



# Idealised media images: The effect of fitspiration imagery on body satisfaction and exercise behaviour



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## ABSTRACT

Recent studies have documented a shift in the cultural ideal of physical attractiveness, with women subscribing to a visibly toned ideal that emphasises health and fitness. The present study experimentally investigated the impact of athletic and muscular fitness-idealised images compared to traditional thin ideal images on women's body dissatisfaction and exercise behaviour, under the framework of Social Comparison Theory. Participants were 106 female undergraduate students randomly assigned to view one of three sets of images (thin ideal, athletic ideal, or muscular ideal) followed by a bout of exercise. Acute exposure to athletic ideal and thin ideal images led to increased body dissatisfaction, but exposure to muscular ideal images did not. Relative to thin ideal images, fitness-idealised images did not motivate participants to engage in higher levels of exercise suggesting that this type of fitness inspiration might not motivate actual exercise behaviour.

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## 1. Introduction

A large body of research has demonstrated that mass media images have a significant influence on sociocultural body ideals and are strongly influential on female body image perceptions (Groesz, Levine, & Murnen, 2002; Perloff, 2014; Stice, Spangler, & Agras, 2001; Thompson & Heinberg, 1999). Body image is defined as an individual's perception of their body appearance, as well as the thoughts and feelings that result from this perception (Cash, 2004; Tiggemann, 2004). Due to their emphasis on appearance and the importance of attractiveness in Western societies, idealised media images place pressure on women to achieve a similar aesthetic profile and can have significant negative implications for body image (Levine & Murnen, 2009).

The thin ideal represents the female form as a slender, feminine physique with a small waist and little body fat (Grogan, 2008; Schaefer et al., 2015). Past experimental studies have demonstrated a link between exposure to thin ideal traditional mass media, such as television, magazines and advertisements, and negative body

image in women (Levine & Murnen, 2009). However, an 'athletic ideal' characterised by both thinness and visible toning, including a more muscular upper body, toned abdomen and firmer lower body, has become popular across different forms of media (Boepple, Ata, Rum, & Thompson, 2016; Schaefer et al., 2015; Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2016). A small amount of research has demonstrated that media exposure to images that are toned as well as thin do promote negative body image, similar to the thin ideal (Homan, 2010). This appears to be the case for print media (Homan, 2010), as well as social media images presented through the Internet (Jong & Drummond, 2016a, 2016b; Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015).

This shift in the popularity of the athletic ideal has, in part, been due to the global social media movement known as 'fitspiration' (an amalgamation of the words 'fitness' and 'inspiration'), a social media source which many women now use for health-related information and inspiration related to diet and exercise (Jong & Drummond, 2016a; Vaterlaus, Patten, Roche, & Young, 2015). "Fitspiration" consists of images and inspirational quotations aimed typically at women to inspire healthy living by providing tips on exercise and diet to improve health and fitness (Boepple & Thompson, 2016; Jong & Drummond, 2016a). A search (December, 2016) of the #fitspiration hashtag on Instagram returned close to 10 million pictures. A perusal of the images under the fitspiration hashtag shows two distinct ideal body types: an athletic ideal

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and a muscular ideal. The athletic ideal refers to a lean body, little body fat, and an athletic (i.e., fit) and toned/muscular appearance (Schaefer et al., 2015). In contrast, the muscular ideal, whilst still generally reasonably thin, is overtly muscular in appearance with well-defined leg, arm, and abdominal muscles.

While athletic ideal images may be viewed as healthier (due to their focus on promoting fitness) than thin ideal images, they may be quite difficult to attain and are actually somewhat paradoxical in nature. Realistically, attainment of an athletic ideal necessitates strict dieting practice, as well as substantial and consistent weight training (Ramme, Donovan, & Bell, 2016). For the majority of women, this lifestyle is unrealistic and unobtainable (Curioni & Lourenco, 2005). Recent content analyses of fitspiration media have also warned that components of these images, including their overall focus on appearance, the presence of objectifying features, the emphasis on appearance-related reasons for exercise, and the focus on weight management behaviours, are likely to have damaging effects for female body image (Boepple et al., 2016; Carrotte, Prichard, & Lim, 2017; Simpson & Mazzeo, 2016; Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2016).

Research suggests that exposure to images featuring a toned and fit body only produces negative body image when paired with thinness (Groesz et al., 2002; Homan, McHugh, Wells, Watson, & King, 2012). For example, Homan et al. (2012) found that women exposed to athletic images of thin women experienced increased body dissatisfaction compared to those who viewed athletic images of women who were not thin. Relatedly, Benton and Karazsia (2015) demonstrated that an athletic ideal (thin and toned) had a similar significant negative impact on women's body satisfaction as the thin ideal, in a way that a more muscular (and less thin) ideal did not. It is possible that women see the muscular ideal as too masculine and therefore not attractive (Dworkin, 2001). This notion is supported by the common lack of support within the general population for the level of muscularity obtained by female body builders (Grogan, Evans, Wright, & Hunter, 2004; Shilling & Bunsell, 2009).

One framework that is useful for examining the potential impact of idealised images on body image is Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954). This theory suggests that individuals frequently assess their success and levels of ability by comparing themselves to others (Festinger, 1954). This comparison also extends to other dimensions of the self, such as physical appearance (Wheeler & Miyake, 1992). Social comparison can be examined as a trait variable, in that there exist relatively stable individual differences in social comparison engagement (Thompson, Heinberg, & Tantleff, 1991), or as a state variable, in response to specific situations (Tiggemann & McGill, 2004). Trait social comparison has been found to moderate the impact of idealised media images on body image, such that women with higher trait social comparison tendencies experience greater body dissatisfaction after viewing idealised images than those with lower social comparison tendencies (Dittmar & Howard, 2004). State appearance comparison is considered a key mechanism by which the media negatively affect women's body image (Tiggemann & McGill, 2004; Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015). According to Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954), humans have an innate desire to compare themselves to others on relevant dimensions. When a woman compares herself to an idealised media image, she almost invariably falls short, resulting in dissatisfaction with her own body. Experimentally, state appearance comparison has been shown to at least partially mediate the effect of exposure to idealised images on body dissatisfaction (Tiggemann & McGill, 2004; Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015).

Health and fitness-related images such as fitspiration aim to engage and motivate women to partake in healthy behaviours such as exercise. Recently, Tiggemann and Zaccardo (2015) established a link between acute viewing of fitspiration images and a single-item measure of inspiration to exercise. To date, research on different

types of ideal images (e.g., Benton & Karazsia, 2015) has not examined the effect of these images on exercise intentions or actual exercise behaviour. Given the physical and psychological benefits of exercise (Buckworth, Dishman, O'Connor, & Tomporowski, 2013), it is important to determine whether certain types of idealised images actually motivate engagement in exercise and/or whether their tendency to promote negative body image deters women from engaging in exercise. As fitspiration images have been shown to increase exercise inspiration (Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015), it is anticipated that these types of images are likely to also promote actual exercise behaviour. By doing so, strategies can be devised to better motivate engagement in physical activity.

The present study aimed to investigate the effects of fitness-idealised images in comparison to traditional thin ideal images, on body dissatisfaction and exercise behaviour (distance travelled on a treadmill over a 10-minute period), under the framework of Social Comparison Theory. This was done using an experimental design examining the impact of three different types of images (thin ideal, athletic ideal, and muscular ideal). It was predicted that exposure to both thin ideal and athletic ideal images emphasising thinness, would lead to higher levels of body dissatisfaction and state social comparison than exposure to muscular ideal images. It was expected that this effect would be moderated by trait appearance comparison. Given their focus on promoting fitness, it was also predicted that exposure to 'fitspiration' images (athletic ideal and muscular ideal) would lead to a greater level of exercise (measured as distanced travelled on a treadmill over a 10-minute period) in comparison to exposure to thin ideal images that do not focus on fitness.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

Participants were 106 female university students recruited from Flinders University in South Australia. On average they were 20.60 years old ( $SD = 1.85$ ) with a mean body mass index (BMI) of 22.65 ( $SD = 3.93$ ), which falls within the 'healthy weight' range.

### 2.2. Design

The study employed a between-subjects experimental design with image type (thin ideal, athletic ideal, muscular ideal) as the independent variable. The major dependent variables were state body dissatisfaction (measured pre and post exposure), state social comparison, and exercise behaviour. Trait social comparison was tested as a moderator.

### 2.3. Materials

#### 2.3.1. Experimental manipulation: image type

Three sets of visual stimuli were created for the study, each containing 15 images. Images were sourced from Google Images and Instagram, forms of media commonly accessed by the target population and available for public use (Sensis, 2016). To choose images, the keywords entered were 'thinspiration' for thin ideal images; 'athletic fitspiration' for athletic ideal; and 'muscular fitspiration' for muscular ideal images. The image sets contained women of different racial backgrounds and captured a variety of activities to reflect the types of images commonly seen on social media (Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2016). The final sets of images (15 per condition) were chosen from a larger set of 85 images that were rated equivalently on levels of visual quality and physical attractiveness (1 = *not at all* to 7 = *very much*) by 10 independent female raters aged 17–25 years. Thin ideal images were rated high on thinness ( $M = 5.85$ ;  $SD = 0.08$ ); medium on

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