tolerant towards themselves. The feeling of self-esteem that results from the use of media, and the exposure to educative content is consequently considered as transformative for its users. During several interviews, the topic of videos showing a before/after transformation has been approached. All interviewees who talked about it admitted thinking positively about them, reinforcing the belief they are strong enough to achieve similar evolutions (Antunovic & Hardin, 2013). In this case, female viewers are not only exposed to one convincing female fitness vlogger, but to fellow viewers who achieved what these vloggers advocate in their videos. This discovery of other women's potential is happening through a display done by a female influencers, displaying real facts from different perspectives other than their

professional, and not only from athletes. This strength that is displayed by female vloggers and other audience members is an element that has been highlighted in every single one of the interviews. Between admiration for other girls' strength and realization of their own, female users stated how observing female vloggers perform help them. Being exposed to women who show strong physical and psychological attributes gives the audience a feeling of power and knowledge:

'I knew what I saw, and I thought that I knew how to do the exercise and I would just go and apply it at the gym, and I didn't care if I didn't know much, I just did my own thing. [...] In the beginning I was of course a bit intimidated to train with weights. [...] The videos and these people help me feel more confident.' (Interviewee 10, 26, p.94)

What interviewee 10 explains is how learning from observation and from copying encouraged her to try new skills without fear of failure. Confidence, self-love, self-respect and happiness are the most repeated features mentioned by interviewees. These aspects of their life that improved thanks to vloggers are determinant in the portrayal of an empowered woman. Human beings need to feel valued; by copying a role model such as female vloggers, they strive towards building themselves up (Maslow & Lewis, 1987). Despite aiming to challenge normative beliefs on how women should act and look, female fitness vloggers appear to help accepting body differences by promoting self-esteem over social recognition. Interviewee 1 explains it perfectly stating:

'We think that doing fitness and weightlifting is making you look a certain way, but it's not necessary true. It makes your heart stronger, you mental stronger [...]. It's not just about appearance but the overall well-being and healthier'. (Interviewee 1, 25, p.10)

Ultimately, all women should be able to confidently participate in sports, whether they have the 'feminine' look or 'manly' look everybody fears. YouTube, due to its social and participative aspect, can be a platform for challenging the normative beliefs regarding women's bodies and abilities. The video formats emphasizes the visual representation of an evolving femininity. It can be difficult to emphasize femininity in a fitness context, yet confidence and strength demonstrated give a new dimension to femininity. The need for self-actualization is strongly represented in this element (Maslow & Lewis, 1987). Confidence, self-esteem, valuation are all factors necessary for a change of the normative beliefs, and therefore, for the empowerment of women.

### 4.5.2 Motivation

The motivation theme is one of the most recurrent gratifications within the interviews. As a matter of fact, many of the interviewees explained how anybody can achieve anything, it is a matter of

work. This inspiring message is displayed, for instance, in motivational videos that have been discussed in some of the interviews. According to interviewee 10, these videos were useful to a certain extent. She discussed how as a beginner, these speeches were extremely helpful to stay motivated. The lack of confidence and self-esteem may be discouraging to start with, but by introducing motivational discourses and videos, vloggers reach out to their audience. The interviewee once again expressed the slow shift operating; this form of support is extremely important for amateurs, but the need slowly diminishes with the rise of confidence and knowledge. This way of thinking has been confirmed later by another respondent who stated:

‘We are all still learning but younger girls especially, they need to hear empowering messages to like know that [...] you can achieve a healthy body and lifestyle as well.’ (Interviewee 7, 19, p.68)

Once again, the difference between beginners and people who already have a definite experience is noticeable. Therefore, it is possible to assume that the more self-confidence grows, the less viewers need encouragement speeches to remain motivated. On the other hand, the word ‘inspiring’ has been repetitively used among each one of the twelve interviews. In fact, this word has been used to qualify not only the vloggers, but also the community of supporters and content of each videos. Interviewee 3, for instance, clarified feeling inspired by the vloggers’ work ethic that she could witness. On the other hand, interviewee 5 explained that, for her, the workout content itself is inspiring, and confessed taking regular tips and exercises directly from videos. In contrast, interviewee 9 expressed feeling inspired not by the videos themselves, but by the level of intimacy her favorite vlogger is sharing. She clarified building a feeling of connection with her, which others did too (according to the comment section). Interviewee 1, 4 and 2 described being inspired by the recipes presented on videos, motivating them to try new cooking ideas they found. This ‘inspiration’ respondents feel towards vloggers is what motivates them to try new things, but also to better themselves. Except for one respondent, they all acknowledge the fact that they transformed everyday habits due to the content they have been exposed to. By sparking the audience’s admiration, vloggers inspire them to change, even motivate them to act and reach their own specific goals and dreams. Interviewee 9 described how the influencer she follows helps her stay on track with her dreams even during a tough time. The comforting words helped her remain motivated and positive during hard moments. It is possible, then, to draw a parallel between the audience’s satisfaction and the person they follow. In an experimental attempt, all interviewees have been asked who they were following and why they were following these persons in particular. From all the answers, two patterns have emerged: following a vlogger for her reliability and following a vlogger for her quality as role-model. The

appreciation and fulfilment of the viewer's needs will determine their trust in the information delivered, and the likelihood to relay them.

'I was trying to figure out my way thanks to all these videos and pictures and I got motivated.

When I see a super cool video with a workout that inspires me to try something new I have the same kind of rush of motivation.'(Interviewee 10, 26, p.91)

Interviewee 1 explained that her own motivation to try out new things has been inspired by witnessing happiness and passion within videos. Seeing such happiness on the actors of the video motivated her to try new things but she also felt the envy to try similar exercises.

### 4.5.3 **Courage**

Finally, this element has been brought to attention several times by the respondents. Most of them recall this clear parting that still exists in gyms: the men's section with free weight and machines, and the women's section with cardio equipment. A majority of respondents admitted finding the courage to break this limit thanks to videos, and because vloggers were giving them 'the keys' (Interviewee 9, 22, p.79) to change their own life. Interviewee 6 talked about the courage she acquired thanks to fitness vloggers. She detailed a personal experience she had with a support group she joined. Sissy MUA, one of the vloggers she follows, gathers many support groups online, for all the women participating in her fitness programs. Shortly after joining one of them, interviewee 6 witnessed women sharing their own personal journey on the wall of the support group, giving her the courage to share her own. She stated that the experience of sharing something so personal with so many other people was initially scary, but also that she felt proud to have done it. Interviewee 6 found the courage to share her own journey, thanks to the support and encouragements given by this vlogger, thanks to the courage demonstrated by other women and the desire to feel equally liberated. A majority of respondents explained braving this feeling of being abnormal in the gym by simply focusing on encouraging speeches given by vloggers.

All of the respondents have been asked if they started sharing their own personal journey on social media. Except for interviewee 6, who admitted to sharing her progress on a support group, only interviewee 9 said that she regularly posts videos on her personal accounts. Many respondents explained feeling inadequate and lacking the necessary knowledge to really be beneficial for any potential viewer. This state of mind demonstrate the value they attribute to vloggers they follow and to the quality of information and advices they give. The role of vloggers is still idealized due to their status of celebrity, however, they influence their viewers into becoming their greater self.

### 4.6 CRITICAL ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Even though it has been acknowledged that this research focuses on empowerment and the different positive influences female fitness vloggers had on their viewers, an important point has been noticed. It has been advanced by a majority of respondents that female fitness vloggers may present risks for a part of the population. As a matter of fact, this element outside the scope of the present investigation was regularly mentioned, and therefore needs to be included within the result section as not treatable for the research but acknowledged.

Many respondents detailed their relation with female fitness vloggers using positive or neutral terms, but generally lead their reasoning to the fear they may represent a negative influence for other viewers. Indeed, this element that was not researched came back to the attention of the researcher. A separation between the “me” and “others” was brought forward, stating that there is a fear something may affect others despite not influencing the respondents themselves. This fear reinforces the belief supported by Crane’s (2002) reception theory. Indeed, looking at girls for inspiration is a motivating movement, but the line between admiring and comparing is very thin, especially for individuals who have self-esteem issues. Actually, as explained by interviewee 3 with a change of discourse:

‘Personally, this is not really something that talks to me, in a sense where I never had any weight issues, eating disorders [...] so this is not something that talks to me. Then, we are in a world hyper digitized, where criticism is unfortunately easy and quite violent. [...] but these are just assumptions, because I don’t live it.’ (Interviewee 3, 23, p.32)

It is reinforced by interviewee 6’s experience with such a thing, first stating she is influenced positively by vloggers but they may have a negative influence on others:

‘I don’t think they are here to manipulate you [...] to me it’s a really good message and... It’s also, really you’re like “wow” like admiring” and later states “It’s a bit too much” then “They give too much importance to their perfect body. [...] They are dangerous to others. To younger girls. [...] they aren’t helping anyone with doing that.’ (Interviewee 6, 23, p.56)

This significant change in discourse, between admiring and dangerous behavior shows the separation that interviewee 6 perceives between herself and what may happen to others. This fear of the risks that vloggers may represent for others is the representation of a certain awareness, and an attempt at being objective. The respondents demonstrate a thinking process that include others, and try to be as neutral as possible in their answers. Crane’s (2002) reception theory demonstrates that a similar message may receive significantly different responses from two individuals. Due to one’s personal and cultural

background, or another's past experiences, the way vloggers' messages are perceived will differ, with the risk of having a negative influence but positive on others. These different interpretations are what have been pointed out by the respondents, without further proof or evidence to follow up.

### 4.7 *OVERVIEW OF FINDINGS*

Each section presented in this chapter helps discovering the positive elements of impact vloggers have on their viewers. To answer sub-question one, the foundation of an empowered life does not revolve only around a community of support, but also around a conscious and acknowledged mind. The use of YouTube as a social instrument both to find peer, feel supported and gain visibility is determinant in empowering feelings. It has been repeated throughout the section that knowledge and awareness are the main influencers of a social and personal growth. By offering reassuring words, motivating words, supporters, facts, information, knowledge, skills, and even personal feelings, vloggers strive towards the empowerment of their audiences and towards the change of a status quo. They allow women to gather many elements which independently make them feel stronger, but which also, taken together, can create a significant revolution in the society. Women still suffer every day from stereotypes and gender norms established for decades. However, to mention sub-question two, the influence of strong and positive female role models on social media help other women to reach out for the best version of themselves, and an equal society for their peers. The self-growth stated repetitively by respondents is the result of these vloggers' influence on their life. Whether it is due to the new knowledge, new skills, new information, increase visibility, all these elements are caused by and result of the female influencers. Sub-question three clearly can be answered by the status of influencers they detain; female vloggers embody a role of mentor for other female viewers.

To sum up, the empowerment of female users results in the following steps. First, a strong foundation by offering a feeling of belonging, support and solidarity thanks to the community of followers that is established. Being accompanied by people to the one we can relate to, but also rely on, is essential during an instance of change in one's life. This established community will then allow to increase the awareness and consciousness of a part of the population. Indeed, individual and communal consciousness complete each other and are beneficial to each other for empowering movement. As already detailed previously, awareness is significant but knowledge is one step ahead. Facts, information and knowledge are keys to independence as well as to transformative actions; since vloggers deliver these building blocks, their role as agents of social change becomes apparent. For this reason, both awareness and knowledge are imperative for communities' liberation. Finally, the gratifications brought by vloggers, on a smaller scale,

## Documenting YouTubers and Female Empowerment

play a role individually and collectively. Indeed, the well-being of one person can inspire another one into action. Each one of these elements of result is correlated to others, showing how delicate and determinant they embody for the empowerment of women.

## 5 CONCLUSION

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This thesis investigates how vloggers influence the empowerment of their female audiences by directly researching the viewers' perception of the content they follow. To do so, it has been decided to focus on a self-made definition of empowerment that combines the perspectives of Tang (2016) and Bianchi and Dirkx (2012): Empowerment represents a positive development of a community as a whole, derived from equal opportunities, educational content and rise of consciousness both on an individual and communal levels. This definition clearly states a personal growth as much as collective growth is crucial for empowering feelings and movements. Empowerment as such still has a very unclear definition and may intimidate away many people due to its strong connotations. For this reason, finding elements alleviating empowerment was the best option and the use of sub-questions helped leading the analysis of data. Through the method of in-depth semi-structured interviews, it has been possible to draw conclusions, and thus, answer the research question. The data collection enabled us to find all the answers needed for the research; data was collected from the 12 interviews conducted with female members of female fitness vloggers' audiences. In the following chapter, the three sub-questions will be answered separately. Then their findings will be gathered as an answer to the main research question.

### *SQ1: How do audiences and vloggers make use of YouTube as a social instrument?*

It has been discovered throughout the interviews that *vloggers*, as social influencers, play the role of cause-effect of such social growth and change. Martin's (2012) idea of online social actors detaining two roles; opinions leaders and messengers has been confirmed through the findings. Vloggers are part of the cause, in the cause-effect relationship because of what they promote in their videos, but they also show signs of belonging to part of the effect due to the fact that the "market" wouldn't have been ready for their popularity decades ago yet which is now. In fact, they both influence the movement and are results of it. By being ordinary people chosen by others to be representative of the population, they possess a stronger sphere of influence; since they are expected to be reliable (Martin, 2012). This mentor figure they embody benefits their power of influence over viewers and followers, as argued by Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch (1974) with the growth of opinion leaders online. The foundation they set helps gathering more and more viewers who will support and assist each other and convene a community. Maslow and Lewis (1987) stated that the need for love and belonging is one of the most important human

## Documenting YouTubers and Female Empowerment

needs, which has been supported throughout all interviews. Indeed, the internet increased the opportunity for people to fulfill this need in a virtual social world. By gathering everybody together under the banner of one influencer, one will find a sense of belonging, connection and reliability. Together, individuals are stronger. The interviews disclosed how essential it is for other women to be able to relate to somebody else, and know that they are not in this alone but all together. Members of these communities usually look for Reassuring and compassionate reactions. This is what is pushing viewers to use the platform to seek for peers and find mentor figures in vloggers. These results are in tune with Hart's (2008) findings about online uses and behaviors. This foundation they set gives the opportunity for women to feel empowered and supported, and to make the decision they choose to be the best for them. Within the interviews, that it is necessary for viewers to be able to recognize themselves in others and in a comparable situation; whether it is identify to the vloggers or to former followers within the community. The set of answers acknowledged within this sub-question relate directly to vloggers as influencers and leaders of online communities, which are two main categories explained in the theoretical framework.

*SQ2: Which role do female fitness vloggers play in liberating their female audience from a sole identity?*

This section first considers increased awareness and recognition. Indeed, vloggers' visibility on social media platforms helps to increase the perception of a wider community sports gathers. Fitness has finally been recognized as a sport in itself. Women's legitimacy in sports in general is even more significant. As a matter of fact, this new recognition of female athletes on YouTube and other social media helps the fight against established gender theories that subordinate women's capacities and femininity. This element directly refers to Andreasson and Johansson's (2013) notion of strong femininity and female fitness vloggers being messengers of a social change. In fact, the new recognition female vloggers acquired in the last few years drastically influences the awareness of women and men concerning gender inequalities as well. These stereotypes held regarding femininity, masculinity and sports in general are being challenged through the recently growing recognition of female fitness athletes on YouTube (Gill, 2005). The traditional perception of femininity and women within the sports industry changes along with the need of consciousness acquired by other women. As mentioned before, awareness is one of the major keys to feel liberated from a social status quo. Thus, with the high exposure to media and constant increased mediatization, female fitness vloggers are actors of the feminine liberation (Rocamora, 2016). The digitalization of fitness and increased online communication helped the recognition of new social realities. From being obedient of their own success to active messengers of social change, vloggers are given the role to inform and instruct their audiences through video format.

## Documenting YouTubers and Female Empowerment

Knowledge has been displayed as a major factor of appeal when it comes to watching fitness videos, which associates directly with the concepts of edutainment and infotainment previously specified. Actually, with the rise of Web 2.0, the educational techniques and technologies evolved drastically due to the spread of internet and new technologies all over the globe. The new generation of digital natives have been exposed to the need to assimilate more information at a faster pace. As Prensky (2001) explained, the use of videos as a dynamic and visual learning technique has proven to be relevant with YouTube's increasing audience. Vloggers, who used to share parts of their lives with the concept of a diary, now hold the role of teachers for many. This element of answer refers directly to Curran's (2011) perspective on the balance between entertainment and information he calls infotainment. As mentioned previously, he argues that teaching audiences by distracting them with entertaining formats is an efficient way to educate viewers. Evidently vloggers are communicators of infotainment. They share knowledge and information in entertaining videos, and by increasing the awareness of their audience, they also influence their consciousness of situations and skills, and a change. Female audiences are presented with the elements necessary to their own emancipation from an established and inflexible identity. This use of media to spread messages is a direct reference to Singhal and Rogers' (2002) edutainment. The increasing knowledge about their own bodies, their own capacities and abilities allow women to decide what is best for them, and therefore, make an educated judgement of who they want to be. This statement has been promoted by Tang (2016) as one of the main elements of empowerment. This sub-question relates directly to two theoretical sections developed in this thesis: YouTube as entertainment and learning tool, but also to the theoretical part about vloggers as communicators for social change

*SQ3: How do female fitness vloggers influence the self-development of their female audiences?*

Finally, it has been found both in the results and by scholars that using a step by step instructional format helps audiences to visualize and reproduce important knowledge about sport, fitness and a healthy lifestyle. By being offered a full education about fitness, female audiences have the possibility to change and improve their own self (Lee & Lehto, 2013). Actually, knowledge is determinant for the educated self-development of an individual, and once again the notions of infotainment and edutainment are significant (Singhal & Rogers, 2002; Curran, 2011). Arguably, knowledge is the main element of empowerment, as it is the most mentioned term in all of the conducted interviews. As already mentioned, knowledge helps people make a conscious choice about a given situation. By being knowledgeable about what they are capable of, women can assess as well how they can change a situation. It includes supporting each other online, as much as sharing their own personal journey, or simply knowing their own value. One needs knowledge to work on one's own self-development, regardless of one's online participation. Nevertheless, the findings showed that the need of knowledge diminished once the women

estimated that they had reached a level of saturation in regards to information. In this case, they watch vloggers for the other fulfillments they allocate. Self-esteem, confidence, strength, motivation, sense of equality and even courage, all are values female viewers of vloggers aims at. The uses of media depicted by Katz et al. (1974) and Maslow (Maslow & Lewis, 1987) was a fundamental theoretical argument that appeared to reveal itself in the findings. The fact that respondents disclosed receiving these values and gratifications from viewing female fitness vloggers indicates that they have a positive influence on their audiences. These female influencers give their audiences useful keys to self-growth and self-development. In opposition to the importance given to the participating audiences theory (Schafer, 2011; Jenkins, 2004), the findings in this thesis show that regardless of the level of involvement, audiences always benefit one way or another from these vloggers' messages. Lastly, the answer to this sub-question clearly discusses three segments of the theoretical framework called 'The millennials and social media uses', 'A world-wide-web community' as well as 'YouTube as entertainment and learning tool'.

*Main RQ: How do female fitness vloggers influence the empowerment of their female audiences?*

The findings of this thesis show 5 elements of influence, which benefit empowering developments among women. Vloggers represent an entity by themselves. They carry many roles; normal human being, role model, teacher, influencer, gatherer of populations and messenger. By exhibiting their own process of self-development, fitness vloggers expose their audience to different ways of feeling empowered, whether it is through sport or a healthy lifestyle (Bianchi et al., 2002). They influence many elements: personal growth, learning new skills, discovering one's full potential and reaching out for it. They give knowledge, foundation, consciousness and courage necessary to feel empowered as a woman. YouTube as a means for empowerment shows a clear rupture between the past and present contexts, indicating a faster spread of transformative messages (Rocamora, 2016). This represents the rejection of traditional movements and identities, in favor of the liberation of women as strong and equal to men in a sportive and healthy environment. It is possible to see strong similarities between Duffy's (2008) impression of YouTube as an infinite source of information and fulfillment, and the interviewees' portrayal of the platform as an encyclopedia or a service on demand. As a result, female fitness vloggers do influence women positively; by facilitating their individual liberation inducing a collective emancipation (Collins, 2000). This positive influence fits perfectly each of the definitions given to empowerment. As explained by Bianchi and Dirkx (2012), the positive development of a community as a whole, rises both from an individual and collective increasing consciousness and knowledge. According to scholars, individual empowerment is a prerequisite for collective empowerment and contrariwise.

### *Reflection and Limitations*

After carrying out the analysis, it has been found in this thesis that the theory which was presented in chapter 2 was relevant for this research. However, it seems, many theories such as the hierarchy of needs by Maslow (Maslow & Lewis, 1974), uses and gratifications by Katz et al. (1974) and community effect have been underestimated. It was expected that they played a role with regards to empowerment, however, the data clearly showed that they actually represented a major feature for female fitness vloggers' influence. Mediatization was a theory that was not as significant as estimated, although, interviewees demonstrated how important the visibility and recognition acquired by vloggers was (Rocamora, 2016). Without mediatization, vloggers would not hold a power over other women, and would probably not have a similar level of influence. However, the role of mediatization did not influence the respondents' perception of vloggers, nor their perceived influence.

One of the limitations that has been established concerns the positive influence of vloggers. By deciding to focus only on how female fitness vloggers influence the empowerment of their audiences, it has been assumed since the very beginning that the negative influence was minimal and should be disregarded. This self-imposed limitation in the end forced us to rely on the consideration for positive impacts when in fact many respondents talk about potential risks for others. They all did so without being led towards discussing this aspect but brought it up on their own. In fact, the noxious effects of high exposure to media and fitness vloggers approached by Stover (2014), Jong and Drummond (2016) and Harrison (2000) have been voiced by most respondents. The end result of this research focusing solely on positive effects is that this made it impossible for us to research further these elements, even though they appeared to be meaningful for many interviewee. Besides, the results did not validate any theory from Gossling and Stavrinidi (2015), Rocamora (2016) and Ellison, Hancock and Toma (2011) about self-presentation and the effect of media on vloggers' portrayal of their self. These were expected to play a significant role in the positive liberation but rather appeared to be relevant in regards to encouraging dangerous behaviors. Again, the importance of self-presentation seemed to weigh solely on a negative or toxic effects. Due to the empowering approach taken, this perspective on vloggers' self-presentation could not be researched further due to its direct link to negative impacts, which is out of topic. Additionally, this research has been based on in-depths interviews solely. The fact that it grasps only the female viewers' perspective is unfortunate. Indeed, using the technique of triangulation to cross-compare the data could have been an interesting addition to the research. In this study, there is a focus solely on empowering features. Using triangulation to compare the intended messages from vloggers with the

reception of these same messages could have enlightened a great area of investigation concerning Crane's (2011) reception theory, which remained superficial in this research.

Arguably, the results validate, suit and contribute to the existing theoretical knowledge. The definitions of empowerment were vast enough to explore many areas and focus primarily on elements delivered by the respondents. Focusing on empowerment in itself allows an exhaustive approach of positive feminist factors. As explained before, many studies focused on female fitness Instagrammers and bloggers mostly to demonstrate the risks related to such social exposure. The results show that YouTube as a social platform for that replays transformative messages to a large extent. Since many studies lacked research on the link between video blogging and female empowerment, they complete other researches that were focusing solely on a written diary format. The use of visual formats in liberating movements has rarely been a sole focus of studies before, therefore the set of data collected during this study increases the general knowledge about this topic. The new prominence of edutainment and infotainment as learning processes directly relates to the increasing popularity of social media and growth of the digital generation. Indeed, the fact that the findings show such a great importance given to knowledge and awareness in empowering movements contributes to academic and societal discussions. In addition, feminism remains a heated topic that benefits from more investigation. The aim of this research was to uncover how female fitness vloggers influence the empowerment of their female audience. Hence, the results profit the ever popular discussion about female empowerment in a patriarchal society, and even more through a male dominated sector that is sports and fitness.

As mentioned in chapter 4, a very interesting pattern appeared. Throughout the interviews, almost all respondents established a difference between "me" and "others". Indeed, except for interviewee 6 who witnessed dangerous behaviors online, due to the exposure to female fitness vloggers, all other interviewees made assumptions in the name of "others". This idea of a social fear, or fear for others, based on presumptions would be interesting to investigate further. The fact that the respondents argued that they were not being influenced or impacted in a negative way by vloggers, they still assumed that this is a risk for many others, and even more for younger girls. This change in discourse would be very interesting to study, to determine where this fear for others is coming from. Are the assumptions true? Is it simply fear of others? Does this fear of potential risks represent a deeper anxiety of the respondent?

In addition, this study focuses solely on impacts on viewers. However, it would be interesting to investigate the influence or impact of viewers on vloggers. Recently in the news, many vloggers exposed disorders they developed due to their high exposure to big audiences and to social media in general. This new trend of social liberation led us to wonder how these disorders were triggered. This study has research the influence of vloggers on their audiences, but what about the influence of audiences on

## Documenting YouTubers and Female Empowerment

vloggers? Are they empowering their vloggers? If so, how? Thus, a study of viewers' influence on vloggers would be an interesting addition to the researched topic. Due to their status of online celebrity, their own point of view is disregarded in most of the studies about fitness and female empowerment. Exploring this aspect could help a cross comparison of female empowerment within the specter of fitness and use of YouTube.

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## APPENDIX A

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### Topic Guide (English):

#### Demographic:

- How old are you?
- Where are you from?
- Are you practicing any sport?
- If yes: -how did you get into fitness?
  - for how long have you been doing fitness?
  - How did you start your own fitness journey? Why did you start?

#### Content:

- What type of fitness videos are you watching?
- Do you prefer full fitness content or also lifestyle?
- Are you following any fitness channel or vlogger?
  - Which vloggers are you following?
  - For how long have you been following them?
- How did you find them (the videos/the vloggers)?
- What made you watch their videos? Why did you start watching their videos?
- If watching other vloggers: How did they choose the vloggers they follow?

#### Participation online:

- Do you comment often?
- Why do you comment?
- Do you have friends who do comment?
- Do you share the videos with your friends? Do you share tips you learned from the videos?

#### Community effect:

- Did you ever have contacts with other followers?
- Through which mean? Comment/ direct message
- Do you also find motivation/advices within the comments?
- What makes you feel like part of a community?
- Do you feel like part of a community thanks to this vlogger?
- How is the community making you feel in your journey?
  - > Do you feel supported?
- Do you feel like being a part of an online community helps you/motivates you in your own personal journey?

# Documenting YouTubers and Female Empowerment

## **Vlogger's self-presentation:**

- To what extent do you feel connected to what they show?
- Do they feel motivated by the results achieved by the vloggers?
- Do they feel connected to vloggers thanks to the sharing of their personal journey?
- Do you see videos/content as authentic or staged?
- Which feelings do you have toward the way fitness vloggers present themselves?

## **Influencer/opinion leaders:**

- Do you really exercise according to these fitness vloggers' recommendations? —> do you have an idea
- Are you changing your habits along the habits you notice in the videos? / Have you ever changed your habits?
- Have you ever purchased products vloggers promoted in their videos? /Are they products they show you decided to buy?
- Do you trust their judgment? Do you trust the info they give you? Exercises, advices, opinions, products, etc.
- (Are the audiences really influenced in their consumer behavior?)

## **Perception:**

- How were your perceiving fitness before starting watching?
- How do you perceive fitness now? Did it change?
- Did it change your point of view on weight lifting to see these fitness bloggers practice this sport?
- Is there a change that operated in your mind when you started following thoroughly their posts?
- Do you think that their presence on several media is helping spreading their ideas/messages?

## **Empowerment:**

- What is your definition of empowerment?
- Are they motivating you to change your lifestyle?
- Do you make supplementary researches about the info they give you?
- Do you try to learn more about fitness now that they motivated you?
- What were your feelings towards weight lifting before?
- Do you feel empowered by the fact that female fitness vloggers make accessible to women a - masculine sport?
- Do you think that everything is online, you can easily access info online helps influence the opinion of people on women and weight lifting?
- Would you recommend/consider these videos to women who would like to start fitness?
- Did they motivate you to share your own journey?
- Did they help you face difficulties in your personal life? (Psychological or even physical)
- Are there any messages you took out of the videos?
- Do they feel encouraged by the motivating speeches coming from fitness vloggers and their community?
- Which feelings do you have after watching a video?

## Documenting YouTubers and Female Empowerment

-If you had to give 3 words about your feelings towards these fitness videos, which ones would it be?

**Topic Guide (French):**

**Démographique:**

- Quel âge avez-vous?
- D'où êtes-vous?
- Vous pratiquez-vous un sport?
  - Si oui: comment vous êtes-vous mis au fitness/musculation?
- Depuis combien de temps faites-vous du fitness?
- Comment t'es-tu mise au fitness? Pourquoi avez-vous commencé?

**Content:**

- Quel type de vidéos de fitness regardez-vous?
- Vous préférez le genre de vidéo de full workout (physique complet) ou le style de vie fitness?
- Suivez-vous une chaîne de conditionnement physique ou un vlogger?
  - Quels vloggers suivis-tu?
  - Depuis combien de temps les avez-vous suivis? Comment les avez-vous trouvés (les vidéos / les vloggers)?
- Qu'est-ce qui vous a fait regarder ses vidéos? Pourquoi avez-vous commencé à regarder leurs vidéos?
- Si vous regardez d'autres vloggers: comment ont-ils choisi les vloggers qu'ils suivent?

**Participation online:**

- Est-ce que ça t'arrive de commenter ?
- Pourquoi commentez-vous?
- Avez-vous des amis qui commentent-ils?
- Partagez-vous les vidéos avec vos amis? Partagez-vous les astuces que vous avez appris des vidéos?

**Community effet:**

- Avez-vous déjà eu des contacts avec d'autres followers?
- Par quel moyen? Commentaire / dm
- Trouvez-vous également des conseils / motivation dans les commentaires?
- Qu'est-ce qui vous fait sentir comme une partie d'une communauté? – est-ce que tu as l'impression de faire partie d'une communauté ?
- Vous sentez-vous comme une partie d'une communauté grâce à ce vlogger?
- Comment la communauté vous fait-elle ressentir dans votre évolution/parcours?
  - Vous sentez-vous supporté?
- Avez-vous l'impression de faire partie d'une communauté en ligne vous aide / motive dans votre propre parcours?

**Vlogger's self presentation:**

- Dans quelle mesure vous sentez-vous connecté au style de vie qu'ils montrent?
- Sont-ils motivés par les résultats obtenus par les vloggers?
- Se sentent-ils connectés aux vloggers grâce au partage de leur parcours personnel?
- Voyez-vous des vidéos / contenus authentiques ou mises en scène?
- Quels sentiments avez-vous à propos de la façon dont les fitness vloggers se présentent?

## **Influencer/opinion leaders:**

- Vous exercez-vous vraiment selon les recommandations de ces vloggers de fitness? -> avez-vous une idée
- Est-ce que vous modifiez vos habitudes selon les habitudes que vous voyez dans les vidéos?
- Avez-vous déjà changé vos habitudes?
- Avez-vous déjà acheté des produits vloggers promus dans leurs vidéos? / Les produits qu'ils vous montrent ont-ils décidé d'acheter?
- Faites-vous confiance en leur jugement?
- Faites-vous confiance aux informations qu'ils vous ont données? Exercices, conseils, opinions, produits, etc.
- (Le public va-t-il vraiment influencer son comportement de consommation?)

## **Perception:**

- Comment est-ce que vous perceviez le fitness/muscu avant de commencer à regarder?
- Comment est-ce que vous percevez le fitness maintenant? Est-ce que cela a changé?
- Est-ce que cela a changé votre point de vue sur le fitness de voir ces fitness vloggers pratiquer ce sport?
- Y a-t-il un changement qui a fonctionné dans votre esprit lorsque vous avez commencé à suivre leurs vidéos?
- Pensez-vous que cette présence sur plusieurs médias aide à diffuser leurs idées / messages?

## **Empowerment:**

- Est-ce qu'ils vous motivent à changer votre style de vie?
- Est-ce que vous faites des recherches supplémentaires sur les informations qu'ils vous donnent?
- Est-ce que vous essayez d'en apprendre davantage sur le fitness/la muscu maintenant qu'ils vous ont motivé?
- Quels étaient vos sentiments en ce qui concerne la muscu avant?
- Vous sentez-vous habilité par le fait que les vloggers féminins rendent accessibles aux femmes un sport masculin?
- Pensez-vous que vu que tout est en ligne, vous pouvez facilement accéder à l'information en ligne aide à influencer l'opinion des personnes sur les femmes et la muscu/le fitness?
- Recommanderiez-vous / envisagez-vous ces vidéos aux femmes qui souhaitent commencer le fitness?
- Les ont-ils motivés pour partager votre propre parcours/progression?
- Vous ont-ils aidé à faire face à des difficultés dans votre vie personnelle? (Psychologique ou même physique)
- Y a-t-il des messages que vous avez retenu des vidéos?
- Sont-ils encouragés par les discours motivants issus des vloggers fitness et de leur communauté?
- Quels sentiments avez-vous après avoir regardé une vidéo?
- Si vous deviez donner 3 mots qui définissent votre sentiment envers ces vidéos de fitness, quels seraient-ils?

## APPENDIX B

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### Coding Frame:

#### -Increased awareness and recognition:

→ Awareness:

- About Fitness as a sport
  - Sports can be fun
  - Sports can be cheap
  - There are risks with any sports
- Everybody is different but it's good
- Open eyes on stereotypes existing
  - Not a manly sport
  - They are human
  - Not drugs but discipline
- Self-aware (aware of own body)
  - Being healthy is important
  - Willingness, You need to want it to get it
  - Bad eating habits they had

→ Visibility

- Social Media
- Triggered interest
- Discover fitness
- Everywhere you go, fitness is
- Number of followers
- Number of views

→ Recognition

- Normalization of fitness for women
  - Women can do it as well
- So many people already do it
  - Democratization of fitness as a sport
- Quality of comments

#### -Deliver knowledge:

→ Choice/Decision

- Decide which vloggers fits your personality best
- Content on demand
- Like a book you open anytime
- Conscious you are the one who can change it all
- In control of how this affects you
- Personal goals different for all
- Make your own assessment of what is being shown

→ Opinion

- Teach you to make own judgement
- Change people's opinion on fitness/female abilities
- Reassure
- Let people express themselves in comments

# Documenting YouTubers and Female Empowerment

→ Knowledge:

→ Information: Use until reach saturation of info

- Informative content
- Source of Info
- Encyclopedia
- Answer questions
- Simplified information
- How long progress takes
- Being fit is hard work not genetics
- How long this takes: Duration
- Discover a new sport, new branches
- Clothing sizing if sports brands
- 

→ Skills

- Learn exercises
- Learn form and moves
- Walk in footsteps
- Step by step documenting
- To prevent from having injuries

## -Induce a change:

→ Social change:

- Kill cult of physique
- Change stereotypes
- Promotes healthy lifestyle over sexy body
- Lifestyle over diet
- Feeling of equality
  - Gender equality
  - All levels
  - All ages
  - All shapes

→ Personal change:

- I started making more researches
- Self-Evolution : physical and psychological
- Better eating habits
- Improve in sport/ improve ourselves
- Learn to be more patient

## -Set a foundation

→ Support

- Part of a group
- Receive feedback
- Videos as a reminder
- Feel Accompanied

## Documenting YouTubers and Female Empowerment

- Conforted by vlogger's words
- Regularity in posting that counts as a check in
- Mental help / support
- Mentor figure
- Identification
- Familiarity
- Scheduled and structured
- Feeling Encouraged
- Feel like you are not alone

→ Solidarity

- Relate to others
- Familiarity
- Trust between people/followers
- Community effect
- Following the crowd
- Save each other

### **-Personal gratifications**

→ Self-esteem:

- Strength
  - Gives the envy to have Ambition
  - Feeling Powerful
  - Feeling Strong
  - Girl power
  - Reachable to anybody who wants it
  - Have a Discipline
- Confidence
  - Acceptation of own body
  - increases Self-confidence
  - Assume who they are
  - Condones
  - Everybody can do it
  - make you believe you are important
  - #Gainingweightiscool
  - Proud of working out
  - to try and know how to do exercise
  - Trust own judgment
  - Believe your own capacities
  -

→ Motivation

- Give Inspiration
- To change own habits
- To be more curious
- Admirative of "success"
- Fight laziness thanks to hyped content
- Witness happiness and passion
- Reminder to follow your own journey, not others

## Documenting YouTubers and Female Empowerment

- Follow your dreams
- Relate to other people/relate to vloggers
- To keep going with the efforts
- Reach a specific goal

→ Courage

- Go to a gym/ask a trainer
- Recognition of sports helped build the courage to try
- To share own journey
- To go in the middle of the guys at the gym
- To try new exercises and new machines at the gym
- Feel less out of norm