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## Is Fitspiration Truly an Inspiration? Relationships between Fitspiration, Exercise, and Body Image

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### Abstract

Young adults across the United States struggle to meet physical activity recommendations and consume healthy diets, and they often suffer from issues related to body image. Social media influencers dedicated to fitspiration (i.e., fitness inspiration) are purported to have a goal of inspiring others to lead healthier lifestyles. The purpose of this study was to explore the relationships between fitspiration and exercise and body image perceptions amongst college students. Participants ( $n = 361$ , mean age = 20.2 years, 78% female) completed surveys that included sociodemographic information, social media usage, fitspiration content engagement, exercise, and body satisfaction. An independent samples t-test assessed differences in exercise by fitspiration viewership, and a chi-square analysis determined relationships between fitspiration and body satisfaction. Participants were routinely active on social media (91% use it for > 1 hour per day), and 61.5% were exposed to fitspiration content. Approximately 41% of respondents have followed exercise advice from fitspiration influencers, though only 11% reported having purchased products. No relationships were reported between following fitspiration and days per week of exercise ( $M\Delta = .02(.20)$ ,  $p = .91$ ). Participants that followed fitspiration were more likely to be dissatisfied with their bodies,  $\chi^2(1, n = 316) = 7.77$ ,  $p = .005$ , compared to participants who did not. Findings demonstrate fitspiration was not related to exercise and was related to poorer body image perceptions among college students. These results are supported by previous findings and indicate a critical misalignment between the purported purpose of fitspiration and the outcome of its viewing.

### Keywords

social media, health behavior, fitspo, exercise

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### Abstract

Young adults across the United States struggle to meet physical activity recommendations and consume healthy diets, and they often suffer from issues related to body image. Social media influencers dedicated to fitspiration (i.e., fitness inspiration) are purported to have a goal of inspiring others to lead healthier lifestyles. The purpose of this study was to explore the relationships between fitspiration and exercise and body image perceptions amongst college students. Participants ( $n = 361$ , mean age = 20.2 years, 78% female) completed surveys that included sociodemographic information, social media usage, fitspiration content engagement, exercise, and body satisfaction. An independent samples t-test assessed differences in exercise by fitspiration viewership, and a chi-square analysis determined relationships between fitspiration and body satisfaction. Participants were routinely active on social media (91% use it for > 1 hour per day), and 61.5% were exposed to fitspiration content. Approximately 41% of respondents have followed exercise advice from fitspiration influencers, though only 11% reported having purchased products. No relationships were reported between following fitspiration and days per week of exercise ( $M\Delta = .02(.20)$ ,  $p = .91$ ). Participants that followed fitspiration were more likely to be dissatisfied with their bodies,  $X^2(1, n = 316) = 7.77$ ,  $p = .005$ , compared to participants who did not. Findings demonstrate fitspiration was not related to exercise and was related to poorer body image perceptions among college students. These results are supported by previous findings and indicate a critical misalignment between the purported purpose of fitspiration and the outcome of its viewing.

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Since its inception, the rise of social media has been prolific. At present, more than 45% of the global population, or 3.6 billion people, are active on social media (Statista, 2020). Given this, social media has been leveraged as an income-generating platform to launch or support careers and has led to a new type of micro-celebrity called an influencer (Khamis et al., 2017). Social media influencers create public identities and brand themselves. While this concept is not novel, the broad reach social media allows influencers to have is new (Labrecque et al., 2011). Influencers build reputations for themselves by demonstrating knowledge in one area, and then persuade their audiences

(i.e., followers) to take their recommendations for product purchases (Khamis et al., 2017). Recent evidence suggests social media influencers are effective in motivating consumer behavior, and they are sought out and paid by companies for their influence on their followers (Lim et al., 2017).

One type of social media influencer is one that produces content called fitspiration. Fitspiration, commonly abbreviated as ‘fitspo,’ is a blending of the words ‘fitness’ and ‘inspiration,’ and refers to content designed to inspire others to become more physically fit. A search (December, 2020) of the hashtag “fitspo” on Instagram reveals 72.2 million posts, while “fitspiration”

garners another 18.9 million posts. Fitspiration posts commonly include photographs or images of people and food, and fitspiration influencers may dedicate their personal brands to exercise and diet tips, videos, and program sales (Boepple et al., 2016; Boepple & Thompson, 2016; Carrotte et al., 2017).

While inspiring others to achieve health and fitness is a worthy goal and has thus served as the foundation of careers for generations of health scientists, health behavior theorists, and health educators, fitspiration does not align with accepted methods for promoting behavior change. Supporting positive health behavior change has relied heavily on the use of health behavior theory. Health behavior theories explain and predict health behaviors by exploring the contexts in which behaviors occur and the relationships across behavior-related variables (Glanz et al., 2015). By explaining behavior, theories identify methods that can more effectively influence and change behavior. A growing body of evidence supports the notion that health behavior interventions are more likely to be successful in promoting positive health behavior change when they have theoretical foundations (Ammerman et al., 2002; Glanz & Bishop, 2010; Grol et al., 2007).

Although not rooted in health behavior theory, fitspiration has gained ground on social media. Young adults in the United States are among the most active demographic on social media, with 90% of young adults aged 18 – 29 reporting using at least one social media platform (Perrin & Anderson, 2019). This group also struggles with meeting physical activity recommendations and consuming healthy diets, and suffers from body image issues. Specifically, data collected from the 2018 National Health Interview Survey indicates that just over half of all adults (53.3%) report meeting physical activity guidelines for aerobic activity

(Centers for Disease Control, 2018a) and that physical activity declines from adolescence into adulthood (Corder et al., 2019). Additionally, only 12.2% of adults meet the daily fruit intake recommendation, and only 9.3% meet the daily vegetable intake recommendation (Centers for Disease Control, 2018b). Weight gain in the transition to college has been established (Wengreen & Moncur, 2009), as has the college student diet generally not meeting nutrient recommendations (Tam et al., 2017). Given the low levels of physical activity participation and poor diets, obesity rates across adults have continued to rise. As of 2018, 42.4% of all adults were classified as obese according to the Centers for Disease Control, and this is reflected in our nation's college students (Hales et al., 2020).

Body image issues are pervasive among all young adults and are especially prevalent in females and those in higher weight status groups (Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2018; Weinberger et al., 2016). Body dissatisfaction has also been related to unhealthy weight management practices (e.g., unhealthy weight control behaviors, binge eating; Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2006) and has consistently predicted the development of eating disorders, disordered eating (Goldschmidt et al., 2015), and depression (Sharpe et al., 2018). In a longitudinal study exploring the trajectories of male and female body dissatisfaction from adolescence into adulthood, it was reported that body dissatisfaction for both males and females increased from middle to high school, and again during the transition to young adulthood, and that body mass index (BMI) increased along with it (Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2006). Better understanding body dissatisfaction and working towards preventing it may be an essential component of health interventions geared towards young people.

While fitspiration is purported to support healthier lifestyles, researchers have found time spent on social media websites to be related to poorer body image perceptions for adult women and adolescent girls (Fardouly et al., 2015; Tiggemann & Slater, 2013). Further evidence suggests it may not be social media in general, but rather the viewing of specific content on social media that is related to body image dissatisfaction (Meier & Gray, 2013). Studies exploring the impact of fitspiration support that conclusion. Viewing fitspiration, which typically endorses a homogenously lean body type, and may include intentional or unintentional shaming and stigmatizing messaging, has been harmful to women's body image perceptions (Boepple et al., 2016; Boepple & Thompson, 2016; Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015).

Research on the relationship between fitspiration and exercise, however, is somewhat limited. Exercise is referring specifically to physical activity that is planned, structured, and done with a goal of improving or maintaining one or more components of physical fitness (Caspersen et al., 1985). In one study, researchers reported a relationship between an acute bout of viewing fitspiration content and being inspired to exercise (Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015), though no behavior was measured. In another experimental study, college students were randomized to view either fitspiration or travel images and then offered the opportunity to either exercise or rest. No differences in exercise behavior were detected across the two treatments (Prichard et al., 2020). More evidence is therefore needed.

Given the pervasiveness of fitspiration across social media platforms, and the possible misalignment between its purported goals and the outcomes associated with its viewership, more research in the field is warranted. The purpose of this study was to

determine the prevalence of fitspiration viewership, the relationships between fitspiration and exercise, and the relationship between fitspiration and body image amongst college students.

## Methods

### Participants and Procedures

A convenience sample of undergraduate students (aged 18-25) at a large public university in the Southeastern United States were invited to participate in an anonymous survey related to exercise, social media usage, and body image in January of 2020. Prospective participants were recruited through an email blast sent to undergraduate students, social media announcements, flyers posted in academic buildings around campus, and announcements in classrooms. The survey was accessible from any electronic device via a hyperlink or QR code. All undergraduate students at the university were eligible to participate, and no other inclusion or exclusion criteria were specified. Institutional Review Board approval was received from the referent institution prior to participant recruitment. Participants were required to provide their informed consent online before accessing the survey. Upon survey completion, participants were offered the opportunity to be entered into a drawing to win one of twenty \$30 gift card as a thank you for their participation.

### Measures

Survey items assessed sociodemographic characteristics, exercise, social media usage, and body image perceptions. Socio-demographic survey items ascertained: age, height (inches), weight (pounds), GPA, year in school (e.g., freshman, sophomore), and extracurricular involvements. BMI was calculated through self-reported height and

weight (weight [kg] / height [meters<sup>2</sup>]); American College of Sports Medicine, 2017).

Exercise was measured with only one survey item developed specifically for the study. Participants were asked how many days per week they exercised on average over the previous month. Social media usage and fitspiration viewership survey items were also developed for this study. Social media items addressed how frequently participants used social media (average hours per day) and which social media platforms they followed. Survey items related to fitspiration assessed: if participants follow social media pages of fitness influencers (e.g., people who post workout videos, diet plans, fitness tips); if they see fitspiration content on their social media even if they don't follow similar accounts; if they have ever followed fitness or diet advice from influencers; if they have ever purchased products sold or recommended by influencers; and if they have ever researched the qualifications of the person running the social media account. Body image was measured via two survey items developed for this study. Participants were asked if they are generally satisfied with their body most days, and if social media fitness influencers generally make them feel better, make them feel worse, or have no effect on their body image.

### Data Analyses

Descriptive statistics were computed for each variable of interest. Independent samples t-tests were used to determine differences in exercise and BMI among those who follow fitspiration influencers on social media platforms compared to those who do not. A chi-square analysis was conducted on categorical data regarding the body image perceptions across students who do and do not follow fitspiration on social media. Data were screened prior to analyses. Normality Table 1

was confirmed using the Shapiro-Wilkes test for the independent samples t-test, and cell assumptions were met for the chi-square analysis. Taken together, no violations were detected and analyses were conducted as planned. Analyses were performed using SPSS 26.0 software (Chicago, IL), and a probability level of  $\leq 0.05$  was adopted throughout.

### Results

A total of 426 students accessed the survey through the hyperlink or access code. Of these, 361 completed the survey in its entirety and those data were retained for final analyses (84.7%). Descriptive statistics are presented in Table 1. Less than half of the sample ( $n = 141$ ; 39%) reported following social media influencers dedicated to fitspiration, though a greater percentage reported being exposed to fitspiration despite not electively following it ( $n = 222$ ; 61.5%). Following fitspiration was more common among females than males (42.9% of all females surveyed compared to 26.3% of males).

Table 2 reports the most popular social media platforms where fitspiration was viewed. Instagram was reported as the most popular platform to view fitspiration (48% of participants), with all other social media platforms falling far behind (e.g., only 5% of participants viewed fitspiration on Twitter, the next most popular platform). Among those that selected 'other' as a response, TikTok ( $n = 4$ ) and Reddit ( $n = 3$ ) were mentioned. Table 3 presents responses to questions related to the impact of fitspiration on behavior and body image perceptions. Results indicated 41% of participants ( $n = 149$ ) reported following the fitness advice or tips posted by fitspiration influencers, and of these, 82% identified as female. Only 33% of participants ( $n = 118$ ) reported taking diet

*Descriptive Statistics (n = 361)*

Variables	Mean [SD]	range
Age	20.2 [1.4]	(18 – 25)
BMI	24.3 [4.9]	(12.0 – 42.4)
Exercise (days)	2.9 [1.8]	(0 – 7)
Males	3.5 [1.9]	(0 – 7)
Females	2.8 [1.9]	(0 – 7)
	<i>Count</i>	<i>%</i>
Sex		
Female	280	77.6%
Male	80	22.1%
Other	1	.002%
GPA		
≤ 1.99	1	.002%
2.0 – 2.49	21	5.8%
2.5 – 2.99	28	7.8%
3.0 – 3.49	74	20.5%
≥ 3.5	237	65.7%
Year in School		
Freshman	87	24.1%
Sophomore	61	16.9%
Junior	103	28.5%
Senior	110	30.5%
Extracurricular Involvement		
Fraternity Member	27	33.7%
(males)		
Sorority Member	154	55.0%
(females)		
University Athletics	4	1.1%
Club Sports	13	3.6%
Social Media Use (hours)		
≤ 1 hour	33	9.1%
1 – 2 hours	152	42.1%
3 – 4 hours	140	38.8%
5 – 8 hours	33	9.1%
≥ 8 hours	3	.8%
Follows Fitspiration	141	39.0%
Exposed to Fitspiration	222	61.5%

*Note.* Exercise was measured using average days per week over the last month; Social media usage was measured in estimated daily hours.

Table 2

*Most Popular Social Media Platforms Where Fitspiration is Viewed*

Platform	Number of Responses
Instagram	225 (47.87%)
Twitter	25 (5.32%)
Facebook	34 (7.23%)
Snapchat	32 (6.81%)
YouTube	71 (15.11%)
Pinterest	44 (9.36%)
Other	39 (8.30%)

*Note.* Question was asked in check all that apply format

Table 3

*Impact of Fitspiration on Follower Behavior and Body Image Perceptions*

Variables	Yes	No
Took diet or nutrition advice from fitspiration?	118 (32.7%)	243 (67.3%)
Took fitness or exercise advice from fitspiration?	149 (41.3%)	212 (58.7%)
Purchased products sold from fitspiration accounts?	40 (11.1%)	321 (88.9%)
Examined qualifications of influencer behind fitspiration account?	58 (16.1%)	303 (83.9%)
Generally happy with their body most days?	220 (61.0%)	141 (39.0%)
Does fitspiration Influence body image?		
Makes me feel better about myself	9 (2.5%)	
Makes me feel worse about myself	203 (56.2%)	
Has no impact on my body image	149 (41.3%)	

advice from fitspiration influencers, 83% of whom were female. A total of 40 participants (11%) purchased products advertised by fitness influencers, and these products included: protein powder or other exercise supplements, vitamins, exercise programs, exercise equipment and apparel, and books or guides. Of the 203 participants who reported fitspiration influencers made them feel worse about themselves, 89% were female.

Participants were also asked to select all responses that apply as to why they do not follow the exercise programs the fitspiration influencers provide. Their responses

included: lack of time ( $n = 121$ ), lack of trust in the advice ( $n = 117$ ), lack of motivation ( $n = 108$ ), lack of access to required equipment ( $n = 84$ ), lack of confidence in personal ability ( $n = 63$ ), or they do not believe the fitness level is attainable ( $n = 50$ ). Participants were also asked why they do not follow the diet advice, and their responses included: cost ( $n = 86$ ), other ( $n = 76$ ), lack of time ( $n = 72$ ), lack of motivation ( $n = 65$ ), and lack of access to ingredients ( $n = 51$ ). Entered responses for 'other' included: distrust in the advice, no need for diet advice, and not believing it has the potential to be successful.



Table 4 displays the results of the independent samples t-test used to determine differences in days per week of exercise and BMI among those who follow fitspiration influencers on social media platforms compared to those who do not. Results indicated no significant difference in average days per week of exercise across the two groups (mean of 2.91 days per week [SD = 1.79] for those who follow fitspiration compared to a mean of 2.94 days per week [SD = 1.85] for those who do not). Results also showed no significant difference in BMI

across the two groups (mean BMI of 24.13 [SD = 4.97] and 24.39 [SD = 4.86] for those who do and do not follow fitspiration, respectively).

A chi-square analysis was performed to examine the relationship between body image and following fitspiration. The relationship between variables was significant,  $X^2(1, n = 316) = 7.77, p = .005$ , and indicated those who followed fitspiration were significantly less likely to be satisfied with their body image. Table 5 displays the cross-tabulation results of the analysis.

Table 4

*Differences in Exercise and BMI by Fitspiration Viewership*

Follows Fitspiration?		Mean (SD)	Mean $\Delta$ (SE $\Delta$ )	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	95% confidence interval	<i>p</i>
Yes ( <i>n</i> = 141)	Exercise	2.91 (1.79)	.02	-.11	305	-.41 – .36	.91
No ( <i>n</i> = 220)		2.94 (1.85)	(.20)				
Yes ( <i>n</i> = 141)	BMI	24.13 (4.97)	.26	-.49	359	.79 – -1.30	.75
No ( <i>n</i> = 220)		24.39 (4.86)	(.53)				

Note. SD: Standard deviation; Mean  $\Delta$ : Mean difference; SE $\Delta$ : Standard error difference; df: Degrees of freedom

Table 5

*Chi-Square Relationship between Body Image and Fitspiration*

		Generally Satisfied with Body Image?		
		Yes	No	Totals
Follows Fitspiration?	Yes	68	152	220
	No	64	77	141
Totals		132	229	361

$$X^2 = 7.77, df(1), p = .005$$

Note. df: degrees of freedom

## Discussion

The primary objective of this study was to evaluate the relationships between fitspiration and exercise, and between fitspiration and body image perceptions. Results indicated that the college students in this sample used social media at a high rate and followed or were exposed to fitspiration influencers at a high rate. Following fitspiration was not related with exercise behavior, but was shown to be associated with higher levels of body dissatisfaction, and potentially its related harms.

Descriptive statistics revealed 91.9% of all participants engaged with social media for one hour or more per day. This is consistent with national surveillance data reporting 90% of 18 – 29-year-olds used at least one social media website in 2019 (Perrin & Anderson, 2019). Descriptive data also indicated participants in this sample engaged with or were exposed to fitspiration content at high levels. Although only 39% of participants actively followed fitspiration content or fitspiration influencers, 61.5% of those surveyed reported being exposed to it. In another study of both U.S. and Australian young adults, participants were asked about the frequency with which they viewed fitspiration (Fardouly et al., 2018). They reported that they, on average, “rarely” to “sometimes” viewed fitspiration. While it is difficult to compare the two findings, it is clear that fitspiration content is well-known and accessible, whether one chooses to actively view it or not.

The most common social media platform where fitspiration was viewed in the present study was Instagram. This has been reported in previous fitspiration content analyses and is likely due to the app’s sole focus on imagery and video (Carrotte et al., 2017). Because Instagram does focus solely on imagery, it has been hypothesized as potentially more harmful to women’s body

image perceptions than other social media platforms (e.g., Facebook or Twitter) where content other than pictures is emphasized (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016; Holland & Tiggemann, 2016). Surveillance data indicate Instagram has gained popularity over recent years and has been particularly popular among young women and adolescent girls (Anderson & Jiang, 2018; Lenhart, 2015,). This may indicate young women and girls are also the largest consumers of fitspiration content, which is consistent with the findings in this study (i.e., 43% of females reported viewing fitspiration compared to 26% of males). This highlights adolescent girls and young women as a priority population when exploring the impact of viewing and engaging with this content on health. Adolescent boys and young men, however, do also engage with fitspiration and should not be neglected by researchers.

Measuring the level of engagement with fitspiration content was a unique aspect of this study. While previous articles examining fitspiration focus solely on its viewership (Prichard et al., 2020; Robinson et al., 2017), this study asked participants about how they engage with the content beyond just viewing. Participants were asked if they have ever taken fitness or diet tips from fitspiration influencers, and 41% and 33% responded yes, respectively. An additional 11% reported purchasing products recommended by fitspiration influencers. It is important to note here that while only 39% of the participants in this study reported electively following fitspiration, 41% admitted to using the fitness tips posted by an influencer. This indicates that only asking participants about whether or not they follow fitspiration may not adequately determine a person’s engagement with the content. The reach of fitspiration is broad, and results reveal it need not be electively followed to be consumed.

Participants in this study were also asked if they have ever looked into the

qualifications of the influencer behind the fitspiration content. Only 16% said yes, despite a lack of trust in the credibility of the content being cited as one of the main reasons for not following the fitness or diet advice posted by influencers. This may be due to the accepted notion that all information from the Internet should be viewed through a critical lens. Distrust may also stem from the knowledge that fitspiration influencers commonly edit and filter their photos to generate an idealized image of themselves that may differ from reality (Araújo et al., 2014).

In the present study, independent samples t-tests revealed no significant difference in days per week of exercise between those who followed fitspiration and those who did not. Those who followed fitspiration averaged 2.91 days per week of exercise, while those who do not follow fitspiration averaged 2.94 days per week (a mean difference of .02 days). Experimental evidence, where participants were exposed to fitspiration content or neutral content (e.g., travel images), and then given 10 minutes to either exercise or rest reported no differences in exercise across treatments (Prichard et al., 2020). In another study, participants were randomly assigned to view one of three sets of images (thin ideal, muscular ideal, or athletic ideal) and then were asked to exercise on a treadmill at any pace. No differences in exercise intensity were found across groups, further indicating fitness-ideal images do not influence actual exercise behavior (Robinson et al., 2017). Unique to this study is that exercise and fitspiration viewing were measured cross-sectionally versus experimentally in a laboratory setting. These methods were chosen specifically to assess the relationships between habitual fitspiration viewership and routine exercise over time (by asking participants to estimate their average days per week of exercise over the previous month). The results were the

same as in the laboratory settings however, supporting the notion that fitspiration is not related to exercise behavior. This also indicates that fitspiration influencers, if their goal is to inspire fitness through exercise, are ineffective.

While there is limited evidence relating exercise to fitspiration viewership, an abundance of evidence exists exploring the relationship between body image and fitspiration. Results are nearly unanimous: fitspiration is related to body dissatisfaction (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016; Prichard et al., 2018, 2020; Robinson et al., 2017; Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015). Only limited evidence suggests fitspiration does not have an impact on body image. In one study where this was found, however, the authors still reported fitspiration to be related to poorer self-compassion (Slater et al., 2017). The chi-square analysis conducted in the present study is consistent with the majority of previous findings. The relationship between fitspiration and body dissatisfaction was significant, where those who followed fitspiration were significantly more likely to be dissatisfied with their bodies.

In the present study, participants were asked directly if viewing fitspiration made them feel better, made them feel worse, or had no impact on their body image. More than half of all respondents reported it made them worse about themselves (56%), only 3% reported it made them feel better, and the remaining said it did not affect them (41%). In another study, when young females observed the influence that fitspiration accounts had on them, the majority cited it as a negative influence (Goldstraw et al., 2016). This indicates young women may be choosing to consume material that they know causes them harm. Fitspiration addiction may therefore be a topic worth exploring among public health professionals when confronting the issues facing young women. Although some researchers have proposed that the

well-documented physical and psychological benefits from engaging in more exercise as a possible result of fitspiration can mitigate the impact of the body dissatisfaction it causes (Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015), overall this has not been found.

Body dissatisfaction being related to fitspiration is especially concerning because of the relationships body dissatisfaction has with other, more severe conditions and behaviors. Specifically, body dissatisfaction has been related to higher levels of dieting, unhealthy weight management practices, binge eating, bulimic symptoms, and lower levels of physical activity (Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2006). In another study, researchers reported 17.7% of fitspiration followers were classified as high risk for developing an eating disorder, 17.4% reported very high levels of psychological duress, and 10.3% were classified as being at risk for being involved in addictive exercise behaviors (Raggatt et al., 2018). This further highlights the need for intervention addressing the harms of fitspiration and finding methods that actually do inspire health and fitness among young people.

There are several limitations to the present study that should be noted. While the sample size was robust with 361 participants, they come from a college campus with more than 15,000 enrolled students and thus may not adequately represent their entire student body or other college students. Racial and ethnic data were not collected as a part of this study. It is therefore unknown whether this sample represents the campus population as a whole. The majority of the sample identified as female, and those who chose to participate, on average, performed very well academically, with 65% reporting a 3.5 GPA or higher. This may also therefore not be reflective of the general population. Although fitspiration includes content about both diet and exercise, only exercise was measured in this study. Exercise was also

measured via one survey item that asked about days per week of exercise, and did not query minutes per day. This may not have been sufficient to detect exercise dose. Future researchers should consider using a standardized measurement of exercise with demonstrated validity and reliability to understand this relationship further. Survey items related to fitspiration viewership were also developed by the researchers. Standardized items may be useful for the future work of researchers as they continue to explore relationships between Internet content engagement and behavior. The influence of fitspiration on eating could also be explored in the future. Despite these limitations, the results of this study further the conversation related to social media and fitspiration in meaningful ways. By measuring fitspiration content engagement, days per week of exercise, and body dissatisfaction, conclusions were able to be drawn about the relationships across these variables.

Overall findings indicate that social media is not without consequence. Fitspiration, whether one electively follows it or not, scrolls across the screens of the very cohort it has the potential to harm the most. While seemingly well-intentioned by name, enough evidence now suggests fitspiration does not inspire healthy behaviors in young people and instead is associated with body dissatisfaction and its related burdens. Future research should continue to confirm this phenomenon within other paradigms, consider longitudinal approaches to exploring these relationships, and actively seek means to mitigate the harm fitspiration may cause.

### **Implications for Health Behavior Research**

The results of this study indicate that fitspiration, despite its very name, was not

related to exercise behavior, but was related to body dissatisfaction among its most reliable viewers. An important finding of this study was that viewing the content and even following the advice of influencers did not require being a follower of fitspiration. Health behaviorists must understand the wide reach fitspiration has on young people when addressing its related issues, namely body satisfaction. The results also highlight a common problem health behaviorists address in their work: people knowingly making choices that contribute to their own poorer health. If social media influencers truly wish to improve the health and the fitness levels of their followers, they must rely on tried and true behavior change techniques rooted in health behavior theory. Future studies should explore the motivation of fitspiration influencers themselves, while health practitioners should continue to work to bridge the gap between theory and practice, thus allowing for opportunities to make positive behavior change accessible to all.

### Discussion Questions

1. According to its name, fitspiration is designed to inspire fitness. Enough evidence exists now to suggest that fitspiration is not related to fitness-promoting behaviors (e.g., exercise) and is related to body dissatisfaction among the very people it intends to support. Social media influencers do not take a Hippocratic oath and are not trained in behavior change theory. How can those working in health behavior: a) address fitspiration as a whole, and b) widely disseminate tried and true health behavior change practices so fewer young people fall victim to false approaches?
2. How have public health practitioners responded in the past to emerging evidence that suggested something purported to be healthy was in fact unhealthy? What lessons from the past can be applied to fitspiration?

How might the nuances of social media alter such approaches?

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## Appendix

### *Social Media Survey Items*

<i>Survey Item</i>	<i>Response Options</i>
Do you follow social media pages dedicated to providing exercise, workout advice, or fitness inspiration?	Yes / No
Do you see accounts dedicated to fitness inspiration like those asked about in the previous question even if you don't follow them?	Yes / No
Which social media platform do you follow these types of accounts on? (Check all that apply)	Instagram / Snapchat / Facebook / Twitter / YouTube / Pinterest / Other (please list)
In the past month, how much time did you spend on social media each day?	Less than 1 hour / 1-2 hours / 3-4 hours / 5 or more hours
Have you ever followed the workout tips posted by fitness influencers?	Yes / No
Why do you not follow their workout tips?	Lack of time / Lack of confidence in ability / Do not trust their tips or find them useful / Lack of motivation / Do not believe their fitness level is attainable / No access to the necessary equipment / Other
Have you ever followed the diet tips or nutrition advice posted by fitness influencers?	Yes / No
Why do you not follow their diet advice?	Cost / Lack of time / Lack of motivation / Lack of access to ingredients / Other (please list)
Have you ever purchased any products marketed by a fitness influencer?	Yes / No
Please state what type of products you have purchased	Participants enter response
Have you ever checked to see an influencer's qualifications or certifications?	Yes / No
Would you say that fitness influencers make you feel better or worse about yourself in regards to your body image?	Better / Has no effect / Worse