MINDFUL FITNESS AND MINDFUL WOMEN: THE ROLE OF KYRGYZ FEMALE INFLUENCERS IN SHAPING DISCOURSES OF FEMININITY IN SOCIAL MEDIA

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Author's Declaration

I, the undersigned, Aigerim Batyrbek kyzy, candidate for the MA degree in Gender Studies declare herewith that the present thesis titled "*Mindful Fitness and Mindful Women: The Role of Kyrgyz Female Influencers in Shaping Discourses of Femininity in Social Media*" is exclusively my own work, based on my research and only such external information as properly credited in notes and bibliography. I declare that no unidentified and illegitimate use was made of the work of others, and no part of the thesis infringes on any person's or institution's copyright.

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Abstract

This thesis explores how Kyrgyz female influencers construct and market femininity through mindful fitness on Instagram. Based on digital ethnography and critical discourse analysis, the study analyzed Instagram content including posts, stories, reels, and highlights from five nano-influencers and one wellness community to understand how empowerment, health, and gender are narrated, visualized, and commodified. The research addresses three crucial questions: (1) How is femininity constructed and marketed in the context of mindful fitness? (2) What types of femininity are promoted? (3) How do class and ethnicity shape access to and representations within this space? The findings revealed how Kyrgyz social media influencers engage with global mindful discourses and adopt it to the local cultural context, showing empowerment through emotional discipline and body control. However, these narratives often align with neoliberal and postfeminist frameworks that individualize responsibility, depoliticize structural gender inequality, and privilege urban, Russian-speaking, middle-class women. Thus, mindful fitness becomes a field of both empowerment and exclusion of certain groups of women. While it offers embodied agency and localized expressions of care, it also reinforces class-based distinctions and aesthetic norms of ideal femininity while continuing the idea of patriarchy. The research argues that mindful fitness in Kyrgyzstan is not only about health, but a gendered, commodified, and cultural space where femininity is produced, controlled, and consumed.

Keywords: mindful fitness, femininity, Instagram, neoliberal feminism, intersectionality, discourse, class, language, religion, digital ethnography

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Over the past years, mindful fitness emerged as a global phenomenon, transforming what was once a spiritual idea into a mass-market wellness product. According to statistics, the global yoga market reached $120 billion in 2024 and is expected to reach $288 billion by 2034. The reason is more than 300 million practitioners worldwide and an annual growth rate of 9% (Rozhdestvenskaya 2024). The commercial goal behind the growth of mindfulness practices into profitable wellness products is supported by the global distribution of a well-developed market, including an entire industry of special clothing and equipment, training courses, classrooms and fitness apps (2024).

What was once based on ancient spiritual and meditation practices has evolved into a global industry that combines wellness, emotional self-regulation, and lifestyle branding. The emergence of social media platforms like Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok has further spread this trend, making mindful fitness a highly demanded and mandatory part of contemporary life. The mindful fitness trend is also emerging in Kyrgyzstan, where it is rapidly gaining popularity, especially among urban, middle-class women. In this context, yoga, Pilates, and breathing exercises are considered not only wellness practices but also symbols of self-care, an ideal model of modern femininity, and emotional strength. The development of digital platforms has enabled social media influencers to become key figures in promoting these ideas. For instance, in Kyrgyzstan, this idea mostly spread through Instagram which is the most popular social media platform in the country (Kuvatova 2023). Posts with aestheticized images, motivating captions, and a thoughtful lifestyle offer followers a vision of femininity

based on a balance of life, beauty, and control (2023). However, this femininity image is not available to everyone. This image is determined by language, class, and social platform, giving preference to those who have economic and cultural capital, but often excluding women who are from rural areas, have low-income and speak in Kyrgyz language only (Sultanalieva 2020).

To be able to grasp the complexity of this phenomenon in Kyrgyzstan it is important to take into account the Kyrgyz perspective of the history of gender, statehood and religious revival. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Kyrgyzstan went through significant ideological transformations, moving from socialism values to neoliberal capitalism and experiencing a resurgence of nationalism and Islam ethics (Kandiyoti 2007; Zdravomyslova and Temkina 2003). Under the new circumstances, gender roles have been redefined. The ideal Kyrgyz woman has become the embodiment of both moral authority and productive capacity. In Kyrgyz society women are expected to be a caring mother, emotionally stable, and body disciplined (Murzakulova 2015). Meanwhile mindful fitness turns to the space to offer women the tools to manage their bodies and emotions in socially acceptable ways. This research seeks to examine how Kyrgyz Instagram influencers construct and market femininity through mindful fitness. By critically analysing their content, videos, and photos, this research provides an understanding of how contemporary media influences the ideas of femininity. The research will address the following research questions:

1. How do Kyrgyz Instagram female influencers construct and market femininity through mindful fitness?

- What kind of femininity (ies) do Kyrgyz Instagram female influencers construct and promote?

- How do class and ethnicity interact in the construction of femininity discourses within mindful fitness practices in Kyrgyzstan?

To explore these research questions the thesis draws on theoretical foundations such as neoliberal feminism, post-feminist sensitivity, and intersectionality. Neoliberal feminism reinterprets empowerment as individual responsibility and market participation (Rottenberg 2017), while postfeminism emphasizes aesthetic labor, emotional positivity, and self-regulation as signs of ideal femininity (Gill 2007; McRobbie 2008).

In turn, intersectionality provides a framework for analyzing intersection of gender with class and gender while showing who has access to be mindful (Crenshaw 1989; Nash 2008). Moreover, the research adopts Kurak feminism which is based on a local approach that combines global feminist ideas with Kyrgyz cultural values and religious ethics (Sultanalieva 2020). Using digital ethnography and critical discourse analysis, this research focuses on the content of five Kyrgyz female influencers and one mindfull community Instagram page. It argues that mindful fitness in Kyrgyzstan is not only about health values, but mainly a symbolic and emotional environment where femininity is formed, sold and selectively disseminated.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

This research is conducted as part of discussions at the intersection of femininity , social media, and mindful fitness. The first section of the literature review examines existing research on the relationship between femininity and social media, focusing on how digital spaces both reinforce and challenge traditional gender norms. The second part of the literature review section explores mindful fitness as a socio-cultural concept, traces its historical roots and analyzes how it differs from other types of fitness. It also discusses how mindful fitness can be both empowering and influenced by neoliberal ideas. In the third section, these discussions based on the existing scholars' articles are examined in a post-Soviet context, showing how historical transformations have affected gender identity in Kyrgyzstan. Finally, the fourth section dedicated to the intersections of class, ethnicity, and femininity in mindful fitness, shed light on the structural barriers that shape women's access to fitness spaces. Not all women experience fitness and femininity the same way. This section then reviews how fitness trends can be shaped by social and economic factors, providing insight into the inequalities embedded in contemporary fitness culture.

2.2 Femininity and Social Media

Before the appearance of social media, gender norms and the standards of how a man and a woman should look were broadcast through television and online advertising studios (Liu 2023:13-16; Ward & Grower 2020: 177-199). However, with the rapid development of social media, gender expectations have become more apparent. For instance, the algorithmic systems of platforms like Instagram monetize idealized images of femininity such as

thinness, wellness, and aesthetic discipline under the guise of empowerment (Cwynar-Horta 2016:15-34). Thus, unlike television, where the image is controlled by producers, social media allows women to create their own digital images.

The user-driven and personalized features of social media strengthen its capacity to reproduce and circulate prevailing gender ideologies. In this context, other scholars highlighted the nature of social media as a space for sharing experiences, publishing ideas, and spreading information, that strengthen the role of shaping and manipulating images of femininity and masculinity particularly among Generation Z (Boyd & Ellison 2007:2010–2024; Bermúdez, Sánchez-Teba, Benítez-Márquez, Chamizo 2021:3-16). In the book *Gender and the Media*, Rosalind Gill also emphasizes that social networks can serve as a space for reproducing gender inequality, where male hegemony still prevails (Gill 2007). In turn, the development of social media has provided women with new opportunities for self-presentation and identity formation, shaping discourses about femininity in the digital space. Previous scholars have explored how social media promotes self-presentation, identity formation, and social capital creation (Boyd and Ellison 2007; Steinfeld, Allison, and Lampe 2007). These platforms facilitate the creation of personal images and narratives, influencing how femininity is perceived and performed in online contexts (Cote and Pybus 2007).

For instance, Instagram is one of the most widely used platforms that allows users to manage their social status through visual metrics such as photos, likes, and followers (Marder, Joinson, and Shankar 2012). Among these practices, the act of posting selfies has become particularly significant. However selfies serve as a common and highly visible form of self-presentation that allows women to construct digital identities. Yet they also represent a controversial space in which autonomy and visibility are negotiated and women navigate a space where self-expression coexists with amplified audience evaluation. For this reason,

while some researchers find social media practices a means to challenge dominant beauty norms and reclaim visual agency (Thorpe & Toffoletti 2018), others claim that all the practice in social media ultimately reinforce traditional gender expectations by positioning women as objects of public consumption and validation (Burns 2015; Warfield 2015; Abidin 2015). While some scholars claim that selfies allow women to challenge socially accepted norms of beauty (Scott-Dixon, 2002; Koskela 2004: 199-215), others suggest that they reinforce gender expectations by positioning women as objects of public appreciation (Burns 2015; Warfield 2015; Abidin 2016). As Dobson notes, the representation of women in social media spaces remains a subject of debate (Dobson 2015:67). In turn, one of the scholars pointed out how young women use stereotypical gender representations in their Instagram selfies and showed that these images often reinforce traditional femininity (Butkowski 2019:49). Men, in particularly, contribute to this reinforcement by encouraging specific images of femininity through engagement metrics such as "likes" (Armstrong 2014:156). Even the accounts of influential celebrities tend to be designed for the male gaze, emphasizing physical attractiveness (Dang 2022: 91).

Post-feminist discourse simplifies feminism by emphasizing beauty and bodily expression as forms of empowerment (McRobbie 2008:11-17). Women claim to "dress for themselves," but their social media presentations often conform to generally accepted standards of attractiveness, including slimness, smooth skin, and a toned physique (Murray 2015:62). Striving to conform to these ideals can lead to harmful behaviors such as extreme dieting (Butkowski, Dixon, and Weeks 2019:209). Thus, although social media promotes women's self-expression, it also serves as a tool to strengthen gender norms (Liu 2023:15). Regarding femininity, another researcher notes that this concept, as a social construct, has historically been associated with beauty, aesthetics of the body, and culturally ingrained ideals that define

the "ideal woman" (Cwynar-Horta 2016:88). She draws from the concept of Judith Butler gender performativity which claims that gender is not an innate feature but shaped by society's expectations (Butler 1990:45). Social media platforms enhance this performativity by allowing women to control their online followers, often reinforcing or challenging dominant gender norms (2016:88).

The spread of women's activities is happening faster through social media influencers who are taking a leading position Bjørn defines social media influencers as people who have achieved a significant online presence and influence the opinions, behavior, and consumer choices of their audience (Bjørn 2023:23-26). Female social media influencers focus on gender norms and shape them through their content, often combining stories of empowerment with traditional beauty standards. On the one hand, they challenge social norms by promoting a positive attitude towards their bodies and self-acceptance. For example, the Instagram body-positive movement is challenging traditional notions of beauty by promoting different body types and rejecting dominant femininity (Cwynar 2016:90). However, even within such movements, dominant gender norms persist. Research shows that many supporters of body positivity still adhere to traditional norms of femininity, such as makeup, styled hair, and idealized poses that reinforce rather than break traditional beauty standards (2023:77).

Thus, the intersection of femininity and social media reveals both empowerment and limitation in the digital representation of gender. While female social media influencers challenge traditional norms and create new opportunities for self-expression, they also reinforce existing beauty standards and consumer trends.

2.3 Historical Perspective of Mindful Fitness and Neoliberal Implications

The concept of mindful fitness has deep historical roots in ancient Asian disciplines such as

yoga and Tai Chi. Originating in India and China, these practices emphasize the integration of mind and body, fostering a spiritual connection with nature (La Forge 2016:6). Classical yoga, as outlined in the Yoga Sutra attributed to Patanjali, comprises eight limbs, including postures (asanas), breath control (pranayama), and meditation (dhyana), all contributing to what is now recognized as mindful exercise (La Forge 2016:6). Similarly, Tai Chi evolved from qigong, a Chinese system of meditative movements aimed at activating the body's natural healing mechanisms through the control of vital energy, or qi (La Forge 2016:6). As Ralph La Forge notes in his research on mindful fitness, mind-body exercise programs or "mindful exercises" have proven to be important players in the development of individual and group exercises (2016: 1-6). Mindful exercise is characterized by low- or moderate-intensity physical activity performed in a meditative mode, with conscious proprioceptive perception and attention to breathing (2016:1-6). In other words, mindful exercises are explained as physical activity that requires performing certain practices with deep inner mental concentration. However, as some scholars note, since the early 2000s, the term *"mindfulness"* has turned into a twenty-first-century buzzword, creating widespread interest and enthusiasm (Sun 2014: 394-415).

Mindfulness ideas have delved into the discourse of different social institutions, including medicine, psychology, the corporate world, schools, politics, the military, and the mainstream media, and their proponents have announced the beginning of a "mindfulness revolution" (Boyce 2011). This suggests that the elements of ancient traditions have transformed and integrated into modern mindful fitness programs such as Nia, jogging, and various hybrid forms combining Eastern philosophy with contemporary exercise science (2016:1-6). Unlike traditional fitness, which often focuses on performance, aesthetics, or endurance, mindful fitness focuses on mindfulness and the presence, connection of mind and body during

physical activity (Sun 2014:397). This approach draws on Buddhist traditions and modern psychological concepts, positioning itself as a personal practice and social phenomenon influenced by broader cultural perceptions (Sun 2014: 399).

While some scholars emphasize the benefits of mindful fitness in promoting a holistic sense of well-being, others argue that it continues to be embedded into dominant cultural perceptions of health and fitness (Purser 2019). Moreover it potentially reinforces neoliberal ideologies that emphasize personal responsibility and the pursuit of self-improvement (Yeung 2013:5; Sun 2014: 406; Dilts 2011:132). This individualistic approach contrasts to the collectivist idea promoted under Soviet time. As a former republic of the Soviet Union, Kyrgyzstan was also influenced by the ideological structures of the USSR, including its approach to sport and physical culture. For instance, in the context of the Soviet Union sport was a collective project that helped strengthen discipline, national strength and public health (Rojo-Labayen and Rodriguez-Diaz 2020:198). Collective participation was encouraged through government-funded programs, while physical education was seen as a social obligation rather than an individual choice (2020: 198). However, after the collapse of the USSR, neoliberal reforms transformed sports into a market industry. Government support has declined, and financing has shifted towards privatization, sponsorship, and elite competition (Rojo-Lakaien & Rodriguez-Diaz 2020: 206). While Soviet sports emphasized collectivism, neoliberal capitalism prioritized individual success, commercialization, and global branding, reflecting a broader shift from state-controlled social structures to market-oriented politics (2020: 212).

Also based on the definition of Roland Purser the concept of mindfulness is being adopted into neoliberal values and transformed into the privatization of mindfulness. As a result, mindfulness is increasingly framed as an individual responsibility to be applied across all

areas of life. This shift aligns with how capitalist organizations appropriate the concept to shape employee behavior, enhance productivity, and ultimately maximize profit (Purser 2019). Purser challenges the concept of mindfulness and its practices, which claim that focusing on the present moment without any judgment can reduce human suffering and transform the world, while contributing to global rebirth (2019). From his view, it is just a coping mechanism offered as a product, not "well packaged" (Purser 2019). Thus, mindfulness should not be seen as a tool for individual self-regulation or personal well-being. Instead, Purser critiques how mainstream mindfulness practices often ignore cultural, social, and structural contexts and ignores systemic issues like social injustice, inequality, and environmental harm, while placing responsibility on individuals to manage their suffering internally (2019). The term "neoliberal mindfulness" was introduced in the *McMindfulness: How Mindfulness Became the New Capitalist Spirituality* book in connection with Purser's discussion of some of the psychological, sociological, and behavioral characteristics of mindfulness, namely to describe how it became neoliberalized to meet the needs of capitalists by individualizing social problems and ignoring collective ones (Hammoudeh 2021:200-205).

In addition, the transformation of mindful fitness from its spiritual roots into contemporary wellness practices has not only neoliberal features such as individualization and commodification but also gendered implications, as some researchers note that its appropriation and reinvention often align with social expectations of femininity and position it within a predominantly female space. This gendering of mindful fitness contrasts with other fitnesses, such as weightlifting or competitive sports, which are traditionally male-dominated and emphasize features like strength and competitiveness(Dvorkin 2016; Andreasson and Henning 2024). Meanwhile traditional fitness programs that focus on specific achievements like weight loss, increased muscle mass, or enhanced cardiovascular endurance, mindful

fitness encourages practitioners to concentrate on bodily sensations, breathing, and mental state during movement, contributing to a holistic sense of well-being (Yeung 2013:5). This shift aligns with broader trends in contemporary wellness culture, where the intersections of mental and physical health are increasingly acknowledged. By emphasizing self-awareness over external evaluation, mindful fitness promotes body autonomy and self-compassion (Sun 2014:406). This approach has gained visibility on social media platforms, where influencers advocate for balanced and sustainable fitness practices, offering alternatives to traditional fitness norms (Yeung 2013:7).

However, some scholars critique mindful fitness for its connection to neoliberal ideologies that focuses on individual responsibility and self-optimization (Sun 2014:406; Dilts 2011:132). This critique posits that while mindful fitness is often portrayed as empowering, it may perpetuate neoliberal notions of self-regulation, framing well-being as a personal duty rather than acknowledging systemic socio-economic inequalities (Dilts 2011:132). This perspective resonates with Angela McRobbie's analysis of neoliberal logic's gender dynamics, where the freedom offered to women is often a substitute for feminist politics and collective action (McRobbie 2008). This dichotomy underscores the need to critically analyse how fitness practices are socially constructed and the implications for gender inclusivity. The commodification of mindful fitness within the wellness industry further complicates it. As mindfulness practices become mainstream, they are often repackaged into marketable products and services, a phenomenon some critics refer to as "McMindfulness" (Purser 2019). This commercialization leads to losing its deeper meaning. Instead of helping people reflect or create real change, it just becomes a quick fix for stress or a way to get more done without looking at the bigger issues (Purser 2019). In addition, the representation of mindful fitness on social media platforms can perpetuate unrealistic standards and contribute to feelings of

inadequacy among individuals who cannot afford or access these practices. The emphasis on wellness lifestyles can create a narrow definition of health and well-being, excluding diverse experiences and bodies (Cwynar-Horta 2016). While mindful fitness has the potential to promote holistic well-being, it is essential to critically examine its intersections with gender norms, neoliberal ideologies, and structural inequalities.

2.4 The Post-Soviet Context and Gendered Identities in Kyrgyzstan

The study of gender identity in Kyrgyzstan is closely connected with the historical transformations that the country has undergone since independence which happened in 1991 (Kamp 2009: 4-43). The formation of gender identity in the Central Asian region, namely in Kyrgyzstan, was influenced by the gender policy of the Soviet ideology and the transition to nationalism and neoliberalism (Sultanalieva 2020: 39-65; Zdravomyslova & Temkina 2003:51-61). For this reason, gender and fitness discourses in Kyrgyzstan can not be explored without acknowledging the country's Soviet legacy (2020). As a former republic of the USSR, Kyrgyzstan inherited Soviet ideological frameworks that promoted state-driven gender equality.The collapse of the Soviet Union had significant consequences political, economic, and social restructuring that affected gender roles and identity too (Kandiyoti 2007: 610-617). As other scholar highlighted, after the collapse of the Soviet Union Kyrgyz society marked a transition from state-imposed gender equality to a more traditionalist and nationalist revival (Sultanalieva 2020: 18-32). For instance, under Soviet rule, women had the same rights as men and were encouraged to participate in labor activities (2020: 18-32). However, under Soviet ideology local gender norms were ignored. As a result, the gender equality promoted by the Soviet state often lacked depth and authenticity, because it was enforced from above rather than emerging from local cultural values and social norms (2021:11-25).

After independence, the abandonment of socialist policies, combined with economic

instability and privatization, led to a revision of the traditions of gender roles with an increased emphasis on the role of women as mothers and guardians, which was reinforced by both government policies and social expectations (Cleuziou & Direnberger 2016: 2-15). Research that was done on post-Soviet gender identity in Kyrgyzstan highlights the revival of patriarchal structures strengthened by nationalist ideologies. In turn, this ideology often positions women as bearers of national identity and moral values (Kandiyoti 2007). Women's rights activists argue that the transition to a market economy has affected women, as they face higher unemployment, informal participation in the labor market, and limited access to resources and social protection (Hoare 2009:1-19). At the same time, the revival of traditional customs such as bride kidnapping, polygamy, and early marriage further reflects the contradiction between modernity and cultural heritage, showing how gender norms are often manipulated in the name of preserving Kyrgyz national identity (Kim 2020:706-716). These trends point to the dual pressures faced by Kyrgyz women. They face post-socialist economic transformations and resurgent patriarchal norms that seek to limit their autonomy and opportunities (2021:11-25). Feminism in Kyrgyzstan thus developed in a unique context shaped by both the Soviet legacy and modern global feminist movements (2021).

In contemporary Central Asian society, femininity is often associated with moral qualities and family honor, strengthening expectations that women should prioritize marriage, household chores and child care (Kudaibergenova 2018: 379-389). The discourse on femininity is reinforced by various social institutions, including the family, the media, and religious organizations that promote the ideal of a submissive and caring woman. The revival of Islamic ideology has also shaped femininity in Kyrgyz society. Many religious movements promote more conservative gender roles. This has raised debates about whether these ideas of femininity reflect true empowerment or reinforce patriarchal control (Murzakulova

2015:125-139). Despite these restrictive norms, Kyrgyz women constantly resist and reinterpret femininity in their own way. The growth of feminist activism, women-led NGOs, and mass movements has provided alternative ideas about what it means to be a woman in Kyrgyzstan nowadays (Juliette Cleuziou1, Lucia Direnberger 2020:141).

According to the finding of previous scholar a lot of women challenge traditional gender roles by pursuing higher education, engaging in political activities, and exploring non-traditional fields such as business and law (Murzakulova 2015:125-139). Organizations such as the Bishkek Feminist Initiative and the feminist art collective SQ work to address issues such as domestic violence, reproductive rights, and LGBTQ+ rights, often using digital platforms to effectively engage with younger generations (2015:125-139). It suggests that social media has also played a crucial role in discussions about femininity, allowing women to share their experiences and challenge hegemonic ideology (2015). Kyrgyz female influencers play a significant role in challenging social expectations, providing alternative narratives of womanhood that blend modernity with tradition. Femininity in Kyrgyzstan remains a controversial and evolving concept driven by contradictions between historical heritage, cultural expectations, and modern feminist movements. While traditional notions of femininity continue to have a significant impact, Kyrgyz women actively discuss their identity and role in a rapidly changing society (Kamp 2016:48).

In the post-Soviet era, Kyrgyz feminist activists relied on global feminist structures to advocate for gender equality, as well as the views of indigenous and Islamic feminists, demonstrating the intersection of religion, culture, and feminist activism (Kudaibergenova 2018). Scholars have also discussed the ways of how Western feminism can be applied in the Central Asian gender norms context (Mohanty 1988: 61-88). Oyewumi (1997) and Nnaemeka (2005) claim that feminist theories should be adopted considering the local

epistemology rather than being imposed through the Western ideology. Meanwhile Kyrgyz researcher argues that feminist movements should integrate local cultural practices, oral traditions, and knowledge systems to achieve effectiveness, rather than simply copying Western feminist ideas that may not reflect Kyrgyz cultural value (Sultanalieva 2020: 70-81).

As a result, a new feminist concept has appeared, which is called ’Kurak feminism' (Sultanalieva 2020:136). Based on this localized feminist approach, scholars argue that this approach combines elements of Soviet gender policy, the traditions of indigenous Kyrgyzstan, and global feminist thought (Sultanalieva 2020:126). This term is taken from the traditional Kyrgyz patchwork (kurak), symbolizes the blending of various feminist traditions, including Soviet, Western, and local Kyrgyz perspectives (2023:126). In turn, Kurak feminism recognizes the diverse experiences of Kyrgyz women, from rural activists who fight against domestic violence to urban professionals who advocate for political representation (Sultanalieva 2020:127). Unlike Western feminist its critics claim that Western feminist scholars are leading to a “bespoke feminism” in which NGOs prioritize donor programs over public activism (Ghodsee 2004; Hemment 2004). Other scholars argue that Kyrgyz women's movements have successfully used global feminist ideas to challenge local patriarchal structures, transforming these influences into Kyrgyz feminist values (Sultanalieva 2020:136). These discussions reflect a broader and continuous dialogue between the legacy of the past, national identity, and contemporary gender discourses in Kyrgyz society. Thus, despite all the factors, the formation of Kyrgyz femininity shows that gender identity is not static, but is constantly changing.

2.5 Fitness Under Communism and Capitalism: Shifting Ideologies

To analyse the emergence of a neoliberal fitness culture, I would like to emphasise how sports and physical activity were shaped under various ideological regimes, in particular under

communism and capitalism. For instance, during Soviet Time under the communist system sport was linked to the state ideology and was not just entertainment, but a collective project related to national identity, health and labor productivity (Riordan 1977:24; Alekseev 2025: 3-35). In other words, physical culture (fizkultura) was promoted as a civic duty and a tool for educating socialist citizens. Thus, the state invested heavily in infrastructure and mass participation campaigns, positioning physical activity as a duty to society and the nation (Riordan 1977: 24; Alekseev 2025: 3-35). For this reason, in this collectivist concept, women's organisations were seen as tools of State development rather than individual choice. Despite Soviet ideology claiming to promote gender equality, women's participation in sports was often determined by traditional roles, such as the importance of reproductive function or their duty to the team, rather than their individual aspirations (Zdravomyslova and Temkina 2003:51-61). Female athletes were celebrated when they contributed to raising national prestige, but their physical bodies were still regulated in accordance with the moral ideals of femininity, modesty, and strength in the service of the state (Alekseev 2025: 3-35). The ideal Soviet woman was supposed to embody strength and discipline, but never to challenge patriarchal norms (Riordan 1977: 118). Oates-Indruchová provides a deeper critique of the physical culture, revealing how the idea of a "genderless sporting body" was largely ideological (Oates-Indruchová 2003:48–63). Although socialist discourse promoted sport as gender-neutral, in practice, it repressed gender difference rather than excluding it. Women were expected to be strong in sport but still conform to traditional femininity. The supposed exclusion of gender difference concealed a system that continued to control how female athletic bodies could behave. According to Oates-Indruchová, the socialist vision of a depoliticized, "genderless" sporting body actually contributed to the maintenance of patriarchal structures, ensuring that women's strength remained in the service of the state rather than challenging dominant gender norms (2003:48–63).

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the communist ideology shifted to the capitalist and neoliberal system. This shift has had a significant impact on all areas of life, including sports. As a consequence,sports and fitness have become increasingly privatised and commercialised. The focus has shifted from government provision of collective well-being to personal achievement, appearance, and lifestyle management (Andrews and Silk 2012:7). Women are encouraged to invest in their bodies not for the sake of the nation but to be productive, attractive and in demand in the market. This reflects broader ideological changes, when health becomes a personal responsibility, and the female body becomes an object of aesthetic labor and consumer engagement (Rottenberg 2017:329 - 348) T). It suggests that in the neoliberal system, the ideal woman should not only be fit, but also self-disciplined, emotionally balanced and successful. As Rottenberg explains, women are seen as responsible for managing all aspects of their physical and emotional lives, making empowerment a market-driven duty (2017:329 - 348) The shift in body ideology is particularly evident in connection with the growth of a wellness culture, where fitness is seen as self-care and self-promotion, closely related to productivity and attractiveness (Gill and Elias 2007). Thus, within the framework of these two ideologies, the role of sport and physical culture in shaping femininity has changed from state- led collectivism to consumer-oriented individualism. However, in both cases, the women's body is still controlled by external social expectations. A socialist woman was supposed to serve the nation, and a neoliberal woman is supposed to serve the market. This ideological shift will serve as the basis for this research, demonstrating how gender differences are represented and regulated in the contemporary digital space of mindful fitness among women in Kyrgyzstan.

2.6 Intersection of Class, Religion and Femininity in Mindful Fitness Practices

Considering the findings of previous research based on the various physical exercises, whether walking, participating in sports clubs or attending physical education classes, or even practicing self-recognized fitness, is all a product of culture (MacDonald 2009: 1-19). Scholars argue that women perceive physical fitness and femininity differently depending on their class, ethnicity, and social status (2009: 1-19). While fitness culture is often positioned as generally accessible and beneficial, it still highlights the existing hierarchies (Harrison and Belcher 2009: 740). For instance, economic status is one of the most common indicators determining access to fitness fields (2009: 1-19). High-end wellness centers, personal training, and trendy fitness destinations such as yoga retreats or Pilates studios are mostly attended by middle- and upper-class women who have the finances and flexible schedules to participate in such events (Macdonald et al., 2009:14). These fitness centers often become symbols of exclusivity, strengthening socio-economic privileges, while wellness is positioned as a lifestyle choice rather than a necessity for health. At the same time women from lower class face systemic obstacles such as high membership fees, lack of affordable child care, accessible public places to exercise (2016:20-52). Moreover, working-class women may face additional obstacles, including tight work schedules and the burden of housework, further limiting their ability to engage in fitness (Macdonald et al., 2009:14). Scholars note that ethnicity can complicate access to mindful fitness by shaping language use, cultural norms, and perceptions of belonging within wellness spaces. Women from non-Western countries often face certain difficulties when exercising due to cultural expectations, gender norms, religious expectations or ethnic, race stereotypes regarding physical activity (Harrison and Belcher 2009: 740) For instance, Muslim women often face conflicting opinions when choosing between religious modesty and physical exercise, especially in public or mixed-sex

settings (Macdonald et al., 2009:14). The lack of culturally sensitive fitness centers, such as women-only gyms or fitness programs with different dress codes, increases the alienation of women (2016:20-52). Other scholars noted that this does not mean Muslim women are passive actors. On the contrary, they adopt within these restrictions showing agency by attending female gyms or adapting clothing to meet both religious and fitness needs. As Hargreaves describes, elite Muslim women often "lead a double life," exercising in private spaces while maintaining modest public personalities (Hargreaves 2007:91). At the same time, strength of religious faith has been shown to influence body image in Muslim women in complex ways. Mussap found that higher religiosity was associated with lower body dissatisfaction (Mussap 2009:124) The reason is they wear covered clothing and do not consume as much Western media, like TV and magazines that often show unrealistic beauty standards (2009:124). It suggests that religion can function as a protective factor against the commodified body ideals dominant in neoliberal fitness culture.

Although some Islam feminists claim that physical activity is a spiritual practice while citing the Qur'an to argue that maintaining physical strength and beauty is a moral duty (Sunarmo 2021). Meantime others critique the politicization of the veiled body, highlighting how strict modesty norms often serve to adjust to patriarchal control (Hargreaves 2007:76–78). In other words, fitness and body experiences are not merely about trends, but are also shaped by religious beliefs and underlying power dynamics.

Indigenous and marginalized ethnic groups also face forms of social exclusion, where physical activity is often viewed within the framework of Eurocentric views that are inconsistent with their cultural traditions (Harrison and Belcher 2009: 740). For instance, in indigenous communities in Australia, historical colonial heritage continues to affect access to sports and fitness, and many indigenous women cite systemic racism, underrepresentation,

and culturally unacceptable fitness programs as barriers for participation (Macdonald et al., 2009:14). Western beauty ideals further shape women's perceptions of fitness, reinforcing narrow understanding of femininity that favor whiteness, thinness, and body discipline (Harrison and Belcher 2009: 740). The contemporary fitness and wellness industry actively promotes an aestheticized version of health that meets Eurocentric beauty standards, positioning a toned, slender body as the main indicator of success and self control(Macdonald et al., 2009:14). Women who do not meet these standards, whether because of their body type, racial characteristics, or cultural expressions of femininity, often face marginalization in fitness centers (2016: 20-52). Previous scholars highlight the role of globalization and technological advancement, claiming that the rise of technology has contributed to the widespread use of social media (2008: 278). For this reason , on social media fitness influencers perpetuate inspiring images that glorify Western body ideals while simultaneously commodifying health through carefully crafted self-branding strategies (Macdonald et al. 2009:14).

This negotiation also reflects broader class division where upper class women can afford private fitness spaces, while working-class women may remain excluded. Kyrgyz female social media influencers play a crucial role in changing these perceptions by integrating traditional aesthetics with contemporary fitness trends (2016: 20-52). By finding a compromise between global fitness discourses and local cultural expectations, these influencers challenge the prevailing norms of beauty, while reinforcing the distinctive Kyrgyz ideals of femininity and strength (Harrison and Belcher 2009: 740). Social media serve as both a place of empowerment and a space where prevailing beauty norms are replicated (Harrison and Belcher 2009: 740). On the one hand, platforms such as Instagram and TikTok provide an opportunity for women to share diverse ideas about fitness, promoting inclusivity

and body positivity (Macdonald et al., 2009: 14). On the other hand, these platforms remain deeply commercialized, and fitness content is often focused on consumerism, brand sponsorship, and unattainable aesthetic goals (2016: 20-52). Influencers, challenging dominant perceptions, also participate in the commercialization of wellness practices, often selling products and programs that remain inaccessible to low-income and ethnically diverse women (Macdonald et al., 2009: 14). This creates a paradox when fitness is simultaneously presented as a means of empowerment and at the same time remains an obstacle for those who do not have the means to participate fully (Harrison and Belcher 2009: 740).

Exploring the relationship between class, ethnicity, religion and femininity in fitness practices is important for contextualizing the role of Kyrgyz women who influence the formation of informed fitness discourse (2016: 20-52). Although fitness culture is often presented as a universal field, it remains reinforcing existing inequalities (Harrison and Belcher 2009: 740). While scholars have examined the construction of femininity through social media in the context of mindful fitness, existing research predominantly focuses on English-speaking influencers in Western societies. This leaves a significant gap in understanding how influencers from peripheral or semi-peripheral contexts—such as Kyrgyz female influencers—engage with global fitness trends and negotiate local cultural norms to construct discourses of femininity in the digital space.

Chapter 3

Theoretical Framework

This research draws on three interconnected theoretical frameworks: postfeminism, neoliberal feminism, and intersectionality. Postfeminism and neoliberal feminism are used in conversation to understand how empowerment, choice, and self-discipline are framed within wellness and fitness discourses. Using the works of Rosalind Gill and Catherine Rottenberg, I consider how neoliberal feminism empowerment is constructed, performed, and commodified within mindful fitness, particularly through body and affective labor. In turn, neoliberal feminism explores the ideas of individualized, depoliticized narratives of success and self-care (Rottenberg 2017), while postfeminism promotes a sensibility in which women are seen as autonomous agents who freely choose to subject themselves to regimes of bodily control and affective labor (Gill 2007). Within this framework, mindful fitness is seen not only as a practice of wellness, but as an ideological idea that encourages women to govern themselves through routines of emotional regulation, bodily discipline, and entrepreneurial self-presentation. Following Pirkko Markula's feminist analysis of fitness, I explore mindful fitness as a cultural space where technologies of the self are enacted and women are encouraged to work on their bodies and inner states as a means of achieving an idealized, balanced femininity (Markula 2011). This process, while often framed as empowerment, subtly reinforces normative ideals around self-control, productivity, and body visibility, particularly in digital contexts. Meanwhile intersectionality serves as a critical framework to examine the structural inequalities embedded within these empowerment discourses, especially as they operate in Kyrgyz society. While the concept of intersectionality was introduced by Crenshaw (1989), in my thesis I will build on its interpretation in the work of Jennifer C. Nash (2008). Nash identifies limitations of Crenshaw's early conceptualisation of

intersectionality that predominantly focused on the intersection of race and gender and shows the ways intersectionality has been blurred in hegemonic feminism. She shifts her attention beyond race and gender, encouraging to consider how other factors like nationality, language, ethnicity, and sexuality can shape people's experiences of oppression in complex ways (Nash 2008: 8-9). Together these theories help to show how Kyrgyz women engaged in mindful fitness shape femininity in digital and socio-political contexts.

3.1.The Rise of Mindful Fitness and the Disciplined Body under Neoliberal Feminism

Based on the revival of popular feminist discourse in mainstream culture, Catherine Rottenberg (2016) introduces the concept of neoliberal feminism. According to her, neoliberal feminism reframes feminist empowerment by aligning it with market-based logic (Rottenberg 2016: 329-333). The main idea of this theory is positioning empowerment as an individual responsibility rather than arguing for collective political transformation (2016: 329-333). A notable moment marking this shift occurred in 2014, when actress Emma Watson publicly declared herself a feminist during a speech at the United Nations (2016). The overwhelmingly positive reception of her speech, which quickly went viral, signalled the return of feminism as a socially acceptable, even fashionable identity, particularly among prominent Western women. This case challenged the assumption that society had entered a postfeminist era, where feminism is viewed as an unnecessary movement (Rottenberg 2016:330). Alongside Watson, figures like Sheryl Sandberg and Anne-Marie Slaughter promoted a version of feminism centred on the ideal of balance, where the notion is that women can pursue professional ambition without giving up motherhood. However, as Rottenberg (2016) argues, this new feminist discourse is deeply individualised and privatised. It encourages women to invest in their careers early, delay motherhood, and manage their personal lives like strategic investments (Rottenberg 2016:331 336). Neoliberal feminism reveals how women are

encouraged to maximize their personal productivity, often by shifting care responsibilities onto less privileged women typically racialized and working-class (2016). This further reinforces racialised and class-based hierarchies (Rottenberg 2016:332–334). Thus, the logic of neoliberal feminism causes contradictions. While it demands from women to function as market actors, it continues to rely on traditional gender roles and unpaid reproductive labor, revealing a core tension within neoliberal rationality itself.

The central concept that is introduced by Rottenberg is "neoliberal feminist subject" This subject represents the image of ideal woman within neoliberal feminism who is self-reliant, self-regulating, and responsible for navigating empowerment not through collective solidarity or structural change, but through personal choice, ambition, and strategic self-investment (Rottenberg 2017). In other words, empowerment in this context is achieved through market participation, self-discipline, and body control. The neoliberal feminist subject is celebrated for balancing career, wellness, beauty, and family, often by engaging in consumer practices (2017: 53–78). This figure is highly visible on social media platforms, especially among influencers who combine fitness, wellness, and aesthetic self-presentation. In addition, this subject is constructed as aspirational. Based on this concept, the subject of neoliberal feminism is a woman who is resilient, emotionally intelligent, and economically productive (2017:329 - 348). Her self-discipline is not only bodily but also moral, representing the ideal woman who can 'have it all' by managing stress, appearance, and professional ambition simultaneously. Rottenberg highlights that this discourse turns from systematic obstacles to individual challenges by concealing the socioeconomic constraints that shape women's lives. A particular expression of this subjectivity can be found in the global rise of mindful fitness.

The nature of mindful fitness is often perceived as a way of empowerment, promising women achieve balance, healing, and self-consciousness through practices such as yoga, pilates, and

somatic movement (Markula 2011: 60-74). At first glance, mindful fitness differs from the traditional and mainstream fitness industry. The reason is mindful fitness focuses on slow movement, breathing, and self-awareness. Moreover it gives the sense of a softer, more balanced approach to health. However, as Pirkko Markula argues, this shift does not challenge gendered power relations in society. Instead, it represents a transformation from external discipline to internalized self-governance, where power no longer operates through overt control but through the subject's own desire to be emotionally balanced, self-aware, and productive (2011: 64-66). Here, I draw from Kathi Weeks's concept of affective labor which refers to the production and manipulation of feelings, moods, and atmospheres to generate social value and connection (Weeks 2007: 233-249). She highlighted that this a form of immaterial labor that uses "the labors of the hand, brain, and heart" and is deeply rooted in the service sector, where "workers are required to use their knowledges, affects, capacities for cooperation and communicative skills to create not only material but increasingly immaterial products" (Weeks 2007:239). Also according to Kathi Weeks (2007), affective labor has become a feminized form of post-industrial work, demanding the constant performance of optimism, calm, and emotional resilience (2007: 240). In this context, mindfulness becomes a marketable emotional style, and the performance of inner peace is both a labor and a commodity. It suggests that this affective and bodily labor is also deeply commodified. Women are prompted to purchase yoga classes, fitness retreats, organic supplements, or mindfulness journals to become better versions of themselves. As Rottenberg (2017) notes, empowerment becomes a market duty, and self-care becomes a form of consumption. Gill (2007:153-154) and McRobbie (2008:1-2) describe this postfeminist sensibility as one that celebrates visibility, aesthetic labor, and individual choice, while masking the structural inequalities behind such performances.

3.2 Localisation of neoliberal feminism in Kyrgyzstan

Despite the globalisation of neoliberal feminism, it is important to mention the non-universal nature of empowerment, taking into account local cultural, religious and political contexts. In Kyrgyzstan, the neoliberal feminist ideals of self-responsibility, emotional self-regulation, and body discipline are perceived in accordance with post-Soviet history, the revival of Islam, and nationalist discourses (Sultanalieva 2020:126). Sultanalieva Syinat in her work *Coloniality of Being" in the Narratives of Kyrgyzstani Women's Rights* introduces the concept Kurak feminism. According to her this is a patchwork of global feminism, Islamic morality, and nationalist respectability (2020). As Sultanalieva frames this approach "takes what it likes from the Soviet gender order, global feminism and neoliberalism, in a process that could be described as plagiarism or appropriation [...] as the borrowed becomes a part of the living and breathing bricolage, a kurak (traditional Kyrgyz patchwork) (Sultanalieva 2023: 136–137). This leads to the emergence of local feminist formations that selectively employ neoliberal logic, while also meeting moral, familial, and religious expectations. In other words, this form of feminism does not directly reject dominant feminist ideas, but rather strategically aligns them to ensure social legitimacy. his localisation process is particularly evident in the field of fitness and wellness, where neoliberal feminist ideals of bodily self-government are being adapted to religious and cultural norms. For example, Sunarmo's approach describes how fitness classes in the Muslim context are shaped by the demand for gender-segregated spaces, modest clothing, and spiritual health design (2021: 453-455). These practices demonstrate how market ideals in the field of health and wellness are not only imposed, but also shaped within the framework of halal.

Here I would like to expand on Saba Mahmood's concept, which offers a theoretical view of such dynamics, arguing that free will should be understood not only in terms of resistance, but

also in terms of opportunities that arise within certain normative structures (2001: 207). From this perspective, women's participation in a fitness culture that conforms to Islamic norms can be viewed not as subordination, but as a form of self-expression conditioned by historical and theologically specific circumstances (Mahmood 2001: 206-208). Thus, the localisation of neoliberal feminism in Kyrgyzstan reveals the process of translation and negotiation, during which empowerment is expressed through the global feminist ideas and local moral norms. This demonstrates how neoliberal subjectivity is combined with religious piety, nationalist respectability, and cultural legitimacy (Sultanalieva 2020:128). These theoretical concepts provide the crucial basis for analysing how Kyrgyz social media influencers spread the idea of femininity and empowerment through mindful fitness considering the cultural significance of femininity.

3.3 Intersectionality: Who Has Access to Mindful Fitness?

In my research I focus on the less visible, normalized forms of inequality that emerge within seemingly neutral or empowering cultural practices. For instance, the routines promoted by Kyrgyz mindful fitness influencers such as morning meditation, healthy eating, and aesthetic discipline are often presented as universal, default ways to self-care. However, not all women have the economic opportunity, time, or linguistic access to these routines. These exclusions are rarely acknowledged, and as a result, the image of the “healthy, balanced, and mindful” woman becomes both idealized and inaccessible for many women. In this sense, what appears as inclusive empowerment may actually contribute to the reinforcement of existing hierarchies and social norms (Collins 2021).

While mindful fitness often presents empowerment and femininity as equally available for all women, in practice, access to these is highly uneven and conditional. For this reason, drawing on the concept of intersectionality as introduced by Crenshaw (1989) and further

developed by Nash (2008) this research explores how overlapping structures of gender and class shape the ways Kyrgyz women engage with and represent mindful fitness on social media. As Jennifer K. Nash in her work "*Rethinking Intersectionality*" (2008) identifies limitations in Kimberly Crenshaw's foundational formulation of interconnectedness. Nash critiques the initial focus primarily on the intersection of race and gender, especially in the context of black women's experiences in the United States (Nash 2008). Nash argues that Crenshaw's concept, although fundamentally unintelligible, has become overly institutionalized in feminist theory (Nash 2008:4). Instead of viewing intersectionality as a fixed layer of identities, Nash suggests that scholars view this concept as a critique of power, focusing on the political, discursive, and structural forces that shape various forms of inequality (Nash 2008:6). In other words, rethinking the idea of intersectionality and including the exploration of how class and gender allow to identify who has access to the wellness industry in Kyrgyzstan and who is excluded. It also identifies which forms of femininity are recognized and another type of femininity is excluded.

Intersectionality challenges hegemonic notions of identity. Rather than viewing race, class, gender, and sexuality as universal categories, intersectionality explores these factors as co-constitutive and mutually shaping (Davis 2008:68). It suggests that subjectivity is never shaped relying on the universal concept of identity. Instead, lived experiences emerge through the complex interplay of multiple social locations. Patricia Hill Collins emphasises the importance of recognising “interlocking systems of oppression” and how individuals experience these differently depending on cultural context and position within power hierarchies (Collins 2015:7). Thus, intersectionality denies universal approaches in feminist theory and focuses on how different social positions shape experiences. Nash builds on this by showing that intersectionality should not be reduced to simply including marginalized voices

without challenging the deeper power structures that cause inequality (Nash 2008:5). A central insight of intersectionality is that inequality is not the sum of separate discriminations, but the consequences of broader systems , such as patriarchy, capitalism, and racism. They are operating simultaneously. These systems shape institutions, cultural norms, and access to resources in ways that reinforce privilege for some groups and create systemic obstacles for others (Crenshaw 1989:67). Intersectionality provides a framework for understanding how these structures produce and sustain hierarchies. Also the way how individuals are differently positioned within systems of power depending on their intersecting identities. For instance, Patricia Collins explores how class intersects with gender and sexuality to complicate both privilege and marginalisation, arguing that seemingly inclusive discourses can obscure structural exclusion (Collins 2021). Intersectionality analyzes these complexities by asking not only who is included or excluded, but how these positions are produced and maintained through intersecting systems of power.

In recent article scholarship, intersectionality has also been framed as mobile and critical (Esposito 2023: 505-521). Sara Salem argues that intersectionality functions as a “travelling theory”. It suggests that this concept moves across disciplines and geopolitical contexts, adapting to different cultural contexts (Salem 2018: 405). This mobility makes it a powerful tool for feminist research, but also raises questions about its coherence and risks of depoliticisation. She offers a critical extension of intersectionality by claiming that identities and experiences are not only structured by social categories but are also shaped by affect, temporality, and spatiality. She warns against a rigid concept of intersectionality and encourages a more flexible engagement with power relations (2018:405). This perspective suggests intersectionality not as a fixed idea, but as a flexible way to understand inequality itself.

Chapter 4

Methodology

This research adopted a qualitative methodological approach grounded in digital ethnography to examine how Kyrgyz female influencers construct and promote femininity through mindful fitness on Instagram. Digital ethnography allows for the observation and interpretation of online practices, visual representations, and discursive strategies in their natural digital contexts (Pink et al. 2016: 7). I found this approach the most appropriate one considering the visual and discursive nature of Instagram. Using this method I analyzed how gendered identities are negotiated, performed, and commercialized in a post-Soviet Central Asian context. The methodology chapter outlines the overall research design, selection process of influencers, data collection, analytical framework, ethical considerations, and limitations while offering a comprehensive justification for each step taken during the research process.

4.1 Research Design

This research is designed as an interpretive, exploratory analysis and aims to understand the intersection of body, gender and neoliberalism within digital wellness cultures. Instead of testing hypotheses, it seeks to uncover meanings and power relations rooted in visual and textual content created by mindful fitness influencers in Kyrgyzstan. I used an interpretive approach because it emphasizes the co-construction of meaning, which aligns with feminist epistemologies that prioritize lived experience and reflexivity (Hesse-Biber 2014:4). This research aligns with constructivist traditions that understand reality as socially produced and shaped by discourse and visual representation (Berger and Luckmann 1966:13). The digital field is seen not as a data source but as a cultural space where ideologies, performances, and

social relations are reproduced (Highfield and Leaver 2016:55). It suggests that platforms like Instagram are not neutral but rather algorithmically structured spaces that shape visibility and desirability through socio-technical logics (Gillespie 2007:147-166). Thus, analyzing influencer content requires attention to platform politics as well as social discourse and cultural practices.

4.2 Digital Ethnography

Digital ethnography (also called netnography) adapts traditional ethnographic methods to online spaces(Kozinets 2015:79). Robert Kozinets explains that it allows researchers to study communities and cultures formed through digital interaction. This method is not only about content analysis but also about engaging with the "field" of digital culture in ways that recognize its contextual, networked, and diverse forms of expression, from visuals to text (Pink et al. 2016:11). Instagram serves as the primary area of ethnographic observation, enabling the researcher to collect data in the form of posts, captions, hashtags, and follower engagement (likes, comments, shares). It allows an understanding of how influencers construct self-branding, embody empowerment, and perform gendered subjectivities through a mix of visual aesthetics and discursive frames (Duffy and Hund 2015:1).

I conducted digital fieldwork over three months (February–April 2025), during which I observed and archived content produced by five Kyrgyz female influencers who actively promote mindful fitness. The ethnographic process involved creating a research-specific Instagram account to passively follow, observe, and document influencer content. Passive observation was selected over interactive methods (such as interviews or direct messages) to reduce the ethical risk (Postill and Pink 2012:123). Additionally, the duration of three months field research allowed me to capture both routine and exceptional content cycles, including fitness challenges, personal representation, and collaborations with wellness brands. By

combining longitudinal observation with purposive content sampling, the study offers a temporally dynamic understanding of gender performance.

4.3 Sampling Strategy

The selection of influencers followed purposive sampling logic while considering the main theoretical concepts and research questions. I adopted a purposive sampling strategy to select participants or cases that are both rich in information and theoretically meaningful (Patton 2002:46). The main features that were important for me while selecting participants.The selected participants are ethnically Kyrgyz women who actively use Instagram to promote mindful fitness practices like yoga, pilates, breathwork, and holistic wellness. They are considered nano-influencers because they have a specific number of followers between 1,000 and 10,000 which makes them more accessible and trusted by their audience (Bjørn 2023:11). Meanwhile , I conducted digital fieldwork over three months (February–April 2025). In total, I analyzed over 300 posts across five influencer accounts while systematically observing content produced by five Kyrgyz female influencers who actively promote mindful fitness. This sampling strategy reflects the assumption that nano-influencers are more likely to integrate local values, cultural references, and dialects in their content than celebrities or macro-influencers who tend to replicate more globalised trends (Conde & Casais 2023). (Abidin 2016:98). I purposefully selected ethnically Kyrgyz women influencers to analyse how femininity, empowerment, and mindful fitness are constructed and spread within the majority ethnic group in Kyrgyzstan. This focus allows for a culturally grounded analysis of how globalized discourses are adapted to local context. In addition, I included both single women and married women with children to explore their engagement with mindfulness and femininity.

Below I have outlined brief descriptions of accounts of those influencers to provide contextual information about the selected accounts:

@yogaigerim (Aigerim) is a Bishkek-based yoga instructor focusing on women's health, body toning, and lifestyle transformation. Her content includes humorous reflections, motivational reels, and a hybrid of urban scenery and home fitness exercises.

@zalina_yoga.kg (Zalina Chuprun) is an influencer who describes herself as an "active mom of three," Zalina emphasizes yoga-fitness in nature and home spaces. Her posts often combine family life with yoga, promoting a gentle and wellness aesthetic.

@indira_maxutova_yoga (Indira)positions herself as an online yoga coach specializing in injury recovery, kinesiology, and body alignment. Her bio frames yoga as "self-healing," and her content centers on pain management, correctional movement, and personal discipline.

@umai_demi (Jamila) claims herself as a coach and Jamila blends somatic therapy and ritual femininity. Her Instagram presence is deeply narrative and poetic, often grounded in symbolic visuals and spiritual language.

@kalievagipariza (Gipariza Kalieva) is a founder of the Wonder Women network and an experienced movement educator. Gipariza blends medical knowledge with bodywork training. She actively promotes female empowerment through professional training and wellness education.

@wonderwomen.kg is a community-based Instagram page established by Gipariza Kalieva. This community promotes mindful fitness and women's health. With over 19,000 followers, this page functions as a collective embodiment of the values spread by its founder, providing a space for medically informed, emotionally resonant, and aesthetically curated fitness narratives.

4.4 Data Collection

Data collection was conducted in three steps through 1) observation, 2) archiving, and 3) annotation. These steps were structured to ensure both breadth and depth in capturing digital content across visual, textual, and interactional approaches . The process began with observation, where daily content from the selected influencers was monitored. This stage involved taking notes of post frequency, themes, and timing, helping to establish influencers' posting patterns and audience engagement trends (Pink et al. 2016:12). Next posts were systematically archived. Approximately 150 posts were saved as screenshots and manually copied captions, ensuring that all embedded hashtags, emojis, and visual design choices were preserved.

4.5 Analytical Approach: Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

In order to analyze the collected data, I used Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). This method is used to examine how language and visual representation construct social realities, while uncovering power relations, and identities (Mengibar 2015). The analysis proceeded through description of linguistic and visual elements, the interpretation of discursive practices, and the explanation of broader social implications. Each post was analyzed through three layers such as visual, textual, and interactional. Visuals show body posture, facial expression, clothing, and background aesthetics while the textual layer provides captions, quotes, and self-narratives.The interactional dimension of the account or a post then includes comments, emojis, and influencer replies. Gathered data was interpreted based on theoretical concepts such as neoliberal feminism (Rottenberg 2017:421), commodified empowerment (Gill and Elias 2007), and intersectionality (Crenshaw 1989:152; Nash 2008:9) . This allowed for both theory-driven and context-specific data analysis. One illustrative example is how influencers used hashtags like #fitmom or #balance to construct perfect femininity rooted in body

discipline and caregiving. These were often accompanied by polished photos that presented the influencer as both aesthetically pleasing and emotionally stable. The contrast between effort and ease, discipline and grace, illustrates the neoliberal feminist logic of transformation and self-responsibility (Rottenberg 2017:426). At the same time, I used thematic analysis to find common ideas and topics in the data, such as empowerment, discipline, spirituality, motherhood, and body control. These common topics helped me organize the analysis and decide how to distribute the content. While presenting the findings, I used a narrative approach to keep the flow and emotional tone of how influencers tell their stories. Since storytelling is a crucial part of how they build trust and authority, this method helped me follow their way of sharing experiences while also looking at the deeper meanings behind their content.By starting with their personal stories and gradually moving toward representations of body discipline, idealized femininity, and commodified wellness (such as retreats and webinars), the structure of my analysis corresponds the way influencers construct the ideas about empowerment, self-transformation, emotional resilience, and aspirational lifestyles on social media.

4.6 Acknowledging use of AI

I would like to acknowledge the use of AI tools such as QuillBot (https://quillbot.com) during the final drafting stage to check grammar, to reach sentence clarity, and improve academic language. All the results were carefully reviewed, modified where necessary, and integrated with academic standards. It means no AI-generated content was used without verification, and all interpretations and arguments remain my own. In addition for the translation and initial comprehension of social media content posted in Russian by the selected influencers, Yandex Translate (https://translate.yandex.com) was used as a preliminary tool. The translated material was subsequently checked and interpreted by me. The translator was used only to

give readers what the posts show and did not influence the analytical interpretation of the material.

4.7 Ethics

This thesis adjusts to the ethical principles outlined by Central European University. While Instagram is a public platform, ethical concerns rise when content is contextually private or when analysis risks exposing personal narratives without consent (Markham and Buchanan 2012:7). To address this, I directly contacted each influencer and sent them a consent letter via Instagram to obtain their informed consent for including and analyzing their digital content (see Appendix B). Only after receiving permission, I started the data collection process and analysis. In addition, reflexivity also extended to data analysis. Interpretations were regularly cross-checked in accordance with cultural texts, feminist literature, and conversations with Kyrgyz peers to avoid ethnocentric bias or over-reliance on Western theory. This process aligns with intersectional feminist methodologies that emphasize situated knowledge, epistemic humility, and power-awareness (Collins 2014:9).

4.8 Limitations

In order to ensure the validity of this research, I was engaged with different types of content like images, captions, reels videos, archival stories across five influencer accounts over three months. I also kept detailed notes throughout the process, which helped me stay consistent and reflect on my interpretations. However, there are some limitations. Firstly, social media content shows performed and selectively shared identities but not the full picture of someone's life. Influencers often post content that is shaped by algorithms and audience expectations. In other words, it makes these representations partial and strategic rather than comprehensive (Marwick 2015:144). Secondly, the absence of interviews does not show

influencers' own interpretations, intentions, and reflections. Although Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) offers a strong approach to analyse data it does not provide the depth and nuance of direct narratives. However, future research might benefit from integrating interviews or focus group discussion to address this gap. The next limitation is the consideration of only influencers content without audiences. Because of ethical concerns, I avoided quoting comments that could identify users. Still, audience reactions are important for understanding how messages about empowerment are received, challenged, or supported.

Including audience perspectives in future research could help reveal whether mindful fitness content is seen purely as aspirational, or if it also serves as a coping mechanism in response to struggles in experiences related to gendered pressure or emotional strain. Also audience perspective will allow to explore how practices like yoga have been used as quiet, supportive ways among women navigating various forms of struggles, yet these practices often remain outside the dominant, polished frames of visibility shaped by platforms like Instagram. Analysing all these aspects of mindful fitness could shift the conversation from commercialized empowerment toward practices of care, resilience, and healing. While this falls beyond the scope of the present study, it remains a valuable direction for future research.

Despite these limitations, this research provides a solid and reflective way to understand how femininity and empowerment are represented in Kyrgyz Instagram spaces. It contributes to feminist in digital ethnography by applying global theories in a local, non-Western context. In this thesis I explore social media not only as a tool of communication, but as a gendered and effective space of identity construction. The feminist nature of this ethnography lies in its commitment to analyzing power, visibility, and voice through an intersectional lens.

Chapter 5

Analysis

This chapter of the thesis presents the analytical results of a digital ethnography. Through these findings I will show how Kzrgyz social media influencers engaged in mindful fitness create and spread certain forms of femininity, empowerment, and wellness through their social media content The analysis focuses on visual materials such as photos, videos, archival stories, as well as text elements, captions and hashtags. These materials are interpreted using the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach (Mengibar 2015) to uncover power dynamics. The analysis draws on the concepts of neoliberal feminism (Gill and Elias 2007; Rottenberg 2017) and intersectionality (Crenshaw 1989; Nash 2008) to explore the power dynamics embedded in the narratives of female influencers.

The following questions guided me during the data collection process:

1. How do Kyrgyz Instagram female influencers construct and market femininity through mindful fitness?
   a) What kind of femininity (ies) do Kyrgyz Instagram female influencers construct and promote?
   b) How do class and ethnicity interact in the construction of femininity discourses within mindful fitness practices in Kyrgyzstan?

Instead of giving a general overview, this chapter focuses on thematic analysis. I start by describing the image of each influencer on social media, followed by a careful reading of selected posts illustrating key discursive and visual patterns. These include 1) the ways in which narratives of sisterhood and emotional healing are framed within neoliberal ideals of personal responsibility; 2) the representation of body control, softness, and flow as modes of self-empowerment; 3) the commodification of empowerment through visually constructed

aesthetics; 4) the promotion of individualized wellness narratives that hide systemic inequalities; 5) and finally, the interplay of language and economic capital in shaping access to mindfulness spaces such as yoga retreats and wellness events.

Each of these themes is situated within the broader theoretical framework of the thesis, particularly drawing on neoliberal feminism (Rottenberg 2017; Gill and Elias 2007) and intersectionality (Crenshaw 1989; Nash 2008). In doing so, the chapter shows how global discourses of health, empowerment, and self-optimization are localized in the Kyrgyz context. In addition, all digital materials were selected after 2021. Thus, each example of my findings is considered not only as content, but also as a cultural factors shaped by the logic of the platform (2007).Through this thematic analysis, the chapter describes how influencers on social media in Kyrgyzstan contribute to the formation of dominant ideas about what it means to be a strong, successful woman in Kyrgyzstan.

5.1 "I Started with Pain": Personal Storytelling and Emotional Authority in Mindful Fitness

One of the most common and crucial features of mindful fitness instructor's content is their use of personal stories, especially stories about different types of struggles be it emotional, physical or spiritual. Through their stories, they show why they came to mindful fitness portraying these existential periods in their lives, where they went through difficult times, such as emotional burnout, postpartum depression or feeling lost, anxiety, and stages of an existential crisis. These stories are not just personal confessions but they play a crucial role in how social media influencers build trust and authority. By publicly working through their pain and showing that they have come out "healed," influencers position themselves as guides for others. It resonates with what Gill (2007) describes as a postfeminist sensibility, where emotional openness and vulnerability are redefined as sources of strength.

In other words, by sharing their pain in carefully chosen words and images, they show that they have healed themselves. Thus, these personal stories become the basis for how they present themselves as teachers, guides, and “healers” for other women. This also aligns with Kathi Weeks' idea of affective labor (2007). It suggests that affective labor is a kind of work where influencers manage and show their emotions, but also shape who they are through that emotional effort. Through affective labor they use hands, mind, and heart, and often involve using emotions to connect with others and create value (2007:239). In order to construct this narrative influencers accompany their stories with carefully chosen images, calm facial expressions and emotional language. Below I will provide screenshots and visually represent how their calm facial expressions and calm attitude become a symbol of wisdom, awareness and authority. For example, in an Instagram story highlight, influencer @yogaigerim describes her transition from another field to mindful fitness as a difficult emotional choice:

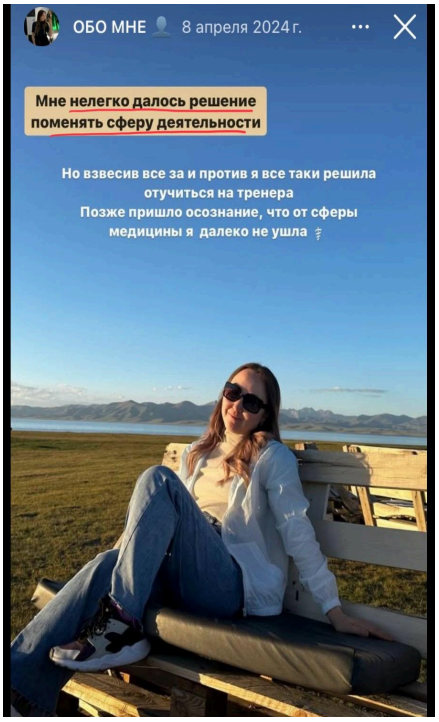

Figure 1. Instagram story highlight by @yogaigerim

In this example I would like to point out the case when the decision to change a career serves as an emotional leap. According to @yogaigerim her transition into wellness was a difficult emotional decision. She claims:

"Мне нелегко далось решение" (Decision wasn't easy for me)

This caption frames her personal struggle. Rather than relying on credentials, she builds credibility through emotional honesty. It resonates with the concept of affective labor where expressing and managing feelings becomes a kind of work. In this case, that labor is not done for a company, but for self-presentation. Her personal story becomes a form of branding, where she is not just offering a service but selling herself as someone who has healed and therefore has the right to lead others in their own healing (Weeks 2007: 233-249)

In the next example I would like to show how one of the influencers came to yoga and achieved calmness.

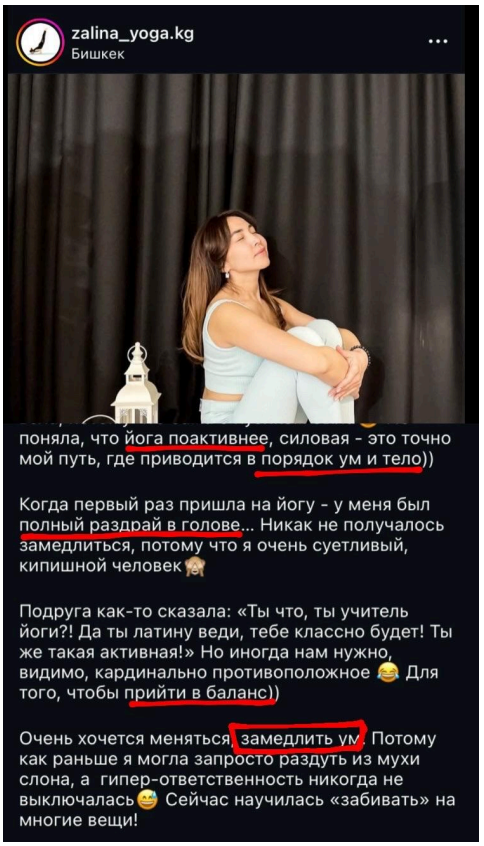

Figure 2. Instagram post by @zalina_yoga.kg

This instructor (@zalina_yoga.kg) frames her story through the language of emotional overload. She writes :

> *Когда я первый раз пришла на йогу у меня был полный раздрайв в голове," " очень суетливый человек и никак не получалось замедлиться." (When I first came to yoga, my mind was a total mess…I couldn't slow down at all…I really want to change, to slow down the mind.)*

Yoga is not seen as just movement here. It becomes a tool for calming down, finding balance, and emotional stability. These posts reflect the idea of feminine healing through softness, a recurring narrative in mindful fitness. The influencer frames her former self as overwhelmed, unable to slow down. Yoga, for her, is a tool to reconnect and not just with the body but with emotional calm. This aligns with Gill and Elias's ideas that postfeminist narratives often center around emotional self-regulation and therapeutic self-work (2007) Here, yoga is

framed not as fitness but as self-soothing, as medicine for anxiety and a feminine mode of soft discipline.Another crucial aspect that influences pointed out is Emotional Crisis as a Turning Point.

One of the influencers shares deeply personal moments of emotional struggle, which become the starting point for transformation.

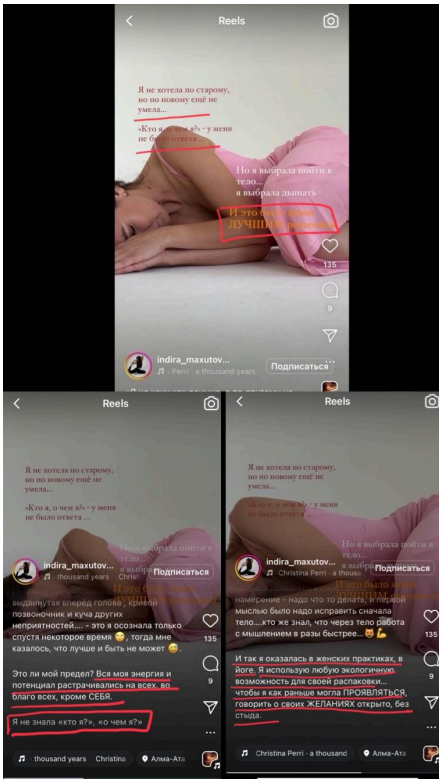

Figure 3. Instagram reels by @indira_maxutova

In one post, @indira_maxutova_yoga writes:

> *“Я не хотела по-старому, но по-новому ещё не умела… ‘Кто я, о чём я?’ — у меня не было ответа… Я знала, что работа с мышлением и телом в разы быстрее. И это был самым лучшим решением.”*
> *(“I didn’t want the old way anymore, but I didn’t yet know how to live the new way… “Who am I, what am I about?’ — I didn’t have an answer… And choosing to start working with my body and my mind was the best decision.”)*

In this screenshot there is an influencer in her soft pink outfit, body inward, eyes closed. This posture suggests both protection and vulnerability. Her choice to *"пойти в тело" ("go into the body")* connects the emotional and the physical. This moment of identity crisis becomes a starting point to healing, made possible through embodied practices like yoga and breathwork. She does not present herself as fixed or strong, but as someone who has relearned how to feel again and in doing so, she gains emotional authority to guide others. Drawing from Weeks's concept, affective labor does not end with the job; it "is carried by subjects into the temporalities, subjectivities, and socialities of non-work" (Weeks 2007: 243). This post shows how affective labor extends into everyday life and becomes a lifestyle. Her emotional transformation becomes not just something she experienced, but something she performs for others and turning crisis into guided calm. Also according to Rottenberg this reflects the neoliberal feminist idea where healing becomes a personal journey rooted in the body (2017). In turn, the body becomes the project. Recovery is something to achieve through internal work not through external change.

Another influencer shares a story of burnout with a direct, almost clinical breakdown of events:

Figure 4. Instagram story highlight by @kalievagipariza

> *"Я работала в режиме 24/7 → выгорание → разочарование в людях → потеря филиала и здоровья… Всё это сильно ударило по эго, но многому научило."*
> *("I worked 24/7 → burnout → disappointment in people → lost my studio and my health… All of this hit my ego hard, but it taught me a lot.")*

This shows a timeline of existential crisis and emotional burden. In this example neoliberal and affective labor come into conversation. For instance, the structural failures that led to burnout are now questioned but rather internalized (McRobbie 2008). Also pain is not politicized but it is transformed into a learning experience. It reinforces the idea that dealing with burnout is part of the feminine growth process, where women must fix themselves through introspection, not critique the systems that failed them. In addition, her honesty invites connection, but also creates distance: she is now on the other side of the struggle and can lead others through it. As Kathi Weeks (2007) claims, this process of affective labor, where women are not just expressing emotion but working through it in ways that produce

social and professional value. By aestheticizing her burnout, the influencer constructs a new professional identity. Someone who has recovered, and now holds emotional authority. As Weeks notes, in contemporary labor cultures, “work produces subjects” (Weeks 2007:246). In other words, through emotional processing and public vulnerability, the influencer becomes a more complete self, a healed self, who now has the right to lead others. Her affective labor becomes both a personal recovery authority within the mindful fitness economy (2007).

The next significant narrative centers on Motherhood and the Body as a Portal.

Figure 5. Instagram post by @umai_demi, 25 July, 2023

For instance, a mindful fitness instructor who teaches pilates @umai_demi grounds her story in motherhood and transformation. She claims:

> *“РОДЫ для меня очень про движение Души Женщины, но и очень про человеческое, про земную жизнь.” ("Childbirth, for me, is about the movement of a Woman’s Soul, but also about the human, Earth life.")*
>
> *"Я изучала многое о послеродовом восстановлении для себя. И поиски привели меня в Пилатес." ("I studied a lot about postpartum recovery for myself. And that search led me to Pilates.")*
>
> *"Пилатес стал отличным инструментом не только в физическом восстановлении, но и в осознавании себя через движение." ("Pilates became a powerful tool not only for physical recovery, but also for self-awareness through movement.")*
>
> *"тело — это портал в бессознательное и возможность не только думать о жизни, а проживать чувства в 3D и пропускать жизнь и быть живой." ("The body is a portal to the unconscious and a way not only to think about life, but to feel it in 3D, to let life flow through you, and to be alive.")*
>
> *"Я обучу контакт с телом и через это — контакт с жизнью через движение." ("I teach connection with the body, and through that — connection with life, through movement.")*

According to *@umai_demi* motherhood is a deeply transformative journey, framing childbirth as a collapse of the old self and a transition to a new identity. It suggests that the maternal body becomes a portal both spiritual and emotional rather than just biological. Her turn to Pilates after giving birth is not only for physical recovery but as a method of reconnecting with her true self, reinforcing movement as a pathway to embodied awareness. In addition, her framing of the body as “a portal to the unconscious” and a tool to “let life flow through you” reflects a spiritualized idea of healing. The idea of the “feeling woman,” where care, flow, and depth are idealized feminine traits (2007). At the same time, it connects with Rottenberg’s view that in neoliberal feminism, self-care becomes sacred work and women, especially mothers, are expected to return from crisis wiser and softer (2017).

Thus personal narratives resonate with Sultanalieva’s concept of kurak feminism (2020:126–127). These influencers do not fully reject tradition and simply adopt Western

modernity. Instead they blend vulnerability, movement, and Kyrgyz femininity into something new. In turn, Kyrgyz femininity, as shown in mindful fitness content, is different from both traditional gender roles and Western feminist ideas. It encourages women to be emotionally open and take care of their bodies, but it also values modesty, care for others. Meanwhile in Western postfeminist culture, being empowered often means being visible, confident, and in control of image and sexuality (Gill 2007; Lepore 2015). In contrast, Kyrgyz femininity sees strength in softness, emotional depth, and spiritual balance. Women are not encouraged to fight the system directly but to care for themselves and others in ways that fit cultural expectations.

5. 2 "Becoming a Wonder Woman": From Pain to Power

The Kyrgyz mindful fitness space is built on a discourse that merges physical transformation with emotional awareness. Originally grounded in holistic health philosophies, mindful fitness promotes not only activity of the body but also emotional self-regulation, presence, and inner strength. However, as Pirkko Markula (2011) and recent studies on mindful fitness have shown, this framework is not ideologically neutral (Markula 2011: 61-75; Dvorkin 2016; Andreasson and Henning 2024; Purser 2019). In practice, it often reinforces neoliberal norms of self-governance, where women are encouraged to become not only fitter but also more emotionally stable, productive, and aesthetically aligned with feminine ideals. In this way, the body becomes a mindful project, where both muscles and emotions must be sculpted, refined, and managed through internalised discipline. In this part, I will analyse how Kyrgyz mindful fitness influencers transform personal healing narratives into emotional authority. Once positioned as 'healed,' they promote retreats, webinars, and women's circles that provide a specific image of the ideal woman who is emotionally balanced, spiritually aware, and

physically slim. This ideal, framed as empowerment, reflects neoliberal, aestheticized, and moralized expectations of femininity.

5.2.1 Emotional stability and the feminine mind

Kyrgyz social media influencers often refer to themselves and their followers as “Wonder Women,” defining this figure as a woman who “successfully combines work, children, household and hobbies,” while remaining emotionally balanced and physically disciplined (@wonderwomen.kg). In other words, Wonder Woman is a master of multitasking, sold through retreats, yoga, and Instagram aesthetics. Her empowerment is privatized, aesthetic, and commercialized. However, this localized figure is different from the original Wonder Woman, created in 1941 by psychologist William Moulton Marston and inspired by suffragette Emmeline Pankhurst (Lepore 2014:3).

The description of Wonder Women in American pop culture is portrayed as a feminist superheroine who fought for the rights of women against patriarchal restrictions (Lepore 2014). The image of the "Wonder Woman" promoted through social media by Kyrgyz mindful fitness influencers is constructed through a discourse of continuous self-work and emotional refinement. It suggests that rather than presenting femininity as innate or fixed, these influencers frame it as an ongoing, self-managed project. Drawing on narratives of personal transformation through mindful fitness, they promote emotional healing as the first step toward empowerment. For instance, in social media, the figure of the ideal woman emerges as someone who is always “in the process” and consistently nurturing her emotional and physical well-being while trying to stay balanced and composed. According to instructors, after being healed by mindful fitness, they gain strength and begin to share their knowledge and path with other women. In turn, social media is becoming an effective and fast way to spread the image of an ideal woman in society. “Wonder Woman” is a woman who is always

“in the process”, always working on herself both emotionally and physically. Wonder Woman is soft, open, kind and wise, emotionally balanced, and in deep control with her body (@indira_maxutova).

At the same time, she is slim, clean, calm and disciplined. She takes care of her mental health, pelvic floor condition, skin tone, posture, breathing patterns, flexibility, sexual energy, and her hormones (@umai_demi). Mindful fitness instructors have a specific formula that they sell and teach women in order to show them how to become Wonder Woman. In this partI will analyse how these social media influencers promote the image of “Wonder Woman” using their personal healing stories through mindful fitness, and spread this image among other women. Below, I have provided screenshots of their content to show how the image of a “Wonder Woman" is promoted by organising spaces for emotional healing (retreats, women's clubs, online webinars), and then explore the role of body regulation and commodity aesthetics. Both of these practices create the image of a “Wonder Woman” who is soft and wise on the inside, taut and radiant on the outside.

Women's Circles, Rituals, and Healing Gatherings

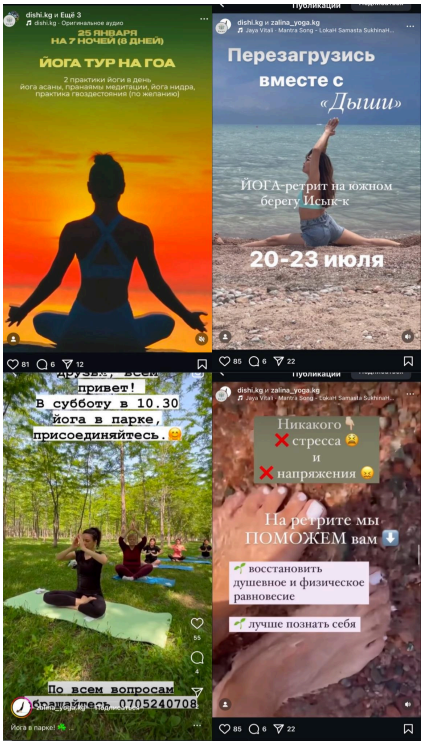

Figure 6. Instagram Post by @zalina_yoga.kg

One of the influencers wrote the description in her archival story:

> "*На ретрите мы ПОМОЖЕМ вам восстановить душевное и физическое равновесие.*" ("*At the retreat, we will help you restore emotional and physical balance.*").
>
> "*Лучше познать себя*" ("*Better know yourself*")

These retreat posts frame healing as something that occurs outside of everyday life. For instance, in nature, near water, and under the guidance of emotional supervision. The images posted by the influencer @zalina_yoga.kg demonstrate natural landscapes such as forests, lakes, and mountains as spaces of emotional restoration. Participants are often barefoot, in soft yoga clothing, seated in circles or meditative poses, reinforcing intimacy, community, and

a return to 'authentic' emotional states. According to the influencer, “restoring” is the main promise. At these retreats, affective labor is no longer something the influencer carries alone but it is handed over to the experience itself (Berlant 2011; Weeks 2007: 233-249) . In turn, a mindful fitness instructor steps into the role of curator, a guide through transformation. This indicates that the shift from “healing the self” to “leading others” observed in the Instagram content of Kyrgyz mindful fitness influencers is not simply a personal journey but rather a discursively and economically structured performance of femininity and empowerment. According to Gill and Elias (2007), this framing adjusts emotional healing as a self-managed project.

For instance, a woman must invest time, money, and effort into her emotional self-regulation. This shift from “healing the self” to “leading others” is framed as a natural process, but it is, in fact, a structured performance of feminine empowerment, shaped by postfeminist discourse (Gill 2007:153). These influencers do not merely share their recovery narratives. Instead, they capitalise on them, transforming existential vulnerability into a professional credential and a commodity. This occurs in several ways. For instance, through monetised retreats, branded courses, and content that uses vulnerability as authenticity to build trust. Their narratives of suffering and healing are not only personal stories but they are forms of emotional branding. The more emotionally transparent they appear, the more credible their empowerment becomes. Moreover, by exposing their personal journeys of suffering and resilience, these influencers reinforce the expectations embedded in postfeminist discourse: that the “Wonder Woman” is self-reliant, self-regulating, and solely responsible for her own empowerment through personal choice and strategic self-investment. This also aligns with neoliberal feminism, which encourages women to view empowerment as a privatised, self-regulating goal (Rottenberg 2016: 329- 333). Women are expected to manage their emotional struggles

on their own, and even more than that, to turn those struggles into something productive. The idea is that if a woman feels burned out, anxious, or lost, it is up to her to fix it by investing in retreats, courses, or coaching sessions. Based on Rottenberg's conceptualisation of neoliberal feminism which "reconfigures feminism as an individualised and depoliticised project of self-care" where women are urged to constantly work on themselves in order to stay competitive and emotionally stable (2016:428).

In the case of Kyrgyz mindful fitness influencers, their emotional journeys become both their brand and their business. They not only heal themselves but also sell that healing to others, reinforcing the idea that empowerment is something that women can buy and practice. For instance, in the screen below one of the influencer create women circle to reach that emotional stability

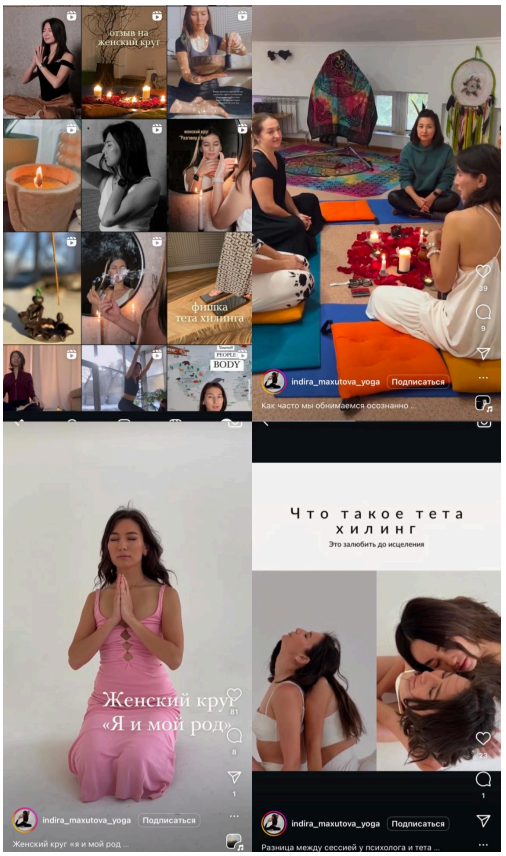

Figure 7. Instagram Content from @indira_maxutova_yoga

Here I would like to point out the main quotes:

> *"Фишка тета хилинга — это залюбить до исцеления." ("The secret of theta healing is to love so deeply that it heals you.")*

These practices feminise healing through visual softness (candles, softness, pink clothing), emotional language, and sisterhood. As María Lugones explains, sisterhood has often been used in feminist discourse as a metaphor for solidarity among women, but white feminists frequently extended the concept as is, without rethinking or recontextualizing it to account for differences in race, class, and lived experience (1992:135-143). However, within the cultural context of Kyrgyzstan, sisterhood is recontextualized as aestheticised intimacy and emotional bonding, detached from its political origins. In turn, the influencer now takes on the role of guiding the experience like a facilitator of emotions or someone who holds space for others. Through collective healing, they create an image of ideal femininity who are caring, vulnerable, and healed. Qualities such as kindness, wisdom, openness, and emotional sensitivity are presented as the distinctive features of the "real" or "mature" woman. While it appears to offer inclusion and care, it simultaneously obscures structural inequalities such as the gendered expectation of women's emotional labor, class privilege limiting access to wellness practices, and cultural norms that prioritize a feminized, middle-class aesthetic of healing. They do not just teach but they host, hold, and harmonize. It shows the concept of emotional entrepreneurship (Gill & Elias 2007), where spiritual wellness and community care become the influencer's services. Another example of these circles provided by *@indira_maxutova_yoga* influencer:

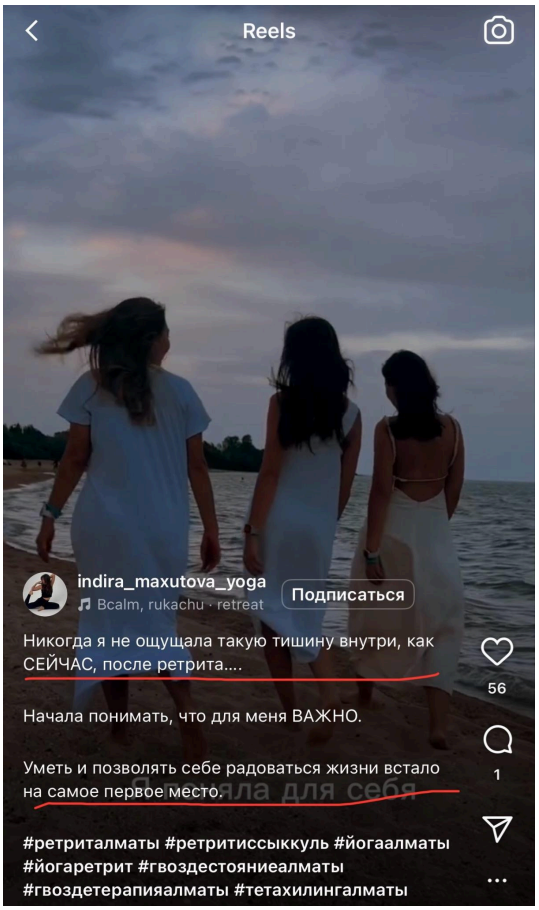

Figure 8. Instagram Reels Video by @indira_maxutova_yoga

In order to promote emotional stability one of the influencer posted this reels video and put this description:

> *"Никогда я не ощущала такую тишину внутри, как СЕЙЧАС, после ретрита." ("I have never felt such inner silence as NOW, after the retreat.")*
>
> *"Уметь и позволять себе радоваться жизни встало на самое первое место." ("Learning to allow everything and to enjoy life has become my first priority.")"*

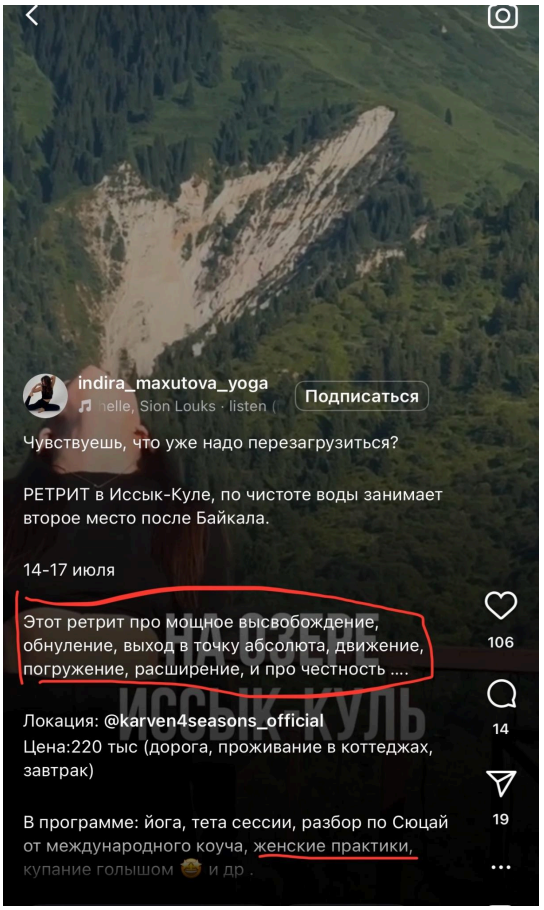

Figure 9. Instagram Reels Video by @indira_maxutova_yoga

This video shows an advertisement for a retreat at Issyk-Kul, promising radical emotional and physical transformation. She wrote:

> *"Этот ретрит про мощное высвобождение, обнуление, выход в точку абсолюта." ("This retreat is about powerful release, resetting, reaching the point of absolute.") . "Женские практики" ("women's practices").*

Retreats are marketed as spaces not merely for relaxation or casual wellness, but for total emotional reprogramming. The language used in Instagram posts — "мощное высвобождение" ("powerful release"), "обнуление" ("resetting"), "выход в точку абсолюта" ("reaching the absolute point") — constructs the emotional work required as profound and transformative. Yet, despite the grandiose imagery of internal revolution, the

process remains firmly depoliticized and privatized: women are not invited to collectively resist systemic pressures or advocate for structural change. Instead, they are encouraged to work tirelessly on themselves, consuming retreat packages, therapeutic programs, and spiritual workshops in an endless loop of self-improvement. This aligns with what Gill and Elias (2007) describe as emotional entrepreneurship. In this framework, emotional authenticity and transformation are no longer spontaneous or political acts, but they are commodified, aestheticised, and made profitable. In addition, the neoliberal feminist subject is celebrated for balancing career, wellness, beauty, and family, often by engaging in consumer practices (Rottenberg 2017: 53–78). These social media influencers are highly visible on social media platforms, combining fitness, wellness, and aesthetic self-presentation. Their ideas are constructed as aspirational. Based on this concept, the subject of neoliberal feminism is a woman who is resilient, emotionally intelligent, and economically productive (2017: 53–78). Her self-discipline is not only bodily but also moral, representing the "Wonder Woman" who can 'have it all' by managing stress, appearance, and professional ambition simultaneously. Rottenberg (2017) highlights that this discourse turns structural barriers into individual challenges to be overcome, thereby concealing the socioeconomic restrictions that shape women's lives.

Another social media influencer also mentioned the crucial role of organising retreats as women's circles to reach emotional stability and the image of "Wonder Woman." However, global discourses of wellness and empowerment do not enter local contexts unchanged. Instead they are reshaped through cultural practices, symbols, and spaces. For instance, in the screenshots that were taken from the influencer @umai_demi, women gather inside a traditional Kyrgyz yurt (a circular, portable tent used by nomadic peoples in Central Asia). In this context all the details are a blend of global trends with local culture. The yurt is not just a

place for gathering. It also brings a strong sense of Kyrgyz identity to the organized retreats and women's circles. For local women, it makes the wellness practice feel more familiar, culturally grounded, and emotionally meaningful. This is an example of how global trends like yoga, meditation, and sisterhood circles are aligned with local cultural values.

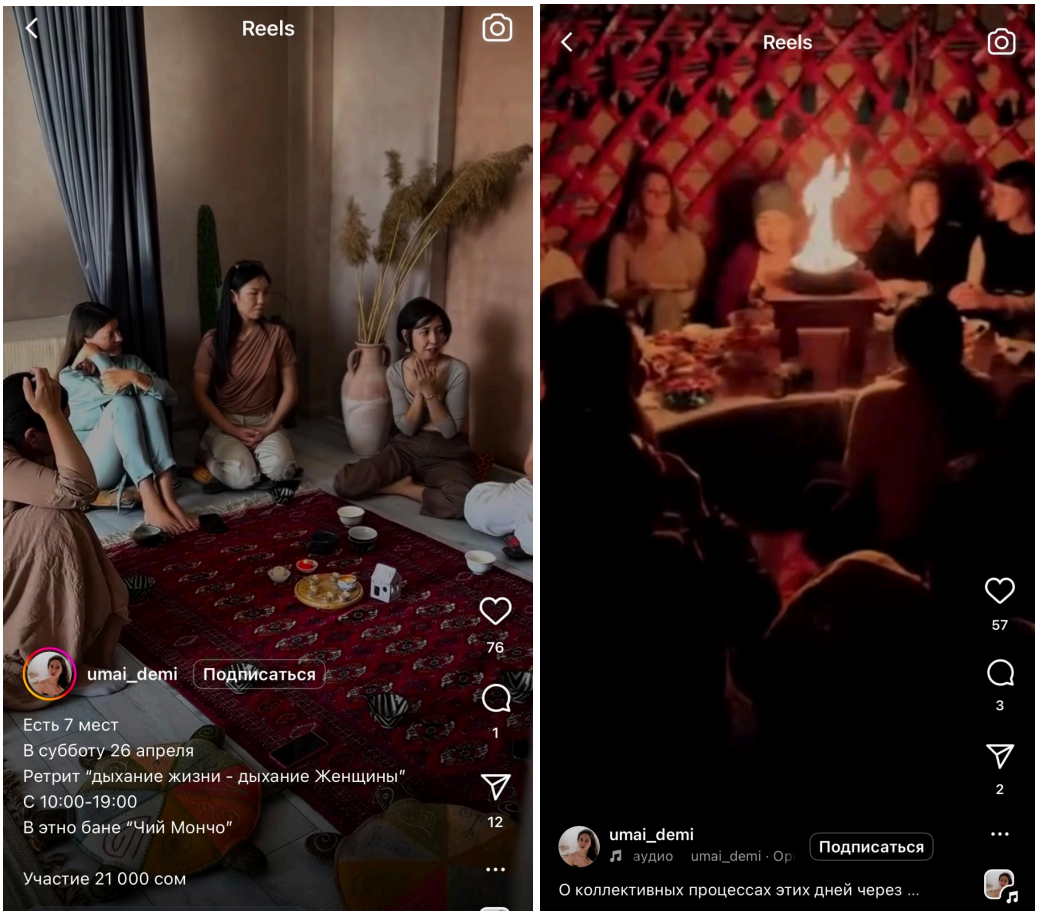

Figure 10. Instagram Video by @umai_demi

She points out the importance of gatherings and having retreats

> *"Ретрит 'Дыхание жизни — дыхание Женщины'." (Retreat is called "Breath of Life — Breath of Woman".)*

The act of gathering around a carpet, drinking tea, and breathing together is not presented merely as a casual meeting, but as a ritualised practice of emotional reconfiguration. Through breathing rituals, participants are invited to engage in embodied affective labour, aligning their physical breath with emotional harmony. Breathing is a biological, involuntary process, and it is reframed as something to be consciously disciplined. HereI would like to highlight the localization of these practices. The yurt, the fire, the tea, and the circle suggest not only a sense of intimacy, but also continuity with local cultural forms of collectivity, care, and femininity. It means practices like breathwork that are typically associated with global mindfulness discourse being localized through embodied rituals and affective atmospheres. This process aligns with Sultanalieva's concept of Kurak feminism that claims a feminist assemblage that stitches together transnational ideas with culturally grounded aesthetics and ethical values (2020). Rather than rejecting tradition, these gatherings reinterpret it, allowing women to experience empowerment through rituals of belonging, softness, and shared emotional labor. Following Mahmood’s understanding of agency as the capacity to act within normative structures, such practices represent neither passive conformity nor overt resistance (2001). Instead, they show a form of localized feminist agency that draws strength from cultural familiarity. In this way,concepts like emotional self-regulation or embodied healing are not simply accepted but they are adopted within Kyrgyz society.

5.3 Courses, Webinars, and Therapeutic Education

In addition to physical practices and retreats, many influencers expand their authority through courses, webinars, and therapeutic-style content that focus on emotional well-being and personal development.

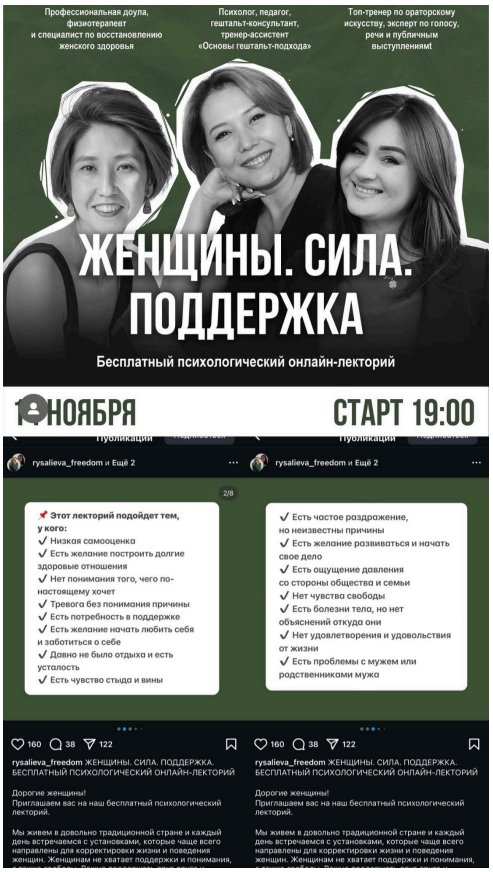

Figure 10. Instagram pat from @umai_demi

> *"Этот лекторий подойдёт тем, у кого: Низкая самооценка, тревога, усталость, чувство стыда…" ("This webinar is for those with: low self-esteem, anxiety, exhaustion, feelings of shame…") (@umai_demi)*

The influencer's role expands from mindful fitness to include therapeutic guidance, positioning herself as a source of emotional support. The body may still be involved, but the main focus is on emotional education. Through this format, the influencer scales her emotional authority into a teachable method, offering not just stories, but structured lessons, checklists, and formulas. This aligns with Rottenberg's (2017) idea of "privatised responsibility": you feel bad? Join my course. The problem is internal; the solution is purchasable. Thus, in providing retreats, organising circles, and leading therapeutic webinars, they are not merely inviting women to heal, but they are inviting them to participate in a lifestyle where emotional work is aestheticised, consumed, and endlessly reproduced. In this

field, empowerment is no longer a radical demand for systemic change, but it is a soft, consumable project of the self.

Here, I draw on Saba Mahmood's (2001) conceptualisation of agency to expand the analysis of empowerment practices among Kyrgyz mindful fitness influencers. Saba Mahmood challenges the conventional liberal association of agency solely with resistance to power, suggesting instead that agency must also be understood as the capacity for action within normative structures (Mahmood 2001:207). From this perspective, the performances of empowerment by Kyrgyz fitness influencers are not necessarily acts of explicit resistance against dominant cultural, gendered, or economic norms. Rather, they can be seen as forms of self-authorisation shaped within and through existing social expectations (Mahmood 2001:206-208). The influencers do not disrupt the existing order, but they navigate, aestheticise, and capitalise on it, offering their audiences not revolution, but the curated, emotionally charged promise of becoming a "Wonder Woman."In sum, the figure of the "Wonder Woman" in Kyrgyz mindful fitness culture is not just a healed subject instead she is a branded leader, a curator of emotional space, and a soft authority. Her empowerment is not oppositional but aspirational, built through emotional labour and sold as a lifestyle. This sets the stage for the next section, where empowerment should be achieved not only through emotional stability and mindfulness, but also aestheticized, commodified, and Instagrammable body shape.

5.4 Controlled Yet Covered: The Hijab Body and the Aesthetics of Discipline

In the mindful fitness space, instructors claim that health is not just a personal goal but it is a public performance of control, aesthetics, and feminine success. From tightly toned bodies to daily discipline routines, these influencers frame wellness as a form of aesthetic image over

the body. The female body, in this context, is not only something to care for but also something to fix, sculpt, and display. Through images, self-surveillance, and motivational captions, influencers project an image of the "Wonder Woman" as light (emotionally and physically), tight (slim and strong), and always in control. Here, using Lupton's concept of self-tracking, I show how fitness influencers aestheticise bodily control and emotional regulation through practices of constant monitoring and optimization. In this framework, health is not simply a state of being, but a continuous project of self-management, where the slim, disciplined body becomes evidence of moral worth and feminine success (Lupton 2016: 102–104). I would like to explore how the discourse of bodily discipline and slimness functions as a central concept in the branding of empowered femininity. Drawing on Deborah Lupton's concept of self-tracking, using screenshot from *@yogaigerim* I explain how fitness influencers aestheticise control, transform health into a moral obligation, and link femininity with self-regulation.

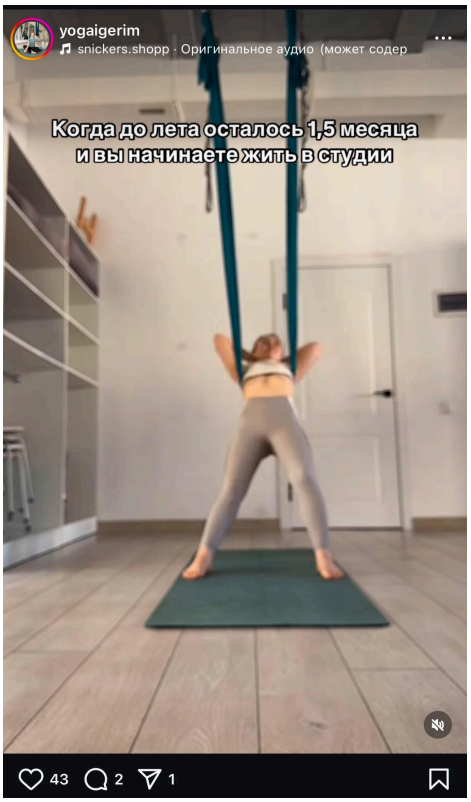

Figure 11. Instagram Reels by @yogaigerim

> *"Когда до лета осталось 1,5 месяца и вы начинаете жить в студии" ("When there's 1.5 months till summer and you start living at the studio").*

This reel from @yogaigerim humorously links seasonal appearance pressure to constant self-discipline. The woman's body hangs from a yoga swing in a strong, open posture, and her strength is aestheticised in motion. The setting is minimalistic and bright, reinforcing modern and clean lifestyle values.

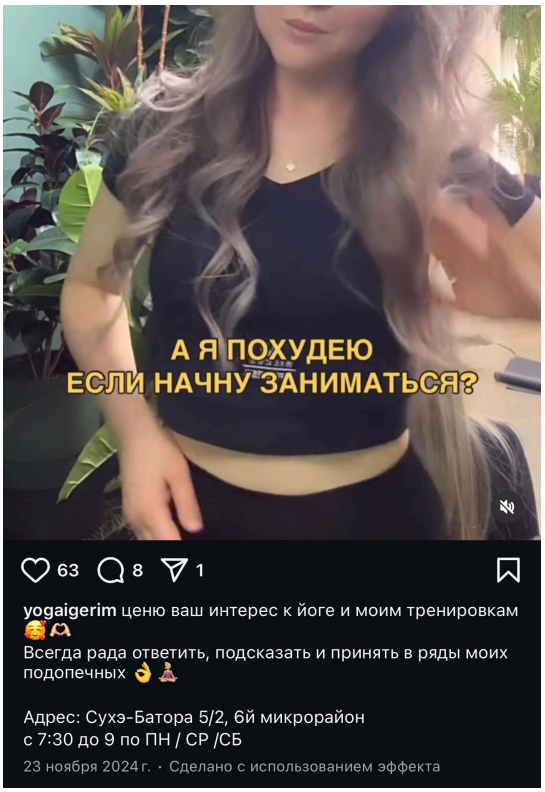

Figure 12. Instagram Post by @yogaigerim

"А я похудею если начну заниматься?" ("Will I lose weight if I start training?").

This screenshot captures the central question behind many women's approaches to mindful fitness for weight loss. The influencer does not reject the question, instead she offers her support to guide the process. Her body posture is confident and slightly playful, and her exposed flat stomach serves as visual evidence of her effectiveness.

Figure 13. Instagram Post by @yogaigerim

“Сжигали оливье” (“We burned the Olivier salad”) — a New Year’s joke.

In this post, the influencer jokes about "burning the Olivier salad" (“Сжигали оливье”), referring to a traditional dish that is a central part of New Year’s celebrations across many post-Soviet countries, including Kyrgyzstan. Olivier salad, known in Russian as "salat Olivie," is a rich, mayonnaise-based salad typically made with boiled potatoes, carrots, pickles, eggs, peas, and meat such as chicken or bologna. It is a deeply symbolic food associated with festivity, abundance, and Soviet-era holiday traditions (Kushkova 2011:44-96). Thus, the act of "burning" the Olivier salad in this context serves as a humorous and ironic metaphor for rejecting overindulgence, unhealthy eating habits, and outdated traditions. In the mindful fitness discourse, it humorously marks a personal shift from old, indulgent behaviours toward a new lifestyle centred on health, wellness, and bodily discipline.

The playful tone masks a strong underlying message: indulgence must be immediately corrected through control of the body. The influencers do not instruct women to lose weight directly; rather, they invite them to become “better versions of themselves,” where slimness serves as a visual marker of emotional, moral, and spiritual success. This moralization of health is deeply rooted in Deborah Lupton’s theory of self tracking and disciplinary regimes. Women are not forced to conform but they willingly subject themselves to regimes of exercise, food control, and body monitoring. Influencers function as “technicians of the self” (Lupton 2016), teaching women how to manage their bodies through knowledge, commitment, and self-observation. Through hashtags like #здоровоетело (#healthybody) or references to pelvic strength and “burning off Olivier,” the body becomes a site of moral capital. Control is eroticized, softness is conditioned, and femininity is only valid when visibly lean. Scholars such as Angela McRobbie (2008:11-22) and Rosalind Gill (2007:153–154) argue that postfeminist culture positions women as free and self-determining subjects, while simultaneously requiring them to engage in continuous self-monitoring, self-discipline, and emotional regulation. This discourse promotes an image of the “empowered woman” as one who is slim, emotionally balanced, and polished - someone who can effortlessly manage her body, her emotions, and her career.

While emotional healing practices aim to cultivate inner stability and resilience, body regulation emerges as an equally essential feature of “Wonder Woman”. This dynamic becomes particularly evident in the widespread circulation of humorous Instagram posts that link bodily self-management. One such example comes from an Instagram story where the influencer playfully addresses appearance-based content while reinforcing slimness as a normalised social body ideal.

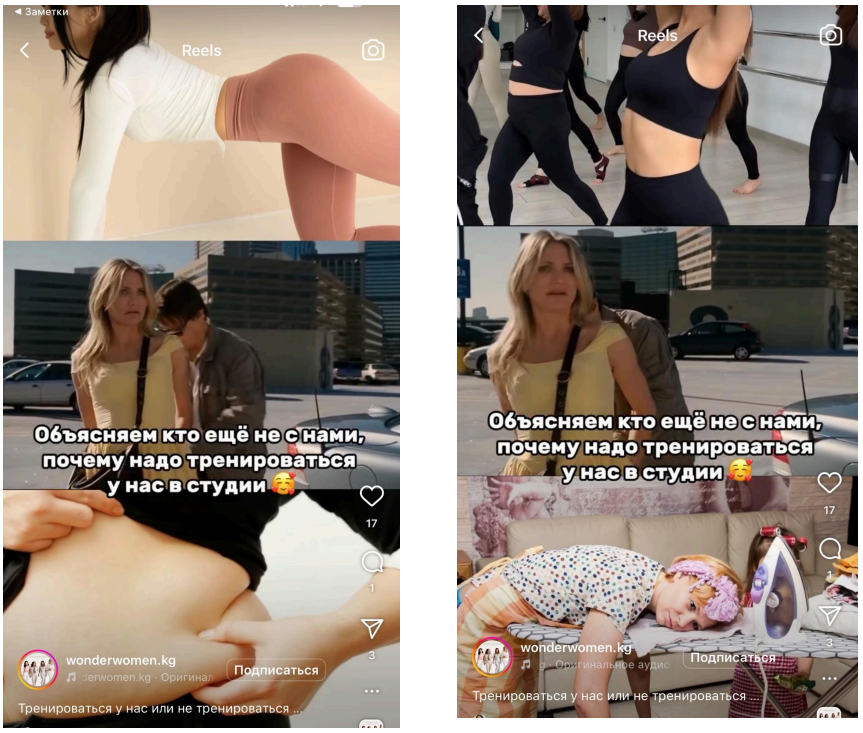

Figure 14. Instagram Post by @wonderwomen.kg

These reels from @wonderwomen.kg use meme-like irony to promote a clear message about endless and keeping lim body. In the first reel, women in sleek activewear perform synchronized exercises in a clean studio space. The screen suddenly cuts to a confused woman from a film scene, with the caption:

> *"Объясняем кто ещё не с нами, почему надо тренироваться у нас в студии "*
> *("We're explaining to those not with us yet why they should be training in our studio").*

In the upper part of the screen, a woman holds a strong plank pose in soft lighting before the screen flips to a staged photo of a housewife slumped over an ironing board. The contrast visually implies a "before and after" or "either-or" scenario. Either women train and maintain the ideal body or gain weight, lose control, and collapse into domestic burnout.

The shift in body ideology is particularly evident in connection with the growth of wellness culture, where fitness is seen as both self-care and self-promotion, closely related to

productivity and attractiveness (Gill and Elias 2007:24). Rosalind Gill argues that contemporary postfeminist media culture is marked not only by themes of empowerment, self-surveillance, and bodily control, but also by a distinctive tone of irony and knowingness (159-160). Rather than presenting disciplinary ideals in overt or moralistic terms, postfeminist discourse often spreads its demands in humor, sarcasm, or light-hearted banter. This use of irony allows media texts to "have it both ways" to express sexist, normative, or exclusionary ideals while simultaneously disavowing them as not serious or "just a joke." For instance, in the previous screenshots, irony thus becomes a form of discursive protection, enabling influencers and audiences alike to maintain a safe emotional distance from the weight of the ideals being promoted. As Gill (2007) notes, irony serves as "a way of establishing a safe distance between oneself and particular sentiments or beliefs," especially in a media environment where taking oneself too seriously is socially risky. In the context of postfeminist fitness discourse, this tone allows for the promotion of slimness, discipline, and emotional self-regulation without appearing coercive. It hides the labour of bodily management behind jokes, casual comments, and motivational clichés. This is particularly crucial in the field of mindful fitness, which blends body control with emotional healing.

The following screenshots below show the hijab cases that even covered bodies should conform to the same ideals, but be displayed in different ways.

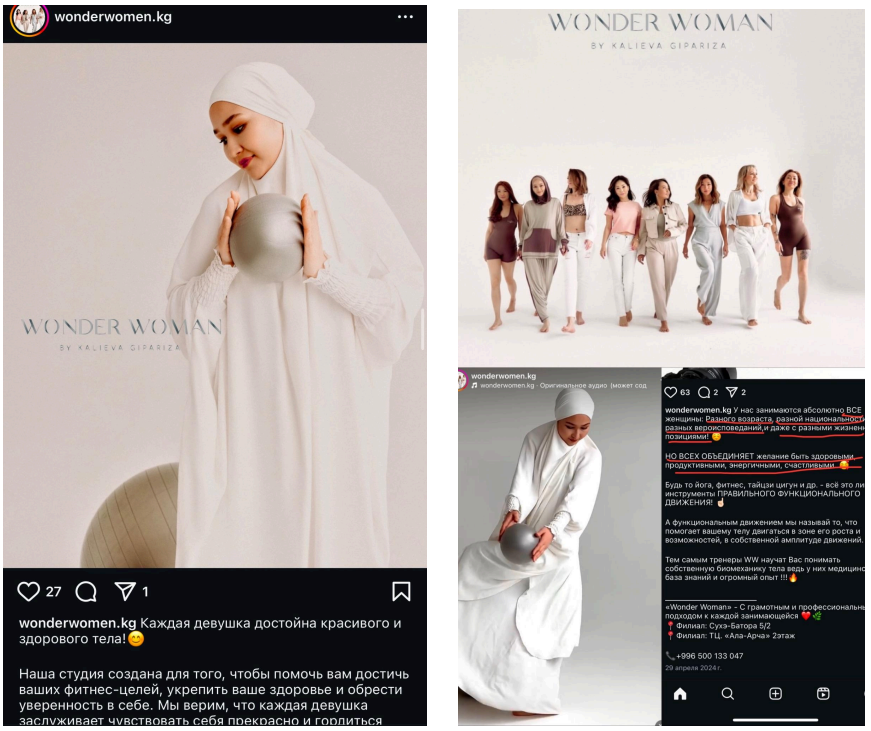

Figure 15. Instagram Posts from @wonderwomen.kg

These posts by wonderwomen.kg introduce a hijab-wearing participant holding a Pilates ball, paired with the caption:

> *"Каждая девушка достойна красивого и здорового тела!" ("Every girl deserves a beautiful and healthy body!").*

At first glance, the image may seem merely a nod to religious diversity. However, when read through the lens of localised feminist discourse in Kyrgyzstan, it reveals a deeper entanglement between neoliberal ideals of fitness and religious and national moralities. Drawing on Sultanalieva's (2020) concept of Kurak feminism, this post represents an instance where globalised ideas of self-care, productivity, and bodily responsibility are patched together with Islamic modesty and Kyrgyz cultural legitimacy. Kurak feminism does not confront dominant gender norms outright, but it reshapes them in ways that appear locally acceptable (Sultanalieva 2020:126–127). Here, slimness and body discipline are not rejected,

but they are maintained as ideals and are repackaged within modest visual forms. The covered figure, though not revealing her body, is presented as engaged, capable, and active. This signals a moralised aesthetic of fitness, one that aligns with religiosity and spiritual self-management. From this perspective, the hijab is not an obstacle to empowerment, but a localised tool through which neoliberal health ideals can be expressed. Following Mahmood's concept, participation should not be read as passive conformity to patriarchal norms, but rather as agentive actions taken within historically and theologically specific conditions (Mahmood 2001:206–208). The woman's presence within the fitness frame becomes a culturally embedded articulation of empowerment—not one that resists bodily ideals, but one that reinterprets them through religiosity and social respectability. Moreover, this image exemplifies what Sunarmo (2021) describes in Muslim fitness spaces: the shaping of health and wellness through halal frameworks, including modest dress, gender-safe environments, and moral discourses of bodily care (Sunarmo 2021:453–455). Thus, the logic of body transformation in Kyrgyz mindful fitness is not merely imposed from the West but it is translated, recontextualised through localised practices that negotiate between market ideals, Islamic values, and national gender identity.

While the previous example showed how fitness ideals are adapted through cultural and religious values, the following posts shift the focus from modest visibility to inner regulation and bodily discipline. Here, empowerment is constructed less through symbolic clothing or moral modesty but more through precise control over the body, emotions, and daily routines. This post by @indira_maxutova_yoga offers a clear example of how mindful fitness influencers link body discipline

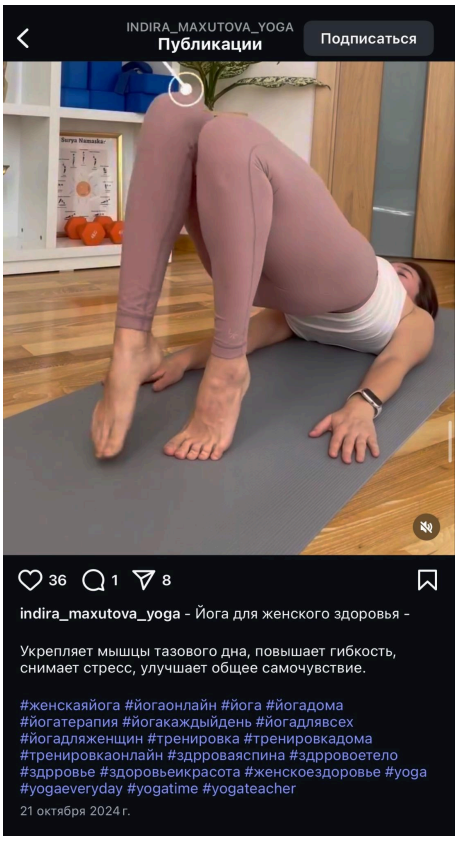

Figure 16. Instagram Post by @indira_maxutova_yoga

This post by @indira_maxutova_yoga offers an example of how mindful fitness influencers link body discipline to emotional balance and idealised femininity. In the image, the influencer performs a pelvic bridge pose and a movement often associated with core control and pelvic health. This pose not only signals physical discipline but also implies a kind of moral and emotional self-mastery. The aesthetic of the post is soft and orderly, with pastel-coloured leggings, a clean interior, and neatly placed yoga props all contributing to a visual sense of calm and care. The caption further emphasises the connection between body and inner well-being:

> *"Йога для женского здоровья – укрепляет мышцы тазового дна, повышает гибкость, снимает стресс, улучшает общее самочувствие" ("Yoga for women's health – strengthens the pelvic floor, improves flexibility, relieves stress, improves general well-being").*

The language here is highly gendered and focuses on women's health and reproductive vitality.It links flexibility and stress relief to an ideal of womanhood that is both strong and serene.

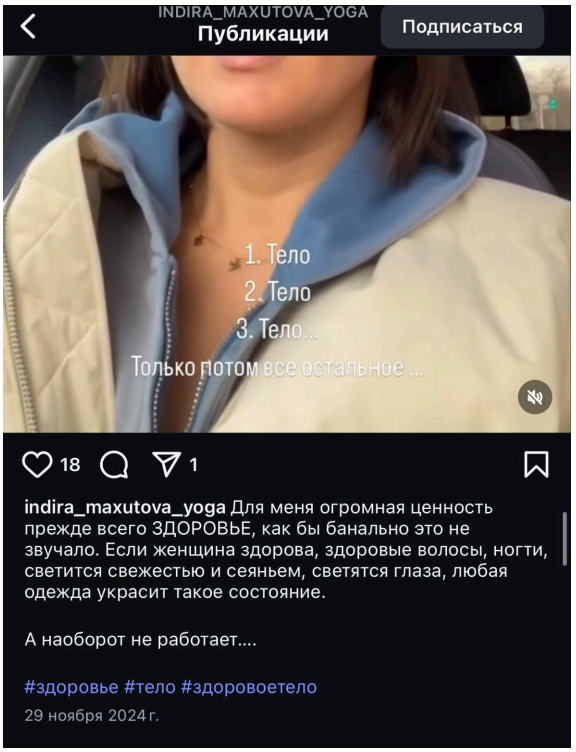

Figure 17. Instagram Post by @indira_maxutova_yoga

Another instructor who has nickname @indira_maxutova_yoga writes:

> *"1. Тело 2. Тело 3. Тело. Только потом всё остальное" ("1. Body. 2. Body. 3. Body. Only then everything else.").*

This mantra-like structure highlights the centrality of the body in her philosophy. The video emphasises postural precision and pelvic floor strength. Again, the visual is soft, the body flexible and calm yet deeply disciplined.

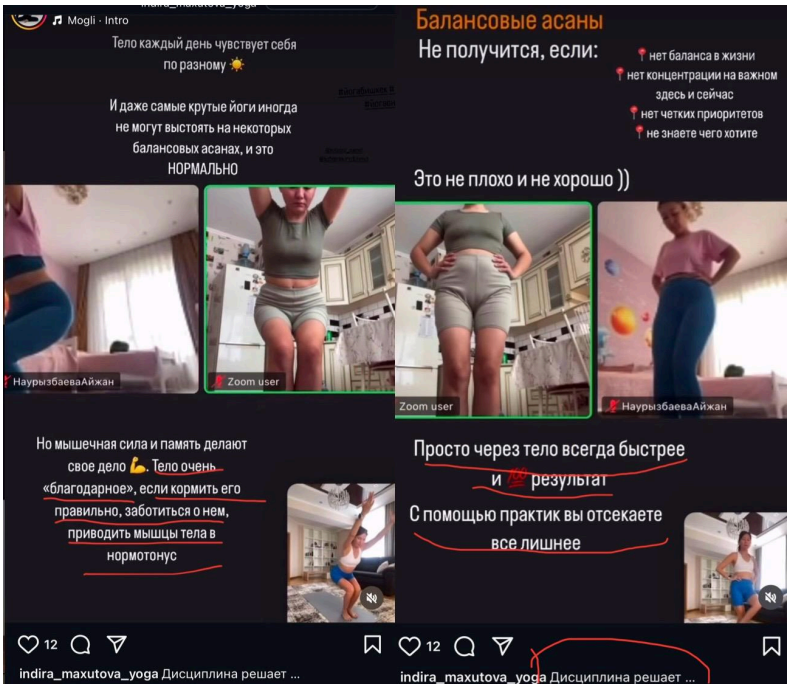

Figure 18. Instagram Story by @indira_maxutova_yoga

This Instagram collage from @indira_maxutova_yoga shows women during Zoom fitness classes, performing squats and standing balance postures. Text overlays link physical balance and strength with emotional and cognitive balance, using casual, motivational language.

Main Key Quotes (from the post):

> *"Балансовые асаны не получатся, если нет баланса в жизни."*
> *("Balance poses won't work if you don't have balance in your life.")*
>
> *"Тело очень благодарное, если кормить его правильно, заботиться о нем."*
> *("The body is very grateful if you feed it properly and take care of it.")*
>
> *"Просто через тело всегда быстрее и результат."*
> *("It's always faster through the body to get results.")*
>
> *"С помощью практик вы отсекаете всё лишнее."*
> *("Through practice, you cut off all excess.")*

One illustrative example comes from an Instagram collage by @indira_maxutova_yoga, featuring screenshots of women participating in Zoom fitness classes. The images show

participants practising balance poses and squats in domestic settings, while text overlays draw direct connections between bodily discipline and emotional control. Phrases such as "Балансовые асаны не получатся, если нет баланса в жизни" ("Balance poses won't work if you don't have balance in your life") frame physical mastery as both a metaphor for, and a material consequence of, emotional equilibrium. This naturalised link between body ability and emotional self-regulation reflects Deborah Lupton's concept of self tracking where the regulation of the physical body becomes inseparable from the governance of inner life. Physical imbalance is no longer just a technical failure. Instead, it signals a deeper personal flaw in emotional or cognitive management. The repeated claim that "Тело очень благодарное, если кормить его правильно, заботиться о нем" ("The body is very grateful if you feed it properly and take care of it") portrays the body as a responsive moral subject. Here, physical practices such as healthy eating, body training, and posture correction are integrated with a sense of moral urgency. In addition, motivational slogans like "Просто через тело всегда быстрее и результат" ("It's always faster through the body to get results") and "С помощью практик вы отсекаете всё лишнее" ("Through practice you cut off all excess") further entrench a neoliberal ethos of optimisation. A "Wonder Woman" is expected not just to maintain balance, but to eliminate anything 'excessive' — whether emotional baggage, physical fat, or mental distraction — as part of an endless personal improvement project. Thus, body control emerges as the visible proof of internal emotional mastery, seamlessly tying together the regulation of the self with aesthetic fitness ideals. I would like to draw the on Gill's (2007) notion of postfeminist sensibility where women are urged to view continuous self-surveillance and bodily discipline not as oppressive but as signs of empowerment, even as these practices reproduce deep ideological expectations about femininity, slimness, and emotional self-management.

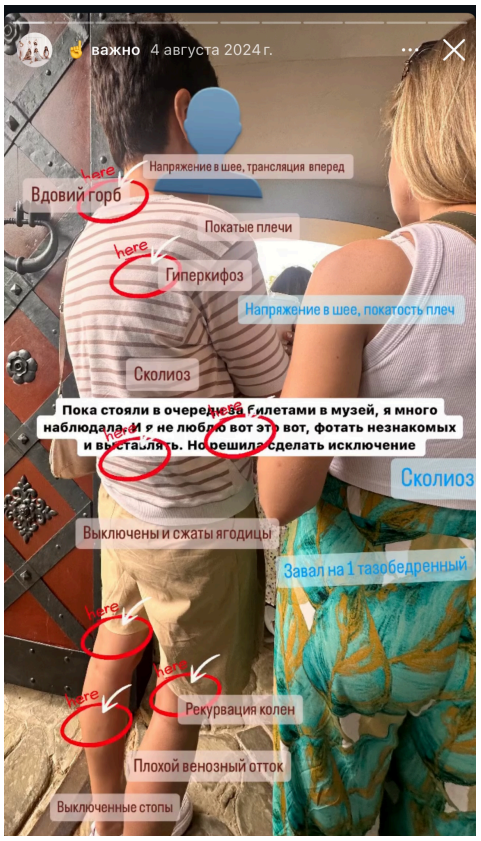

Figure 19. Instagram Story by @kalievagipariza

@kalievagipariza describes her rigorous standards as a trainer and medical background:

> *"Мне очень важно их лечить" ("It's important for me to heal them"), and notes that "почти каждый… стал обучать" ("Almost everyone has started teaching").*

This post conveys authority through exclusivity and rigour, as demonstrated by her detailed analysis of a random vistor's posture in a museum. It illustrates how bodily surveillance has become an integral part of everyday life. Her detailed commentary on a stranger's posture reflects how bodily surveillance has shifted from an external gaze to an internalized, self-regulating mechanism. Drawing on Lupton's concept of self- tracking, the influencer assumes the role of an expert who monitors, corrects, and optimizes bodies not with force, but through knowledge and guidance (Lupton 2016: 102-122). Yet this disciplinary power is not purely oppressive but it is entwined with care, education, and empowerment. The series of

posts by @indira_maxutova_yoga shows how Kyrgyz mindful fitness culture ties bodily discipline to emotional, moral, and aesthetic norms. The repeated emphasis on pelvic health, postural precision, and removing "all excess" reflects what Lupton describes as self-tracking as a moral and effective project where the body becomes a space of endless monitoring, interpretation, and improvement. Although in this context, self -tracking is not exercised externally. Influencers like @indira_maxutova_yoga act as technicians of the self (2016:102-122), offering practices, mantras, and metaphors through which women are taught to control their bodies, emotions, and thoughts. The phrase "1. Тело 2. Тело 3. Тело" ("1. Body. 2. Body. 3. Body. Only then everything else") serves as a mantra that provides the focus on body control as both a condition and symbol of personal mastery. The emotional and motivational language embedded in Instagram stories—*"Балансовые асаны не получатся, если нет баланса в жизни"* ("Balance poses won't work if you don't have balance in life")—combines metaphors of inner and outside balance. These phrases illustrate mindful fitness discourse, which promotes a holistic view of health that combines emotional awareness with physical self-optimisation. In addition, as Markula (2011) has argued, such discourses often reproduce neoliberal values of productivity and responsibilization, particularly for women. Women are not only encouraged to become stronger or more flexible but they are expected to eliminate excess, including fat, distraction, stress, and even emotion. This regime of optimisation is not limited to yoga mats. In a post by @kalievagipariza, the trainer emphasises her role in "healing" clients and critiques the proliferation of unqualified instructors. This chapter has explored how the figure of the "Wonder Woman" in Kyrgyz mindful fitness culture is constructed through intertwined narratives of emotional healing, self-discipline, and bodily transformation. Through retreats, courses, and social media practices, influencers promote a vision of ideal womanhood that links inner balance with outer beauty, emotional stability with physical slimness. In the next chapter, I turn to how this

ideal is further expanded through the figure of the mother, where motherhood is not seen as a limitation but as an added proof of resilience, authority, and empowerment. I will examine how influencers integrate motherhood into their branding, portraying the “superwoman” as a mother who meditates, teaches, builds a business, and raises healthy children—embodying balance across all spheres of life.

5.5 Even with a Baby on My Mat: Motherhood and the Wonder Woman Discourse

Another most common topic emerged while analyzing the accounts of Kyrgyz mindful fitness influencers is motherhood. In this context motherhood is not perceived as an obstacle but as an empowerment. Rather than seeing motherhood as a reason to stop, these women use their experiences as mothers to reinforce their authority.

In a story post from @kalievagipariza, there is a woman holding a baby in one arm while taking a mirror selfie in a yoga studio. The caption claims:

Figure 20. Instagram Story by @kalievagipariza

> *“К 28 годам я поняла, что тренировки — это необходимость для моего тела. Базовый уход за собой… В любой непонятной ситуации — тренируйся”(“By the age of 28, I realized that workouts are a necessity for my body. Basic self-care. When the body is healthy, the soul automatically falls into place. In any unclear situation—train.”)*

Here, the gym mirror becomes a symbol of control. Even her appearance and posture being calm, stylish, and holding a child show the message that motherhood is not a disruption to self-care, but a reason for it. This aligns with Gill’s concept of the postfeminist sensibility (2007). For instance, contemporary women are expected to manage caregiving, health, and emotional balance. Self care stops being a choice but it turns into something that women owe to themselves, family, and future.

Another image from *@kalievagipariza* shows a mother practicing yoga with her baby nearby. The child is neither hidden nor framed as an interruption. Instead, she is part of the scene, integrated into the calm setting. The visual blends caregiving and emotional calmness.

Figure 21. Instagram Story by @kalievagipariza

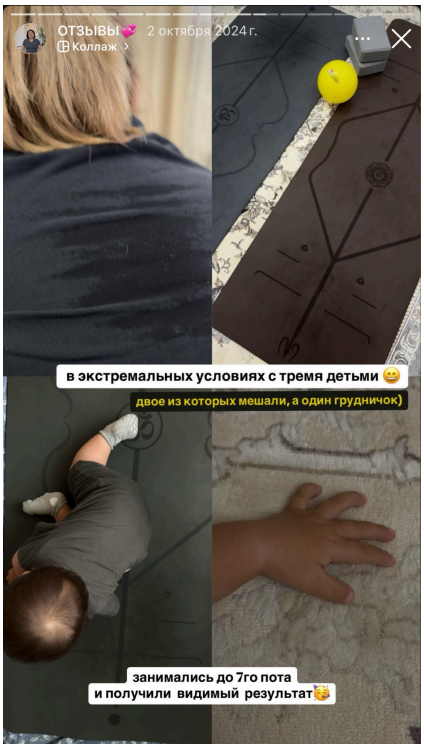

Figure 22. Instagram Story by @yogaigerim

More explicitly, @yogaigerim writes in a story post:

> *"В экстремальных условиях с тремя детьми. Занимались до 7 пота и получили видимый результат" ("In extreme conditions with three kids (two distracting me and one breastfeeding) — trained through the seventh sweat and got visible results."*

This humorous exaggeration highlights personal achievement. Her story connects with McRobbie's idea of "double entanglement," where women reject traditional images of maternal sacrifice but still operate within new norms of hyper-performance (2008). Strength is validated not by removing obstacles, but by working through them. Here, the image of a mother sweating between exercise becomes a badge of honor and a symbol of neoliberal resilience.

In another story, the same influencer writes:

> *"Моя маленькая йогиня. Занималась со мной с утра" My little yogini 🤍 practiced yoga with me this morning."*

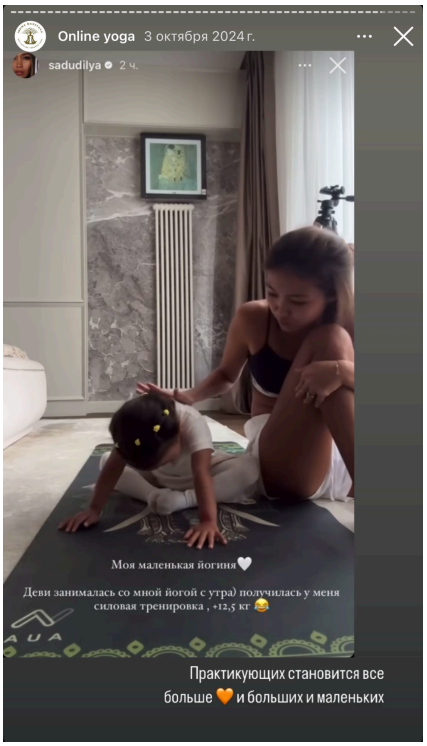

Figure 23. Instagram story by @indira_maxutova_yoga

Here, the child becomes part of the fitness practice. Motherhood is reframed as a creative form of resistance training. This is not just about adaptability but it reflects what Sultanalieva describes as a post-Soviet Kyrgyz femininity marked by moral excellence, productivity, and spiritual labor (2020:127). These women are not rejecting tradition but they are remixing it into a branded lifestyle of embodied empowerment.

Finally these stories construct a clear message that being a mother does not reduce a woman's ability to lead, teach, or perform. On the contrary, it adds legitimacy. Children are not excluded but they are part of the narrative, often used to demonstrate emotional maturity, time management, and resilience.

In these cases, children become a symbol of inherited empowerment. Motherhood becomes a role model not through detachment from household chores but through the ability to aestheticize and harmonize it. These representations are not acts of rejection, but the way

women build their agency being mothers. As Saba Mahmood claims, agency is not only about resistance but also about adapting to the existing norms, embodying them in ways that make space for dignity, authority, and moral legitimacy (2001). It suggests these women do not reject caregiving but they accept it, using it to ground their authority in both emotional and physical terms.

At the same time, this reconstruction of motherhood aligns with Kurak feminism that does not aim to break traditional gender roles. Instead these influencers combine motherhood, productivity, morality to create a form of empowerment that aligns with the cultural values. In addition, these stories send a clear message that motherhood is not an obstacle but a way of resilience. At the same time, they reinforce another image of motherhood where simply being a mother is not enough unless it is shown with balance, beauty, and self-control. This is not a rejection of expectations, but rather a culturally reshaped way of femininity.

5.6 Breathe in Russian, Pay in Som: The Privileges Behind Mindfulness

In Kyrgyzstan, the Russian language continues to function as a powerful class marker, long after the collapse of the Soviet Union. While Kyrgyz is the state language, Russian language remains the second official language status and widespread use, especially in urban, professional, and elite circles (Mambetaliev 2023: 51-54). Speaking fluent Russian is often associated with higher education and class. While limited fluency or a strong Kyrgyz accent may indicate rural roots or a lack of formal cultural capital (Sultanalieva 2023). This linguistic hierarchy shapes everyday interactions and access to resources, and it deeply informs how authority and aspiration are performed in media spaces. Here I would like to explore how mindfulness intersects with language, class, and access. While influencers frame yoga and retreats as paths to empowerment and healing, their messages often center on wealth,

cosmopolitan aesthetics, and linguistic prestige. Below, I analyze examples that demonstrate how the image of the "mindful woman" is constructed and for whom it is spread.

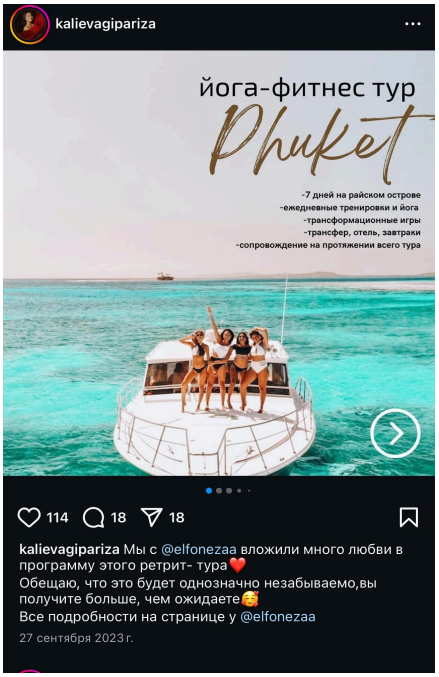

Figure 24. *Instagram by @kalievagipariza*

Instagram caption by @kalievagipariza:

> *«7 дней в раю, трансформационные практики, all inclusive, трансфер, отель, досуг и работа с собой»*
> *("7 days in paradise, transformational practices, all inclusive, transfers, hotel, free time, and inner work")*

This caption accompanies glossy photos from a Phuket retreat with white sand beaches, flowing white dresses, perfectly styled group yoga shots. The entire promotion is in Russian. The language of transformation is paired with aesthetics of wealth and Instagrammable femininity. In addition, the location of these practices strengthens class hierarchy. In turn, Phuket is a destination that is not financially accessible to many women in Kyrgyzstan. It shows class hierarchy embedded within wellness sessions. As Rottenberg argues, neoliberal feminism reframes self-care and healing as personal investments. Here, the "inner work" is

packaged as an elite consumer product, accessible only to those with the right language, funds, and aesthetic literacy (2016).

In the next Instagram posts promoted by @indira_maxutova_yoga there is the way to be part of mindful fitness: exotic or serene locations, emotionally charged language, spiritual vocabulary, and a high price tag. Despite the different visuals or themes, all three offer a similar model . For instance participation in these retreats is presented as a crucial step toward healing and transformation. However, that participation requires mobility, money, and cultural fluency. Below are the posts in detail:

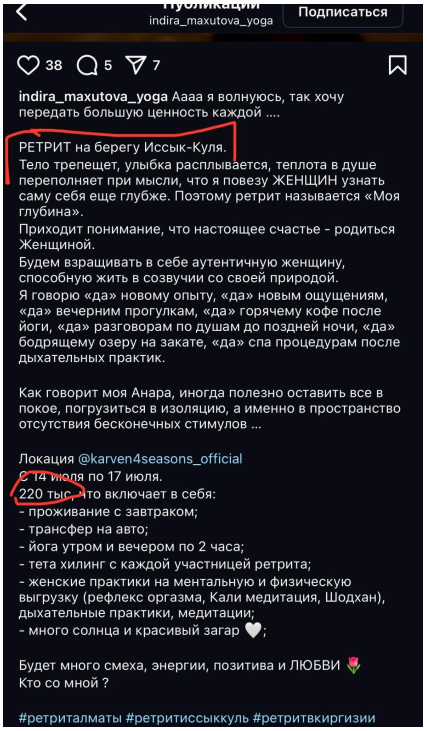

Figure 25. Instagram stories by @indira_maxutova_yoga

«РЕТРИТ в Иссык-Куле, по чистоте воды занимает второе место после Байкала. Цена: 220 тыс (дорога, проживание в коттеджах, завтрак)»
(“A retreat at Issyk-Kul, the second cleanest lake after Baikal. Price: 220,000 KGS including travel, cottage lodging, and breakfast”)

This message emphasizes purity and luxury, framing the lake itself as part of the healing process. The price suggests exclusivity.This retreat constructs an image of natural luxury, combining environmental purity with emotional promise. Issyk-Kul becomes more than a place, it becomes a cleansing space for the privileged body. Yet the price immediately restricts who can enter this healing space. Post advertises a retreat atIssyk-Kul for 220,000 KGS approximately 2,260 EUR which includes transportation, accommodation in cottages, and breakfast. According to Rottenberg , neoliberal feminism frames empowerment not as collective transformation, but as a private investment. Here, healing becomes a privileged experience (2018). As Nash claims, intersectionality is not just about identity — it is a critique of how structures like capitalism and linguistic privilege shape access (2008:6). In this context, the ability to "heal" in this setting is mediated through wealth, location, and fluency in Russian wellness discourse.

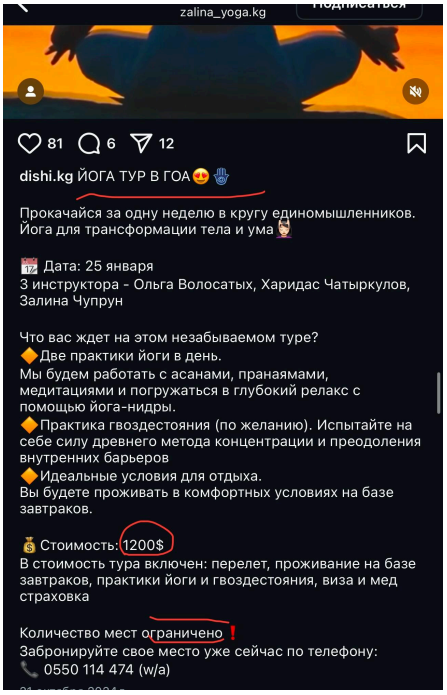

Figure 26. Instagram stories by @indira_maxutova_yoga

> *“ЙОГА ТУР В ГОА”(“Yoga tour in Goa”) “Прокачайся за одну неделю в кругу единомышленников”(Йога для трансформации тела и ума”) (“Level up in one week among like-minded people. Yoga for body and mind transformation.”) Стоимость: 1200$ (“Price: $1200”)*

This post by *@indira_maxutova_yoga* advertises a retreat in Goa as an elite, life-changing experience. The language of “трансформация” (transformation) and “прокачайся” (level up) positions the retreat as an upgrade body and become emotionally stable. In order to achieve the transformation women must invest in. The price of $1200, especially when presented in dollars rather than Soms (Kyrgyz currency), aligns the offering with international luxury rather than local affordability.

The scarcity tactic “ограничено!” (limited!) creates urgency, framing healing as a limited resource available only to the fast and the wealthy.Self-care is reimagined as an individual, exclusive commodity (Rottenber 2018)The emotional vocabulary of growth and transformation is used to obscure the classed and exclusionary nature of the offering. From an intersectional perspective (Nash 2008), this retreat reveals how systems of power — global capitalism, linguistic prestige, and gendered consumer culture — combine to produce a narrow version of the “mindful woman.” She is globally mobile, financially secure, and aesthetically aligned with Instagram wellness culture. The offering may appear open to all women, but in practice, it is tailored for the cosmopolitan, Russian-speaking, upwardly mobile class — systematically excluding Kyrgyz-speaking, rural, or low-income women. Just like the Issyk-Kul retreats, this Goa offering constructs mindfulness not as a cultural or spiritual practice grounded in local realities, but as a high-end, globally curated product. The breath may be slow and mindful but the language of empowerment is still in Russian, and the currency is still in dollars.

Chapter 6

Discussion

This research demonstrates how Kyrgyz female influencers utilise mindful fitness not only as a physical practice but also as a means of constructing authority and empowerment, and disseminating specific notions of femininity. Across the posts and narratives analyzed, emotional storytelling plays a central role in this construction. Influencers often share their personal crises, such as burnout, postpartum depression, anxiety, or existential loss, as the turning points that led them to mindful fitness. In this part, I would like to step back from providing details and reflect on what these practices mean in terms of shifting cultural values and how they're shaped by and push back against existing gendered norms.

6.1 Empowerment or the Continuity of Patriarchy?

At first glance, it might seem that the messages of influencers promote empowerment. However, this empowerment is associated with values of traditional femininity such as patience, restraint of emotions, and graceful resilience. These traits resonate with long-standing ideals of femininity shaped by both Soviet and post-Soviet moral frameworks, where the image of the strong woman was one who endured silently, adjusted without complaint, and bore the emotional burdens of the family and nation (Zdravomyslova and Temkina 2003). This dilemma between past and present gender norms suggests that the empowerment on display is not necessarily subversive or liberatory, but rather a carefully controlled evolution of old ideologies. It means instead of breaking old prejudices, influencers are reframing them and adjusting to modern aesthetics and wellness language. What's being

sold as empowerment often does not challenge the system but rather makes existing norms more appealing and digestible for today's audience. It's the same script, but with better promotion. Rottenberg's critique of neoliberal feminism helped me identify this discourse (2017) According to her conceptualisation of the feminist subject in neoliberal ideology is the "empowered" woman who takes full responsibility for her life (2018:72). She does not point to structural injustice; instead, she sees every struggle as a personal challenge, and constantly works on self-improvement. This idea fits perfectly with the content I analyzed such as posts urging women to "heal," "stay strong," or "choose joy," often through yoga, breathwork, or mindset shifts. It shows that women should be endlessly adaptable, emotionally self-sufficient, and always striving to improve on their own. What's troubling is that this version of empowerment leaves little space for collective resistance or systemic change. It places the burden on individual women to fix themselves, rather than identifying systematic issues and not asking why women feel overwhelmed, disconnected, or pressured. The focus shifts from changing the world to changing the mindset. While self-care is important, it becomes problematic when it turns out to be the only way to respond to systemic oppression.

6.2 If I Can not Afford a Retreat, Can I Still Be Empowered?

While mindful fitness practices are perceived as universally accessible fields for healing and transformation, their availability is determined by economic and cultural capital. For instance, retreats costs above 200,000 KGS, one-on-one coaching, and niche spiritual workshops construct forms of distinction that exclude women from the working and lower economic classes. Participation in these practices becomes a way to signify upward mobility and modern femininity. The influencers, largely urban and middle-class, show their lifestyle as aspirational but implicitly inaccessible to those limited by financial or family obligations. The ideological promise of wellness hides the fact that it is a selective and exclusionary field.

While these influencers are all Kyrgyz women, their relatively privileged class position shapes their ability to participate in and promote wellness cultures. The absence of rural, working-class reinforces a universal idea of the empowered woman and those who can afford rest, silence, and personal growth (Crenshaw 1989; Nash 2008). Even practices framed as flexible and inclusive, such as online yoga or breathwork sessions, often assume reliable internet access, private space, and uninterrupted time. However in rural regions of Kyrgyzstan, infrastructure barriers may prevent women from participating at all. But even in the capital Bishkek, many women face the constraints managing paid work, caregiving, and domestic labor. For them, mindfulness is not simply a matter of will or discipline but it becomes a privilege tied to money, labor conditions, and time. It promotes a vision of empowerment that is aspirational rather than accessible, obscuring the everyday economic and temporal constraints that prevent many women from engaging in these practices.

6.3 Emancipatory Possibilities

Despite these exclusions, this research does not dismiss the transformative and emancipatory dimensions of mindful fitness. Based on Saba Mahmood's idea of agency within norms, it becomes clear that these women are not only reproducing dominant ideologies but also reworking them (2001). Within the context of neoliberalisation, post-Soviet gender roles, and Islam modesty, influencers create alternative spaces for feminine expression and community care. For instance, the emotional rituals promoted by influencers circles of women breathing together, storytelling, postpartum recovery practices represent forms of what Pirkko Markula (2011) calls "embodied resistance." These are not political protests but effective practices that focus on the body as an area of reflection, healing, and solidarity. In a society where emotional vulnerability is often silenced, the public display of softness and care becomes a counter-narrative to dominant models of womanhood. The spiritual language used in captions,

"the body is a portal," "movement as medicine," "healing through breath", offers an image of femininity that values feeling, introspection, and relational wisdom. These discourses align with Sultanalieva's concept of Kurak feminism, a localized feminist formation that mixes global self-care ideas with Kyrgyz cultural values and Islamic ethics. Influencers may not reject traditional norms, but they reinterpret them in ways that resonate with their cultural context (2020) .

In addition while mindful fitness is often presented as a way for healing, most of the influencers in this research did not openly speak about experiences of structural violence such as poverty, discrimination, or domestic abuse. However their stories focus on emotional growth, burnout, or personal transformation and are usually framed through a wellness lens. From this perspective, mindful fitness carries emancipatory potential such as allowing for the creation of alternative spaces where care, softness, and emotional expression are valued. When these practices are translated into Instagram content, their political and emotional depth can be obscured. The aesthetic framing of mindfulness such as calm tones, graceful movements can shift attention away from the structural barriers that make these practices necessary. Also hiding the pain, pressure, or silent struggles that may have led these women to mindful fitness are rarely visible. As a result, emancipation risks being understood only as personal growth or self-optimization, rather than as an embodied response to broader social issues.

Furthermore, motherhood is reframed as a form of embodied knowledge and a source of legitimacy. The presence of children in yoga videos, the merging of parenting and the framing of maternal labor as strength challenge dominant representations of idealized femininity as unburdened. These women are not hiding their motherhood but they are centering it as a source of power. Finally, even though wellness is commodified, it can still serve as a site of

solidarity. Shared vulnerability, collective healing can offer emotional and existential support that many women lack in other institutions. In a post-socialist, patriarchal, and economically unequal society, the emergence of such affective economies should not be dismissed as only commercial. They are spaces of care, however partial or stratified. Thus, Kyrgyz mindful fitness influencers perform a complex negotiation between global feminist ideas and local cultural expectations. Their practices reflect both the constraints of neoliberal subjectivity and the possibilities of emotional and embodied agency. They discipline and empower, exclude and include, commodify and connect. Mindful fitness is not inherently liberating or oppressive, but rather a contested cultural field where power is performed, negotiated, and subtly transformed.

Chapter 7

Conclusion

This thesis has explored how Kyrgyz Instagram influencers construct and market femininity through mindful fitness, identifying the intersection of empowerment, femininity and neoliberal discipline. Guided by research questions of how femininity is constructed, what kind of forms it takes, and how class and ethnicity intersect within these processes, this research highlights both the possibilities and limitations of mindful fitness in the digital space in Kyrgyzstan. As it has shown, the influencers do not directly apply Western models of wellness. Instead, they localize global discourses of mindfulness and empowerment, adjusting them within Kyrgyz cultural context. Emotional storytelling, body discipline, and vulnerability become tools through which they construct an aspirational, therapeutic, and marketable authority. Mindfulness is not universally accessible. The ability to "be mindful" or to "heal through movement" is determined by economic privilege. As the analysis showed, retreats priced in hundreds of thousands of KGS and with content predominantly in Russian exclude rural areas, only Kyrgyz speakers, and lower-income women. As a result, it promotes an idealized version of the empowered Kyrgyz woman, someone with the means to access rest, beauty, and emotional balance. Thus, this research contributes to feminist digital ethnography by demonstrating how social media becomes a platform for enacting both compliance with dominant gender norms, neoliberal wellness ideologies, and class-based aesthetics, and critique of them. It highlights the need to analyze empowerment not as a fixed or universal idea, but as a flexible, situated, and often commodified performance. In fact, mindful fitness in Kyrgyzstan is not a lifestyle trend but it is a field where femininity, class, and cultural identity are negotiated, displayed, and sold. However, this thesis is limited in its

exclusive focus on the digital content produced by influencers. Future research could explore audience perspectives and direct engagement with both influencers and followers through interviews and ethnographic methods. This would allow for a more nuanced understanding of how femininity is interpreted, negotiated, and internalized by various factors within this space. Using such an approach could also shed light on the broader social responses to mindful fitness practices in Kyrgyzstan. Rather than considering this field as commercial, it may also be explored as a potential contributor to a localized feminist movement. The type of feminism that does not completely reject traditional norms but reconceptualizes them through adaptation, cultural specificity. In this way, mindful fitness could serve as a co-creator of feminist agency in Kyrgyzstan, aligning with diverse conceptualizations of gender without losing its connection to local value.

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Appendix

A. Formal Consent Letter

Consent for Use of Social Media Content in Research

Dear X,

I hope this letter finds you well. My name is Aigerim Batyrbek kyzy, and I am a master's student in the Gender Studies program at Central European University . I am currently conducting research for my thesis titled "Mindful Fitness and Mindful Women: The Role of Kyrgyz Female Influencers in Shaping Discourses of Femininity in Social Media." My research analyzes how Kyrgyz female influencers in the mindful fitness space engage with and

shape femininity through their content. As part of my research, I am using digital ethnography and Critical Discourse Analysis to examine social media posts related to mindful fitness, self-care, and empowerment. Your content provides valuable insights into this topic, and I would like to request your permission to analyze and reference some of your public posts.

I would like to mention that your content would be used for academic purposes. In addition, any direct references would be properly cited. However if you prefer, your identity can remain anonymous in my thesis. I would like to highlight that you are welcome to ask any questions or withdraw your consent at any time. If you agree to participate, please reply to this letter confirming your consent. I truly appreciate your time and contribution to this research. Please feel free to reach out with any questions or concerns.

Best wishes,

Aigerim Batyrbek kyzy

B. Informal Message

Hi X,

My name is Aigerim, and I'm a master's student in Gender Studies. I'm also really into mindful fitness

and love how it connects movement, self-care, and well-being. I've been following your content, and I think the way you share your fitness journey is so inspiring!

Right now, I'm working on my thesis about how Kyrgyz female influencers shape ideas of femininity through mindful fitness on social media. Since I'm also part of this community, I really want to understand and highlight the perspectives of women like you who are creating fitness spaces online.

I'd love to include some of your posts in my research and see how they contribute to the conversation about mindful fitness, self-care, and empowerment. Of course, I'll make sure everything is properly credited, and if you'd prefer to stay anonymous, that's totally okay too.

Let me know what you think—I'd be happy to answer any questions! 😊

Best,

Aigerim 💛