



Brief research report

A content analysis of thinspiration images and text posts on Tumblr



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ABSTRACT

Thinspiration is content advocating extreme weight loss by means of images and/or text posts. While past content analyses have examined thinspiration content on social media and other websites, no research to date has examined thinspiration content on Tumblr. Over the course of a week, 222 images and text posts were collected after entering the keyword 'thinspiration' into the Tumblr search bar. These images were then rated on a variety of characteristics. The majority of thinspiration images included a thin woman adhering to culturally based beauty, often posing in a manner that accentuated her thinness or sexuality. The most common themes for thinspiration text posts included dieting/restraint, weight loss, food guilt, and body guilt. The thinspiration content on Tumblr appears to be consistent with that on other mediums. Future research should utilize experimental methods to examine the potential effects of consuming thinspiration content on Tumblr.

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1. Introduction

Recent research suggests a link between social media use, body dissatisfaction, and disordered eating, among other negative consequences (Holland & Tiggemann, 2016; Mabe, Forney, & Keel, 2014; Pepin & Endresz, 2015). Work by Pepin and Endresz (2015) determined that social media use is associated with more pressure to lose weight, to be more attractive, and to alter appearance. Additionally, Mabe et al. (2014) conducted an experimental study in which they found social media use to be associated with weight and shape concerns in women. A review by Holland and Tiggemann (2016) confirms that there is indeed a relationship between social media and eating disorder symptoms, especially among women.

Several social media researchers have directed their efforts to the examination of pro-eating disorder content, which advocates both anorexic and bulimic behaviors as a valid means of losing weight (Lapinski, 2009). Nearly all pro-eating disorder websites are run by a female administrator who provides information to consumers on how to successfully engage in highly restrictive eating (Borzekowski, Schenk, Wilson, & Peebles, 2010). Pro-anorexia (pro-ana) websites can also contain 'thinspiration' or content idealizing thinness and rejecting larger bodies (Borzekowski et al., 2010; Lapinski, 2009; Rouleau & Von Ranson, 2011).

Experimental studies on the topics of pro-ana and thinspiration have found that female visitors to these websites are more likely to think about their own weight in the future (Bardone-Cone & Cass, 2007) and reduce their caloric intake (Jett, LaPorte, & Wanchisn, 2010); however, other research has demonstrated that exposure to pro-anorexia websites either increases women's satisfaction with their own bodies (Delforterie, Larsen, Bardone-Cone, & Scholte, 2014) or is unrelated to one's level of appearance self-esteem (Theis, 2011). The contradictory findings in these studies may be explained by earlier research which demonstrates that internalization of the thin ideal and social comparison moderate the relationship between traditional media and appearance focused anxiety (Dittmar & Howard, 2004), and therefore certain females will be more affected by these messages.

Additionally, while some internet servers have attempted to block websites with pro-ana content, thinspiration messages are prevalent and may have negative consequences for viewers (Boepple & Thompson, 2016). Ghaznavi and Taylor (2015) found that thinspiration images on Pinterest and Instagram often include a bony image of a women, typically displayed in a sexually suggestive manner, and that the more sexually suggestive the image, the more social endorsement it receives. Furthermore, in a content analysis comparing fitspiration and thinspiration websites, the thinspiration websites contained significantly more content related to weight loss, more positive comments about being thin, more food guilt inducing messages, and more photos of females engaging in thin poses, such as angling the body at 45°, than fitspiration

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websites, which are intended to promote a fit lifestyle (Boepple & Thompson, 2016).

One under-researched social media outlet in regard to thinspiration is Tumblr. Tumblr is a social media website in which users create blogs to which they can either post original content or reblog content from other users. It is home to 347.7 million blogs as of May 2017 (About Tumblr, n.d.), making it less popular than both Facebook and Instagram but more popular than Twitter and Pinterest (Chaffey, 2017). Tumblr users typically follow individuals that they do not know in real life; this adds to the appeal of the social media website in that users feel they can post anything they want without judgment from their peers (Reeve, 2016). Instead of attempting to portray only the best parts of their lives as is popular on other social media networks such as Instagram and Facebook, Tumblr users openly confess their hardships, often in the form of self-deprecating humor. Themes such as loneliness, self-loathing, self-harm, and suicide are not uncommon (Cavazos-Rehg et al., 2017).

While Tumblr might provide a safe haven for teenagers and young adults to express their true selves, it is possible that the anonymous nature of Tumblr could influence the consumption of pro-eating disorder content. There has been speculation that Tumblr's anonymity has led to an increase in content glorifying self-harm on the website, including thinspiration content (Menshikova, 2014). To our knowledge, the only study investigating eating disorder content on Tumblr determined thinspiration to be more common on Tumblr than Twitter (Branley & Covey, 2017), providing some evidence for the aforementioned speculation. In this study, an inductive method was applied in which the researchers developed a coding scheme based on initial review of the social media websites and then used this same coding scheme to rate the presence of various variables on both Twitter and Tumblr. However, this study focused on eating disorder content more broadly and did not provide specifics as to the content present under the thinspiration tag on Tumblr.

The present study evaluated both images and text posts under the tag 'thinspiration' on Tumblr. Consistent with the findings of the previous studies that thinspiration content includes primarily images of women (Boepple & Thompson, 2016; Borzekowski et al., 2010; Ghaznavi & Taylor, 2014) and particularly affects female viewers (Bardone-Cone & Cass, 2007; Delforterie et al., 2014; Jett et al., 2010), the current investigation focused only on images of females. Text posts were not isolated to only those posted by females as it would be impossible to know the gender of the posters for certain. It was hypothesized that both images and text posts would include themes of dietary restriction and excessive exercise as a means of achieving the thin-ideal, and that sexually objectifying images would be common, consistent with prior literature on the topic (Boepple & Thompson, 2016; Borzekowski et al., 2010; Ghaznavi & Taylor, 2014; Rouleau & Von Ranson, 2011).

2. Method

2.1. Selection of images and text posts

For the purposes of this study images and text posts were found by typing 'thinspiration' into the search bar on the Tumblr homepage and selecting the first 50 images or text posts present over a seven-day period in February, with images and text posts collected at differing two-hour intervals between 7:00 AM and 7:00 PM across the week. This amounted to 350 images and text posts collected initially over seven days. Our sample size was guided by previous studies of similar natures (Borzekowski et al., 2010; Branley & Covey, 2017; Ghaznavi & Taylor, 2015). Because we were only interested in images of women for the current study, we

Table 1
Descriptions of Coded Images and Text Posts.

Variable	Description
Image Variables	
Thin	Corresponds to figures 1–2 on Swami's Photographic Figure Rating Scale (Swami, Salem, Furham, & Touvé, 2008)
Muscular	Visible muscle tone
Curvy/Overweight	Corresponds to figures 6–10 on Swami's Photographic Figure Rating Scale (Swami et al., 2008)
Culturally Based Beauty Ideals	
Blemish free skin	Blemish free skin, neat and shiny hair, symmetrical features, white and straight teeth, lithe figure, supple breasts, or other culturally based beauty norms
Bathing Suit	Wearing only bathing suit
Underwear	Wearing only underwear
Sexual Objectification	Wearing little clothing (including bathing suit or underwear) or displayed in a sexual context
Before/After	Before/after photo demonstrating weight loss
Thin Pose	Posed to appear smaller (e.g., angling body at 45°, putting hands on hips, crossing one leg over the other, etc.)
Text Post Variables	
Sexual Objectification	Promotes women as objects of sexual pleasure
Fat Stigma	Implies negativity in regard to being overweight
Thin Praise	Implies positivity in regard to being thin
Exercise for Appearance	Encourages exercise for appearance related reasons
Food Guilt	Guilt-inducing messages about food
Dieting/Restraint	Discusses dieting or restraint around food
Losing Weight or Fat	Discusses losing weight or fat
Objectifying Messages	Encourages viewership of the body as an observable object
Body/Weight Guilt	Guilt-inducing messages about body or weight

excluded any images of males. Posts were also excluded if they were duplicates. After exclusion of males and duplicates (128 posts), a total of 222 images and text posts remained.

2.2. Ratings of the variables

Variables used in the coding process were selected from two previous studies examining similar content (Boepple, Ata, Rum, & Thompson, 2016; Boepple & Thompson, 2016). The image variables coded for included 'thin,' 'curvy/overweight,' 'muscular,' 'culturally based beauty ideals,' 'bathing suit,' 'underwear,' 'sexually objectifying image,' 'before/after photo,' and 'thin pose.' The text post variables coded for included 'sexually objectifying text,' 'fat/weight stigmatization,' 'thin praise,' 'exercise for appearance,' 'food guilt,' 'dieting/restraint,' 'losing weight or fat,' 'objectifying messages,' and 'body/weight guilt.' Descriptions of these variables can be found in Table 1.

2.3. Training of coders

Two coders, both undergraduate students studying psychology, rated the images and text posts included in this content analysis for all variables assessed. Images and text posts were coded with a '1' or '0' by both coders for each variable to indicate either the presence or absence of that variable. Images were coded with the nine variables specific to images, and text posts were coded with the nine variables specific to text posts. If an item included both an image and a text post, that item was coded for all 18 variables. Both raters participated in a training session specific to this content analysis prior to actual coding in which they coded sample images of thinspiration content obtained from the 'thinspiration' tag on Tumblr. Inter-rater agreement at this time was 95.75%. After actual coding took place, Cohen's Kappa was calculated to determine inter-rater reliability. Cohen's Kappa ranged from good to excellent (.69–1.0) for all variables assessed. Any discrepancies in the coding were resolved via discussion between the two coders.

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