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The Fitness Blues

The world of social media has now become the millennial generation's lead source of information. Latest fashion trends, gadgets, and food habits are broadcasted through these websites and applications. In the United States, people are realizing that the sedentary lifestyle is unhealthy. As a result, more people are taking on a healthier lifestyle through exercising. However as more people are exposed to the fitness and healthy lifestyles, applications such as Instagram use the power of social media to promote daily exercising, clean eating, and dieting. Through Instagram, users are able to post and view pictures that are shared with other users on this social media platform. Many fitness and health Instagrams post a lot of fitspiration photos (combined words of fitness and inspiration), which includes but not limited to gym selfies, healthy food recipes, and pictures of "body goals", which may represent the body type viewers hope to achieve at the end of the fitness journey. Unfortunately these fitspiration photos have had an impeding impact on teenager's self-esteem. Some teenagers look at these fitspiration images for the wrong reasons. Rather than looking at images of fitness models as an inspiration to work out or to take on a healthy lifestyle, teenagers may view these body images as a way to compare their body type to the "ideal" body types that may be unrealistic to achieve. This paper will focus on the relationship between the fitspiration images on Instagram, and its impact on teenager's self-esteem.

Body image and self-esteem start to become very important topics during the adolescent years. Teenagers are particularly vulnerable when it comes to topics such as body image. During these distinct years, teens are struggling to find their own identity while fighting the changes of puberty. They usually look towards their peers, celebrities, or other role models to see what body type or image is considered handsome or beautiful. According to Statistics on Body Image, Self Esteem & Parental Influence, “more than 90 percent of girls, ages 15 to 17 years, want to change at least one aspect of their physical appearance”. Additionally, about a quarter of these girls have considered plastic surgery. Unfortunately, social media plays a huge part in body satisfaction. Psychologists Wichstrøm and von Soest, conducted an experiment to study the relationship between self-esteem and body satisfaction in Norwegian adolescents over a 13 year period of time. They concluded that although there is no clear relationship between self-esteem and body satisfaction; however it could be said “body satisfaction is a source of self-esteem” (24). Wichstrøm and von Soest also discovered that the cause of body satisfaction is most likely due to the repeated exposure of the standard body type, society has deemed to be beautiful or normal (24). It makes it difficult for teenagers to find their own identity and for them to be content with themselves if images of thin models are always appearing in their life. With the ubiquity of social media, pictures of thin women who depict female beauty are easily shared amongst all social media platforms (Perloff 366). Most teenagers are glued to their electronic devices on a daily basis, so the chances of coming across one of these pictures are high. However, author Perloff states that an occasional exposure of these pictures is not going to alter the teenager’s self-esteem; it is the constant exposure to thin body types. With the daily usage of social media, teenagers are unrelentingly exposed to these images, which will undoubtedly cause a toll in their self-esteem.

The promotion of fitness and healthy lifestyles, have been the entire rave on social media like Instagram. However, many women who follow these accounts and trends are not necessarily benefitting from them. Adams, from the Huffington Post, reported that fitspiration images may appear to be promoting a “healthy” lifestyle, but many mental health professionals, whose specialty is body image, has begun to think otherwise. These mental health professionals have stated that the main problem is most likely the fact that women may be comparing themselves to these thin bodies. Teenage girls begin to think that these body types are, what seemed to be called, “body goals”. Researchers Tiggemann and Zaccardo, conducted an experiment, studying the effects of Instagram fitspiration images on participants’ mood and body satisfaction. 130 women between the ages of 17 and 30 were asked to complete a pre and post survey to measure their mood and body satisfaction after looking at fitspiration photos. Tiggemann and Zaccardo concluded that exposure to fitspiration images does result in negative moods and lower body satisfactions (65). These fitspiration images do provide a lot of motivation to work out and to take on a healthier lifestyle, but they can cause women to feel the need to look like the images they see on Instagram. With the increase in popularity for fitness Instagrams, more women are misinterpreting the true meanings of these posts. Instead of exercising or dieting to be healthy, many are doing it to be skinny, which has a definite difference between skinny and fit. According to Dictionary.com, the definition of skinny is as stated: very lean or thin; emaciated; while the definition of fit is as stated: in good physical condition; in good health. It is clear that the words skinny and fit have two different definitions, where skinny has more of a negative connotation and fit with a positive connotation. Exercising is exceptionally important for a healthier life. However, some may mistakenly over exercise in order to obtain a skinny body to fit in to the societal standards of beautiful. Girls are constantly comparing themselves to other

girls, in a way that they are competing for the “best” body. Unfortunately, the images of thin and tone fitness models encourage these individuals to strive to obtain a body type that may be unattainable.

While fitspiration photos, are both motivating women positively and negatively, these photos are over sexualizing the human body, which lowers the self-esteem of many women. Sinkler, a fitness editor from Yahoo! Beauty, suggests that there may be a new term for these fitness posts called “Fitness Porn”. With the increase in fitness posts, many of these posts have now showcased “nearly naked women in provocative poses inside the gym” (2016). There has already been a problem for female teenagers about feeling beautiful and confident, but now there is another growing problem about feeling sexy. Author Perloff mentions that self-objectification is an important factor in the development of adolescent’s decrease in self-esteem. This process is described as how “girls and women come to view their bodies as objects to be looked at” (365). Girls, especially those who fall in these teenage years, are extremely vulnerable because of the need to compete against one another for beauty. Furthermore, these are the prime years for girls to start experimenting with the opposite sex. With this in mind, many girls start to focus on their physical appearance for the sole purpose of impressing the opposite sex. Their body is becoming objectified in their minds, and the goal of satisfying the opposite sex and society develops. Perloff makes an important point about self-objectification: is fitness more about how we view ourselves or about how others view us. Now that sexiness is becoming a part of these fitspiration photos, the idea of sexualizing and objectifying the female body is reoccurring.

This intense focus on the physical appearance of the body is detrimental to self-esteem. Instead of only having to worry about feeling beautiful, people now have to worry about feeling sexy. It should not be this way. Women and men should be confident and comfortable in their

own skin no matter what body type, race, gender or color they may be. The idea and the intention of fitspiration Instagram posts should be motivational and positive. Society has always introduced a specific body type people should have through Barbie dolls, bikini models, and even celebrities on TV. In reality, body types should not matter as much as social media and society make it to be. Fitness and a healthy lifestyle is something that is highly encouraged with the increasing rate of obesity and sedentary lifestyle. Social media allows users and society to popularize the idea that fitness and a healthy lifestyle is what one needs to achieve the societal norms of beauty.

Teenagers are too young to worry about whether or not they need to be skinny, beautiful or sexy. Women do not need to be competing against one another to look a certain way. Instead of an ongoing competition, society must work together to find a way to stop the emphasis that physical appearance is important. Social media is not to blame for fitspiration's negative side effects in the fitness and health world. Nevertheless, it is beneficial for our society to promote eating right, and exercising frequently to ensure that we all live a healthy life. But, it is important to be cautious of the kind of motivational pictures that we post. Our generation may seem to have underestimated the power of social media in spreading information and ideas. The millennial generation should not forget that in the end, we have the power to choose what we want on the Internet.

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