MPC MAJOR RESEARCH PAPER

GET IT, GIRL!
AN EXPLORATION OF "FITSPIRATION" CONTENT ON INSTAGRAM USING VISUAL SOCIAL SEMIOTICS AND SOCIAL COMPARISON THEORY

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ABSTRACT

By definition "fitspiration" (fit + inspiration) is any message designed to inspire or motivate individuals to achieve their fitness objectives. These messages are usually accompanied by an image of a very fit person performing a physical activity. Fitspiration messages seem to be everywhere with more than 12 million results on Instagram alone. This Master of Professional Communication Major Research Paper (MRP) explores the "fitspiration" phenomenon on the social media platform Instagram by examining 50 images tagged with "#fitspiration" during March and April 2017. Informed and analyzed through multiple methods including content analysis, visual social semiotics theory, discourse analysis and social comparison theory, this report seeks to answer the research questions: (1) What are the characteristics of "fitspiration" images on Instagram that are aimed at young women? (2) What messages do these media images convey? (3) What are the implications of these messages on young women? The results of this study suggest that the "thin-ideal" that is embedded in western culture still dominates social media and the "fitspiration" community, which continues to negatively impact young women's self-esteem and body image. However, based on the findings there is a shift to the "strong is the new skinny" mentality where the captions and comments of each image are overwhelmingly positive in nature with little to no existence of destructive discourses. In an attempt to lessen the effects of such idealized and unrealistic portrayals of female bodies on young women there must be this continued presence of constructive messages and conversations on social media, coupled with education and social media literacy for young females.

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INTRODUCTION

In today's society, social media infiltrate everyone's daily lives. With smartphones and mobile applications users are able to access and post content of their personal interest in an instant through social networking platform such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. In particular, Instagram is a free mobile application that allows users to capture, edit, and upload photo and video content to their profile. The platform has many of the same features as other social media websites including the ability to "like," comment, "follow," use hashtags, and utilize editing filters. Instagram creates a space for people to display their lives and habits, which can be liberating, but there has been growing speculation about the implications these seemingly "perfect" images have on audiences. A recent survey conducted on 1,479 teens and young adults in the United Kingdom found that among the most popular social networking sites Instagram was positively correlated with self-expression and self-identity (RSPH, 2017). However, the app was also ranked the worst social media platform in regard to its effect on young people's mental health including their body image, sleep, and fear of missing out (RSPH, 2017).

Mass media, its sexualization and objectification of women, and the effects of this on young women have been widely criticized and researched during the past few decades (Engeln-Maddox, 2005; Grabe, Ward & Hyde, 2008; Richins, 1991). More recently there has been growing research and attention on social media platforms and their ability to influence women's self-esteem and body image (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016). Within this area of research, there has also been expanding emphasis on fitness-related content labeled as "thinspiration" and "fitspiration" (see Ghaznavi & Taylor, 2015; Tiggemann, & Zaccardo, 2015; Tiggemann, & Zaccardo, 2016). Fitspiration is the marriage of "fitness" and "inspiration" and this term is

frequently used as a caption or tag on Instagram pictures. These pictures are aimed at empowering women and encouraging them to adopt a healthy lifestyle with exercise and food.

This study explores "fitspiration" content present on Instagram and how these "fitspiration" posts portray women's bodies using media images on Instagram and consequently what messages these media images convey about women's bodies. This has been done through studying the content of these visual images, the text-based captions that accompany them and the user comments affiliated with these images. To aid in this, this report utilizes the theoretical lenses afforded by visual social semiotics and social comparison theory presented in the articles by Harrison (2003), Bessenoff (2006), and Lim and Yang (2015), respectively. As a result of analyzing and interpreting "fitspiration" images through the above theoretical devices, in this report I hope to identify some of the elements these images contain, what messages they may convey, and consequently the various implications they may have on young women's body image. I believe Instagram and fitness- related posts have a strong influence on the self-esteem of young women and that they alter their body image. The goal of this report is to highlight and uncover the potentially harmful elements of such images and media content as they pertain to young women's quality of life, mental health, and body image and consequently offer remedies to combat these negative effects.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The sexualization and objectification of women in society and media is not a novel concept (Engeln-Maddox, 2005). The fixation on women's bodies has evolved to include the growing interest in health and exercise and has manifested in social media with "fitspiration" becoming a noteworthy subject. Three areas that are further explored below in order to highlight the concept of "fitspiration" are idealized images in media; health, fitness and "fitspiration" content; and social comparison theory.

Idealized Images in Media

In order to fully understand fitspiration, it is important to highlight how women have historically been depicted in the media and the literature surrounding it. For decades, media images and advertisements aimed at women have been criticized for their depiction of unattainable and idealized body compositions (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016). Widespread attention and research has shifted from traditional media contexts, containing unrealistic ideals, to social media content that has the ability to pervade individuals' homes twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Now, literature has begun to investigate if, and how, these effects from traditional media can be transferred to a social media context (Lewallen, 2016; Lim & Yang, 2015).

Emphasis on such media is warranted due to the concern that it has destructive and damaging results on the audience because the "ideal" female body that is pictured is often alarmingly and unrealistically thin (Engeln-Maddox, 2005). Research has indicated that advertisements containing idealized women's bodies can have both direct and indirect adverse effects on women's self-esteem and body image and has, in some cases, been associated with eating

disorder-related behaviors (Choi, Leshner, & Choi, 2008; Engeln-Maddox, 2005, Grabe et al., 2008). Body image is a complex concept and can be described as the "degree of satisfaction with one's current physical self or as a mental construction of oneself" (Choi et al., 2008, p. 148). Due to the overload of idealized media images and advertisements, Engeln-Maddox (2005) argues that "normative discontent" exists in Western cultures. This term refers to the concerning discovery that there is extensive body dissatisfaction among girls and women and that this is now "normal" (Engeln-Maddox, 2005). In support, Grabe et al. (2008) affirm that young women's body dissatisfaction has hit normative levels, where roughly 50% of American girls and young women indicate they are discontent with their bodies.

Society has often-accused mass media of being the source of objectified female content and of the dissemination of the "ideal" perfect body (Dittmar, 2009; Richins, 1991). Exposure to such media in the Western world begins at a young age, beginning with the introduction of Barbie and her physically impossible body dimensions (Dittmar, 2009). This then continues to television programs and advertisements that are saturated with extremely skinny and "perfect" models (Dittmar, 2009). Television, movie, and magazine content has been persistent in prioritizing and rewarding slimness, with "skinny" TV characters being overrepresented, while overweight characters are rarely pictured (Grabe et al., 2008). Other examples of mass media that depict uniformly thin and physically attractive models are beauty and cosmetic advertisements. Such media has been associated with negatively effecting young women's confidence and fostering unfavorable feelings among young women about their weight, body shape, and face, which can result in the adoption of unhealthy eating habits as well as seeking risky plastic surgery procedures (Richins, 1991). As a result of such continued exposure to thin female bodies in the

mass media, Engeln-Maddox (2005) argues that it reinforces Western culture's belief that being thin is what makes women attractive and desirable.

While the mass media continues to be of interest to scholars who research the effects of idealized images on young women, the emergence of the Internet and social media has warranted considerable debate. Platforms such as Facebook, Pinterest, Instagram, and Twitter not only contain mass-communicated advertisements and messages, but also, more significantly, are concentrated with user-generated content curated by user's peers. Social media is an interesting area of research because it embodies numerous characteristics that traditional media does not. These include its primary purpose of connecting and interacting with peers, content that is centered on users instead of models or celebrities, and users' ability to broadcast their "best" selves by sharing only appealing images, which may have been edited and/or enhanced (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016). Perloff (2014) argues that it is important to consider how social media can manipulate feelings and views of one's body image due to the substantial amount of young women online and their interest and dependence on social media.

There has also been continuing research that argues that when individuals observe their peers in online settings they make many comparisons of their physical selves, which can influence their body images (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016; Lewallen, 2016). In support of this notion, a survey conducted on 2,000 adults in the U.S. found that 46% of women respondents felt greater levels of dissatisfaction with their appearance after using social media (Lewallen, 2016). This realization can be tightly associated with Bandura's (2001) social cognitive theory of mass communication that suggests that individuals can learn and model their behaviour from the

media when exposed to heavily reoccurring images in mass media, and that this exposure to idealistic and unrealistic female appearances can lead to negative comparisons and body dissatisfaction (Perloff, 2014). Fardouly and Vartanian (2016) urge that research and media literacy programs for youth will continue to be needed on this topic because social media usage has persistently been correlated with body image issues in young adults and that this affiliation will intensify in the future. Because social media has the ability to construct online communities around specific interests, the emergence of content surrounding health and fitness has become popular. The literature pertaining to this area is explored in more detail in the next section.

Health, Fitness, & Fitspiration Content

"Fitspiration" is a relatively new term and trend that has yet to be extensively researched. Much of the emerging literature surrounding "fitspiration" content is concentrated on its immediate effect on women when they are exposed to it, and more specifically on women who exhibit eating disorder behaviours (Goldstraw & Keegan, 2016; Hefner et al., 2016; Holland & Tiggemann 2017; Lewallen, 2016; Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015). As outlined above, there has been comprehensive research conducted on the effects of media images in magazines and television advertisements on young women's self-esteem and body image, and more recently, social media's role in this. Hefner et al. (2016) found that individuals who use mobile apps as a tool for fitness motivation and tracking progress experienced significant increases in obsessive exercise routines and tendencies. Content in magazines and on online websites relating to fitness and health has continued to grow and be a trendy and prominent subject matter in today's society (Lewallen, 2016).

A branch of this fitness-related content that has begun to infiltrate social media is "fitspiration." This blend of fit and inspiration is used to categorize content that appears online and is intended to motivate and encourage individuals through images and text to pursue an exercise and diet regime (Boepple, Ata, Rum, & Thompson, 2016). The "fitspiration" concept was created as a response and resolution to "thinspiration" (thin and inspiration), which is content that depicts undernourished and unhealthy thin bodies. This trend is aimed at encouraging young women to have dangerous body weights and advocates for eating disorder behaviors (Ghaznavi & Taylor, 2015; Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2016). However, even though "fitspiration" was intended to be positioned as a healthy initiative, it can also exhibit characteristics that can be potentially harmful to young women. Preliminary content analysis on fitspiration websites and Instagram images have identified that the content is frequently embedded with body ideals and appearance (Boepple et al., 2016; Boepple & Thompson, 2016; Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2016).

Consumption of such health and fitness related social media content is prevalent among young adults (Carrotte et al., 2015). This can be supported by a study that was conducted on 1,001 participants aged 15-29 which found that 37.76% of participants indicated they "liked" or "followed" one of the health and fitness related social media examples they were shown on Twitter, Instagram or Facebook, with "fitspiration" pages being the most common with 30.8% (Carrotte et al., 2015). Another study that conducted in-depth interviews with 12 young women between the ages of 18 and 24 discovered that all participants reported observing "fitspiration" content on a regular basis throughout their day, often checking their mobile devices every few minutes (Goldstraw & Keegan, 2016). Carrotte et al. (2015) also identified that nearly half of all participants who reported to be following fitness-related content were teenaged girls. This

discovery is alarming since pre-adulthood is a notably confusing and impressionable time in regards to self-esteem and body image, and "fitspiration" content often contains messages that can negatively affect vulnerable adolescents (Carrotte et al., 2015; Perloff, 2014).

Further research has continued to explore the adverse effects of exposure to fitspiration images and text on young women. Tiggemann and Zaccardo (2015) suggest that aspects of "fitspiration" are worrying, including the lack of diversity in body shapes, the repeated emphasis on the appearance-related benefits of exercise, and the objectifying features of women's bodies such as very defined "six-pack" abdominals. It has been found that viewership of such content is correlated to deteriorating levels of attractiveness, increased body dissatisfaction, negative mood, lower self-esteem, and higher instances of dieting in experimental studies (Bessenoff, 2006; Carrotte et al., 2015). Additionally, there are various studies that establish strong relationship between viewing "fitspiration" content and participant's self-esteem (Goldstraw & Keegan, 2016; Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015). Tiggemann and Zaccardo (2015) found that when participants in their study were exposed to fitspiration images as opposed to the control (travel) images, it resulted in dissatisfied feelings towards their body and negatively impacted their self-esteem. Similarly, 41% of participants who viewed fitspiration images in the Goldstraw and Keegan (2016) study disclosed a decline in self-confidence, while only one reported an increase.

Within this research there have also been some ostensibly positive results. Although "fitspiration" imagery has had an unfavorable influence on body image and self-esteem, some beneficial results have arisen. As indicated by its name, "fitspiration's" main objective is to inspire. In Tiggemann and Zaccardo's study (2015) both groups, who were exposed to either

travel or "fitspiration" images, reported having an increased feeling of inspiration. The women who were shown the "fitspiration" images expressed that they felt more motivated to advance their health, eat better, and exercise. Likewise, other study respondents enjoyed the positive effects of "fitspiration," indicating that it inspired them to become fit, created goals for their training, and provided advice and tips (Goldstraw & Keegan, 2016). These studies indicate that there can be an increase in motivation to get fit and healthy; however, there are corresponding decreases in self-esteem. Whether or not the newly found inspiration translates into any ensuing behavioral change is outside the scope of this research and is an area to be further explored.

Social Comparison Theory

A crucial theory that is important to this research and describes how and why people compare themselves to other people is Social Comparison Theory proposed by Festinger (1954). This theory affirms that humans look to compare themselves to others as a way of evaluating their competencies and accomplishments (Festinger, 1954). There are two ways individuals can exhibit social comparison: upward social comparison and downward social comparison (Festinger, 1954). Upward social comparison occurs when individuals compare themselves to others who they believe to be socially superior to themselves, which can contribute to negative mood and self-evaluation (Bessenoff, 2006). Downward social comparison is comparison to others one identifies as less successful in some respect, which usually aids in mood and self-worth enhancement (Bessenoff, 2006).

Literature focused on social comparison theory and social media has been used to evaluate how audiences react to media images and feel about themselves once they are exposed to them

(Bessenoff, 2006; Engeln-Maddox, 2005; Lewallen, 2016; Lim & Yang, 2015). Bessenoff (2006) found that individuals, particularly those who have body dissatisfaction and a greater discrepancy between their "ideal" self and "actual" self, are more susceptible to social comparison and its negative effects when they are exposed to images with thin people. Similarly, Tiggemann & Zaccardo (2015) argue that women suffer from dissatisfaction with their own body and appearance as a result of upward social comparison theory. They suggest that women assess their own physical appearance against culturally manifested ideals of beauty and thinness that are presented to them in the media (Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015). However, even more compelling, is that upward social comparison with one's "attractive" peers results in an increased negative view of one's physical self than if the comparison was with a beautiful model (Perloff, 2014). This is because models are seen as less comparable to oneself and consequently this makes them a less relatable as a comparison group (Perloff, 2014).

Because peer-to-peer comparisons result in greater negative outlooks on oneself, it is no surprise that social networking sites are prime environments for social comparison and negative body image and self-esteem. The existence of one's peers, the platform's interactive features, and its access to a large number of images indicates that individuals are more easily able to compare themselves to these images and it can considerably impact their body image (Perloff, 2014). Both Perloff (2014) and Tiggemann and Zaccardo (2015) support this by asserting that social comparison is even more prevalent on social networking sites because of their speed and ability for content to be created and viewed anywhere, anytime. This provides the opportunity for exponentially more frequent comparisons of oneself to these "perfect" and more desirable bodies than was ever available through traditional mass media (Perloff, 2014; Tiggemann & Zaccardo,

2015). Tiggemann and Zaccardo (2015) also contend that these social comparisons from social networking sites are amplified because users are exposed to images that are idealized. These images are idealized because individuals are more likely to post images in which they appear most attractive, or are doing something exciting, or in which the photo has been altered in some way (Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015).

Social media and social networking sites also provide a unique situation for social comparison since the majority of platforms, such as Instagram, Twitter and Facebook, give users the ability to comment and "like" photos. When users "follow" or "like" content related to health or fitness, this content will continually appear in their "newsfeed" and they will continually be exposed to these images (Carrotte et al., 2015). Since users have the capacity to engage in dialogue on these images, Tiggemann and Zaccardo (2015, p. 62) suggest that it creates a "pervasive and intense form of 'appearance conversations' that can be correlated to negative body image." As a result of this, one aspect of the research interest for this report is to explore the comments associated with fitspiration images in order to understand what is being said. In support, Perloff (2015) states that social networking sites are one component that individuals may base their self-esteem on, a direct effect of social comparison theory.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Images on social media, and particularly "fitspiration" images, have been identified as creating negative effects on body image, body satisfaction and self-esteem in young women (Carrotte, Vella, & Lim, 2015; Goldstraw & Keegan, 2016; Hefner et al., 2016; Holland & Tiggemann 2017; Lewallen, 2016; Perloff, 2014; Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015). While "fitspiration" content is intended to encourage and motivate individuals towards a healthier lifestyle, the visual elements that are posted and shared may undermine this inspiration and inadvertently result in negative outcomes. Because of this, the first research question of this report will explore and uncover visual themes and elements that are present in "fitspiration" images on Instagram, as well as characterize and analyze the text-based captions.

RQ1: What are the characteristics of "fitspiration" images on Instagram that are aimed at young women?

Once "fitspiration" images have been analyzed and more is known about the characteristics of these images, the next step will be to determine what messages these images convey based on their visual and textual elements. This analysis will assist in indicating and guiding the meaning that is likely to be derived from the images. Determining whether these images contain inspirational, motivational, negative, or harmful messages will also be useful for the third research question.

RQ2: What messages do these media images convey?

The aim of this research will be to detect and conclude what implications these messages have on young women's body image. There have been various experimental studies (Carrotte et al., 2015; Goldstraw & Keegan, 2016; Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015) conducted that have investigated what the immediate effects of exposure to such images are. However, relatively little research

has been conducted on the way young women interact with the "fitspiration" images organically on Instagram itself, and what kinds of commentary and dialogue are being posted and facilitated. The third research question will address how users express their content or discontent with the images.

RQ3: What are the implications of these messages on young women?

METHODOLOGY

In order to characterize, uncover meanings, and analyze "fitspiration" images present on Instagram and to answer the three research questions of this report, the process of collecting data and the methods used to analyze this data are critical. This section discusses the way in which data has been collected and the different theoretical lenses and methods of data analysis that have been utilized.

Data Collection

The data set is derived from the social media platform Instagram. Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger founded the application in 2010 and created the global community that now has over 500 million users and 95 million photos uploaded every day (Instagram, 2017). Instagram is a free social media platform with both web and, primarily, mobile applications that allows users to capture, edit, and upload photo and video content to their profile. A popular and integral feature of Instagram is the use of hashtags (#). Users "tag" their photos with words or phrases that describe their content and by clicking the hashtag any other photos tagged with this theme can be found. In order to answer the three research questions of this report, my data set will be comprised of public images that are posted on Instagram that have been tagged with "#fitspiration." This hashtag is meant to be associated with images that inspire, motivate, and persuade users to adopt a healthy lifestyle of diet and exercise. At the time of this study, a simple search for this hashtag yields over 12 million results and is growing each day.

Gathering Sample

As the population of "#fitspiration" images is far too large for the scope of this research, a sample size of 50 has been determined to be within the requirements and constraints of this project. In order to obtain the dataset in which these 50 images were selected from, the program Netlytic (www.netlytic.org) was employed. Netlytic is a community-supported application that allows for automatic collection of social media data and text and social network analysis (Netlytic, 2017). This program was utilized to search for "#fitspiration" on Instagram. In terms of date range, Netlytic limits data collection up to a maximum of 31 days, with no historical collection abilities. Therefore, starting on March 7th, 2017 to April 7th, 2017 images with the tag "fitspiration" were collected. Another search ranging from April 8th, 2017 to May 8th, 2017 was conducted. This produced a list of "fitspiration" tagged media for this two-month time frame. Twenty-five images were selected from the first 31 days, and another 25 from the second 31 days. It is also noted that the media is ordered by when the media was tagged, rather than the order it was posted (Netlytic, 2017).

This data collection method was chosen due to Instagram's platform limitations. If the sample was to be manually collected through the Instagram app it would be much too time consuming for the scope of this project to filter through all the images, since there are thousands posted each day. Instagram also has limitations on third party programs and applications' ability to collect data. Currently Instagram does not allow searching by date/time for hashtag posts (i.e. "#fitspiration" images from Sept. 2016 – Oct. 2016), therefore only recent images could be collected through this means. However, given that there are thousands of images with

"#fitspiration" posted each day, a large volume and variety of images are present. It is understood that because of the limited time frame and manual collection the data set will not be completely free of biases; however, through careful analysis of the selected images, important information can be derived for the scope of this research.

Sampling Units

When determining the sample units that would be selected and further analyzed, only photos were considered and not videos in order to keep the data and analysis consistent. Furthermore, only photos that have captions in English were considered, and images that depict males or content that has nothing to do with health or fitness were excluded from consideration. Lastly, only images with greater than 100 likes were chosen; this is to ensure that the images that were selected were being viewed by a multitude of people and that they were desirable for analysis. These exclusions are necessary as the research questions focus on "fitspiration" content that is aimed at young women and the implications for these individuals. With these constraints, a systematic sampling approach was utilized to select the 50 images for analysis. In each of the 25 data dumps that were acquired from the Netlytic data collection, the 5000th and 10,000th images listed were selected. If the image did not meet the above requirements the next or previous listed image was selected until all requirements were met. Once the 50 sample images were selected, they were filed and organized using an excel worksheet for analysis to occur. The methods of analysis are further explained in the following section.

Methods of Analysis

Now that the criterion and specifications for the method of data collection have been discussed, the selected images and captions will be analyzed through a content analysis, a visual social

semiotics framework, and lastly a discourse analysis with applications from social comparison theory. The purpose of conducting multiple methods of analysis is to permit a more comprehensive analysis of the selected images and to appropriately answer each of the three research questions.

Content Analysis

First, in order to answer RQ1: "What are the characteristics of 'fitspiration' images on Instagram that are aimed at young women?" a deductive qualitative content analysis was conducted to categorize and analyze images and the text-based captions. The table below outlines and describes the codebook and variables that were utilized in order to perform the content analysis. This codebook has been primarily adopted from Tiggemann and Zaccardo (2016, p. 4) with a few elements from Boepple et al. (2016, p. 134):

Table 1 – Codebook

Variable	Description	Details
Category	People, food or other	Images of people featured one or more person(s), images of food included a food item and all other images were coded as 'other'
Food	Healthiness of food	Healthy (high nutritional value and/or low in fat/kilojoules, e.g., smoothies and salads) or unhealthy (low nutritional value and/or high in fat/kilojoules, e.g., burgers, pizza and fries)
Adiposity	The individual's physical build (level of visible fat)	Thin (slight frame with little to no visible fat stores), average (medium frame with moderate level of visible fat), overweight (high level of excess fat)
Muscularity	The individual's level of muscular definition	Little to none, visible definition or high-level definition. This may have been unable to be determined due to the framing of the image or clothing covering the body

Action	The action the individual is carrying out in the image	Posing (fitness related, e.g., in fitness clothes or at the gym), posing (fitness unrelated), engaging in a fitness activity (e.g. lifting weights, doing yoga or running), posing in a fitness modeling competition or posing for a before and after photo
Objectification	Presence or absence of elements of objectification	Images featured one or more of the following aspects of objectification: - A specific body part is the main focus of the image - Posing in a sexy manner (e.g. alluring/sultry gaze, winking or arching back) - Individual's head and/or face absent or not clearly visible - Limited clothing: sports bra, bathing suit, underwear
Thin ideal	Presence or absence of "thin ideal" variables	- Before and after photos (visual change in body) - Posing to appear thinner (45-degree angle, hands on hips, flexing, sucking in)
Caption/Quotation content	The content and implied intention of the text	- Inspirational (fitness related) – might motivate someone to improve their life and make positive changes in terms of fitness, exercise, diet, weight, muscles or appearance (explicitly mentioned); - Inspirational (unrelated to fitness) – might motivate someone to improve their life and make positive changes in an unspecified way - Other – any other text (e.g. joke or promotional. Promoting a diet or exercise program)
Dysfunctional quotation	Presence or absence of dysfunctional element in quotation	Quotation that could be taken 'too far' or to the extreme – might encourage unhealthy or excessive attitudes and behaviours towards the body, diet or exercise

This approach entailed analyzing the samples with regards to the above variables and categorizing them. The goal was to have a systematic and analytical approach with variables that would initially guide the research but also allow for emerging themes to be discovered

(Brymann, Bell, & Teevan 2012). It is the hope that by coding each image based on the above code variables the characteristics of "fitspiration" will be determined.

Visual Social Semiotics Analysis

Second, to answer RQ2: "What messages do these media images convey?" a qualitative, deductive analysis using Claire Harrison's (2003) visual social semiotics framework was conducted. This framework was chosen since it provides a structured and methodical approach to analyzing images. Visual social semiotics can be defined as "the description of semiotic resources, what can be said and done with images (and other visual means of communication) and how the things people say and do with images can be interpreted" (Harrison, 2003, p. 48). Therefore, this framework will assist in analyzing images from a visual and semiotic perspective in order to extract the different meanings and interpretations that may be embedded. In this framework, Harrison (2003) presents practical applications and draws on Kress and van Leeuwen's (1996) framework of visual social semiotics where they suggest that images concurrently perform at least three meta-semiotic tasks to create meaning: representational metafunction (RP), interpersonal metafunction (IM), and compositional metafunction (CM). Each of these metafunctions are further explained below.

The representational metafunction is the people, places or objects within an image and describes what the picture is about (Harrison, 2003, p. 50). This metafunction is further broken down into categorizing the image into either a narrative image, if it contains actions, or a conceptual image, if it produces a concept or idea:

Table 2 – Representational Metafunction Structures and Process

Structures	Processes
Narrative: Narrative images allow viewers to create a story about the RPs because the image includes vectors of motion	*Action*: the narrative is created by vector that can be bodies, limbs, tools, weapons, roads, and so forth. *Reactional*: the narrative is created by eyelines (acting as vectors) between RPs.
Conceptual: Conceptual images do not include vectors, rather RPs tend to be grouped together to present viewers with the "concept" of who or what they represent	*Classificatory*: RPs as "kind of" something or some group (that is, they are members of the same class). Advertisements for beauty products often have classificatory images such as a group of models (Revlon models) *Analytical*: RPs are displayed in terms of a "part of whole" structure. The "whole" is a Carrier who possessed "parts" called Attributes. *Symbolic*: RPs are important for what they "mean." A motorbike in an advertisement can, for example, be analytical (that is asking the viewer to check out its attributes) but it is also symbolic of virility. Abstract shapes such as triangles, squares and circles also fall in this category.

(Harrison, 2003, p.51)

Next the interpersonal metafunction describes the actions among all the RPs involved in producing and viewing the image, that is, both the subject in the image and the person viewing the image. This process helps to identify how the picture engages the viewer (Harrison, 2003). Table 3 below describes the different elements of this metafunction:

Table 3 – Interpersonal Metafunction Features and Processes

Features	Feature Processes
Image Act and Gaze: The image act involved the eyeline of the RP(s) in relation to the viewer.	*Demand:* The RP is looking directly at the viewer. A demand generally causes the viewer to feel strong engagement with the RP. *Offer:* The RP is looking outside the picture or at someone or something within the image. In this case,

	the RP becomes an object of contemplation for the viewer, creating less engagement than that of the *demand.*
Social Distance and Intimacy: Social distance is determined by how close RPs in an image appear to the viewer, thereby resulting in feelings of intimacy or distance.	The viewer can see an RP is six different ways • *Intimate distance:* the head and face only • *Close personal distance:* the head and shoulders • *Far personal distance:* from the waist up • *Close social distance:* the whole figure • *Far social distance:* the whole figure with space around it • *Public distance:* torso of several people
Perspective – The Horizontal Angle and Involvement: This angle refers to the relationship between the position of the RP(s) and the viewer.	*The frontal angle:* when an RP is presented frontally to the viewer. This angle creates strong involvement on the part of the viewer as it implies that the RP is "one of us." *The oblique angle (side):* When an RP is presented obliquely to the viewer. This angle creates greater detachment since it implies that the RP is "one of them."
Perspective – The Vertical Angle and Power: There are two possible vertical angle relationships: 1) that of the RP(s) and the viewer, and 2) that between RPs within an image.	*High angle:* The RP is looking up, has less power *Medium angle:* The RP is looking horizontally, has equal power *Low angle:* The RP is looking down, has more power

(Harrison, 2003, p. 53)

Lastly, the compositional metafunction integrates both the RM and IM to determine how they correlate to one another and combine into a useful whole (Harrison, 2003). These compositional features outlined below allow the image's message and meaning to be communicated to the viewer:

Table 4 – Compositional Metafunction System and Elements

System	Elements
Information Value: the placement of RPs allows them to take on different information values.	*Left/Right:* RPs on the left side of an image have the value of being "given" knowledge while RPs on the right are "new." o Given = familiar, commonsense o New = an issue, a problem, or solution

	Top/Bottom: RPs are the top of an image have the value of being "ideal" while RPs below represent the "real." o Ideal = emotive, imaginary, what might be, often the pictorial elements of an image o Real = factual, informative, down to earth, practical, often textual elements in an image *Center/Margin:* RPs in the center provide the nucleus of information to which surrounding elements are subservient.
Salience: Salience refers to the ability of an RP to capture the viewers' attention	*Size:* The larger the RP, the greater the salience. *Sharpness of focus:* Out-of-focus RPs have less salience. *Tonal contrast:* Areas of high tonal contrast have greater salience. *Color contrast:* Strongly saturated colors have greater salience than "soft" colors. *Foreground/Background:* An RP in the foreground as greater salience that an RP in the background.
Framing: How RPs are framed affects whether they are seen as connected or separate	*Framelines:* The lines within the image that divide RPs or hold them together. *Pictorial framing devices:* the stronger the lines around the image, the greater the connection.

Modality: Modality refers to how we feel about the visual message's validity and reliability. Images with higher modality appear more real than those with lesser modality.	Modality markers*:* The visual cues that indicate "realness" generally run along a spectrum of possibilities *Color saturation, differentiation and modulation:* o Full color = high modality o Black and white = low modality *Contextualization* o Fully conceived background = high modality o Background completely absent = low modality *Depth* o Deep perspective = high modality o No perspective = low modality *Illumination* o Fullest representation of light and shade = high modality o Absence of light and shade = low modality

(Harrison, 2003, p. 57-58)

As outlined in Harrison (2003) it is meaningful to mention that visual social semiotic theory derives from Western and North American culture and perspectives. However, following this structure of semiotic analysis will allow for a systemic examination of each sample unit that will uncover meanings, messages and perspectives present. This is important because, as Harrsion (2003) states, individuals no longer rely entirely on textual elements to understand a text; rather, they now incorporate and measure everything they see in a text and construct meaning for themselves. This notion is essential for this study because this framework will help to determine how young women view the fitspiration images and interpret the messages they convey.

Discourse Analysis and Social Comparison Theory

Finally, RQ3: "What are the implications of these messages on young women?" will be answered through a discourse analysis of the comments of the selected images. This discourse

analysis will involve looking at the content of the language that has been posted, and looking for any themes that are being discussed in the comments section of the images. Additionally, a qualitative approach of Festinger's (1954) social comparison theory will be applied and combined with the discourse analysis to further investigate how users may view these images and make comparisons. This method will attempt to uncover the potentially positive or negative implications of these images on young women. A preliminary review of user accounts that post comments can be used for judgment of gender and age. As presented by Brymann, Bell, and Teevan (2012) discourse analysis is less about coding and more about intuitive analysis, searching for a purpose and meaning behind the way things are said or presented. Comments and discourses will be analyzed in relation to social structure to answer questions such as: are users creating social identities through their comments, are they commenting empowering reactions, pledging to get healthier, or are they disavowing the images and their contents? Through analysis of the discourses present, conclusions can be drawn about the effects the selected images have on viewers. Additionally, a social comparison theoretical lens, as described in detail in the literature review, will be applied during analysis in order to interpret how each image may create and alter the social comparisons of the viewer.

ANALYSIS

Now that the methodologies and theoretical applications of this report have been fully outlined and discussed, this section will detail the process used to analyze the selected 50 images with regards to each research question.

As previously discussed, a content analysis was employed to answer the first research question. A spreadsheet was created with the code variables from table 1 with an additional column for each of the 50 images where the presence or absence of each variable was recorded. Images were first coded on the basis of being either person(s), food or other. If the image was of a person, the image was further coded for the person's adiposity, muscularity, if they were performing an action, and if any objectifying or thin ideal elements were present. If the image was of food it was further classified as either healthy or unhealthy. The nature of the images' captions or any quotations present were coded for either being inspirational (fitness related), inspirational (unrelated to fitness), or other (neutral). Once all 50 images were coded completely, themes and patterns were noted in order to discuss in the following section of this report.

Next, Harrison's (2003) visual social semiotics framework was utilized in order to uncover the semiotic composition of each of the "fitspiration" images and to answer research question two regarding the messages these images convey. Another spreadsheet was created with each of the three metafunctions and their corresponding structures and processes outlined. I first systematically analyzed each image with regards to the RM. I classified each image as either being narrative or conceptual and then further described the action or reaction the RPs were performing, or the concept being displayed. Next I identified the IM features that were present in

each photo such as image act/gaze, social distance/intimacy, horizontal angle/involvement perspective, vertical angle/power perspective, as well as the CM features such as informational value, salience, and modality.

At last, the comments of each of the selected images were analyzed in an attempt to reveal how the messages of each image could impact young women viewers. A final excel file sheet was created to log the number of comments, whether they were positive or negative in nature, and whether they were made by a female or male. The types of comments, discourses and rhetoric used were noted for further discussion in the coming section.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section of the study will discuss the findings from the preceding analyses. Divided into the three different analytical approaches that address both the visual elements and textual elements of each of the Instagram images as a whole, the findings reinforce western cultural ideals regarding the portrayal of women and the "thin-ideal." Although each image was posted by a different female Instagram user it appears there are many thematic and elemental similarities that transpire as a result of the "fitspiration" topic.

Content Analysis Findings

Using the codebook adopted by Tiggemann and Zaccardo (2016, p. 4) and Boepple et al. (2016, p. 134) I found that 44 images contained people (88%), five depicted foods/meals (10%), and one was a graphic with solely a quote (2%). All food depicted was healthy in nature and appeared to be of high nutritional value and/or low in fat/kilojoules such as salad, grilled chicken, oatmeal, fruit, and green vegetables. The image with the quote "if you still look cute after your prep, you don't prep hard enough" was categorized as inspirational and fitness related because it suggests that there must be just as much energy put into prepping food as there is in exercising and that nutrition is just as important during a health regime.

With respect to the images containing people, 93% of images contained only one female subject. Furthermore, of these images, 15% were "before and after" photos depicting some change in physical build or weight loss, 24% were women performing a fitness activity such as lifting weights, doing yoga or doing Pilates, and 37% of images were those of women posing in a fitness-related manner, by either flexing their muscles, wearing athletic clothes or appearing in a

gym environment. The remaining 24% of images were with women posing for a picture unrelated to fitness – in normal clothes or out in public. In terms of the body shapes that were present, it is unmistakable that the "thin-ideal" ideology is being disseminated through "fitspiration" images. Seventy-one percent of the images only containing one female were categorized as having a thin adiposity with a slight frame and little to no visible fat stores, 17% of women depicted were of average adiposity, only 7% were characterized as overweight and the remaining 5% were coded as unable to determine. Similarly, 63% of the sole female subjects had either "visible" muscularity definition or "high-level" muscularity definition (34% and 29% respectively). Seventeen percent of the images showcased a female with "little to none" levels of muscularity and 20% were unable to determine due to clothing or the framing of the image.

Also of importance, 68% of images with a female subject appeared to highlight and showcase the "thin-ideal" with either before and after photos with a visual change in body or posing to appear thinner (45-degree angle, hands on hips, flexing, sucking in). The thin-ideal concept can be described as a slight, feminine physique with a small waist and little body fat (Tiggemann and Zaccardo 2016). Of course, as "fitspiration" is meant to showcase a healthy lifestyle it would be assumed that images of fit and muscular bodies would appear. However, as shown above, the instances of thin and muscular bodies are much more prevalent than "average" or over weight body compositions. This constant portrayal of already "perfect" bodies could be discouraging to young female viewers because they may consequently aspire to change their appearance to look like the female subject in the same way she may view a magazine advertisement and aspire to look like the model. As a result, these aspirations may negatively impact young women's confidence and feelings about their weight and body shape because they compare themselves to

the perfect bodies they see, which in fact are not perfect, as in most cases, they have been digitally altered and their imperfections photo shopped. Perhaps if more average or above-average female bodies were showcased young women would feel increasingly motivated to get healthy because they're able to relate to the subject and they see similarities between themselves, instead of simply yearning to have the perfectly fit and toned body of a fitness guru. While aspiration may be what "fitspiration" is attempting to cultivate in viewers, it has been found that these social comparisons can negatively affect young women's self esteem and body image (Perloff, 2014).

In terms of the objectification of the females depicted in the Instagram images, over half (52%) of the images categorized as "person(s)" contained one or more objectifying element such as a specific body part as the main focus of the image (7%), posing in a sexy manner (e.g. alluring/sultry gaze, winking or arching back) (11%), the individual's head and/or face was absent or not clearly visible (5%), or the subject had limited clothing on such as a sports bra, bathing suit, or underwear (30%). However, it can be noted here that a sports bra may not be interpreted as being objectifying as some women wear this piece of apparel as part of their workout attire. Nonetheless it exposes a great deal more of a women's body to viewers. Captions are another integral part of Instagram and users utilize them to further explain their images and to express themselves. The captions of each of the selected 50 images were coded and categorized by the author as being: inspirational (fitness related) – may motivate someone to improve their life and make positive changes in terms of fitness, exercise, diet, weight, muscles or appearance (explicitly mentioned); inspirational (unrelated to fitness) – may motivate someone to improve their life and make positive changes in an unspecified way; or other (neutral) – any other text.

Fifty-eight percent of the captions were categorized as being inspiring and related to fitness, 36% of captions were neutral and 6% were inspiring but unrelated to fitness. Three examples of inspiring captions found were:

> *"Transformation is a sum of small efforts repeated day-in and day-out. You become what you repeatedly do, and the quality of your life is determined by the quality of the habits you live by. Changing habits is one of the most fundamental skills to learn, because it allows you to reshape your life, reshape who you are. That's truly transformational. The body is just one of the benefits that comes with it."*
>
> *"It never gets easier; you just get better. So don't miss a day, let's do this! #strong"*
>
> "*I was feeling like crap this morning - bloated, sluggish, just rubbish. I was trying on dresses to go out tonight, and when I looked at myself I thought, you know what? I feel better about myself than I ever have done! I feel strong, I feel healthy, and I can see it in my body! I still feel so bloated and not the best, but I am happy with myself, and I am proud when I look in the mirror, and that's something I've never been able to say before!"*

Many more captions similar to the ones above demonstrate the positive and motivating messages that "fitspiration" was meant to be founded on. The word "strong" was also prevalent in the captions of 42% of the total images. This word has been adopted by the "fitspiration" community as a word to represent being strong in body, mind and spirit and has been positioned as a rebuttal to aspiring to be "skinny." The women were quite honest in their captions about the struggles they face on their fitness journey and appeared to be opening up to their viewers about the realities of working out and living a healthy lifestyle in an effort to appear more relatable and "real." Fortunately, in this sample, no text was seen to be dysfunctional in nature in a way that could have encouraged unhealthy or excessive attitudes and behaviours towards the body, diet or exercise. However, an interesting finding is that 52% of all the Instagram posts promoted or mentioned to some degree a form of diet program, fitness regime, fitness apparel, or gym, either in their caption, location geotag, or hashtags. Some of these programs include Kayla Itsines

Bikini Body Guide, Weight Watchers, and IIFYM ("If It fits Your Macros") diet plan. With more than half of the "fitspiration" posts promoting a different program it could be discouraging or harmful to viewers if they think they must use a certain plan or regime in order to achieve results, or if they think that by simply using the same product they will achieve the same results as the thin female shown.

Nevertheless, this content analysis has proven to provide ample information to support the first research question: What are the characteristics of "fitspiration" images on Instagram that are aimed at young women? The selected images indicate that "fitspiration" images include characteristics such as primarily single female subjects, posing in a fitness manner, having thin adiposities and visible-to-high levels of muscularity, with positive, inspiring captions. Although the "thin-ideal" appears to be prevalent within the women's body shapes, when coupled with the raw and motivating captions, the effects of the idealized female bodies on young women's self-esteem may be lessened.

Visual Social Semiotics Analysis Findings

A probable reason for the recent interest of "fitspiration" images on Instagram is the potentially harmful messages that these images convey to viewers and subsequently their ability to affect young women's self-esteem and body image as a result of these messages. As the authors of each of the selected images may or may not have had specific intentions and messages they wanted to convey with their Instagram post, each and every viewer could also interpret them differently, therefore be receiving different messages. The findings in this section are based on the various structures and processes of Harrison's (2003) visual social semiotic framework as a means to

illustrate how viewers may have interpreted the images and subsequently what messages could be disseminated to a young female viewer. It is important to note here that not all aspects of the three metafunctions were found to be present in each image or were equally important. Some processes and features appeared more frequently and prominently, such as the interpersonal metafunction. This metafunction appeared to be particularly important to these fitspiration images because almost all of them included human RPs, and determining how the RPs interact and engage with the viewer is crucial for uncovering the messages that are being communicated.

First the RM helps to identify what the picture is about (Harrison, 2003). As noted in the content analysis above the vast majority of the images included human RPs (88%). Of these, 34 images (77%) were classified as being "action" images where the narrative of the image is told by vectors, which in this case were created by the limbs of the female viewers as they posed and flexed to showcase their bodies. These vectors of motion create a narrative about the subject as the viewers are able to visualize the action and motion taking place. These narratives coupled with their captions tell the story of working out and the progress the RP has gone through. They allow the viewer to visualize the process and action of working out which has resulted in the nicely toned and fit bodies exhibited. Additionally, the five food photographs were identified as being conceptual analytical images. This means the image is asking viewers to look at the parts of the RP that make it a whole (Harrison, 2003, p. 51). This could lead viewers to ask and think about what makes a healthy meal and to look further at the meal's attributes or ingredients. Combined with the IM, the images depicting food effectively combined the four aspects – visual demand, intimate distance, frontal angle, and low vertical angle – to generate strong viewer involvement. The close proximity and high, bird's eye angle suggests that preparing healthy

food can be easy, and this angle also suggests that the viewer has control over the food and that food does not control them. This could be motivating to young women who may struggle with destructive eating behaviours or have difficulty maintaining a healthy diet. This is an important image to convey for "fitspiration" and to young female viewers because it is crucial that messages promoting healthy relationships with food are present and active in society and online.

Next, the images with human RPs were analyzed using the IM descriptors. This metafunction was found to be the most telling and applicable of this framework for the selected "fitspiration" images because the way a subject is portrayed in an image dictates the level of engagement with the viewer (Harrison, 2003). The results are somewhat mixed with approximately half of the images portraying low levels of engagement and the other half creating strong levels of engagement with the viewer. The strong levels of engagement were created when the subjects bared a "demand" gaze, frontal angles, and medium and high vertical perspective angles. The results show that 21 images contained a "demand" gaze, 24 had a frontal perspective angle, and 26 had a medium vertical angle perspective. Having the individual presented frontally to the viewer, making eye contact and being at an equal eye level creates strong involvement with the viewers, denotes equality, and implies that the subject is "one of us" (Harrison, 2003). Depending on the distinct perspectives and angles of the images different messages may be conveyed to the viewers. If the message is that the female subject is equal, it can be interpreted by the viewer that this type of lifestyle is attainable. Whereas if the images are continually diffusing messages that the female subjects are of higher power and unattainable, it can be harmful to young women's self-esteem if they think they can never reach this type of lifestyle. Messages of superiority and low levels of engagement were also found in the selected images

Figure 1

with 24 containing an offer gaze, 20 with an oblique angle, and 10 with a low vertical angle perspective. These features result in the subject becoming an object of contemplation rather than establishing engagement with the viewer and imply the subject is "one of them" (Harrison, 2003, p. 52). Figure 1 shows how the differing perspectives and image act/gaze processes could affect how the viewer interprets the image. The image on the left is a low angle and has the RP looking down so that she has more power in relation to the viewer, whereas the image on the right has the RP looking horizontally at a medium angle, which denotes equality with her and the viewer. The RP on the left is also positioned at an oblique and posterior angle, which creates greater detachment with the viewer and the image on the right has the RP positioned at a frontal angle and creates stronger involvement on the part of the viewer (Harrison, 2003). Due to the low angle and greater detachment from the viewer, the image on the left creates the message of superiority or that she/her appearance could be unrealistic. This message could discourage young female viewers if they think they can never reach this level of fitness. Whereas the picture on the right has greater attachment with the viewer and implies that the subject is "one of us." The RP then becomes much more relatable and a young female viewer could feel inspired with the "if she can do it, I can do it" mentality. And lastly, both RPs are looking directly at the viewer, which is a demand gaze and this causes the viewer to feel strong

engagement with both of the RPs. As a result of these semiotic elements it could be interpreted that the individual on the right is more identifiable with young female viewers and they could feel inspired by her whereas they may feel threatened or discouraged by the individual on the left.

Lastly, by analyzing the images from a CM perspective, all images appeared to have high information value, salience and modality in order to make coherent visual messages for the viewer. The majority of the RPs were of a good size, in focus and in the foreground of the image, emphasizing the importance of them. Modality is also strong for the images due to the nature of Instagram as an editing tool. The posters were able to edit the colors, shading, saturation and other visual elements in order to make their image esthetically appealing and coherent to their viewers. Ultimately, the analysis of the images using the RM, IM and CM descriptors were sufficient in answering RQ2 "What messages do these media images convey?" Young women may feel empowered and motivated by such images that contain messages of equality and attachment to the subject whereas other images convey messages of inferiority, which could cause repeated and continuous feelings of discouragement regarding getting fit and healthy.

Discourse Analysis and Social Comparison Theory Findings

Now that the visual elements of the selected images have been analyzed, I will turn to the comments that were made on each of these photos in an attempt to answer RQ3: "What are the implications of these messages on young women?" The accounts that made comments were viewed to make educated judgments about age and gender. As well, a social comparison theory

lens was applied as a means to determine how young female viewers may interpret the images and messages.

The number of comments per image ranged from 1 to 22, with one exception being an image that had 105 comments. Female commenters generally made up more than half of the comments on each page, with promotional/business accounts and male commenters making up the remaining half. The image that had the most comments turned out to be an interesting find. This image had over 2,000 likes and the account holder has approximately 30,000 followers, which indicates that this photo has been viewed widely. Of these 105 comments it was not apparent by looking at the users' profiles that *any* were female. Five were accounts that showcased female models posing in lingerie and the rest appeared to be male. It is somewhat surprising that there were no female commenters. The majority of these comments made by the male users were praise about her appearance including words such as "damn," "perfect," "beautiful," and mobile app emoticons that signified their approval such as heart eyes, kissing faces or clapping hands. While there were no female commenters it is important to note that there is a high possibility that young females have seen this image along with the males who commented due to the large number of likes and followers of the account who posted the image. While this is the only account that had this many comments in this sample, it is likely that there are many more accounts that have this far of a reach due to "fitspiration's" high popularity on Instagram.

Another interesting finding was that there were only two comments that were determined to be negative or destructive in nature. There were no comments that belittled the subject in the image;

however, these two comments showed that after viewing the image the commenter expressed feelings of discouragement in themselves. These comments were:

- "I *want to be as confident in my body as you are. I have too many things that I hate and I'm disgusted to ever show it off*";
- *"Wow, I will never look like this!!!"*

These comments show that there is the potential for viewers to feel less motivated after viewing fitspiration images because they think their fitness goal may be too far from reach. Here these commenters are exhibiting upward social comparisons as well as forming their social identities compared to the subject in that they believe the female subject is "better" than they are. Other than these two comments, the remaining comments were overwhelmingly positive, empowering, and encouraging to the subjects to "keep up the good work" or acclamations and commendations for their physical appearance. Based on this sample, these comments show that the "fitspiration" community is generally positive and that they engage in constructive and motivating discourses and rhetoric. This is a positive finding because as young female viewers are exposed to healthy messages it could in turn motivate them to get healthy rather than being vulnerable to adverse comments that could result in risky practices such as eating disorder behaviours. No comments appeared to force a particular lifestyle on the viewers or encourage obsessive behaviours as has been found in "fitspiration's" counterpart "thinspiration" (Boepple & Thompson, 2016). However, while it appears that the majority of the comments are productive, the constant and repeated confirmation of the "thin-ideal" that was found to be present during the content analysis can be damaging to young women's self-esteem. Such continued exposure to thin female bodies reinforces Western culture's belief that being thin is what makes women attractive and desirable (Engeln-Maddox, 2005).

Also important to note, it was found that the majority of comments related to the subject's appearance. Only a handful of comments expressed interest in obtaining advice regarding exercises. Thus, it appears that "fitspiration" images on Instagram largely use "perfect" and sculpted bodies as motivation rather than using exercise routines or food recommendations as a means to achieve this goal. These comments from female accounts primarily included words such as "*amazing*", "*beautiful*," "*goals*" and even "*I wish I had a body like you!*" With reference to social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954), comments such as these suggest that young women view these images and then create an upward social comparison which can result in an increased negative view of their physical self (Perloff, 2014). With regard to RQ3 and the implications these messages have on young women, if the women in "fitspiration" images continually position themselves to be of superior status or with unattainable bodies, young women's self-esteem will be negatively impacted. The reason for this is that they may feel lesser because social networking sites are one component that individuals may base their self-esteem on (Perloff, 2015). Of course, it is rarely beneficial for young women to compare their bodies to someone else's, as no two bodies are the same. "Fitspiration" should be aimed at promoting self-acceptance and focus on achieving health rather than achieving a specific body type.

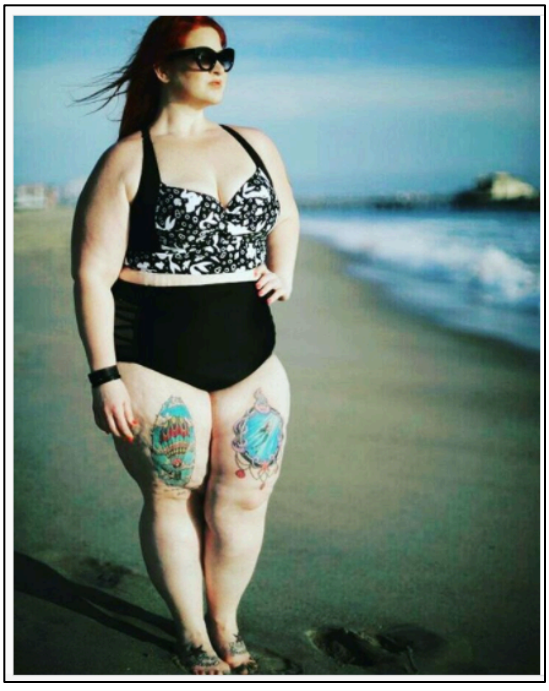

Figure 1

Alternatively, images that portrayed a more "realistic" female body such as the image shown in Figure 2 resulted in young female commenters posting messages such as: "*You are so inspiring*,"

"*I want to be as confident in my body as you are," and* "*Keep up the great work, you're an inspiration*." These comments show that when the young women experience feelings of equality to the subject they are more likely to have feelings of inspiration rather than focusing on the superficial means of aspiring to look like the thin woman. As a result, young women may partake in positive social comparisons, which increase levels of self-esteem. Ultimately, the way a female subject portrays herself or is portrayed on Instagram may have the ability to impact how the viewer feels about the image and subsequently the social comparisons they make of themselves. In the Instagram "fitspiration" community there is an apparent need for more diverse body shapes to be depicted in order to reduce the amount of upward social comparisons that are being made and for the sake of young women's body image and self-esteem.

CONCLUSION

Today's generation of young people have lived their entire teenage years being inundated by social media. Unlike their parent's generation they have never known a life without the ability to connect with peers, and strangers, both near and far with the click of a finger. Social media has transformed how people communicate and interact and has created new ways for young adults to be inspired, shamed, and confused. This growing concern of social media's impact on these young, impressionable minds has created a branch of research concerned with the effects of social media and their mental health (RSPH, 2017).

Due to the increasing popularity of Instagram usage among teens as well as the "fitspiration" theme online, this study sought to explore "fitspiration" content on Instagram. More specifically, this research attempted to determine the visual characteristics of "fitspiration" images, the messages they transmit, and the ensuing implications on young women. A key finding of this research is that there is a shift from the damaging rhetoric of "thinspiration" and "skinny" to being healthy and "strong." The captions associated with the majority of the images were intended to motivate, inspire and communicate to their viewers that a healthy lifestyle is all about balance. Comments on each photo were also all positive; however, it was exhibited that some young women were still making upward social comparisons by indicating the women's bodies were, for example, "goals." These findings show that "fitspiration" images may in fact result in motivation to become fitter as the young female viewers aspire to look like the female subject.

In addition, the majority of the females in the images embodied Western cultural views of beauty by depicting non-average "thin" bodies. This limited representation of body types is consistent

with previous content analyses of "fitspiration" websites and Instagram images that identified the content to be embedded with the "thin-ideology" (Boepple et al., 2016; Boepple & Thompson, 2016; Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2016). Not only does this repeated representation of one body type set unrealistic expectations for young women, it also propagates the idea that this is what a fit and healthy body looks like, when in fact a wide assortment of body types can both be healthy and enjoy fitness (Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2016).

Ultimately, "fitspiration's" goal was to shift the conversation online and on social media from the desire to be "skinny" and lose weight to advocating for a fit and healthy *lifestyle.* While this appears true through this research and previous studies mentioned in the review of literature, there are still indications that there can be an increase in motivation to get fit and healthy from "fitspiration" content; however, there are corresponding decreases in self-esteem (Goldstraw & Keegan, 2016; Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015). This can likely be attributed to the large majority of women pictured still exhibiting the "thin and toned ideal" (Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2016).

Limitations

It is important to note that due to the narrow scope and time constraint of this project that limitations exist. As mentioned previously, the hashtag "fitspiration" on Instagram generates over 12 million results of images that have been tagged with this phrase. During this study, only 50 images were analyzed from a small time frame of a two-month period. This may have resulted in a data set that does not accurately depict the population in its entirety. As well, as the analysis was largely interpretive in nature, it is understood that the findings and explanations may involve some biases or results that could be interpreted differently depending on the

researcher. Another limitation of this project was that the agency of the social media users who consume "fitspiration" posts was not explored. Further research could analyze if social media users have any agency of their own to avoid harmful images, or if they are simply victims with no ability to resist or make their own decisions. Nonetheless, this limited study can serve as a useful reference for professional communicators regarding how media images can create and communicate meaning to viewers, specifically on Instagram. This study also helps to reinforce previous works and potentially inform future research regarding "fitspiration's" visual elements and implications on Instagram.

Recommendations & Future Research

The findings from these analyses indicate that young women can achieve feelings of motivation from "fitspiration" but can also experience negative thoughts about their physical selves. In an effort to resist and/or cope with the effects that social media can have on young women, media literacy can be an important tool. Grabe et al. (2008) ascertain that this type of instruction can be used to educate adolescent and young women about being more critical and diligent consumers of media that focuses on physical appearance. As a result, lowered levels of body dissatisfaction and harmful eating behaviours may be prevented (Grabe et al., 2008). Also important is the need for continued education of people using social media who have a large online presence. These public figures have the ability to impact and effect young females with their posts because young females look up to them and these social media figures, in some cases, have the power to be a young girl's idol. Accounts that have this reach should be cognizant of their viewers and show the ones who look up to them that it's acceptable to have imperfections and that imperfections are what makes them perfect.

As “fitspiration” is a relatively new concept and as social media continues to change every day, further research is required on this topic. Additional research for this report could involve interviewing young women regarding the “fitspiration” posts or conducting an experimental study to see how the images affect both their levels of motivation and levels of body image and self-esteem. Furthermore, studies that follow whether or not the newly founded inspiration derived from “fitspiration” images actually resulted in becoming more active/healthy could generate interesting findings.

In the end, it appears “fitspiration” is headed in the right direction by attempting to combat negative messages and conversations online with positive and motivating dialogue. However, in order to be truly effective and lessen the potential effects of “fitspiration” on young women’s body image, the media’s representation of women’s bodies, and ultimately, societal norms and views regarding what the ideal women’s body looks like must continue to be challenged and disputed. Surely by presenting truly realistic and diverse body types, and by continuing to educate users about the powers of social media, the potential for negative messages will begin to subside.

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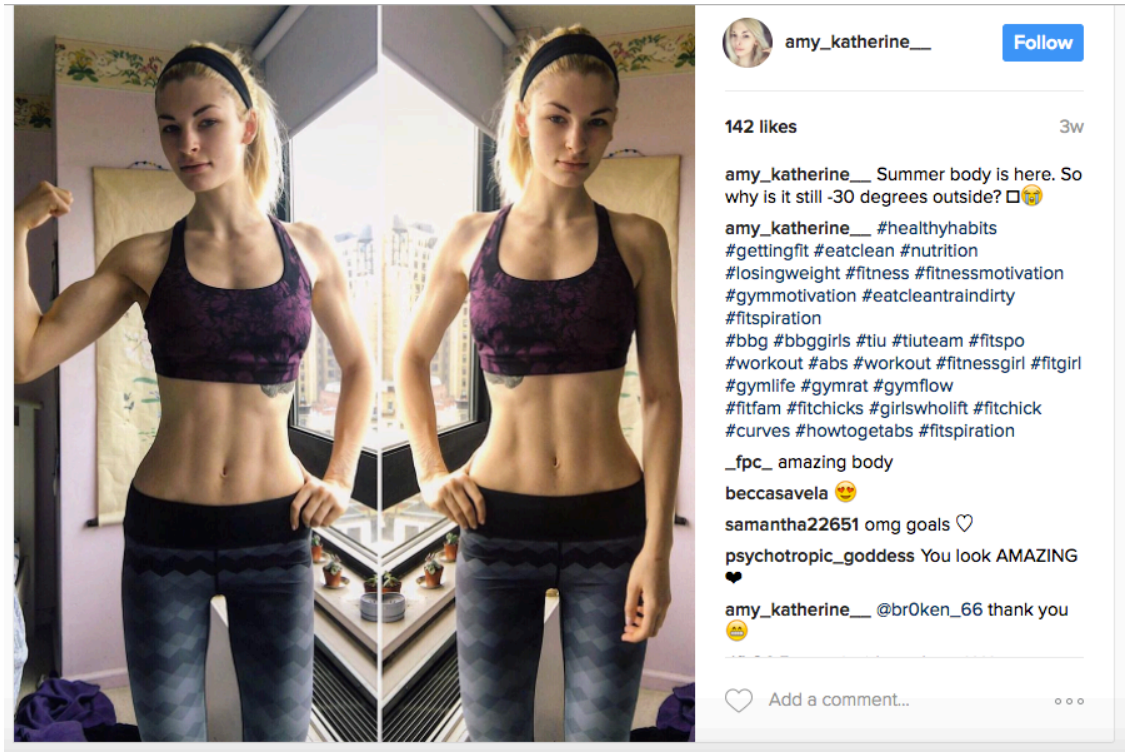
Tiggemann, M., & Zaccardo, M. (2016). ‘Strong is the new skinny’: A content analysis of #fitspiration images on Instagram. *Journal of Health Psychology*, doi: 10.1177/1359105316639436

APPENDIX A: 50 Images Selected for Analysis

Picture 1 – Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/BRYWUixDf_f/

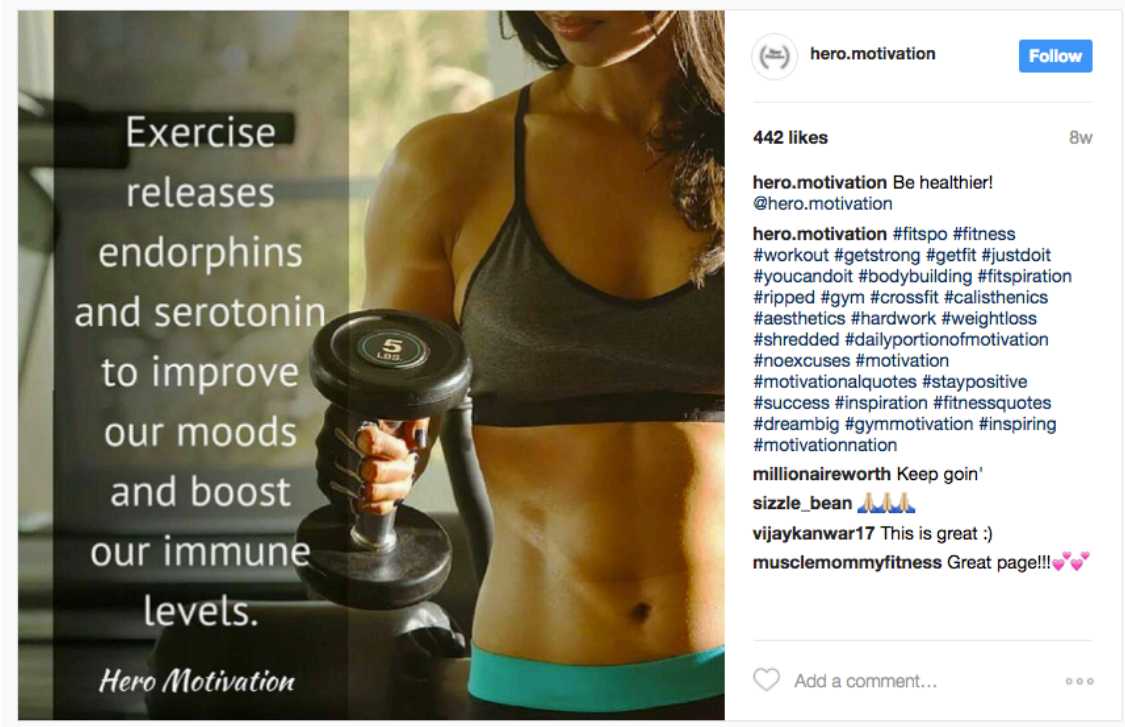


Picture 2 – Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/BRWcmJblIZj/

Picture 3 - Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/BRbsBdaF-bW/

Picture 4 – Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/BRhtxmCjQcZ/

Picture 5 - Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/BRn3kDfldjU/



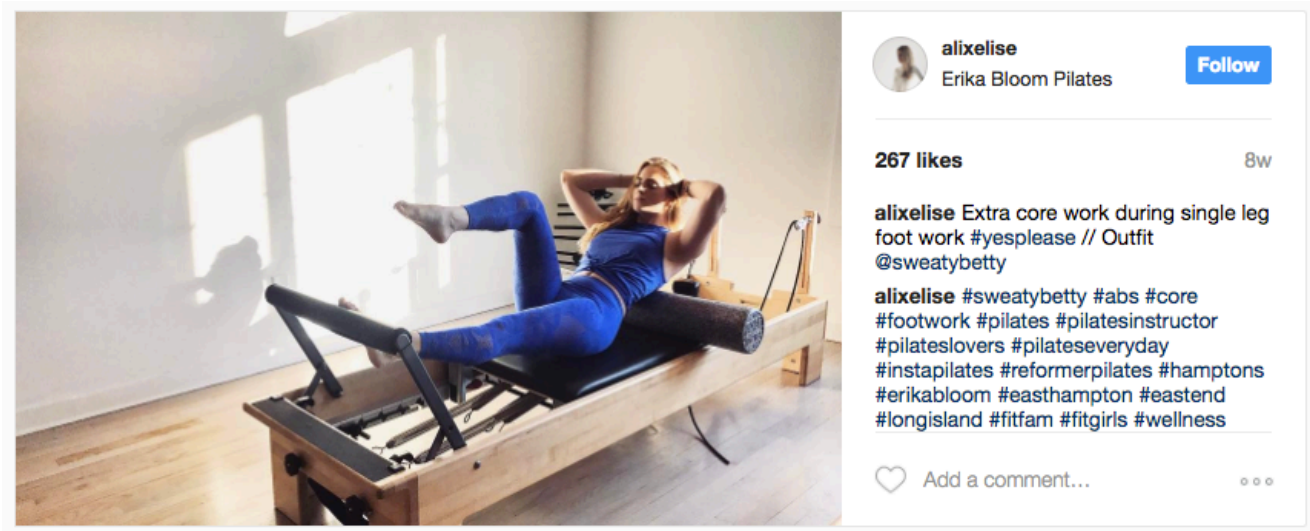
Picture 6 - Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/BRq2BcSD0K0/

Picture 7 - Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/BR63MP2ABUL/

Picture 8 - Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/BRuTGpCjQ1x/

Picture 9 - Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/BRuEFfAjtTb/

Picture 10 - Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/BR0Q9xNlFzV/



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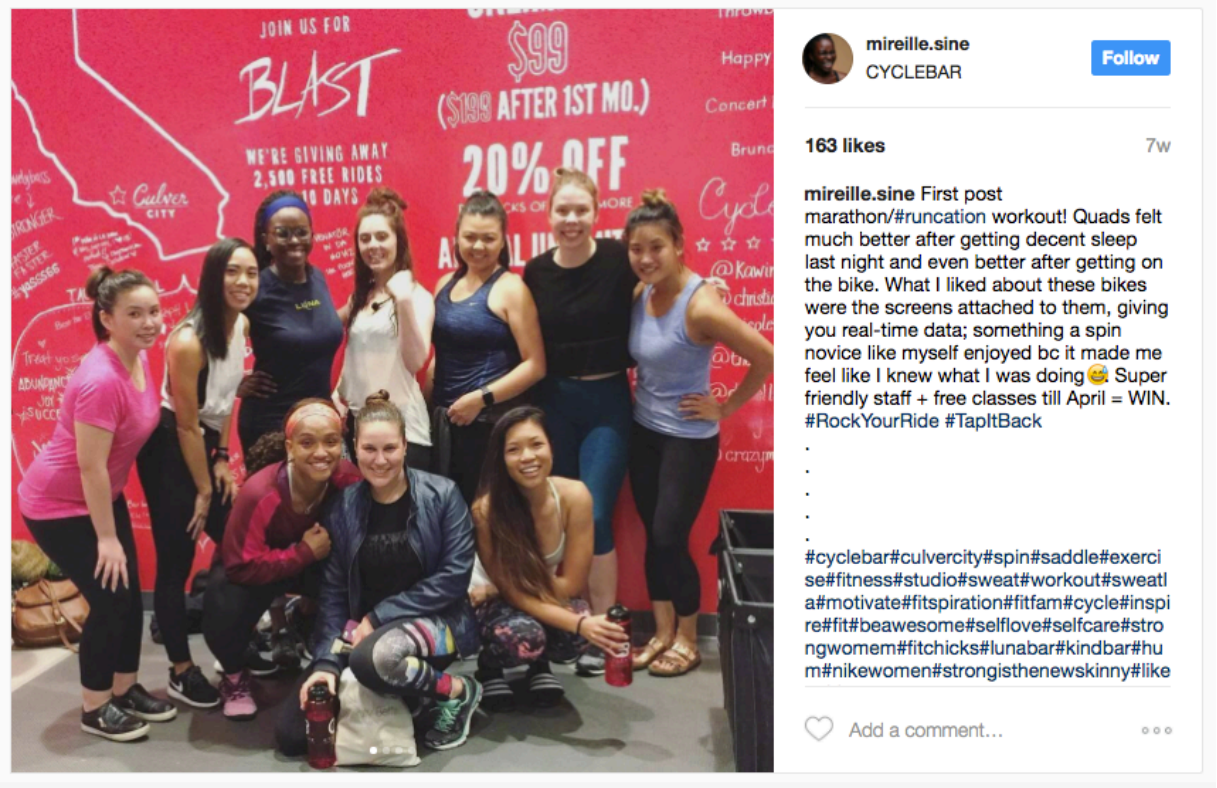
Picture 12 - Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/BSsab76D7KN/



Picture 13 - Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/BR-EmRWhz_X/

Picture 14 - Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/BSA7Uu7h3fA/

Picture 15 - Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/BSHBj0rAQDE/

Picture 16 - Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/BSULAc2lspq/

Picture 17 - Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/BSKcXbxjOrM/

Picture 18 - Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/BSNU9OCjPCo/

Picture 19 - Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/BSY_8QchFDv/

Picture 20 - Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/BSatAmEg1oJ/

Picture 21 - Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/BSdLon1lK5t/

Picture 22 - Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/BSe99qahr4G/

Picture 23 - Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/BSg6Yr6h27g/?taken-by=naturally.nik

Picture 24 - Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/BSkfUiagMDY/

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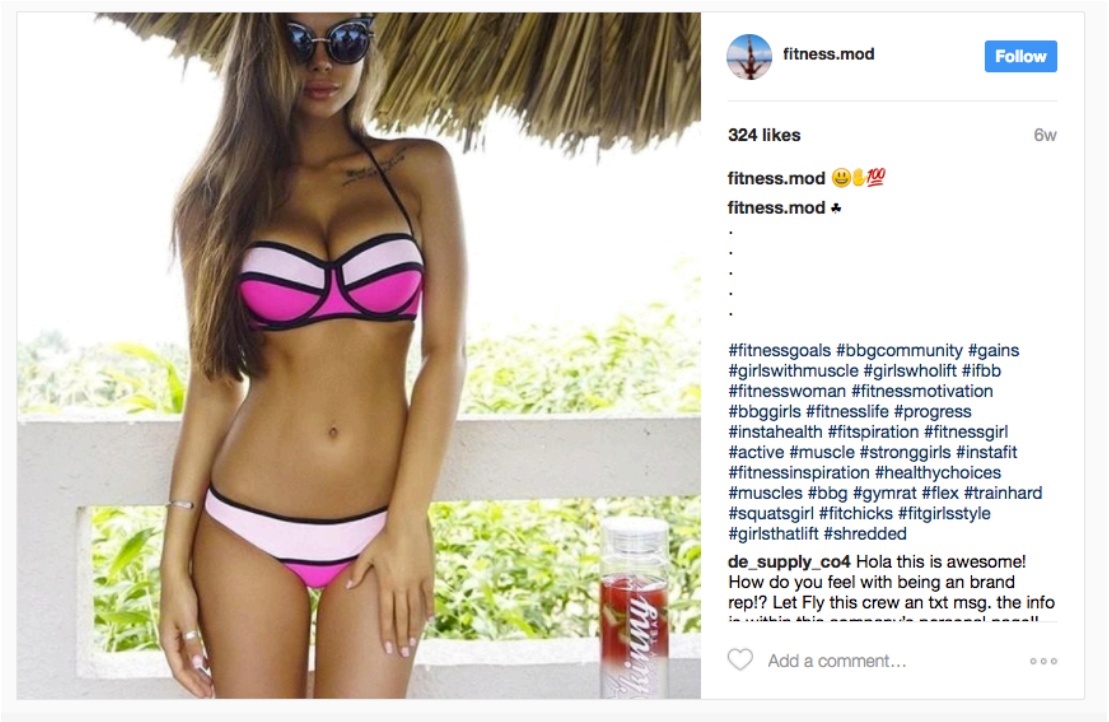
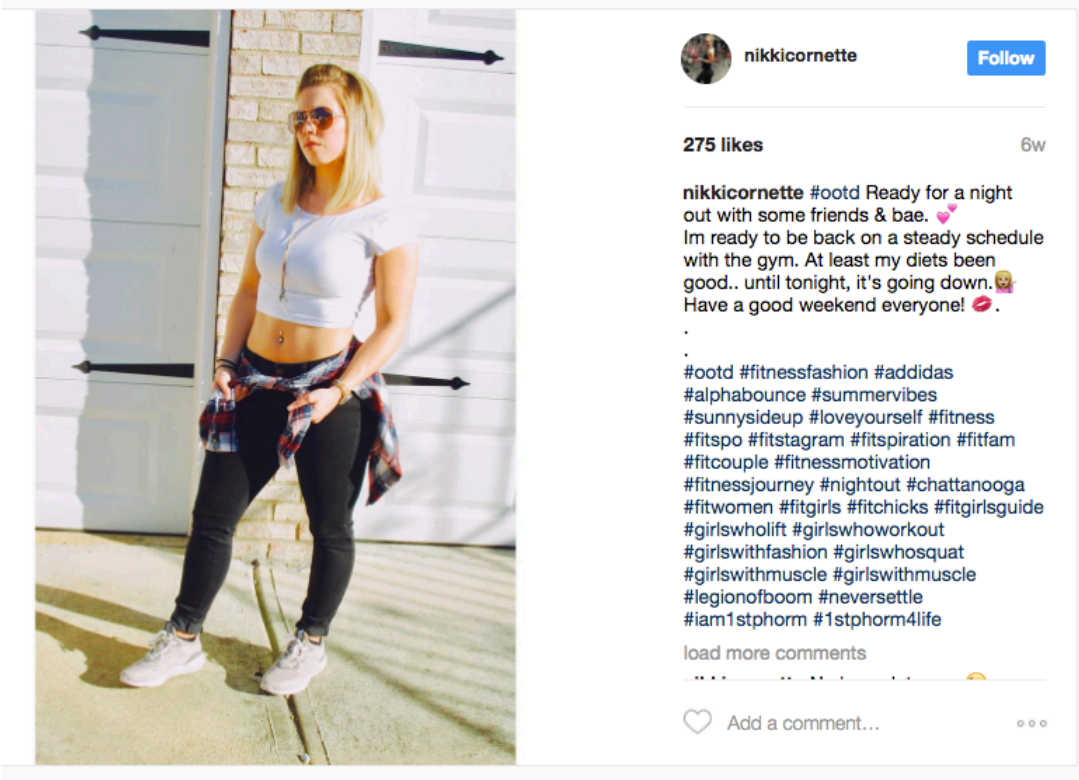
Picture 26 - Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/BSl1AlelJD0/



Picture 27 – Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/BSmQR5TBFas/



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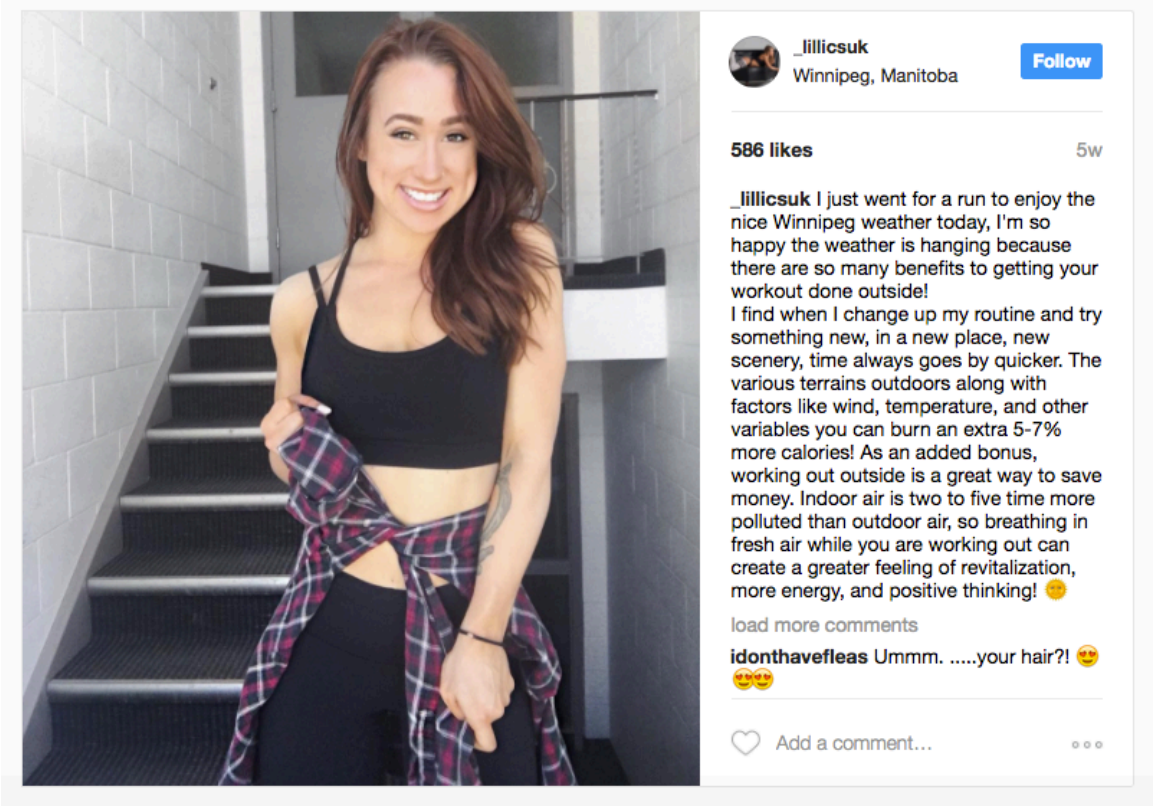
Picture 29 – Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/BSveyIWjWE9/



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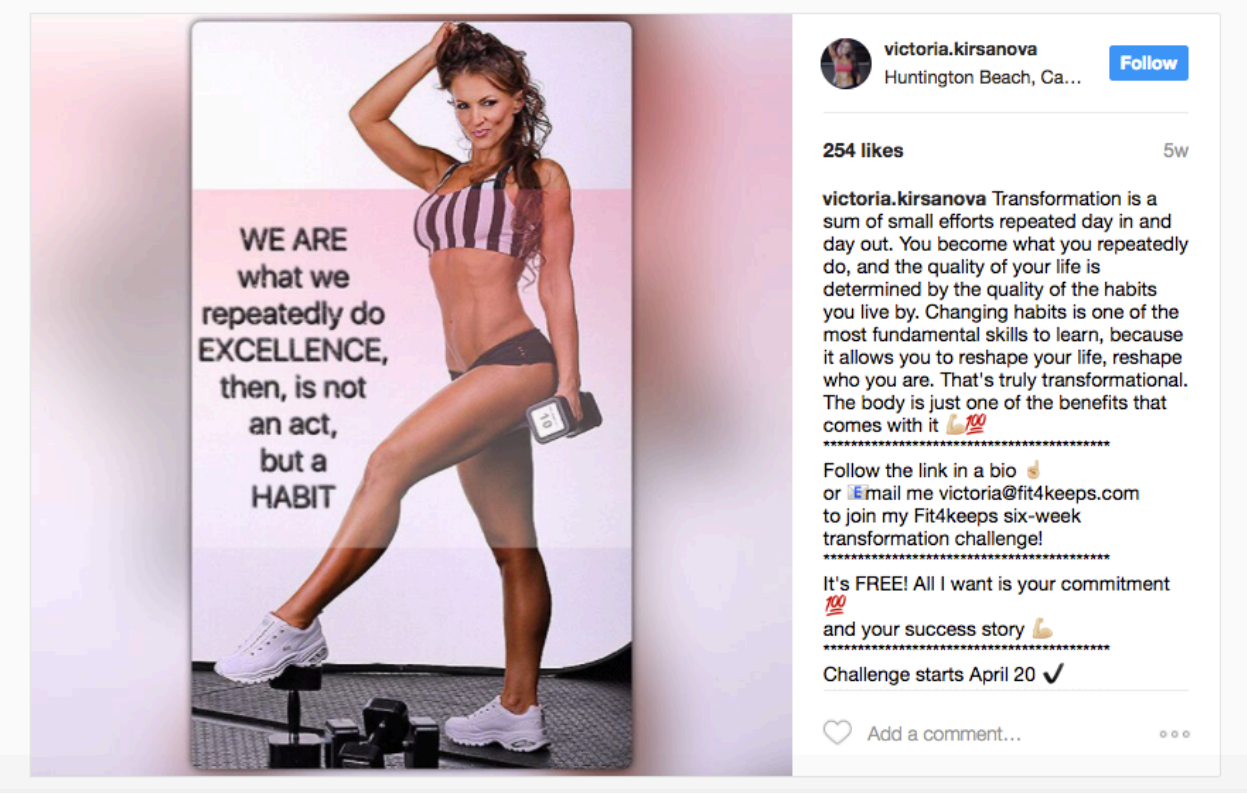
Picture 31 – Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/BS6Tys2l7e3/



Picture 32 – Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/BS754GMFJOR/

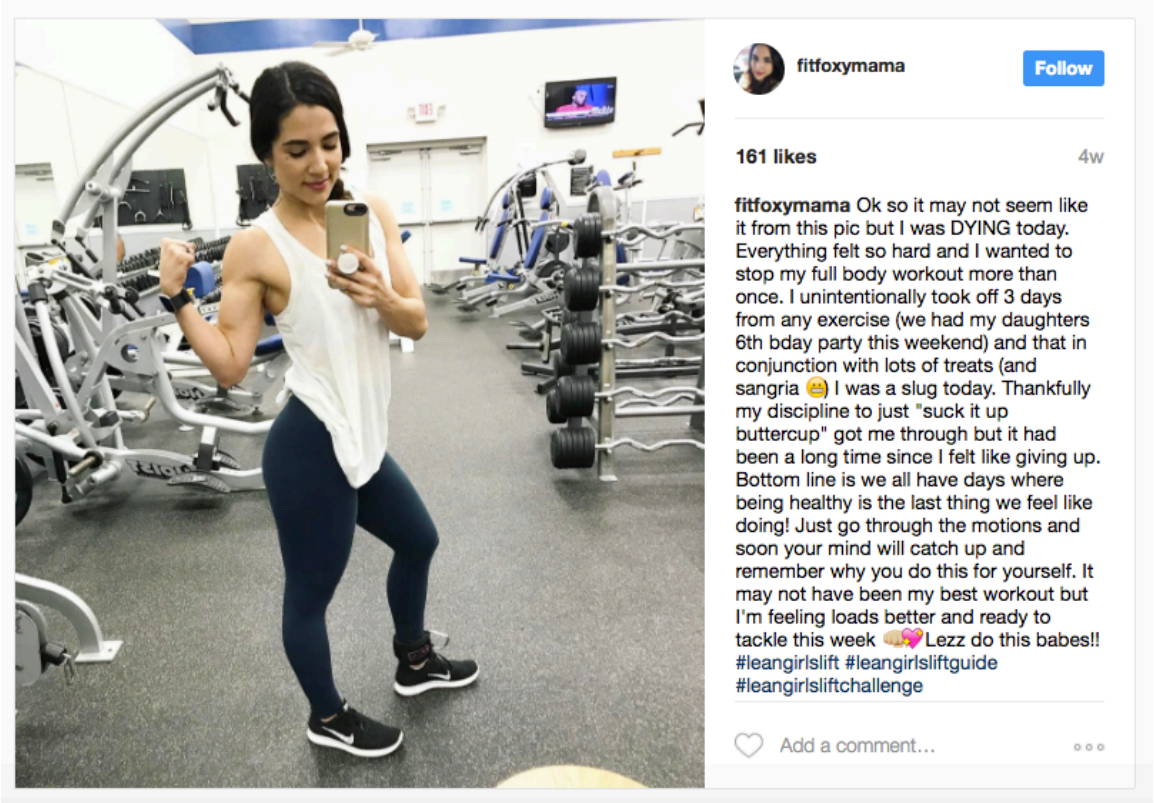
Picture 33 – Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/BTB9rOoAZAK/

Picture 34 – Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/BTFDxdjD4qb/

Picture 35 – Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/BTIf2ungPn8/

Picture 36 – Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/BTLltRhBhAd/

Picture 37 – Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/BTOtfRKDUA3/



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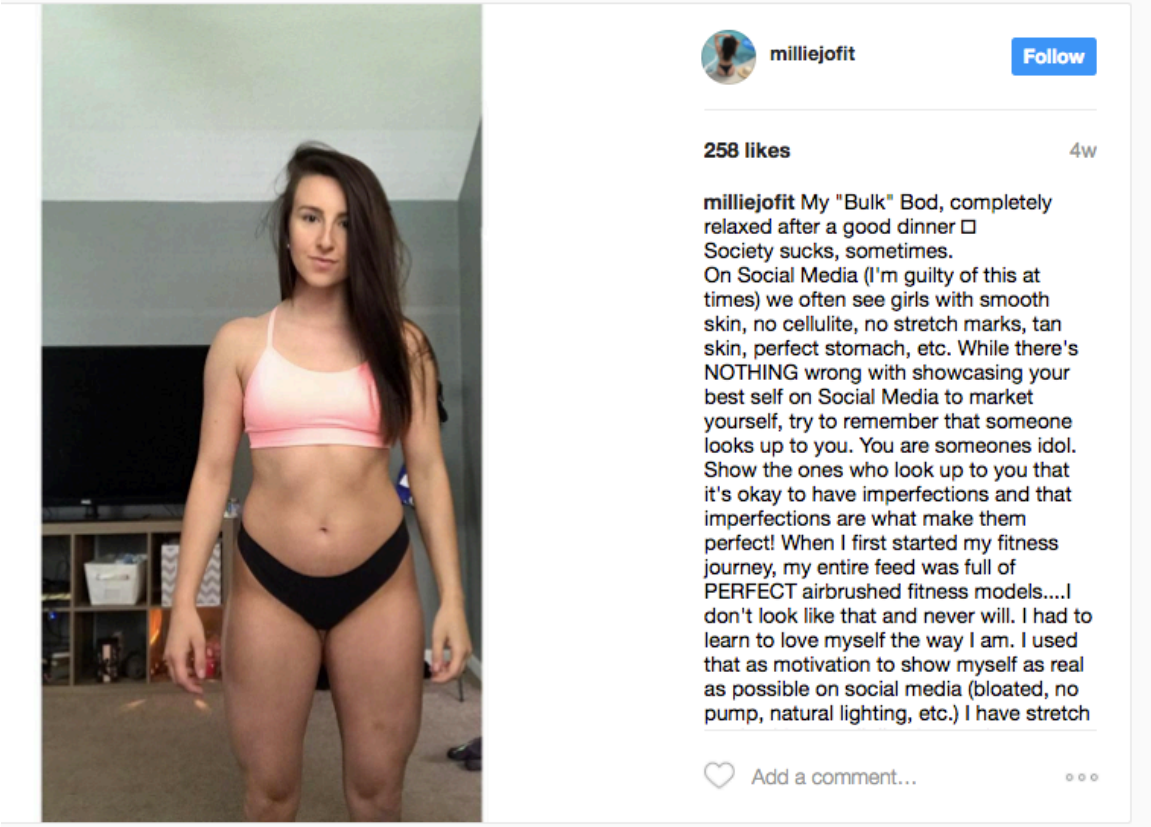
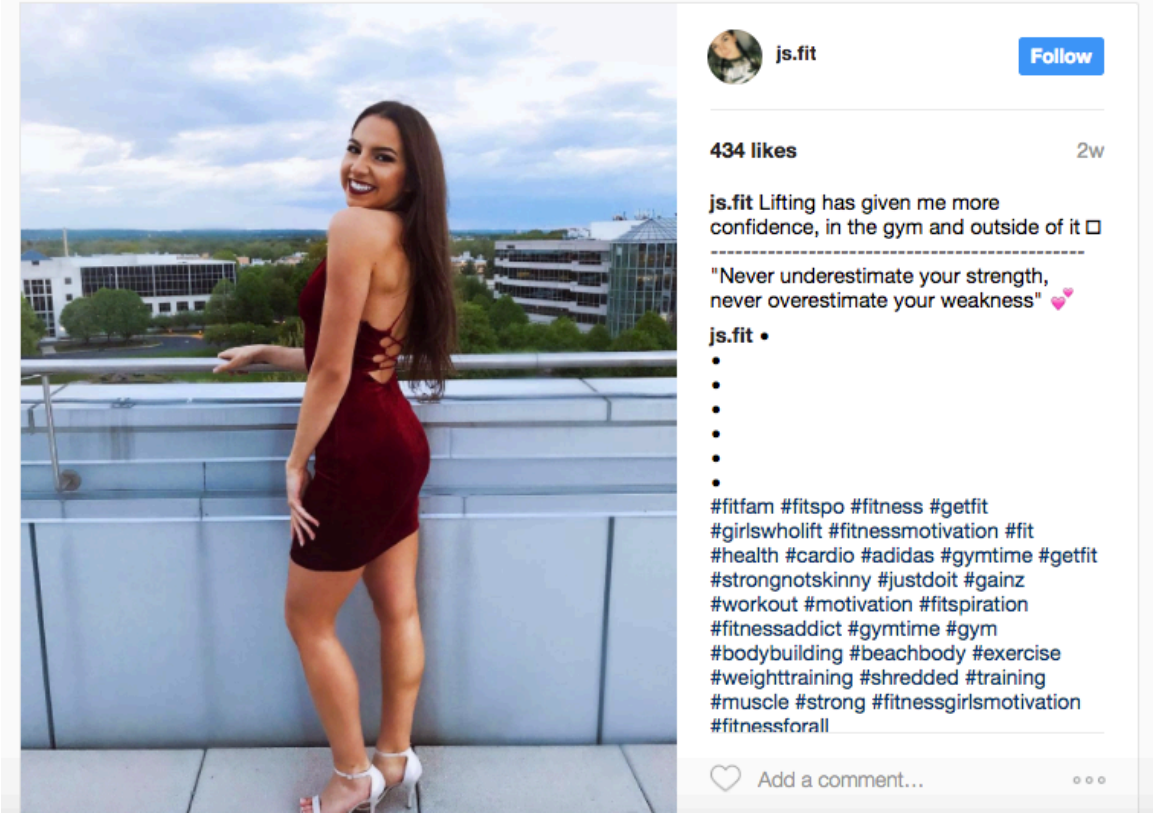


Picture 39 – Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/BTVCA88loW4/

Picture 40 – Source: https://www.instagram.com/monicasjourney_/

Picture 41 – Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/BThUsdMgjOB/

Picture 42 – Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/BTkUWwSF2TT/



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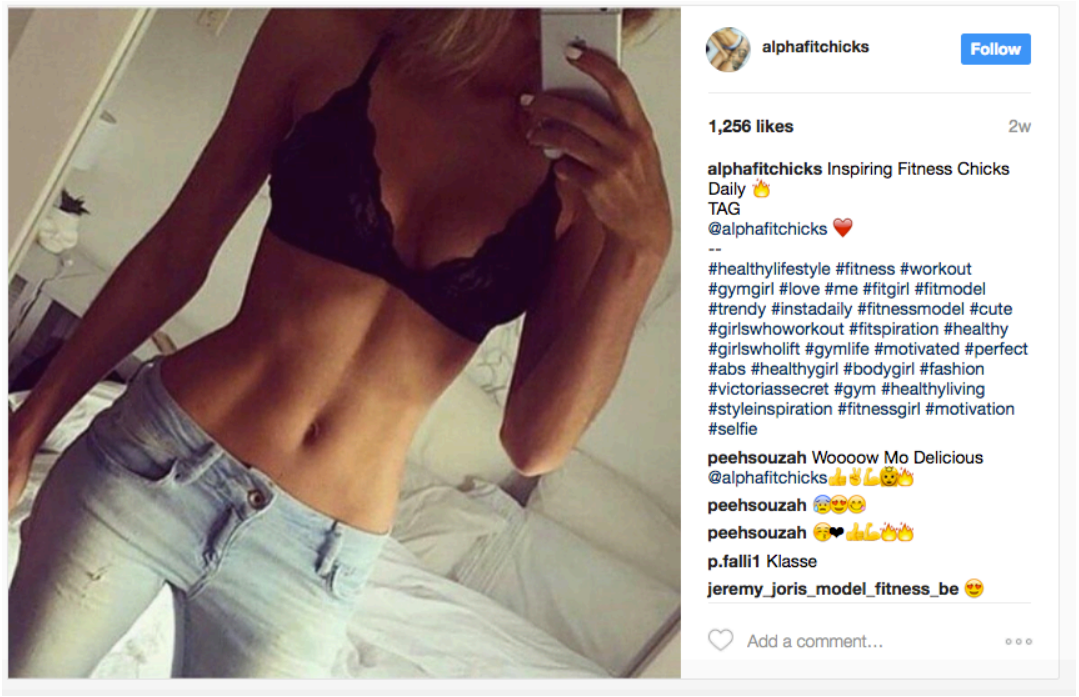

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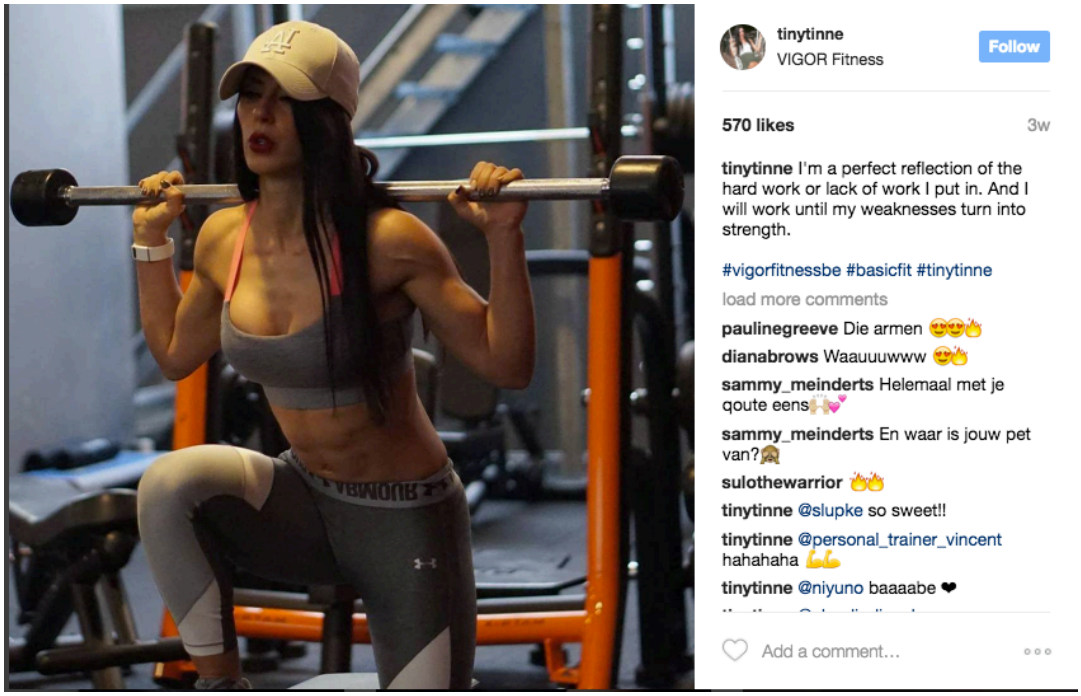

Picture 46 – Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/BTnmC70A8mJ/?taken-by=tinytinne

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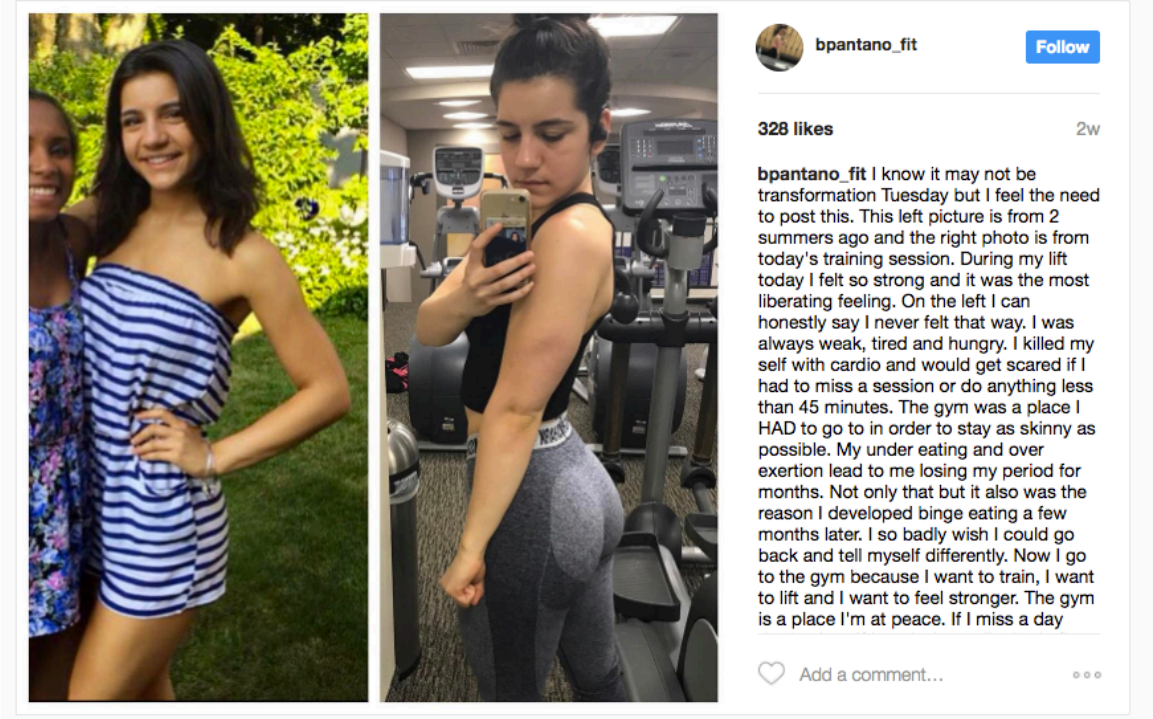

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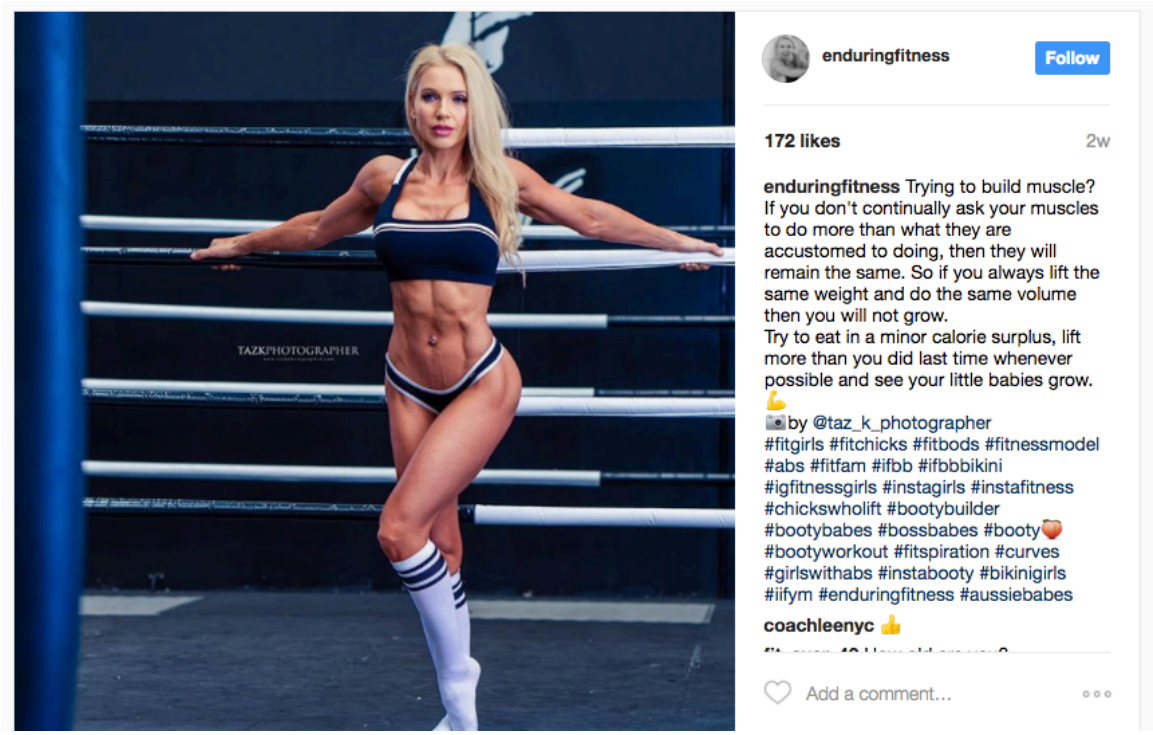

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