

InstaFit, InstaLikes
A Content Analysis of Fitness Culture on Social Media

By
Marissa Carpentieri

Submitted to the Board of Study in Sociology
School of Natural and Social Sciences
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts

Purchase College
State University of New York

May 2019

Accepted:

_____, Sponsor

Matthew Immergut

_____, Second Reader

Alexis Silver

Contents

Introduction	3
Literature Review.....	4
Methodology.....	16
Results	17
Discussion.....	19
Conclusion.....	25
References.....	26

Introduction

Social media platforms have contributed to new and ever growing people rising in fame online. It has become a tool for people to amass an immense following which affords them influence over their online followers. The individuals who amass this kind of following have a trait, talent, or quality that makes them stand out to others. These people are so influential because they provide their audience with special content.

With an increase in fitness interest, there is a whole new boom of fitness personalities online. Focusing on these fitness personalities helps to understand how fitness culture has been cultivated and carried out. The technological age has enforced a new fitness trend of sharing and displaying fitness more openly. Instagram, being one of the most widely used social networking sites, holds a great amount of fitness producers and has attributed to their wide reach. Fitness producers on Instagram are popular because people view their incredibly sculpted bodies as inspiring, and also for fitness motivation and for information on health and wellness. There were over 180 million posts using the hashtag #fitness on Instagram as of 2017 (Urbanek, 2017).

Hash tagging is a tool used on social networking sites to direct the user to a specific category, topic and interest. Instagram is a widely used social networking site that revolves around posting photographs and videos. Many only post related to an area of interest. The purpose of this study is to explore the influence of these fitness personalities on their followers. It is important to research this topic because there is so little prior research. The sociological aspects of these influencers have yet to be explored in depth by academics. The question is, what is “fitspiration” culture and how is it cultivated? Furthermore, elements of gender stigmas in fitness will be observed as well. I will dive into the parts of fitspiration culture and discover its

creation as a whole. The central belief of fitspiration culture is, “you are your body”; therefore, through hard work one can control and create the ideal body thereby creating an ideal self.

This research consists of a qualitative study using content analysis of the images, videos and text of some of the most popular fitness personalities on Instagram. In order to analyze these personalities, I use the theories of self-presentation (Goffman) and the generalized other (Mead). Before this analysis, I will first frame the question by looking at the existing literature

Literature Review

I will be reviewing studies on social media, gendered content, and fitspiration culture. Exploring each of these categories will assist in answering the question at hand. Social media analysis will help to explore the platform public personalities use. Gendered content will compare and contrast the content directed towards men and women. Finally, I will delve into the fitspiration culture as a whole and uncover its details.

Social Media:

In order to understand fitspiration culture, we must first look at the social media platforms where this content is popular. Research has shown that posting on social media is no longer just a casual, entertaining activity for people to pass the time. It has become more of a ritual and act for social acceptance, as well as social recognition (Pinkerton, Tobin, Querfurth, Pena, Wilson, 2017). Through Instagram, users receive feedback via their audience with likes, follows and comments. Increasingly there is a demand for users to receive a lot of positive, visible feedback on Instagram.

Fitness personalities are using social media in order to gain a following and convince people why they are essential to follow. The producers use a technique called impression management; they post according to the impression they want to give to their audience. They are, therefore, able to manage the impression that is given when viewing their account (Goffman, 1959). They manage perception of themselves via what they post. While using social media, it is much easier to control how people see you; you decide what is visible, to who, in what context and with what language. An article in a magazine titled “Health and Fitness” explicitly outlines what is considered the “do’s and don’ts” of fitness social media and introduces the argument that there is an assumed rule book for Instagram producers (Norris, 2018).

Research has been conducted to explore why information about physical activity is shared on social networking sites. The answer, of course, was that people use Instagram as a social tool. In particular, this app has become a field for social interaction, development and growth via the producers’ content. With just the touch of a share button, and the pouring in of likes, producers are encouraged to continue posting in order to keep receiving the positivity.

Using a cross-sectional designed survey, examiners utilized university students to learn more about why student’s posts physical activity on social media. Questions were asked such as “What reasons do you have for sharing this information on social media?” (Pinkerton, Tobin, Querfurth, Pena, Wilson, 2017). From the study, four major themes emerged surrounding their responses that included; “keeping people in the loop/ informed, gain recognition, inspire others and general social comment”. Notably, all of the themes listed involved elements of social support and social integration (Pinkerton, et al. 2017). It feels safe to conclude that this is a relevant result to most social media publishers.

Social media has also added to the feeling that individuals must be perfect and well-polished in order to be liked. With this in mind, producers are finding it crucial to build a positive “character” or “image” on Instagram. Typically, that type of persona is seen widely on social media because it receives such a heavy following. Smith and Sanderson (2015) observed that athletes deliberately “built positive self-images, such as ‘humanitarian,’ ‘family-driven,’ or ‘dedicated athlete’ to enhance their public popularity” (Norton 2017). By sharing a positive, friendlier image online, they gain more followers, likes and recognition; people will gravitate more to a friendly face and friendly language. In terms of fitness culture, it also adds to an underlying feeling of community and belonging. When audiences view famous producers acting down to earth and humble, it makes them more likeable and therefore the audience wants to continue to see them on their social media feeds.

Fitness Culture in Media

#fitspiration

It is vital to not only look specifically at individual creators, but to look at the fitness culture as a whole and its origins in order to understand the values. Ultimately, these values of fitness are being carried out by the producers through their postings and content. To find easy access to such content, social media users use the hashtag #fitspiration. The shortened phrase for fitness inspiration has become a global tag to direct those looking for motivation to workout, eat right, tone up etc. Online, the content includes video, text and pictures generated by accounts to share to the Instagram world (Deighton-Smith and Bell 2017). By using the hashtag, it allows for faster viewing of such posts and vast exposure (Deighton-Smith and Bell 2017). As of March 2019, over 17.3 million posts using the hashtag #fitspiration have been shared.

Authors Deighton-Smith and Bell conducted a content analysis revealing that many common messages and themes emerged; encouragement of pain as motivation, using phrases such as “Unless you puke, faint, or die, keep going”, a “fit physique requires commitment and self-regulation...”. (Deighton-Smith and Bell, pg. 20, 2017) Additional literature reveals that “#Fitspiration posts perpetuate sociocultural appearance ideals that emphasize low body weight and visible muscle tone for both men and women” (Deighton-Smith, Bell 2017). To further understand how these themes are emerging, it is important to analyze the content.

The majority of fitness posts with women present display a thin, athletic woman, with emphasis on the stomach and buttocks (Carotte, Lim, Prichard, 2017). Men are depicted as very muscular- much more than women- and with a similar emphasis on the stomach. Yet, men frequently have abdominal definition. (Carotte, et al. 2017). This is harmful to society's perspective on ideal body types, gender norms, and fitness lifestyle because it enforces ideas that only one form and result of fitness is the right one. The creators of a community revel in certain latent messages and present what fitness is “supposed to be”.

Those who create Instagram content have especially benefited from the reputation of #fitspiration. Not only have they reaped the rewards of the hashtag, they have curated it. Producers have gained fame and recognition from the hashtag. When user's employ the hashtag #fitspiration, it directs them to fitness content on social media and may eventually lead them to the producer's account. More use of the hashtag equals more exposure and overall greater attention to the fitness community. #Fitspiration has assigned a certain status and memo to content and is being utilized by fitness creators globally.

“The Ideal Body”

Published research has shown that body type stereotypes and stigmas are continually pushed. This is seen via imagery in media; fitness culture is, in reality, focused on aesthetics yet sold as health. Producers fail to encourage people to use fitness as a goal for good health. Researchers suggest that “Women who are motivated by appearance are more likely to engage in unhealthy weight loss behaviors” (Basch, Hillver, Berdnik, Huynh, 2016). Advertisements are grounded in the desire to alter appearance, though they are sold under the guise of health. The advertisements are playing on the desire to fit into conventional beauty standard, while being advertised as something necessary for health. This suggestion of underlying, unhealthy messages in advertisements coincides with the imagery and language in Instagram posts.

Weight loss is superior in fitness according to research; their study showed that the most commonly coined terms of a magazine included “before and after”, “eating less” etc. (Basch, et. al 2016). Tying into the theme that looking better makes you better, the fitness community thrives predominantly on a decrease of numbers on the scale. Losing weight makes you immediately a remarkable, more “impressive” individual. In accompaniment to the 87 weight loss products included in the magazine, “obtaining a sense of achievement” was the most common message. These latent themes of how weight loss is superior are key to explaining how fitness online is cultivated and created through the messages they are sending in the content posted (Basch, et. al 2016).

Just like advertisements, Instagram posts are carefully created with considerations of what is being shown, what is captioning the image, and how to reach the biggest audience; Instagram accounts have become essentially a marketing strategy. These fitness communities have presented what the “ideal body type is” through the media they are sharing, and provide an

open space for negative thoughts on body image (Blackstone, Herman, 2018). Much of the literature takes a critical perspective on fitspiration culture, pointing out the detrimental effects it has on viewers (Makenzie Norton 2017). Norton states that the overwhelming impractical body content is being spread throughout media “Plastic surgery and photoshopped images distorts body ideals... A few people even agreed that being supermodel-thin is still the ideal for women” (Norton 2017). These values, beliefs and imagery created by the producers combine in making up the basis of this culture

Gendered Content

There is a predetermined gender bias in fitness culture. Typically, society’s idea of the perfect man includes bulging muscles, rock hard abs, and chiseled chests. Women are expected to be curvy (but not too curvy), slim, have a round butt, and a flat stomach. Because of these gendered expectations, social media content aimed towards men and women differ greatly.

Women in fitness

Fitness content is extremely gendered and specific; particularly the objectification of women. In the 1990’s female body building became more prevalent. The fitness message was clear; women were to tone and strengthen up but not too much in order to maintain their feminine identities (Andreasson, Johansson 2013). Deighton-Smith and Bell (2017) state that there is a vast objectification of fitness with individuals viewing themselves through an appearance-based lens.

In relation to Instagram content, producers continue to abide by certain gender stereotypical rules. Women are significantly more likely than men to show their buttocks, wear sexualized clothing, and pose sexually in their images on Instagram. Women are clearly more

likely to be objectified than men in fitness, by themselves and by society (Deighton-Smith, Bell, 2017). Deighton-Smith and Bell (2017) analyzed images of the fitspiration world and found that both men and women were posting images displaying their muscular toned bodies, stating that “consequently, for women, who are typically presented in a more objectified manner than men within the media, it has become normative for their bodies to be viewed as objects to be evaluated, desired, and commented upon and for potential negative outcomes to be minimized or dismissed” (Calogero, Tantleff-Dunn, & Thompson, 2011). There is a gap in sociological literature on the gender differences among the actual Instagram creators.

Not only are women objectified, they are also targeted heavier in terms of needing to lose weight or tone up. There are more women following fitness accounts because they feel they need more encouragement on how to get fit; they think their bodies need more work. The fitness world has made women feel they need more push than men to get “fit” and that shows in the numbers. An online survey conducted by Carrotte, Vella and Lim (2015) reported that 85% of the social media content consumers classified as females aged 15-17 years old. With a heavy following of young women in fitness culture, women are being targeted more and more at even younger ages.

This of course includes the women who publish fitness inspiration and their contribution to such stereotypes. The multitude of female fitness models on social media signals to other women that they are doing something right being as fit as they are. They are popular, more liked, complimented more and noticed more all because of one thing; their “perfect” bodies. Women have contributed to the narrative of female body “ideals”, “gender ideals” and fitness (Andreasson, Johansson 2013).

Men in Fitness

Despite the general consensus that women are more likely to be objectified in fitness, there is also male specific content that is worth observing. Unsurprisingly, images of men widely displayed and emphasized on the biceps, abs, muscles while there was noticeably a much less emphasis on weight loss and being thin (Carotte 2017). This huge display of upper body and abdominal definition helps to define the beliefs of male fitness. The picture of men in content as muscular and strong has fortified an underlying perception of men needing to be the size of body builders.

There is a need for more literature on men's fitness and the depiction of them in media. Gender identity is a key component for Instagram posts and how one will manipulate the images they share. In order to fit into the social construct of man vs woman, posted content is carefully chosen based on the "correct" perception. Vertinsky explains, individuals in society are always already given pre-set codes of what their body should look like; nobody is left untouched without an expectation assigned to them. "The body is always already culturally mapped; it never exists in a pure or uncoded state" (1994).

Self- Presentation

Goffman's Theory

Goffman (1959) argued, "When an individual appears in the presence of others, there will usually be some reason for him to mobilize his activity so that it will convey an impression to others which it is in his interests to convey" (Goffman, 1959).

Goffman's theory of dramaturgy describes how individuals of society take on a certain role in order to appease the situation and environment. They express identity through verbal and non-

verbal messages on public presentation. (Smith and Sanderson, 2015). “They are asked to believe that the character they see actually possesses the attributes he appears to possess, that the task he performs will have the consequences that are implicitly claimed for it...the individual offers his performance and puts on his show ' for the benefit of other people” (Goffman, 1959).

A metaphorical use of theater and drama helps to illustrate how individuals put on a show for those around them. Goffman considered the elements of a theory called dramaturgy to include the “front stage” and “back stage”; front stage being the show that we put on, the back stage when we are not performing to anyone. While in the “front stage”, one is careful to perform in a particular fashion. It is as though the world is watching and you are now on stage. These performances are what you desire the world to see and think of you. Front stage conduct reflects concealed standards and desires for our character that are molded to some extent by the setting, the specific job we play inside it, and our physical appearance. Despite how exactly one wants to be viewed, they are aware of being watched and perform accordingly.

Back stage is when one is at home, in the privacy of an office, or specifically for this study, when offline and not posting. The back stage is actually the place to be considered where you can stop performing and “relax”. With the world not watching, one can act and behave as they please or as they truly are. There are no societal standards to play towards or audience to impress. Being backstage however, one must always keep in mind of the standards needed when they are on stage. Some use backstage as a time to practice social interactions for when they go back into the spotlight of the world.

As fitness personalities online attempt to rise in popularity, they portray a specific type of image they believe people want to see. In today’s competitive media, the importance of being relevant and popular is crucial. To do so, social media gurus capitalize on the promotion of

certain ideas, beliefs and looks. In relation to the fitness community online, a major element advertised is how to get the “best” body. Instagram fitness personalities are pressured to have and maintain an ideal body that viewers want to see. The high tier performers being observed are the ones who ultimately make up the general “fitspiration culture”. Their contribution is not only highly viewed, but sets the stage for what is the “fit self”, how to get there and with what lifestyle.

If we applied Goffman’s theory to social media, the fitness community on Instagram becomes the front stage for producers. The followers of Instagram influencers are the audience who tend to criticize or judge. Their “round of applause” comes in the form of likes, follows, encouraging comments, and encouraging messages. The account producers aim for these reactions while on stage and therefore are careful to act towards the expectancies of their audience. In this case, this tends to be revolved around how a person looks including the “right” body, and the level of fitness they display. Fitness producers are only back stage when they are offline and are not posting or being recorded in some way. Still, to commit to their role as “inspirational” and envy worthy, they must rehearse and prepare for their role with extensive exercise, rigorous diet and constant consideration of the producers’ physical appearance. If they do not, they will eventually lose the credibility of the “fit” role they are portraying and fail on their performance.

With the aid of the internet, a person has an increased amount of control on what is being viewed. Instagram allows you to pick any image you like after it can have been edited or altered. It’s also significant to realize that the accounts are created very carefully to maintain a good image of themselves. Instagram allows them to configure their self-presentation with a more hands on approach (Smith and Sanderson, 2015). Instagram users engage in deceptive self-

presentation strategies through emphasis on personality and physical attributes (Norton 2017). The purpose of this study is to analyze fitness culture on social media, and more specifically the producers of this mass community. In addition, its purpose is to discover how these producers construct fitness.

Mead's Theory

Mead builds on Goffman's theory of self-presentation by theorizing that individuals assume their sense of self through the experience of taking on attitudes of the whole society. By assuming these same beliefs and attitudes, Mead argues only then that the individual gains their sense of self and belonging. The generalized other refers to society as a whole and the community that is being examined. With the generalized other in mind, we perform not only using personal belief, but as well as society's beliefs and expectations of the right self. Mead continues stating "the essential basis and prerequisite of the fullest development of that individual's self: only in so far as he takes the attitudes of the organized social group to which he belongs toward the organized, co-operative social activity or set of such activities in which that group as such is engaged, does he develop a complete self" (Mead, 1999).

Mead's generalized other can describe fitspiration individuals who have rose to fame; they all share a similar general idea, similar posts, images, captions, messages, and even words. Similar values, beliefs and imagery have been agreed with by the generalized other, so we see slim differences in content of fitness culture. In other words, producers recognize what is liked by the generalized other, or society, and applies it to their own mantra via their account: what they post, look of the post, captions and more. The generalized other has shown what they want through the form of likes, follows, comments and so forth. Through this realization and

expectation, fitness producers have taken the same ideas and applied it to their “self” presentation online. They have become a part of the generalized other by displaying the same attitudes and principles broad society has presented to them to be popular. This is rewarded by followers, likes and comments and is consequently encouraged.

Both Goffman's and Mead's theories can be applied to real life interactions. However, there has been no discussion on how these theories apply to interactions on social media. Social media, although similar to face-to-face interaction, has a much heavier use of controlled self-presentation. It is also important to recognize the differences in signs of “acceptance” from the outside world and the social media world. When one acts upon the attitudes of society in the natural world, they are met with subtle acceptances, such as inclusion, positive social encounters, and non-verbal gestures suggesting one is welcomed. Social media has a much more visible way of accepting individuals socially; a visual increase in likes, encouraging comments, and a massive following. As a result, the manipulation the perception they'd prefer is boosted. Their hands on self-publication adds another level to these sociological theories. As producers are able to manipulate, edit and decide what is good enough to post to Instagram, they are ultimately deciding what type of act they want to put on for their audience.

With Goffman's theory of self-presentation in mind as well as George Herbert Mead's “generalized other” theory, this study aimed to examine the way social media influencers present themselves online and to study how certain messages and “ideals” in fitness are displayed. Previous research has examined the audience of this community, as well as the impact of such content. This research sought to add to the literature focusing solely on the producers and how such a vastly followed community of ideals is followed. I argue that a specific philosophy of

fitness, as well as body type has been sent to viewers. Via imagery, producers are instilling certain values and beliefs.

Methods

In order to answer my question about fitspiration culture, I have used content analysis as my method. Content analysis is a technique used to make acceptable deductions by translating and deciphering material. This is incredibly useful for answering the question of how fitspiration culture online is created by the producers and what messages they are sending. It allowed for open analysis of real life fitness producers in the modern age and what was popular at the time of research.

Textual analysis was also used to investigate the captions of these fitness accounts and the dialogue sent to followers on Instagram. Digital content analysis serves a great purpose as it “analyzes pattern in the content and distribution of online image, particularly in what they suggest about forms of social and cultural activity” (Rose, 2012). The analysis of posts was done on the 30 most recent posts of the two most followed women in fitness on Instagram and two most followed men. Jen Selter with 12.7 million followers, Michelle Lewin 12 million followers, Ulisses World 5.8 million followers, and Simeon Panda 5 million followers.

I have coded and analyzed images, captions, and frequently used phrases. The research was done solely on Instagram to obtain more accurate results. If I were to have used more than one social media platform, the data may be too confusing. It may not have been fully representative of fitspiration culture, but by choosing only Instagram the research still explores culture through one of the most popular social media platforms. To observe the distinctions for both men and women in the fitness world, researching both men and women was necessary in order to record and interpret the sociological differences.

Limitations

An obvious limitation of this study is only using Instagram as a research platform. Although focusing on Instagram helped keep things more clear and understandable, it limited the amount of data. In addition, only looking at the 30 most recent posts of each account is not an exact analysis of these producers and their entirety of self-presentation. As a college student, the resources and reach of information was limited. Data collection was based only on visible observation and therefore cannot account for unseen aspects outside of Instagram.

Results

The sample yielded 116 photographs, videos, and captions. 30 of those came from Jen Selter's Instagram account, 30 from Simeon Panda's account, 30 from Ulisses world's account, and 26 from Michelle Lewin's Instagram account. Four posts were excluded from Michelle Lewin's most recent 30 posts since the captions were in another language and therefore unable to analyze. These 4 Instagram producers were chosen because they were the most followed women and men of fitness as of April 2019. Using open coding, the posts were observed and dissected as best they could. For an accurate representation of what social media fitness influencers content displays, each account was coded individually. The samples were taken in April 2019.

Jen Selter

In Jen Selter's captions, 12 out of 30 of her posts used nicknames to refer to her audience (babes, loves, fam etc.). 24 of those posts attempted to connect to her followers asking things such as what their opinion was on a certain topic, to share their own stories, to tag a friend etc. 9 out of 30 of the posts included advertisements for other companies she may be sponsored by,

while 10 of the posts included self-promotion telling followers to join her program and use her hashtag (#seltering). 10 of her posts caption's included the code "hard work", "we got this" was seen 5 times, and never give up or no excuses was seen a total of 7 times. 3 times out of 30 her posts referred to women specifically.

The most significant emerging observations for her images and videos were the display of her toned and flat stomach with 28 out of 30 of the posts, her whole body displayed 29 out of 30 times, and having makeup with smooth looking skin 30 times. In addition, 21 of the 30 posts had an obvious emphasis on her butt which was always seen as round, firm and perky. In 13 of the images and or videos, Selter is seen working out and in 22 wearing workout gear. In each of the 30 posts, she was in front of an aesthetically pleasing background.

Michelle Lewin

While observing Michelle Lewin's most recent 30 posts, 4 of them were captioned in another language and therefore was omitted from the sample. Out of the 26 posts analyzed, 9 of them included advertisements for another company, 6 times she expressed her desire to train her audience and to "get fit with her". Twice she used the phrasing of no excuses.

20 of her posts showed her entire body, 12 where she is seen topless in only a bra up top, 7 times wearing workout gear and 7 posts including her working out. Additionally, 11 of the 26 posts showed off her round butt making an emphasis on it. In 8 of her posts, her muscular, toned arms were visibly being shown. 3 of the posts are seen including weight lift and in 3 Lewin is seen modeling. 21 out of 26 of the times her flat, toned stomach is highlighted in some way or angle.

Simeon Panda

The men of fitness were also analyzed. As of April 2019, 10 of Simeon Panda's recent posts tells his audience to "try this workout". 7 of his posts were coded using the terms "just lift",

and 4 with “do the work”. In a staggering 21 out of 30 posts, Panda self-promotes in his captions. 3 included advertisements and 3 discussed muscle mass.

27 of his posts displayed Simeon Panda working out, 21 of those including weight lifting and in 21 he is seen in a gym. 27 out of 30 posts displayed Panda’s muscular arms and 14 displayed his muscular legs. In 17 posts Simeon is topless and in 21 out of 30 his full body is shown. In 1 post, Simeon is seen grabbing his lack of fat on his mid area. 15 posts Simeon is seen doing intensive, rigorous exercise.

Ulisses World

Lastly, Ulisses World was observed. 19 of his captions included the phrase “lets work” and 5 included “shredding”. 21 out of 30 posts included self-promotion of his own paid workout plan to followers while 5 of the posts included advertisements for other companies. 2 posts told followers to “tag a friend” and 3 discussed “progress and results”. 1 used the phrase “gains”. 21 out of 30 images presented Ulisses’s full body. 28 of them bared his incredibly sculpted abs while 27 showed his sculpted, muscular arms. 11 times his muscular legs were exposed. 17 posts showed him topless. In 15 of the posts he is seen in a gym, 13 posts working out and 10 posts weight lifting. Whey powder was included in 3 of his posts and 7 of them had a stand out aesthetic background.

Discussion

In order to understand fitspiration culture, the theorists I examine will help explain the overall actions of the producers. The first person I will look at is Irving Goffman and particularly his theory of self-presentation and dramaturgy. Goffman’s theory of self-presentation helps to understand how and why people are trying to manage their impression to get favorable responses online. For Mead, it was the role of the generalized other that helps to understand the details of

what image the producers want to present based on society, otherwise known as the generalized other.

The results found three reoccurring themes; First, there was a significantly common theme of producers using the desire of people to change their appearance in order to motivate them. Next, it was found that producers used impression management very frequently in order to appeal to their audience. Impression management means they used certain strategies to present themselves positively based on popular demand on Instagram. Finally, it was clear that fitness personalities are not only just motivators, but they are also people of business making profit with their content.

Look Good, Feel Good

After analyzing all of these various posts, what I found was appearance-based motivators was a primary theme. Most of the posts encouraging audiences promoted the importance of looking a certain way; being physically fit is the main objective. Everything else including nutrition, well-being, psychological health, and more, were all considered beneath this central command of “looking good,”; if you look good, you feel good.

Gender norms played a role as well; physical motivation differed based on the male or female body. Overall, the general take on body ideals displayed through the influencers’ content were as follows; men should aim for bulging muscles, specifically in the upper body area, as well as visibly carved out abs with very little body fat percentage. Men should also use rigorous exercise and hope to gain muscle mass while shredding any unnecessary fat. Women, on the other hand, should aim for perfectly rounded butts, flat stomachs with some ab definition, toned

arms but not too muscular, and to look good while doing it. For men and women, the idea that fitness makes you “sexier” was presented in the imagery, but not as obviously in the text.

One noticeable point found in the 30 or so most recent posts of each account is the lack of discussion on nutrition and wellness. The fitness and health world expects to motivate and inspire those watching. This obviously should include well-being and health. According to social media content, that was not the case. The lack of significance to highlight on healthy food sends a message that working out is the definition of being “fit”. With some of the most followed Instagram fitness creators sending this message, the cultivation of fitness is clear. Furthermore, it illustrates how the mass production of appearance-based motivation is created rather than healthy lifestyle motivation.

The results showed that the men were seen lifting weights, noticeably heavy weights, in many more of their posts than the women. Jen Selter’s posts included three weight lifting posts, Michelle Lewin 2. Yet, Simeon Panda had 21 posts showing off his heavy lifting and Ulisses World had 10. The vast difference helps to explain the common social stereotype of men needing to be extremely muscular and buff, while women should strive for a more toned, slimmed down look. Commonly this “societal rule” is displayed, whether it is through advertising, gym classes and/ or fitness language.

The language used by the men observed was different than the women who were observed. Typically, the language used by the men was aggressive, emphasizing through their language what the ideal man should be working towards. Phrases such as “muscle mass”, “body fat”, and “do the work” were coded frequently by both Panda and Ulisses. Terminology such as this outlines what the masculine fitness world teaches as the ideal look and fitness lifestyle.

Unsurprisingly, both Simeon and Ulisses had 80% of their posts displaying their massive muscular arms. Both had 27 posts of their bulging muscles being shown in some way. Another exact similarity is both male fitness personalities had 17 posts of themselves topless. In comparison, both had about 11-14 posts showing off their legs. Highlighting the upper body in their posts is another example of the well-known societal expectation of men having a visibly strong upper body and mid area as opposed to lower body.

This was the opposite case for the women. With Selter having 21 posts emphasizing her buttocks and 10 of Lewin's, it establishes the ideal for women to have a perfectly sculpted, round butt and toned legs. Both women had emphasized their butt's intentionally, whether it was through arching the back or a specific camera angle. As expected, the women were much more sexualized in their posts, as evidenced through more exposure or poses to sexualize their body. Yet, there were some sexualized posts for the men as well. Both men had a few sexualized posts showing more of their groin area with tight shorts or lower raised pants. These producers are now elaborating that fitness is not only impressive, but it is sexy as well. To be fit also means to be sexier than others.

Another highlighted "look" seen in both the men's account and the women's is the flat, toned, sculpted abs look. All accounts had a few specific posts geared on how to get the "desired" abs and flat stomach look. Very rarely, if at all, was there any posts visibly showing anything but a flat, toned stomach from the accounts.

Comparably, both women had almost all of their 30 posts viewing their full body, while the men had some shots only focusing on the top half of their body. Again, this presentation emphasizes the importance of upper body development for men and that women should be more focused on their lower half and mid-section.

None of the accounts openly used phrases to signify what the perfect body must be. For instance, rarely was it observed that either of the women described having a “perfectly round butt” or the men stating their “bulging muscles”. The undertones of this message were displayed more specifically in their photographs and videos by obviously showing off their perfect bodies. What is regarded “perfect” is not directly spoken by the producers, only hinted at. Instead of flat out saying that having a big round butt makes you a better person, the women hint at it by countless showing it off online. By all four fitness producers posting frequently on their specific body parts, it can be read between the lines that the way their body parts look is the way they should look for everyone.

It is also important to note that the four most followed fitness personalities on Instagram are clearly very fit. So fit in fact, that their body type can be regarded as an unrealistic goal to many. It is not surprising that the most carved and well defined bodies are the most popular on social media. In addition, both Michelle Lewin with 12 million followers and Jen Selter with 12.7 million followers clearly have a much larger following than the men, specifically Ulisses World who garnered 5.8 million followers and Simeon Panda at 5 million followers. Again, this reinforces the argument that women in fitness feel far more singled out; this is shown through the mass amount of people following the women fitness accounts. It could also be due to the sexualized nature of the women fitness producers and the male gaze.

Community

Through observation, it was clear that the producers utilized intimacy in order to gain a stronger following. A common tool used by the influencers was the emphasis of comradery amongst their communities. There was much emphasis to their followers of how they were all

one big community, as well as including their followers within the captions. Frequently, the influencers would directly address their audience and welcome them to follow along.

Selter utilized the warmth and friendliness of nick names or pet names. 12 times in her captions, Selter used names like “babe”, “love” and “fam”. Arguably, this is her attempt to entice people to feel wanted and included in her own life. By doing so, it has a positive effect of interactions on her account. Similarly, all four of the fitness accounts invited viewers to do things related to their own account, such as, “try this workout”, seen 10 times on Simeon Panda’s account, and “get fit with me”, “train with me”, “let’s do this together” coded 7 times on Michelle Lewin’s Instagram. Direct encouragement was observed as well. Occasionally captions included “tag your friend”. Again, it promotes interaction on their accounts adding comments and seeming more popular.

This invitational tone makes followers feel wanted on their profile and adds a more personal element in order to keep people interacting. Essentially, it is as though you are working out and watching a friend’s fitness journey. Coincidentally, although there is much emphasis on community and “togetherness”, rarely in the 30 recent posts did any of the accounts include other people. Out of the total 116 sample posts studied, only about seven of those posts included someone else in the image. This is the results of all four fitness accounts combined.

Instagram as a Business

There was no lack of advertising seen in the study. Whether it be through imagery, captions or videos, advertising was obvious. In total, there were 46 posts from all of the influencers that included self-promotion. Self-promotion was seen most frequently in the captions while encouraging followers to join their program, check out their merchandise, to buy their workout routine/ programs etc. Other than self-promotion, there was a total of 19 posts

including advertising through another company. Typically, the products or businesses being advertised to followers were fitness related: workout gear, whey protein, shoe companies etc.

The analysis of this result shows that influencers are not only posting for the benefit of followers to help them solely. It shows that there is also an element of business involved as well as profit. With money and profit involved influencers are inclined to promote certain products even if they don't always believe in them. Producers are encouraging people to purchase things that may or may not work or benefit them.

Conclusion

Social media personalities and producers online are not only sculpting new beliefs and elements of fitness by what they share, they are also reinforcing previous beliefs. Reoccurring messages found included: women should be very well toned, small waists, big butts, sexualized. Men should be very buff, bulging muscles, and aggressive in the gym. Additionally, beliefs and values were seen in fitness lifestyles revolving heavily around the gym vs. nutrition and health, most appearance based motivation is crucial. It is clear as well that fitness producers online are not only just personalities but businesses and advertisements, and there was a heightened amount of impression management on social media.

This research has expanded the previous literature by helping bring light to the fitness world and how it has been manufactured. Eventually we see that the producers of this community help to enforce as well as create new values, beliefs and stigmas.

References

- Andreasson, J., & Johansson, T. (2013). Female Fitness in the Blogosphere: Gender, Health, and the Body. *SAGE Open*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244013497728>
- Blackstone, Sarah R., and Lynn K. Herrmann. "Extreme Body Messages: Themes from Facebook Posts in Extreme Fitness and Nutrition Online Support Groups." *MHealth* 4, no. 8 (August 8, 2018).
- Carrotte, Elise R, Alyce M Vella, and Megan S C Lim. "Predictors of 'Liking' Three Types of Health and Fitness-Related Content on Social Media: A Cross-Sectional Study." *Journal of Medical Internet Research* 17, no. 8 (August 2015): e205-16.
- Cunningham, George B., and Jennifer Woods. "For the Health of It: Advertisement Message and Attraction to Fitness Clubs." *American Journal of Health Studies* 26, no. 1 (March 2011): 4–9.
- "Controlling You Watching Me: Measuring Perception Control on Social Media." *CyberPsychology, Behavior & Social Networking* 20, no. 9 (September 2017): 561–66.
- Deighton-Smith, Nova, and Beth T. Bell. "Objectifying Fitness: A Content and Thematic Analysis of #fitspiration Images on Social Media." *Psychology of Popular Media Culture* 7, no. 4 (October 2018): 467–83.

Ethan, Danna, Corey H. Basch, Grace Clarke Hillyer, Alyssa Berdnik, and Mary Huynh. “An Analysis of Weight Loss Articles and Advertisements in Mainstream Women’s Health and Fitness Magazines.” *Health Promotion Perspectives* 6, no. 2 (June 11, 2016): 80–84.

Goffman, Erving. (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday,

Keep, Melanie, and Alison Attrill-Smith. “Controlling You Watching Me: Measuring Perception Control on Social Media.” *CyberPsychology, Behavior & Social Networking* 20, no. 9 (September 2017): 561–66.

Lauren Reichart Smith & Jimmy Sanderson (2015) I'm Going to Instagram It! An Analysis of Athlete Self-Presentation on Instagram, *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 59:2, 342-358, DOI:

Liu, Ivy L. B., Christy M. K. Cheung, and Matthew K. O. Lee. *Understanding Twitter Usage: What Drive People Continue to Tweet*, n.d.

Michelle Raggatt, Cassandra J. C. Wright, Elise Carrotte, Rebecca Jenkinson, Kate Mulgrew, Ivanka Prichard, and Megan S. C. Lim. “‘I Aspire to Look and Feel Healthy like the Posts Convey’: Engagement with Fitness Inspiration on Social Media and Perceptions of Its Influence on Health and Wellbeing.” *BMC Public Health, Vol 18, Iss 1, Pp 1-11 (2018)*, no. 1 (2018): 1.

Norris, Tia. "Social Media and Fitness: The Do's and Don'ts." *Echo Magazine* 29, no. 8 (May 2018): 68–68.

Norton, Makenzie. "Fitspiration: Social Media's Fitness Culture and Its Effect on Body Image." *Social Media*, n.d., 49.

Robinson, Lily, Ivanka Prichard, Alyssa Nikolaidis, Claire Drummond, Murray Drummond, and Marika Tiggemann. "Idealised Media Images: The Effect of Fitspiration Imagery on Body Satisfaction and Exercise Behaviour." *Body Image*, 2017.

Seidman, Gwendolyn. "Self-Presentation and Belonging on Facebook: How Personality Influences Social Media Use and Motivations." *Personality and Individual Differences* 54, no. 3 (February 1, 2013): 402–7.

"Self-Presentation and Belonging on Facebook: How Personality Influences Social Media Use and Motivations." *Personality and Individual Differences* 54, no. 3 (February 1, 2013): 402–7.

Urbanek, Emma. "Social Media and the Fitness Industry: Statistics You Need to Know." *Social Media and the Fitness Industry: Statistics You Need to Know*, 2017, blog.simplestrat.com/social-media-and-the-fitness-industry-statistics.