

Fitspiration on Social Media and Adolescent Body Image: Social Comparison, Self-objectification, and Differential Susceptibility

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Abstract. This research employs a literature-based analytical approach to investigate the correlation between adolescents' body image and appearance-focused fitspiration on social media. It emphasizes specific fitness and beauty narratives that adolescents encounter on visual and short-video platforms, rather than seeing screen time as a uniform source of impact. The Differential Susceptibility to Media Effects Model, Objectification Theory, Tripartite Influence Model, and Social Comparison Theory are employed to evaluate contemporary research. The examination indicates that interaction centred on appearance is more reliably linked to body-image issues than overall social media usage, with upward appearance comparison serving as one of the most compelling rationales for this connection. Nevertheless, the current data lack a clear or universal direct impact. While body monitoring remains a theoretically relevant but understudied process in teenage fitspiration research, individual and cultural factors such as peer appearance pressure and self-esteem may impact susceptibility. The data strengthens the evidence for a more conditional and content-specific explanation of fitspiration and offers areas of attention for future long-term research.

Keywords: Fitspiration, Adolescent Body Image, Social Comparison, Self-Objectification, Social Media

1. Introduction

In reaction to visual and short-video platforms, fitness-related content is becoming increasingly common in young individual's online environments. During adolescence, social media can facilitate peer interaction, identity building, self-expression, and information access [1]. In this instance, visually-oriented platforms have seen a rise in the popularity of fitspiration—content meant to promote exercise, fitness, nutritional changes, or physical transformation [2]. It provides opportunities to engage in fitness communities, inspiration, and exercise routine ideas. Its health-focused look, nevertheless, could conceal a more nuanced connection between body-image pressure and fitness communication.

Thin, slim, athletic, or strong bodies are frequently presented by appearance-focused fitspiration as proof of self-improvement, discipline, confidence, or success. This is not the same as fitness material that focuses on long-term health, safe exercise, enjoyment, or physical function. A recent

content study of popular TikTok fitspiration videos, gendered standards for appearance, objectifying characteristics, and exercise motivations connected to looks were discovered [3]. Furthermore, a significant fraction of the articles analyzed in the same study contained potentially dangerous or misleading diet and exercise instructions [3].

Therefore, whether fitness material is damaging to everyone is not the main concern. Moreover, a screen time alone is insufficient to explain the connection between social media and teenage body image. Two individuals may interact with quite different types of material despite spending comparable amounts of time on visual platforms. While one may frequently come across bodily modifications and constrictive beauty standards, another may only get practical workout guidance. A content-specific approach is therefore necessary to understand how social media may relate to body-image outcomes.

The paper poses the following questions: Which psychological and social factors are most pertinent in explaining the connection between appearance-focused fitspiration and teenage body-image concerns? According to the lack of an original empirical dataset, the study does not claim to test causal hypotheses or replicate statistical findings. Instead, it evaluates existing evidence and theoretical explanations while highlighting areas that still require further in-depth empirical research.

2. Literature review and research gap

There is growing evidence showing that, when analyzing body-image outcomes, appearance-focused social media use is more informative than general social media use. Whereas general social media intensity alone was less revealing, appearance-focused social media use was directly linked to poorer body satisfaction and subjective well-being, according to research involving 1,579 Australian teenagers [4]. Appearance-ideal internalization and social appearance comparison also helped explain these relationships [4]. According to a recent systematic study, teens and young adults who use social media may also have lower wellbeing and body dissatisfaction, especially if they internalise idealised beauty norms [5].

Further evidence that comparison is crucial to this problem comes from studies conducted with teenage girls. Increased body dissatisfaction has been linked to online appearance-related activities, social comparison time, and upward comparisons with other females [6]. The discovery that close companions could serve as strong comparison targets is particularly significant. This suggests peer representations could also influence an appearance appraisal; thus, the problem is not just with professionally created influencer or celebrity photos.

A more cautious view is provided by experimental findings. In a research involving young women, short-term exposure to TikTok fitspiration increased state appearance comparison and negative mood in contrast to exposure to art-related content [2]. Nonetheless, exposure to fitspiration did not result in a statistically significant increase in body dissatisfaction [2]. Instead, appearance comparison was an indirect procedure. This discrepancy is important because it challenges the idea that exposure alone always leads to a negative body image. Furthermore, lately study data highlights that when it comes to explaining body-image outcomes, particularly visual and appearance-focused social media aspects should receive more consideration than general measures of overall use [7].

The literature also demonstrates that adolescent body-image pressure should not be reduced to thinness alone. Thin-ideal and muscular-ideal internalization may both be important, according to research with teenage males and girls, however the patterns vary per group [8]. Muscularity,

leanness, athleticism, and body size may therefore operate alongside thinness as important appearance standards in contemporary fitness culture.

There are still a variety of research gaps. First, a lot of research measures social media usage in general rather than the content that users really interact with. Second, even though teenagers use a variety of algorithmically selected platforms, a large portion of the study is platform-specific. Third, it is challenging to determine temporal orientation in cross-sectional designs. Reverse causality cannot be ruled out since adolescents with pre-existing body worries may be more inclined to seek out or interact with appearance-focused content.

Existing research also tends to examine individual mechanisms separately. Social comparison and ideal internalization have relatively substantial empirical support, whereas body surveillance has been less directly examined in adolescent fitspiration contexts. Finally, significant individual variations may be hidden by average connections. Depending on the user and the social context, the same material may be seen as pressing, unimportant, or inspiring. Based on a developmental-sociocultural paradigm published in 2022, teenagers' increased sensitivity to peer criticism, measurable feedback, and idealised peer images might all work together to exacerbate appearance-related anxieties [9].

3. Theoretical framework

3.1. Social comparison theory

Social Comparison Theory provides the strongest foundation for understanding the possible relationship between appearance-focused fitspiration and body-image concerns. Festinger concluded that individuals assess traits and skills in part by contrasting them with those of others [10]. Social media significantly improves comparison targets' accessibility and exposure. Teenagers may constantly come across influencers, athletes, celebrities, friends, and new users whose bodies seem more muscular, leaner, fitter, or slimmer.

Upward appearance comparison, in which individuals contrast themselves with someone they believe to have a more desirable quality, is especially pertinent. Comparing upward is not always bad. Assuming the comparison aim is reasonable and reachable, it could offer knowledge or inspiration. On the other hand, social media comparison targets are frequently edited, professionally made, selectively displayed, financially pushed, or exceptionally well-suited. In these circumstances, the comparison could offer an inaccurate benchmark for self-evaluation.

The aforementioned empirical results are in line with this theoretical explanation. While upward comparison is frequently connected to body-image issues, appearance-focused social media use is linked to decreased body satisfaction [4, 6]. This theory is especially supported by the experimental result that appearance comparison moderated the connection between exposure to TikTok fitspiration and body-image outcomes [2].

3.2. Tripartite influence model

By elucidating how societal appearance norms may take on personal significance, the Tripartite Influence Model expands the scope of the investigation. According to the concept, appearance comparison and ideal internalization play a role in the impacts of media, peers, and family, which are identified as significant sources of appearance influence [11]. Adopting an ideal exterior appearance as a personally significant benchmark is known as internalization. In social media environments, peer pressure and the media can cooperate. A fitness creator may promote a highly

sought-after physique ideal, but likes, comments, shares, and following numbers unmistakably demonstrate societal approval. In furtherance of exhibiting an ideal, this environment communicates that the ideal is socially rewarded.

The idea that appearance comparison is not a singular, solitary activity is reinforced by the model. It is ingrained in a larger cultural context where social worth, discipline, beauty, and fitness may all be linked. This concept is supported by evidence showing links between appearance-focused engagement and teenage body satisfaction are explained by comparison and appearance-ideal internalization [4]. Social media and muscular-ideal internalisation were included in a 2022 empirical expansion of the Tripartite Influence Model among teenage females, offering up-to-date evidence for revising sociocultural models to match current platform contexts [12].

3.3. Objectification theory and body surveillance

Objectification theory provides an additional perspective on how repeated appearance judgement may affect people's relationships with their bodies. According to the hypothesis, individuals may be encouraged to view their own bodies from the viewpoint of an observer if individuals are constantly evaluated by others [13]. This process is known as self-objectification and can lead to ongoing body monitoring.

Body monitoring in digital fitness contexts might include recurring concerns about one's appearance in photos, videos, clothes, or perceived social assessment. The focus may go from the body's capabilities to how it looks to other individuals. Nevertheless, care is required due to the evidential foundation. Women's experiences were the main emphasis of objectification theory, and comparative research is still more established than direct empirical research on body monitoring in connection to adolescent fitspiration exposure [13].

A comparable idea is provided by appearance-related social media consciousness. Young people may be constantly conscious of whether their looks will be evaluated by a social media audience, according to a validated adolescent measure [14]. This supports the theoretical relevance of online appearance monitoring, although it does not by itself establish fitspiration as its cause.

3.4. Differential susceptibility to media effects

The Differential Susceptibility to Media Effects Model, or DSMM, addresses a central weakness in simple media-effect explanations: the same content does not affect every user in the same way. The model distinguishes dispositional, developmental, and social susceptibility [15].

Self-esteem, preexisting body issues, or a propensity for comparison are examples of dispositional vulnerability. Age, identity development, and sensitivity to peer appraisal are examples of developmental vulnerability. Peer appearance pressure, family support, friendship networks, and more general cultural norms are examples of social susceptibility [15].

Therefore, the purpose of DSMM is not to forecast that every teenager who is exposed to fitspiration would be unhappy. Rather, it changes the focus to the circumstances that may make a link stronger or weaker. This paradigm is especially helpful for explaining conflicting results across populations and research. Recent scholarship similarly stresses that social identities and user characteristics can modulate associations between social media and body image, which supports a conditional rather than uniform account of media effects [16].

4. Literature-based analytical approach

Statistical hypothesis testing would not be acceptable in this research as it does not contain an original empirical dataset. Without participant data, it is impossible to do descriptive statistics, main-effect regression, mediation analysis, moderation analysis, or repeated-measures modelling. As a result, the analysis uses a literature-based methodology.

Three questions are asked as the conversation progresses. First, how frequently does current research link lower body-image outcomes to appearance-focused exercise or appearance-related social media engagement? Second, to what extent is upward appearance comparison a process supported by the evidence? Third, how much of the diversity in results may be explained by societal and individual susceptibility?

Objectification and body surveillance are retained as secondary interpretive concepts. They provide a theoretically plausible extension of the analysis, but the available evidence is not treated as proof of a distinct causal pathway.

5. Discussion

5.1. Appearance-focused content matters more than screen time alone

The literature's strongest overall conclusion is not that using social media more often inevitably results in a negative body image. Conversely, it appears that substance and activity type are crucial. In teenagers, appearance-focused participation is more consistently associated with lower body satisfaction than general usage intensity [4]. This difference supports a move away from screen-time explanations. Further, the TikTok data confound a simple direct-effect assumption. Fitspiration exposure can increase appearance comparison without immediately causing a rise in body dissatisfaction [2]. This indicates the material's psychological processing affects how exposure is understood.

As consequence, literature prefers a conditional interpretation than a universal one. Whereas appearance-focused fitspiration may be more relevant to body-image disorders than health-focused fitness communication, current evidence does not support classifying all fitness information as harmful.

5.2. Social comparison is the strongest supported mechanism

Upward appearance comparison presently offers the most theoretical and empirical backing among the suggested psychological explanations. The Tripartite Influence Model describes how peer surroundings and media foster comparison and ideal internalization, while Social Comparison Theory explains why idealized bodies serve as benchmarks for self-evaluation [10, 11].

Adolescent research shows that appearance comparison is associated with lower body satisfaction [4, 6]. Experimental evidence further demonstrates that comparison can increase after fitspiration exposure and can statistically explain body-image responses even when the direct effect of exposure is not significant [2].

An indirect-process interpretation is supported by these results. The main concern could not be the existence of a fitness image per se, but rather if the image turns into a personally applicable benchmark for comparison. This also contributes to the explanation of why seemingly equivalent information may elicit varied responses.

5.3. Media effects are likely to be conditional

According to DSMM, young individuals should not be viewed as a single audience [15]. Content interpretation may be influenced by preexisting body issues, self-esteem, developmental stage, peer pressure, and social support.

An adolescent whose peer group places a high priority on beauty, for instance, could take a fitspiration post as proof of a socially acceptable body norm. The identical post may be seen as standard workout content by another adolescent who has more social support or is less interested in appearance comparison.

Nonetheless, more evidence is still needed in this field. Differentiating between real confirmation and theoretical plausibility is crucial. The precise moderating role of peer appearance pressure and self-esteem in fitspiration exposure requires empirical investigation, despite the fact that both factors are likely susceptibility variables.

5.4. Body surveillance is relevant but less established

Considering social media users are both potential objects of assessment and viewers, Objectification Theory offers a helpful expansion of the comparison framework [13]. As a result, adolescents may grow more aware of how other users see their own bodies.

The development of an adolescent appearance-related social media consciousness measure supports the relevance of this process [14]. Nevertheless, the evidence currently provides a stronger basis for appearance comparison than for a specific causal pathway from fitspiration to body surveillance. Body surveillance should therefore be treated as an important future research question rather than an established conclusion.

6. Implications and future research

There are several applications for the literature. Interventions for media literacy should do more than just tell teenagers to cut back on screen usage. Young people may be able to identify selective self-presentation, commercial sponsorship, altered images, and false transformation tales with the use of more effective methods.

Fitness communication itself can also be evaluated more carefully. Content that emphasizes function, enjoyment, health, safe exercise, and realistic development is conceptually different from content that frames appearance as evidence of discipline or personal value. Future platform and creator practices may benefit from recognising this distinction.

Future research should directly measure the content adolescents encounter rather than relying only on general platform-use estimates. Content-specific exposure records and validated body-image assessments might be combined in a longitudinal or repeated-diary strategy. Age-appropriate measures of body-related appraisal may be offered by tools like the Body-Esteem Scale for Adolescents and Adults [17]. If consent and privacy are properly safeguarded, participant-donated social media data may also enhance exposure assessment. The need to investigate what drives appearance-focused social media habits over time is further supported by a recent longitudinal research of Australian teenagers that found appearance-ideal internalization was a significant driver of these actions [18].

Longitudinal studies are particularly important since they are the most effective way to evaluate reverse causation. By using repeated assessments, researchers might look at whether changes in exposure arrive before changes in comparison or body-image outcomes. To ascertain if social

support, age, gender, peer pressure, and self-esteem significantly mitigate these correlations, larger samples may also be employed.

7. Limitations

The shortcomings of the current study are caused by its reliance on prior research rather than original data. It cannot ascertain if theoretical mechanisms function in a specific teenage population or generate new statistical associations. Direct comparison is limited by the differences in age groups, platforms, metrics, and study approaches among existing studies.

Experimental research frequently use young adults rather than teenagers, and a large portion of the evidence is still cross-sectional. Rapid changes also occur in content cultures and platform algorithms. Research based on a single platform or time frame might not be entirely applicable to other social media contexts. Furthermore, as TikTok and other quickly evolving platforms provide unique features, recent methodological commentary calls for body-image research to move beyond limited convenience samples and basic social media metrics [19].

Moreover, there is more evidence in the literature for ideal internalization and social comparison than for some of the other suggested processes. Rather than putting all theoretical conceptions into an equally established causal paradigm, this unequal evidence basis should be acknowledged.

8. Conclusion

A clear conclusion that all fitspiration or social media use is detrimental to teenage body image is not supported by the available data. Rather than screen time alone, the evidence suggests that appearance-focused material and the psychological processes associated with exposure are more significant.

The mechanism with the most theoretical and empirical backing among these is upward appearance comparison. While current teenage and experimental research shows a constant role for comparison in body-image outcomes, Social Comparison Theory and the Tripartite Influence Model explain why idealized fitness bodies may become individually meaningful norms.

Nevertheless, it's essential to be aware that media impacts are not always consistent. The significance of societal, developmental, and individual vulnerability is emphasized by DSMM. Objectification theory also suggests that body monitoring may be relevant, regardless of whether there is currently a lack of empirical evidence in teenage fitspiration research.

Consequently, the most likely explanation is conditional rather than deterministic. The key question is not whether fitspiration is inherently good or harmful, but rather when fitness communication fosters function and health and when it becomes a forum for comparison shopping and external criticism. More longitudinal, content-specific, and adolescent-focused research is required before more reliable causal conclusions can be drawn.

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