Pinterest Fitspiration and Body Preoccupation

by

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Abstract:

Fitspiration is a growing trend on social media platforms emphasizing a blend of fitness and inspiration. Studies demonstrate that young women exposed to fitspiration have a higher-than-average incidence of negative body satisfaction. Furthermore, image-based social media in particular is thought to increase body preoccupation (Mazzeo, 1999). Viewing fitspiration on social media may contribute to mental health problems in young women, including eating disorders (Nadel, 2022). This study will analyze how fitspiration influences college women ages 18-23 using Pinterest by looking at their perceptions, actions, and communication related to fitspiration. A qualitative ethnographic approach was used to evaluate the weekly experience of women viewing fitspiration on their personal Pinterest accounts. Fourteen women in college from the United States of America received an in-depth interview lasting 30-60 minutes which was then transcribed and hand-coded using thematic analysis. The findings showed that the participants all expressed feelings, actions, and thoughts consistent with a body preoccupation. Many of the participants noted these associations first started around age 13. Participants also described the "it girl" trend as portraying unhealthy body expectations for women. Increased exposure to filter bubbles was discussed by the participants as intensifying the impact of fitspiration. Online social comparison was identified as a factor that produced negative feelings. Participants emphasized the need for improved education on how to navigate social media, and a call for the full spectrum of body types to be impartially represented online. Participants also felt this negative dynamic could be ameliorated with relevant nutritional and psychological education for content creators. The themes elucidated in this study may provide the impetus for further research to increase our understanding of how women using fitspiration

social media may be influenced. Further research should explore the effect of the communication of social media and its contribution to eating disorders and other mental health issues.

Keywords: Fitspiration, Social Media, Body Preoccupation, Health Communication, Pinterest, Young Adult Women

Literature Review

Communication

The National Communication Association (2021) defines communication as: "at its foundation, communication focuses on how people use messages to generate meanings within and across various contexts, and is the discipline that studies all forms, modes, media, and consequences of communication through humanistic, social, scientific, and aesthetic inquiry." Anderson (1959, p. 1) states, "Communication is the process by which we understand others and in turn, endeavor to be understood by them. It is dynamic, constantly changing and shifting in response to the total situation." Anderson's definition accounts for the fluid and dynamic nature of communication. It is important to describe communication as a dynamic definition due to the historical shifts in communication such as the technological revolutions (Gerber, 1984). The technological revolution allowed for communication to change by adding a layer of meditation between the sender and receiver. Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) focuses on "the role of interactivity between parties through mediated channels of communication" (Rafaeli, 2012, p. 2). For this research, I will be focusing on social media communication as a form of CMC. This research specifically focuses on the aspects of communication that include health communication, mediated communication, intrapersonal communication, and the perceptions and encoding of participants using social media.

Fitspiration

Fitspiration (or fitness inspiration), "is a term used to describe web-based images of fit people, people in the gym, health foods, or inspirational quotes relating to diet and fitness being shared and consumed via visual social media" (Mayoh & Jones, 2021, p. e17811). Fitspiration developed as a new social media trend on image-based social media sites as media usage began to grow to promote health and fitness (Simpson & Mazzeo, 2017). Fitspiration has changed as different social media sites such as Instagram and Tiktok have grown in popularity. In 2021, fitspiration popularity increased as its definition transitioned into showing examples of health and fitness in everyday life (Murashka et al., 2021). For my research, it is important to identify how fitspiration can show up in many different forms on Pinterest such as posts involving inspirational slogans, motivation or advice for weight loss, healthy eating, day in the life of eating routines, exercises routines, slogans, fitness images, or regimens.

When the content on Pinterest fitspiration was analyzed, Cha et al. noted that "Fitspiration typically includes images of women with fit, thin bodies who are wearing workout clothes and/or engaging in fitness activities" (2018, p. 851). Previous studies on fitspiration have also looked into who fitspiration affects and who it is produced by. Simpson (2017) found that fitspiration is more common on women's social media. Moreover, Cha et al. (2022) discovered that more women than men produce fitspiration on social media. Because previous studies have identified fitspiration is more common on women's feeds and is produced more by women, I will be focusing specifically on women viewing fitspiration during my interviews.

When communication scholars studied fitspiration, they identified that fitness clothing or accessory advertisements are common among fitspiration posts (Murashka et al., 2021). Furthermore, many fitspiration posts are developed to inspire weight loss, so as more fitspiration content is produced, we may expect an increase in diet and weight loss tips (Simpson & Mazzeo,

2017). As fitspiration is found mostly in social media and on fitness sites, the consumption of either of these will likely increase the amount of fitspiration someone is exposed to. An increase in fitspiration exposure can also be predicted with higher amounts of social media consumption in general (Mayoh & Jones, 2021). Communication scholars have found that fitspiration is correlated with increased body dissatisfaction and eating disorder tendencies (Cha et al., 2022). Moreover, previous studies showed a direct correlation between more social media use and higher body dissatisfaction (Murashka et al., 2021).

Additional scholarly research has been done on fitspiration social media and eating disorders in the psychology field. This is often observed through surveys that test the correlation between social media and body dissatisfaction or eating disorders. Fitspiration has been measured in the psychology field on fitspiration websites and different image-based social media platforms. This research has discussed the increase in fitspiration media surrounding weight loss. "National surveys consistently reveal that most women (up to 75%) consider themselves too fat even when they are below the ideal weight standards established by insurance companies. Consequently, on any given day in America, 56% of all women are on diets. Among 11 to 17-year-old girls, the number one wish is to "lose weight and keep it off", and 80% of girls have dieted by the time they reach the age of 18" (Wilson & Blackhurst, 1999, p. 267). With the diet and weight loss industry growing in popularity through social media fitspiration, it is estimated that this industry generates up to 50 million dollars a year in revenue (Fixmer-Oraiz, 2019). By interviewing fitspiration viewers, I hope to look into the lived experience and perceptions of fitspiration's target audience of young women.

Body Preoccupation

Body preoccupation is "The focus on one's body image, often including excessive thoughts and repetitive behaviors" (Nadel, 2022, pg. 3). Body preoccupation can show up as consistent or obsessive thoughts or actions that focus on weight loss, exercise, diet, and/or body image. Furthermore, body preoccupation can lead to a constant and overwhelming interest in consuming fitspiration. Body preoccupation can also manifest through eating disorder tendencies. For example, someone struggling with body preoccupation who has access to fitspiration information online through social media will likely encounter information on how to alter their body through exercise and diet plans. Specifically, in young women, body preoccupation revolving around weight, size, and shape is a longstanding common phenomenon (Cooper et al., 1986). Focus on body image has been associated with eating disorders and mental health problems (Mazzeo, 1999). Body preoccupation is not just common in women at risk for eating disorders, but also in young women with no risk factors (Mazzeo, 1999). Eating disorder tendencies are increasingly prevalent among college-aged women. A study found that 61 % of college women engage in disordered eating behaviors (Mintz & Betz, 1988). Because there is an established relationship between social media and body preoccupation, researching the cause of body preoccupation is increasingly important (Nadel, 2022).

Social Media and Body Image

Common concerns around social media and body image have been addressed in research on how the sexualization of images online affects body image perception (Skowronski et al., 2022). Skowronski (2022, p. 126), found the sexualized "thin ideal" body type frequently presented on social media will increase a young girl's value of her appearance. Another concern with social media is the potential for self-comparison to fitspiration. Themes presented in previous qualitative research on social media and self-comparison in women found that unrealistic body

expectations are increasingly shown online, promoting altering food and diet for "wellness" and self-comparison to these ideals can lead to a "bad influence" (Monks et al., 2021, p. 231). With young women in college forming new eating habits and wellness culture growing online, it becomes crucial to understand what affects formative eating habits in college.

Identity Formation and Eating Habits in College

Formative eating habits are created during the college years (Smith-Jackson, 2012). As young adults leave their home environment for the first time and move away to college, new eating habits are formed based on their changing environment and resources. Smith-Jackson (2012) found that women in college report fears of gaining weight due to new food independence when moving away from home. Additionally, identity formation evolves intensely during young adulthood years in college due to exposure to new environments, social situations, and individual exploration. Research found that identity formation and eating habits shift in college due to social comparison in a new environment (Lindner et al., 2008). Moreover, Lindner (2008) states the female undergraduate population reported the highest levels of eating pathology and social comparison. Conclusively, the undergraduate female population is particularly at risk for a change in eating habits due to a change in identity formation and increased social comparison both online and in person.

Social Media and Young Women

Previous studies on social media and young women discuss weight loss information online and the relationship between social media and mental health problems. A content analysis of young women on Tiktok found that "nutrition-related content on TikTok is largely weight normative, and may contribute to disordered eating behaviors and body dissatisfaction in the young people that are TikTok's predominant users" (Minadeo & Pope, 2022, p. 1). In addition, the diet and weight loss industry is pushing weight loss as an ideal by using hashtags in young

women's posts such as, "#thinspiration, #fitspiration, #cheat meal, #weight loss, and

#quarantine15" (Minadeo, 2022, p. 3). With a prevalence of diet culture and a push for weight

loss in young adults, "research indicates that social media usage in adolescents and young adults

is associated with disordered eating and negative body image" (Wilksch et al., 2020, p. 97).

Specifically, "the results from a study of a nationally representative sample of young adults aged

19 to 32 years indicated a strong and consistent association between social media use and eating

concerns in young women" (Sidani et al., 2016, p. 1470). Previous studies show women are

substantially more targeted by weight loss social media algorithms, fitspiration content creators,

and the diet industry, leading to increased body image and eating concerns.

Pinterest

Pinterest is a popular social media site used by young women with a platform for

promoting weight loss through creating aspirational vision boards. Similar to other social media

sites such as Instagram and Tiktok, Pinterest has a home page with a curated feed based on its

user's interests. Uniquely, Pinterest is a social media site used to create vision boards based on

these interests through pinning, liking, and saving posts which may include photos, videos, and

text (See Appendix A). Unlike other social media sites, Pinterest supports many forms of content

instead of a singular focus on imagery, text, or videos. Users can follow accounts that have

similar interests and their home feed is catered to by algorithms that reinforce support for their

interests and views. In contrast to other social media sites, Pinterest compiles video, text, and

images all catered to a user's interests on their home page. Through vision boards, users can

compile media together under specific categories or goals. An example of this is when a user has

a vision board catered towards fitspiration, their homepage begins to generate content relating to

fitspiration (from both people they follow and posts the algorithm suggests from people they

don't follow) so they can grow their vision board (See Appendix B). This study specifically

focuses on Pinterest because of its target market and vision board-based content-saving features.

Pinterest's main target market is young women, and a survey of Pinterest users found that **"42%**

of all Pinterest users are women ages 18–29 years" (Simpson, 2019, p. 1). According to Statista

(2021), a survey of women users on Pinterest showed that the second and third most popular

categories used are health/beauty and food/drink. Pinterest has a home page that provides users

with new posts to save and share. On Pinterest, digital ad tracking is used to monitor the interests

of its users and observe the performance of ads designed to cater users' home page feed.

Additionally, since the purpose of Pinterest is to develop a home page based on the user's

interests, filter bubbles are used to provide information and posts that match each user's

individual opinions, beliefs, and interests.

Filter Bubbles

The concept of filter bubbles is a relatively new term in mediated communication used to

describe how an algorithm uses filters based on a user's data to funnel information to its user.

The filter bubble is the idea that "digital media algorithms and recommendation engines limit

and narrow people's exposure to information and ideas by offering results that the search engine

considers relevant to a user's profile" (Pariser, 2011, p. 304). When viewing fitspiration on

Pinterest, as a result of filter bubbles, users are fed only what they are interested in, which can

then increase the frequency of "weight-loss" or "thin ideal media" on their social media. Filter

bubbles may pose a danger for users struggling with body preoccupation or mental health

problems, as the algorithm could feed a repetitive amount of the same thought information (such

as fitspiration and weight-loss media). It is unknown if this increases the frequency of body

preoccupation, but it is important to acknowledge that it increases the frequency of one-sided

posts the user is receiving that match their interests and research. Overall, filter bubbles can warp one's perspective and exposure to new concepts (Hobbs, 2021, p. 75).

Theoretical Background

Social Cognitive Theory provides a framework for understanding the influence of fitspiration messaging through social media. Bandura (2001, p. 16) states Social Cognitive Theory posits that "humans learn by observing people's actions and their consequences." When fitspiration was researched, Bandura (2001, p. 20) explained that "the influence of fitspiration messages can be understood through the lens of Social Cognitive Theory, meaning viewers of fitspiration learn weight loss techniques through observing fitspiration." Social media provides an increase in the flow of information and ready availability to see others' actions online. When Social Cognitive Theory is applied to mediated communication it states that we learn information regarding human values, thinking patterns, and behaviors from modeling in the media including ideas, "involving food, eating, and body shape" (Bandura, 2001, p. 20). Social media allows its users to gain a wider variety of access to celebrities' and friends' lifestyles and fitspiration posts. Additionally, Bandura (2001, p. 16) discusses that Social Cognitive Theory "suggests that heavy viewers are more likely to internalize and model this celebrity-like behavior, and social media provide the tools required to do so." Social Cognitive Theory, when applied to social media, supports that users learn values, thinking patterns, and behaviors involving food patterns, exercise consumption, lifestyle, and body image from fitspiration.

Research Questions

RQ 1: How does body preoccupation manifest in users of fitspiration on Pinterest?

RQ 2: Who do Pinterest fitspiration consumers idolize?

RQ 3: What tensions does fitspiration on Pinterest produce in daily life?

Methods

Sampling

This research focused on college women ages 18-23, as young women are a primary target audience for Pinterest. Furthermore, previous research supports a correlation between social media use and increased body dissatisfaction in young women, associated with issues of identity formation and changes in eating habits. Although previous studies have shown a direct correlation between social media use and body dissatisfaction, there is limited information in the literature regarding the qualitative data on the lived experience of viewers of fitspiration (ie. from the point of view of the women interacting with fitspiration) (Murashka et al., 2021).

As a person who fits these demographics myself, I was able to use my social connections to reach out to young women engaged in fitspiration content on Pinterest for potential study candidates. Through my personal Pinterest account, I began accessing my network of students on campus with fitness-focused Pinterest accounts. Next, a mix of snowball and network sampling was used to select the interviewees for this research. This sampling method parallels previous studies' methods (Harrigan & Braithwaite, 2010). Davis & Lachlan (2017) describe snowball sampling as a method used to find participants through referrals, best used for sampling a specific group of people that are harder to access. Network sampling works by locating participants and recruiting them from networks that include social networks, workplace contacts, organizations, and support groups (Davis & Lachlan, 2017). These methods were chosen to ensure access to the niche population of women 18-23 in college viewing fitspiration on Pinterest. Using snowball and network sampling, I recruited participants by accessing students on college campuses in Southern California who were active Pinterest fitspiration users. After interviewing these participants, I collected referrals from each participant to other students across

the United States who fit the criteria to be interviewed for this study. In total, I interviewed 14

participants from seven different universities. Overall, my personal connection to the

demographic and use of snowball and network sampling methods allowed me to gather valuable

information on the lived experience of young women interacting with fitspiration on Pinterest.

Procedure

    A qualitative ethnographic research design was used for this study to better understand the

participant's unique perspectives. Scholars have frequently utilized this methodology in

communication research to explore individuals' lived experiences (Lindlof & Taylor, 2018). I

conducted fourteen one-on-one interviews that were 30 to 60 minutes in length to establish trust

with the participants and increase the depth of the content provided. The interview contained 30

to 40 questions with follow-up questions as needed, under three topic areas including **I.** Content,

II. Impacts, Communication, and Perspective, and **III.** Body and Eating Habits (See Appendix

C). Each participant signed a consent form approved by the Institutional Review Board before

the interview. Additionally, the participants were allowed to end the interview at any time and

not to answer any question they were not comfortable with. The interviews were audio recorded

with the permission of each participant, so they could be transcribed and coded for themes. The

interviews took place over Zoom and in person at Point Loma Nazarene University. Interviews

over the phone and in person were recorded using NVivo 11. These audio recordings were kept

in a secure folder on a locked laptop for the duration of the study. After the data was transcribed,

each participant was randomly assigned a letter and their transcripts were de-identified before

coding the data.

Coding

After the interviews were completed, each audio recording was transcribed into text using the NVivo Analysis software, then checked for transcription accuracy. Subsequently, each interview was printed and coded by hand using highlighters and a chart to organize themes by color. Hand-coding was used to uncover themes as it is a widely recognized and recommended methodology for qualitative ethnographic research to identify themes which establish the validity and reliability of the coding process (Krippendorff, 2013). The themes were then paired with corresponding quotes from the de-identified participants, supporting the themes that developed throughout the interviews. Twelve main themes emerged from this process. This study focuses on the three most prevalent themes that correspond with the intended research questions.

Validity and Reliability

The validity and reliability of this research are presented through response validation and method format. Response validation of themes was assured by asking participants repetitive and confirming questions about each theme to encourage a clear understanding of the participants' opinions, actions, feelings, and perceptions. Clarifying questions were used to confirm their statements and transcribed audio was used to ensure a correct recollection of quotes. Furthermore, to prevent a biased view of the information, I took notes on my feelings and perceptions of the participants during the interview in order to separate my opinions from the data collected. The organization of data into a chart based on themes and quotations from participants was used to ensure clear connections between the participants' quotes and themes that emerged. Moreover, the layout used for interviews followed the Institutional Review Board's templates and was consistent with the instruction on qualitative ethnographic research methods and interviews provided by Davis & Lachlan (2017).

Ethicality

Ethical approval was granted by the Institutional Review Board at Point Loma Nazarene University to conduct research with human subjects. Furthermore, a schedule of the briefing, questions, and follow-up resources was approved by the IRB to be used in the interviews. Each participant agreed to participate in the interview and was made aware they would be audio recorded. Before the interview, every participant was briefed on the type of content they would be asked about and agreed verbally to be audio recorded. Moreover, they were notified verbally and on the consent form that they were free to stop or not answer a question at any time. At the end of the interview, each participant was provided with 24-hour resources through the National Eating Disorders Hotline and local mental health resources at the institutions they attend.

Reflexivity

It's important to acknowledge my positionality as a researcher and discuss how I engaged in reflexivity throughout the research process in order to prevent bias. My relatable experiences and connection to my target population played a prominent role in this research."Positionality refers to the ways in which researchers' social identities, backgrounds, and experiences shape their perspectives, assumptions, and interpretations of the research topic" (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1299). I am a 23-year-old female college student who had an active Pinterest account with fitspiration boards from age 13 to 21. I have also personally struggled with body preoccupation and at age 22 I deleted my Pinterest account for a year to improve my struggle with body preoccupation. Because of my personal experience, I decided to re-download Pinterest at twenty-three and investigate Pinterest fitspiration and body preoccupation through research. Due to my social identity, background, and experiences with fitspiration and body preoccupation, I took steps to ensure to identify my positionality and account for reflexivity. "Reflexivity, as a concept, refers to the continuous process by which researchers engage in self-examination and

self-awareness to critically examine their biases, perspectives, and positionalities in relation to the research process and the data produced" (Nasoordeen & Holmgren Troy, 2021, p. 319). Given that some of the interviewees were a part of my network, and because of my previous bias from my experience with fitspiration on Pinterest, I took notes on my feelings, beliefs, and biases during each interview. Taking notes ensured I would not interrupt participants with my thoughts and opinions. Furthermore, I recorded each interview and transcribed the interviews directly to text to guarantee quotes and themes would directly reflect the participant's experience and not my own interpretation. By reviewing my notes during the coding section of this research, I was able to reflect on my opinions and verify they were not influencing the data I collected. As qualitative data may invite reflexivity, I discussed my data and positionality with my research committee to acknowledge the impact of my identity on the data I collected. The discussion with my committee before and after the data was coded for themes, helped separate my bias from the data collected and establish reflexivity. I affirmed my themes by consistently revisiting bodies of literature on Pinterest fitspiration and body preoccupation throughout the development of my themes and discussion. My positionality in the community I am studying is an essential part of this research. By being aware of my position and taking steps to ensure reflexivity as discussed above, I was able to consider how my background may have influenced my research in this community. Additionally, as a result of my positionality and reflective work, I am able to approach this work with more empathy and sincerity. My intent is to give a voice to women struggling with body preoccupation. My identity and experience are qualities that add to my ability to have a higher level of sensitivity when discussing body preoccupation. My desire is to provide adequate resources and a place where people can talk openly about their experiences.

Results

Participants spend an average of an hour a day on Pinterest. The most common times Pinterest was used by the participants were after class, in the morning, or before bed. The majority of the participants started using Pinterest in Middle School around the age of thirteen. Eleven of the participants confided that Pinterest harms their body satisfaction starting at age thirteen. All of the participants declared that they have used health and fitness tips or routines from Pinterest. The majority of the participants talked about body preoccupation or an excessive increase in thoughts or actions revolving around their bodies. Furthermore, twelve of the participants mentioned the "it girl" trend on Pinterest and addressed the unrealistic expectations and body trends that revolve around this trend. Lastly, all of the participants discussed experiencing comparison or jealousy regarding fitspiration and Pinterest. Three overall themes emerged in the data: **1.** body preoccupation, **2.** the **"**it girl" trend and unrealistic expectations, and **3.** the transfer of online comparisons to everyday life. Additional quotes are included beneath each theme to support these findings.

Data Analysis

Theme 1: Body Preoccupation

The participants reported an increase in body preoccupation which influenced a change in thoughts and actions while using Pinterest. Specifically, the racing thoughts and the inner dialogue of the participants that emerged while engaging with fitspiration were discussed. Participant X mentioned a stream of thoughts that came into her head when viewing Fitspiration: "In my head, I was like I'm not skinny enough, how do I become skinnier? Should I look up how I can become skinnier? How do I get myself to look like these girls." After discussing how this thinking eventually led her to an eating disorder, she commented, " Skinnier was the greatest achievement ever in my brain. People won't like me unless I'm skinny. Maybe I should try this diet." Participants B, C, and A mentioned having a stream of compulsive thoughts when thinking

about their body type after viewing fitspiration. Participant C acknowledged, "When I was

younger and had an eating disorder. I'd set this standard of body in my brain and social media

would perpetuate it." Participant A admitted, "I would have fantasies about the juice cleanse," as

she described thinking about how much weight she would lose on a juice cleanse. Many of the

participants discussed feeling an increase in pressure to lose weight after viewing fitspiration on

Pinterest. When asked how long they felt this pressure, the participants expressed that it lingered

with them for days and was directly correlated with increased usage of Pinterest. Participant J

said, "after feeling pressure, I would return to Pinterest to find ways to lose weight which would

increase a cycle of thinking about my body, eating, and exercise patterns negatively." Similarly,

Participant D responded to an interview question by expressing she feels the fitspiration online

has given her an "addiction to weight loss." Participants X, Y, and Z said they have started

compulsively checking fitspiration on Pinterest because weight loss is constantly on their minds.

Participant B confided, "I will hyper-fixate on my body image" when asked how Pinterest

impacts her. Furthermore, thirteen of the participants stated that viewing and interpreting

fitspiration gives them negative feelings including sadness, madness, body dissatisfaction, and

jealousy. The majority of the participants recalled that this was most impactful on their mental

health around age thirteen. Furthermore, they confessed to trying dangerous weight loss tips

from fitspiration including 30-day juice cleanses and Saran Wrapping their stomach to decrease

their body size. Participant X said, "I was wrapping Saran Wrap around my waist because I

wanted to look like a 20-year-old model." The participants also discussed some of the weight

loss habits and tips they learned from Pinterest in college (included below). Participants

mentioned feeling tired and overworked from these habits while simultaneously feeling like they

"have to continue." Similarly, participants mentioned feeling constantly disappointed that they

did not lose the weight they were promised through fitspiration posts, or discouragement because they did not look like the fitness content creators on their screens. They felt like they were "never satisfied with their results, or they could always be skinnier." "Calories is what I cared about," said participant E when asked what she thought about during her day after viewing fitspiration. Furthermore, participants expressed that the ideal body online was skinny or underweight, and felt dissatisfaction with their bodies because this was the ideal body represented.

"I run two miles and then work out a section of my body every day"
"It makes you look at yourself negatively"
"I wouldn't be able to run because I wasn't eating enough"
"One half of me said you have to keep going the other half said my body is dying"
"I would starve and binge"
"I had unrealistic body expectation pressures because of the fashion I like would look better on someone skinny"
"I'd use it as motivation not to eat"
"Even though I was in good shape I thought I wasn't because my stomach isn't completely flat"
"These clothes will only look good on me if I'm a 23 waist"
"I'm short and I will never look like them in those clothes"
"I found myself photoshopping my head on Pinterest models"
"I didn't lose 30 pounds so I wasn't satisfied"

Theme 2: "It Girl"

The most discussed ideal represented on Pinterest fitspiration today is the "it girl" trend. An "it girl" online is a type of influencer or person who posts fitspiration and lifestyle content on social media that fits a specific aesthetic. When describing what the "it girl" aesthetic is, Participant B said, "she's clean, she wakes up early, she works out." The "it girl" posts on social media about products, fitness, fashion, beauty, and food. She is often seen posting content about self-care, productivity, and how to eat healthier. Some of the products she owns are brand-name clothes, beauty products, and electronics. She attends fitness classes, organizes her space, and cooks healthy meals. Participant B further explains that the "it girl" persona is "always put together." Additionally, some of the foods identified by participants F & G that the "it girl" eats

are salads, spinach, smoothies, and protein bars. Examples of social media influencers or people

referenced by the participants that had the "it girl" aesthetic included Hailey Bieber and Kendall

Jenner, or the "Barbie type." Participant E mentioned, "They are very fit and thin and their

photos are edited." All of the participants discussed seeing this trend on their feed, describing it

in different ways, but with a common trend of including a skinny or fit woman representing the

"it girl." Although each participant had different "it girls" represented on their feed they all

shared similar traits. The more common trends mentioned under the "it girl" theme were "clean

cut, healthy, and thin." The "it girl" trend content included weight loss tips, a day in the life of

eating, and advertisements for health, wellness, and fashion products. Participant A said it is

"skinny as a trend" while describing the "it girl." The participants detailed unrealistic body

expectations, and skinny as a body theme, when asked about how they perceive the online "it

girl" trend. Participant Z said the "it girl" is "super exaggerated and unrealistic." When

describing the "it girl" participant A said, "It's like they eat one single egg." When discussing

this trend, participant X said, "I think it's worse to disguise an eating disorder as an 'it girl'

trend." Others expressed their perception that influencers were pushing products through this

trend, but that they still wanted to buy the products because it would make them like the "it girl"

on their feed. They felt this trend communicated what they have to look like, and that it increased

the pressure to have a certain body type, eating habits, and products. Participant F stated, "They

would promote weight loss tea and I would go drink them." Some perceived that the fitspiration

posts were pushing unhealthy eating habits. Another common trend expressed through the "it

girl" is that she is influenced by aesthetics. Participants expressed that Pinterest aims to curate

boards of aesthetic posts. The participants perceived that the "it girl" trend was heavily

influenced by aesthetics catered to match fashion and beauty trends consistent with those in pop

culture and online. When asked to describe the "it girl," Participant Y said, "These girls look

perfect, they aren't shaking or anything" referring to the fact their bodies don't look tired or

jiggle when they exercise. Moreover, participants expressed that seeing the trend online caused

negative feelings of comparison and jealousy.

> "The it girl is selling things they are "getting bag for sure"
> "The majority of things promoted by an "it girl" today are to look skinnier or lose weight"
> "They are pushing the narrative you have to look a certain way"
> "Looks like they have a better life because they are skinny"
> "These girls look perfect they aren't shaking or anything"
> "The it girl changes every 10 years"
> The "it girl" is "Super exaggerated and unrealistic"

Theme 3: The Transfer of Online Comparisons to Everyday Life

As participants viewed the "it girl" and fitspiration content on Pinterest, they all experienced

feelings of social comparison and jealousy which they noticed transferred into their everyday

life, actions, and thoughts. This constant comparison to the online "thin ideal" body type even

fed into their daily lives on campus. Participant G stated, "Comparison sucks, everyone is blonde

and tall" when describing how her online comparisons also influenced how she perceived

women on campus. Additionally, participants commented that comparisons online led them to

feel unworthy of wearing clothes that were advertised to them in the fashion section of

fitspiration. Participant B said, "It's all about comparison, I feel jealous on and offline."

Participant D said, "Oh I don't look like her, I can't wear that dress." When describing how

comparison from online manifests, participant G stated, "I feel like I will only look good if I am

a size 23…I would edit my photos for six months because I thought I had to have a cinched

waist. " Furthermore, when participants were asked about comparison, they said it led to jealousy

and seeking out unhealthy weight loss tricks. Participant J said it creates a climate of

"competitive comparison pressure" and many reported wanting to look like someone else.

Participant B claimed, "it's hard not to fall into the comparison game." Participant A said, "I even found myself photoshopping my head on Pinterest models." When asked where the unhealthy actions come from, participant B stated, "jealousy was a huge part of it for me." Similarly, when asked about fitspiration, participant A said, "It just makes you compare." Participant C admitted she looks at underweight individuals online and thinks, "I want that so bad." Participant E divulged, "It makes me mad...but it motivates me...it's a blessing and a curse." Participant X remarked that in her head she thinks, "How do I get myself to look like these girls?" Participant Z even revealed, "it drives you worse and worse until you spiral." Participant Y commented, "Even though I was in good shape I thought I wasn't because my stomach isn't completely flat." Many of the participants contributed this overwhelming sense of comparison to the repetitive messages on their Pinterest. Participant D mentioned that "when you look at one post with abs, tons more come up." Moreover, participant A said, "weight loss comes up at least every 3 to 4 posts." Even when the participants are not seeking out weight loss, it still "overwhelms" their feed. Participant Z said, "I don't want to see these anymore, and they still come up."

"Oh I wish I had that"
"Competitive comparison pressure"
"I want to look like her"
"It's all about comparison, I feel jealous on and offline"
"I'd fall into the comparison game"
"Comparison sucks everyone is blonde and tall"
"Oh I don't look like her I can't wear that dress"
"Jealousy was a huge part of it for me"
"It just makes you compare"

Discussion

This study used in-depth interviews to understand the communication between fitspiration and college-aged women on Pinterest. The study found themes of body preoccupation, jealousy, and the "it girl." While previous studies have looked at the correlation between fitspiration and

body preoccupation, this study aimed to uncover new themes perceived by the population of college women ages 18-23.

When analyzing the theme of body preoccupation it's important to acknowledge the confessions of racing thoughts and changes in diet or exercise common after viewing fitspiration. The discussion around what participants viewed on their feed may have contributed to body preoccupation. Specifically, the theme of the "it girl" consisting of a thin body type as an "ideal" online combined with repetitive weight-loss advice was mentioned as feeling overwhelming to the participants.

Previous studies have identified a correlation between social media and eating disorder behaviors (Wilksch, 2020). Participants in this study have also identified an increase in unhealthy eating habits after viewing fitspiration on Pinterest. Consistent with previous research, participants identified viewing fitspiration as increasing negative feelings (Cha, 2022). The participants found it "hard not to check fitspiration social media after feeling negative about their body," leading to compulsive checking of fitspiration. Further research should explore users' relation to compulsive checking on fitspiration. Participants also found it hard to find representations of their own body types online. Feelings of "not belonging, anger, and sadness" were discussed when the participants were asked about the body types represented online.

Another important factor of this study's findings was the concept of an "it girl" as an emerging trend on social media. Although there is little research on this new trend, research on the concept of an "it girl" describes it as a girl who takes on an "iconic" status (Robbins, 2019). Participants described the "it girl" of their social media as skinny, underweight, and perfect. Many of the participants expressed negative feelings related to this trend such as pressure and feeling unrepresented online. A "skinny" body theme or online ideal should be explored in the

future to see if there is a correlation between this societal ideal online and body preoccupation as expressed by some of the participants. When exploring viewers' perception of this trend, some identified and acknowledged that the influencers seemed "unnatural" or were "pushing a product," but confirmed they still watched the content despite their dissatisfaction with fitspiration. Because "fashion and aesthetic" were identified by the participants as motivating factors for an unhealthy body ideal online, further research can explore the impact of fashion on body type representation online.

Research in the areas of social media comparison and eating disorders has investigated the negative influence of comparison on social media (Papageorgiou et al., 2022). Consistent with this research, participants discussed that comparison was prevalent when viewing fitspiration. Furthermore, participants disclosed that their comparison online translated into their everyday life at school with consistent access to fitspiration. Participants also disclosed feeling more susceptible to comparison at the age of 13 when they felt they couldn't reliably differentiate that fitness influencers were not producing a realistic representation of their bodies. Although the participants have related that they can now differentiate fitspiration from reality, they still disclosed having negative feelings when comparing their bodies to the body and eating standards shared in fitspiration. Moreover, they discussed comparing themselves to fitness influencers online, which led to increasing their social comparison at school and with friends. Although previous research has explored the impact of social comparison to friends on body preoccupation, the findings of this research urges for a better understanding of the impact of comparison to fitspiration on social media. Because Cultivation Theory suggests, "that cultivation of attitudes is based on attitudes already present in our society, and that the media take those attitudes which are already present and represent them bundled in a different

packaging to their audiences," it is crucial to identify how body standards are being represented

through fitspiration, and whether this repeated attitude can perpetuate body preoccupation in its

viewers (Davie, 2010, p. 2). Moreover, when discussing Resonance Media Effects Theory,

McQuail (2005) states "The impact of the media on individuals is a function of how well the

message resonates with the values, experiences, and needs of the audience." Fitspiration is

hazardous for users who are struggling with body preoccupation because the "it girl" trend is

cultivating a societal message of weight loss to their users directly in line with their needs and

wants to lose weight. The combination of Cultivation Theory and Resonance Media Effects

Theory provides a theoretical framework for further research to explore the potentially dangerous

effects of fitspiration for its viewers. Considering the hazardous weight loss actions participants

discussed engaging in, this may be a crucial area for future researchers to explore. In particular, it

would be worthwhile to investigate the impact of the "it girl" trend in terms of cultivation theory

when applied to mediated communication and its impact on comparison both on and offline.

   Although the concept of fitspiration and body preoccupation has been studied in the past the

language has changed on social media today. Stereotypical models of weight loss advice have

been disguised through the "it girl" trend while maintaining the same underlying message of a

need for extreme weight loss. This is important for future researchers studying the impact of

social media on eating disorders or the communication of unhealthy weight loss media online.

Future researchers should investigate the "it girl" content produced in addition to straightforward

weight loss media due to the findings and discussions of how these participants are interpreting

"it girl" media as a direction on how to lose weight or that they "need to lose" weight.

Conclusively this study aimed to understand what fitspiration was communicating to its users

and participants expressed that the "it girl" trend in fitspiration is communicating body

preoccupation, unrealistic standards, and comparison.

Additionally, these findings are relevant to the producers of fitspiration content including

fitspiration influencers, advertisement companies, and fitspiration marketing content creators.

The producers of this content should pay closer attention to the impact of the content they are

creating and the messages they are communicating through this content as participants have

identified the negative effects fitspiration has on their mental health and body preoccupation.

Furthermore, participants disclosed not wanting to buy products marketed with unrealistic body

standards as they did "not feel good enough to buy these products" and interpreted viewing

fitspiration as negative to their mental health and well-being. Participants urged that companies

should aim to be more "inclusive and realistic" for them to feel comfortable viewing fitspiration

and purchasing products. Moreover, participants demanded that fitspiration content should be

"more informed" and that unsolicited weight loss advice made them "lose trust" in the

companies, people, and products they are viewing on social media. Therefore if producers want

to continue profiting and creating a relationship with their consumers there is a need to change

fitspiration content so that it is ethical and responsible in line with the needs of the consumer.

If you are on the receiving end of fitspiration or are the parent of a child viewing fitspiration

it is crucial to be aware of the danger of viewing fitspiration and the correct steps to avoid the

negative repercussions of fitspiration and body preoccupation. Hobbs (2021) discusses the

importance of early intervention and open discussion about media impacts on children. Having

conversations with children about the unethical messaging and pressure to lose weight in

fitspiration social media can increase their awareness in order to prevent them from being

persuaded to alter their bodies to the unrealistic thin body ideal represented online. Furthermore,

a way to separate users from overwhelming media is through taking a media fast or a break from social media which increases the awareness and cognizance of users online (Hobbs, 2021). Additionally, for young college women viewing fitspiration being aware you are viewing edited bodies, knowing that fitspiration can be hiding a message of weight loss under the "it girl" trend, and knowing all body types are not reflected in fitspiration are the first steps to identifying discrepancies in the content being viewed. Additionally, seeking support groups and/or professional medical advice such as a therapist or nutritionist can help users navigate body preoccupation, negative feelings, and/or mental health problems identified from fitspiration social media.

Limitations

The limitations that should be considered when interpreting these findings are the explanatory nature of the study, the sample size used, and the population chosen. The purpose of this research was to look into themes produced by women viewing fitspiration, not to prove a correlation between fitspiration and body preoccupation. The participants used for this study were selected using snowball and network sampling from seven different universities. Because the sample size was limited to fourteen women selected from seven universities (with the majority of the universities residing in California), the study does not represent all college women ages 18 -23. However, the sample size was intentionally small to establish longer in-depth interviews with the participants to receive deeper insight into their feelings and experiences.

Further Research

Future research should explore the themes found in this study using quantitative methods to establish a correlation between fitspiration and body preoccupation. Future researchers may

focus research on thirteen-year-olds, using social media for fitspiration to get a deeper insight into the perceptions of young girls at the age mentioned by the participants for having the deepest impact on their lives. Further research can also investigate the relationship between fitspiration and eating disorder tendencies in college-aged women. Moreover, further studies can expand upon this research layout by replicating the study using a larger number and more diverse participants to see if the results are reproduced. Research is also recommended on the other themes not discussed in this paper that emerged in the interview data including sport-focused fitspiration and body preoccupation in adolescent women. Moreover, further research should explore the emerging "it girl" trend on social media and its impact on mental health and eating disorders. Finally, future research may benefit from exploring the impact and influences of fitspiration on men and the LGBTQ+ community.

Appendix A
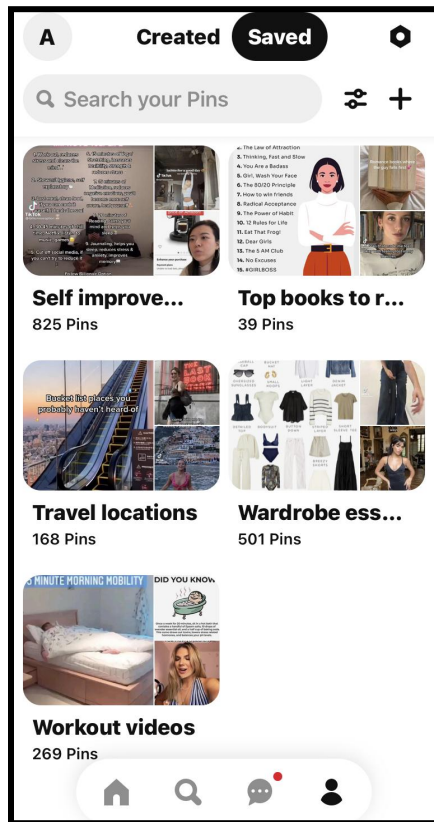
Appendix B
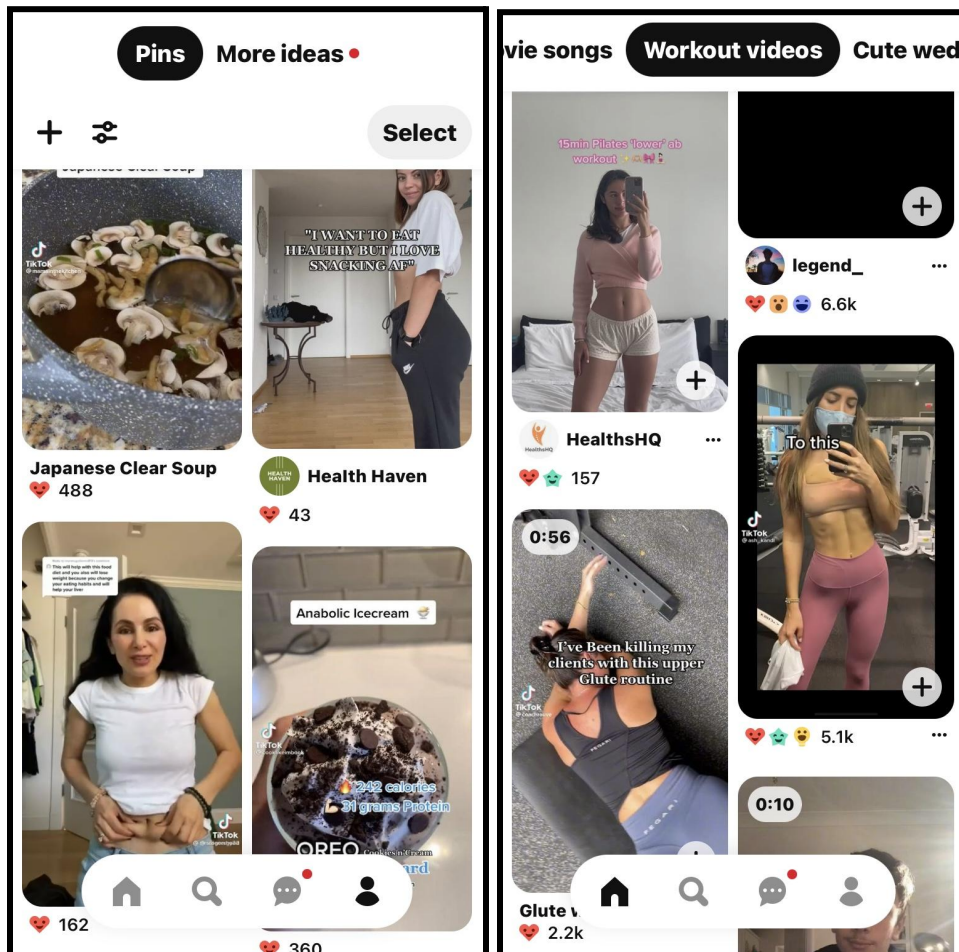
Appendix C

Schedule of Questions for Field Project
(30-40 questions, 3-4 topic areas)

Introduction: Hello, BLANK. My name, again, is Ashlee Phillips from Point Loma

Nazarene University.

Orientation: I want to thank you again for allowing me to interview you.
So, just to remind you, I'm enrolled in a "Communication Studies Research Honors Project"
class this semester, and part of this class involves
interviewing others in order to gain insight for my research paper. You are free to stop at any
time if you feel uncomfortable and can choose to not answer any questions I ask.

I'd like to cover three main areas with you today.
First, I'd like to ask you about your Pinterest. Then, I'd like to
know more about how Pinterest impacts you. Finally,
I'd like to end by hearing how you feel and how Pinterest affects your body image and
eating/exercise habits.

As we discussed last week, this should take about 60
minutes. Is it okay if I audio-record our interview? Is it okay if I take
notes? Great! I'll be compiling the results of our interview into a report for my research and you
will be able to see the final paper if you would like to.

Transition: Do you have any questions before we get started?
 I'd like to begin with
What you look for in Pinterest posts for your health and fitness boards (1 of about 3 TOPICS)

I. Content they are viewing

A. Tell me about your Pinterest boards.
(Secondary Questions – further indented)

1. How long have you been on Pinterest?
2. How did you first discover it?
3. What do you use it the most for?
4. What time of day do you use your Pinterest board?
5. What do you name, title, or label your boards?
6. How do you organize your pins?

7. Can you tell me about the kind of content you look for?

8. Can you show me some of the posts on the board?

B. Do you view any media that tells you how to lose weight, eat healthier, and/or exercise?

1. How often do health and fitness posts come up on your feed?
2. Can you describe any of the posts that promote weight loss?
3. Which one(s) did you find most interesting?
4. Which one(s) did you feel compelled to try?

   a. Please share some you have tried and your results.
   b. What was your experience while trying this?
   c. Were you satisfied with your results?

Transition: Okay, now that I know about the content you look for, let's talk

about how it impacts you.

II. Impacts, Communication, and Perceptions

A. *How does viewing this content make you feel?*
B. *What do you look for and what does it say?*

1. What do you look for in a health and fitness post you would save?
   a. Can you show me some examples?

2. Can you give me an example if you have ever felt uncomfortable with the content you're viewing?

   a. Can you tell me more about this?
   b. What do you think this post communicates to you?

3. Can you give me an example of a health and fitness Pinterest post that has ever made you sad, mad, or jealous?

   a. Can you describe this experience to me?
   b. What do you feel is the message of this post?
   c. How did you interpret this post?

4. Do you have any examples of unrealistic body expectations on your Pinterest and can you show me them?

    a. How does this affect the way you feel about the content?
    b. What does this post say or communicate to you?
    c. How does this make you feel about yourself and your body?

5. Can you show me an example of a post you like?
    a. What about the post stood out to you?

6. How do you perceive the health and fitness community on Pinterest?

B. Do you think viewing these posts motivates you to follow what they tell you?

1. Do you think it puts pressure on you to lose weight?

    a. If so, can you describe a time when this happened?

2. Has it ever made you feel like you need to follow what it tells you to do?

    a. Tell me more about this
    b. How does this make you feel about your body?

3. Do you feel like any of these posts show unrealistic body expectations?

    a. Can you show me an example?
    b. How does this make you feel about your body?
    c. What does this say or communicate to you?
    d. How does it make you feel?

4. Have you ever followed a routine from a post for weight loss or eating habits?

    a. Can you tell me about a time this happened?

5. How do you feel health and fitness Pinterest helps you?

    a. Can you give me an example of how it has helped you?

6. What do you like about health and fitness Pinterest?
   a. Can you show me some examples?
   b. What do you like about these posts?

7. Do you think your body type is represented on health and fitness Pinterest?
   a. Can you tell me about the body types you see most often on Pinterest?
   b. Can you show me an example?
   c. How does this make you feel?

Transition: Now that I have learned about the impacts, let's move on to

your body image and eating habits.

III. Body and eating habits

A. Do you feel like Pinterest affects the way you feel about your body?

1. How do you feel about your body after viewing the posts?

   a. Can you tell me if and how this feeling stays with you?

2. Has your body satisfaction changed after viewing Pinterest?

   a. Can you give me an example of how your body satisfaction has changed as a result of Pinterest?

B. How are your eating and exercise habits affected by Pinterest?

1. Do you feel like you want to lose weight after viewing health and fitness media?

   a. Can you tell me how often you feel this way?
   b. Can you describe how it feels?

2. Do your eating or exercise habits change after viewing health and fitness media?

   a. How have they changed?
   b. Can you tell me about this experience?

     3. Can you tell me about a time you felt (positive or negative) pressure after viewing health and fitness Pinterest posts?

          a. What did that make you think of?
          b. How did that make you feel?

4. Can you describe a time when you feel overwhelmed by health and fitness media?
    a. Tell me more

     4. Are there any other social media platforms that you also use for this topic?

Transition: That's all very helpful thank you. Okay, well, it looks like we've run out of

time for questions.

Future Contact: Are you still able to give me an email for follow-up clarifications?

Summary: I was able to find out a lot about the impact of social media in your life… I appreciate the information and vulnerability you shared with me. I have provided a list of mental health resources for body preoccupation. Thank you for sharing your experiences with me.

Website: https://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/help-support/contact-helpline
Phone number: **(800) 931-2237**

This hotline is open for texts and calls if you need any resources. Furthermore, here is the number for on-campus support at PLNU.

Contact the Wellness Center at
Phone: (619) 849-2574
Email: sdwellnesscenter@pointloma.edu.

Reestablish Rapport: Again, I really appreciate you taking the time to help me today. You have

been a very big help. Thank you so much!

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