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The Impact of Fitspiration on Youth Mental Health in India's Evolving Social Media Landscape: A Narrative Review

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	Background: Social media has become a transformative force, radically transforming the dynamic landscape of technology and communication, content sharing, and social interaction globally. Fitspiration, a portmanteau of "fitness" and "inspiration," predominantly manifests as online content, particularly images and videos, designed to motivate fitness goals but often showcases idealized body types, potentially causing body image issues and disordered eating. **Method:** This narrative review synthesizes current literature on fitspiration's effects on Indian youth, incorporating studies that assess social media usage patterns, coping mechanisms, and awareness. A basic quality assessment, though not systematic, was performed considering study design, sample size, methodology, and relevance to ensure the inclusion of high-quality studies. **Results:** The review emphasizes the intricate dynamics among social media, cultural expectations, and psychological well-being. More time on social media correlates with lower mental well-being scores. Fitspiration can fuel self-objectification and potentially harmful behaviours. **Conclusion:** While promoting health, fitspiration's focus on ideal bodies can lead to body image dissatisfaction and disordered eating. Future research should explore coping strategies and reduce negative influences. Educational programs and support networks can empower adolescents. **Keywords:** Fitspiration, Body image, Social media, Body dissatisfaction.

INTRODUCTION

Social media serves as a digital connectivity forum that helps users create, share, and engage with content while maintaining connections within virtual communities. It has undoubtedly become a transformative force, radically transforming the dynamic landscape of technology and communication, content sharing and social interaction globally. Its evolution, fueled by technological advancements, has led to intricate online networks where individuals connect, share, and engage with content in unprecedented ways(Harchekar, 2017). This interconnectedness has far-reaching consequences, reshaping various aspects of modern society, from political ideologies, digital communication, and personal relationships to self-perception, health and fitness, and the growing influencer trend that shapes consumer behavior and societal values. In fact, the exposure significantly shapes individuals' perceptions of body image and fitness standards, often showcasing unrealistic and unattainable physiques, which negatively impact self-esteem and body satisfaction, leading to potential psychological and behavioral consequences. While this phenomenon affects nearly all age groups, it is especially prevalent among young adults aged 20-24, teenagers aged 10-19, and pre-teens aged 11-12(Tiggemann & Slater, 2013; Vaterlaus et al., 2014)

The dynamics of social media trends have now emerged as a significant force in shaping public opinion, affecting consumer behavior, and fostering connections among individuals worldwide. In recent times, such kind of a social media trend that has evolved into a cultural phenomenon, promoting fitness and a healthy lifestyle, is the Fitspiration trend, popularly known as "Fitspo". This term, a portmanteau of "fitness" and "inspiration," predominantly manifests as online content, particularly images and videos, designed to motivate individuals to pursue their fitness objectives, and sometimes referring to people who inspire us to remain fit. These images often promote an ideal aesthetic, emphasizing toned and lean bodies, frequently achieved through intense training and specific diets(Griffin et al., 2022), setting unrealistic fitness goals for many. Although fitspiration may have

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originated with positive intentions, its effects on body image and mental health are significant, leading to harmful consequences of body dissatisfaction, self-criticism, and unhealthy behaviors.

The pervasive nature of social media has made it an area of critical importance, with significant consequences for both individuals and public health (Merino et al., 2024)

India's social media landscape is undergoing a dynamic transformation, fundamentally altering communication patterns, content consumption, and influence dissemination across diverse demographics (Mishra, 2017). Young urban Indians have been at the forefront of following various viral trends, particularly on platforms like Instagram and TikTok, inspiring many companies to integrate fitspiration into their digital marketing strategies to engage with younger consumer segments. Many content creators have also utilized this trend to share educational or motivational messages. Moreover, the popularity of fitness-related challenges and contests that have gone viral nationwide highlights the trend's broad appeal. The growing trend of "fitspiration" in India requires a thorough examination, considering the country's unique cultural landscape and its rapidly changing relationship with health, fitness, and body image. While web-based fitspiration can spread accessible health information and inspire healthy behaviors (Mayoh & Jones, 2021), the Indian context adds complexity due to diverse cultural norms, economic disparities, and varying access to resources and information.

Research indicates that content promoting fitness inspiration on social media platforms such as Instagram and Pinterest often focuses more on appearance-related body image ideals and weight control practices than on health-oriented standards and behaviors(Simpson et al., 2016; Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2016). Teenagers and young adults are the demographic most profoundly affected by content shared on various digital platforms, such as Instagram, Facebook, Pinterest, Twitter, Tumblr, and Thread, among others. In the contemporary digital age, social media assumes a pivotal role in molding this developmental phase, presenting extensive opportunities for communication, interpersonal connection, and the acquisition of information. However, its widespread influence also brings complex challenges that can profoundly affect adolescents' mental health and well-being. With social media becoming an almost indispensable part of their daily lives, many young individuals find it difficult to imagine life without these platforms. As a result, mental health professionals and related practitioners must recognize the role of social media when evaluating both risks and protective factors for this age group. The pervasive nature of social media has made it an area of critical importance, with significant consequences for both individuals and public health (Merino et al., 2024).

Although it is popular globally, the information and research work related to fitspiration trend on social media is limited. Very few studies have explored its impact on the mental health of the younger generation, and only a handful of studies have been conducted related to fitspiration in the Indian context. Thus, this review seeks to collate existing information on the possible consequences on mental health due to fitspiration among adolescents and young adults in the Indian setting.

METHOD

This narrative review explores the phenomenon of fitspiration from a qualitative perspective. Narrative review methodology focuses on the qualitative understanding and synthesis of domain-specific knowledge instead of adhering to a quantitative framework that values methodological precision and bias reduction as well as interrater consistency (Liumbruno et al., 2013). Multiple electronic databases such as Google Scholar, PubMed, PsycINFO, Scopus, ProQuest, and DOAJ were used to conduct the literature review. The analysis exclusively encompassed research pertaining to youth demographics, specifically individuals aged 15 to 35 years, young adults within the age range of 19 to 30 years, and adolescents between 15 to 18 years, who engage with fitspiration-related content. Multiple keywords were used to obtain the literature related to fitspiration and social media: "fitspiration", "fitspo", "thinspiration", "body image", "body dissatisfaction", "social media", "young people", "adolescents", "mental health", "Indian context", "exercise habit", "healthy", "fitness culture". All other relevant synonymous words were used in the search. The search was limited to English-language articles published between 2015 and February 2025. Studies involving adults older than 35 years and youth younger than 15 years are not included in the study. Papers published in a language other than English, demographic area other than India, and unrelated to the subject matter are excluded from the discussion.

Research Article

The review also excluded case reports, case series, opinion pieces (including editorials and letters to the editor without data), hypotheses, meta-analyses, and review articles. The Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) tool was applied to assess the quality of each included article.

RESULTS

A limited number of studies have been conducted in the field of fitspiration, especially with the Indian population. It is significant to understand young people's use of digital technologies for health-related purposes across the range of diverse media and devices currently available to them. The following sections provide an overview of the evidence linking fitspiration trends on social media to mental health disturbances among youth in India. A few pathological risks have been identified in connection with exposure to fitspiration content, particularly within the context of India's rapidly evolving social media landscape. The issues can be clustered into the following themes: I. Body Image Dissatisfaction and Social Comparison, II. Mental Health and Psychological Well-being, III. Influence of Media and Social Media, IV. Social Media Usage Patterns, V. Coping Mechanisms and Awareness.
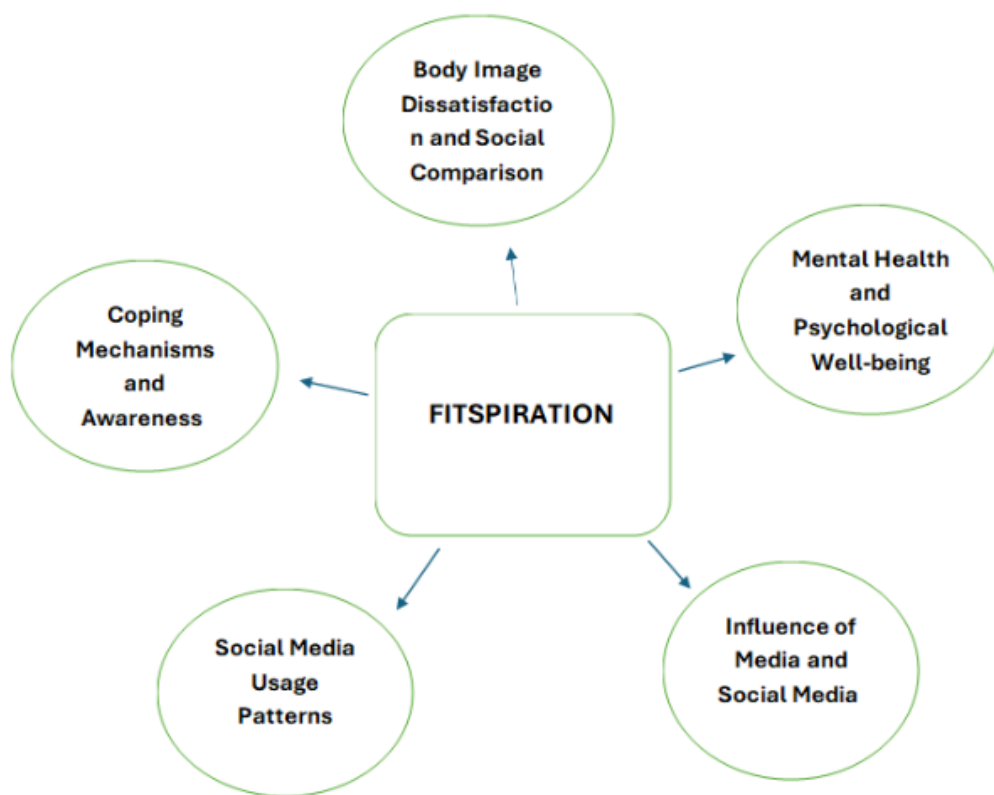

Fig. 1: Representation of the cluster themes related to fitspiration content.

I. BODY IMAGE DISSATISFACTION AND SOCIAL COMPARISON

Social media often involves constant exposure to carefully curated and, most of the time, digitally enhanced images, leading to a chain reaction of negative effects, creating pressure to comfort people to unattainable and unrealistic beauty standards. Social media, including fitspiration content, often promotes unrealistic body ideals, contributing to negative perceptions of one's own body (Khatri & Sharma, 2024; Ranjan et al., 2024). These ideals are frequently unattainable and lead to body dissatisfaction (Ranjan et al., 2024). Fitspiration promotes an idealized image of a specific body type: a slender, athletic physique for women and an extremely muscular build for men, both of which are beyond reach for the majority of people. The widespread sharing of fitspiration content online fuels social comparison, leading young users to feel dissatisfied with their bodies, experience self-doubt, and develop unhealthy eating and exercise habits. These patterns not only heighten the risk of problematic exercise behaviors but also correlate with an increased desire to change their body, a concern highlighted by several authors (Aggarwal, 2020;

Research Article

Chakraborty & Malik, 2022; Mishra, 2024; Nimiya et al., 2024). This reinforces the idea that fitspiration can contribute to body image issues by promoting unrealistic ideals.

While both males and females are impacted by social media portrayals, the emphasis differs. For women, the "thin body type" is often idealized, while for men, there's pressure to achieve a muscular physique (Aggarwal, 2020). The study conducted by(Nimiya et al., 2024) found that although both genders engage in social comparison on Instagram, females experience more body image issues while males show greater exercise motivation.

II. MENTAL HEALTH AND PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING

Fitspiration has a significant influence over the attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors of individuals, especially within the impressionable demographic of adolescents and young adults. Social media platforms have become integral to the daily lives of young individuals, fundamentally reshaping their interactions and engagement with the world. A study found that the majority of adolescents experienced anxiety or stress due to their social media use, with 18.6% strongly expressing and 36.3% moderately expressing feeling pressured by factors such as follower counts, likes, and comments (Taddi et al., 2024). A large proportion also experienced sleep disturbances due to late-night usage, indicating a critical challenge among youth in setting boundaries between digital engagement and real-world interaction (Taddi et al., 2024). Another study found that fitspiration images had no significant impact on appearance or social state self-esteem in males. For females, while appearance self-esteem remained unchanged, social state self-esteem significantly increased post-intervention. These results contradict the initial hypothesis that fitspiration would decrease both forms of self-esteem in both genders (Kapadia & Patki, 2023). The constant drive to stay informed in today's hyper-connected world, driven by the fear of missing out, has become a major factor in emotional distress and psychological well-being. Regularly checking social media notifications was frequently linked to feelings of anxiety or pressure to remain continuously informed, underscoring the addictive potential of social media for certain individuals (Mishra, 2024). In one of the studies conducted on adolescent students, approximately one-third of the participants showed an inclination toward developing an eating disorder (Singh et al., 2016). Those with body image issues were more likely to develop disordered eating habits (Singh et al., 2016).

III. INFLUENCE OF MEDIA AND SOCIAL MEDIA

Since its launch in October 2010, Instagram has grown into a visually driven social media platform with over one billion active users (Nimiya et al., 2024). Within this expansion of the digital landscape, fitspiration has emerged as a popular trend advocating a healthy lifestyle. Although fitspiration started with an intention of purportedly healthier alternative to thinspiration, which often showcased skinny and toned bodies and promoted extreme dieting practices (Rajan, 2018), however, over time it turned out to be emphasizing extrinsic motivation for indulging in physical activity and outer beauty rather than promoting intrinsic motivation and healthier benefits of exercise. This focus on appearance reinforces objectification and encourages one's body to be sculpted and perfected. The core issue lies in the subtle yet significant shift in focus from holistic well-being to the attainment of a specific aesthetic (Rajan, 2018). Academic research has revealed that even brief exposure to fitspiration content can negatively impact self-esteem and body image. The rise of influencers and celebrities on social media fuels unrealistic body standards, contributing to widespread discontent (Khatri & Sharma, 2024). The cultural representation of unrealistic beauty standards in media and advertisements affects adolescent girls, who may obsess over celebrities' lifestyles and adopt harmful ways to acquire a slender physique. Khosla found in her study that the participants followed celebrities and admired Bollywood actresses and Korean pop stars, internalizing established standards of beauty. When they compared themselves to these idols, they felt insecure and dissatisfied with their body image. The study also reveals that participants pursued unhealthy eating habits, extreme diets, and hard workout routines (Khosla, 2024).

IV. SOCIAL MEDIA USAGE PATTERNS:

Social media addiction is characterized by an individual's compulsive and excessive engagement with social media platforms, which disrupts other aspects of their life (M, 2023). This addiction is fueled by the persistent expectation of social media gratification, which is typically obtained by posting self-promoting content online A statistically significant relationship exists between the duration of social media usage and mental well-being scores, indicating that students who dedicate more time to social media tend to exhibit lower mental well-being scores (Bhaskara et

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al., 2020). Additionally, a separate study categorized the usage patterns of fitspiration content on Instagram into active and passive modes. Active use involves direct engagement with content through commenting, liking, and sharing, whereas passive use entails more passive consumption via browsing (Chakraborty & Malik, 2022). Social media can perpetuate negative stereotypes, even when meant to be humorous, reinforcing damaging ideals and endorsing toxic gender roles (Ranjan et al., 2024).

V. COPING MECHANISMS AND AWARENESS

There is a growing need to promote healthy social media practices, foster resilience, and enhance awareness among young users, as recognizing the negative impacts of social media is crucial for developing effective strategies to safeguard mental well-being in the digital age (Khatri & Sharma, 2024; Mishra, 2024). Creating supportive environments that encourage open discussions about social media's impact can empower young individuals to seek help and share their experiences, ultimately leading to healthier online interactions. A study that focused especially on adolescent girls conducted in the northwest district of Delhi, found that participants pursued unhealthy eating habits, extreme diets, and hard workout routines (Khosla, 2024). Body image constitutes a complex construct, integrating an individual's perceptions, attitudes, cognitions, beliefs, emotional responses, and behaviors associated with their body. Identifying body image issues early is crucial to prevent eating disorders and obsessive thinking about one's body (Singh et al., 2016), thereby developing a healthy coping mechanism.

CONCLUSION

While fitspiration aims to promote health and well-being, studies suggest that its focus on idealized body types can lead to body image dissatisfaction, decreased self-esteem, and potentially disordered eating behaviors, especially among vulnerable individuals(Limniou et al., 2021). This review synthesizes the current literature on fitspiration and its effects on young peoples' mental well-being in India, a country with a unique and dynamic social media landscape, describing the distinct and often paradoxical effects of fitspiration content. Most of the studies' findings draw attention to the need to unpack fitspiration's impact on body image, self-esteem, and mental well-being among Indian youth, and suggest a complex interplay between social media, cultural standards, and psychological health.

The reviewed evidence suggests that fitspiration content on social media can promote self-objectification and engagement in potentially harmful behaviors among young people. To empower adolescents, especially girls, schools should strategize educational workshops and build support networks with the help of school counselors and family members to cultivate a positive body image. Future research should aim to understand the coping mechanisms of Indian adolescents to mitigate the harmful impact of social media on their body image. Another study recommends that parents, teachers, and healthcare providers should discuss the ill effects of excessive concern about body structure and diet with adolescents while encouraging critical thinking about media portrayals(Singh et al., 2016).

Limitations of the existing research should be taken into consideration while interpreting these findings, as the reliance on cross-sectional designs, which few of the studies have adopted, restricts the capacity to draw causal inferences about the effects of fitspiration on mental health. Few studies have taken small sample sizes and depend on self-reported data, which is susceptible to social desirability bias and recall inaccuracy. Another limitation like focusing on a certain gender or category of population in a particular city or area of India may result in limiting the generalizability of the findings to other populations or contexts. The dearth of longitudinal research that tracks the long-term impacts of fitspiration exposure on mental health outcomes is a notable gap in the literature, and more research is needed to determine the direction and magnitude of these relationships over time. Future research should prioritize longitudinal designs, diverse sampling strategies, and the inclusion of objective measures of mental health to address these limitations and provide a more comprehensive understanding of the complex relationship between fitspiration and youth well-being in India. The existing studies predominantly focus on the negative impacts of fitspiration, overlooking potential positive aspects such as motivation for exercise and healthy eating(Limniou et al., 2021). Therefore, to fully understand the effects of fitspiration, a balanced approach is required, taking into account both its advantages and disadvantages.

Research Article

QUALITY ASSESSMENT

Although not systematic, a basic quality assessment was performed, considering study design, sample size, methodology, and relevance. This ensured the inclusion of high-quality studies that provide valuable insights.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATION

No new data collection was involved, and thus, no ethical approval was required. Proper citation and acknowledgment of all sources were ensured.

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