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# Fitspiration: Social Media's Fitness Culture and its Effect on Body Image

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Fitspiration: Social Media's Fitness Culture and its Effect on Body Image

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### **Abstract**

Social media's largest platforms, especially Facebook and Instagram, has revolutionized the average American's accessibility to new subcultures, usurping the societal influence of traditional media forms while retaining many of their marketing methods. The following capstone research discusses how the fitness subculture and fitness-related content on social media affects male and female body image and body ideals. Through a content analysis of current literature, I provide connections between the marketing of fitness in American media and its influence on men and women's body image. Using social comparison theory, I analyze prior research that explains the causes of body dissatisfaction and explain social media's role in this. I created a survey to gain insight on modern social media consumption of fitness-related content and to observe its effect on body image, its effectiveness as motivation to live a healthier lifestyle, and its influence on American women's body ideals. In my conclusion, I discuss the importance of this research in regards to educating young people on media literacy, body image, and overall health and wellness.

**Keywords:** Fitspiration, social media, body image, fitness, social comparison theory

## Introduction

Within the last decade, social media has become deeply rooted in the American culture. According to the PEW Research Center, in 2016 68% of U.S. adults are Facebook users, 28% use Instagram, and 21% use Twitter (Greenwood, Perrin, & Duggan, 2016). While social media was originally created to help the average person stay connected with friends and family, its practical use has become more diverse and more money-driven. American's now use social media for work, school, dating or simply to find information. Social media users have probably noticed yet another way people are using social media, and that is for health and fitness related purposes. As a social media user myself, I have definitely noticed this new fitness trend and have even been affected by it. Anytime I log into one of my social media accounts I see my friends posting about their workout routines or healthy meals. Even if one chooses to un-follow every fitness-related account, the enormity of this subset of online culture is undeniable. On every platform, you can find thousands of results for hashtags relating to before-and-after weight loss photos, body selfies, like the "belfie" (combination of the words butt and selfie), and endless vague motivational quotes and captions. Examples include, "The only bad workout is the one you didn't do," and "Don't wish for a good body, work for it." This "inspiring" content even has its own amalgamation: fitspiration. Fitspiration seems to aim to inspire people to achieve their fitness and body goals, but in many ways it also sets those goals itself. Fitspiration is found using hashtags, allowing people to see hundreds of related pieces of content in just seconds. Is this modern attraction to inspiring and picture-perfect "healthy lifestyle" gurus the best motivational tool for people who want to improve their lives, or does it also cause harm? Through firsthand experience, I have seen my beautiful and healthy girlfriends obsess over counting calories, feel the pressure to work out every single day, have feelings of guilt whenever they eat one too many

cookies, and even be on the verge of tears when they step onto a scale only to find themselves at the same weight they were last week. I have even witnessed young men in their twenties begin to experiment with steroids to achieve that over-muscular physique they saw on a professional bodybuilders Instagram.

On the surface, social media's fitness culture seems to promote healthy eating, habitual exercise and the idea that achieving your ideal fit physique is at your fingertips. But what is the underlying message? Like everything in the media, the spokesperson of the message usually fits one ideal prototype. The model spokesperson does not account for the vast and diverse general public the message is reaching. For example, Instagram user Kayla Itsines is labeled as a public figure on her website and has 6.7 million followers. She is ranked number one in the fitness category on the Forbes Top Influencers list and is described by many as the face of the fitness culture on social media. In Itsines' featured article on Forbes.com, author Clare O' Connor (2017) explains how, "hundreds of thousands of women worldwide spend \$19.99 a month on Itsines' Bikini Body Training Guide program, keeping their own followers updated on their progress using the hashtag #bbg." This hashtag has been used in over 10 million Instagram posts which depict womens before and after progress pictures after using the program (O'Connor, 2017). However, Kayla Itsines is a young, white, attractive and naturally thin female. Even though women of all shapes and sizes use her program and some see results, many of these women will never look like the programs creator and may feel discouraged. This discouragement can lead to low self-esteem and a negative body image resulting in all the issues that literature tells us can result from these disorders. Kayla Itsines is just one example of the hundreds of fitness models, online trainers, and health bloggers on social media with an increasing amount of

influence on their followers. Nonetheless, it is influencers like her that made me become interested in this particular social media phenomenon.

There has been exhaustive research done on the question of how media affects body image in women with growing research on this topic in men. However, social medias effect on body image in both men and women is a relatively new discussion. For the purposes of my own research I want to focus on the aforementioned fitness culture and its impact on men and women's body image. I want to explore the often-overlooked dark side of what at first glance seems to be a body-positive subculture; its unintended effects include people obsessing over their physiques for appearances' sake, negative body images, and self-destructive eating and exercise habits. The fitness culture is also changing body ideals in men and women as it promotes a more toned and muscular look in both. Through both qualitative and quantitative methods, I research the answers to two questions: In what ways does social medias fitness culture affect men and women's body image? And, how is fitness related content on social media changing the ideal body types of men and women? I will be using social comparison theory as the framework for my findings and analysis.

### **Literature Review**

#### *Selling of fitness and fitness in the media*

The fitness industry's marketing tactics fundamentally rely on consumer capitalism to market themselves. Fitness promotion and marketing transformed in the 1970s, when exercises like running, aerobics and weightlifting became increasingly popular. Big name brands, including Nike and Reebok, not only provided the materials and services for the fitness industry, they made consumers feel they needed their products to be fit (Hentges, 2014, p. 33). Hentges (2014) explains how today's American capitalist consumer culture is the foundation for the



commercial nature of the fitness world. There is a constant demand for everything new and better, as well as a “quick fix” to body problems. Even though Hentges (2014) recognizes the drawbacks of this approach, she agrees that there are positives to anything that inspires people to exercise. (p. 33). Dworkin and Wachs (2009) also recognize the importance of a consumer culture in the selling of fitness, particularly in relation to gender. According to Dworkin and Wachs (2009):

The addition of consumption is vital to understanding “masculine” and “feminine” bodily ideals because advertisements, dominant cultural trends, and contemporary health and fitness practices merge to form the popular assumption that fitness ideals “speak to all” while quietly and inevitably including some bodies and excluding others. (p. 10)

Although men and women's experience in terms of consumerism and objectification in the media are converging, there are still separate ideals for how their bodies should look. For example, in the fitness industry, fat is equally feared by both men and women. However, the way fitness magazines depict reducing fat is different for each gender. Men are not as pressured to diet to reduce fat and are more encouraged to “eat to grow” muscle. “Cutting fat is masculinized by linking it to the revelation of manly striations and cuts” (Dworkin and Wachs, 2009, p 37). Meanwhile, the language surrounding reducing fat in women's diets is linked directly towards the goal of gaining a toned physique that is free of cellulite (p. 37). Furthermore, there is a common theme in fitness magazines that men should naturally be bigger than women and strive for a more muscular look, while women should essentially decrease the size of their bodies (p. 49). Hesse-Biber et al. (2006) expand on this idea by also linking women's desire to be thin to capitalism and patriarchal ideals. Dating back to ancient Greece, according to Aristotle women have been deemed as “passive prisoners of their body functions.” As women begin to separate themselves from male domination, they feel the need to be more in control of their bodies, which include dieting, exercise and even starvation, in order to obtain the socio-cultural ideal for

women to be thin. The fitness industry promotes this by disguising societal pressures to look a certain way as “health” pursuits (Hesse-Biber et al., 2006). Hesse-Biber et al. (2006) explains “...body obsession becomes an effective measure of gendered social control, self-imposed, yet congruent with the ideological and financial dictates of patriarchal capitalism” (p. 214).

Despite these gendered differences in the marketing of body ideals, the media portrays a fit physique not only as a standard of an individual's health but as a product of “social responsibility and civic participation” (Dworkin and Wachs, 2009, p. 35). The theory of moral panic explains how the media can stigmatize people who do not fit the specific body standards presented by fitness and health magazines. With a rise in the number of overweight or obese Americans, it becomes even more socially harmful when a major form of media teaches the public that certain physical features symbolize that a person is morally inferior. Consumerism infers all people should minimize their flaws (e.g. body fat) by purchasing what health and fitness magazines are selling, in both theory and in consumer goods (p. 70).

Why do ordinary Americans accept the definition that someone should be inferior to others solely based on their appearance? Advertisements give customers a sequence of “moral decisions” that produce a dichotomy of “right” and “wrong” (Hesse-Biber et al., 2006). For example, if a person eats healthy foods or follows an exercise in a magazine then they are doing what is morally right. However, if a person is not eating the predetermined “good” foods or not working out, they will be stigmatized by society and therefore experience the guilt or depression at being an outsider.

The theory of healthism also needs to be examined when discussing fitness marketing. Healthism puts the “problem” of health, in this case an unfit body, on the individual; it is their responsibility to find a solution to the “problem” (Dworkin and Wachs, 2009, p. 11). Consumer

culture relies on the exchange of the disciplined and objectified body as well as society's role to govern what is right and wrong. Dworkin and Wachs (2009) state:

Thus, in the process of advertising and selling the right kind of bodily object through consumption, the bodies of the privileged are legitimated and idealized as moral actors. This is because the right kind of bodily object—the cumulative effect of one's purchases, social practices, and the ensuing surfaces of the flesh—is always out of reach by some and attainable by others.” (p.11)

The fitness industry and market rely heavily on the cultural maintenance of societal values and norms pertaining to gender, morality, and obsession with appearances. This style of marketing can have detrimental effects on its consumer base, such as eating disorders and poor body image.

Hentges (2014) introduces the theory of feminist fitness to counteract some of the ways consumer capitalism within the fitness industry can affect one's physical and mental health. “So many fitness approaches are based on results: bigger biceps, smaller thighs, better cardio endurance... feminism fitness is more of a journey, with stages and education” (Hentges, 2014, p. 96). Although this theory was designed for women, this form of feminism challenges body standards for both men and women, using fitness goals as a form of empowerment. Feminist fitness has made its way through the media, particularly social media, and encompasses people of all shapes and sizes, as well as marketing body-positive fitness and diet tips (p. 104). Being able to understand the ways in which fitness is marketed and sold in the media, as well as its effect on consumers, will help young people understand the ways *social* media promotes certain body ideals in men and women.

#### *The relationship between social media and body dissatisfaction*

There has been thorough research conducted by social scientists in the last decade on how American mass media (e.g. television, magazines, advertisements) has a significant and mostly negative effect on men and women's body image. Social scientists are now beginning to look at

social media's influence on body dissatisfaction in its millions of users. Unlike television and magazines that depict images of models and celebrities, social media portrays "idealized" images of user's peers. With photo filters, hashtags, contests, "features", and monetization, people have the ability to edit and enhance their appearance to impress their classmates, friends, and communities. Users with hundreds of thousands of followers are rewarded for being popular when they receive money from advertisers who want them to showcase a product. Social media is of course more interactive than other forms of media, providing instant gratification and a feeling of personal validation (Kim and Chock, 2015). The current research seems to be congruent in its findings even though different methods and theories are applied to each study.

Social media differs from traditional media by having a variety of comparison targets. Kim and Chock's (2015) analysis of Festinger's social comparison theory is that people tend to compare themselves to those who are "better off" than them, leading to an "upward social comparison." Social media portrays "real people" which has been hypothesized to show different results in the impact of social media on men and women's body image (Fardauly et al., 2014; Kim and Chock, 2015). Social media users may see images of their peers as personally achievable as a result of comparable lifestyles between the two (Fardauly et al., 2014). Also, studies have shown that the way people present themselves on social media is selective and will reflect the overall ideal body that users want to achieve (Kim and Chock, 2015). However, research has shown that young adults' levels of body dissatisfaction are the same whether they compare themselves to their peers or to celebrities and models (Fardauly et al., 2014; Kim and Chock, 2015).

The overall findings on social media's impact on female body dissatisfaction is that there is a correlation between social media consumption and body image concerns (Fardouly and

Vartanian, 2014; Fardouly et al. 2014; Kim and Chock, 2015). One study conducted surveyed 227 female first-year psychology students at an Australian university. Questionnaires were designed to find out the students' Facebook usage, rate of appearance comparison (e.g. "When using Facebook, I compare my physical appearance to the physical appearance of others"), body image concerns (e.g. body dissatisfaction and drive for thinness), and comparison to specific target groups on Facebook (e.g. same sex and relationship to the participant) (Fardouly and Vartanian, 2014). Fardouly and Vartanian (2014), concluded that higher levels of Facebook usage had a positive correlation with body dissatisfaction and a drive for thinness. They also found that participants were just as likely to compare themselves to female distant peers as they were to close female friends and celebrities, but not as much to female family members. These findings are consistent with another study of 112 female students and staff between the ages of 17 and 25 years at a university in the United Kingdom. This study had participants engage with Facebook as well as with a magazine website to see whether the influence of the two platforms made a difference in the women's mood, body dissatisfaction, and comparison in weight, body shape, face, hair, and skin. The result: women experienced a more significant downturn in their mood when looking at Facebook and felt a greater desire to change their hair, face and/or skin. However, there was no significant difference in desire to change weight and shape which was assumed to be because Facebook's profile photos are most often portraits and not full-body photos (Fardouly et al., 2014).

Although most of the research between media and social media's impact on body image has been done on women, there has been a growing amount of literature on media's role on men's body dissatisfaction. Kim and Chock (2015) found a study that showed 84% of male college students reported a negative self-image and dissatisfaction with their bodies. Their study

aimed to see if there were any gender differences in body dissatisfaction and Facebook use for social grooming. According to Kim and Chock (2015), social grooming on social media "...is characterized by the social engagement behaviors of browsing around, visiting, checking other users' profiles, clicking 'likes,' leaving messages, or commenting on others' profiles" (p. 333). Kim and Chock (2015) hypothesized that social grooming on Facebook would result in body image concerns in both genders with female's concerns being associated with a drive for thinness and male's concerns being associated with a drive for muscularity. They surveyed 186 participants: 119 females and 67 males between the ages of 18 and 25. The results showed that higher levels of social grooming on Facebook significantly lead to body image concerns, particularly a drive for thinness in both men and women. Females showed higher ratings for a drive of thinness and were more likely to make appearance based comparisons. Males showed a higher drive for muscularity even though social grooming habits in men were not related to this. (Kim and Chock, 2015). Although there have been numerous studies conducted on the relationship social media has to body image, the ones listed above were representative of the most current research. These studies provide a good basis in understanding how fitness related content on social media contributes to appearance comparisons and body dissatisfaction.

#### *Fitness's role in social media and social media's role in fitness*

Much of the current research has a general understanding that specific beauty ideals of thinness, as portrayed in the media, have single-handedly caused a national epidemic of self-criticism, but little research has been done on other beauty ideals. The athletic body ideal, which depicts a fit and toned body with a low percentage of body fat, may also have an impact on the rise of body-image related mental issues (Boepple et al., 2016). Studies have shown that teenagers are more likely to engage in gym related physical activity when they internalize images

in the media and that women who were exposed to images of fitness models had higher levels of body related anxiety. In general, research proves that regular exercise is correlated to an increase in body satisfaction. However, when a person admits to exercising solely for appearance-related reasons alone, a decrease in body satisfaction is shown, as well as a higher rating of guilt-fueled compulsive exercise and disordered eating habits (Boepple et al., 2016). Seymour (2002) conducted a study showing the role of social comparison in men and women's exposure to athletic media images on mood, body image and desire to exercise. The women of the study reported a drop in their mood and a higher desire to work out, but no changes were documented in the men (Seymour, 2002). These studies show that exposure to fitness and athletic imagery on social media can produce generally the same effects on body image that other ideal images on social media do.

The steady and projected rise of media and technology consumption amongst young adults has been a cause of concern for health behaviorists, due to its inactive nature. According to Vaterlaus et al. (2014), social media may have a different effect on health behaviors in young adults because of its interactive nature. According to social ecological theory, a person's eating and exercise habits are based on a variety of ecosystem levels (e.g. individual, environmental, and cultural factors). Sectors of influence, in this case, social media, also plays a role in how people make health decisions (Vaterlaus et al, 2014). Using the qualitative methods of focus groups and semi-structured interviews, Vaterlaus et al (2014) conducted a study of 34 university students in the United States to discover how social media may influence their opinions, behaviors, and motivations in regards to food choices and exercise. Interestingly, one conclusion was that social media helps motivate young people to work out simply because they have easy access to a variety of new exercises. Participants of the study admitted to following "fitspo"

accounts on Instagram, Pinterest, and Facebook in order to stay motivated. 59% of participants also explained the norm of taking exercise related selfies and posting statuses and other content in discussing their health practices. However, most agreed that frequent posts about dieting and exercise led to negative reactions from viewers and followers who perceived this content as a form of “digital bragging.” They noted that this behavior was done to make others feel shameful about their own bodies and lifestyles while elevating their own sense of self-worth and accomplishment. One female participant stated “It’s like they post a pic: ‘still really fat, trying to lose weight’ and their muscles are ripped and they got bulging biceps and you’re like ‘where’s the fat?’” (p. 155). This kind of content can be relevant to Seymour’s (2002) findings that fitness-related images lead to a decrease in mood and body satisfaction in women.

A content analysis of fitness-related websites, known as “fitspiration” sites, was conducted to analyze the images and messages these sites portray, as related to diet and exercise (Boepple et al, 2015). Tiggeman and Zaccardo (2015) describe fitspiration as “images that are...designed to motivate people to exercise and pursue a healthier lifestyle” (p. 62). Despite the motivational nature of these websites, the perception of constantly reinforced specific ideal body types (e.g. thin and toned) and of objectified body parts that are constantly being reinforced can cause body image issues. Fitspiration websites were found to motivate people to exercise for appearance-related reasons while stigmatizing fat. Only 10% of sites contained images of women who were labeled as curvy or “overweight.” There were also messages similar to pro-anorexia sites, specifically quotes associating eating with guilt. An overall theme among the sites was that they promoted sexually objectifying content with over 50% of websites depicting woman in their underwear (Boepple et al, 2014). An experiment was conducted of 130 female university students in South Australia between the ages of 17 and 30 to analyze the correlation between



these fitspiration sites and body dissatisfaction. Participants were exposed to a set fitspiration images and a control set of travel images to discern the differences the pictures made in mood, body dissatisfaction, and feelings of inspiration (Tiggemann and Zcardo, 2015). The results were consistent with the content analysis in that viewing fitspiration images led to a negative mood, increased body dissatisfaction and a greater need to work out and eat healthier.

Tiggemann and Zcardo (2015) note that the larger effects in their study, as compared to previous work, should not be overlooked stating that:

This may be a function of fitspiration imagery being more potent in some way than thin-ideal imagery. Perhaps women do not process fitspiration images as critically as they do thin-ideal images, or perhaps adding tone and strength to thinness cumulates to provide women with more ways in which to feel inadequate. (p. 65)

Nonetheless, these findings show yet another way social media has a growing influence on its users leading to a variety of body image related concerns, provide clear reasons why the influence of social media in this sphere and should be further discussed and analyzed.

### **Theory**

Most of the literature surrounding this topic applies social comparison theory to its analysis. Social comparison theory was founded by social psychologist Leon Festinger in 1954 and suggests that people build their opinions of themselves and their abilities by comparing themselves to others. People become more driven to obtain success and certain goals when they are gaining approval from others. (Festinger, 1954). However, people are also more likely to compare themselves to people that are the most similar to them. Festinger (1954) describes this by explaining:

“Thus, a college student, for example, does not compare himself to inmates of an institution for the feeble minded to evaluate his own intelligence. Nor does a person who is just beginning to learn the game of chess compare himself to the recognized masters of the game.” (p. 120).

However, there will still be discrepancies between a person and who they are comparing themselves to which leads to an upward social comparison. This is the kind of comparison that is seen a lot when discussing the influence of media, especially social media. When a person participates in this kind of comparison, they tend to compare themselves to people who they believe to be better than themselves which can lead to negative self-evaluations of oneself (Bessenoff, 2006). Festinger (1954) explains that upward social comparison will lead to a form of action to “reduce discrepancies” among the individual and who they are comparing themselves to. For example, a person is more likely to eat healthier and workout when they are exposed to images of their fit and toned contemporaries. There is a general understanding in the literature that social media provides users with idealized, filtered, and enhanced images of their peers, leading to upward social comparison, which often results in a negative body image (Boepple et al., 2014; Fardauly et al., 2014; Fardauly and Vartanian, 2014; Kim and Chock, 2015; Seymour, 2002; Tiggeman and Zaccardo: 2015). Kim and Chock (2015) elaborate on how people can be more selective in how they portray themselves online, with the ability to edit and retouch pictures, to show a not-quite-real airbrushed, idealized beauty standard. Interaction and engagement on social media is another way people participate in social comparison as they seek evaluation and approval from others through these online social interactions, which influence their opinions of themselves (Kim and Chock, 2015).

I will be applying the theoretical framework of social comparison to my own research. Since I will examine how social media's fitness culture affects men and women's body image, I will be applying social comparison theory to see if respondents feel negatively about their bodies when exposed to fitness related imagery. I will also see if fitness related content on social media inspires people to live a healthier lifestyle (e.g. workout more often). Lastly, this theory will help

me better understand what target groups young people are most often comparing themselves too, as well as their opinions and perceptions regarding the ideal female body type.

### **Methodology**

For this study I developed a survey using the online tool SurveyMonkey. The survey consisted of twenty questions, including three demographic questions (e.g. age, gender, race/ethnicity). The survey begins with questions on social media consumption. A majority of the questions used a Likert-Scale that gauged respondent's attitudes from strongly agree to strongly disagree on a variety of questions dealing with social medias influence on body image. When asking participants' if the ideal body type for women has changed in recent years, I provided an open ended comment box to gain insight on specific attitudes and opinions. I also felt that qualitative data would provide stronger support for my quantitative findings. I distributed my survey using a web link that I posted to my personal Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter accounts. The web link was also posted on iLearn forums in my SBS 366: Quantitative Research Methods and SBS 379: Tattoo, Makeup and Burkas classes. The data was analyzed directly on SurveyMonkey as well as Microsoft Excel.

### **Data Analysis**

#### *Survey Findings*

I collected responses from 188 participants with 140 \*(74.5%) identifying as female and 48 (25.5%) identifying as male. I asked participants what race or ethnicity best describes them and out of all the respondents, 126 (67.0%) identified as White/Caucasian, 43 (22.9%) as Hispanic, 14 (7.5%) as Asian / Pacific Islander, 3 (1.6%) as American Indian or Alaskan Native,

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\* Percentages were rounded up to the 10<sup>th</sup> percentile

and 2 (1.1%) as Black or African American. I also asked their age group with 77 (41.0%) being ages 24-29 years, 61 (32.5%) ages 18-23 years, 33 (17.6%) ages 42+ years, 14 (7.5%) ages 30-35 years, and 3 (1.6%) ages 36-41 years.

The next set of questions inquired about overall social media consumption and its employment in terms of fitness related content. When asked how much time each individual spends on social media per day: 81 (43.1%) spend between 61-120 minutes, 71 (37.8%) spend 60 minutes or less and 36 (19.2%) spend more than 120 minutes. Most participants, 125 (66.5%), follow, "like" or are "friends" with only 0-5 fitness related accounts on social media with 14 (7.5%) following the most fitness related accounts at 16+ accounts. However, 102 participants (54.3%) said they have followed some kind of diet plan, detox, cleanse or workout routine that they have found on a fitness related social media account. A majority of respondents 130 (69.2%) said they do not post fitness related content on their own social media accounts (e.g. body selfies, pictures of food, videos of workouts, etc.).

The following questions analyze respondents' perception of their body image, how they compare themselves to others on social media, exercise habits, and fitness accounts' inspirational effects on them pursuing a healthier lifestyle. Since most of these questions used a 5-point Likert-scale with answers ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree, I combined the answers of strongly agree with agree and strongly disagree with disagree to make my analysis more straightforward. 93 respondents (49.5%) agreed that they have a positive body image, 52 (27.7%) were neutral and 43 (22.9%) disagreed. Even though most participants have a positive body image 117 (62.6%) agreed that they often compare their bodies to those they see on social media. However, the responses were split on the question of whether individuals feel bad about their bodies when they look at fitness related content on social media. 76 participants (40.4%)

agreed, 68 (36.2%) disagreed and 44 (23.4%) were neutral. In regards to comparison targets, 80 (42.6%) agreed that they are more likely to compare their bodies to fitness models and to athletes than to supermodels or celebrities. 55 participants (29.3%) were neutral and 53 participants (28.2%) disagreed. 76 participants (40.4%) agreed that social media inspires them to work out and live a healthier lifestyle, while 75 (39.9%) were neutral and 37 (19.7%) disagreed. To understand if the inspirational effects of fitness on social media directly applied to respondents' workout habits I asked how often individuals work out in a week. 62 participants (33.0%) workout 2-3 days per week, 53 (28.2%) workout 4-5 days, 50 (26.6%) workout 0-1 day, and 23 participants (12.2%) workout 6-7 days.

Lastly, I wanted to gain insight on people's attitudes on social media's influence on body ideals and mental health. 117 (62.6%) of respondents agreed that the fitness culture/industry on social media infers that they look a certain way. 142 participants (75.5%) agreed that social media portrays unrealistic body ideals for women, which may correlate with peoples' responses that social media does more harm than good in terms of women's mental health with 109 (58.0%) agreeing that it does. This can also be connected to the fact that 134 participants (71.7%) have personally had or know someone who has had, an experience with an eating or exercise disorder. A main research question of mine is how fitness related content on social media is changing ideal body types. To better understand this I asked participants if the ideal body type has changed in recent years for women. Out of the responses, 164 (87.2%) agreed, 18 (9.6%) were neutral, and 6 (3.2%) disagreed. Participants could voluntarily respond to this open ended question in a comment box explaining how the ideal body type in women has or has not changed. I received 148 responses and explain common themes and give examples of responses in my qualitative analysis.

### Cross Tabulations

In relation to previous research done on this topic, I wanted to compare men and women's responses to a few of my survey questions. Social media tends to negatively affect women's body image self-perception more than men's, so I wanted to see if I found this trend in my own research.

Figure 1 below shows that more men agree to having a positive body image than women do. A chi-squared test of independence was performed to examine the relation between gender and positive body image. The relation between these variables was not significant,  $X^2(2, N=188) = 5.41, p > 0.05$ .

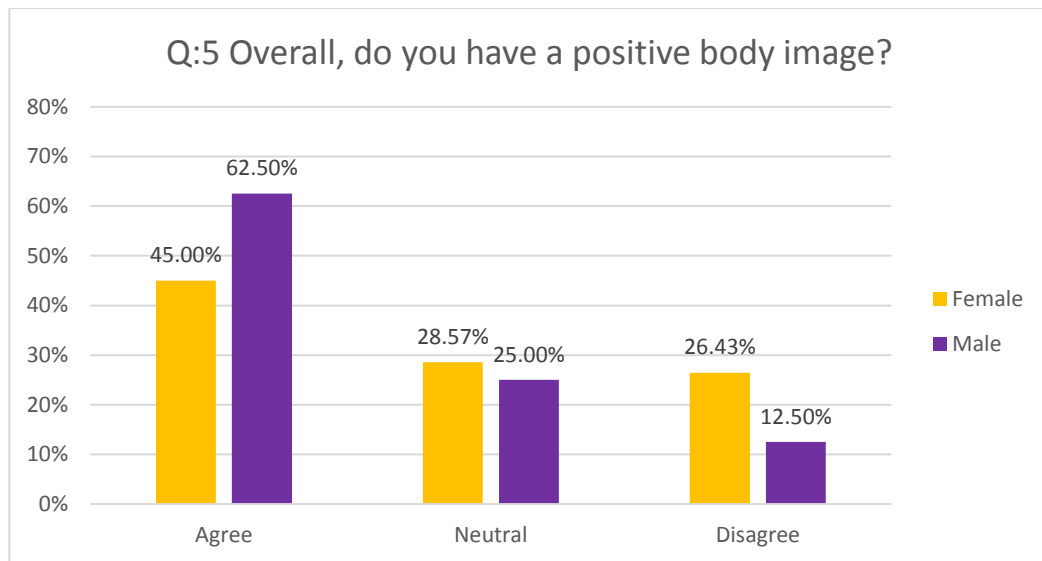


Figure 1.

To apply social comparison theory to my data analysis I compared men and women's responses to a series of questions dealing with making body comparisons. The results our found in the figures below.

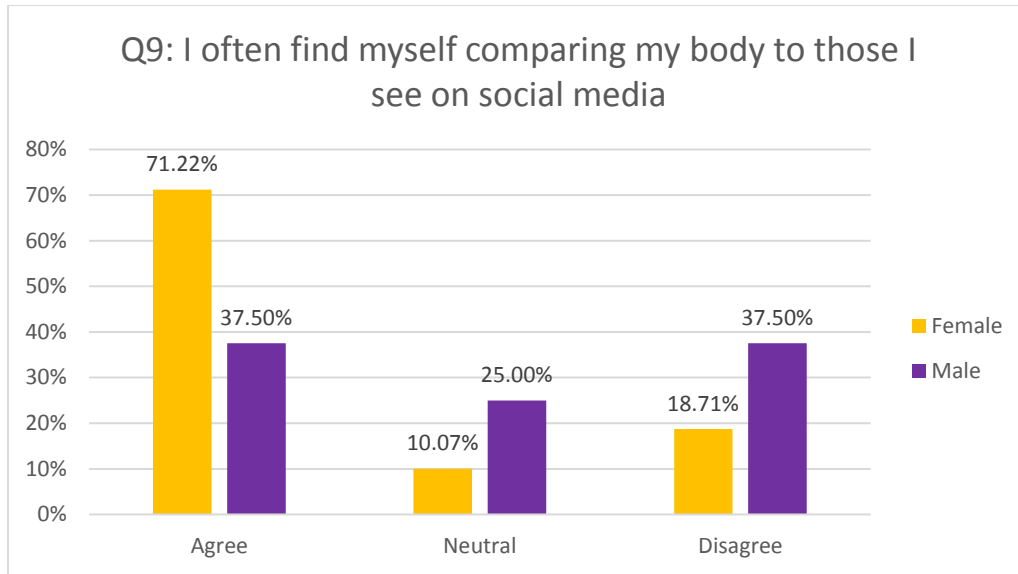


Figure 2.

Figure 2 above shows that females are more likely to compare their bodies than males. A chi-square test of independence showed that there was a significant relationship between these variables,  $X^2 (2, N= 188) = 17.56, p < 0.05$ .

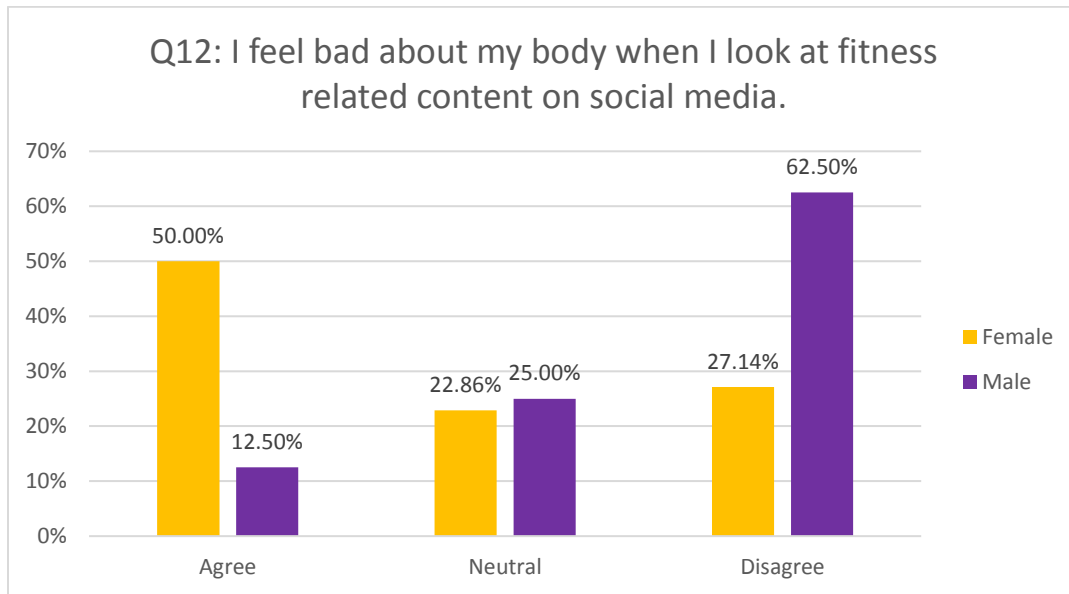


Figure 3.

Figure 3 above expands on this analysis by showing that females are more likely to feel bad about their bodies when looking at fitness related content on social media. A majority of males

disagreed with this statement. A chi-square test of independence proved the relationship between these variables is significant,  $X^2(2, N= 188) = 24.89, p < 0.05$ .

These findings are consistent with Kim and Chock (2015) in that females are more likely to make appearance-based comparison than males. They also support the numerous studies conducted that show that women are prone to negative moods and higher body dissatisfaction when comparing themselves to images they see on social media. Social comparison theory also states that people are more likely to compare themselves to people who are similar to them. Many fitness models and athletes on social media are real people with little celebrity status, so their bodies are also often perceived as more realistic and obtainable as well. Figure 4 below shows men and women's responses in regards to different comparison targets.

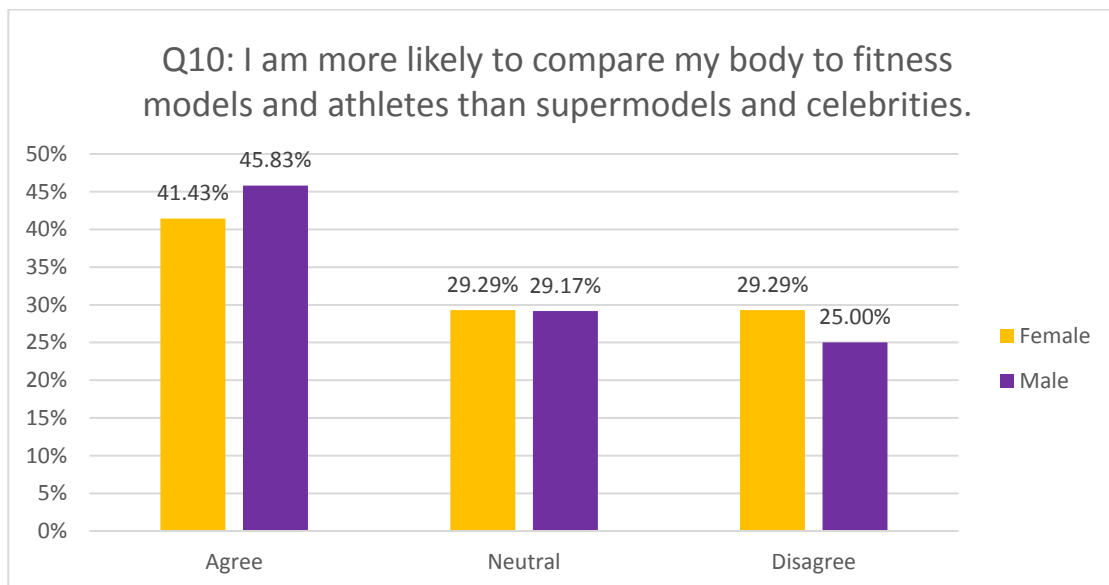


Figure 4.

Men and women's responses were very similar with a majority of them agreeing that they are more likely to compare themselves to fitness models and athletes. These findings support Festinger's (1954) theory.



*Qualitative Data and Analysis*

I provided an open ended question asking participants to explain how the ideal body type for women has or has not changed. I feel that social media has influenced the ideal body type for women because it has made different body types more acceptable. I hypothesize that the fitness culture on social media is changing the overarching “thin ideal” for women into a more fit and strong look. However, Tiggemann and Zaccardo (2015) hypothesized that fitspiration websites pressure women now to look both fit and thin which can cause even bigger issues in regards to a women's body image. It is true that even though most fitness models have more muscles and curves, they still portray a specific body type that not every women fits into. I wanted to observe people's general attitudes on this subject and hypothesized that participants would agree with me that the ideal female body type is becoming more athletic and strong. About 87% of participants agreed that the ideal body type has changed for women in recent years and there were some common themes among their answers.

A lot of people agreed that the ideal body type has changed into a more fit look. Some keywords in these statements were: strong, muscular, fit, tone, flat abs, cross-fit, bodybuilders, weightlifting, and healthy. Someone wrote the phrase “strong is the new skinny.” There was also a general consensus that women are more encouraged to flaunt their curves now, with emphasis on women having larger butts. Keywords that were found included: curvy, thick, big butt, bustier, big boobs, hourglass shape, muscular butt, hips, fuller figures, coke bottle body, and voluptuous. People also explained that there is more acceptance for different body types and body positivity is being promoted. They mentioned how there are more plus size models and real women bodies being portrayed in the media. However, there were also a lot of comments saying that the new ideal body type is still unrealistic and unachievable. There were a lot of responses

that talked about how plastic surgery and Photoshopped images distorts body ideals. A few people even agreed that being supermodel-thin is still the ideal for women. Below I have quoted some responses from people that stood out the most for me:

1. "The ideal body change has not only changed but conformed into unrealistic goals of achievement. Women and men tend to claim that they are "natural" and look a certain way but the reality is they either take supplements or get surgery to achieve the "perfect look." We are reaching goals that are not realistic for anyone yet will make others feel bad about themselves that they cannot achieve it. This "perfection" is dangerous and causing harm to our current and future selves. The ideal look to have perfect abs while having a big butt and big boobs is an absurd concept and yet that's what we are trying to achieve. The walking Barbie dolls." (18-23 years, Female)
2. "The ideal body typed has changed to fit instead of skinny. I'm skinny naturally and never felt uncomfortable with my body until fitness became so popular on social media." (18-23 years, Female)
3. "It seems we've gone from only praising the underweight look to only praising the "fit woman" look...still no love for those of us who are strong but have a few extra pounds or are "too thin" but also strong. Still a mentality of "you have to look like (insert stereotype here) or you're not as good/pretty/worthy." (24-29 years, Female)
4. "I believe fitness has become a larger part of society within recent years but has not so much changed the ideal body type. even though people are working out and using different methods to achieve their goals, I believe an overly thin body is still desired by a majority of women." (24-29 years, Female)

5. "With social media around now, women see celebrities, fitness models, and even Instagram models who have this great body type and lifestyle that most of us do not. Years ago we didn't have all of this except for just TV and movies. But with younger kids in high school and even in middle school getting smart phones and downloading Instagram, Snapchat, etc., there is a pressure to look like a fitness or Instagram model, which is sad. Women and young girls are looking at Alexis Ren or Kylie Jenner and thinking they need bigger lips and a skinny waist to be accepted and feel beautiful in today's society." (24-29 years, Male).
6. I believe that the ideal body type has become more realistic in body acceptance/positive movement while simultaneously, and ironically, becoming more unrealistic in the amount of Photoshop/plastic surgery used to look curvier. (24-29 years, Female).

### **Conclusion**

There is no question that social media has an enormous impact on today's society. Even though the basis of this research was based on social media's influence on the average American person's body image, the influence of social media expands beyond an individual or interpersonal level to much larger political, economic, and cultural areas. In our technologically savvy society, social media will continue to be researched in all academic disciplines. The research that has been conducted on social media's influence on body image alone shows the importance of this topic and I hope my research has contributed to this. Based on my observations I noticed how social media's fitness culture affected the people around me including myself, while even affecting the way social media is marketed and run today.

Building on the previous literature on this topic, my survey showed that fitness related content on social media is influencing people's lifestyles and the way they compare themselves

to others. I found that women tend to have a more negative body image, made worse when seeing fitness imagery and tend to compare their bodies to those they see on social media more often than men. This is congruent with preceding research. However, there are men who experience body image issues and feel the pressures from social media to look a certain way.

Fitspiration provides many people with a supportive online community, which encourages them to work out, to follow specific diets and online workout routines that are, and to strive for a fit and toned body type. There are repercussions to fitspiration and other fitness related content on social media, so media literacy is necessary to counteract these negative effects. McClean et al (2016) conducted a systematic literary review of media literacy's role in body dissatisfaction and found that media literacy interventions improved some body image related issues. The Media Literacy Project was founded in 1993 and aims to educate people on how to better access, analyze, evaluate, and create media. They teach young people to better interpret the messages that come from the many forms of media there are today, including social media. In relation to the effect of fitness-related content on social media on body image, media literacy can help people have a more positive body image. A media-literate individual can see fitness imagery on social media and accept inspiring messages while still making informed emotional decisions on the way social media consumption affects their self-esteem and self-image. This is the first step to social media's fitness culture influencing its audience in a purely positive way. Social media's role in body dissatisfaction is apparent; men and women's happiness should not be sacrificed because they are being told to fit a stereotypical body ideal. I encourage further research on this topic and the incorporation of different theories and forms of quantitative and qualitative analysis. I hope my research inspires readers to be aware of

seemingly benign content on social media, and to begin to create a more positive body image for themselves.

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## Appendix A

**Social Media's Fitness Culture and its Impact on Body Image**

**This survey is for my senior capstone project and was designed to better understand how fitness related content on social media impacts people's body image and body ideals. This survey is completely voluntary and responses are both confidential and anonymous. Thank you for participating.**

**-Makenzie Norton**

**Feel free to contact me at [manorton@csumb.edu](mailto:manorton@csumb.edu) if you have any questions or concerns relating to the survey and my research.**

1. Do you have a social media account? (ex. Instagram, Facebook, Pinterest, Twitter, etc.)

Yes

No

2. How much time do you spend on social media per day?

Less than 30 minutes

30-60 minutes

61-90 minutes

91-120 minutes

More than 120 minutes

3. How many fitness accounts do you follow, like, or are friends with on social media?

0-5

6-10

11-15

16-20

21+

4. Do you post fitness related content on your social media accounts? (ex. body selfies, pictures of food, videos of workout routines, etc).

Yes

No



5. Overall, do you have a positive body image?

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

6. Have you ever followed a diet plan, detox, cleanse or workout routine that you have found on a fitness related social media account?

- Yes
- No

7. Social media inspires me to workout and live a healthier lifestyle.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

8. How often do you workout in a week?

- 0-1 days per week
- 2-3 days per week
- 4-5 days per week
- 6-7 days per week

9. I often find myself comparing my body to those I see on social media.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

10. I am more likely to compare my body to fitness models and athletes than to supermodels and celebrities.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

11. I believe social media portrays unrealistic body ideals for women.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

12. I feel bad about my body when I look at fitness related content on social media.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

13. I believe the fitness culture/industry on social media infers that I look a certain way.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

14. I believe social media does more harm than good in terms of women's mental health.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

15. I or someone I know has had an experience with an eating or exercise disorder.

- Yes
- No
- Unsure

16. The ideal body type has changed in recent years for women.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

17. Based on your response to question 16, explain how the ideal body type for women has or has not changed.

18. What is your age group?

- 18-23
- 24-29
- 30-35
- 36-41
- 42+

19. Which race/ethnicity best describes you?

- American Indian or Alaskan Native
- Asian / Pacific Islander
- Black or African American
- Hispanic
- White / Caucasian

20. What is your gender?

- Female
- Male
- Other

## Annotated Bibliography

1. Boepple, L., Ata, R. N., Rum, R., & Thompson, J. K. (2016). Strong is the new skinny: A content analysis of fitspiration websites. *Body Image, 17*, 132-135.

- 4 pages

This article examines the effect of fitspiration websites on their users. The authors hypothesized that because these websites over-emphasize appearance there would be problematic messages sent to the public about exercise and eating habits. They entered the keywords “fitspo” and “fitspiration” into search engines to gather their data. They analyzed 10 images and text from 51 different websites and rated them on a variety of characteristics. The results showed that most of the websites focus was on appearance. They encourage people to exercise, but only for appearance related reasons and suggest that people have very restricted diets in order to maintain thin and fit. A lot of the images were sexualized as well. The imagery on these sites suggest that there is one particular body ideal that women should strive for.

They recommended further research in this area to gain more insight on fitspiration's effects on psychological health. This source provided me with interesting content in terms of how the fitness culture is portrayed in social media. I was able to make connections from these authors research to my own survey. Fitness related content on social media seems to inspire people to work out and live a healthier lifestyle, however, it has detrimental effects on body image. People in my survey reported to feeling bad about their bodies when looking at fitness related content. This is due to fitspiration websites that were explored above because they promote one body type and infer that women should look a certain way while promoting unhealthy eating and exercise habits.

2. Dworkin, S. , & Wachs, F. (2009). *Body Panic : Gender, Health, and the Selling of Fitness*.  
New York: New York University Press.

- 227 pages

Dworkin and Wachs' study examines ten years' worth of men and women's health and fitness magazines in the American culture. Their study aimed to explain how both men and women's bodies are "made" in today's society. Through an in depth analysis of images, workouts, and overall messages found in these magazines they made connections between specific body ideals and gender. They discuss how the sociocultural changes in the American society that allowed women to become more independent and enter in usually male dominated domains, created a body panic among men. This accounted for men to strive for a bigger and more muscular physique. Women are always expected to be smaller than men.

Despite these distinct gender differences in men and women body ideals, in present day, both genders are being marketed in the same way. There is a common fear of fat in both genders, even though different ways to eliminate fat are taken. For example, men are recommended to eat to grow, while women are pressured to diet. Overweight people are stigmatized and seen as not acting in a moral way or participating in their civic duties as an American citizen. Fitness and health magazines put pressure on people to look a certain way and when they do not participate in the fitness world they receive negative feedback from their peers.

The authors examine different theories in regards to this issue. The theory of moral panic explains how the media can stigmatize people who do not fit the specific body standards presented by fitness and health magazines. With a rise in the number of overweight or obese Americans, it becomes even more socially harmful when a major form of media teaches the public that certain physical features symbolize that a person is morally inferior. The theory of

healthism also needs to be examined when discussing fitness marketing. Healthism puts the “problem” of health, in this case an unfit body, on the individual; it is their responsibility to find a solution to the “problem.” For my own capstone research, I compared Dworkin and Wachs work and their incorporations of different theories to my incorporation of social comparison theory. Moral panic and healthism play a role in social comparison theory because both theories stigmatize people for their health and bodies. Social comparison states that people seek acceptance from the opinions of others and make appearance based comparisons among their peers. If a person compares themselves to someone and their expectations don't add up they may feel a moral panic and blame themselves for their “health” problem.

I thought this book was a very good basis for my capstone research and provided me with a lot of background on the selling and marketing of fitness in American culture. With this knowledge I was able to better make connections to how fitness is marketed on social media.

3. Fardouly, J., Diedrichs, P. C., Vartanian, L. R., & Halliwell, E. (2015). Social comparisons on social media: The impact of Facebook on young women's body image concerns and mood. *Body Image, 13*, 38-45.

- 8 pages

The authors study was created to see the effects Facebook usage had on women's mood and body image. They compared Facebook usage to the control group of online fashion magazines to see if there were any differences in appearance comparison tendencies. 112 females were tested and randomly assigned to different groups. The authors measured the participants' mood, body dissatisfaction and appearance comparison including hair, skin and weight. The results suggested that women who spend more time on Facebook experienced a more negative mood than the control group. Women were also more likely to make more hair, facial, and skin appearance

comparisons when spending time on Facebook than the control group. However, there was no significant results on weight related comparisons, which was deemed to be because of the portrait like nature of Facebook. The authors recommended more research to be done on this topic due to the increasing popularity of Facebook and social media overall.

They incorporated social comparison theory to their analysis and found that their results supported this theory. Women are more likely to make appearance based comparisons when looking at Facebook because Facebook portrays people that are more similar to its users, rather than an online fashion magazine, which shows supermodels. This article helped me incorporate my own analysis of social comparison theory to my survey for my capstone research. My findings were congruent with these authors in that men and women were more likely to compare themselves to fitness models and athletes rather than supermodels and celebrities.

4. Fardouly, J., & Vartanian, L. R. (2015). Negative comparisons about one's appearance mediate the relationship between Facebook usage and body image concerns. *Body Image*, 12, 82-88.

- 7 pages

Social media use, particularly Facebook, is highly prevalent among young women. Body dissatisfaction is also very prevalent. The authors study examined the relationship between Facebook usage and body image concerns among young women. They gained a sample of 227 female first-year psychology students and an Australian university. First they asked questions relating to Facebook usage. For example, they asked how often do the girls check their Facebook a day. They also tested the participants on their tendency to compare their appearance to others on Facebook using three statements from the Physical Appearance



Comparison Scale. They also tested whether or not participants were more likely to make comparisons to their friends, families, distant peers or celebrities.

They found that young women are more likely to compare themselves to close friends which supports social comparison theory. This theory states that people are more likely to compare themselves to people who are similar to them. They also found a positive relationship between Facebook usage and body image concerns. Women who spend more time on Facebook are more likely to feel bad about their bodies. This is similar to my own survey research in that women were more likely to compare their bodies to others on social media than men, as well as feel bad about their bodies when looking at fitness related content. I also asked participant's how many minutes they spent on social media a day with most of them spending 61-90 minutes. I did not directly compare overall Facebook usage with body image, but I hypothesize that high social media consumption leads to negative body images.

5. Hesse-Biber, S., Leavy, P., Quinn, C. E., & Zoino, J. (2006). The mass marketing of disordered eating and Eating Disorders: The social psychology of women, thinness and culture. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 29(2), 208-224.
  - 17 pages

The work of these authors looks more into the social aspects of eating disorders rather than the psychological aspects. Eating disorders have been related to psychology but there are social psychological ways of addressing this problem. The mass media promotes a "cult of thinness" portraying one "thin ideal" body type. Through the exploration of four social psychology theories, cultivation theory, gratifications and uses theory, social comparison theory and objectification theory, the authors are able to better explain how the media is able to lucratively

market disordered eating. The fitness industry promotes this by disguising societal pressures to look a certain way as “health” pursuit. Hesse-Biber et al. (2006) explains “...body obsession becomes an effective measure of gendered social control, self-imposed, yet congruent with the ideological and financial dictates of patriarchal capitalism” (p. 214). They also explain that advertisements give customers a sequence of “moral decisions” that produce a dichotomy of “right” and “wrong.” This can be related to Dworkin and Wachs analysis on how fitness ideals are sold in magazines. They disguise the pressures to look fit and thin in their inspirational and healthy material. This article contributed to my capstone research because social media and body image is usually studied by psychologists and I was able to look at it from a more sociological perspective.

6. Hentges, S. (2013). *Women and Fitness in American Culture*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc.

- 251 pages

The author explains common representations and experiences of American fitness. Hentges focuses mostly on woman's experiences in terms of fitness and examines the function of fitness in individuals as well as in the American culture as a whole. Starting from 1968 to present day, Hentges discusses a broad range of topics dealing with history, different forms of fitness related activity, teaching methods and much more. Drawing on her experiences as a cultural theorist, educator and fitness instructor she looks at the fitness world through an interdisciplinary perspective dealing with theories and analyses including generations, cultural appropriation, community development, choreography, methodology, healing, and social justice. The book has people analyzing their own fitness journeys and offers the message that fitness can transform people's lives in a positive way if they are willing to work for it. In terms of my capstone

research, this book provided me with a good foundation of the historical background of fitness, as well as marketing techniques.

The fitness industry's marketing tactics fundamentally rely on consumer capitalism to market themselves. Fitness promotion and marketing transformed in the 1970s, when exercises like running, aerobics and weightlifting became increasingly popular. Big name brands, including Nike and Reebok, not only provided the materials and services for the fitness industry, they made consumers feel they needed their products to be fit. Hentges explains how today's American capitalist consumer culture is the foundation for the commercial nature of the fitness world. There is a constant demand for everything new and better, as well as a "quick fix" to body problems. Even though Hentges recognizes the drawbacks of this approach, she agrees that there are positives to anything that inspires people to exercise.

She introduces the theory of feminist fitness to counteract some of the ways consumer capitalism within the fitness industry can affect one's physical and mental health. "So many fitness approaches are based on results: bigger biceps, smaller thighs, better cardio endurance...feminism fitness is more of a journey, with stages and education" (Hentges, 2014, p. 96). Although this theory was designed for women, this form of feminism challenges body standards for both men and women, using fitness goals as a form of empowerment. Feminist fitness has made its way through the media, particularly social media, and encompasses people of all shapes and sizes, as well as marketing body-positive fitness and diet tips. Being able to understand the ways in which fitness is marketed and sold in the media, as well as its effect on consumers, will help young people understand the ways social media promotes certain body ideals in men and women. I felt like this theory was perfect for how social media affects women's body image. Feminist fitness relieves some of the pressures that media puts on bodies.

Overall, I thought this book was a very interesting read, especially for anyone who has an interest in fitness.

7. Kim, J., & Chock, T. (2015). Body image 2.0: Associations between social grooming on facebook and body image concerns. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 48, 331-339

- 9 pages

The authors created a cross-sectional study of 186 men and women to examine the relationship between social media use and body image attitudes. They particularly looked if social media created a drive for thinness in women and a drive for muscularity in men. They used social comparison theory as their theoretical background drawing on Festinger's analysis of upward comparison. Since social media puts out idealized images of individuals, people think these individuals are better off than them resulting in them striving to be better results.

They found that casual social media use did not relate to any issues with body image, however they found that men and women who comment and actively use social media had a stronger desire to be more thin. There were no significant results in a drive for muscularity. This article relates to my capstone research because I used social comparison theory and modeled a similar research method by using a survey to find if there is a correlation between social media consumption and body image issues. Like Kim and Chock, I focused on gender differences in body image in my survey analysis. I found that women tend to have a more negative body image, especially when looking at fitness related content. Further research would be ideal to gather information on particular male body ideals because I focused mainly on women's body ideals. This article provided good detail for my literature analysis and I was able to build on theories and methodologies.

8. Seymour, D. L. (2002). *The Role of Social Comparison in Exposure to Athletic Media Images on Mood, Body Dissatisfaction, and Desire to Exercise* (Doctoral dissertation, Lakehead University, September 2002) (pp. 1-73). Ottawa, ON: National Library of Canada.

- 73 pages

This study's purpose was to examine social comparison theory's role in athletic images in the media on individuals' body image and mood, while also examining the effects these images have on people. The sample included 90 males and 132 female undergraduate students at Lakehead University. This research is a dissertation from a student at the same university. Before the experimental manipulation, participants completed a questionnaire package that asked about self-esteem, body image, exercise activity, and leisure time.

For the experiment, participants were randomly exposed to idealized athletic images of men and women. After exposure to these images, females reported a decrease in body image and an increase in desire to exercise. Men reported a decrease in positive affect after looking at these images. The findings supported social comparison theory because when comparing themselves to others, people will experience a drive to be like them. In this instance, women had a drive to work out when looking at athletic images. Females overall seemed to be more affected by idealized athletic images than males in terms of mood and body image. This proves to be true in most of the research I have looked at, including my own survey. Men reported having a higher body image and were less likely to compare themselves to bodies they saw on social media. This article was very interesting because it related directly to my capstone research because it dealt with fitness imagery and media. Even though I focused

particularly on social media, Seymour provided a good basis on how social comparison theory can relate to athletic and fitness imagery.

9. Tiggemann, M., & Zaccardo, M. (2015). "Exercise to be fit, not skinny": The effect of fitspiration imagery on women's body image. *Body Image*, 15, 61-67.

- 7 pages

This study examines the effects of fitspiration on women's body image. The authors explain fitspiration as an online trend that inspires people toward a healthier lifestyle by promoting exercise and healthy food. However, Boepple et al. analysis of fitspiration websites showed that these inspiring websites discreetly send the message that exercise should only be done for fitness related purposes, which may cause adverse effects in women's body image. The study consisted of 130 college female participants who were randomly assigned to look at fitspiration images and a control set of travel images. The results were congruent with the rest of the research done on this topic.

The authors found that fitspiration content led to an increase in negative mood and body dissatisfaction. After looking at travel images, the participants reported a decrease in state appearance self-esteem. The authors concluded that fitspiration can have unintended negative effects on body image. They used social comparison theory in their analysis, which many of the negative effects of media has been directed to. The research supports sociocultural models of medias effect on body image, extending media to social media. The authors also noticed that the significance in their results should not be overlooked and that fitspiration imagery can be more dangerous to a women's body image than other idealized imagery because it pressures women to be both fit and thin. This article gave me good information for my capstone and the findings

were congruent with my survey. Participants, especially women, reported feeling bad about their bodies when looking at fitness-related content on social media.

10. Vaterlaus, J. M., Patten, E. V., Roche, C., & Young, J. A. (2015). #Gettinghealthy: The perceived influence of social media on young adult health behaviors. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 45, 151-157.

- 7 pages

This study uses qualitative analysis to discuss the relationship between social media and young adult health behaviors. The study consisted of 34 participants, male and female, and used the qualitative methods of semi-structured interviews and focus groups to gather their data. These methods were aimed to gain insight on how social media influences people's opinions, behaviors, and motivations in regards to food choices and exercise.

Interestingly, one conclusion was that social media helps motivate young people to work out simply because they have easy access to a variety of new exercises. Participants of the study admitted to following "fitspo" accounts on Instagram, Pinterest, and Facebook in order to stay motivated. 59% of participants also explained the norm of taking exercise related selfies and posting statuses and other content in discussing their health practices. However, most agreed that frequent posts about dieting and exercise led to negative reactions from viewers and followers who perceived this content as a form of "digital bragging." They noted that this behavior was done to make others feel shameful about their own bodies and lifestyles while elevating their own sense of self-worth and accomplishment. One female participant stated "It's like they post a pic: 'still really fat, trying to lose weight' and their muscles are ripped and they got bulging biceps and you're like 'where's the fat?'" (p. 155).

This article provided good qualitative analysis on the direct influence of social media on health behaviors. In my survey I asked participants if they agreed that social media inspires them to work out and live a healthier lifestyle with most agreeing that it does.



