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In this paper we explore how 'pedagogies of perfection' in fitness content on social media work as a postfeminist technology of the self, exhorting young women to act upon themselves to become 'perfect' but hiding the extent to which exercise as aesthetic labour is normatively demanded. We draw on focus groups and individual interviews with thirty-seven young women who follow fitness content on Instagram, and discourse analysis of the social media presence of Patry Jordán, a famous Spanish fitness influencer. Through the concept of 'pedagogies of perfection' we explain how fitspiration is a gendered public pedagogy of digital health through which neoliberalism and postfeminism are disseminated, providing techniques to develop individualized projects of the self. The perfect is the 'horizon of expectation' for continued self-optimization where young women engage in a never-ending project of the body that also demands the 'improvement' of psychological attitudes. Through the careful articulation of 'positive' pedagogies, the idea of imperfection or failure becomes embedded within the perfect. This production of the self both as a problem and with possibilities represents 'the horizon of expectation', a powerful force that leads to the belief that all women can achieve 'successful' feminine subjectivities, while reproducing gender inequality.

Keywords: fitspiration, digital health, social media, Instagram, gender

Introduction

Social media has become a digital health technology highly instructive in nature, playing a key pedagogic role in how young people learn about their bodies, health, fitness and wellbeing (Camacho-Miñano, MacIsaac, Rich, 2019; Goodyear et al., 2019; Rich, 2019). It can be conceived as a form of digitized 'public pedagogy' (Rich & Miah, 2014), where learning takes place beyond formal schooling. The ubiquitous nature of this form of learning is unsurprising given the wide use of social media by

1   young people. For example, recent research has uncovered that many young people

2   (53%) used social media to look for health-related content (mainly physical activity,

3   diet/nutrition and body image) (Goodyear et al., 2019). These findings are relevant,

4   especially for girls, who are more frequent social media users than boys (OECD, 2017).

5   Recent studies revealed that these public pedagogies which circulate on social media are

6   dominated by normative gendered narratives of the healthy and fit bodies, and impact

7   the ways in which young people understand themselves and perceive and act over their

8   own bodies and health (Camacho-Miñano et al., 2019; Rich, 2018). Understanding

9   social media as a powerful gendered educative space, especially for girls, raises

10   important questions for feminist critical research and practice and also for those

11   working through formal pedagogies, such as Physical Education. This formal learning

12   space is also dominated by gendered norms that constraint the experiences of many

13   young women, limiting their embodied identities due to the exposure of the body, public

14   displays of performance and normative comparisons (Metcalfe, 2018). Additionally, the

15   current demand for fitness in schools to address obesity, when carried out uncritically,

16   risks homogenising young people's bodies to normative ideals (Azzarito, Simon &

17   Martinen, 2016).

18   Specifically, this paper focuses on how young women are growing up in these new

19   digitised health and fitness cultures that reflect neoliberal ideas entangled with

20   postfeminism (Camacho-Miñano et al., 2019; Rich, 2018). Here, postfeminism (Gill,

21   2007) is understood as gendered neoliberalism (Gill, 2017), where women plan, manage

22   and engage in projects for optimizing the self, whilst reproducing normative ways of

23   doing gender. This is a never-ending endeavor that demands not only work on the body

24   but also an improvement of psychological attitudes. Within this paradigm of self-

25   transformation, we have drawn on the idea of the 'perfect' (McRobbie, 2015), which

1 acts as a 'horizon of expectation' (p. 3) providing motivation and direction for

2 continued improvement.

3 Building from our previous work that explored how young women negotiated

4 postfeminist discourses around health and fitness on social media (Camacho-Miñano et

5 al., 2019), the purpose of this paper is to explore how the idea of 'perfection' is

6 articulated within social media and how young women negotiate this imperative of the

7 perfect.

8 *Health and fitness content on social media*

9 The promotion of health and fitness content on social media is often associated

10 with the concept of 'fitspiration' or 'fitspo', a common hashtag fusion of the words

11 'fitness' and 'inspiration'. It refers to messages (including body pictures) shared on

12 social media to promote healthy eating and exercise within a global philosophy of

13 strength and empowerment (Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2016). Here, 'perfection' is

14 conveyed by images of 'fit', 'healthy' and 'strong' bodies, which are implicitly

15 considered to be virtuous, empowered and achieved through hard work and 'clean

16 eating' (Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2016). Thus, this content creates and promotes 'truths'

17 about the relationships between body shape and fitness, compelling young people to

18 work toward a better self as a moral project (Wright & Halse, 2014).

19 Research that has explored the fitspiration movement on social media has revealed its

20 gendered nature. Through content analyses, studies have detailed that most of the

21 images on display are of thin and toned women, often containing objectifying features,

22 and a significant focus on exercise for appearance (e.g., Boepple et al., 2016). There are

23 also 'inspirational' slogans encouraging personal effort and empowerment, which

24 amplify feelings of moral superiority (Lucas & Hodler, 2018). Furthermore, while

25 fitspiration aims to motivate users to engage in healthy behaviours, these images have

1   been associated with the sexualization of women (Washington & Economides, 2016)

2   and negative psychological effects (Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015). These ideas are

3   usually embodied by fitness influencers, with the potential to persuade many followers

4   to engage in their fitness communities. The influencers' success is dependent on the

5   processes of 'commodification through intimacy' (Berryman & Kavka, 2017, p. 307),

6   which is achieved by presenting the self as a best-friend or 'big sister'. They aim to be

7   'relatable' to their followers by appearing authentic, in some way imperfect, yet close to

8   perfection.

9   From this we can see the relevance of fitspiration as a pedagogical platform for the

10   development of subjectivities, particularly for young women. It functions as a

11   postfeminist biopedagogy (Camacho-Miñano et al., 2019) which instructs and regulates

12   young women's bodies and subjectivities through a language of choice, empowerment

13   and health while, simultaneously, exercise is conceived as a discipline to achieve the

14   normative body. Thus, young women's engagement with health and fitness content on

15   social media can be understood within neoliberalism and postfeminism, as distinctive

16   cultural conditions in western societies (Favaro & Gill, 2019; Gill, 2007, 2017)

17   *Neoliberalism, postfeminism and 'the perfect' femininity*

18   Neoliberalism is considered a rationality characterized by privatization, free

19   market and the promotion of an individual ethic which extend market values to all

20   forms of conduct (Burchell, 1993). It provides an understanding of the self as an active,

21   determined, competitive, and calculating subject, as an 'entrepreneur of the self'

22   (Foucault, 2008, p. 226). This logic of neoliberalism extends into the health domain

23   where discourses of healthism circulate (Crawford, 1980), encouraging individuals to

24   make the 'right choices' about their health. Feminist scholars argue that young women

25   are the ideal neoliberal subjects (Gill & Scharff, 2011; McRobbie, 2009), as they are

1   called on by neoliberal incitements of self-transformation through consumption

2   (Ringrose & Walkerdine, 2008) and develop accordingly an entrepreneurial subjectivity

3   (Gill & Scharff, 2011).

4   Central for a critical gendered analysis of neoliberalism is the analytical concept of

5   postfeminism, referred to as a cultural sensibility that defines the 'common sense' of

6   contemporary gender relations through a fluid and often contradictory pattern of

7   characteristics (see Gill, 2007, 2017). Briefly, as described by Favaro and Gill (2019, p.

8   153), this 'common sense' is characterized by 'relentless individualism, that calls forth

9   endless work on the self, and which centres notions of agency, empowerment and

10   choice while enrolling women in more intense regimes of "the perfect"'(McRobbie,

11   2015).

12   The idea of 'the perfect' femininity (McRobbie, 2015) is considered a 'dispositif', a

13   Foucaultian concept referring to an heterogeneous but patterned ensemble of discourses,

14   institutions and regulatory decisions and modes, constituting a technology of the self

15   (Foucault, 1990). This last concept acknowledges both individual agency and the wider

16   social discourses and regimes of truth, as well as the productive and reproductive

17   relations between them, allowing us to understand the emergence of new subjectivities.

18   Here we posit how the idea of 'the perfect' is a technology of the self that functions as a

19   pernicious postfeminist pedagogical tool for young women in the form of constant self-

20   regulation (McRobbie, 2015).

21   The perfect functions as a 'a space of everyday femininity' that emerges through

22   popular culture referring to how to manage different life areas (e.g., work, sexuality,

23   body) to be successful. It is a form of self-regulation 'based on an aspiration to some

24   idea of the good life' (McRobbie, 2015, p.9). It is a kind of 'neoliberal spreadsheet', 'a

25   highly standardised mode of self-assessment, a calculation of one's assets, a fear of

1   possible losses' (McRobbie, 2015, p. 10). Therefore, the perfection functions as a

2   'benchmarking strategy', through which competitive ethic and meritocratic values are

3   internalized. Individualized projects of the self, therefore, function as a post-feminist

4   technique that creates 'an inner-directed self-competitiveness' which is in effect self-

5   beratement about not being good enough or perfect enough, and 'outer-directed

6   competition or antagonism toward other women' (McRobbie, 2015, p. 15).

7   Consequently, women become an outcome of their own choices, leaving gender

8   inequalities intact as social inequalities or power relations remain hidden (Favaro &

9   Gill, 2019; Gill, 2017; McRobbie, 2009, 2015).

10   In postfeminist cultures, the body is crucial both for the definition of femininity and the

11   value of women. Thus, the female body becomes a political field crossed by power

12   relations that sustain the patriarchy through the intensification of body pressures for

13   women, assuming that women's 'natural' desires are to appeal to the heteronormative

14   male gaze (Bordo, 1997; Gill, 2007). This gaze is internalized by the women, who

15   discipline themselves in their efforts to attain 'the perfect' female bodies. These bodies

16   are slender and toned, and exercise is another discipline of self-improvement. This

17   endeavour becomes normative, although subsumed in discourses of choice, hiding the

18   extent to which it is culturally demanded. Therefore, exercise is considered as an

19   'aesthetic labour' (Elias et al., 2017, p. 5) that compels women towards an

20   entrepreneurial subjectivity (Gill & Scharff, 2011). Furthermore, self-optimization

21   demands the 'improvement' of the affective and psychic life, privileging positive

22   feelings (Favaro & Gill, 2019). Interestingly, the 'perfect' is constructed not as

23   complete perfection, but is sustained as the 'horizon of expectation' (McRobbie, 2015,

24   p. 3). Thus, in striving for perfection is 'a light-hearted endorsement of "imperfection"'

25   (McRobbie, 2015, p.13). Therefore, all women are interpellated by this regime,

including flawed and in-process individuals. Defects are considered normative, accepted

and overcome by a 'love yourself' discourse (Gill & Elias, 2014), in which confidence

(Gill & Orgad, 2015) and resilience (Gill & Orgad, 2018) are carefully articulated as

'reactions' to the tyranny of 'the perfect'.

Postfeminism has been recently used as a lens to research the 'fitspiration' movement

(e.g., Camacho-Miñano et al., 2019; Riley & Evans, 2018; Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2020).

For example, Riley and Evans (2018) demonstrated how exercise blogs promote the

idea that being successful, fit and healthy means working on the body and mind in a

never-ending process of self-transformation. Camacho-Miñano et al. (2019) focused on

how fitspiration on Instagram functions as a postfeminist biopedagogy for young

women. Toffoleti and Thorpe (2020) analysed online self-presentations of fitspirational

bodies showing how they work affectively to connect and compel women to exercise,

through feelings of pride, strength and pleasure that function as affective strategies to

counteract negative feelings.

The purpose of the present study is to contribute to this burgeoning literature by

examining the ways in which the idea of 'perfect' femininity is articulated both in

contemporary neoliberal and postfeminist fitness cultures and in young women's

subjectivities. By charting similarities between online publications and young women's

engagement with normative fitness discourses on social media, we also point to the

multiple discursive nature of the compulsory thrust for perfection. Through this process

we developed the concept of postfeminist 'pedagogies of perfection' as a framework for

thinking about contemporary young femininity in fitness discourses within postfeminism.

Methodology

This study draws on focus group and individual interviews with thirty-seven

young women, as well as discourse analysis of the social media presence of Patry

Jordán, a famous fitness influencer that the young women followed. These data sources

provide an empirical account of the discursive and material landscapes that young

women encounter when they negotiate decisions about physical activity, health and

their bodies, and the way these discourses become meaningful in the context of their

everyday fitness practices and learnings.

Initially, four young women worked with the lead researcher to develop the methods for

this research, ensuring that the approaches subsequently used were appropriate for this

specific population. In the main research phase, thirty-seven young women, aged 15-17

years, took part. They were recruited with the help of their PE teacher from three

Secondary Schools located in a medium-size town in the centre of Spain. They self-

defined as physically-active, possessed a personal Instagram account and were regular

viewers/followers of fitness content on Instagram. Data were obtained from twelve

focus-groups interviews with six groups of young women (each group was interviewed

twice). Some task-oriented activities (e.g., sending of Instagram posts published in

accounts they already followed), were used to stimulate rich conversations. From our

preliminary analysis, we selected a range of participants (n=10) to take part in in-depth,

face-to-face interviews. All the interviews were conducted in Spanish. Following the

analysis, the selected quotations were translated into English and reviewed by a

professional native translator.

The selected influencer was the Spanish personal trainer-turned-Influencer, Patry

Jordán, who promotes the 'GymnVirtual' brand (http://gymvirtual.com). We focus our

attention on this influencer because several young women mentioned following her

social media accounts to perform fitness activities (named in four out of the six group of

girls, although this specific influencer was not initially our discussion focus).

Additionally, Patry Jordán is the most followed fitness influencer in Spain. As of

1   October 2020, Gymn Virtual had more than 1.8 million of Instagram followers and 10.8

2   million of Youtube subscriptions. We analysed her Instagram posts, from January 2019

3   to July 2020, in her two most famous accounts (@GymnVirtual and @PatryJordan, 190

4   post in total) and 20 videos of her main two YouTube channels ('GymnVirtual' and

5   'Secretos de chicas' [Girls' secrets]). The videos were selected using a combination of

6   the following criteria: number of viewers (400.000 minimum), date of publication

7   (selecting content within last three years) and variety of topics in the whole set of

8   videos, considering: types of exercises (e.g., high intensity exercise, dance routines);

9   body parts trained (e.g. arms, gluteus, abdomen); purpose (e.g., gain muscle, loss fat or

10 weight); other beauty practices (e.g., for the nails, hair, skin); and format narrative (e.g.,

11 trick, challenges).

12 Ethical approval was granted by the first Camacho-Miñano et al.'s University ethics

13 committee and the study adhered to guidelines on internet mediated research and online

14 research with young people (e.g., Berman, 2016). All participants were informed that

15 their participation was voluntary and they could withdraw from the research in any time.

16 Anonymity, privacy, and confidentiality of data were guaranteed, including the

17 Instagram data that was used, which complied with the platform's terms of use.

18 We carried out a Foucauldian-informed poststructuralist discourse analysis on all

19 interview data to uncover patterns in language and explore meaning. Drawing on

20 postfeminist sensibility as the theoretical framework, we tried to unveil how dominant

21 discourses of 'the perfect' femininity that circulate as socially constructed 'truths'

22 (through power/knowledge relations) are actively negotiated by young women and with

23 what effects over their subjectivities (Wright, 2004). Cases in which participants talked

24 about the idea of perfection and associated concepts were identified and thematically

1 coded for repetition, cohesion, and contradiction within and between transcripts. Once

2 main themes were identified, further cycles of analysis were conducted alongside an

3 immersion in the literature. Additionally, a poststructuralist discourse analysis (Rose,

4 2016) of the Instagram posts and Youtube videos of the Influencer was conducted to

5 identify, describe, capture and code how the ideas associated with perfection was

6 produced.

7 **Results and discussion**

8   The themes and categories of analysis highlighted below show how the desires

9 and expectations of achieving perfection are embedded in power relations that shape

10 both what and how young women learn through fitspiration on social media, forming

11 what we have termed the postfeminist 'pedagogies of perfection'.

12 *The 'perfect' femininities: healthy, sexy, and popular fit bodies*

13   The young women discussed how they were constantly exposed to images of

14 'perfect' fit bodies on Instagram, mainly embodied by influencers and celebrities. These

15 people were considered as models of the 'perfect life' which includes a privileged

16 lifestyle that involves 'travels', 'fashion' and 'brands'. However, the body remains

17 central to the idea of 'the perfect' and the young women considered that 'uploading

18 videos in gym, doing exercises' are primary indicators of the successful feminine

19 lifestyles.

20 While critiquing these narratives by referring to unhealthy practices or being too perfect

21 and superficial, most of our participants admired the perfect body and were engaged

22 with physical activity content or 'exercise routines' to achieve it. Self-comparisons with

23 this 'perfect body' and desires and expectations to achieve it often dominated in the

24 conversations:

1   Interviewer: And do you ever compare yourself to these pictures on Instagram?

2   Susi: Yes, I do. [silence] Yes, I think everybody does, they compare themselves to

3   somebody. Like this one has a good body, and I don't. And that I want to be like

4   her and that's why I'm going to do sport, like she does (Interview 7)

5 Specifically, participants reported that through this ubiquitous content on social media,

6 they were exposed to images of the 'perfect bodies', whose characteristics they clearly

7 articulated: a '90-60-90', 'flat belly', 'good legs', 'a big bottom', 'big chest'. These

8 contradictory demands of a 'slim but with shapes' body has also to be complimented

9 with tone, to have a 'big and toned bottom' or a 'six pack'. The young women

10 explained: 'To have the body that we call perfect you have to do exercise, for sure'

11 (Clidi, Focus group 1) and you have to 'train every day':

12   You don't get the perfect body just like that, I mean it is necessary to work on it ...

13   and not just one day, I mean like they do ... [the influencers] every day or most

14   days a week (Ziri, Interview 1).

15 Participants showed a vast knowledge of the fitness content that circulates on social

16 media, including a range of 'the typical exercises for body toning', such as 'squats',

17 'abs', 'planks' or 'things to work the bottom'. As evidenced above by Ziri, they

18 considered exercise as an 'aesthetic labour' (Elias et al., 2017), that is considered as

19 another 'project to be planned, managed and regulated in a way that is calculative and

20 seemingly self-directed' (p. 39) towards the ideal body. This idea is continuously

21 promoted through posts made by Patry Jordán, for example: 'Achievements are not the

22 result of chance but of constant work'. Additionally, work on the bodies is re-

23 legitimised under a discourse of health, that produces 'truths' about the relationships

24 between body shape, fitness and health and exhorts young women to work on

25 themselves to exercise and become good citizens (Wright & Halse, 2014)

1 Patry Jordán similarly understands the role of exercise to achieve a toned perfect body.

2 The majority of the content she publishes is for toning women's 'problematic body

3 parts', such as her videos: 'intense abs routine for a flat tummy', 'routine to increase

4 and get bigger and nicer glutes' or '10 minutes booty workout'. Interestingly, arm

5 toning was understood as problematic for both the young women and the Influencer,

6 highlighting the importance of tone without transgressing normative femininity by

7 having muscly arms.

8 Paradoxically, the final purpose of the fitness content on social media was mainly

9 conceived by our participants as a means to achieve a (hetero)sexually desirable body,

10 by explicitly idealizing the healthy fit body and constructing it as an 'object' to be

11 desired:

12   Nuria: Because it's like that on Instagram there are videos to do exercise, but they
13   look for the standards that there are […], for girls there are videos of legs and
14   bottom
15   Interviewer: And for what purpose?
16   Nuria: To be hot, so to speak.
17   Alena: To have a good body and be able to show off well. Or that people see you
18   and say "fuck, how hot is she?" (Focus group 5).

19 The celebration of a sexually empowered self is also a common narrative in the

20 Influencer's social media presence. Here we see images of her in revealing clothes or

21 underwear, sometimes posing with her partner in suggestive ways. Similarly, when she

22 engages in fitness activities, she wears revealing attire, and regularly publishes videos

23 performing sexualized fitness dance routines. In another post, she appears in underwear,

24 posing the question: 'Is a man questioned as much when he uploads such a picture as a

25 woman is?', explaining that you will be always criticized, 'So LIVE and be yourself. All

26 my outfit is from @etam'. Here she makes gender inequality visible but offers an

1 individual (postfeminist) solution by presenting herself as active, confident, desiring

2 sexual subject (Gill, 2008) compatible with the brand promotion.

3 These discourses and practices of branding oneself as sexual empowered and agentic,

4 are reproduced by some participants, especially those whose bodies appeared to be close

5 to the 'perfect body'. These girls affirmed that they upload photos showing their bodies

6 on display, posing at the gym, in bikinis or even in underwear. These girls are the

7 powerful, 'confident girls' (Favaro, 2017), who adopted a micro-celebrity subject

8 position (Marwick, 2016) and present the self as a commodity for the consumption of

9 their followers. Ali explained how she tries to emulate a celebrity like self-presentation

10 online, and in doing so, she reveals a contradictory postfeminist discourse in which she

11 reconciles uploading 'what I like' with doing it for obtaining likes and pleasing the

12 boys:

13   A few years ago, I used to upload what the public was interested in, but now I
14   upload what I like and my photos with more likes... I really like to show my
15   body,... with censorship...[not completely naked], but just as I am. Artistic photos
16   in which I show my body because they are the ones I like the most, for an obvious
17   reason, because guys like to see a girl's body, but I don't do it with that intention. I
18   like to take advantage of my body... as it is and to show its parts (focus group 6).

19 Our participants agreed that the 'empowered' femininity tied to the perfect body grants

20 online and offline visibility, but in complex ways. Specifically, the young women

21 detailed how if you show a 'good body' on Instagram you can 'gain followers, be liked

22 by people' (Ziri, Interview 1), and attract the gaze 'of boys'. As illustrated above, Ali

23 demonstrates her agency in managing the display of her body and the male gaze

24 apparently for her own interests. However, they also revealed how fit females on social

25 media could be exposed to positive but usually sexualized comments, and face the risks

26 of 'haters', receiving negative or 'rude comments' and 'obscene compliments' while

'the boys don't suffer this censure' (Ali, focus group 6). This tendency could be

considered part of the popular online misogyny phenomenon (Banet-Weiser, 2015)

which normalizes violence and hostility against women.

Additionally, there seems to be a blurring of the lines between online and offline fields

in their relationships with the boys and their own bodies, stating that the perfect body is

key to success in (hetero)sexual relationships. This was related to the way in which

social media shapes boys' perceptions of how female bodies should look:

> Boys are boys [emphasis]… From seeing the Influencers so perfect, they are also
> looking for someone who is like them […] and we say 'nothing, we are not worth
> it' and.. there are some who say 'I'm going to exercise to look like them and see if
> the boys like me more'(Ziri, Interview 1)

Therefore, through the circulation of 'perfect bodies', the fitness content on social

media provides a visual structure in and through which young women filter their own

body experiences, (hetero)sexual relationships and subjectivities.

Entrepreneurial transformation of the self towards the perfect

The regime of the 'pedagogies of the perfect' embedded within fitspiration

incites young women to develop the knowledge and affects to constantly work on and

modify their bodies towards the ideal. This was evident in the way our participants

detailed how they learned about body transformation through fitspiration content. They

made explicit reference to before and after images, which they admired and found

motivating, despite recognising that they could be linked to extremely unhealthy

practices or be fake due to photo editing.

As Eva explained, these images are 'To motivate you, right? As I have done, so can

you' (focus group 4). Alma detailed that the transformations revealed a positive change

from being fat and receiving criticisms to 'being proud' and specified how 'some people

say: look, I have achieved this and you can no longer tell me that I am fat because I

have managed to lose weight' thanks to 'my own effort' (focus group 4). As

demonstrated by Toffoletti and Thorpe (2020), this type of fitspiration imagery tends to

reinforce the affective registers of shame (before) and pride (after), and function in

online fitness communities as a strategic device that evokes feelings of motivation

through fear of being the abject (before) body. This is exemplified by Sara, who lost

twelve kilos because I 'felt very bad' and I did it 'for my own good' (focus group 6),

referring to the use of fitness influencers as the 'expert' who guided her.

Interestingly, a recurrent discourse of Patry Jordán is the transformational project,

alongside posting images and positive affects as key pedagogical techniques for self-

optimisation. In one video she states: 'to really see if we are doing things right, I advise

you to take before and after picture because it serves as a guide [...] to really see if you

are achieving your goals'. This message is powerfully conveyed across the Patry Jordán

sites through before and after photos and the constant invitation to her followers to

share their own body transformations. Through the digital circulation of fitness content,

including those of ordinary people, feelings of relatability (Kanai, 2019) connect young

women to other platform users, motivating them to embark in the same process of

transformation and consumption (Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2020):

> And then there are also her followers. For example, there is a video that shows a
> girl who is overweight and comes out as... she was and after practicing the exercise
> that was in GymVirtual. And that calls my attention a lot, because there is zero
> Photoshop, because there are also videos of the girl every day practicing the
> exercises and eating healthy (Lili, focus group 3).

The pedagogies circulating within fitspiration offer young women a range of neoliberal

tools through opportunities to measure, monitor and regulate their bodies and behaviours.

For example, one key pedagogical tool of Patry Jordán is a calendar of exercises for each

new month, with links to videos with different objectives for each day. Each proposed action can be 'ticked off' to register work completed. No day is free from work, with Sundays being assigned to taking photos of their bodies and to share posts of their calendar or in-progress-bodies. These practices are part of the self-tracking or 'quantified self' phenomenon (Lupton, 2016), which is considered a mode for self-knowledge to optimize the self, extensively facilitated by digital technologies.

In both pools of data, the transformation imperative toward the perfect is not just prescriptive, but a matter of choice, agency and individual freedom, constituting a technology of subjectivity through which individuals govern themselves. This is evident in how the Influencer constantly invites women to select their own objectives related to the change, constructing them as 'individual choices'. For example, in the video 'get your transformation with these tips', she explains: 'if you are watching the video it is because you really want to reach your objective and you want to take the reins of your life'. Rebe articulated how this narrative motivates her 'because if you set yourself a goal, just as she [influencer] did, you can achieve it, if you work and are persevering' (Interview 5). Thus, they are encouraged to take responsibility for their own change under the guise that one is 'simply working for oneself' (Kanai, 2019, p. 30) hiding the extent to which aesthetic labour (Elias et al., 2017) on the body is normatively demanded.

Interestingly, the ideologies of perfection include nearly all life domains, such as sleep, nutrition, social relations. An innumerable range of beauty practices, similar to those taught by Patry Jordán in her 'Girls' Secrets' channel, are also included: body techniques for the nails, hair, skin, etc. These practices are presented as normatively feminine, requiring significant time, money and effort. All these areas can be self-improved, which illustrates the extensification of the work over oneself in the

1   postfeminist culture (Gill, 2017). This is reflected in the responses of the participants,

2   who recognized the many things they have to do to 'take care of yourself'.

3   Our data also provides evidence about how 'entrepreneurial subjectivity' (Gill & Scharff,

4   2011) includes not only what to do, but also the cultivation of the right affective and

5   psychic life (Gill, 2017). Messages of confidence and positivity are continually promoted

6   in the Patry Jordán sites, suggesting that the only barrier for self-transformation is located

7   within the individual. For example, her main mantra is 'I can do everything',

8   accompanied with constant messages for the cultivation of a positive mental attitude

9   (Favaro & Gill, 2019), such as in the post: 'If you learn to change your attitude, you will

10   have created the best habit that can help you in your life💪'. The visual images are also

11   dominated by messages of positivity, through smiling facial expressions and bodily

12   postures (e.g., the biceps curl, fingers making the v of victory, arms in punch position)

13   and similar emojis, that suggests pleasure and pride with personal body and fitness

14   achievements.

15   Although the young women conceived exercise as a hard work that requires effort,

16   discipline and persistence, positivity and confidence are fundamentals in the young

17   women's efforts to achieve 'everything you want'. This affective register central to

18   postfeminism (Gill, 2017) also shapes girls' subjectivities, compelling them to present a

19   positive self on social media:

20   It's just something we teenagers have to show everything we do, and be cool,
21   positive. [Physical activity] it's like you care about your body, you're going to 'get
22   good' (laughs) and stuff like that (Susi, Interview 6).

23   These pedagogies construct all females as having the potential to transform themselves

24   to achieve 'successful' lives and subjectivities. This is reinforced by the Influencer using

25   the strategy of 'commodification through intimacy' (Berryman & Kavka, 2017, p. 307).

1   Patry Jordán tries to be relatable under the shared promise of positioning both herself and

2   her followers, 'not as perfect' but 'in a nebulous zone of proximity to it' (Kanai, 2019,

3   p.4). As Lili expressed 'she is not the typical perfect girl, but a normal girl who...is like

4   any of us...with a normal body, who works out' (focus group 4). Patry Jordán

5   demonstrates her 'authentic' normal life, through pictures of her with her dog, partner or

6   friends. They are combined with more glamorous photos, blurring the lines between the

7   'authentic' and the 'brand', but both actively encouraging women to engage in

8   consumption to construct the 'perfect'.

9   *The role of failure in striving for the perfect*

10   Our data exemplify how the idea of imperfection or 'failure' to achieve the

11   perfect cannot interrupt the narrative of change, because there is always the 'horizon of

12   expectation' towards 'the perfect' (McRobbie, 2015). In the young women's and

13   Influencer's discourses there are different strategies to manage failure.

14   First, failure is constructed as happening to 'at risk' people, identified by our participants

15   as 'girls who are chubbier' or 'people with low self-esteem'. These two ideas seem to be

16   interconnected, revealing how female confidence is attached to having an attractive (non-

17   fat) body, whereas failure is due to lack of personal responsibility. In talking about those

18   'at risk', they usually referred to 'other' young women. A few spoke about their own

19   failures and struggles; for example, Rosa: 'if you want to achieve something, it's all about

20   trying, not about making excuses like "I can't be healthy" or "I can't exercise", because

21   of my constitution', although later she expressed her frustration recognizing that

22   'sometimes I've tried to say "come on, let's try...", but...in a very short time I've given up'

23   because of lack of time, lack of motivation or whatever' (focus group 3).

24   Second, failure is managed by acknowledging the concept of time, the idea that

25   transformation will happen in the future, because the process requires, as Patry Jordán

1   said, 'to be patient'. You build things up little by little'. Failure is specifically linked to

2   a past self, the failed self (also 'sad and insecure'), while the present self is linked to a

3   future self who can potentially be successful (Riley & Evans, 2018). As the Influencer

4   explained, self-responsibility and positivity are key:

5   Change the way and take responsibility, that is, what is past is past, but from today,
6   how will I do it to achieve my goal? (YouTube video)
7   Love yourself and make sure you smile in the face of adversity and never return to
8   the place that made you feel sad and insecure. Because you don't belong there
9   (Instagram post)

10   Transformation is described as a never-ending process because once you have

11   succeeded you have to maintain it, something that the young women found challenging.

12   Patry Jordán also said 'understand that this is not going to be something quick',

13   although her dominant narrative remained around an end point which acts as the

14   motivating factor. This is evidenced in the prolific nature of the before-after images on

15   her media sites that celebrate the success achieved (Riley & Evans, 2018).

16   Thirdly, failure is constructed within the Influencer's sites through a 'pedagogy of defect'

17   (Bordo, 1997) reframed in positive terms. Such pedagogy incites intense self-scrutiny,

18   under the premise that all bodies have defects. As Romi expressed: 'I don't feel bad about

19   my body, ever, that is.... Sometimes I complain, of course, like any woman' (focus group

20   6). Here we see how these defects are considered normative and have to be accepted and

21   overcome by a 'love yourself' discourse (Gill & Elias, 2014). For example, the Influencer

22   says: 'Don't hide your defects and scars. You don't need to be perfect'. In one video she

23   critiques internet beauty tests that establish the ideal body through precise benchmarks,

24   such as 'the width of your knees must be the wide of a mobile '. In demonstrating these

25   tests, she is implicitly inviting her followers to engage in the self-scrutiny of their

26   'defects', while at the same time distancing herself from such. She uses humour as a

strategy to articulate a 'collective affective attachment' to her messages (Kanai, 2019),

making fun of her own defects ('I need a tablet for the width of my knees'), and inviting

her followers to try the tests 'as a grace, but don't take it seriously'. While she is verbally

criticising these practices, her visual narrative seems to reproduce them.

Finally, failures are accepted but reframed as opportunities to develop a better self. In

the Influencer's account, she presents some of her own struggles: 'I felt lost. Lost for

not controlling my emotions, out of control [...]'. These are careful accounts that

construct her as 'imperfect' but also as relatable (Kanai, 2019). More frequently,

failures are perceived as temporary obstacles to be overcome through a resilient mindset

(Gill & Orgad, 2018), to be able to 'bounce back' from adversity (e.g. 'Fall seven times

and get up eight times'), embracing an attitude where failures and negative experiences

are reframed in positive terms.

Conclusions

Our research evidences that health and fitness content on social media can be a

hugely persuasive public pedagogy, influential in shaping how young women learn, not

only about their bodies and 'healthy' lifestyles, but also about themselves as neoliberal

and postfeminist subjects. Specifically, our research provides nuanced data to reveal

how the postfeminist 'pedagogies of perfection' embedded in fitspiration functions as -a

pernicious pedagogical tool for young women in the form of constant self-regulation

providing motivation and direction for continuous optimization of the self. Both in the

Influencer and young women's discourses, their endeavor is framed within an

'entrepreneurial subjectivity' to be sexy and popular and 'having it all' (Kanai, 2019).

Here, exercise is demanded as another 'aesthetic labour' (Elias et al., 2017) to work on

the body that also requires the improvement of psychological attitudes.

Paradoxically, within these pedagogies of perfection, the idea of imperfection or failure is integrated, through the careful articulation of other 'positive' pedagogies oriented to develop 'successful' feminine subjectivities. Here, the 'pedagogy of defect' (Bordo, 1997) in fitspiration makes normative an intense self-scrutiny of women's bodies, but to be embraced through a 'love your body' discourse (Gill & Elias, 2014). This functions through pedagogies to be confident and resilient and to reframe the self, including personal struggles and failures, in upbeat terms (Favaro & Gill, 2019; Gill & Orgad, 2015, 2018). These pedagogies are extremely powerful presenting a horizon of expectation towards the perfect for all women.

In the pedagogies of perfection that circulates on fitspiration, the promotion of positive affects and the perception of choice encourage young women to embrace 'empowered' femininities while internalizing the competitive ethic and meritocratic values of neoliberalism. Therefore, the aspiration to be perfect, with the multiple labours it requires, incites a new form of individual agency that hides structural inequalities and power relations. Negative feelings and complaints are minimized and have to be restructured through a positive mindset and confidence (Favaro, 2017; Favaro & Gill, 2019; Gill & Orgad, 2015). As technologies of the self, these pedagogies work to homogenize young women's desires and affects around their bodies and their own subjectivities. Therefore, these pedagogies are part of the cultural demands that 'call into being' (Favaro & Gill, 2019, p. 163) a feminine subject which is complicit with neoliberalism and patriarchy (Gill, 2017).

Finally, our research raises questions about how more formal educative spaces, such as schools and specifically PE -whose focus is on learning about the body and embodied learnings- could assist young women in engaging critically with popular culture learnings about fitness, bodies, and health on social media. Previous approaches

developed in PE that use participatory visual pedagogies (Azzarito et al., 2016) or

activist approaches around girls' bodies (e.g., Oliver & Lalik, 2004) could be applied to

expand the 'pedagogical possibilities' of social media (Rich, 2018). This has the

potential to truly empower young women through their physicality, within a broader

agenda for gender equity and social justice as collective action. Consistently, the

development of teacher learning programs to address these issues is an area which

deserves further research.

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