



“Exercise to be fit, not skinny”: The effect of fitspiration imagery on women’s body image



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ABSTRACT

Fitspiration is an online trend designed to inspire viewers towards a healthier lifestyle by promoting exercise and healthy food. The present study aimed to experimentally investigate the impact of fitspiration images on women's body image. Participants were 130 female undergraduate students who were randomly assigned to view either a set of Instagram fitspiration images or a control set of travel images presented on an iPad. Results showed that acute exposure to fitspiration images led to increased negative mood and body dissatisfaction and decreased state appearance self-esteem relative to travel images. Importantly, regression analyses showed that the effects of image type were mediated by state appearance comparison. Thus it was concluded that fitspiration can have negative unintended consequences for body image. The results offer support to general sociocultural models of media effects on body image, and extend these to “new” media.

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Introduction

An extensive research literature has documented widespread body dissatisfaction among women, particularly with body shape and weight. This body dissatisfaction is generally attributed to sociocultural factors, with the mass media considered the most powerful and pervasive force (e.g., Thompson, Heinberg, Altabe, & Tantleff-Dunn, 1999; Tiggemann, 2011). Indeed, the link between media exposure and body dissatisfaction has been supported by extensive correlational (for meta-analyses, see Grabe, Ward, & Hyde, 2008; Levine & Murnen, 2009) and experimental evidence (for meta-analyses, see Grabe et al., 2008; Groesz, Levine, & Murnen, 2002; Want, 2009). Across the studies there is a reliable small-to-moderate negative effect of thin-ideal fashion magazine or television images on body satisfaction, particularly for those women who already have significant body concerns. More recent correlational research has established a similar link between time spent on the Internet and body dissatisfaction in adult and adolescent women (Bair, Kelly, Serdar, & Mazzeo, 2012; Tiggemann & Miller, 2010; Tiggemann & Slater, 2013, 2014). As yet, however,

there has been little experimental research on the effect of newer media formats on body image (Perloff, 2014).

Social Networking Sites and Body Image

One particular form of Internet media use that has increased markedly in popularity are social networking sites, such as Facebook, Twitter and Myspace. These allow users to create public or semi-public personal profiles, to share photos and information, and to interact easily with ‘friends’ in their networks. Recent Australian statistics suggest that approximately 69% of adults use social networking sites, with 46% doing so at least daily (Sensis, 2014). A small but growing number of correlational studies have investigated the use of Facebook in particular and demonstrated links with internalization of the thin ideal and body dissatisfaction (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2015; Mabe, Forney, & Keel, 2014; Meier & Gray, 2014; Tiggemann & Miller, 2010; Tiggemann & Slater, 2013).

In a more detailed examination of the components of Facebook, Meier and Gray (2014) determined that it was not the total time spent on Facebook, but instead the amount of time spent engaging in Facebook “photo activity” (e.g., posting photos, viewing friends’ photos), that was related to body image concerns. Similarly, Mabe et al. (2014) found that placing greater importance on receiving comments on their photos and more frequent untagging of photos of themselves was associated with disturbed body image. Thus image-based social media platforms may have stronger associations than Facebook with women’s body image concerns.

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The present study sought to use Instagram as the medium. Instagram is one of the most popular social networking platforms, with currently 4 million active Australian users (Murton, 2015). The site is unique in that it is purely dedicated to the posting and sharing of photos, either with friends (on a private profile) or the wider public (on a public profile). Users can post their own personally created images, as well as share other users' images, so that they appear on their profile. The website also allows users to "tag" their images with identifying words, making it easy to search for themed content.

The Role of Social Comparison

The negative effects of media exposure have generally been attributed to the process of social comparison (Levine & Murnen, 2009; Want, 2009). Social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) argues that women evaluate their own appearance by comparing themselves with the cultural ideals of beauty and thinness presented in the media. Almost invariably this will be an upward comparison by which women fall short, resulting in dissatisfaction with their own appearance and body (Strahan, Wilson, Cressman, & Buote, 2006; Want, 2009). This reasoning is supported by experimental evidence that the observed negative effect of media exposure on body dissatisfaction is at least partially mediated by engaging in social comparison while viewing thin ideal images (Bessenoff, 2006; Tiggemann & McGill, 2004; Tiggemann, Polivy, & Hargreaves, 2009; Tiggemann & Polivy, 2010).

Social comparison can also be conceptualized as a trait. There exist relatively stable individual differences in the general tendency to engage in social comparison. This has been found to be a strong predictor of body dissatisfaction in its own right (for a meta-analysis, see Myers & Crowther, 2009), as well as a moderator of the effect of thin-ideal images on body-focused anxiety in an experimental study (Dittmar & Howard, 2004).

There are a number of reasons that social comparison may be particularly pertinent to social networking sites. First, the speed and ease with which individuals can connect to their peers gives rise to the opportunity for ready and multiple comparisons (Tiggemann & Miller, 2010). Further, these comparisons are likely to be made with at least somewhat idealized images, in that users generally post only photographs in which they look good or are doing something 'cool', and even these can be digitally altered (Krämer & Winter, 2008). Instagram, for example, offers the selection of a number of possible filters to enhance the appearance of the photo. Second, according to social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954), the drive for self-evaluation causes people to seek out comparisons with others who are similar rather than dissimilar to themselves. Thus peers provide more important appearance-comparison targets than models or celebrities (Heinberg & Thompson, 1995). In support, Cash, Cash, and Butters (1983) found that women exposed to photos of attractive peers had lower self-ratings of attractiveness than women exposed to the same photos presented as professional models. Third, social networking sites like Facebook and Instagram allow users to "like" and make comments on the photos. Thus social networking sites may provide a pervasive and intense form of "appearance conversations" that have been shown to be associated with poorer body image (Clark & Tiggemann, 2006; Jones, Vigfusdottir, & Lee, 2004).

A few correlational studies have explicitly examined social comparison and Facebook use. For example, Meier and Gray (2014) found that Facebook users scored higher on trait appearance comparison than non-users. Further, Fardouly and Vartanian (2015) showed that trait appearance comparison mediated the relationship between frequency of Facebook use and body image concerns.

Fitspiration

A recent trend offered by the Internet is "fitspiration". Fitspiration (the amalgamation of the words *fitness* and *inspiration*) consists of images that are, as described by one website, designed to motivate people to exercise and pursue a healthier lifestyle (Abena, 2013). Thus fitspiration has been put forward as a healthy antidote to another Internet-based trend known as "thinspiration" (amalgamation of *thin* and *inspiration*). Thinspiration consists of images of emaciated women and accompanying text designed to inspire viewers to lose weight and promote an eating disorder lifestyle (Borzekowski, Schenk, Wilson, & Peebles, 2010; Ghaznavi & Taylor, 2015). Exposure to such material has been found to be damaging to body image in correlational (Harper, Sperry, & Thompson, 2008) and experimental studies (Bardone-Cone & Cass, 2007), but fortunately is largely limited to a small number of pro-eating disorder websites.

In contrast, fitspiration is designed to inspire people to achieve an empowered body image through exercise and healthy eating ("What is Fitspiration", 2013). It is widely promulgated on a range of websites, most notably the social networking site of Instagram. To illustrate, a search of the "fitspiration" hashtag on Instagram returned over 3.3 million images. Further, when a user posts a picture to Instagram, it also appears on all of their friends' feeds. In addition, as many people link their Instagram accounts with their Facebook accounts, any content posted on Instagram is automatically also posted to Facebook. Thus, while users can actively seek out or 'follow' fitspiration imagery on Instagram by searching the "fitspiration" hashtag, they are also likely to experience some inadvertent exposure.

A perusal of Instagram images tagged with the "fitspiration" hashtag indicates that photos are mainly of women, typically engaging in exercise or dressed in exercise gear, or of healthy food. Sometimes these are overlain with inspirational quotes, either general in nature (e.g., "We don't grow when things are easy; we grow when we face challenges") or fitness-related (e.g., "Exercise to be fit, not skinny"). Overall health and well-being are strongly endorsed through the promotion of healthy eating, exercise and self-care. The general philosophy is one which emphasises strength and empowerment. For example, a common slogan amongst fitspiration advocates is "Strong is the new skinny". Thus fitspiration has the potential for considerable positive social influence on physical and mental health.

However, there are several aspects of fitspiration which may raise some concern. First, the great majority of women in the images exhibit one particular body shape: a relatively thin and toned figure. While this figure is less thin and more muscular than that of the models typically found in fashion magazines, it is still unattainable for most women (Krane, Stiles-ShIPLEY, Waldron, & Michalenok, 2001). Further, the repeated promotion of only this one body shape carries the implication that only thin and toned bodies can be fit and healthy. In addition, the images are of everyday women rather than fashion models, and hence likely to give rise to greater social comparison. Second, many of fitspiration's attempts to inspire women towards health and fitness focus on the appearance-related benefits of such a lifestyle. Example quotations include "Do it for looking in the mirror and feeling good about what you see" and "Suck it up now and you won't have to suck it in later". Research has demonstrated that exercise motivated by appearance reasons rather than health or enjoyment is associated with negative body image (e.g., Strelan, Mehaffey, & Tiggemann, 2003). Third, a number of the images have objectifying features, such as particular poses or a focus on particular body parts (e.g., washboard abs). Exposure to objectified images has been associated with self-objectification and body dissatisfaction (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Harper & Tiggemann, 2008). Indeed, the medium of Instagram might be seen

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