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Instagram's '*Fitspiration*' Trend and Its Effect on Young Women's Self-Esteem

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Abstract

Increasingly, sports and fitness brands are using a variety of social media platforms. Instagram has come to the fore in the area of fitness, asserting itself as the *de facto* channel for users to catalogue their athletic activities, and offering inspirational training advice to followers. Considering this increasingly-popular '*fitspiration*' trend, we see a significant impact upon young female users self-esteem, specifically in relation to their perception of body imagery. Hence, this paper will develop understanding of fitness brands' social media activities by investigating the impact of Instagram upon the self-esteem of young women. Nascent literature has examined influence upon self-esteem among women throughout a variety of advertising mediums, however, none have explored the connection between self-esteem and social media. Accordingly, semi-structured interviews with female sports enthusiasts are proposed to uncover opinions and perceptions relating to their use of Instagram. Initial findings reveal a strong correlation between participant perception of the '*fitspiration*' social media accounts they subscribe to, as well as the impact upon their self-esteem. Ultimately, this paper makes two theoretical contributions relating to the effect of social media upon female self-esteem, as well as contributing to a wider debate of body image within a modern digital economy.

Keywords: Instagram, fitspiration, women's self-esteem, body imagery, digital economy

1 Introduction

Female digital natives are familiar with technology from a young age and engage in "a culture of participation ... to share content from reviews, ratings, photos, stories and more." (Soloman and Tuten, 2015:6). Instagram is one of the social media platforms at the forefront of this participation culture, claiming that 80 million photos are shared on its platform each day (Moth, 2015). Of its 400 million monthly active users, it is most popular with younger women aged between 16 and 24 (Moth, 2015). According to Instagram (2016) it is "*a fun and quirky way to share your life with friends through a series of pictures. Snap a photo with your mobile phone, then choose a filter to transform*

the image.” It is this transformation of the photo using an editing function and applying filters (e.g., alterations to colour, texture and lighting) that has come under criticism for its ability to distort the story the photo is telling (Bevan, 2012). Arguably, this manipulation alters young women’s perspective of reality, especially when they spend up 27 hours per week online, 14% of which is on Instagram (Ofcom, 2015). Equally, Instagram is renowned for extremely high levels of engagement amongst users when compared to other social platforms, such as Twitter (Moth, 2015). According to Morrison (2015) Instagram provides its users with the ability to connect with and develop communities with similar interests via the use of hashtags.

A recent trend, which has emerged on Instagram, has generated the name ‘*fitspiration*’, an amalgamation of the words fitness and inspiration. Users post photos to the hashtag ‘*fitspiration*’ to promote health, fitness, nutrition and exercise. Williamson (2013) and Adams (2014) both argue it is promoting thinness, suggesting it could cause anorexia, depression, body dissatisfaction and lowered self-esteem rather than inspiring young women. This is further compounded by women’s mainstream media, which informs readers about “inspiring fitness girls to follow on Instagram” (Fisher, 2015). Conversely, Elle magazine has explored women’s feelings about being bombarded with perfect, flawless images and the pressure these exert (Fleming, 2014). New trends like ‘*fitspiration*’ develop quickly on social media and companies try hard to keep one-step ahead (DeMers, 2015). As brands aim to join in with this latest trend, there is a blurring of lines between fitness brands marketing communications, and the ‘*fitspiration*’ trend. Hence, it is necessary to understand how this trend is affecting consumers, and in particular young women. To this effect, this study explored ‘*fitspiration*’ imagery posted by fitness brands on Instagram, and its effects upon young females. Specifically, we sought to uncover whether through this imagery, young women experience a discrepancy between their ‘ideal self’ and actual self, as well as impacting their self-esteem.

2 Literature Review

Instagram’s ‘*fitspiration*’ phenomenon displays hundreds of thousand images of women in gym wear and swimwear daily, all displaying highly toned figures. As this paper is exploring imagery in a marketing context, it is important to understand that this is not a unique concept to Instagram. Imagery is utilised extensively as part of marketing campaigns, with each image carefully chosen, cropped and edited to carry symbolic and emotional meaning (Branthwaite, 2002). There have been many previous studies into more established social media sites, like Facebook and Twitter exploring the impact on self-esteem (Vogel *et al.*, 2014; Kende *et al.*, 2015). However, empirical studies of Instagram are limited to date.

Gerbner and Gross’ (1976) Cultivation Theory, could go some way to explain why Instagram is so influential. Their original work sought to explain why people watching a lot of television had a distorted perception of reality. Their work found views of reality shifted based on what was portrayed in television programmes, rather than ‘real world’ experiences. This even held true despite these programmes being acknowledged as

fictional (Gerbner and Gross, 1976). Further work by Bryant and Zillmann (1986:6) found that extensive use of television means society: *"cannot avoid absorbing or dealing with its recurrent patterns, probably many times each day."* A similar premise to social media consumption in today's society, with young people spending vast amounts of time online. Windahl *et al.*(1992) found regular television viewers viewed the world differently to those who do not watch television as extensively. While no work to date has directly addressed the relevance of Cultivation Theory in a social media environment, Morgan and Shanahan (2010) argue it is more applicable today than ever before. This study aims to extend this theme in a modern social media environment, investigating whether constant exposure to *'fitspiration'* images has any significant effect on young women's perception of reality.

One of the key features of Instagram is the ability to distort the reality depicted in the photos with options to manipulate photos via editing and filters (Araujo *et al.*, 2014). Interestingly Dumenco (2012) made an excellent point when he stated: *"deep down [society knows] that the digitally manipulated lie is more appealing than the truth"*. It was interesting to explore via this paper whether young women all very aware of the manipulation of images were still affected by them.

Another theory that goes some way to explaining what happens when women see a picture of another woman is Social Comparison Theory. Still applicable today, Festinger and Katz (1954) found that humans will evaluate themselves by comparison with another. In particular, Bessenoff (2006) found people who have body dissatisfaction or internalise the media's depiction of the thin ideal are especially vulnerable to social comparison. Upward comparisons to people far more advantaged can result in a person left feeling more positive or a person feeling more negative (Krizan and Gibbons, 2014). For example, a person could be left feeling proud or even inspired by the person they are looking up to, or instead feel inferior, worthless, envious or discouraged. It is possible these negative comparisons could be linked or have an effect on self-esteem, which is susceptible to change as self-esteem is based on how we feel (Carlock, 1999). Self-esteem is developed by: *"the people who surround you, the groups and organisations to which you belong, the subcultures with which you identify, and world events"* (Carlock, 1999: 145). Furthermore, work by Maiz-Arevalo and Garcia-Gomez's (2013) suggests that social media is one of the elements which people may base their self-esteem on. They explored compliments and conversations on social media and their effect on users. In addition, body image is also strongly related to self-esteem, as Carlock (1999:207) explains: *"women in particular are persecuted for their weight"* due to what the media depicts as being ideal, and importantly *"the more congruent our real and ideal selves are, the higher our self-esteem"*.

Furthering our knowledge of self-esteem is the theoretical area self-discrepancy, a concept whereby individuals have an idyllic identity (ideal self) they would like to achieve, and a separate view of how they see themselves at present time (actual self) (Higgins 1987). According to Bessenoff (2006), people who have body dissatisfaction or who internalise the media's depiction of the thin idea, are commonly known to take part in social comparison. Finally, Richins (1991) found if a female model is viewed by another woman, the model provides a standard to compare themselves to. Moreover, an array

of theoretical standpoints exist from which to investigate the impact of *'fitspiration'* imagery upon the self-esteem and notions of body image among young women today.

3. Research Method

The nature of the research objectives lend themselves to qualitative interviews that study interviewees' perceptions as well as the observable reality. Initially, a short, structured interview was conducted to ascertain that interviewees actually used Instagram and were aware of the *'fitspiration'* trend, prior to their participation in a semi-structured interview. Additionally, a repertory grid technique based on Kelly's (1955) personal construct theory was proposed to elicit further data from the interviewee. The repertory grid technique was used to explore the participants' personal constructs with regards to the positive or negative effects of *'fitspiration'* imagery on Instagram. Individual questions within the semi-structured interviews were based around how much time the interviewees spent on Instagram, how real they believed images on Instagram to be and their opinions of the *'fitspiration'* trend. A variety of images taken from Instagram of the *'fitspiration'* trend were shown to all interviewees, to inspire comments and probe discussions surrounding each participant's thoughts and feelings on the images, see figure 1 below. A convenience sample of 12 young women aged between 18 and 24 was established, based in the North West of England for consistency of views within a localised area. Primary data collected was therein analysed thematically.

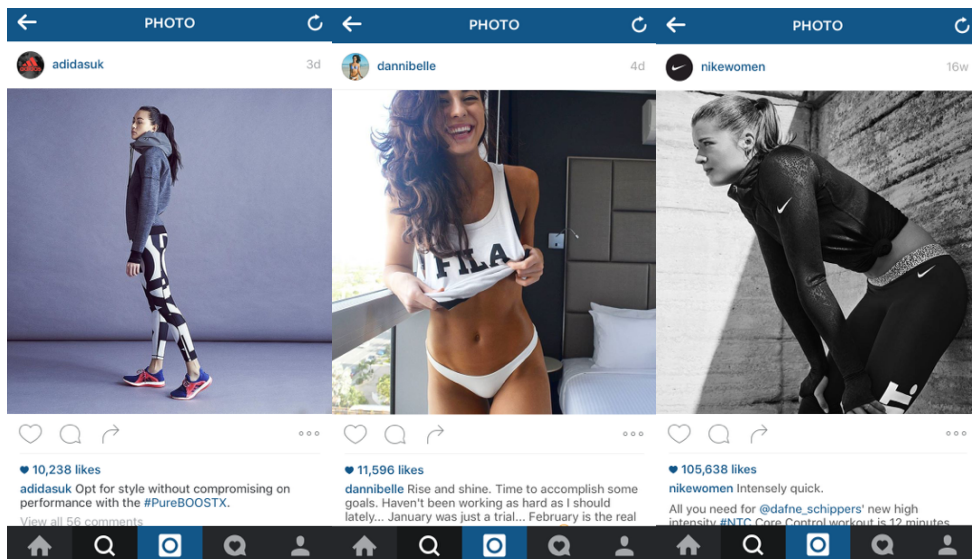


Figure 1: Examples of *'fitspiration'* imagery shown to the interviewees

4. Findings

Data collected so far indicates a strong correlation between engaging with *'fitspiration'* imagery and interviewees self-esteem. Firstly, all interviewees reported a high degree of regularity in viewing *'fitspiration'* accounts, on their mobile devices, often checking

every few minutes of the day, for example P8 admitted they logged in: *'multiple times a day, more than I should to be honest.'* (P8) The amount of time spent observing these accounts is consistent with the initial findings of earlier work supporting Cultivation Theory (Gerbner and Gross, 1976; Bryant and Zillmann, 1986), whereby a high degree of media consumption was found with participants, yet their perception of reality of the imagery perceived through programming was observed. Furthermore, analysis of findings also reveals a range of perceptions around the artificial nature of contrived imagery of athletic women on Instagram, namely: Optimistic (3 participants), Pragmatic (3 participants) and Realist (6 participants).

The Optimist view refers to the participant views which celebrated the positive outcomes of the fitspiration accounts, citing the benefit of motivations to get fitter, obtaining health tips, and offering targets for their training, as P6 explains in this illustrative account: *'I like these pictures as they give some women something to aspire to'* (P6). In this manner social media is the vehicle offering the Optimistic view of fitness to recreate a positive 'reality' through *'fitspiration'*, and can share this lifestyle digitally because she can't do it in real life. This viewpoint is further reflected by a number of participants who referred to a system of fitness goals, in their viewpoint of fitspiration: *'At the end of the day reality is what we live in... people dream, and have goals it's never actually the real thing. An Instagram account is like, goals'* (P8).

Whereas, a Pragmatist view of *'fitspiration'* was also observed, alluding to the false nature of the constructed imagery, and adopting a critical view of the concept as a whole, despite partaking in the trend on a daily basis. Accounts of *'fitspiration'* showed a perception, which questioned its reality. Interestingly, when asked about their self-esteem, and image, the Pragmatist view was that it did not affect them: *'It's not real, it's not achievable, it doesn't affect me because, that wouldn't be me. I'm not too bothered.'*(P5). On the other hand P10, in their Pragmatist view went as far as normalising the false nature of the *'fitspiration'* accounts by only viewing video content on the accounts as she: *'prefers looking at the videos because it's a lot harder to edit them'* (P10). Furthermore, a cautionary tone emerged from another Pragmatist who claimed: *'it's a bit fake sometimes and I think it's giving girls the wrong impression.'*(P12)

Finally, the majority of interviewees adopted a Realist viewpoint when discussing their interactions with *'fitspiration'* accounts. Often being described in terms of objective realism, P1 describes how it is: *'all a bit too perfect'* (P1), whereas P4 explained how she: *'doesn't identify with them because they are in a lot better shape than me – they look like fitness models rather than real people who train.'*(P4). Noteworthy is the definition of realism in terms of ordinary people who train, and professional fitness models reflects the aspects of Cultivation Theory in effect. P7 extends this notion that she was: *'not a fan of six packs on women, I can't really see anyone with curves on these pictures, like with hip curves or hourglass; none of them are hourglass they're all straight down. I mean, I would love to have a body like that but I also prefer curves'* which suggests the tendency to rely upon traditional body shapes as a realistic viewpoint when viewing *'fitspiration'* imagery.

4.1 Social Media Moderation Behaviour

Interestingly, while all three perspectives accepted the artificial nature of *'fitspiration'*, it was observed that a number of interviewees displayed a mature approach to curating the behaviour of their younger siblings in following *'fitspiration'*. P10 describes for us how she manages the Instagram account for her younger sister as she believed: *'it's unhealthy at that age to be constantly bombarded with (fitspiration) images like these, I know obviously we are older but to a 12 year old girl, she doesn't need that.'* The maturity to P10's actions in moderating another's behaviour, while also engaging with the same social media suggests a realisation of the dangers of the concept, while also adopting the same behaviours. This level of sophistication in terms of social media adoption is also reflected by P9, who described how social media can also have significant dangers for young women. *'I think everything is emphasized now through social media, in the olden days you wouldn't be that bullied if you were fat because there wasn't that extra social media to do it. But I do think social media is a part of the pressures that some people might feel.'*

4.2 Self Esteem

During the interviews, *'fitspiration'* images were used to elicit any perceived changes to self-esteem when viewing images through a simple rating system. A range of viewpoints were expressed by the sample however the majority of respondents (six) reported initial low self-confidence, which was not affected by the imagery observed. Moreover, five respondents reported a drop in their self-confidence, and only one reported a positive influence after viewing fitspiration imagery.

Participant	Initial Rating	Reported Affect
1	5	No
2	6	Yes – negative
3	5	Yes - negative
4	5	No
5	3	No
6	5	Yes - negative
7	4	No
8	7	Yes - positive
9	5	Yes - negative
10	4	No
11	5	Yes - negative
12	6	No
Summary: No Affect = 6, Negative Affect = 5, Positive Affect = 1		

Table 1: Reported Alterations to Self Esteem

5. Summary

In summary, millennial generation fitness enthusiasts were observed to engage with 'fitspiration' on a daily, and hourly basis for a variety of motivations. Their perception of the reality of this concept, and the impact upon their self-esteem are the two key outcomes of this study. Cultivation Theory (REF) considers alterations to persons perceptions of reality, as cultivated by the media imagery they consume. In this manner, participants within this study admitted looking at 'fitspiration' images altered their perspective of reality despite admitting it's artificial constructedness. Optimistic, Pragmatic and Realist perspectives were observed from analysis of the findings coupled with alterations to their self-esteem were shown when viewing 'fitspiration' imagery. Indeed, social media offers a platform for millennial fitness enthusiasts to engage with the concept of 'fitspiration' with varying degrees of critical reflection, while at the same time impacts upon their self-esteem.

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