



Brief research report

## Strong is the new skinny: A content analysis of fitspiration websites



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### ABSTRACT

“Fitspiration” websites are media that aim to inspire people to live healthy and fit lifestyles through motivating images and text related to exercise and diet. Given the link between similar Internet content (i.e., healthy living blogs) and problematic messages, we hypothesized that content on these sites would over-emphasize appearance and promote problematic messages regarding exercise and diet. Keywords “fitspo” and “fitspiration” were entered into search engines. The first 10 images and text from 51 individual websites were rated on a variety of characteristics. Results indicated that a majority of messages found on fitspiration websites focused on appearance. Other common themes included content promoting exercise for appearance-motivated reasons and content promoting dietary restraint. “Fitspiration” websites are a source of messages that reinforce over-valuation of physical appearance, eating concerns, and excessive exercise. Further research is needed to examine the impact viewing such content has on participants’ psychological health.

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### Introduction

People often turn to the media (e.g., TV, the Internet) to determine appropriate behavior and cultural appearance standards. A substantial body of research indicates that exposure to culturally-based beauty ideals (e.g., the thin-ideal) is related to increased body dissatisfaction, internalization of the thin-ideal, and disordered eating-related attitudes and behaviors among women (Grabe, Ward, & Hyde, 2008). However, little research has examined the impact other beauty ideals, such as the athletic ideal (an “extremely fit, toned body in addition to extreme thinness,” Homan, 2010, p. 240) have on body image-related constructs. One study suggests adolescents who strongly internalize media-based appearance-standards engage in higher levels of physical activity compared to youths who do not internalize these standards, and thus media have a responsibility of cultivating and reinforcing realistic and healthy norms of appearance, physical activity, and body image (Taveras et al., 2004). Sabiston and Chandler (2010) found that women exposed to images of fitness models had higher body-related anxiety following exposure than women not exposed to such images, suggesting that, similar to the thin-ideal, media-based

athletic body ideals may negatively impact body image-related constructs in women.

Analogous to thin-ideal internalization, internalizing athletic ideals may negatively impact the psychological health of women. Homan (2010) found that college women who idealize athletic, rather than exclusively thin, body types were more likely to report feeling guilty when missing an exercise session. Young girls who report wanting toned muscles were more likely to use products such as anabolic/injectable steroids (Field et al., 2005). These results suggest that media-based athletic ideals may be detrimental for female viewers.

For individuals who endorse high levels of internalization, upward appearance-related comparisons to media images of the thin or athletic ideal may motivate exercise and dieting behaviors. Although exercise has been consistently linked to decreased body dissatisfaction (e.g., Campbell & Hausenblas, 2009), evidence suggests engaging in health-behaviors for appearance-motivated reasons is associated with negative body image and eating outcomes. Adkins and Keel (2005) found that young adults who exercised for appearance-related reasons scored higher on measures of compulsive exercise and disordered eating. Exercising for appearance-motivated reasons is correlated with higher depressive and ED symptoms (DiBartolo, Lin, Montoya, Neal, & Shaffer, 2007). Motivations to engage in exercise have also been found to moderate the relationship between exercise frequency and positive body image (Homan & Tylka, 2014). More specifically, the relationship between exercise frequency and positive body

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image was weaker among undergraduate women who endorsed high versus low-to-average levels of appearance-related exercise motivation.

Content analyses illuminate potentially damaging media messages. Results of a content analysis of “pro-ana” websites indicated that “thininspirational” content, motivating individuals to engage in eating disorder-related behaviors, was present on 85% of the websites (Borzekowski, Schenk, Wilson, & Peebles, 2010). A more recent study, which extended the literature to photo-sharing social media websites (i.e., Twitter and Pinterest), found that such sites include images promoting a “segmented, extremely thin, and sexually suggestive” ideal and may be paired with pro-eating disorder text (Ghaznavi & Taylor, 2015, p. 60).

Limited research has explored the impact viewing such content has on readers; however, results of one study suggest viewers exposed to pro-ana sites experience lower social self-esteem, and report being more likely to exercise and think about their weight in the future, compared to viewers of a control website (Bardone-Cone & Cass, 2007). A recent meta-analysis (Rodgers, Lowy, Halperin, & Franko, 2016) revealed a significant effect of exposure to pro-eating disorder websites on body dissatisfaction ( $d=0.41$ ) and dieting ( $d=0.68$ ). Together, these results suggest viewing content that idealizes thinness to the extreme and inundates viewers with the thin-ideal is immediately harmful for viewers and may lead to an increase in future harmful behaviors. This supposition is also supported by Aubrey’s work (2010) demonstrating that women who were exposed to magazine headlines endorsing appearance rather than health messages had higher levels of body shame and a greater motivation to exercise for appearance-based reasons.

Even Internet-content that seemingly promotes healthy lifestyle change may contain problematic messages regarding body image. Recent content analytic research on Healthy Living Blogs (i.e., websites that supposedly document healthy lifestyles of bloggers) led researchers to conclude the majority of messages found on these blogs normalize restrained eating, food-based guilt, excessive exercise behaviors, objectification of the body, overweight stigmatization, and praise of thin body ideals (Boepple & Thompson, 2014). These messages are alarming, given the links between these variables and poor body image-related constructs. Excessive, or compulsive, exercise often occurs before the onset of an eating disorder (Davis, Blackmore, Katzman, & Fox, 2005), and is associated with poorer outcomes (Strober, Freeman, & Morrell, 1997) and higher rates of relapse (Carter, Blackmore, Sutandar-Pinnock, & Woodside, 2004).

“Fitspiration” websites are a relatively new addition to Internet media intended to inspire people to live healthy and fit lifestyles through motivating exercise- and diet-related images and text. These sites differ from similar media content such as Healthy Living Blogs in that these sites do not focus on the life of a “blogger,” but rather more generally promote fitness messages. A recent experimental study suggests that while exposure to fitspiration images indeed increases viewers’ inspiration to engage in healthy behaviors, it also leads to increased body dissatisfaction and negative mood and decreased state appearance-related self-esteem (Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015). Previous research comparing Fitspiration and pro-anorexia sites established that Fitspiration sites share some similarities to pro-anorexia sites (Boepple & Thompson, 2016); however, this research focused on comparing specific, and limited, themes. To date, an in-depth research analysis of content present on fitspiration sites has not been conducted. Based on previous content analytic work (Boepple & Thompson, 2016), it was hypothesized that content found on these sites would emphasize appearance and thin/athletic ideals, and promote messages related to dietary restriction and exercise for appearance-based reasons.

## Method

### Selection of Fitspiration Sites

To acquire our sample of Fitspiration websites, keywords “fitspo” and “fitspiration” were entered separately into three search engines (i.e., Google, Yahoo!, and Bing). The study examined fitspiration websites, therefore terms “fitspiration and “fitspo,” rather than general phrases such as “health,” which may have resulted in more general website results, were utilized. We defined “fitspiration” websites as sites which either (a) described themselves as promoting “fitspiration” or (b) included the term “fitspiration” in either the website’s name or url. Any site not meeting these criteria was discarded. For each keyword entered into a search engine, the first three webpages of results were cataloged, generating a total of 84 websites.

The decision to catalogue results from the first three webpages was based on the research of Hindman, Tsioutsoulouklis, and Johnson (2003) who concluded that, in conducting Internet-based research, researchers can focus on the most heavily linked ones (sites) since they are the most widely read and influential. Websites that overlapped or had been deactivated were removed from the sample, yielding a final sample size of 51 websites.

### Ratings of Fitspiration Sites

Variables used in the coding process were deductively derived from similar existing literature (Boepple & Thompson, 2014, 2016). Images on fitspiration sites were classified in three ways: (a) text, (b) picture, or (c) picture with accompanying text. The first 10 “images” on each website were coded.

A description of the variables used in coding is provided as follows. First, Swami, Salem, Furnham, and Tovée’s (2008) Photographic Figure Rating Scale was used to assess Body Type. Any woman perceived as being below the “underweight” range was coded as “objectively thin.” Likewise, women perceived as being above the “overweight” range were coded as objectively curvy or overweight. Women with visible muscle tone were coded as muscular. Second, Culturally-Based Beauty Ideals was defined as being/having clear, blemish free skin; neat, shiny hair; symmetrical features; straight, white teeth; lithe/lanky figure; and supple breasts. Third, images of women in bathing suits or underwear, and text promoting women as an object for sexual pleasure were coded as Sexually Objectifying. Fourth, images showing visual changes in the body labeled “before” and “after” were coded as Thin Ideal Messages. Furthermore, prior to coding, coders examined online guides demonstrating how to “look thin” in photographs. Women displaying poses described in the articles (e.g., angling the body at 45 degrees, putting hands on the hips, tilting the head down, crossing one leg in front of the other, etc.) were coded as posing to appear thinner or smaller. Messages that negatively portrayed being overweight/having fat (e.g., “suck it up now and you won’t have to suck it in later”) were coded as stigmatizing fat/overweight. Messages that positively portrayed thinness (e.g., “do it for the skinny jeans”) were coded as thin praise. Fifth, Exercise and Food Messages were coded. Messages encouraging viewers to exercise for appearance-motivated reasons (e.g., toning) were coded as exercise-appearance. Messages encouraging viewers to feel guilt over food (e.g., “so you’d rather have that bag of potato chips” over an image of a woman’s flat stomach) were coded as negative/guilt inducing food. Messages encouraging dietary restriction (e.g., a meal plan prohibiting soda and processed food) were coded as dieting/restriction.

Two independent raters coded all websites. The first rater was the first author, a female graduate student in clinical psychology. The second rater was the third author, an undergraduate female

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