Social Connectedness on Instagram: Understanding Young Women's Experience of

Thinspiration and Fitspiration on Instagram

by

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Abstract

Viewing inspirational content such as Thinspiration and Fitspiration has been found to increase body dissatisfaction, appearance comparisons (Dignard & Jarry, 2020), and negative affect (Griffiths et al., 2019). 85.7% of young social media users use health and fitness-related social media content, with most users accessing Fitspiration-related content as women (Carrotte et al., 2015). Given the increasing role of Instagram in glamorizing eating disorders among its teen users (CNN Wire, 2021), there is a pressing need to investigate how Instagram affects young women in university, an age group overlooked in research studies on engagement of such content. With most studies focusing on adolescence, exploring the impact of Thinspiration and Fitspiration content on Instagram is crucial among this understudied population. The primary purpose of this research is to explore participants' experiences of viewing and engaging in Thinspiration and Fitspiration content on Instagram and to explore how following and connecting with friends and family on Instagram contribute to participants' experience of viewing and/or engaging in Thinspiration and Fitspiration content. Using thematic analysis, four superordinate themes emerged: profound ambivalence, pervasive and addicting, negative effects on self and relationships, and critical engagement. The findings suggest that young women who view and engage in Thinspiration and Fitspiration have marked ambivalence towards such content. Future directions for research and counselling in body image and social media are discussed. Finally, limitations of the current study are discussed.

Keywords. body image, Thinspiration, Fitspiration, Instagram, social connectedness, focus group, thematic analysis

Preface

This thesis is an original work by Lucijana Herceg. The thesis project, of which this thesis is a part, received research ethics approval from the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board, Project Name "Social Connectedness on Instagram: Understanding Young Women's Experience of Thinspiration and Fitspiration on Instagram", Pro#00117502, March 28th, 2022.

Dedication

I dedicate this thesis to my family, Ilija, Manda, and Robert Herceg. You are all the cornerstone of my life and the reason for all that I do. Your love and support have been the foundation of my success, and I am forever grateful for the sacrifices you all have made to help me achieve my goals. This work is a tribute to all the memories we have created together and a symbol of my appreciation for your endless encouragement and inspiration. I could not have asked for a more supportive family, and I dedicate this work to you all with love and gratitude.

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Table of Contents

List of Tables

List of Figures

Chapter One: Introduction

Social networking sites (SNS) are non-traditional media allowing individuals to interact and connect. These sites connect users based on similar goals, interests, values, and worldviews (Marcus, 2016). SNS has grown in the past decade, and 42% of the Earth's total population is now active on SNS (Emarsys, 2019). Researchers have begun examining SNS's roles in individuals' body image. Previous research has found that traditional forms of media, such as magazines and television, influence and promote body image concerns, especially among women (Cavazos et al., 2014). Currently, research has examined social media's role in individuals' body image. Researchers have found that social media use affects body image negatively (Cohen, 2017) through social comparisons and the internalization of the fit-and-thin ideal (Cohen et al., 2017; Tiggemann & Barbato, 2018; Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015; Uhlmann et al., 2018).

The internalization of the fit-and-thin ideal is defined as accepting the societal standard of beauty as desirable and integrating these values into one's habitual behavior. Embodying the fit-and-thin ideal confirms that having a lean and toned body is ideal in society (Uhlmann, 2020).

According to the social comparison theory, our subjective well-being increases when an individual compares themselves to someone they think to be inferior to themselves (downward social comparison), while comparing upwardly leads to decreases in subjective well-being (upward social comparison) (Festinger, 1954; Groesz et al., 2002). As such, social media is an avenue in which users can constantly compare themselves and their bodies to others, which has been shown to impact individuals' mental health and create an unhealthy obsession with their appearance. Furthermore, social media advertisers often encourage and promote idealized images of beauty (Britt et al., 2015), such as thin-ideal images in which advertisers encourage individuals to buy a specific product with the promise that they, too, can be beautiful (Mills et

al., 2017). This suggests that social media can negatively impact an individual's physical appearance and mental health. Therefore, further studies must investigate the mechanisms connected with these risk factors.

Body image is multifaceted and includes our perceptions and attitudes toward our bodies (Grogan, 2016). Body image can be either positive or negative and can positively or negatively impact one's behavior (Grogan, 2016). Our body image is often influenced by our family, teammates, and the media (Tiggemann, 2012). Negative body image is generally referred to as body dissatisfaction (BD). BD is defined as having a discrepancy between an individual's body weight and shape and their ideal body weight and shape (Wade, 2009). BD has been found to be a precursor to eating disorders such as anorexia nervosa, and anorexia has the highest mortality rate of any psychiatric illness (Arcelus, 2011; Stice, 2002). Indeed, researchers have found that women dissatisfied with their bodies in their early 20s were more likely to continue dieting and engaging in disordered eating behaviors throughout their adult life (Heatherton et al., 1997).

BD and negative body image are associated with many adverse outcomes. Studies have shown that BD is significantly related to lower self-esteem and depressed mood (Choi & Choi, 2016) among women. BD has been reported to be highest among women in Western cultures. More specifically, Fiske et al. (2014) found that 45%-66% of U.S. women experience weight dissatisfaction, and their dissatisfaction with their overall appearance was 23%-56%. As a result, it is crucial to explore the factors contributing to negative body image among women because this can lead to the onset of eating disorders and other mental health concerns,. Since SNSs are prevalent among many young adults, it is imperative to investigate how various SNSs impact women's body image.

Instagram, a photo-based platform, has been found to lead to increased body image dissatisfaction (Fardouly et al., 2017). Following SNSs that are image-based, such as Instagram, may be associated with thin-ideal internalization, body surveillance, and a drive for thinness (Cohen et al., 2017). More specifically, however, researchers have investigated thin-and-fit internalization by looking at social media content, such as Pro-Anorexia websites like Thinspiration, along with the more fit-ideal content such as Fitspiration (Cohen et al., 2017; Tiggemann & Barbato, 2018; Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015; Uhlmann et al., 2018). Pro-anorexia websites are websites devoted to supporting a thin-ideal body type (Williams & Reid, 2007). Thinspiration, or thinspo, contains images of extremely thin bodies (Burke, 2012) aimed at influencing its viewers to engage in or maintain their disordered eating behaviors (Griffiths et al., 2018), thereby perpetuating the societal thin-ideal beauty standard. On the other hand, Fitspiration, or fitspo, is mainly focused on encouraging individuals to engage in diet and exercise (Boepple et al., 2016). Although Fitspiration and Thinspiration are different, Fitspiration also contains the thin ideal found in Thinspiration, emphasizing muscle tone.

Recent beauty trends have shifted in the current decade, and thus, these websites' engagement has also varied. For instance, Tiggemann and Zaccardo (2018) found that Fitspiration had six times more account followers than Thinspiration. Similar to Thinspiration and pro-anorexia websites, Fitspiration also contains harmful messages and content, such as encouraging individuals to overvalue their physical appearance, which has been found to lead to an increase in individuals' eating concerns and promote excessive exercise (Boepple & Thompson, 2014).

Theoretical Framework

This study will use the Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954) and the Objectification Theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) as a conceptual framework to understand the experience young women have when viewing and engaging in Thinspiration and Fitspiration content on Instagram.

Within body image research, the Social Comparison Theory, which Leon Festinger created, is widely used to explain the processes and factors that influence body image (Andrew et al., 2016; Fardouly et al., 2017; Hendrickse et al., 2017; Hogue & Mills, 2019; Robinson et al., 2017). This theory suggests that individuals often compare themselves to others to evaluate their abilities, beliefs, and opinions. Further, individuals base their self-worth in comparison to others whom they perceive to be either superior or inferior to themselves (Festinger, 1954). In the context of women comparing themselves to others, the social comparison theory suggests that women may engage in upward social comparison to understand what they need to do to achieve a certain level of success or beauty. However, this can also lead to feelings of inferiority and low self-esteem if the comparison concludes that they are not good enough. On the other hand, women may engage in downward social comparison to feel better about themselves and boost their self-esteem. This can be problematic if it results in dismissing or devaluating others' accomplishments or experiences. As such, this theory will be used to help us understand the experience the young women in the study had when they socially compared themselves to others on Thinspiration and Fitspiration. Finally, this theory will help us understand the outcomes these comparisons resulted for these young women.

We will explore the Objectification Theory to gain a deeper insight into how women perceive themselves while browsing Thinspiration and Fitspiration pages. This theory explains

how women's bodies are predominantly exhibited on social media platforms like Instagram for others to admire and appreciate, with men being the primary audience. It proposes that women's bodies are objectified and evaluated based on their appearance, leading them to internalize the thin ideal frequently depicted on Thinspiration and Fitspiration pages. For instance, specific spaces, such as online environments, may make women more vulnerable to judging comments from others, as observed by some researchers (Gardner, 1980). Social media platforms like Instagram may also induce women to self-objectify further when they know they are being viewed through the male gaze or engaging in comparisons with others.

Some theorists have argued that women tend to compare themselves to others from a young age due to the societal beauty standards ingrained in them. This could result in them trying to conform to or rejecting the ideal by developing eating disorders. Such beauty standards are prominently displayed on platforms such as Thinspiration and Fitspiration pages, which provide ample opportunity for women to compare themselves against the ideal and objectify themselves and other women.

Significance of the Study

According to Rideout and Fox (2018). 96% of social media users are emerging adults between 18 and 22 years old, and 84% of adults between the ages of 18 and 29 are active on Instagram (Pew Research Center, 2021). Tiggemann et al. (2018) conducted a network analysis study found approximately 85,000 account followers for Thinspiration and around 535,000 account followers for Fitspiration in 2016 (Griffiths et al., 2019).

Although there is research examining the effects of viewing Thinspiration and Fitspiration, there is a gap in the literature on how young women between 18 and 29 experience Thinspiration and Fitspiration on Instagram. Studies have found that women who were exposed

to Thinspiration and Fitspiration content had higher levels of body dissatisfaction, disordered

eating symptoms, and negative affect after viewing Thinspiration images (Griffiths et al., 2018;

Rodgers et al., 2016; Turja et al., 2017; Holland & Tiggemann, 2017; Prichard et al., 2017;

Raggatt et al., 2018; Robinson et al., 2017; Sumter et al., 2018; Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015);

however, only one study found that there were no adverse effects of women viewing Fitspiration

content (Slater et al., 2017). Further, only a few studies look at the differences between

Thinspiration and Fitspiration (Alberga et al., 2018; Saunders & Eaton, 2018), and thus further

investigation is needed to examine their differences.

Studies examining the impact of Thinspiration have mainly been conducted on

individuals with an eating disorder (Curry & Ray, 2010), and Fitspiration studies have mainly

examined healthy participants (Holland & Tiggemann, 2017; Santarossa et al., 2019; Eng et al.,

2022; Murashka et al., 2021). Therefore, there is a need to explore individuals at moderate risk of

developing an eating disorder, as this population may be more affected by this content than

healthy participants but not as affected compared to those with eating disorders.

Finally, no known study has explored how young women's social connectedness on

Instagram is influenced by their engagement in Thinspiration and Fitspiration. As a result, this

qualitative thesis study aimed to explore the experiences of engaging with Thinspiration and

Fitspiration content on Instagram from the experiences and perspectives of young women. My

main research questions were: 1) How do young women between the ages of 18 and 29 years old

experience two types of thin-and-fit-ideal content on Instagram – Thinspiration and Fitspiration,

and 2) How do they experience their social connectedness with their family and friends after

viewing such content. This study contributes to knowledge and understanding of the fit-and-thin-

ideal content found on Instagram. It aims to explore how such content impacts women's body

image and social connectedness with others. My findings may help inform interventions aimed at mitigating the harmful effects of the consumption of social media platforms and their impact on women's body image concerns.

For the purpose of examining the research question at hand, I ran a focus group and used thematic analysis (TA) in order to understand the role of Thinspiration and Fitspiration in the experiences of young women and their perception of their social connections following exposure to these constructs. By providing participants the opportunity to share their unique experiences and perspectives on the topic, they were able to gain a sense of meaning and understanding from the discussion. The decision to run a focus group in this study was deliberate and necessary as the subject matter under investigation required sensitivity when exploring young women's perspectives. Through the use of thematic analysis, I uncovered significant themes across all participants. Participants were encouraged to analyze the importance of their personal experiences based on their own values and beliefs, rather than being restricted by pre-established conclusions or theories.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Women and Body Image

Some scholars claim that there is a normative discontent among U.S. women in which body dissatisfaction is considered a social norm (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Rodin et al., 1984). Researchers have found that 40.3% of women aged 20-24 reported body image as the most significant concern (Mission Australia, 2010, as stated by Wilksch et al., 2018). In another study, researchers found that adolescent girls experienced more body dissatisfaction, media-induced pressure, and concerns about weight compared to boys, according to a separate investigation (Knauss et al., 2008). Likewise, Tiggemann and Kuring (2004) found that college-aged women scored higher on body surveillance, body shame, appearance anxiety, and disordered eating than men. These studies show that young women are more vulnerable to developing body image issues and disordered eating behaviors than men. Further research is needed to understand the risk factors and vulnerabilities women experience concerning their body image.

In the 1950s, body image was defined as "how the body appears to ourselves" (Schilder, 1950, p. 11). The concept of body image mainly focuses on studying eating-disordered behaviors among women, including their weight and shape concerns (Grogan, 2016). Recently, however, body image is considered to be multifaceted (Grogan, 2016) and includes the perceptions and attitudes we hold towards our bodies. Moreover, body image can be either positive or negative and can positively or negatively impact one's behavior (Grogan, 2016).

Negative body image is a widespread concern among college-age women (Neighbors & Sobal, 2007) and often results in dieting behaviors, which can perpetuate the risk of eating

disorder development (de Castro & Goldstein, 1995; Killen et al., 1993). Dieting is strongly

correlated with body dissatisfaction. 60% of college women are dieting (Frank et al., 1991).

Given the correlation between dieting and body dissatisfaction, it is likely that a majority of

college women are dissatisfied with their bodies. In one study, approximately half of college

women had either normative body image discontent or negative body image (Williams et al.,

2004). Even for those with positive body image, there may be fluctuations in how they feel about

their bodies daily (Wood-Barcalow et al., 2010). Most women, then, feel some discontent about

their bodies. This discontent provides the challenge or opportunity for coping strategies to be

employed (Smith-Jackson et al., 2011). This normative discontent is a profoundly troubling

cultural fact that produces great distress and severe health problems.

According to sociologist and author Bill Edgley, there is a prevalent societal fixation on

obtaining the perfect body, which can potentially lead to adverse consequences. As per Edgley's

(1990) argument, individuals are increasingly concerned with their physical appearance and are

willing to go to extreme lengths, such as crash diets, excessive exercise, and utilizing potentially

dangerous supplements or steroids, to achieve their fitness goals. Edgley (1990) also explores the

impact of social media on the obsession with the ideal body. With influencers and celebrities

routinely promoting perfectly sculpted physiques, ordinary people often feel pressured to meet

unrealistic expectations, which can hurt their mental health, particularly teenagers. Moreover,

Edgley (1990) points out the rise of *Health Nazis*, who are fixated on strict dietary choices and

fitness regimes. Such unhealthy attitudes towards health and well-being can lead to social

anxiety isolation and aggravate mental health issues like anxiety and depression. Finally, Edgley

(1990) recommends a balanced approach to wellness. Rather than obsessing over a particular

body type or sticking to inflexible dietary protocols, an individual should adopt healthy habits

that promote mental and physical well-being. For example, they should incorporate regular physical activity, a balanced and nutritious diet, and prioritize self-care activities that promote mental wellness.

Theoretical Framework Overview

The Social Comparison Theory and the Objectification Theory are related concepts that refer to social processes that have affected women's body image (Grogan, 2016). The Social Comparison Theory proposes that people compare themselves with others to gauge their self-worth and evaluate their abilities and opinion (Festinger, 1954). This comparison occurs in everyday life, and it mostly happens unconsciously. In the context of body image, individuals often compare themselves to others, especially to people they perceive as more attractive or thinner. This is known as upward social comparison and often results in reduced self-esteem and increased body dissatisfaction.

The Objectification Theory, on the other hand, suggests that women's bodies are objectified by society (especially men), and women are often viewed and valued based on their physical appearance rather than their inner qualities. Objectification often leads to women feeling like objects or commodities and experiencing body shame and dissatisfaction (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Both theories share a common theme of comparing oneself to others and using that comparison to define one's self-worth or value. In the context of body image, women are often subjected to social comparison and objectification, resulting in negative body image and various mental health issues. This can be particularly harmful to women, as they are constantly bombarded with images in the media that set unrealistic beauty standards and reinforce negative body image.

Social Comparison Theory

Social Comparison Theory helps explain how body image concerns have become so prominent. Festinger (1954) states that one of the most important factors is the type of social comparisons individuals make. For example, comparing ourselves to family and friends is perceived as realistic and tangible (Fardouly et al., 2015) and thus leads to more body dissatisfaction. Likewise, comparing ourselves to friends with the thin ideal significantly increases body dissatisfaction (Krones et al., 2005). On the contrary, comparing ourselves to strangers such as celebrities or influencers is considered more competitive and less realistic and thus does not lead to the same body dissatisfaction as comparing ourselves to family and friends. As such, Festinger (1954) also notes that individuals tend to actively seek out individuals they deem essential to compare against others socially.

Among women, it has been found that they are motivated to seek body comparisons to attain the sociocultural pressure to be attractive and thin (Rodgers et al., 2016). For instance, researchers have found that women and girls who try to look like models on television or in magazines are likely to feel dissatisfied with their bodies (Anderson et al., 2001). Similarly, Tiggemann & McGill (2004) found that participants who were exposed to either body parts or whole body images of magazine models reported increased negative mood and body dissatisfaction. They also found that the amount of body dissatisfaction and negative mood reported was contingent upon the social comparison the participants invested in. However, Lew et al. (2007) found that when participants compared themselves downwardly to fashion models on non-appearance measures such as intelligence, they showed significant increases in body and weight satisfaction and a substantial decrease in anxiety about their appearance and a desire to lose weight compared to a control group. As such, body dissatisfaction is perpetuated through the

media (Groesz et al., 2002) but can be mediated by the amount of investment and the type of social comparison.

A study by Sohn (2009) investigated the social comparison between men and women when viewing media and television. They found that although men watched more television per week compared to women, the women in the study scored higher on overall social comparison to television and magazines. The women also viewed their bodies as being more significant than they are after such exposure. This shows us that when individuals adopt the belief that certain body types are valued by society, they tend to seek out media content that reinforces this notion, such as Fitspiration and Thinspiration. This selective exposure then triggers a process of social comparison, which has been shown to contribute to negative body perception and dissatisfaction. This is relevant for the current study in that being exposed to the media, such as Thinspiration and Fitspiration, may lead women to endorse the thin ideal portrayed within this social media, causing them to compare to those images socially. Researchers have found that when individuals compare themselves to the idealized images portrayed in media, they may become motivated to alter their body shape. Those who feel like they fall short of these standards may feel compelled to close the perceptual gap and change their appearance (Sohn, 2009).

Social comparison can have huge effects on individuals. For instance, Lewallen (2016) stated that individuals have sought plastic surgery after socially comparing themselves to others on social media. Requests for cosmetic surgery might be on the rise due to increased social media activity, according to findings from the American Academy of Facial and Reconstructive Surgery (AAFPRS).

According to Wheeler and Miyake (1992), individuals typically make upward social comparisons. This behavior has been linked to adverse effects on self-perceptions and attractiveness (Morrison et al., 2004). Thornton and Moore (1993) conducted a study that observed participants who identified as either women or male, and who were shown pictures of professional models of the same gender. Results showed that those exposed to the images obtained lower scores when rating their physical attractiveness than those in the control group.

It has been found among college-age women that one source of upward social comparison they engage in is physical fitness and appearance contexts. This has been shown to lead to feelings of envy among this population. Most importantly, women engaged in more upward social comparison within appearance contexts (Lewallen, 2016).

Thinspiration and Fitspiration images often feature highly idealized body shape, size, and health standards. Individuals may view these images and feel inadequate or dissatisfied with their bodies. This comparison can lead to low self-esteem, body dissatisfaction, and unhealthy behaviors such as disordered eating and excessive exercise.

Due to the rise of social media and its easy access, making these social comparisons against others is unavoidable. It may amplify them by creating a perpetual cycle of competition and comparison. The constant stream of Thinspiration and Fitspiration images can create a normative pressure to conform to these idealized standards.

In conclusion, the social comparison theory suggests that seeing and comparing oneself to Thinspiration and Fitspiration images can negatively affect individuals' self-esteem, body image, and behaviors. Therefore, it is essential to be critical of the messages presented on social media platforms and promote positive and healthy body image messages.

Objectification Theory

In our society, great importance is placed on women who are young, slim, and White, which is portrayed as the ideal in mass media. With the emergence of social media, exposure to this ideal is constant, making it difficult to find images of women of average weight or appearance. Although this is considered the ideal in society, it has been found that only 1 in 40,000 women meet this requirement (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). As such, Wolfe (1991) reported that the having the ideal womens body is not only unrealistic, but it is impossible to achieve (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997).

To better understand the experiences that women go through concerning their self-perceptions and experiences, the Objectification Theory will be examined. This theory is helpful because it explains how the sexual objectification of women's bodies supports and sustains gender inequality and patriarchy. The theory also highlights the negative consequences of objectification for women's mental health, including increased anxiety, depression, and a decreased sense of self-worth (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997).

The Objectification Theory emerged from feminist theories claiming that women's social worth is reduced to physical objects intended to be used for sexual pleasure (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; American Psychological Association, Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls, 2007). This theory examines the experiences of individuals treated as objects rather than human beings.

The objectification theory helps us understand how women's bodies are valued mainly for the consumption of others (Frederickson & Roberts, 1997), particularly for men's pleasure. Women are objectified as social objects, and their bodies are meant to be looked at and evaluated. This internalization of the observer's perspective can lead young women and girls to

internalize the thin ideal (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997), thereby objectifying themselves. This internalization has been shown to lead to body surveillance, self-monitoring, and a preoccupation with one's appearance (Moradi & Huang, 2008), which can contribute to body dissatisfaction and body shame (Moradi & Huang, 2008). Women may not realize they are objectifying themselves or internalizing societal beauty standards. According to Costanzo (1992), if girls and women are subjected to external pressures to improve their physical appearance repeatedly, they may start to view their efforts to enhance their appearance as natural or made entirely by their free will. This can lead to disordered eating behaviors, lower self-worth, and depression (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Tiggemann & Kuring, 2004).

Researchers have theorized a few reasons why individuals sexually objectify women. One reason may be that women's physical attractiveness indirectly signals reproductive value, and so evaluating women's physical attributes has become an essential criterion in men's mate selection (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Another reason that society sexually objectifies women is that it allows for the established to create, preserve and convey the dominance of men (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997).

Another way women self-objectify is by constantly posting images of themselves online and monitoring their outward appearance/images (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). By constantly being sensitive to other people's thoughts and feelings about their physical attractiveness or believing that we are sights to see, women may become self-conscious and engage in habitual monitoring of the body's outward appearance (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Constant body monitoring may also lead to shame and anxiety (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997).

It is important to note that not all women objectify themselves. Women are all different and have different classes, ethnicities, ages, sexualities, personal histories, and physical attributes

that may make them less likely to objectify themselves. Further, objectification does not always have to happen to women all of the time. A woman's level of consciousness concerning the viewpoints of actual or possible onlookers towards her body in distinct social settings will aid in determining the magnitude and nature of the adverse outcomes that she may undergo. For instance, researchers have found that specific spaces may make women more susceptible to evaluative commentary by others (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Such spaces may be online. Social media, such as Instagram, may predict women to self-objectify more, knowing very well that others are viewing them with the male gaze or that they are also engaging in social comparisons.

In addition, women's attitudes towards food and dieting can be directly linked to the Objectification Theory. For instance, eating disorders are notably more common among girls and women. Researchers have found that dieting and weight control are so prevalent among girls and women that it is considered a normal discontent towards their bodies (Rodin et al., 1984). Some theorists have argued that women have internalized the societal standards of beauty since a young age, leading them to compare themselves to others constantly. Women may either strive to conform to this ideal or attempt to reject it by developing eating disorders. According to Fredrickson and Roberts (1997), women may attempt to alleviate their negative feelings about their bodies by either diminishing their discontent, shame, and anxiety or by adopting an eating disorder that signifies their resistance. This is further supported by research on sexual assault and abuse among women. Research has suggested that women who have been sexually abuse or assaulted tend to exhibit substantial disruptions in their body image and are more prone to developing eating disorders than others. This provides further evidence regarding the connection

between girls' and women's negative attitudes towards eating and the objectification of their bodies, according to Fredrickson and Roberts (1997).

Fitspiration and Thinspiration are related to objectification theory for several reasons. First, they often reinforce a narrow definition of femininity based on physical appearance, an essential aspect of objectification theory. This can lead to individuals feeling constant pressure to attain a particular body type, damaging their mental and physical health.

Second, Fitspiration and Thinspiration often present images of women with highly sexualized and objectified body types. These images can contribute to the internalization of the male gaze, a central objectification theory concept. The male gaze refers to the idea that women are viewed as objects to be looked at and desired by men rather than individual human beings with complex thoughts, desires, and needs.

Finally, Fitspiration and Thinspiration often reinforce traditional gender roles and gender stereotypes. Women are often depicted in passive poses or as objects of desire, while men are portrayed as vital. This perpetuates the idea that women should be submissive and men should be dominant, another aspect of objectification theory. Because Thinspiration and Fitspiration appear on SNSs, an exploration of social media, its intended use among social media users, and the the different ways that social media can be used will be discussed. Finally, because Fitspiration and Thinspiration predominately appear on Instagram, an overview of Instagram and its relation to body dissatisfaction will be discussed.

Social Media

For many people, social media or social networking sites (SNS) are a regular part of their social lives, if not an ordinary part of their day. SNS have grown in the past decade and 42% of the Earth's total population are now active on SNS (Emarsys, 2019). These sites are rapidly

changing the way that people interact with one another and have the potential to influence

psychosocial functioning and emotional distress.

Motivations for Social Media Use

Users may have different motivations for using social media (Perloff, 2014). Researchers

have found that individuals use social media for seven main reasons: to interact with others, seek

information, pass the time, entertain themselves, communicate for convenience (Mackson,

2019), and socially compare themselves to others' opinions or abilities (Cramer et al., 2016).

Because social media is largely interactive and mainly user-generated, making it more

customizable (Fuchs, 2017) than traditional mass media, individuals can control what content

they view or engage in (Perloff, 2014). They can also choose what images they choose to post

online (Santarossa et al., 2019). According to Ellison (2007), SNS is mainly used by users to post

images of the self and to evaluate images posted by others. This makes it likely that social

comparisons can be made online, objectification among young women can unfold, and the fit-

and-thin ideal can be easily accessed and instilled in women.

Active vs. Passive Instagram Use

Social media (SM) users can either passively or actively use SNSs. For example, passive

SM use is not interacting with others (Padín, 2021), such as scrolling through SM or "liking"

content on SNSs. On the contrary, active SM use can be defined as actively liking, commenting,

or posting on SNSs (Padín, 2021).

Facebook

Researchers have found that the previously popular SNS Facebook was associated with internalizing the thin ideal, body dissatisfaction, and disordered eating (Holland, 2017). It was found that sharing and viewing photos of others on Facebook was associated with objectified body consciousness, internalization of the thin ideal, and body dissatisfaction (Saunders, 2019). Facebook is more text-based, which makes it less likely that users will be exposed to fit-and-thin ideals, thereby making it less likely that they will make social comparisons. Although once a popular SNS, Facebook has decreased in popularity and usage among young adults.

An Overview of Instagram Use and Users

Of the variety of social networking sites, Instagram has rapidly gained popularity since its creation in 2010 (Instagram, 2020; Fioravanti et al., 2021). Instagram users create online profiles containing personal information about the self that is broadcasted to other online users, which can be updated with additional information (status updates, photos, stories, and so on) at the discretion of the profile owner. The information shared is also open to receiving quantitative or qualitative feedback from Instagram friends and followers.

Instagram allows its users to share photos (Instagram, 2020) and videos. Instagram also allows users to retouch their selfies (Chae, 2017; Lee & Lee, 2019) using the editing feature, which allows users to post perfectly curated images of themselves in unique and selective ways (Walther, 2007).

It has been found that 96% of SM users are young adults between 18-22 years old, and 84% of Facebook and Instagram users are between 18-29 years old (Pew Research Centre,

2021). This means 55% of young adults are exposed to the 40 billion photos uploaded daily to Instagram (Aslam, 2017). Moreover, young adult women are the most Instagram users (Instagram, 2020). Consequently, the constant bombardment of images posted by family, friends, and celebrities on Instagram may encourage young women to either try and attain beauty standards seen on SNSs or post online images that adhere to these perfectly curated ideal images. As such, no doubt being exposed to this cultural beauty standard has, and will, cross the eyes of many, with the ultimate risk of developing body dissatisfaction.

Due to the predominantly photo-based nature of Instagram, this SNS may exacerbate the effects of social comparison by exposing users to cultural beauty standards such as the fit-and-thin ideal. The social comparison on Instagram can be done where users can engage in content actively or passively and "like" and "comment" on other users' photos and videos. Receiving likes and comments on one's photos can function as a form of reassurance (Madeline, 2000) but may pressure young women to conform to beauty ideals (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Researchers have found that passively using SNS is associated with isolation (Padín et al., 2021), a decrease in the number of interpersonal connections formed, an increase in social comparison (Padín et al., 2021), and symptoms of eating disorders (Padín, 2021).

Instagram and Body Dissatisfaction

There are mixed findings on whether time spent on Instagram leads to well-being and body satisfaction determinants. A study conducted by Cohen and Waters (2016) found that women who were described as high-frequency Instagram users (i.e., those who spent 1 to 2 hours or more on Instagram daily) had higher appearance orientation (the importance and investment one places in their appearance) compared to women who spent less time on Instagram. Similarly,

Ahadzadeh et al. (2017) found that time spent on Instagram was associated with greater body dissatisfaction. On the contrary, Hendrickse and Arpan (2016) conducted a study asking participants to self-rate the frequency with which they engage in Instagram activities, such as liking, commenting, or browsing Instagram. Their study showed no relationship between the time spent on Instagram and body dissatisfaction or drive for thinness, but participants who already tended to engage in appearance comparisons while on Instagram showed more body dissatisfaction and drive for thinness.

In addition, other researchers have found that the time spent on SNSs is less important than the activities on these sites (Pertegal-Vega et al., 2019). For example, Instagram photo-based activities (i.e., browsing, viewing, commenting, liking, and tagging others' photos) positively predicted the drive for thinness and body dissatisfaction through the mediating variable of appearance-related comparisons (Hendrickse et al., 2017).

Another study found that Instagram users report more body image concerns than Facebook users, and when Instagram users follow appearance-based accounts (e.g., celebrities, models, and fitness) as opposed to non-appearance accounts (e.g., travel), they reported even more body image concerns (Cohen et al., 2017). Furthermore, people who post edited photos of themselves show increased weight and shape concerns and overall body dissatisfaction (Madeline, 2002). This is important for young women since this gender is more likely to post edited pictures of themselves (Madeline, 2002). As such, active versus passive Instagram use may be more critical to body image concerns than total time spent on Instagram.

Although much attention has been paid to how SNSs such as Facebook and Instagram impact women's body image, less is known about the impact that specific content found on

Instagram has on women's body image, sense of self, and connections with friends and family. More specifically, Thinspiration and Fitspiration, commonly found on Instagram, promote fit and thin normative ideals and have been found to create a host of negative implications among women. Since 18 to 29-year-old women are the largest consumers of Instagram (Auxier & Anderson, 2021), view Thinspiration and Fitspiration more than their male counterparts, and have a greater risk for eating disorders (Gonzalez-Nuevo et al., 2021), the current study will explore the experience of young women engaging in Thinspiration and Fitspiration.

Fitspiration displays images of fit and lean (Holland, 2017) individuals and claims to promote health and fitness (Raggatt, 2018) among its content viewers, while Thinspiration contains images of extremely thin women to encourage individuals to pursue extreme thinness.

Meaning of Thinspiration and Fitspiration

Thinspiration, or thinspo, is a movement (Tapia, 2022) that promotes a thin body type through photos, blogs, diet and exercise instructions, and inspirational messages. It is associated with pro-anorexia websites (Richman, 2014) and encourages disordered eating and poor body image (Buchanan, 2016). Fitspiration, or Fitspo, is a recent trend promoting exercise, health, and fitness through inspirational body images, healthy living quotes, and workout videos (Easton et al., 2018). Fitspiration also provides a community of like-minded individuals aspiring to be fit and can serve as an educational tool and source of motivation and inspiration (Limakatso, 2023). Both Thinspiration and Fitspiration can promote unhealthy or unrealistic body standards. The following sections will delve into the meaning of pro-anorexia websites, Thinspiration and Fitspiration.

Thinspiration

Thinspiration, or thinspo, is the combination of the words 'thin' and 'inspiration' and contains images of extremely thin bodies (Burke, 2012, p. 37) of attractive women (Alberga, 2018) with the ultimate goal being to motivate viewers to attain the thin-ideal body which is perpetuated in the media (Gibson, 2016). Thinspiration also influences viewers to engage in or maintain their disordered eating behaviors (Gibson, 2016). Thinspiration is a movement (Tapia, 2022) often found within pro-anorexia websites (Anderson, 2011) and also found on other social media platforms (Buchanan, 2022), such as Instagram.

Richman (2014) notes that Thinspiration seems to have been used since at least 2006. They also state that between 2006 and 2008, the number of pro-anorexia and pro-bulimia social media posts rose 470%. Originally, the term was found on these *pro-ana* or *pro-mia* websites, as well as on YouTube videos—as a way to fuel disorders and promote starvation. At its core, it was part of a more significant movement to encourage rather than treat eating disorders.

Thinspiration usually displays images of women focusing on specific body parts (Alberga, 2018) (i.e., torso, collarbones, hip bones). In addition, these images usually contain text, captions, and food (Gibson, 2016), further emphasizing the thin ideal. The thin-ideal body type portrayed on Thinspiration websites is almost impossible for the average woman to attain in any healthy way (Gibson, 2016). As such, these websites offer warning messages on their pages to viewers before viewing or engaging in its content due to its glamorization of eating disorders and potential harm.

Thinspiration contains multiple categories, including fashion models, celebrities, athletes, and real individuals (Borzekowski et al., 2010; Morris et al., 2006; Smith et al., 2014). Thinspiration contains images of women who are so thin that their bones are protruding. As

such, Thinspiration represents the "anorexic experience" and is intended to "idealize extreme to emaciated slender bodies" (Burke, 2012, p. 37). These websites promote thinness among their users (Griffiths et al., 2018) by displaying images of unrealistically thin bodies while encouraging individuals to lose or continue having a low weight (Lewis & Arbuthonott, 2012).

Thinspiration has many negative consequences (Borzekowski et al., 2010). For example, viewing Thinspiration is related to having unhealthy beauty standards among women and an increase in body dissatisfaction (Bardone-Cone & Cass, 2007; Jett et al., 2010; Rodgers et al., 2015, 2015b; Griffiths et al., 2018) an increase in self-objectification, and to lead to an increase in disordered eating (Ghaznavi & Taylor, 2015; Grabe et al., 2008). Researchers have also found that content on both Thinspiration and pro-anorexia websites are in line with the attitudes and beliefs that depict eating disorder psychopathology (Boepple & Thompson, 2016; Ghaznavi & Taylor, 2015; Norris et al., 2006; Talbot et al., 2017; Tiggemann et al., 2018; Wick & Harriger, 2018). Thinspiration has been identified as a significant contributor to the rise of eating disorders among its audience and serves as a driving force for individuals to adopt weight loss practices (Lewis & Arbuthnott, 2012).

Thinspiration images that are found on Pro-anorexia websites (Gibson, 2016) have been found to have adverse psychological effects. Researchers have found that viewing Thinspiration decreases body satisfaction (Bardone-Cone & Cass, 2006; 2007; Delforterie et al., 2014). In addition, Jett et al. (2010) found that viewing pro-anorexia websites for 45 minutes among women college students with a BMI of at least 18 who had no history of an eating disorder led to decreased food consumption over one week. Further, Harper et al. (2008) and Pryslopski (2011) found that pro-anorexia websites lead to body dissatisfaction, restrictive dieting, decreased food consumption, and bulimic symptoms.

Thinspiration is prevalent all over social media and is used mainly among populations of individuals with eating disorders (Csipke & Horne, 2007). Thinspiration is mainly found on Instagram and Tumblr (Alberga et al., 2018; Griffiths et al., 2018) and has increased in popularity. Harris et al. (2018) found millions of Thinspiration images online, and thousands of Thinspiration images are posted to social media daily (Harris et al., 2018). Marcus (2016) conducted a content analysis of 800 Thinspiration images on Instagram. He found that the hashtag supported the pro-anorexia lifestyle, encouraged users to find weight-loss buddies and motivated users to discriminate against outsiders by arguing with recovered anorexics. Angyal (2013) claimed that Facebook and Instagram have taken measures to ban Thinspiration activity due to the negative psychological consequences of viewing this content. However, new websites are being created despite these bans.

Pro-Anorexia Websites

Pro-anorexia websites, which emerged in the late 1990s (Burke, 2012), support a thin-ideal body type (Williams & Reid, 2007). These websites contain images and written guidelines (Williams & Reid, 2007) aimed at helping individuals maintain their eating disorder or become better anorexics. Guidelines on how to "reduce calorie intake, decrease the chances of being caught for eating disorder behaviors, and ways to cope with the isolation and loneliness that "accompanies eating disorders" (Reitz & Keller, 2005, p. 79) are given on these websites. This online community encourages disordered eating behaviors through behavioral and emotional support for the onset and continuation of extreme dieting and exercise (Haas et al., 2011).

Researchers discovered over 180 active websites promoting pro-anorexia messages through a search in the year 2010 (Borzekowski et al., 2010). Some researchers claim that these websites form an elitist group whose group members make sure that other users truly have an eating

disorder and are not simply sporadically engaging in occasional food restrictions (Curry & Ray, 2010). Around 58% of pro-anorexia websites provide disclaimers against using the websites if one does not have an eating disorder (Norris et al., 2006).

Although these websites do not promote or encourage eating disorders (Reitz & Keller, 2005) among non-eating disorder users, they ensure that users who have an eating disorder sustain their eating disorder by sharing harmful knowledge with others (Curry & Ray, 2010). This movement views anorexia and bulimia as lifestyle choices rather than mental health conditions. This elitist group has even created its terminology for various topics discussed on the websites. For example, anorexia is called *ana*, bulimia is called *mia,* Thinspiration is called *thinspo*, and ultimate goal weight is abbreviated as *UGW*.

In addition, tips and tricks, Thinspiration images, and quotes are displayed on these websites (Borzekowski et al., 2010; Morris et al., 2006). Specific accessories are marketed on some of these websites, such as red bracelets that declare to others who know their meaning that they are part of the pro-anorexia community (Borzekowski et al., 2010). Moreover, religious metaphors are used to promote strict adherence to specific disordered eating guidelines, such as the *Ana Creed* or *Ana's 10 Commandments.* This deviant content has forced the shutdowns of various websites. However, many pro-anorexia websites and blogs remain prevalent within the community, and replacement websites are created instead of websites that were shut down (Brotsky & Giles, 2007; Dias, 2003; Tierney, 2006).

Motivations for Viewing Pro-Anorexia Websites

Users seek out pro-anorexia websites for various reasons. The most frequently reported reasons users sought pro-anorexia websites were to learn about weight loss tips, curiosity, to meet people, induce a sense of belonging (77%), social support (75%), and to continue their

eating disorder (52%) (Rehg, 2000). As Dias (2003) stated, pro-anorexia websites give users time and space to share with other users their struggles about not being ready to give up their eating disorder. Users may also provide a place of non-judgment of other users' weight-loss goals, encourage one another, and share ideas for weight loss. However, this support, encouragement, and online space have negative implications. Tierney (2006) found that being a member of the online community encourages isolation from others, including family, friends, and healthcare professionals. Further, users who do receive emotional support from other users on these pro-anorexia websites are at risk of being given potentially harmful advice. This is especially harmful since individuals with eating disorders need social support (Linville, 2011).

Harms of Pro-Anorexia Websites

There are many harmful consequences of pro-anorexia websites. A systematic review study conducted by Mento and colleagues (2011) aimed to examine how pro-anorexia and pro-mia (pro-bulimia) websites psychologically impact women teenagers. The study found that pro-anorexia and pro-bulimia websites lead to discomfort and body dissatisfaction among women teenagers, which leads to reduced self-esteem. In addition, a study conducted by Custers and Bulk (2002) found that viewing pro-anorexia websites among 13 to 17-year-old womens resulted in a higher drive for thinness, decreased perceptions of appearance, and increased perfectionism.

A pilot study conducted by Bardone-Cone and Cass (2006) explored the effects of exposure to pro-anorexia websites among 24 young women between 18 and 20 years old. The young women were randomly assigned to one of three conditions – a pro-anorexia website created by the primary researcher, a website about women fashion using average-sized models, or an appearance-neutral website about home decor. The participants completed questionnaires that measured their moods and cognitions before and after viewing these websites. The authors

measured positive and negative affect, state self-esteem, appearance self-efficacy, perceived weight status, and perceived attractiveness to the opposite sex. The study found that young women who viewed the pro-anorexia websites had a decrease in self-esteem, appearance self-efficacy, and perceived attractiveness. These young women also experienced increased negative affect and perceptions of being overweight. However, these results were not seen in the women who viewed the control websites. Jett et al. (2010) examined the impact of pro-anorexia websites. They found that after viewing these websites, participants had a decrease in calorie intake and reported using techniques to help with food reduction found on the websites.

In addition, Csipke and Horene (2007) conducted a study in which participants were questioned about the impact of viewing pro-anorexia websites. A total of 26 participants stated that pro-anorexia websites gave them practical advice, which helped them maintain their disordered eating behaviors. In addition, 43 of the participants stated that these websites helped them with emotional support. Furthermore, 2.6% of the participants stated that these websites provided practical tips on maintaining their eating disorder and providing them with emotional support, and 19.2% stated that these websites were harmful to them, leading to poorer body image. Interestingly, this study's results also showed a difference between actively and passively engaging in pro-anorexia websites. For example, participants who actively engaged in pro-anorexia websites felt less lonely than participants who passively observed these websites. Participants who viewed these websites said it helped improve their emotional well-being.

It has also been found that the amount of time spent on pro-anorexia websites can predict disordered eating and lower quality of life than simply viewing these websites. Peebles et al. (2012) found that participants who viewed pro-anorexia websites more than light users had lower quality of life and rates of disordered eating behaviors compared to heavy users.

Viewing pro-anorexia websites is also common among individuals diagnosed with an eating disorder. For example, a study by Wilson et al. (2006) found that most patients (96%) with eating disorders had learned a new weight-loss or purging technique after viewing these websites. The authors stated that participants who used pro-anorexia websites the longest also reported longer durations of their eating disorder and less time spent in school due to health issues.

The studies conducted on pro-anorexia websites show the adverse and harmful effects of viewing such websites among children, teens, and adults. Moreover, these websites negatively affect healthy individuals and individuals with an eating disorder diagnosis. As such, it is vital to examine why viewing these websites causes such adverse effects on individuals. Pro-anorexia websites are mainly harmful in that they emphasize living a *certain lifestyle* that views eating disorders, particularly anorexia nervosa, as a lifestyle choice that is particularly dangerous and leads to the development of eating disorders. Pro-anorexia websites mainly contain Thinspiration content (Borzekowski et al., 2010). Nearly 85% of pro-anorexia websites focus on disseminating Thinspiration material to their audience (Borzekowski et al., 2010, p.), which will be discussed next.

Fitspiration

Fitspiration is a new and popular social media trend and online fitness community (Easton et al., 2018), as well as a popular hashtag (Griffiths et al., 2018; Prichard et al., 2018), comprised of the word fitness and inspiration (Eng, 2022; Lepesheva & Kholmogorova, 2020; Raggatt et al., 2018). Fitspiration may also be called 'fitspo' (Griffiths et al., 2018; Santarossa et al., 2017) and contains images, video sharing, text, exercise, and healthy eating tips that promote health and fitness (Alberga et al., 2018; Camacho et al., 2019; Lepesheva & Kholmogorova, 2021;

Santarossa et al., 2019; Raggatt et al., 2018). Fitspiration usually displays images of women

exercising or in exercise gear (Holland & Tiggemann, 2017) and is characterized by idealized

depictions of overtly fit and lean bodies with visible muscle tone (Boepple & Thompson, 2016;

Holland & Tiggemann, 2017; Simpson & Mazzeo, 2016; Talbot et al., 2017; Tiggemann &

Zaccardo, 2015; Tiggemann et al., 2018). Moreover, Fitspiration contains "fitness challenges,

diets, and health cleanse" (Raggatt et al., 2018, p. 2) and inspiring quotes (Raggatt et al., 2018),

such as *Strong beats skinny every time* (Holland & Tiggemann, 2017), where like-minded

individuals can share their interest in health and fitness (Raggatt et al., 2018). The ultimate

purpose of Fitspiration is to motivate individuals to lose weight and maintain weight loss through

exercise and healthy eating (O'Brien, 2013).

Fitspiration emerged several years after the #Thinspiration movement, a trend that considered

a thin body an ideal body image, and it has since gained a huge following globally. However,

Thinspiration has been rebranded (Buchanan, 2016) in that the emergence of Fitspiration is

taking its solace.

Although Fitspiration or fitspo content may be found "disseminated" on social media sites

such as "profile pages or blogs of personal trainers, fitness models or bodybuilders" (Raggatt et

al., 2018, p. 2), Fitspo is disseminated mainly on multiple social media avenues, most notably on

Instagram (Santarossa et al., 2017). For instance, Holland and Tiggemann (2017) searched for

#Fitspiration on Instagram, and 5.2 million images were returned. Moreover, Santarossa et al.

(2019) searched for #Fitspiration and found 3.3 million images. Similarly, Murashka Peng

(2021) retrieved 18.74 images when they searched for the hashtag 'Fitspiration on Instagram.

Reasons for Following Fitspiration

One primary reason for following Fitspiration is to gain motivation to exercise. Easton et al. (2018) conducted a focus group with 20 adults on the perceived impact of viewing Fitspiration and the motivations and experiences of viewing this content. One theme they found was that participants viewed Fitspiration to gain motivation and knowledge to attain a healthy lifestyle. Similarly, DiBisceglie and Arigo (2021) found that inspiring others and being motivated and accountable were the most frequently reported reasons individuals post on Fitspiration. In addition, researchers have found that Fitspiration is intended to inspire and motivate individuals to attain an ideal body image through exercise and healthy eating (Eng, 2022; Lepesheva & Kholmogorova, 2021; Raggatt et al., 2019; Santarossa et al., 2019).

Although viewing Fitspiration has some detrimental effects, researchers have also found some positive benefits. For example, being exposed to Fitspiration has been found to lead to body satisfaction in the short term (Prichard et al., 2018; Robinson et al., 2017; Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015). Furthermore, Prichard et al. (2018) found that Fitspiration promotes a healthy lifestyle, such as exercising.

Harmful Consequences of Viewing Fitspiration

Although there are some positive benefits of viewing Fitspiration, such as gaining motivation to eat healthy and exercise, there are some potential dangers. Although most individuals seek Fitspiration to feel good (Santarossa et al., 2019), a study conducted by Easton et al. (2018) provided different results. Easton et al. (2018) ran a focus group with 20 adults on the perceived impact of Fitspiration, motivations for viewing this content, and experiences. Among several themes, experiencing negative emotional well-being after viewing Fitspiration was found.

Similarly, a study conducted by Prichard et al. (2018) found that participants' negative moods increased as they viewed Fitspiration images.

In addition, Benton and Karazsia (2015) examined the effects of viewing thin and muscular women. The images of the muscular women were divided into thin and toned and hyper muscular images. The researchers found that viewing thin and toned women yielded the same results as simply viewing thin women. In other words, both groups experienced a decrease in state-oriented body satisfaction. Nonetheless, it was observed that the hyper-muscular group did not show any significant difference from the control group, implying that the exposure to images of muscular and thin women prompted comparable reactions in body satisfaction as those elicited by images of the thin ideal (Anderson, 2001).

Fitspiration and Thinspiration

There are mixed findings regarding which websites are more harmful and among which populations. Although the fit-and-thin body ideal is displayed on both Fitspiration and Thinspiration websites (Alberga et al., 2018), some researchers (Dignard & Jarry, 2020) claim that Fitspiration may be more harmful than Thinspiration because it is more realistic compared to Thinspiration. For example, celebrities and influencers can modify and curate their images, selectively choose which photos to post on their social media platforms and present a particular lifestyle to their audience. This, in turn, allows users to compare themselves to these celebrities and influencers as if they were similar (p. 202). This may be more damaging compared to comparing ourselves to our friends and peers, as celebrities and influencers are not similar to us and have the means to curate a perfect self. According to Pilgrim (2019), the more social media content promotes identification, the more it is perceived to be realistic.

In addition to the social comparison aspect of Fitspiration, Alberga et al. (2018) claim that content on Fitspiration promotes more guilt about one's body weight and shape than Thinspiration. Furthermore, Tiggemann et al. (2018) found that more individuals follow Fitspiration accounts (six times more) compared to Thinspiration and, for this reason, maybe more harmful than Thinspiration (Griffiths et al., 2018).

However, Griffiths et al. (2018) believe that both Fitspiration and Thinspiration are equally harmful to individuals with eating disorders, but being exposed to Fitspiration content may be less harmful than Thinspiration among individuals with eating disorders due to the extreme means of dieting found in Thinspiration (Alberga et al., 2018)

Some researchers believe that Thinspiration and Fitspiration are equally harmful to healthy individuals. The study carried out by Dignard and Jarry (2020) involved women undergraduate students who were randomly allocated to view Fitspiration, Thinspiration, or travel images. The researchers measured participants' state body satisfaction, state appearance comparison, and positive body image. The authors found that viewing Fitspiration and Thinspiration content decreased body satisfaction among university students compared to viewing travel images.

Thinspiration and Fitspiration are typically associated with promoting thinness and a particular body type through extreme diet and exercise habits promoted through images and quotes. Fitspiration, in particular, aims to promote a healthy and active lifestyle but can also encourage unhealthy or unrealistic body standards.

Rationale for Study

According to Rideout and Fox's (2018) research, 96% of social media users are between the ages of 18 and 22, while 84% of adults aged 18 to 29 use Instagram (Pew Research Center, 2021). Thinspiration had around 85,000 followers, while Fitspiration content had approximately 535,000 followers in 2016 (Tiggemann et al., 2018; Griffiths et al., 2019). Although previous studies have explored the effects of Thinspiration and Fitspiration content on women's body image, further research is needed on how young women aged 18 to 29 experience this content on Instagram.

Research has shown that exposure to such content can lead to elevated levels of body dissatisfaction and disordered eating symptoms, with only one study finding no negative effects from Fitspiration content (Griffiths et al., 2018; Rodgers et al., 2016; Turja et al., 2017; Holland & Tiggemann, 2017; Prichard et al., 2017; Raggatt et al., 2018; Robinson et al., 2017; Sumter et al., 2018; Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015; Slater et al., 2017). Furthermore, limited research investigates the differences between Thinspiration and Fitspiration (Alberga et al., 2018; Saunders & Eaton, 2018), and there is a need to explore how individuals with a moderate-risk of developing an eating disorder are affected by this content. There is also a lack of knowledge on how social connectedness is impacted by such content, making further research essential.

Given that individuals aged 18 to 29 use Instagram more frequently than other age groups (Auxier & Anderson, 2021), young adult women in this age group are the study's focus. Research suggests that this age group is at higher risk of developing eating disorders (Gonzalez-Nuevo et al., 2021). Among college-aged students, viewing inspirational images such as Thinspiration and Fitspiration has been found to increase body dissatisfaction and appearance comparisons (Griffiths et al., 2018; Rodgers et al., 2016; Turja et al., 2017; Holland &

Tiggemann, 2017; Prichard et al., 2017; Raggatt et al., 2018; Robinson et al., 2017; Sumter et al., 2018; Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015). Recent reports have indicated concerns about Instagram's role in promoting eating disorders among teenagers (CNN Wire, 2021), making it vital to investigate the effects of such content on young women in this age group.

In addition, Borzekowski (2010) found that young adults between 18-24 and older adults 25 years and older are maintainers of ProED websites (p. 1528). Carrotte (2015) conducted a cross-sectional study to identify the characteristics of young social media users who consume health and fitness-related content and found that most participants identified as women (85.7%). Of the women participants, 44.8% consumed at least one type of this content. Lepesheva and Kholmogorova's (2021) research supports these findings, as they noted that Fitspiration pages primarily target women to encourage them towards a healthy lifestyle. Accordingly, women participants will be included in this study.

Instagram is the prime focus of the study since most Thinspiration and Fitspiration content is shared on this platform (Carrotte, 2017). This study aims to explore participants' experiences of using Instagram (IG) and viewing and engaging in Thinspiration and Fitspiration on IG. I also plan to explore how these individuals perceive social connectedness. Specifically, participants' experience following friends and family on IG and how this contributes to their experience of viewing and engaging in these concepts. The main research questions in the current study are: 1) How does IG impact women's tendency to engage in eating disorder risk such as body dissatisfaction, specifically by their experience in following and engaging in harmful content such as Thinspiration/Fitspiration? and 2) What is their experience of social connections with friends and family when viewing/engaging in this content?

The current qualitative study has several strengths. First, using a qualitative research design allowed for detailed and comprehensive information to be gathered regarding the experiences of participants. This approach also allowed a deeper understanding of young women's attitudes and perceptions towards Thinspiration and Fitspiration. In addition, the use of a focus group was a strong feature of this research since it allowed the exploration of sensitive topics with young women. Second, the open-ended approach allowed participants to direct the conversation and minimized potential researcher bias. Moreover, the research uniquely focused on individuals with a moderate risk of developing eating disorders rather than those without a history of eating disorders or those presently experiencing symptoms. Finally, this study is one of the first to explore young women's social connections in relation to viewing Thinspiration and Fitspiration.

Chapter Three: Methodology

Qualitative Research

A qualitative research approach was used to understand the subjective experience of young women viewing and engaging in Thinspiration and Fitspiration on Instagram. Qualitative research refers to a framework or paradigm for conducting research that uses words or imagery as its source of data (Braun & Clark, 2013).

Qualitative research assumes that "knowledge is constructed by people engaging in meaning-making through their experiences" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 6). A qualitative researcher seeks to access patterns within the data (Tolich & Davidson, 2003) and make sense of or understand the meaning of these patterns (Braun & Clark, 2013) from participants' perspectives.

Experiential qualitative research was used in the current study. The key to experiential qualitative research is understanding people's perspectives on their experiences and the meanings they ascribe to them (Braun & Clarke, 2013). This research aims to understand the participants' world. The participant's language is considered to be the source that uncovers the person's inner world and helps us understand how they report their experiences (Braun & Clark, 2013). Giving a voice to participants' lives and their experiences is the central aim of experiential qualitative research (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Finally, the experiential approach was further underpinned by a social constructionist paradigm in which the researcher believed that reality is mostly socially constructed by individuals. As a result, the primary aim of the researcher was to understand the complex world and participants' lived experiences.

Research Design

A focus group interview was used for the current study to understand and gain insight into participants' perspectives (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Developed by Robert Merton and colleagues in the early 1940s (Merton, 1987; Merton & Kendall, 1946), the focused interview grew out of research conducted by the Bureau of Applied Social Research within Mass Communications (Merton & Kendall, 1946). Since then, focus groups have been extensively used in the social sciences (Braun & Clarke, 2013) and business settings such as marketing and have proven advantageous. For instance, focus groups have proven useful when examining new topics of interest and when little information is available (Acocella, 2012; Wilkinson, 1998). Moreover, focus groups replicate real-life ways of speaking with others (Wilkinson, 1988), which allows flexibility (Acocella, 2012) and discussion among participants (Acocella, 2012). Participants can interact with each other, ask questions, and agree or disagree on specific topics (Wilkinson, 1999). Similarly, discussions during these interviews can often be sensitive; therefore, focus groups can create an open and supportive environment where participants can feel safe sharing their unique experiences (Wilkinson, 1998).

Our study used a focus group interview for several reasons. First, except for Easton et al.'s (2018) study and the more recent publication by Hogue and colleagues (2023), understanding the experiences of young women engaging in Thinspiration and Fitspiration on Instagram is relatively novel. Second, although Thinspiration and Fitspiration have been around for some time, Instagram has provided a new platform where this content can flourish. As a result, a focus group interview allowed for the exploration of how the thin-and-fit-ideal content manifests/presents itself on Instagram, according to the experiences of young women. Third, young, emerging adult women between the ages of 18 and 29 are the most extensive account

followers of Thinspiration and Fitspiration and use Instagram more than others; however, more research needs to be conducted on this population's unique experiences with this content. Finally, and most importantly, topics surrounding body image issues are likely to come up during the interview, and having a safe and supporting environment is essential for all participants to feel secure to express themselves and share their unique experiences without feeling ashamed or fearing judgment from other group members.

To ensure the focus group interview was manageable and provided an avenue for rich discussion among participants, Braun and Clarke (2013) advise including between three to eight research participants in the interview. A total of nine participants were included in the study. Because semi-structured interviews are the most common type of interview used within qualitative research (Braun & Clark, 2021), the present focus group used a semi-structured format in which the researcher had open-ended questions prepared prior to the onset of the interview (see Appendix E). Having a question guide prepared before the interview allowed participants to "raise issues that the researcher has not anticipated" (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 78). This also allowed participants to lead the conversation when necessary, rather than being compelled by the researcher to discuss a particular topic from the open-ended question guide, which may have disrupted the continuity of the interview.

Participants

Nine women-identifying women aged 18 to 28 years old participated in the study. Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants, as this is the typical approach used in qualitative research (Patton, 2002). The main objective of purposive sampling is to provide insight, deep understanding, and information-rich data from the topic of interest (Creswell & Clark, 2011; Patton, 2002). Purposive sampling was used in this study to obtain a sample of

young women who had spent time on Thinspiration and Fitspiration. Each of them will be briefly

introduced (with a pseudonym).

Amy:

Amy is 28 years old and identifies as Western Asian/Middle Eastern. She holds a graduate

degree and is currently employed in the healthcare field.

Stacey:

Stacey is a 26-year-old Caucasian woman. During the time of the study, Stacey was a student

and worked at a crisis and suicide line. Stacey grew up riding horses and enjoyed participating in

Irish dance.

Phoebe:

Phoebe is 23 years old. She is an undergraduate student, studying psychology. Phoebe works

part-time as a relief aid. She enjoys baking, cooking, and practicing her faith. She enjoys being in

nature, reading poetry, and bubble baths. Recently, Phoebe has been interested in the daily lives

of ancient people as she loves to find familiarity and similarities between them and herself. She

also enjoys learning from her Eritrean culture and other cultures around the world. Finally,

Phoebe enjoys DIY projects and spends her time on Pinterest looking for new ideas.

Celia:

Celia is 23 years old and is Chinese. At the time of this study, Celia was still a student but has

since graduated with a Bachelor of Science in Mechanical Engineering.

Claire:

Claire is a 25-year-old Caucasian woman who was born in Mexico. She is a registered Dietitian

and a full-time PhD candidate in the second year of her studies in Canada. She studies the effects

of the long-term repercussions of COVID-19 on body composition, and function and their impact

on mindfulness. Claire is a ballet teacher and is involved in various associations related to research and innovation.

Anna:

Anna is 26 years old and is a registered nurse. Anna was born in Germany and moved to Canada when she was 5 years old. Anna enjoys spending her free time swimming, spending time with her family and friends, and traveling across the world.

Victoria:

Victoria is a 29-year-old Caucasian woman of Irish, Ukrainian, and German descent. She is a graduate of the University of Alberta with a degree in Electrical Biomedical studies. She currently works full-time as an electrical engineer. During her spare time, Victoria enjoys competitive dancing and competitive rhythmic gymnastics. Victoria's Instagram feed mainly consists of 3 categories: rhythmic skills, dance combos for creative inspiration, and bodybuilding content in the category of bikini only. Victoria hopes to compete in bodybuilding in the future. She also creates personalized exercises and exercise routines for fitness and nutrition from the best athletes and from the content she views on Instagram. Social media has helped Victoria find a workout program that she has stuck to since 2008. This program has helped with her weight loss journey in which she lost 80 lbs and has kept it off for more than 15 years.

Ophelia:

Ophelia is a 19-year-old dual-citizen, Polish-Canadian woman. Ophelia was born in Poland and moved to Canada when she was 3 years old. She currently has a degree in human physiology. After completing her degree, she took a year off to teach English in Warsaw. In September 2023 Ophelia will be starting her master's degree in innovative medicine.

Cassia:

Cassia is an 18-year-old woman. Her ethnic background is 50% Eastern European (Russian) and 50% Afro-Caribbean (Trinidad and Tobago). Cassia is a full-time third-year university student and works part-time as a waitress.

Eligibility Criteria

To be eligible to participate in the study, participants needed to be a) at least 18 years of age, b) identify as a woman, c) have an active Instagram account, d) view Thinspiration and Fitspiration on Instagram, e) not have been previously, or current diagnosed with an eating disorder as screened by using the Eating Disorder Examination Questionnaire – 13 (EDE-Q-13) (Lev-Ari, 2021), f) have no substance abuse or significant personality disorder as screened by using the National Institute on Drug Use Screener (National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2009) and the Standardized Assessment of Personality – Abbreviated Scale (NIDA et al.; SAPAS; Moran et al., 2003), and g) have a moderate risk of developing an eating disorder as screened by using the Eating Disorder Examination Questionnaire – 13 (EDE-Q-13).

While quantitative measures were used, this is a qualitative study with a small sample of participants. No analyses of these scores were undertaken beyond individual participants' simple inclusion or exclusion.

Participants who self-identified as regular consumers of Thinspiration and Fitspiration content on Instagram were included in the study. Further, since individuals between 18 and 29 are most Instagram users (Perrin & Anderson, 2019), this age range was selected for this study. In addition, Instagram was chosen to be explored in the current study due to its visual aspect, increasing popularity (Pew Research Centre, 2021), and the amount of Thinspiration and Fitspiration content displayed on the platform (Gerrard, 2018). As such, purposive sampling

allowed the researcher to select participants based on age, gender, Instagram user, and knowledge of Thinspiration and Fitspiration content (Etikan, 2016).

Individuals with a high risk of developing an eating disorder, previously diagnosed with an eating disorder, or who currently have an eating disorder were excluded from the study. It was assumed that individuals who met those criteria might become distressed during the focus group and did not represent the young women we wanted to study. These participants were given an information sheet on possible resources they could refer to to receive the proper treatment they needed if they were interested in doing so. They were excluded from the study.

Participants who were interested in the study and who met the eligibility criteria outlined on the poster were encouraged to contact the researcher via email to set up an initial interview to gather demographic information and to screen for any possible risk of an eating disorder, substance use, and personality disorders using the screeners mentioned above.

It is important to note that this study was not intended to assess or diagnose individuals with a possible or current eating disorder or to infer any psychological aspect of participants. This study intended to include participants with a moderate risk of developing an eating disorder. Thus, it was necessary to screen individuals for eating disorder risk to ensure the current study's validity. As such, including relatively healthy participants ensured that this validity was met.

Measures

Time Spent on Instagram

During the initial interview, participants were asked to specify the average number of minutes or hours they spend using Instagram daily. All participants had an active Instagram account. Participants reported that they spent between 1 and 10 hours a day on Instagram.

Eating Disorder Examination Questionnaire – Short Form

All participants were asked during the initial interview if they had ever been diagnosed with an eating disorder or if they currently have an eating disorder diagnosis. Participants who had an eating disorder before or who currently had an eating disorder were not eligible to participate in the study. These participants were given an information sheet with resources available to help them within the community (see Appendix C).

The Eating Disorder Examination Questionnaire (EDE-Q) is commonly used in research to assess eating disorder symptoms. However, the tool is quite lengthy and time-consuming. As a result, authors Lev-Ari (2021) created the Eating Disorder Examination Questionnaire – 13 (EDE-Q-13), a short and user-friendly questionnaire to assess for symptoms of eating disorders. The EDEQ-13 also fits well with the original EDE-Q and is highly correlated with the original EDE-Q. In addition, the EDE-Q-13 includes bingeing and purging subscales and can determine whether community samples have eating disorder symptoms (Lev-Ari, 2021). Lev-Ari and colleagues (2021) used seven items from the original EDE-Q: these items included item numbers 1, 3, and 4, which assessed Dietary Restraint (DR), items 22 and 23 assessed Weight Concern (WC) and Shape Concern (SC) (Shape and Weight Over-evaluation [SWO]), and items 25 and 26 that measure body dissatisfaction (BD). Questions 1-3 assessed Restricted Eating, 4-5 assessed Shape and Weight Over-evaluation, 6-7 assessed Body Dissatisfaction, 13-15 assessed Bingeing, and 16-18 assessed Purging. All questions opened with the following: "On how many of the past 28 days…." and the 12 questions that followed asked about "specific thoughts or behaviors." Sample questions included "Have you made yourself sick (vomit) as a means of controlling your shape or weight?" or "Has your weight influenced how you think about (judge) yourself as a person?" Participants had the option to choose one of six frequency categories (i.e.,

1-5 (score of 1); 6-12 (score of 2); 13-15 (score of 3); 16-22 (score of 4); 23-27 (score of 5); and

every day (score of 6). Scoring was made uniform by adapting all items into a Likert-type

response format. The EDE-Q-13 appears in Appendix D. The total and subscale scores correlated

strongly with the 28-item EDE-Q, where the correlation between the EDE-Q-13 total scores and

the original EDE-Q total score was .92. All correlations were significant at p < .001 level and

ranged between .29 and .95.

Because we aimed to study the experience of young women with a possible moderate risk

of developing an eating disorder experience through Thinspiration and Fitspiration, specific

ranges were created to distinguish between individuals who were considered at low risk of

developing an eating disorder, moderately at risk, and high risk. More specifically, individuals

with a low risk of developing an eating disorder had scores between 0 and 12, individuals with a

moderate risk of developing an eating disorder scored between 13 and 23, and individuals with a

high risk of developing an eating disorder scored between 24 and 27. Individuals who scored

more than zero on the following questions ("Have you made yourself sick (vomit) as a means of

controlling your shape or weight?" And "Have you taken laxatives as a means of controlling

your shape or weight?") were automatically grouped in the high-risk group and were not

included in the study. Three participants were excluded from the study. One participant scored in

the low-risk range for developing an eating disorder and thus was excluded from the study. Two

other participants were excluded from the study as one had a prior diagnosis of an eating

disorder, and the other scored in the high-risk range of developing an eating disorder. Both

participants were given a referral resource sheet (see Appendix C) to assist them in seeking

treatment for struggles with eating and body image issues.

Personality Screener

A short screener was used to ensure that participants had no pre-existing mental health concerns that could disrupt the focus group discussion or make conversations difficult (i.e., Standardized Assessment of Personality Abbreviated Scale; Moran et al., 2003; see Appendix D). During the initial interview, participants were required to answer eight questions verbally with a yes or no response format. Sample questions included "Do you normally lose your temper easily?" and "Are you normally impulsive?" The authors found that scoring 3 or 4 on the SAPAS identified the presence of a personality disorder in over 80% of participants in Moran and colleagues' (2003) study. As such, participants who scored three on this screener were excluded from the study. The internal consistency of the measure was moderate (0.68).The current study did not include any participants with a personality disorder, and none of the potential participants showed any indication of having one based on their scores.

Substance Use

The Screening for Drug Use in General Medical Settings Quick Reference Guide Version Two was used as a quick screener to ensure no participant had any drug-related issue that might interfere with the focus group discussion (National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2009; see Appendix D). Participants were asked questions about their alcohol, tobacco, prescription drugs for non-medical reasons, and illegal drug use over the last year and lifetime drug use. The risk level for each participant was based on the range levels recommended in the quick reference guide. Individuals who were at low risk of having a substance-related issue and who scored between 0-3 on the screener were included in the study. Individuals who scored in the moderate (score 4-26) and high risk (score > 27) ranges were excluded from the study and given a resource sheet to help with any substance-related issues they may be facing. The current study did not include any

participants with a substance use disorder, and none of the potential participants scored in the

high risk range for having one.

Procedures

Since this study focused on Instagram, the researcher recruited participants from her

personal social media accounts, including Instagram and Facebook. An advertisement poster was

made accessible on both social media platforms, containing pertinent information on the study,

such as its objectives, conditions for participation, incentives, and channels for expressing

interest (see Appendix F). To avoid conflicts of interest, the study did not include friends and

family members who were known to the researcher. In addition to posting the study on SNSs, the

researcher also displayed posters around the University of Alberta for university students to

participate. Specific locations around the university were targeted for participant recruitment. For

instance, the posters were displayed around the recreation building as it was assumed that

individuals who frequently visit Thinspiration and Fitspiration content also engage in fitness and

health-related activities. In addition, the education building was also used to display the

advertisement posters as students in this area may be inclined to join research studies for

personal and academic interest.

After expressing interest by email, potential participants were invited to schedule an

initial Zoom interview where they would provide demographic information, confirm their

eligibility, undergo screening for eating disorders, substance abuse disorders, and personality

disorders, and review the consent form (see Appendix A). Zoom was used as it is a secure

meeting app that allows for maximum security of individuals. All emails exchanged between the

researcher and participant were secure using the researcher's University email address on a

password-protected and encrypted laptop. All procedures were approved by the University of Alberta's Institutional Review Board.

Initial Interview

The initial interview guide was based on the study's research questions (see Appendix B) and allowed the researcher to determine whether participants met the study eligibility criteria. The researcher gathered basic demographic information, such as participants' age, date of birth, gender identity, amount of time spent on Instagram, whether they view Thinspiration and Fitspiration content on Instagram, and how often. Demographic information was collected to show the diversity of the sample and the particular characteristics of each participant (Braun & Clarke, 2013), not as a way of defining or explaining variables usually conducted in quantitative research.

All participants were screened for an eating disorder using the Eating Disorder Examination Questionnaire – 13 (EDE-Q-13). Only participants at moderate risk of developing an eating disorder were included in the study. Participants who were screened as having a high risk of developing an eating disorder were excluded from the study and were given a mental health resource sheet that included information on how to receive help (see Appendix C).

In addition to being screened for an eating disorder, all participants were screened for substance use disorders using the National Institute on Drug Use Quick Screener (NIDA). Individuals who scored as having a low risk of abusing drugs were included in the study. Finally, participants were screened for any severe personality disorder that could interfere with the focus group using the Standardized Assessment of Personality – Abbreviated Scale (SAPAS). Participants who obtained high scores were excluded from participating in the study.

During the initial interview, all participants were made aware of the confidentiality and anonymity during the focus group. The researcher ensured that participants knew the focus group interview would be recorded and that they could withdraw at any time. All participants were made aware that confidentiality could not be guaranteed. As such, participants were made aware that keeping conversations confidential was vital to ensure everyone felt safe and comfortable to express themselves. Participants were told to create a pseudonym for themselves and were asked to email the researcher with the pseudonym they would use to transcribe the focus group data. Participants were asked to let the researcher know their availability to attend the focus group in June or July 2022. Consent forms were emailed to all eligible participants. Additionally, participants were asked to read and sign the consent form and email it back to the primary researcher once completed. The initial interview lasted between 10 to 20 minutes.

Focus Group

The focus group interview was held in a private room at the University of Alberta. The focus group was led and guided by the primary researcher. An assistant known to the researcher took notes during the focus group but remained anonymous and silent during the interview. All participants sat around a table, and the researcher encouraged participants to talk with one another until all participants arrived at the location. To encourage a sense of belonging and foster a warm and comfortable environment among participants, the researcher asked the participants to start a conversation with the person next to them by answering a few questions about themselves, such as "What are you studying at school." While participants were getting to know one another, the researcher set up the two audio recorders at each end of the table.

Once all participants arrived, the researcher began the interview by going through group rules, which included the topic of confidentiality and anonymity. Participants were asked to keep

all conversations within the focus group confidential and to keep names and pseudonyms

anonymous outside the focus group. This ensured that all participants felt comfortable and safe

to share their experiences during the interview. Once all participants agreed to proceed, the

interview began.

In order to maintain an informal environment, conversational questions were used in the

focus group (Krueger, 1998). The researcher used semi-structured interview questions to help

guide the interview (See Appendix E). The open-ended questions allowed participants to engage

in the interview in the way they saw fit (Maxwell, 2013). By using open-ended questions, the

researcher could follow a schedule while also allowing flexibility among participants to expand

on specific topics or points made during the discussion (Glesne, 2016; Patton, 2002) or probe for

further details (Patton, 2002). Some open-ended questions included: "Think back to the first time

you discovered Thinspiration and Fitspiration content on Instagram. What was this experience

like for you? What about these pages appealed to you the most?" "What are your motivations for

engaging in Thinspiration and Fitspiration?" The focus group lasted 1 hour and 45 minutes. At

the end of the focus group, all participants were given a $25 Amazon gift card as a thank-you for

contributing their time to the research study.

Thematic Analysis

Data was analyzed using thematic analysis (TA). TA is a qualitative research method that

identifies themes and patterns in a dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2013). It aims to answer the primary

research question by identifying these themes and patterns. Since TA does not rely on a specific

epistemological position, paradigm fit, or theoretical position, it is considered a flexible research

tool that can be used within multiple theoretical frameworks (Braun & Clarke, 2006). For this

current study, the social constructionist paradigm was used.

In accordance with Willig's (2017) findings, the qualitative research question employed in a study has a significant role in dictating the approach utilized in analyzing the data. For the present study, an empathetic approach was adopted, specifically the hermeneutics of empathy. This method focuses on comprehending the intended meaning of a text by analyzing it from the bottom up, adhering to its explicit content rather than exploring concealed meanings. The empathetic interpretation aims at unraveling the meanings within the text and noticing patterns, as opposed to explaining the rationale behind them. As per Willig (2017), the empathetic approach primarily concentrates on the how of an experience rather than the why.

Conducting TA involves a six-phase process. This process includes 1) familiarizing oneself with the dataset, 2) coding, 3) generating initial themes, 4) developing and reviewing themes, 5) refining, defining, and naming themes, and finally, 6) writing up the results. Each process will be elaborated below.

Familiarization with the data involves deeply and intimately immersing yourself within the dataset. This process involves listening to the audio recording of the focus group interview and making notes about topics covered and insights within the data set. This process also involves repeatedly listening to the audio recording to ensure that everything said in the focus group interview was captured accurately.

Coding of the dataset involved looking through it, finding the more interesting and meaningful topics and ideas, and using code labels on them. During this process, I used both semantic and latent coding. Semantic coding involved capturing the "explicitly expressed meaning" of the focus group interview. This meant that the codes created stayed very close to the actual language used by the participants (Braun & Clark, 2022, p. 57). I used latent coding to capture the deeper or conceptual meaning in the dataset (Braun & Clark, 2022).

Generating themes involved identifying any "patterned meanings" (Braun & Clark, 2021, p. 35) across the dataset. Recognizing consistent meaning within my dataset required me to analyze several data items simultaneously that were consistent and significant in conveying valuable insights related to my research questions. This allowed me to identify the underlying theme at the core of my research objective (Braun & Clark, 2022). Subthemes and sub-subthemes were also developed during this process. Subthemes share some similarities with the theme they are part of (Braun & Clark, 2021). Next, I grouped codes based on similar ideas and concepts, providing a meaningful answer to the research questions.

Developing and reviewing themes involved determining whether the candidate themes fit well with the dataset. This process also ensured the themes made sense about the coded extracts and the entire dataset. This process asked: Does each theme tell a convincing and compelling story about an important pattern of shared meaning related to the dataset? and Do my themes highlight the most important patterns across the dataset about my research question? In addition to developing and reviewing themes, I refined, defined, and named themes. This process involves fine-tuning the analysis by ensuring that all themes are differentiated from the others and that each theme is concise. The final stage of thematic analysis involves weaving the data extracts and the analytic narrative into a compelling story that addresses the research questions.

Ethics

Ensuring the trustworthiness of qualitative research involves multiple strategies. For the current study, trustworthiness was carried out by using methods such as member checking, detailed descriptions, bracketing, reflective journaling, memoing, and peer review and feedback (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Gunawan, 2015; Tufford et al., 2010). Detailed

descriptions mean describing what a researcher sees, which is done "within the context of the setting of the person, pace, or event" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 189). According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), member checking is considered to be the most vital strategy for evaluating the trustworthiness of a qualitative research study. The researcher takes measures to guarantee that the outcomes accurately reflect the intended meanings of the participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Member checking involved sending all participants a completed transcript of the focus group interview and asking each participant to note whether the transcript accurately reflected their experiences and intentions. After receiving feedback from a few participants, I incorporated minor modifications to the transcribed document. The revised transcript was then sent for a final review and approval to those participants who had requested the changes.

In addition to member checking, I used bracketing to provide the most unbiased interpretation of the research data from the participants. Bracketing entails the suspension of personal beliefs and preconceptions so as to present the most impartial and objective outcomes based on the participants' responses (Tufford et al., 2010). I used two strategies of bracketing: reflexive journaling and memoing. Before the onset of the study, I wrote down the reasons for the study and why I was interested in conducting this study. I engaged in reflective journaling throughout the research process, allowing me to maintain a reflective stance (Tufford et al., 2010). I also took notes (memos) before, during, and after the focus group interview. This allowed me to record my thoughts, reflections, and any bias I encountered (Tufford et al., 2010). Finally, I engaged in a peer review process with my master's thesis supervisor, asking for his guidance and feedback in defining and summarizing my themes.

Positionality

I am primarily interested in this topic due to personal struggles I had when I was younger concerning body image issues. I recall my first encounter with Thinspiration when I was around 16 years old. The imagery and experience were so vivid that I even recall how I felt during the experience. I remember being astonished by how slim these women looked and wondering what I would have to do to look like that, how long it would take me to look that way, and most importantly, how amazing I would feel if I ended up looking that way. I most likely did not know it back when I was 16 years old, but as I grew older, I began to realize how detrimental this content was to my overall well-being. These websites slowly crept their way into my psyche, where I began to not only hate my own body but also engage in more harmful ways of changing my body. I started restricting the amount and types of foods I would eat, thinking I would feel that feeling that was so often emphasized on Thinspiration. At times, I did feel fantastic - in a sense, almost inspired and empowered by my ability to have such self-control. Despite what others believe, pain is pain and cannot be dismissed or compared. I understand firsthand the pursuit of a particular feeling or high that ultimately leads to disappointment or illness. The societal glorification of attaining a specific body type is worrying as it presents an unattainable goal for the average individual. I am profoundly troubled by the aftermath of such expectations, which lead to adverse effects such as strained relationships, inadequate work performance, poor self-esteem, and increased stress levels. My personal experiences have motivated me to research this topic, and I have intentionally put my own experiences aside to appreciate the experiences of other young women. I aim to understand the subjectivity of the issue and validate the different stories that individuals may have.

Chapter Four: Findings

The women in the study reported experiencing a sense of mixed messages and uncertainty about Thinspiration and Fitspiration on Instagram. The women wanted to seek out and view Thinspiration and Fitspiration, but they also felt a strong sense of self-criticism and insecurity about viewing it. The women felt that there was a clear distinction between Thinspiration and Fitspiration content. Thinspiration promoted a distinctive look and lifestyle that revolved around being thin and controlling one's body. In contrast, Fitspiration promoted health, fitness, and overall well-being. Further, almost all women believed that Fitspiration was healthier compared to Thinspiration.

The young women believed Thinspiration promoted eating disorders among its viewers, and Fitspiration encouraged adopting a healthy lifestyle. However, the women were also aware that Fitspiration disguised itself as healthy and motivational when, in reality, it too was another form of dieting and engagement in disordered eating and body shaming. Interestingly, when asked what they would tell a friend or family member about Thinspiration and Fitspiration, almost all the women agreed that they would encourage their loved ones to seek content on Fitspiration rather than Thinspiration. This further emphasized the women's uncertainty and contradiction about viewing Thinspiration and Fitspiration.

In addition, the women felt a sense of connection and belonging to others who engaged in the content. They continued to seek it out despite its adverse impacts on their self-esteem, body image, and relationships with family and friends. They knew how to engage with the content critically and decipher between *fake* and *real* content, but still felt unable to control their engagement in this content and the resulting negative feelings that arose. This was a vicious cycle for most of the women. As such, working towards a particular physique, whether thin and

frail, often promoted on Thinspiration accounts, or a toned and muscular physique seen on

Fitspiration, often resulted in failed attempts and negative emotions.

All women in the study were between 18 and 28 years old (see Table 1). Further, all

women scored in the low range for possible substance use and personality disorder. Additionally,

all women scored in the moderate range of screening for a possible eating disorder. Most women

spend on average 1-2 hours on Instagram daily; however, one participant stated that they spend

an average of 5 to 6 hours on Instagram daily (see Figure. 1). Almost all the women stated that

they view both Thinspiration and Fitspiration content on Instagram, while a smaller percentage

of the women reported that they view either Thinspiration or Fitspiration only (see Figure 2).

Table 1

Superordinate Themes and Subthemes

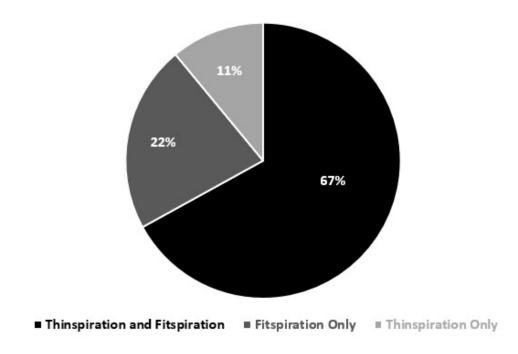| Theme	Subtheme
Profound ambivalence	• Relatable vs. unrelatable
Pervasive and addictive use	• First experience
Negative effects on self and relationships	• Feeling guilty about body • Distinctive look • Healthy vs. unhealthy

Critical engagement	• Untrustworthy content and false advertisements
	• Vulnerability and protective factors
	    ○ Age
	    ○ Mood

Figure 1

Time Spent on Instagram Daily

Note. Hours spent on Instagram daily.

Figure 2

Participant Engagement on Instagram

■ **Thinspiration and Fitspiration** ■ **Fitspiration Only** ■ Thinspiration Only

Note. Percentage of women who viewed Thinspiration only, Fitspiration only, or both.

Themes

The following four superordinate themes emerged from the study: (1) profound ambivalence; (2) pervasive and addicting; (3) negative effects on self and relationships; and (4) critical engagement. Some themes may be related to each other, but each theme signifies a unique aspect of the participants' experiences. Table 1 presents these superordinate themes, subthemes, and sub-subthemes. All participant names were replaced with pseudonyms chosen by the participants themselves prior to the study. Pseudonyms and age have been indicated alongside quotations (e.g., pseudonym, 21). All participants in the current study were women. Lastly, each theme begins with a brief description and is followed by direct quotes, written into a narrative account, to support the theme description.

Profound Ambivalence

This theme underscores the contradictory feelings that the women harbored while interacting with Thinspiration and Fitspiration. It brings to light the emotional tug of war they experienced with the thin-and-fit-ideal content, characterized by a love-hate relationship. Although they were aware of the detrimental effects, they continued to consume it, occasionally deriving satisfaction from it, but also damaging their self-confidence, body image, and social relationships. Interestingly, virtually all the women were cognizant that the ideal of being slim and physically fit was unrealistic because of genetics or anatomy and that influencers were promoting a false narrative simply to market their lifestyle or merchandise. Further, all the women also stated that they were well aware of how to critically engage in such content and not fall prey to the underlying messages sent by Thinspiration and Fitspiration. For example, Claire, 25, Anna, 26, and Amy, 28 expressed how viewing this content made them feel "bad" about

themselves, yet they would still seek out this content either to "gain motivation," or strive to look

a certain way. As Anna, 26, stated, in describing the impact of viewing this content,

> […] Same with the For You page, if it's like always on there, you're always thinking,
> you're like I wanna look like that, like comparing yourself. If it's like too much of it, then
> it's like […..] almost harmful I think. A little bit, when it's too much "Is there something
> wrong with me, or, like them?"

In addition, Claire, 25, stated that the primary reason why she kept following

Thinspiration and Fitspiration accounts on Instagram was to "have something to talk about with

her friends" and to "scrutinize." This scrutiny existed because she and her friends knew that

these accounts were inherently "fake" and impossible to achieve. Although Claire made this

remark she also later went on to explain how not achieving the certain fit ideal she wanted made

her feel "frustrated."

Ophelia, 19, was also aware that she could never look like the images seen on

Thinspiration and Fitspiration; however, this didn't stop her from ruminating about the possibility

of being able to look a certain way and therefore feeling happier as a result:

> [...] If I'm like scrolling and I see like Bella Hadid, even though I know I can't be Bella
> Hadid, it just makes me feel, like so bad about myself. Yeah, cause I'm like "Oh like [..]
> had I not let myself *go* [..] maybe that could have been something I could have achieved."

Stacey, 26, also displayed a contradictory attitude towards Thinspiration and Fitspiration.

First, she reported that she started running at a younger age to "achieve that look" and found that

running benefited her in ways such as her mental health. However, later during the interview, she

mentioned how she would feel "ashamed" and "guilty" for not attaining the physique found in the

30-day abs workout videos. She was also aware that these 30-day ab workouts were "incredibly hard on your body." Furthermore, she also reported that she would feel negative when she saw Thinspiration and Fitspiration on her For You page when it was closer to summer because she didn't look like "that" and she wanted to wear "shorts" and "go to the lake." Experiencing negative feelings after viewing this content led her to seek emotional support from her mother and discuss her emotions related to these feelings. Finally, Stacey also mentioned how she would feel bad for not looking like the images on Thinspiration and Fitspiration and believed that if she did look like those images then others would "like" her.

Relative vs. Unrelatable.

Most participants felt more drawn to following Fitspiration as it was "more attainable" compared to the thin and frail physique often portrayed on Thinspiration. For example, Anna, 26, Amy, 28, and Celia, 23, all stated how they knew that "genetically" they would "never" look like the women on Thinspiration. Anna also mentioned that:

> I think for me the fit structure just because it's more *attainable* for me genetically like at this point in my life I know that now as a kid I didn't which is why like Tumblr when you're younger I guess [..] so I think I'm not as drawn to the thinspo as I am to fitspo because it is more [..] attainable maybe not to that extent but to some extent I feel the opposite I think just like knowing the way that like fat is distributed on my body the way my bone structure is and thinspo is like not attainable so I like want it more so [laughs] so I know like pictures of like Bela Hadid or like tall, beautiful models and like [..] and very thin wispy bodies *I* want to look like that because I know that if I like workout again just like the way muscle like distributes on my body I'll be like very boxy and I'm like that's

not [.....] I like want that like *thin wispy like fairy* and I know it's just like not gonna ever happen so I feel like I interact more with that.

However, Anna was also well aware that the images and videos she saw on Fitspiration were also unattainable. For instance, she stated that the videos she would see on Fitspiration "were oftentimes […] bodybuilders, or like people who do it professionally, like model, and Fitspiration models who like get paid to workout and make content." She was also well aware that she would never "get abs in 8 days" which was promoted by an influencer named Chloe Ting. However, this still did not prevent her from following Thinspiration and Fitspiration accounts to keep her "motivated" such as by following "healthy recipes" or "going to the gym" since it would make her feel "better."

Ophelia, 19, made an interesting point and stated that it was "harder" to compare herself to her friends who had "lost weight" since she knew that they were real people compared to individuals who were "perfect," "athletes on steroids," or "models" on Thinspiration and Fitspiration pages. As a result, comparing herself to her friends who had lost weight made her feel "bad" because she was aware that their weight loss was realistic and attainable.

Celia, 23, further stated that she prefers following Fitspiration since it allows her to eat what she wants "without having to worry that 'oh am I gonna start looking a bit too fat'" or having to "monitor all those sorts of things." Celia also emphasized that changing trends in society and society's view of what is considered beautiful consistently change and this impacts people's preferences for physical appearance. For instance, she stated,

> At first, it was like "Oh you wanna be stick thin" now you want a big butt [...] I prefer Fitspiration just because I think that [..] for me it is like more attainable and also cause I don't think I have like that like stick thin body type anyway [..].

Although Amy, 28, agreed with most participants that Fitspiration was more attainable compared

to Thinspiration due to her genetics, she still enjoyed viewing Thinspiration:

> It's just something like aspirational [....] but like aside from that I think the reason why I
>
> *keep* following them is like [..] because it's like [..] it's kinda nice to *look* at sometimes [..]
>
> I think nothings like inherently wrong with that.

Pervasive and Addicting

A majority of the women in the study expressed that Thinspiration and Fitspiration had a

pervasive and addictive presence in their lives. They described it as being inescapable, with the

content enveloping them. For instance, Amy, 28, stated "You just get fed so much of it." Amy

also stated, that:

> So like even if I try to stay from it, my For You page, it like shoves it down my throat …
>
> Uhm I stopped like actively seeking it out because it makes me feel bad, but it kind of
>
> always finds its way *back to me somehow*, so it's kind of like, pervasive in that sense.

On a similar note, Clarie, 27, also experienced this content being forcefully imposed on her and

felt "trapped" and frustrated because Thinspiration and Fitspiration content would "always"

appear on her Instagram page. However, she reported feeling "better" after viewing her

husband's Instagram account since his Instagram did not display such harmful content:

> Well, no I just wanted to say that sometimes [..] you feel trapped like why is this just
>
> popping all this stuff I know [...] I don't want to follow them but just keep scrolling like
>
> we all said […] some days I just start looking at my husband like Instagram and I see
>
> how different it is and I feel much better like scrolling and seeing his Instagram than my
>
> Instagram.

Contrary to most participants' opinions, Victoria, 29, mentioned how Instagram was her first "source to gather information" on "dance conditioning, dance exercises, fitness, and diet." As such, Victoria did not seem to view the pervasiveness of Thinspiration and Fitspiration in a negative light, rather, she saw this as an opportunity to achieve her fitness-related goals.

It is noteworthy that the theme of pervasive and addicting also delves into the way the women participated in Thinspiration and Fitspiration. For instance, the women would actively search for Thinspiration and/or Fitspiration, then they would strive to achieve the perfect body they saw on these platforms. Most of the time the women would fall short of reaching their goals and experience negative emotions due to this failure. This failure inevitably resulted in negative emotions and would force the women to try to achieve the body they wanted initially and this vicious cycle would repeat itself. For instance, Ophelia, 19, stated:

> [...] I remember [...] comparing myself to [...] Bethany Mota and [...] Ariana Grande [...] like she lost the weight and she was also like posting a lot of outfit pics at the time which like [..] also influenced me so I remember just like [...] seeing the pics of Ariana Grande on Instagram and like going to the mirror and trying to like pop out my collarbones [.....] then I would just like start stalking these girls and seeking like "oh did they really lose weight" like "how much weight did they lose" and stuff like that like it wasn't intentional [..] but like [...] I found it to be like entertaining but then eventually it does get to a point where like [..] it's addiction but not of seeing their bodies more so of like trying to be like that yourself.
>
> Similarly, Phoebe, 23, felt the same way as Ophelia, 19, and recalled being "mesmerized"

that a woman on Thinspiration could have the "same size" of "calves and thighs."

Other participants such as Anna, 26, found "scrolling" on Thinspiration and Fitspiration "addictive." She noted that if "daily routines" posted on Instagram were "unattainable" she would keep scrolling until she found a daily routine that was attainable which would result in her feeling more "positive" towards the routine. She would be able to fulfill the goals provided by these daily routines.

First Experience.

The majority of women in the study first came across Thinspiration and Fitspiration around 2013-2015, during their adolescent years, primarily through the social media platform Tumblr. A significant aspect of their initial exposure was the concept of the "thigh gap," which many women remembered distinctively. As they recounted their first encounters with Thinspiration and Fitspiration on platforms such as Tumblr and later on Instagram, it became evident that they shared a sense of connection. They could vividly recall the appearance and content of these constructs and the emotions they evoked. Participants reported feeling astounded and curious of the thin images they saw. Initially, most participants experienced positive feelings or a sense of general curiosity towards such content. The notion of the "thigh gap" was prevalent in their early exposure, regardless of the platform. However, younger participants were sometimes unaware of older platforms like Nexopia or Ask FM, implying that this type of content existed long before Instagram gained its popularity.

Negative Effects on Self and Relationships

The general consensus among the women was that viewing and engaging with Thinspiration and Fitspiration had more negative effects than positive ones. The negative impact was evident on their self-esteem, overall well-being, confidence, feelings of worthiness, and even their social relationships with family and friends. For instance, Amy, 28, reported that she would

compare herself to her friends. When she compared herself to her friends who were having a good time such as being on "vacation" she was "happy for them," but feelings of "shame" and "guilt" would surface if her friend "looked good." On a similar note, although Cassia, 18, was aware that comparing herself to her sister was "bad," this didn't stop her from feeling "guilty" and "jealous" that she didn't look like her despite being "100% the same" and "from the same parents." Similarly, Ophelia, 19, also expressed the same concern as Cassia – she was able to experience relief knowing that one of her siblings was "really skinny" while the other sibling shared similar physical attributes to her. This realization reassured her that despite "having the same genetics, food, and everything else," we all possess distinct physical features.

Feeling Guilty About Body.

Nearly half of the participants admitted "feeling guilty" about their bodies or not working "hard enough" to attain a slim or fit figure. For instance, Claire, 25, stated:

[…] When you're connecting to Fitspiration and those pages you feel more like bad to yourself because you're not doing enough things, you're not doing whatever, so it's more like a punishment what I'm doing like this when I'm following those pages […] yeah like you're not enough like uhm I'm sitting here and I haven't do exercises *today* and I haven't even [..] like I had a chocolate today and those people haven't had chocolate yeah it's just like you feel bad [...].

Claire, 25, also mentioned feeling "frustrated" after seeing a Fitspiration page of "muscular" women with a "big butt." Claire admitted that this was frustrating since she "always had trouble with that" despite "going to the gym and doing escalators and lots of weights" for "months." She felt deceived that fitness influencers reported that she would have a "big butt in 10 days." On the other hand, Cassia, 18, recalled going to an international school when she was

in elementary and middle school and being exposed to the thigh gap. Although she knew she would never "look like that," it still created a negative experience for her at such a young age.

Most participants agreed that speaking to family and friends after viewing Thinspiration or Fitspiration led them to become "distracted" during conversations. Participants mentioned feeling "disconnected," "isolated" and "not being able to be in the present moment," and "always having something in the back of their mind." However, although Phoebe, 23, agreed with most participants that she felt distracted during conversations with her family after viewing Thinspiration and Fitspiration, she also mentioned that she felt as though her friends understood her more so than her family:

> [...] Sometimes if I look at a lot of Thinspiration uhm I feel kind of like maybe distracted, but overall uhm kind of like an overall negative vibe [..] I'm giving off maybe and I feel like the conversations aren't as great [..] yeah uhm [....] my friends understand and they probably they also look at like Thinspiration and stuff but uhm [..] with my family I feel like the ugh [..] like the conversations there's more to talk about I feel like I'm more present also with them [...].

Contrary to what Phoebe expressed about her friends being more understanding about her distracted state after viewing Thinspiration or Fitspiration, Amy, 28, felt a sense of insecurity in her friendships when discussing topics related to Thinspiration or Fitspiration. For instance, she stated that although she found talking about her body insecurities with her friends after viewing such content helpful, she also felt uneasy about their perceptions of others on these topics, which made her question their sincerity towards her:

> [.....] I hear the way that like some of my friends or like the ones that at least engage in
>
> that stuff talk about women [..] and then I think it also sets me on a spiral of like do they

see me that *way* […] so like even though it's like really great to connect and like talk

about it and talk through it and all of that I think there also that part of me that's like [..]

okay well [..] I *look way worse* than that person you're making fun of [..] "Do you see *me*

that way too, because I don't see *you* that way, and I'd like to think that we're friends and

we love each other," [..] you want that, but you can never be sure, and that also makes me

feel bad more so than the actual Thinspiration Fitspiration stuff does […].

Furthermore, Amy also expressed her frustration with friends who always talked about

influencers on Instagram. She reported that she wanted to have meaningful conversations with

her friends instead of always talking about Fitspiration. She also felt frustrated when her friends

talked about Fitspiration when she was actively trying not to engage in that content. Similarly,

Celia, 23, made an interesting point and stated that constantly talking about Thinspiration and

Fitspiration with her sister felt exhausting. She stated that she didn't want her life to "revolve

around how good other people look" or what she wanted to look like. Instead, she stated that she

was "interested in a lot more stuff than how she looks." Although Celia states that being

"confident in how you look" is important, she also believes that constantly viewing Thinspiration

and Fitspiration can lead one to become "a bit too self-absorbed" such as "always looking in the

mirror."

Distinctive Look.

The overwhelming consensus among the women was that the "fit" and "healthy" figure,

prevalent in Fitspiration content, was more appealing than the "slim" and "skinny" physique

often portrayed within Thinspiration accounts. The crux of this theme was that the women

viewed Fitspiration as being more "realistic" and "achievable" compared to Thinspiration. This

perception emanated from the shared belief that the desired "look" in Thinspiration and

Fitspiration was impossible to attain, given the participants' "ethnicity" and "anatomy." The typical portrayal of women on Fitspiration accounts was that of a toned, muscular physique, while that in Thinspiration accounts was that of extreme emaciation and "looking thin". In addition, Amy, 28, reported that when she thought of Thinspiration and Fitspiration, she thought of "models," "willow-thin bodies," "popularity," "white-passing women," and "influencers." As noted by Victoria, 29, Thinspiration was a source of fashion inspiration for her, but she also knew that these outfits look "great" on the models since these models did not have "boobs" or "hips" therefore having a distinctive "body type" mentioned by Celia, 23. Finally, most women opined that a "fit" and "toned" body type was more alluring than the frail and emaciated look peddled on Thinspiration accounts.

A few participants spoke about the actions involved in attaining the distinctive look. For example, Phoebe, 23, reported that this distinctive body type found in Thinspiration is achieved through "calorie restriction." Contrary to what Phoebe stated, Ophelia, 19, believed that it wasn't about restriction per se but rather about "control." For instance, Ophelia believes that Thinspiration is achieved through "self-control" such as in controlling what one eats. Lastly, Phoebe noted that "top influencers all have similar body types." This is consistent with the women's account that the distinctive look is oftentimes due to genetics or one's anatomy.

Healthy vs. Unhealthy.

All participants noted a striking difference between the Thinspiration and Fitspiration accounts. For instance, almost all women noted that Thinspiration was inherently more unhealthy than Fitspiration. As such, Thinspiration focused on being "thin," "counting calories," "BMI," and "losing weight." Celia, 23, stated that Thinspiration included a "specific" body type that "not everyone can achieve and is not always healthy." However, the women noted that Fitspiration

included images of women who were more healthy, "toned and muscular," and it provided a

source of "motivation" to "eat healthy" and to "exercise." However, it is worth noting that

despite the women believing that Fitspiration was more "healthy" compared to Thinspiration,

some participants also felt that both types of content were inherently unhealthy. For instance,

Amy, 28, stated:

> [...] I feel like with Thinspiration it's very much like you're all kind of like aiming for this
>
> goal which is like as thin as possible, lowest BMI [.....] like there are good Fitspiration
>
> accounts and there's really bad ones you cannot look me in the eye and say that one guy
>
> whose super fit and eats chicken and rice every day and yells at like his followers for
>
> being like unmotivated and like cowards for not eating chicken and rice every day is any
>
> different than a Fitspiration page like that has an eating disorder anyway they calorie
>
> count, they obsess about how much they workout, and they'll post you know "this is how
>
> much I ran, I ran a marathon today you don't, you're a lazy POS."

Some participants such as Amy felt that Thinspiration was extremely unhealthy to her, especially

at a younger age when she learned to engage in "calorie restriction, eating whole foods, eating

healthy, and doing abs before going to bed." Although she stated that none of this led her to

develop an eating disorder, she still felt that this information was "detrimental" to her.

Critical Engagement

The last theme discusses the women's capacity to analyze and assess Thinspiration and

Fitspiration content critically. The majority of participants concurred that Thinspiration and

Fitspiration consisted of deceitful and unreliable material that was inherently misleading. They

displayed the ability to critically differentiate when such content was an endorsement of a

product like "protein powders," "clothing," or "workout equipment." Participants such as Anna,

26, were also well aware that most of the influencers seen on Fitspiration accounts were "professionals" or "bodybuilders" whose main purpose is to "get paid to workout." Furthermore, the majority of women were also able to recognize that achieving the "look" of individuals portrayed on Thinspiration and Fitspiration was unattainable for them due to their "anatomy" or "ethnicity." For instance, Anna, 26, stated that "just knowing how fat is distributed on my body, the way my bone structure is, thinspo is not attainable." Amy, 28, also felt the same way as Anna and stated that:

> [...] You're just like selling this lifestyle to people and saying "*Anyone* can do it you just need to follow my workout" when like there's so much more that goes into it and you brought up like anatomically some people will just *never* look like you, you can be the *healthiest* people [...].

The participants also expressed their disapproval towards content that masqueraded as Fitspiration but turned out to be Thinspiration upon closer examination. For instance, Stacey, 26, reported that since individuals have become "critical of Thinspiration" this community is "trying to disguise themselves as Fitspiration." For instance, Stacey reported that topics around "being bloated," "how to get a healthy gut" or "foods you need to eat to not be bloated" were not about bloating per se but about "losing weight." On a similar note, Ophelia, 19, also acknowledged the concept of Thinspiration being a disguise as some other content. She stated that she was initially deceived thinking that the word "cocket" was about "girly things" but she later found out that this word was "code for thinspo."

Finally, the ability to discern between a candid or fake photo was another factor that aided participants in thoughtfully evaluating the content they viewed. For instance, Anna, 26, shared that she "felt better" when she would see influencers post "candid photos" and "real

candid photos" of themselves. She also stated that the influencers were similar to her but appeared different because of "filters" and "different lighting." Similarly, Victoria, 29, also noted that videos could be photo shopped to make the individuals look smaller.

Vulnerability and Protective Factors.

The women's ability to critically engage in Thinspiration and Fitspiration did not develop instantly, rather it developed as they aged. The women also revealed that certain factors, such as their mood, acted as a shield against the potential negative impact of Thinspiration and Fitspiration.

Age.

A significant point to note is that the majority of women acknowledged that they were more susceptible to the influence of Thinspiration and Fitspiration during their younger years. As they matured, they felt that they gained valuable insights that enabled them to differentiate between authentic and spurious content. Specifically, they recognized that the notions of fast results for weight loss or muscle strength preached by Thinspiration and Fitspiration were impractical and fruitless. Moreover, they observed that they no longer compared themselves to these beliefs nor subjected themselves to calorie restrictions as they got older. Instead, they adapted parts of this content to their individual preferences and requirements: For instance, Amy, 28, stated:

> [..] There's a girl I went to high school with who was like always very thin and beautiful [...] she like started a Fitspiration account and she has like over like 600,00 followers [.....] I feel like the illusion was kind of shattered for me when I saw that because I'm like [..] "No one is getting your body by doing your workouts. You genetically are very gifted. You've always been thin. You've always been athletic and now you're basically like [..]

monetizing and profiting off of basically telling other women that they're not enough and

telling them if you do my workout, it'll be *great,* and you will look just like me." when

like, that's just not gonna be possible and I think that's like the negative side for me cause

its great and you can like find so many people that have like [..] easy to do workouts twenty-

minute videos and all of that but I think there is [..] something [....] almost like malicious

underneath.

In addition, Claire, 25, also stated:

[…] When I was uhm [..] more like younger [...] I used to think about more like calorie

restriction like more like [..] if everyone was following I should be following and should

be [..] doing the same thing as they are doing [..] but now you just take a good part of it

for like yourself and then just apply to your lifestyle or whatever but I think right now it's

for me *positive* but when I was younger was kind of more negative thing [...].

Mood.

Some of the women were also aware that their mood influenced how they reacted or

experienced Thinspiration and Fitspiration. For instance, Anna, 26, reported that if she was

"having a bad day" and if she was exposed to a "thin" woman on Thinspiration or Fitspiration who

"wakes up at 5 am to drink her coffee" with her "toned tummy," then she would feel "horrible"

and have "an even worse day." However, Anna also stated that if she was "feeling motivated" or

"getting ready to go to the gym" she would feel "inspired" to work out.

Chapter Five: Discussion

Study Characteristics

Given the proposed negative implications of Thinspiration and Fitspiration from previous research (Perloff, 2014; Fardouly et al., 2015), the current study aimed to explore young women's experience of viewing and engaging in thin-and-fit-beauty-ideals (Thinspiration and Fitspiration) on Instagram and how this content influenced their social connectedness with their family and friends. Nine women between the ages of 18 and 29 years old were interviewed. The data was analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2013). My interpretation of participants' experiences yielded four main themes: 1) profound ambivalence, 2) pervasive and addictive use, 3) adverse effects on self and relationships, and 4) critical engagement. Overall, the results revealed that most women viewed both Thinspiration and Fitspiration.

Most women preferred the physical bodies portrayed in Fitspiration as they were seen as more attainable than the often extremely thin bodies portrayed in Thinspiration. However, there was one participant who viewed only Thinspiration content on Instagram.

Most participants expressed contradictory feelings regarding the usefulness and effects of viewing and engaging with Thinspiration and Fitspiration. More specifically, participants spoke about the implications this content had on their body image, relationships with others such as family and friends, and overall well-being. For instance, a few participants reported that Thinspiration promoted eating disorders among its users, while Fitspiration was seen as a disguise for Thinspiration. Despite being conscious of the harmful effects of this content on their body image, connectedness to others, and well-being, the participants were caught up in a continuous cycle of being aware of the harmful nature of the content while simultaneously feeling compelled to view or engage with it.

The following sections will delve into all four study themes, analyzing their association with prior research. I will emphasize any similarities or contrasts between the present study and prior research. Given that this study is pioneering in the field, I will underscore the novel discoveries I found. Additionally, I will assess the impact of these findings and their significance for counselling in body image, social media use, and social connectedness. Lastly, I will detail the current study's limitations and suggest potential avenues for future research.

Theme 1: Profound Ambivalence

Bill Edgley, a sociologist and author, argues that the pressure to conform to unrealistic beauty standards has led people to become preoccupied with their bodies and willing to go to extreme measures to achieve the ideal physique. His work also recognizes the role of social media in perpetuating these unrealistic standards and the harmful effects of constantly being bombarded with images of perfect bodies. Edgley (1990) calls for a more balanced approach to health and wellness that prioritizes overall well-being instead of striving for a specific body type. His observations remain relevant today as the pressure to achieve the perfect body continues to be a pervasive social issue.

The current study's findings align with Edgley's (1990) observation that people strive for an unattainable "perfect" body since it is believed that such a body would bring benefits such as "biological superiority, better relationships, work achievement, and improved self-image" (p. 261). Social media further perpetuates this belief, making the "perfect" body seem attainable and desirable. When individuals fail to achieve this beauty ideal or "perfect" body, it can lead to negative feelings and a sense of defeat. Social media enables people to engage in social comparison with anyone across the globe and allows users to seek the approval of others.

The constant social comparison and approval seeking that social media users engage in may contribute to short-lived positive affect and feelings of worthiness. However, these feelings may come at a cost (Crocker, 2002). Although science and medicine have never found the "perfect" body, it has not stopped women from trying to achieve it. The women in the current study serve as an example of how this cyclical relationship plays out. They attempted to reach their "ideal" body concept through exercise and diet. When most women fail at achieving this ideal, they would feel negative about themselves as people, their mood would become more negative, or they felt pessimistic about their bodies. To combat the negative feelings they experienced, the women would engage in exercise or diet changes, and this cycle would repeat itself.

Interestingly, the women in the study sensibly knew that their bodies could never be "perfect" due to their anatomy or ethnicity, as understood in Canadian society in our time. Despite their awareness of the impracticality of such a body, they continued to seek out content that portrayed this ideal while simultaneously trying to achieve it. It was evident from the women's verbal accounts that this became a repetitive, addictive, and vicious cycle as the young women navigated their addiction of trying to reach an unattainable ideal in hopes of feeling positive about themselves in terms of their body image or sense of self or receiving the approval from others.

Seeking the approval and reassurance of others may be a contributing factor in understanding why women generally strive for the perfect body. The women in the current study might believe that they will be worthy if they meet a certain standard of physical attractiveness. This sense of worthiness leads to positive affect and feeling "safe, secure, and superior." However, as mentioned by Crocker (2002), seeking the approval of others is usually short-lived

and comes with its costs. As discussed in the following sections, even if the women did experience pleasurable feelings from viewing Thinspiration or Fitspiration or meeting their workout goals, this feeling or achievement was either monetary or not sustainable for a more extended period for most women.

Several participants mentioned that they were more interested in Fitspiration than Thinspiration and thus did not make social comparisons based on Thinspiration but did so with Fitspiration. This supports the Social Comparison Theory introduced by Leon Festinger in 1954, suggesting that people can avoid social comparisons by not accepting certain body ideals propagated by the media. Consequently, these women pursued the physical attributes endorsed by Fitspiration, as they did not favor the Thinspiration body type but favored those depicted in Fitspiration. Furthermore, the participants observed that those they followed within these ideologies had similar body shapes, with slight variations. They understood that they could not achieve such a physique due to their ethnicity or anatomy. Morrison and colleagues (2004) noted that people tend to compare themselves to others they feel are similar. Though the study did not explicitly measure body satisfaction, it would be interesting to investigate whether these women were negatively affected, such as the others in the study. Additionally, Botta (2000) found that African-American media images influence African-American women regarding their perception and satisfaction with their bodies, as their ideal body shape standards are distinct from what the media portrays.

The theme of profound ambivalence was similar to the results of a study conducted by Hogue et al. (2023). The researchers interviewed 12 young women about their thoughts and emotions in response to viewing Thinspiration and Fitspiration content on social media. Participants were asked to pay attention to their thoughts and feelings while examining profiles

of Thinspiration and Fitspiration. The main objective of their study was to discern the psychological reactions experienced by these young women in response to viewing Thinspiration and Fitspiration. This study relates to the objectification theory since it highlights how exposure to Thinspiration and Fitspiration can lead to negative emotions and internalization of societal body ideals. The objectification theory posits that the constant objectification of the body in media and culture could lead to the internalization of societal body ideals and eventually contribute to negative emotions, body dissatisfaction, and other problems. The study shows that the women experienced negative emotions such as despondency, repulsion, sadness, powerlessness, irritation and loathing when viewing Thinspiration and Fitspiration, indicating that exposure to such content could have detrimental effects on their well-being and body image. Additionally, the authors note that the women expressed mixed feelings about both types of content, suggesting that they may have been torn between the societal ideals perpetuated by such content and their desires and beliefs concerning body image, health, and well-being.

In addition, Hogue et al.'s (2020) study further showed that despite recognizing the unrealistic nature of the standards presented on Thinspiration and Fitspiration content, the participants still believed that modifying these visual representations according to their tastes was possible, thereby contradicting themselves. For example, some participants believed that having the bodies of social media influencers was impossible for them due to their metabolism. However, they later reported that they could attain the same look with consistent effort. This is also in line with the current study's participants' verbal accounts, in which a few participants stated that with effort, motivation, and discipline, they, too, could achieve the look presented on these sites.

Another familiar ambivalent feeling that participants in Hogue et al. (2023) had was feeling both happy for and jealous of influencers' appearances. A comment by a participant in Hogue et al.'s (2023) study expressed both contentment and a desire to alter her body when viewing Thinspiration or Fitspiration content. The participant conveyed that she was happy with herself but wanted to change her body when she saw discrepancies between her appearance and those depicted within Thinspiration and Fitspiration content. Nonetheless, she recognized that social comparison is widespread and that women should embrace their bodies. As Hogue et al. (2023) noted, the sociocultural model suggests that social comparison with social media content can make young women feel dissatisfied with their bodies and compelled to reshape themselves. Still, women may also emphasize the importance of self-acceptance. This is similar to the experiences reported by some of the participants in the current study, who verbalized wanting to look like the individuals depicted within Thinspiration and Fitspiration content while also feeling the desire to support the body positivity movement and accepting their bodies.

Theme 2: Pervasive and Addictive Use

Undoubtedly, Thinspiration and Fitspiration are ubiquitous. In March 2015, a search for the hashtag #Fitspiration on Instagram resulted in the availability of more than 5.2 million images (Holland & Tiggemann, 2017). 2018, millions of Thinspiration images were online, and thousands were posted to social media daily (Harris et al., 2018). Since Instagram is a photo-based platform, posts that depict images or videos related to Thinspiration and Fitspiration can be transmitted rapidly. This allows individuals to compare themselves to virtually anyone socially. Consistent with what Fardouly and colleagues (2015) found about how comparing ourselves to family and friends is perceived to be realistic and tangible and therefore leads to more body dissatisfaction, participants in the current study are in line with this statement as they

noted that it was "easier" to compare themselves to friends, family, or individuals they knew because they knew that if that individual had lost weight, then they should be able to do the same since they are virtually similar. As such, participants were aware that their friends and family had lost weight or looked a certain way through "hard work" or "effort" and did not rely on cosmetic procedures to alter their bodies, often seen by influencers and celebrities.

In addition to comparing the self to family or friends, researchers have found that comparing ourselves to strangers such as celebrities or influencers is considered more competitive and less realistic and thus does not lead to the same body dissatisfaction as comparing ourselves to family and friends (Fardouly et al., 2015). The participants in the current study knew that they could never look like the influencers or celebrities found on Thinspiration or Fitspiration pages, making their social comparisons less likely to occur. However, this did not mean that the participants did not socially compare themselves to these individuals or feel dissatisfied with their bodies after being exposed to images or videos of Thinspiration or Fitspiration models, influencers, or celebrities. Instead, the women's verbal accounts point to them feeling more prone to socially comparing themselves to people they already know while still being impacted negatively by individuals they do not know personally. This is consistent with previous research showing that women and girls who try to look like models on television or in magazines (through social comparison) are likely to feel dissatisfied with their bodies (Anderson et al., 2001).

Interestingly, a few participants mentioned that it was harder to accept when their friend "looked good" or had "lost weight." This may be because friendships are vital to our identity formation and concept of self, compared to family, as younger adults. Research has found that comparing ourselves to friends with the thin ideal significantly increases body dissatisfaction

(Krones et al., 2005). Again, in line with what was found in the current study, feelings of jealousy among friends or having conversations resolved around body image among friend groups led participants to feel frustrated and less connected within their friend group. Similarly, when the participants viewed their friends as "having fun" or going on vacations, they were seemingly "happy" for them and did not experience such negative mood or body dissatisfaction. This is in line with Lew et al.'s (2007) study, where they found that when participants compared themselves downwardly to fashion models on non-appearance measures such as intelligence, they showed significant increases in body and weight satisfaction and a substantial decrease in anxiety about their appearance and a desire to lose weight compared to a control group. In addition, socially comparing oneself either upwardly or downwardly to others online can increase one's subjective well-being or decrease one's subjective well-being (Festinger, 1954; Groesz et al., 2002). Although subjective well-being was not directly measured within the current study, it was evident that when participants compared themselves to individuals they believed to be "prettier, sexier, or more fit" than themselves, this led them to feel defeated, out of control in other aspects of their lives, or experience negative mood.

Although body dissatisfaction and mood were not directly measured within the current study, it is interesting to note how participants' engagement with Thinspiration and Fitspiration determined their satisfaction with their bodies and mood. For instance, some participants recounted that if they viewed Fitspiration solely for workout videos or solely for nutritious meals, they were less likely to be negatively affected by the content. In contrast, participants who spent more time viewing or engaging with the content felt worse about themselves and those around them. This is consistent with previous findings that found that the amount of body

dissatisfaction and negative mood reported among participants was contingent on the amount of social comparison the participants invested in.

Despite Instagram's efforts to remove harmful content related to eating disorders and self-harm, the hashtag #Thinspiration remains on the site. Some users use it to share photos and messages that promote unrealistic body standards and unhealthy eating habits. A National Eating Disorders Association (NEDA) study found that nearly 70% of the hashtags related to eating disorders, such as #Thinspiration, were still searchable on Instagram. This is worrisome as youth and young adults are the most social media consumers, especially Instagram (Pew Research, 2021). This is further supported by the current study's findings, in which almost all participants stated that Thinspiration and Fitspiration are pervasive. Participants noted that this pervasiveness seemed to be unavoidable and inescapable. Furthermore, many participants stated that Thinspiration or Fitspiration was their "main source of information" regarding weight loss, exercise routines, nutritious meals, and the primary motivation for staying healthy.

Thinspiration and Fitspiration content can be addictive for several reasons. Firstly, it is a form of positive reinforcement that allows individuals to receive validation and feedback through comments, "likes," and comments on their weight loss progress. This validation creates a sense of accomplishment and a desire for more positive feedback, driving them to seek it out continuously. Further, individuals who view this content in a positive and healthy light can find it a motivating source of inspiration for fitness goals. It may help individuals to set and achieve fitness goals, improve overall health, and boost self-esteem. The satisfaction of accomplishing fitness goals and the endorphins released during exercise can lead to a sense of empowerment and addiction to the positive feelings associated with fitness.

The Objectification Theory sheds light on the role of validation and positive reinforcement in driving individuals' engagement with Thinspiration and Fitspiration content. Such content reinforces the cultural ideals of thinness and fitness, central to the theory. This can contribute to the normalization and perpetuation of objectification, perpetuated through social practices and cultural norms that reinforce the idea that a woman's body is an object to be judged based on appearance. The dopamine release in the brain when viewing Thinspiration and Fitspiration can reinforce this objectifying behavior by associating pleasure and reward with these narrow beauty standards.

In addition, Thinspiration and Fitspiration can promote social comparison, causing individuals to compete and strive for unrealistic beauty ideals. This may lead to compulsive and obsessive exercise, restrictive eating patterns, and other unhealthy behaviors such as body dysmorphia and eating disorders. The anticipation of Thinspiration and Fitspiration content leads to dopamine release, making it difficult to stop this behavior. Achieving the beauty ideal portrayed on these content pages may lead to more social acceptance and give individuals a false sense of control over their bodies and lives, contributing to the addictive nature of such content.

Promoting healthy and balanced fitness goals that prioritize overall health and well-being rather than unrealistic and harmful body ideals is crucial. By understanding the addictive nature of Thinspiration and Fitspiration content and its link to the Objectification Theory, we can work towards creating a more inclusive and accepting society that values individuals for who they are rather than their physical appearance.

Theme 3: Negative Effects on Self and Relationships

The study did not directly measure body dissatisfaction, but it was indicated by participants' verbal responses that they felt occasionally dissatisfied with their appearance.

Thinspiration and Fitspiration were shown to impact their emotions and body satisfaction negatively. These findings align with Dignard and Jarry's (2021) study, which found decreased participants' body satisfaction after viewing Thinspiration and Fitspiration. Prior research indicates a positive correlation between women's sense of self and body-image satisfaction (Polivy et al.,1990). According to the Objectification Theory, women are socialized to view themselves as objects to be evaluated and looked at due to the cultural influence of objectifying treatment (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Women are often portrayed as a collection of body parts, while men are depicted with emphasis on their faces and heads (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). This perception is reinforced by societal practices and cultural contexts, leading to the sexual objectification of women's bodies (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). The objectifying gaze is subtly played out through visual media that sexualizes the body (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997), and it is almost impossible to avoid the barrage of sexualized images of the women body in contemporary American culture. The proliferation of such images has fundamentally altered our cultural environment, affecting most women and girls to some extent, regardless of their relationships.

Feeling Guilty About Body

The Objectification Theory offers a framework for comprehending the cultural constraints that undermine the well-being and potential of women (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Women place great importance on interpersonal connections, and when coupled with sociocultural expectations for being a "good woman," this can lead to a feeling of "loss of self" (Jack, 1991). This "loss of self" or self-silencing occurs as women habitually censor their expression and restrict their initiatives to maintain valued relationships (Jack, 1991). Gradually,

this habitual self-censorship can result in inner confusion and frustration, often leading to depression (Jack, 1991).

The study's findings are consistent with previous research highlighting the harmful effects of Thinspiration and Fitspiration content, such as guilt and poor body image (Alberga et al., 2018). Boepple and Thompson's (2018) study further emphasized these outcomes, as both Thinspiration and Fitspiration content were found to emphasize an objectification of the body, dieting, and guilt-inducing messages about weight and shape. This underscores the societal pressure that young women feel to conform to an unrealistic and unhealthy body standard. The Objectification Theory explains this pressure as societal expectations for women to fulfill the role of a "good woman" and conform to a specific beauty standard can make them feel like they have lost their true selves (Jack, 1991). As a result, these individuals may develop patterns of self-censorship and restriction that can cause confusion and frustration over time (Jack, 1991).

The study sheds light on the potential reasons why young women may have felt guilty for not meeting their weight loss and workout expectations. They may have wanted to be accepted for who they are, not solely judged by their appearance, a societal pressure imposed on them. Consequently, they may have resorted to censoring and restricting their bodies, feeling like they had lost themselves. When they could not achieve their goals, they might have felt a sense of loss and isolation, thinking that others would not accept them for their true selves. Furthermore, when these women evaluated themselves relative to internalized or cultural fit-and-thin beauty ideals and came short, it led them to feel a sense of guilt. If these young women received acceptance and validation for their true selves, they may not have felt the need to uphold unattainable standards for their bodies. The study highlights the need for a cultural shift towards accepting and loving oneself for who they are, regardless of external appearances.

Unhealthy Thinspiration

The literature has highlighted that Thinspiration emphasizes extreme thinness, often featuring protruding bony features like hip and collarbones or referencing disordered eating symptoms (Alberga et al., 2018). Similarly, in the current study, participants mainly reported that Thinspiration centered on thinness and promoted eating disorders, aligning with previous research demonstrating that Thinspiration "encourages weight loss, restricted eating, and excessive exercise, and often romanticizes eating disorders, depicting them as a lifestyle choice instead of a psychological illness" (Lewis & Arbuthnott, 2012; National et al., 2013). This is worrisome as all of the participants in the current study were emerging adults who experienced significant changes in many areas of their lives, including social, emotional, and cognitive development. When viewing Thinspiration or Fitspiration content, emerging adulthood can be particularly influential for young women. This is a time when individuals are often seeking to establish their identity and are more susceptible to social pressure and cultural norms surrounding beauty and body image. Young women who view Thinspiration or Fitspiration content may be more likely to engage in unhealthy behaviors such as restrictive eating patterns, excessive exercise, and body dissatisfaction. This is because they may be more susceptible to cultural ideals of beauty and thinness and feel pressure to conform to these norms.

Moreover, emerging adulthood is when individuals may have more access to social media and other online platforms, where Thinspiration and Fitspiration content are prevalent. This can increase exposure to these harmful ideals and lead to more frequent engagement with such content. It is essential to recognize the impact of emerging adulthood when considering Thinspiration and Fitspiration content. During this transition period, support and guidance are critical in promoting healthy behaviors and positive body image. Health professionals, educators,

and parents can play an essential role in educating young women about the danger of such

content and promoting a healthy relationship with fitness and body

image.

Both Thinspiration and Fitspiration are Unhealthy

Boepple and Thompson's (2014) research reveals that Fitspiration and healthy living

blogs often prioritize appearance in their content and that both Thinspiration and Fitspiration

sites contain similar levels of messaging that can induce guilt or shame about body weight or

shape, stigmatize being overweight, objectify women, and promote dieting and restraint (Dignard

& Jarry, 2021). Although Thinspiration sites had more thin-ideal messaging, Fitspiration sites

had 80% of the same messages, suggesting that Fitspiration may be just as harmful as

Thinspiration (Boepple & Thompson, 2016). Dignard and Jarry (2021) similarly argue that

Fitspiration is not as harmless as it is and may be more harmful than Thinspiration. What is

concerning is that while Thinspiration was banned from social media due to concerns about the

risks to psychological well-being among users (Chancellor et al., 2016), Fitspiration is not

regulated in any way (Dignard & Jarry, 2021), making it potentially easier for social media users

to access and compare themselves to. These findings highlight the need to regulate Fitspiration

content and further research into its impact on individuals' well-being.

This highlights the consequences of the unregulated Fitspiration content, which could

lead to the objectification of the body. The objectification theory posits that the constant

objectification of the body in media and culture could lead to the internalization of societal body

ideals and eventually contribute to body dissatisfaction, eating disorders, and other problems.

Since Fitspiration is not regulated, it could be easier for social media users to access and

compare themselves, which could trigger negative feelings about their bodies. Therefore, the

need to regulate Fitspiration content and further research into its impact on individuals' well-being is crucial in objectification theory.

Boepple and Thompson (2014) identified that both Fitspiration and Healthy Living blogs tend to prioritize appearance in their content. Dignard and Jarry (2021) discovered comparable amounts of communications between Thinspiration and Fitspiration websites that intend to evoke feelings of shame or guilt about physique weight or shape, ostracize individuals who are overweight, treat women as objects, and promote dieting as well as self-control. However, while Thinspiration sites had 88% of thin-ideal messaging, Fitspiration sites contained 80% of these messages, suggesting that Fitspiration may be equally harmful to Thinspiration (Boepple & Thompson, 2016; Dignard & Jarry, 2021). Similarly, Dignard and Jarry (2021) concluded that although Fitspiration portrays itself as harmless, it is as harmful as Thinspiration and possibly more harmful (Dignard & Jarry, 2021). Moreover, their findings are accentuated by the fact that while Thinspiration was prohibited from social media due to concerns about its effects on users' psychological well-being (Chancellor et al., 2016), Fitspiration remains unregulated, thereby making it easier for social media users to access and compare themselves to these images.

Theme 4: Critical Engagement

Boepple et al. (2018) discovered that 45% of Fitspiration images used deceptive tactics, such as camera angles, poses, and lighting, to create a slimmer appearance (Alberga et al., 2018). The present study's participants could also critically analyze Fitspiration content, acknowledging its manipulative nature. Similarly, prior research has indicated that Thinspiration images promote unhealthy habits, such as weight loss and glorifying thinness (Slater et al., 2017). The participants in the current study were also aware of these negative implications.

Vulnerability Factors

Age

While previous studies have not explored whether age affects individuals' ability to critically assess Thinspiration and Fitspiration content, the present research offered insight into participant perspectives. Specifically, younger participants reported being more susceptible to the negative influences of Thinspiration and Fitspiration. Nonetheless, people of all ages are affected by these types of content.

According to the Objectification Theory, women in their reproductive years, ranging from early adolescence to late middle age, are more prone to objectification (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). As a result of fat buildup on their hips and thighs, women commonly exhibit a "gynoid fat distribution," which is associated with an attractive physique characterized by a low waist-to-hip ratio. This particular ratio is often seen as an indicator of reproductive fitness (Singh, 1993). From an evolutionary perspective, Singh (1993) argues that men's initial evaluations of women physical attractiveness involve visual assessments of body shape, with low waist-to-hip ratios being the most highly regarded. The age range of 18 to 29 falls within this stage of reproductive potential. As a result, women within this age group are more likely to suffer the effects of objectification and experience increased mental health risks, particularly when exposed to Thinspiration and Fitspiration.

The current study showed that young women were more negatively affected by Thinspiration and Fitspiration when they were younger. Some of the participants in the study felt that they were more than just their physical appearance, and they desired meaningful relationships with others rather than ones centered around Thinspiration and Fitspiration. The findings suggest that two factors may play a role in why young women are more susceptible to the harmful effects of these concepts at a younger age: the extent to which they internalize

prevailing cultural ideals, such as the thin-and-fit ideal, and the amount of objectification they experience. In contrast, women may mitigate the detrimental impacts of objectification as they age by avoiding environments that promote it and instead focusing on their achievements and other interests (Kaschak, 1992).

Mood

As participants in the current study reported feeling "bad" after viewing Thinspiration and Fitspiration, other researchers have discovered similar findings. For instance, Fioravanti et al. (2021) examined the effects of daily exposure to Instagram trends, including Fitspiration, on psychological well-being. They discovered that exposure to Fitspiration content was linked to increased negative mood and appearance comparison. Similarly, Griffiths and Stefanovski (2019) found that daily exposure to Thinspiration and Fitspiration was related to lower body satisfaction and higher adverse effects. However, it is worth noting that a study by Holland et al. (2017) found that exposure to Fitspiration images resulted in increased pressure to attain an idealized body and a decreased satisfaction with one's current fitness level but did not affect other aspects of body satisfaction, mood, or the frequency of appearance comparisons (Krug et al., 2020).

Implications for Counselling

The themes identified in my study provide possible approaches that could be explored and deliberated upon while counseling women who have issues concerning their body image, self-esteem, and relationships with family and friends due to their exposure to Thinspiration and Fitspiration content. The participants in the study highlighted the need to approach Thinspiration and Fitspiration content cautiously due to their potential harm to a woman's self-esteem, body image, and social connections. Therefore, counsellors may employ several strategies that we will

describe to support women who present with any of the abovementioned concerns resulting from

their online exposure and engagement with Thinspiration and Fitspiration content.

It is worth mentioning that despite the existence of effective treatments for individuals

experiencing body image issues and eating disorders (Gollings & Paxton, 2006), some may still

choose not to seek help due to emotions of shame (Schmidt, 2003) and ambivalence towards

change (Vitousek et al., 1998). To address these concerns, counselors may consider the first step

of addressing clients' shame through motivational interviewing to understand their struggles

better. Motivational interviewing techniques can be employed in therapy sessions to overcome

clients' ambivalence towards change.

Motivational interviewing is a strategy for respecting clients' mixed feelings about

changing old habits and assessing their reasons for wanting to change. This approach involves

working collaboratively with the client to achieve positive behavioral change, and research

indicates its effectiveness in managing weight management and substance abuse treatment

(Rubak et al., 2005).

According to Freshwater et al. (2022), a critical lesson within motivational interviewing

is addressing the gap between where patients currently are and where they aspire to be. For

example, Smith-Jackson et al.'s (2011) study uncovered how young college women develop a

vicious cycle where negative body image leads to overeating, which, in turn, reinforces negative

emotions about themselves. These women reported feeling "depressed" or "frustrated" and used

strategies like avoidance or appearance fixation instead of self-acceptance.

Smith-Jackson et al. (2011) stated that clinicians and educators can assist clients by

addressing different levels of willingness to change among college womens with body image

concerns. This is important since it was evident in the current study that the women were fully

aware of the adverse effects of viewing and engaging with Thinspiration and Fitspiration content, yet they continued to engage in it. As such, counsellors can begin their motivational interviewing by getting the client to understand where they are now concerning their struggles and their hopes and goals within therapy.

A counsellor may wish to implement the strategy used by Smith et al.'s (2011) strategy of helping the client determine their willingness to change. A counsellor who wishes to implement this strategy can do so by assessing the client's ambivalence towards change and identifying why they may be hesitant to change. The counsellor can then work collaboratively with the client to explore their motivations to change and the steps they need to take to achieve their goals. The strategy involves identifying the client's readiness to change and then developing a plan to assist them in achieving their goals. By using this approach, counsellors can support their clients in overcoming ambivalence towards change and encourage them to commit to achieving positive behavioural change. This method is associated with increased success rates in facilitating behavioural change and can be adopted in various therapeutic contexts.

Based on the participants' experiences of finding emotional support from their friends and family after encountering negative Thinspiration or Fitspiration content, counselors could help clients enhance their social connections. This could involve utilizing specific methods such as participating in clubs or groups where they can form social connections, volunteering, or reaching out to family and friends. This way, clients can freely express their concerns about their emotional and body image issues, knowing they have a safe place to do so. As family and friends play a crucial role in our lives (Orden et al., 2021), it would be beneficial for counselors to assist clients in identifying their values and how their actions and behaviors correlate with these values to improve their overall well-being and connectedness to others.

Counsellors could leverage media literacy intervention skills to help young women comprehend the negative consequences of viewing Thinspiration and Fitspiration content on social media. As some participants suggested having a critical perspective while viewing such content, incorporating media literacy interventions into therapy sessions could be beneficial in helping clients develop a more reflective approach. According to McClean et al.'s (2016) literature review, media literacy interventions can positively impact body image-related issues. By developing media literacy skills, clients can distinguish between healthy and unhealthy content and view and engage with Thinspiration and Fitspiration content while making educated judgments about their impact on self-esteem, body image, and social connections. Counselors could integrate such interventions into sessions by asking clients to browse Thinspiration or Fitspiration pages on social media during the session and discuss their approach towards such content and their perception of its impact on their self-esteem. Clients could also repeat the exercise at home to evaluate the impact of the intervention on their perspective and media literacy toward such content. By developing media literacy skills in young women, counselors could help them create a healthier relationship with their bodies and decrease adverse outcomes like body dissatisfaction.

Furthermore, it was observed that as women grew older, they became less affected by these websites. This suggests that maturity could play a role in helping women develop a more constructive body image outlook and better coping mechanisms. Age and maturity can be significant factors in helping women resist the pressures of beauty ideals on social media platforms such as Thinspiration and Fitspiration (Fardouly et al., 2015). As such, counselors can work with women to help them cultivate these skills and perspectives that can lead to stronger resilience to such pressures.

The theme of adverse effects on self and relationships might also point to potential strategies for counselling women with body image issues. As such, it may be beneficial for women to improve their self-acceptance. Encouraging women to engage in positive self-affirmations about themselves and their bodies could help alleviate their negative feelings about themselves and their bodies. Further, a counsellor could explore the client's fears about accepting their body for what it is. A study by Gollings and Paxton (2006) evaluated a short group therapy intervention called Set Your Body Free for body image dissatisfaction and related disordered eating behaviors in women (conducted online). Using motivational interviewing to decrease the participants' indecisiveness and amplify their positive image, their study found that the intervention enhanced the participants' body image, eating habits, and psychological factors (Gollings & Paxton, 2006).

Furthermore, therapists might also recommend that their clients practice mindfulness-based meditations that shift their focus away from beauty standards to how their body functions. Guided meditations and visual imagery have been shown to reduce negative body image, increase mood, and increase feelings of hopefulness (Fardouly et al., 2015).

Limitations

This study illuminated the ambivalence, pain and resilience of young women but it also has some limitations worth noting. Although focus groups can provide a comfortable social environment and rich discussion among participants, some participants may have felt reluctant to share their true thoughts due to discomfort or a desire to respond in socially acceptable ways.

Additionally, as the focus group addressed a sensitive topic, participants may have been hesitant to reveal their genuine emotions and opinions out of fear of rejection. One particular participant had mainly positive experiences with Thinspiration and Fitspiration, which aided her

in her weight loss and healthy lifestyle endeavors, while most other participants had negative experiences, potentially leaving this participant feeling excluded from the benefits of these constructs and openly talking about these positive experiences.

The study was also restricted by the difficulty of distinguishing whether a participant was referring to Thinspiration, Fitspiration, or both constructs when sharing their experiences, which hindered the researcher's ability to accurately interpret their responses. As a result, during the focus group, the researcher had to clarify with the participant if they were solely referring to Thinspiration, Fitspiration, or both, which added an additional challenge to the study.

The qualitative findings cannot be generalized to other women with diverse experiences with Thinspiration and Fitspiration. For example, adolescents between the ages of 10 and 19 are in a period of rapid health development (Patton et al., 2016). It has been found that adolescents' understanding of diet and exercise is inadequate (Bell & Deighton-Smith, 2021). Younger individuals are also exposed to such content, in which the most prevalent hashtag on social media, #Fitspiration, has led to approximately 40% of young individuals encountering problematic health and fitness content (Carrotte et al., 2015). As such, adolescents are exposed to such content and place more importance on healthy behaviors for appearance enhancement than overall health (Beltrán-Carrillo et al., 2018; Wright et al., 2006). Therefore, future studies should examine the impact of Thinspiration and Fitspiration on adolescents to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the effects of such content on individuals of different age groups.

Future Directions

As the use of social media, particularly Instagram and TikTok, continues to increase (Perrin, 2021), it is crucial to investigate further their impact on individuals' well-being and body

image. Previous research has shown that Thinspiration is harmful (Perloff, 2014), while Fitspiration often portrays ideal bodies, which has been shown to have adverse effects (Fardouly et al., 2015). Thinspiration and Fitspiration are widespread on social media, making it essential to study who is most affected by its messages and how to prevent harm to specific groups. There is a need for more research on the experiences of young women viewing and engaging in Thinspiration and Fitspiration. Although there was notable cultural and ethnic diversity in this study's sample, future researchers might also consider further exploring these phenomena across and within specific cultures.

Moreover, incorporating a mixed methods design in research could enable the exploration of a more comprehensive and inclusive set of data related to other variables of interest. This could provide a more thorough understanding of the correlation between social media and body image. In addition, newer social media platforms such as TikTok have become widespread and mainstream, and studying its effects on women's body image is pertinent. Similarly, because beauty ideals continuously evolve, it is crucial to investigate the effects of current beauty trends on women's body image.

Additionally, future research could explore the experiences of transgender individuals, who are known to be vulnerable to body image concerns (Diemer et al., 2015). Comparing the experiences of individuals viewing this content across multiple social media platforms could also provide valuable information on which SNS has a more harmful impact. Finally, studying both low and high-risk individuals about symptoms of eating disorders could also help understand the impact of Thinspiration and Fitspiration on body image.

Finally, the current study sheds light on body image intervention and prevention. There needs to be more understanding regarding the strategies individuals employ to manage their

negative body image (Smith-Jackson et al., 2011). Assisting clients in expanding their repertoire of skills to manage negative body image could be a helpful intervention focal point. Ultimately, it may be possible to aid women in managing these insecurities by implementing preventive measures and interventions that delve into viable strategies for reducing negative body image.

Strengths

The current qualitative study has numerous strengths. Firstly, using a qualitative research design facilitated the collection of detailed and comprehensive information about the participants' experiences. Secondly, an open-ended approach enabled the participants to direct the conversation and limit potential researcher bias. Moreover, the study stands out because it investigated a new scenario. Previous studies have focused on individuals with no history of eating disorders or those currently experiencing eating disorder symptoms.

In contrast, this study examined individuals with a moderate risk of developing an eating disorder and how they are affected by Thinspiration and Fitspiration. It is among the pioneering research in exploring how viewing these kinds of content affects women's social connections to family and friends. Lastly, the study highlighted the importance of ethical principles and employed techniques such as member checking, audit trails, and memos to uphold ethical standards.

Chapter Six: Conclusion

In conclusion, the study explored how young women in their late teens and twenties experience Thinspiration and Fitspiration on Instagram and the impact of such content on their views of self and social connections. Results of the study highlight that fit-and-thin beauty ideal content on Instagram, such as Thinspiration and Fitspiration, can play a negative role in women's body image, self-esteem, and relationships with family and friends. More specifically, both types of content can stir up mixed emotions among young women, often leading them to feel positively and negatively about Thinspiration and Fitspiration. Although there is a great deal of research on the effects of Thinspiration and Fitspiration on body satisfaction, self-esteem, and mood, most studies have either focused on younger individuals with a current eating disorder diagnosis or have been quantitative. As social media continues to grow, it is vital to have more research on prevention and intervention strategies to mitigate the adverse effects of such content.

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THINSPIRATION AND FITSPIRATION ON INSTAGRAM

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Appendix A – Consent Form

CONSENT FORM

Study Title: Social Connectedness on Instagram: Understanding How Young Women Experience Thinspiration and Fitspiration on Instagram

Research Investigator: **Supervisor:**
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__Background__
You are being asked to participate in this study because you are a women who is between the ages of 18 to 29 years old, and you are an active Instagram user and view or engage in Thinspiration and/or Fitspiration pages on Instagram. This study is being conducted by the researcher in fulfillment of a Masters degree in Counselling Psychology at the University of Alberta. This study will be completed under supervision of Dr. William Whelton. This study has gotten funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC). Before you decide to be in this study, one of the researchers will go over this form with you. You can ask questions if you feel anything needs to be made clearer. You will be given a copy of this form.

__Purpose__
The goal of this study is to understand the experiences of young women Instagram users who view or engage in Thinspiration and Fitspiration pages on Instagram. This study seeks to understand how your connections with your family and friends on Instagram add to your experience of viewing or engaging in Thinspiration/Fitspiration pages on Instagram. This study hopes to gain a better insight of the impact that these websites have on young womens' eating disorder risk and body dissatisfaction.

__Study Procedures__
Involvement in this study includes participating in an interview and a focus group discussion. The interview will last 10-20 minutes and will be one on one with the researcher through Zoom. The focus group will last 1.5 hours-2 hours and will involve talking in a group (8-10 people) at a location at the University of Alberta campus.

The first interview will be done one on one with the researcher online through Zoom. The second interview will include 8-10 people on campus at the University of Alberta. This room will be selected by the researcher. The location of the study room will be shared with participants through email.

The primary researcher will conduct and record both interviews. In the initial interview, demographic information will be collected. Demographic information will include your gender, age, and date of birth. The researcher will also ask you if you view or engage in Thinspiration or Fitspiration pages on Instagram. The researcher will also ask you for your full address and postal code. The researcher will make sure you do not have an eating disorder. If you meet the standards to participate in the study, you will be asked to participate in the second interview. The second interview will be in a study room located at the University of Alberta's campus. During the second interview, a master's student, who is known to the primary researcher, and who will remain anonymous and silent during the interview, will take notes during the second interview. These notes will allow the primary researcher to collect any meaningful data that would not otherwise be captured during the interview. This will allow the researcher to provide more emphasis when writing up the results of the interview discussion.

The researcher will give you a pseudonym during the interviews. You will also have the choice to choose your own pseudonym. Pseudonyms will be used in any documents created after the study such as publications in order to ensure your confidentiality. The researcher will also make sure to remove any identifying information from all documents.

Risks & Benefits
This research study is part of my master's Thesis. Your contribution is important to me. There are no direct benefits to you by being in this study. You will have the chance to talk about your experiences in a safe place. You may also add to the knowledge around social media use.

Although you will be providing your consent for the study, if you do not meet the inclusion criteria, you will not be able to take part in the study. If you experience any trouble or sadness, you are welcome to stop the interview at any time. I will also provide you with a list of counselling services.

There may be risks to being in this study that are not known. If I learn anything during the study that may affect you, I will tell you right away. If the researcher notices that you have become sad or troubled during the study, she will email you to see how you're doing.

Reimbursement or Remuneration
You will be given a $25.00 Amazon gift card as a thank you for taking part in this study. I will provide the gift card to you by email. If you decide to withdraw from the study before the focus group interview, you will not receive the gift card. If you choose to withdraw from the study after the focus group interview, you will still receive the gift card.

Voluntary Participation
Being in this study is your choice. Although you will be providing your consent for the study, if you do not meet the inclusion criteria, you will not be able to take part in the study. You can withdraw from the study at any time with no consequences. You may also refuse to answer any questions during the interviews. If you wish to withdraw any information you provided during the study, you are allowed to this this by July 30, 2022. If the researcher uses any information from this study in future studies, she will first need to get permission from the Research Ethic Board.

Confidentiality & Anonymity

The interview will be recorded and will be stored in a safe place. I will store the consent form and the interview data separately to protect your privacy. I will not be using your name, email, or any identifying information in any reports. I will only use your name and email address to set up the interviews. This information will be destroyed after the second interview. Study data, including personal information about you, and the notes taken by the primary researchers' colleague during the second interview, will be safely stored on a password protected laptop. This information will be safely stored for a minimum of 5 years (as per University of Alberta Policy) after the study is over. At this time, the information will be destroyed. Your personal information for this study will be private. Only myself and my research supervisor will have your information. While I will make every effort to protect your privacy of what is talked about during the focus groups, I cannot make sure that others from the group will do the same. Please respect the privacy of others outside of the focus group. Zoom recordings of the two interviews will be password protected. The Zoom recordings will use the University of Alberta's VPN for maximum security and protection. If you would like to receive a report of the research findings you can email Luciana Herceg at herceg@ualberta.ca.

Contact Information

If you have questions related to this research, please contact Lucijana Herceg (Department of Educational Psychology) at herceg@ualberta.ca or Dr. William (Bill) Whelton at wwhelton@ualberta.ca

The plan for this study has been reviewed by a Research Ethics Board at the University of Alberta. If you have questions about your rights or how research should be done, you can call (780) 492-2615. This office is independent of the researchers.

Consent Statement

I have read this form and the research study has been explained to me. I have been given the chance to ask questions and my questions have been answered. If I have more questions, I have been told whom to contact. I agree to participate in the research study described above. I will receive a copy of this consent form after I sign it.

_____   _____
Participant's Name (printed) and Signature   Date

_____   _____
Name (printed) and Signature of Person Obtaining Consent   Date

Appendix B – Focus Group Questions

Introduction:
Hi. Thank you for participating in this research study. As you may have read in the consent form, the purpose of this study is to understand your experience of viewing and/or engaging in Thinspiration and/or Fitspiration pages on Instagram. This study also aims to understand your experience of social connectedness with your family and friends on Instagram and how this may affect you viewing and/or engaging in these pages on Instagram. This project is part of my Masters of Counselling Psychology program. Today's interview will last approximately 1.5-2 hours. I want you to know that you can withdraw from the study at any point you choose to do so. Also, you are free to skip any question that makes you feel uncomfortable. Keep in mind, that there is no right or wrong answers to any of these open-ended questions, I simply want to understand your experience.
Do you have any questions thus far for the interview process?
Do I have your consent to record this interview and conduct the interview?
Questions
1. What words or images come to mind when you think of Thinspiration/Fitspiration? (5)

2. Think back to the first time you viewed/discovered Thinspiration/Fitspiration content on Instagram. (5)
    a. Can you tell me about this experience in as much detail as possible?
    b. Can you recall what was happening to you in these moments?
    c. What was this experience like for you?
    d. How did it make you feel?
    e. What were you noticing in your body?
    f. How did you discover this content?
    g. <u>Sub follow-up:</u> Thinking back to this time, what about these pages appealed to you the most?
    h. <u>Sub follow-up:</u> Thinking back to this time, what about these pages did not appeal to you?

3. What are your motivations for viewing and/or engaging in Thinspiration/Fitspiration on Instagram? (15)
    - What are the benefits/drawbacks of viewing/engaging in these pages?
    - What aspects of Thinspiration/Fitspiration influence/motivate you the most?

      <u>Sub follow-up:</u> Many of you stated that viewing/engaging in these pages provides you with motivation to maintain a healthy lifestyle, such as viewing healthy meal plans and exercise/workout regimes.

    - Can you think back to a time when you were motivated to maintain a healthy lifestyle, and how viewing these pages contributed to attaining this healthy lifestyle.
    - Can you tell me how this works?
    - What was this experience like for you?
    - How did it make you feel?

4. Many of you stated that you don't actively search for Thinspiration/Fitspiration on Instagram, rather, it shows up on your feed. (20)
   - Think back to the last time that content of Thinspiration/Fitspiration showed up on your **feed**.
   - Can you describe, in as much details as possible, what this experience was like for you?
   - How did it make you feel?
   - What were your thoughts at that moment?
   - What was happening to you in this moment?

   Sub follow-up: Can you try to recall the last time you **actively** searched for Thinspiration/Fitspiration content on Instagram.

   - Can you describe, in as much details as possible, what this experience was like for you?
   - How did it make you feel?
   - What were your thoughts at that moment?
   - What was happening to you in this moment?

5. Many of you stated that you view Fitspiration more compared to Thinspiration. I want to talk about that. What's it like to view Fitspiration content *compared* to Thinspiration content? (10)
   a. Why do you think you view Fitspiration more compared to Thinspiration?
   b. How does it make you feel to view Fitspiration?
   c. What aspects of Fitspiration influence you the most to continue viewing/engaging in it?
   Sub follow-up: For those of you who view Thinspiration more than Fitspiration, why do you think you view Thinspiration more compared to Fitspiration?
   d. How does it make you feel to view Thinspiration?
   e. What aspects of Thinspiration influence you the most to continue viewing/engaging in it?

6. Tell me about something striking you found or saw while viewing Thinspiration/Fitspiration that you cannot forget? (5)
   a. Describe the event in as much detail as possible.
   b. Why do you think it has such a profound effect on your memory?
   c. What aspect of the event influenced/impacted you the most? How?
   d. What were your thoughts in the moment?
   e. What was this experience like?
   f. What were you noticing in your body?

7. Think back to a time when you did not engage in Thinspiration/Fitspiration content on Instagram, even though you wanted too. (5)
   - Can you recall this event and describe, in as much details as possible, what this experience was like for you?
   - How did it make you feel?

- What were your thoughts at that moment?
- What was happening to you in this moment?
- What were you noticing in your body?
- How did this happen?

8. What is the very first and last thing you notice when you go on these pages? Why do you think you notice that thing first? (5)
   - What do you notice happening in your body when you notice these things?
   - How did it make you feel?
   - What are your thoughts in these moments?

9. What would you tell a best friend or family member about Thinspiration/Fitspiration? (5)

10. Think back to the first time you started following friends/family on Instagram?
    a. What was the experience like?
    b. What about it appealed to you?
    a. How did it make you feel?

11. Think back to a time when you were viewing content on Thinspiration/Fitspiration and later engaged/viewed content with/of friends/family on Instagram. (10)
    a. Can you describe this experience to me in as much detail as possible?
    b. What was this shift/experience in engagement/viewing like for you?
    c. How did this happen?
    d. How did it make you feel?
    e. What were you noticing in your body?

12. Think back to a time when you decided not to engage in or view Thinspiration/Fitspiration content on IG but decided to connect with your family/friends on Instagram instead (5)
    a. What was this experience like for you?
    b. How did this happen?
    c. How did it make you feel?
    d. What were you noticing in your body?

13. In what ways has viewing Thinspiration/Fitspiration impacted your social connectedness (with family/friends) on Instagram? (15)
    a. In person (with family & friends)?

       Sub follow-up: In what ways has viewing Thinspiration/Fitspiration impacted your *perception* of your social connectedness on Instagram?

       Sub follow-up: Do you think viewing/engaging in Thinspiration/Fitspiration has an impact on your social connections with family and friends on Instagram?
    - Think back to a time when you were viewing or engaging with Thinspiration or Fitspiration and this impacted your social connections on Instagram. What was this experience like for you?

- Can you give me an example?
- How do this work?
- What's this experience like for you?

14. What feelings do you experience when you connect with family/friends on Instagram compared to engaging in Thinspiration/Fitspiration? (5)
    a. Why do you think you experience different feelings?

15. How has following friends/family on Instagram impacted whether you judge yourself as a person, judge your weight, or judge your shape? (5)
    - What experience like for you?
    - How does this happen?
    - How did it make you feel?
    - Why do you think this happened?
    - What were you noticing in your body?

<u>Closing:</u>
- Do you have any other final thoughts?
- Thank you for participating in this research. Your contribution to my research study is very important. Is it okay if I end the interview here? If you have any questions about the research or interview process, please feel free to email me. I am going to stop the recording now.

Appendix C – Participant Information Letter and Assent Form

Eating Disorder Guide

Referral Pathway

- [Eating Disorders Referral Pathway (albertahealthservices.ca)](albertahealthservices.ca)

Information about eating disorders from the Canadian Mental Health Association

- [Eating-Disorders-NTNL-Brochure-2014-.pdf (cmha.ca)](cmha.ca)

Psychologists who work with individuals who have eating disorders

- [Find the Best Eating Disorders Therapists and Psychologists in Edmonton, AB - Psychology Today](Psychology Today)

Dr. Emmerling (specialization in helping individuals who struggle with body image, eating disorders)

- [Michelle Emmerling | Registered Psychologist | Edmonton, Alberta (emmerlingpsychology.com)](emmerlingpsychology.com)

Appendix D – Screening Questionnaires

Eating Disorder Examination Questionnaire (EDE-Q-13)
Instructions: The following questions address the past 4 weeks (28 days) only. Please read each question carefully. Please answer all the questions and choose one answer for each question. Thank you. Remember that the questions only refer to the past 4 weeks (28 days) only.

On how many of the past 28 days .....
SCALE: 0, 1–5, 6–12, 13–15, 16–22, 23–27, Every day
1. Have you been deliberately trying to limit the amount of food you eat to influence your shape or weight (whether or not you have succeeded)?
2. Have you tried to exclude from your diet any foods that you like in order to influence your shape or weight (whether or not you have succeeded)?
3. Have you tried to follow definite rules regarding your eating (for example, a calorie limit) in order to influence your shape or weight (whether or not you have succeeded)?
4. Has your weight influenced how you think about (judge) yourself as a person?
5. Has your shape influenced how you think about (judge) yourself as a person?
6. Have you been dissatisfied your weight?
7. Have you been dissatisfied your shape?
8. Have you eaten what other people would regard as an unusually large amount of food (given the circumstances)?
9. Did you have a sense of having lost control over your eating (at the time that you were eating)?
10. Have such episodes of overeating occurred (i.e. you have eaten an unusually large amount of food and have had a sense of loss of control at the time)?
11. Have you made yourself sick (vomit) as a means of controlling your shape or weight?
12. Have you taken laxatives as a means of controlling your shape or weight?
13. Have you exercised in a "driven" or "compulsive" way as a means of controlling your weight, shape or amount of fat or to burn off calories?

Questions 1–3: Restricted Eating; 4–5 Shape and Weight Over-evaluation; 6–7 Body Dissatisfaction; 13– 15 Bingeing; 16–18 Purging

Standardised Assessment of Standardised Assessment of Personality Abbreviated Scale Personality Abbreviated Scale
Only circle Y (yes) or N (no)
1. In general, do you have difficulty making and keeping friends? Y/N
2. Would you normally describe yourself as loner? Y/N
3. In general, do you trust other people? Y/N
4. Do you normally lose your temper easily? Y/N
5. Are you normally an impulsive sort of person? Y/N
6. Are you normally a worrier? Y/N
7. In general, do you depend on others a lot? Y/N
8. In general, are you a perfectionist? Y/N

Never - Once or Twice - Monthly - Weekly - Daily - Almost Daily

In the past year, how many times have you used the following?
1. Alcohol
2. Tobacco Products
3. Prescription Drugs for Nonmedical Reasons
4. Illegal Drugs

Which one of the following substances have you ever used in your lifetime?

a. Cannabis (marijuana, pot, grass, hash, etc.)

b. Cocaine (coke, crack, etc.)

c. Prescription stimulants* (Ritalin, Concerta, Dexedrine, Adderall, diet pills, etc.)

d. Methamphetamine (speed, ice, etc.)

e. Inhalants (nitrous, glue, gas, paint thinner, etc.)

f. Sedatives or sleeping pills* (Valium, Serepax, Xanax, etc.)

g. Hallucinogens (LSD, acid, mushrooms, PCP, Special K, ecstasy, etc.)

h. Street opioids (heroin, opium, etc.)

i. Prescription opioids* (fentanyl, oxycodone, hydrocodone, methadone, buprenorphine, etc.)

j. Other—Specify * Please report nonmedical use only: Do not record medications that are used as prescribed by a doctor.

Never - Once or Twice - Monthly - Weekly - Daily - Almost Daily

Q2. In the past 3 months, how often have you used each of the substances you mentioned?

Q3. How often have you had a strong desire or urge to use?

Q4. How often has your use of [first drug, second drug, etc.] led to health, social, legal, or financial problems?

Q5. How often have you failed to do what was normally expected of you because of your use of [first drug, second drug, etc.]? 0 5 6 7 8

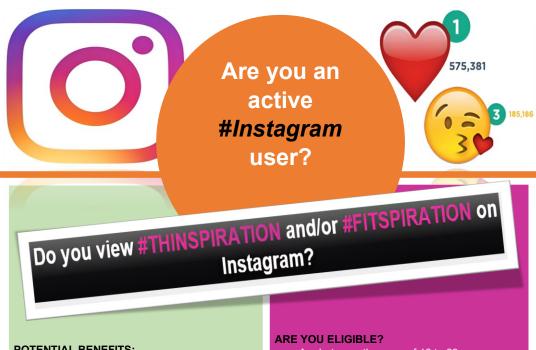**NO – YES, but not in the past three months - YES, in the past three months**

Q6. Has a friend or relative or anyone else ever expressed concern about your use of [first drug, second drug, etc.]?

Q7. Have you ever tried and failed to control, cut down, or stop using [first drug, second drug, etc.]?

Q8. Have you ever used any drug by injection? (non-medical use only)

Appendix E – Initial Interview Questions

Demographics:
1. What is your name?
2. What is your age? Date of birth?
3. Are you women or identify as women?
4. For the purposes of sending you your Amazon gift card, what is your email address?
5. In case of an emergency that can occur during our interview now or during the focus group interview, what is your full address and postal code?
6. Do you have an Instagram account?
7. How long do you spend using Instagram on average?
8. Do you view Thinspiration and/or Fitspiration pages on Instagram?
9. Do you have a social support network?
10. Do you follow friends and family on Instagram?
11. Screen for eating disorder risk using the Eating Disorder Examination Questionnaire 13 (EDE-Q-13) – attached in ethics application
12. Is there anything else you think would be beneficial for you to share with me?

Appendix F - Recruitment Poster

Are you an active *#Instagram* user?

575,381

185,186

Do you view #THINSPIRATION and/or #FITSPIRATION on Instagram?

POTENTIAL BENEFITS:

- Participating in this study allows you to share your experiences of what it's like to view and engage in Thinspiration and Fitspiration websites on Instagram.
- Participation is voluntary

PARTICIPATION INVOLVES:

- A one-on-one short interview (10-20 minutes via zoom) to ask basic demographic questions and to screen for any possible eating disorder.

- A focus group session with 8-10 other females. You will be given the chance to share your experience of what it's like to be an Instagram user as a female who views or engages in Thinspiration/Fitspiration content. This session will take about 1.5-2 hours to complete.

- Your responses will remain confidential and only the researcher and her supervisor will have access to the information you give. While I will make every effort to protect the confidentiality of what is discussed during the focus groups, I cannot guarantee that others from the group will do the same. Please respect the confidentiality of others outside of the focus group.

- Participants will receive a $25 Amazon gift card

ARE YOU ELIGIBLE?

- Are between the ages of 18 to 29
- Identify as female
- Are an active Instagram user
- View and/or engage in Thinspiration/Fitspiration pages on Instagram

FOR MORE INFORMATION AND/OR TO PARTICIPATE:

- Please contact Lucijana Herceg at herceg@ualberta.ca to arrange an interview time

- This research is supervised by Dr. William Whelton at the University of Alberta who can be contacted at 780.492.7979 or wwhelton@ualberta.ca

- The plan for this study has been reviewed by a Research Ethics Board at the University of Alberta. If you have questions about your rights or how research should be conducted, you can call 780.492.2615. This office is independent of the researchers.

University of Alberta Ethics ID: Pro00117502