

Scroll, Motivate, Move? The Role of Fitspiration Content on Visual Social Media on Exercise Motivation and Behavior

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Abstract

Fitspiration is a type of health-related social media content that promotes healthy eating and physical activity. However, existing research offers inconclusive findings regarding the magnitude and direction of this association with exercise behavior. Therefore, to gain a better understanding of the positive and negative associations of Fitspiration content among adolescents, we investigated the mediating role of exercise motivation (intrinsic and extrinsic) in the relationship between exposure to Fitspiration content and exercise behavior. This cross-sectional study ($N = 1,409$) included adolescents aged 14–19 years ($M = 16.1$, $SD = 1.2$). Structural equation modeling was used to examine the relationship between exposure to Fitspiration content on visual social media (i.e., Instagram and TikTok) and exercise behavior, and whether it was mediated by intrinsic (health-related) and extrinsic (appearance-related) exercise motivation. The model revealed a positive direct association between exposure to Fitspiration content on visual social media and exercise behavior. In addition, health-related exercise motivation partially mediated this relationship, whereas appearance-related motivation did not. The findings of our study underscore the importance of a more detailed examination of the relationship between exposure to Fitspiration content and exercise behavior. The observed differences between health- and appearance-related motivation highlight the need for more attention to the distinct associations of intrinsic and extrinsic motivational appeals. Further research into the underlying psychological mechanisms and additional contextual factors is needed.

Keywords: Physical activity, adolescence, exercise motivation, social media, Fitspiration

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Introduction

Overweight and obesity have become an escalating challenge worldwide (World Health Organization, 2025). In many cases, these conditions often begin during childhood or adolescence. Affecting boys and girls similarly, the prevalence of childhood overweight increased by 12% between 1990 and 2022 (World Health Organization, 2025). The prevalence of overweight coincides with a reduction in physical activity (World Health Organization, 2024). Globally, 81% of adolescents (aged 11–17 years) were insufficiently physically active (World Health Organization, 2024). This issue is particularly

concerning given that engagement in physical activity is crucial in enhancing overall well-being and quality of life (Mikkelsen et al., 2017) and that adolescence is a critical period during which lifelong behavior patterns associated with physical activity are established (Kumar et al., 2015). Therefore, understanding adolescent physical activity, particularly in the context of its interaction with screen-based behaviors, is essential for developing effective interventions to promote their health (van Sluijs et al., 2021).

Research indicates that approximately 60% of adolescents (aged 13–17 years) use Instagram and TikTok daily (Faverio &

Sidoti, 2024) and that these social media platforms have emerged as prominent sources of health-related information (Engel et al., 2024). Instagram and TikTok are visually driven social media platforms, often featuring Fitspiration content—a common form of health-related content. Fitspiration, blending “fitness” and “inspiration,” is social media content aimed at motivating a healthier lifestyle (Bowles et al., 2021). The content is followed by social media users to boost motivation or find inspiration (Mayoh & Jones, 2021). Fitspiration content typically features individuals who are thin and muscular (Nuss et al., 2025) and includes workout routines and dietary advice (Hefner et al., 2016). As the content often includes elements similar to those identified in effective diet and physical activity interventions (Rose et al., 2017), it has the potential to motivate individuals toward a healthier lifestyle. With respect to workout content, posts often depict individuals in exercise or athletic clothing, either actively engaging in physical fitness activities or posing in a fitness-related context (Nuss et al., 2025).

Although the content appears promising regarding promoting exercise behavior, existing research does not seem to support the proposed positive relationship between exposure to Fitspiration content on social media and exercise behavior. A systematic review found that only three out of 18 studies reported an association between exposure to Fitspiration content and exercise behavior (Nuss et al., 2024). Notably, one of these studies found that such exposure was linked to compulsive, rather than healthy, exercise behavior (Holland & Tiggemann, 2017). Several other studies found no significant effect of such exposure on exercise behavior (Bowles et al., 2021; Breves et al., 2025; Karsay et al., 2025; Robinson et al., 2017), a finding that was also highlighted in the systematic review by Nuss et al. (2024).

Fitspiration content, however, was found to elicit greater motivation to eat healthy and improve fitness (Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015). Hence, the relationship between exposure to this type of content and exercise behavior might be mediated by different types of exercise motivation. The Self-Determination Theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 2012) explains the motivational dynamics underlying human behavior, including exercise behavior. According to SDT, behavior can be regulated by different types of motivation that exist along a continuum of increasing self-determination and autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 2012). According to this reasoning, motivation may be more intrinsic, referring to engaging in an activity for enjoyment, or extrinsic, referring to performing a behavior for external rewards or to avoid negative outcomes such as disapproval (Ryan & Deci, 2017). In the context of physical activity, health-related exercise motivation is considered to be an intrinsic motivation (Sebire et al., 2008), while appearance-related exercise motivation is categorized as an extrinsic motivation (Ryan et al., 2009). This distinction also fits the dual nature of Fitspiration content, which promotes healthy lifestyle behaviors while also containing idealization (Curtis et al., 2023).

Intrinsic motivation, in the form of health-related exercise motivation, has been linked to greater exercise frequency (Staples et al., 2022), with research indicating that it also exerts a positive effect on overall exercise behavior (Lavoie et al., 2025; Staples et al., 2022). In addition, intrinsic exercise motivation was moderately associated with healthy exercising (Staples et al., 2022), underscoring its importance in promoting sustained physical activity.

As previously mentioned, Fitspiration content often portrays an athletic ideal characterized by thinness and visible muscularity (Jerónimo & Carraça, 2022). Such imagery may encourage adolescents to

exercise for appearance-related reasons, fostering extrinsic motivation. Research indicates that while appearance-driven motivation (extrinsic motivation) has the potential for negative implications, it nonetheless shows a small positive correlation with overall exercise behavior, including both healthy and compulsive forms of exercise (Staples et al., 2022). These findings suggest that extrinsic motivation, despite its potential drawbacks, may contribute to higher exercise engagement among adolescents exposed to such content.

Based on empirical findings (Bowles et al., 2021; Breves et al., 2025; Karsay et al., 2025; Nuss et al., 2024; Robinson et al., 2017), we hypothesize that there is no direct association between exposure to Fitspiration content on social media and exercise behavior. Therefore, we formulated the following hypothesis:

H1: Exposure to Fitspiration content on visual social media does not have a direct association with exercise behavior.

In addition, we assume two mediating paths from health-related and appearance-related exercise motivation between exposure to Fitspiration content on social media and exercise behavior. Therefore, we formulated the following hypotheses:

H2a Intrinsic exercise motivation: The relationship between exposure to Fitspiration content on social media and exercise behavior is positively mediated by health-related exercise motivation.

H2b Extrinsic exercise motivation: The relationship between exposure to Fitspiration content on social media and exercise behavior is positively mediated by appearance-related exercise motivation.

Methods

Participants and Design

The cross-sectional data ($N = 1,409$) were obtained from adolescents recruited through a random sampling procedure. From a national registry of educational institutions in the German-speaking cantons of Switzerland—comprising 536 secondary, 96 vocational, and 57 gymnasium schools with comparable structures—109 were randomly selected and contacted by postal mail, email, and telephone. Of these schools, 37 declined the invitation, 58 did not respond despite multiple contact attempts, and 12 agreed to participate. The 12 participating schools were distributed across six cantons (Aargau, Basel-Stadt, Glarus, St. Gallen, Thurgau, and Zurich) and varied in terms of geographic setting (urban and rural), school size, and academic focus. The decision to participate was made at the level of school principal and was most likely driven by practical considerations, such as available resources and concurrent participation in other studies, rather than by the topic of the present study. The schools included six upper secondary schools, three secondary schools, and three vocational training institutions. Schools were informed that the study targeted adolescents 14 years old and above and were given the autonomy to determine how many classes would participate. This age range was selected to cover middle and late adolescents and was further guided by practical considerations related to the Swiss school system, including legal regulations permitting survey participation without parental consent. The final sample consisted of $n_{\text{boys}} = 696$ and $n_{\text{girls}} = 713$, distributed across 90 classes among the 12 participating schools, aged between 14 and 19 years ($M = 16.1$, $SD = 1.2$).

A prior analysis was conducted using the *semPower* package in R (version 2.1.3; Moshagen & Bader, 2024), specifying a root mean squared error of approximation (RMSEA) of .05, $\alpha = .05$, and $df = 3$. Results

indicated a required sample size of $N = 1,446$ to achieve a power of .80. The model ($n = 808$, $RMSEA = .07$, $\alpha = .05$, $df = 6$) achieved a power of .97, indicating sufficient statistical power.

Procedure

This study was approved by the ethical committee of the authors' institute. Participants completed the questionnaire during class in July 2024. The lead researcher or a student assistant provided in-person consent briefings and instructions to all schools while also supervising and assisting participants during data collection. Depending on the school's infrastructure, the students used either their own devices (primarily laptops and tablets) or computers provided by the schools to complete the online survey. Even though the classes were selected by the schools, student participation was voluntary. Completion of the survey took an average of 17.3 minutes ($SD = 5.1$). The questionnaire covered different health topics, including Fitspiration, which is the focus of this study. In addition, participants were offered entry into a random prize draw to win a gift card, valued between 20 and 100 Swiss Francs, from a large online store (Digitec/Galaxus).

Materials

Social Demographics and Social Media Use

For social demographics, age, gender, and school type were collected. Gender was assessed using three response options: boy, girl, and other. Participants who selected *other* ($n = 19$) were partially recoded: 15 participants whose responses were clearly masculine (e.g., "Apache AH-64," which is used in the context of toxic masculine communities) were coded as "boy," while the remaining four were randomly assigned to either the boy (1) or girl (2) category. School type was assessed by asking participants which school they were attending at the time

of data collection: secondary school, vocational school, or gymnasium. Social media use was measured for Instagram and TikTok, as these platforms were shown to be most relevant in a previous study within the same participant group. Platform use was assessed through a binary item indicating use or non-use, frequency measured on a 9-point scale (1 = never and 9 = several times per hour), and an open-ended question regarding intensity (Frey & Friemel, 2021).

Exposure to Fitspiration Content on Social Media

The term "Fitspiration" was not mentioned to participants. Rather, a description of this type of content was provided. In doing so, both the fitness and motivational aspects of Fitspiration content were highlighted. Exposure to Fitspiration content on Instagram and TikTok was measured on a 7-point scale (1 = never and 7 = very often) using the question: "How often do you see content that tries to motivate you to live healthier (e.g., through exercising or healthy eating?)" ($M_{\text{Instagram}} = 4.9$, $SD_{\text{Instagram}} = 1.7$; $M_{\text{TikTok}} = 5.0$, $SD_{\text{TikTok}} = 1.6$).

Exercise Behavior

Exercise behavior (explicitly excluding the sport class in school) was assessed using three questions adapted from a previous survey in a comparable setting (Frey & Friemel, 2021). Two filter questions were used; a binary question asked whether participants had engaged in exercise over the past six months. Those who answered "yes" were then asked how many days per week they exercised (with additional options for less often than once a week: tried once, tried twice, every other month, almost every month, once a month, and 2-3 per month). This resulted in a 13-point scale (1 = tried once and 13 = daily) ($M = 9.1$, $SD = 3.0$). Participants who indicated they had exercised at least every other month (≥ 2 on the 13-point scale) over the previous six months received

a follow-up question regarding exercise duration. This was assessed by asking participants how much time per week they spent doing exercise. Hours and minutes were reported separately by the participants and subsequently combined by converting hours to minutes for analysis ($M = 263.1$, $SD = 153.1$, $\min = 0$, $\max = 450$).

Exercise Motivation (Health vs Appearance)

Exercise motivation was assessed using an 8-item, 7-point Likert scale asking, “What are your motivations for performing exercise?” The items captured two motivational dimensions: health (e.g., maintaining physical health) and appearance (e.g., muscle definition and improving looks). A factor analysis confirmed the two-factor structure, explaining 40% and 32% of the variance. Items 1–5 loaded strongly on factor 1 (appearance-related, loadings $>.74$), and items 6–8 loaded strongly onto factor 2 (health-related, loadings $>.88$). Both scales demonstrated strong internal consistency: Factor 1 had an α of .93 ($M = 5.7$, $SD = 1.4$), and factor 2 had an α of .90 ($M = 4.8$, $SD = 1.6$).

Statistical Analysis

Structural equation modeling (SEM) was conducted in R (4.2.2) using the lavaan package (version 0.6-19; Rosseel, 2012) to test the hypothesized relationships. A latent construct for exposure to Fitspiration content on social media was created by combining indicators of exposure on Instagram and TikTok. Given the moderate correlation between health-related and appearance-related exercise motivation ($r = .41$), a covariance between these two predictors was specified in the model. Age, gender, and school type were included as control variables. School type was dummy coded into two contrast variables, with secondary school serving as the reference category. Model fit was evaluated using multiple indices, with acceptable fit defined according to

established criteria (Hu & Bentler, 1999): chi-square (χ^2), Tucker–Lewis index (TLI; $\geq .90$), comparative fit index (CFI; $\geq .95$), RMSEA ($\leq .08$, with 90% confidence interval), and standardized root mean square residual (SRMR; $\leq .08$). To test the statistical significance of direct, indirect, and total path coefficients, bias-corrected bootstrap confidence intervals were computed using 5,000 bootstrapping subsamples.

Results

Descriptives

Social Media Use

Participants indicated that 85% ($n = 1,197$) used Instagram, with the majority (70% of the total dataset; $n = 992$) using it daily. Data regarding TikTok use showed that 66% of the participants ($n = 934$) reported using the platform, with 56% of those users ($n = 783$) using it daily. On average, participants reported using Instagram for fewer minutes per day ($M = 55.8$, $SD = 27.1$, $\min = 1$, $\max = 90$) than TikTok ($M = 110.0$, $SD = 55.3$, $\min = 1$, $\max = 180$).

Exercise

Most participants reported exercising in the six months prior to the questionnaire (95%, $n = 1,342$), with 87% ($n = 1,228$) engaging at least once per week. Participation rates were consistently high across genders. Among boys ($n = 696$), 96% engaged in exercise ($n = 665$), with 90% engaging at least once a week ($n = 629$). For girls ($n = 713$), 95% participated in exercise in the past six months ($n = 677$), with 84% engaging at least once a week ($n = 599$).

Correlations

Table 1 presents the correlations between the study’s relevant variables. Age was negatively associated with exercise behavior ($r = -.16$), suggesting that older adolescents reported exercising less. Age was also

Table 1

Correlation Matrix of Fitspiration Exposure, Demographics, Exercise Motivation, and Exercise Among Adolescents (N = 1,409)

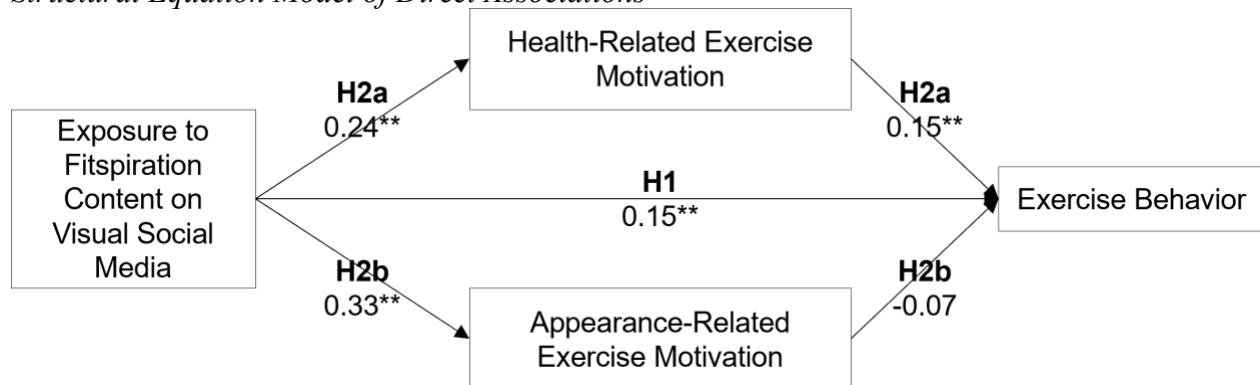
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Age	-							
2. Gender (1 = boy, 2 = girl)	.01	-						
3. Instagram Use (in minutes per day)	.11**	-.10**	-					
4. TikTok Use (in minutes per day)	-.05	.04	.22**	-				
5. Fitspiration Exposure ^a	.00	.13**	.14**	.05	-			
6. Exercise Motivation (Health)	-.08*	.00	.00	-.07*	.21**	-		
7. Exercise Motivation (Appearance)	-.03	-.18**	.08*	.10*	.27**	.41**	-	
8. Exercise Behavior (in minutes per week)	-.16**	-.25**	.05	-.09*	.12**	.17**	.14**	-

Note. * Refers to a p -value of $\leq .05$, whereas ** refers to a p -value of $\leq .001$.

^aExposure to Fitspiration Content on Visual Social Media.

Figure 1

Structural Equation Model of Direct Associations



Note. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .001$.

Table 2*Standardized Direct, Indirect, and Total Associations of the Structural Equation Model*

Variable 1	Variable 2	β	S.E	<i>p</i>-value	Confidence Intervals
<i>Direct Associations</i>					
Fitspiration Exposure ^a	Health-Related Exercise Motivation	0.24	0.05	$p < .001$	[0.15, 0.34]
Fitspiration Exposure	Appearance-Related Exercise Motivation	0.33	0.04	$p < .001$	[0.24, 0.41]
Fitspiration Exposure	Exercise Behavior	0.15	0.04	$p < .001$	[0.07, 0.23]
Health-Related Exercise Motivation	Exercise Behavior	0.15	0.04	$p < .001$	[0.08, 0.22]
Appearance-Related Exercise Motivation	Exercise Behavior	-0.07	0.04	$p = .063$	[-0.15, 0.00]
<i>Indirect Associations</i>					
Fitspiration Exposure	Exercise Behavior (mediation Health-Related Exercise Motivation)	0.04	0.01	$p = .002$	[0.01, 0.06]
Fitspiration Exposure	Exercise Behavior (mediation Appearance-Related Exercise Motivation)	-0.02	0.01	$p = .093$	[-0.05, 0.00]
<i>Total Association</i>					
Fitspiration Exposure	Exercise Behavior (mediation Health- and Appearance-Related Exercise Motivation)	0.17	0.04	$p < .001$	[0.09, 0.24]

Note. ^aExposure to Fitspiration Content on Visual Social Media.

positively associated with Instagram use ($r = .11$), indicating that older adolescents spent more time on Instagram, and negatively associated with health-related exercise motivation ($r = -.08$), reflecting a decline in health-driven motivation with age. Gender showed several associations. Girls reported more Instagram use ($r = -.10$), more exposure to Fitspiration content ($r = .13$), lower appearance-related exercise motivation ($r = -.18$), and less exercise behavior ($r = -.25$) than boys. The negative correlation between gender and appearance-related motivation and exercise behavior suggests that, despite girls reporting greater Fitspiration exposure, boys reported higher appearance-related motivation and more exercise behavior overall.

Testing the Model Fit

The hypothesized model, illustrated in Figure 1, examined the relationship between exposure to Fitspiration content on visual social media and exercise behavior, mediated by health-related and appearance-related exercise motivation. The model exhibited an acceptable fit to the data across multiple fit indices: $\chi^2(10, N = 808) = 30.97, p = .001$, TLI = 0.91, CFI = 0.97, RMSEA = 0.05, 90% CI [0.03, 0.07], and SRMR = 0.04. The model accounted for 20% of the variance in exercise behavior ($R^2 = .20$), 15% in appearance-related exercise motivation ($R^2 = .15$), and 7% in health-related exercise motivation ($R^2 = .07$). Tested modification indices indicated two potential directions from health- and appearance-related exercise motivation toward exposure to Fitspiration content on visual social media; however, testing this modified model did not improve model fit (CFI = .95, TLI = .88, RMSEA = .07, 90% CI [0.05, 0.09], SRMR = 0.04). Hence, they were not incorporated into the final model.

Regarding the control variables, gender was significantly associated with appearance-related exercise motivation ($\beta = -.20, SE = 0.03, p < .001, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.27, -0.14]$), with

female participants showing lower appearance-related exercise motivation than male participants. Both age and gender were significantly associated with exercise behavior. Older participants showed lower levels of exercise behavior ($\beta = -.16, SE = 0.04, p < .001, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.24, -0.09]$), as did female participants ($\beta = -.36, SE = 0.03, p < .001, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.42, -0.29]$). Furthermore, gymnasium attendance was significantly associated with higher levels of exercise behavior compared to secondary school ($\beta = .12, SE = 0.04, p = .005, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.04, 0.20]$). Detailed results, including standardized estimates, standard errors, and confidence intervals for all the direct, indirect, and total associations, are presented in Table 2.

Direct Associations

The first hypothesis, which proposed that exposure to Fitspiration content on visual social media would not have a direct association with exercise behavior, was not supported by the data. Contrary to the hypothesis, exposure to Fitspiration content on social media showed a significant positive association with exercise behavior ($\beta = 0.15, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.07, 0.23]$; Table 2; Figure 1). In addition, direct associations were found between exposure to Fitspiration content on visual social media and both health-related ($\beta = 0.24, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.15, 0.34]$) and appearance-related ($\beta = 0.33, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.24, 0.41]$) exercise motivation. While health-related exercise motivation was significantly and positively associated with exercise behavior ($\beta = 0.15, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.07, 0.23]$), no such association was observed for appearance-related motivation ($\beta = -0.07, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.14, 0.01]$).

Indirect Associations

The second hypothesis posited that health-related (H2a) and appearance-related (H2b) exercise motivation would act as two mediating pathways in the relationship between exposure to Fitspiration content on

visual social media and exercise behavior. Support was found for partial mediation of health-related exercise motivation ($\beta = 0.04$, 95% CI [0.01, 0.06]). The results suggested that greater exposure to Fitspiration content on visual social media was associated with higher health-related exercise motivation, which in turn was associated with exercise behavior. However, the results provided no evidence that appearance-related exercise motivation mediated the relationship between exposure to Fitspiration content on social media and exercise behavior ($\beta = -0.02$, 95% CI [-0.05, 0.00]).

Total Associations

The total association between exposure to Fitspiration content on visual social media and exercise behavior was found to be significant ($\beta = 0.17$, 95% CI [0.09, 0.24]). This association was partially mediated by health-related exercise motivation, as the direct path between exposure to Fitspiration content on visual social media and exercise behavior remained significant. No mediation through appearance-related exercise motivation was found, as its association with exercise behavior was non-significant.

Discussion

This paper aimed to explore the relationship between exposure to Fitspiration content on visual social media and exercise behavior and the hypothesized mediating role of health- and appearance-related exercise motivation in this relationship. Contrary to our first hypothesis, which predicted no direct association based on previous research, exposure to Fitspiration content was found to be positively associated with exercise behavior. Consequently, the second hypothesis was only partially supported. Due to the direct association, health-related exercise motivation served only as a partial

mediator (H2a) between exposure to Fitspiration content and exercise behavior. In contrast, no support was found for the mediating role of appearance-related exercise motivation (H2b).

Regarding the sample characteristics, descriptive analyses revealed that most participants reported engaging in exercise regularly, with 90% of them meeting the World Health Organization's (WHO) recommendation of engaging in at least 60 minutes of physical activity per week (Bull et al., 2020). This represents a positive result, which stands in contrast to the WHO global estimates (World Health Organization, 2024) and the reported rise in screen time and decrease in physical activity (van Sluijs et al., 2021). Regarding gender, both groups showed high levels of physical activity. However, boys reported slightly more exercise per week than girls, in line with previous findings (van Sluijs et al., 2021; World Health Organization, 2024). The finding that older adolescents showed lower levels of exercise behavior is noteworthy and aligns with the WHO's reports of declining physical activity during adolescence (World Health Organization, 2024).

Consistent with previous results (Faverio & Sidoti, 2024), the data also revealed high levels of self-reported social media engagement among our adolescent sample, including daily social media use. A notable finding concerns the difference in usage duration between Instagram and TikTok. TikTok users reported spending approximately twice as much time on the platform as on Instagram. Considering that most Fitspiration-related research has focused on Instagram (Nuss et al., 2024), future studies should expand their investigation to TikTok. In addition, exposure across different social media platforms needs to be accounted for, as exposure on Instagram and TikTok is likely cumulative rather than isolated. Participants reported frequent exposure to Fitspiration across both

Instagram and TikTok. Therefore, research that integrates multiple platforms could provide a more comprehensive understanding of users' overall exposure to Fitspiration content on social media in relation to exercise behavior.

The model tested in this study offers valuable insights into how exposure to Fitspiration content on visual social media is related to exercise motivation and exercise behavior. The model explained 20% of the variance in exercise behavior, 7% in health-related exercise motivation, and 15% in appearance-related exercise motivation. The explained variance for exercise behavior and appearance-related motivation can be considered moderate and meaningful, suggesting that Fitspiration exposure captures a relevant portion of these constructs. However, the relatively low explained variance for health-related exercise motivation (7%) indicates that other factors beyond Fitspiration exposure likely play a more substantial role in shaping health-related motivation, which warrants further investigation.

Regarding the first hypothesis, and contrary to previous studies (Bowles et al., 2021; Breves et al., 2025; Karsay et al., 2025; Robinson et al., 2017), this study found a direct association between exposure to Fitspiration content and exercise behavior. The difference from previous results (Bowles et al., 2021) could be explained by the inclusion of TikTok in the measurement of Fitspiration exposure, as participants in the current study reported using TikTok, on average, twice as long as Instagram. However, it is also plausible that more active individuals are more likely to seek out Fitspiration content or are directed toward it through app algorithms. The difference may also stem from the fact that this study assessed daily exposure rather than a single, controlled exposure in an experimental setting, as employed by Karsay et al. (2025) and Robinson et al. (2017).

In addition, our findings highlighted the potential mediating role of exercise motivation in the relationship between exposure to Fitspiration content and exercise behavior. Health-related exercise motivation partially mediated the relationship between Fitspiration exposure on Instagram and TikTok and average minutes of exercise per week. The remaining direct association between Fitspiration content exposure and exercise behavior may reflect other mediating variables that have not been included in the model, such as self-efficacy or social norms. The difference between health- and appearance-related motivation can be interpreted through the lens of SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2017). The partial mediation of health-related (intrinsic) motivation aligns with SDT's proposition that autonomously motivated behavior is more likely to be sustained over time. In contrast, the absence of a mediating role for appearance-related (extrinsic) motivation is also consistent, suggesting that externally driven motivation is less stable and less likely to translate into sustained behavioral outcomes (Ryan & Deci, 2017).

As suggested by Dolphin et al. (2024), visual social media platforms may not independently bring about behavioral change, but rather appear to be associated with motivational processes that support the adoption of healthier behaviors. From a health intervention perspective, the direct association between exposure and behavior, as well as the partial mediating role of health-related motivation, are encouraging and provide starting points for future intervention strategies. Fitspiration content still includes health-related components that have been associated with adolescents' engagement in exercise, and fitfluencers could be encouraged to emphasize these arguments even more. Yet, the appearance-focused elements have been associated with a shift in exercise motivation away from health toward appearance, potentially undermining the

sustainability and well-being benefits of physical activity, as these motives are often driven by external pressure (Verstuyf et al., 2012). This is particularly relevant given that research has indicated an increasing amount of idealized, appearance-focused content on social media (Harriger et al., 2023; Tiggemann & Anderberg, 2020). Appearance-related motivation has been associated with higher body dissatisfaction and disordered eating (Prichard & Tiggemann, 2008; Tylka & Homan, 2015), as well as long-term adverse effects (Folk et al., 2022). Future research should investigate which elements of Fitspiration content drive this motivation and how they can be mitigated.

Limitations

This study has a few limitations. First, it was based on cross-sectional data and self-reported measures; the findings should, therefore, be interpreted with caution. For example, although not supported by the results of this study, the argumentation as presented implies a directional relationship from exposure to Fitspiration content to exercise motivation. However, this relationship may also work in the opposite direction, as previous research indicates that individuals actively seek out content that aligns with their existing exercise motivation, proactively searching for fitness-, exercise-, and diet-related content on social media (Kells et al., 2023; Raggatt et al., 2018). Future research could move beyond self-reported measures and employ content analysis of digital trace data to offer more objective and detailed insight into actual exposure to Fitspiration content. Second, the study did not distinguish between actively searching for Fitspiration content and passive exposure while scrolling, which could influence the relationships between exposure, motivation, and exercise behavior.

Implications for Health Behavior Research

This study adds meaningful evidence to the ongoing debate surrounding the associations related to Fitspiration content, where findings have thus far remained inconclusive. It contributes to health behavior research by differentiating between intrinsic (health-related) and extrinsic (appearance-related) exercise motivation following exposure to Fitspiration content on visual social media. This addresses a limitation in previous Fitspiration research, which has, among other aspects, focused on general exercise motivation or on direct links between exposure and exercise behavior. This distinction is important, as previous research highlights that Fitspiration content contains appearance-focused elements that could negatively influence exposed individuals. By exploring exercise motivation as a mediator and distinguishing between intrinsic and extrinsic forms of motivation, the findings contribute to understanding why exposure to Fitspiration content may be associated with mixed behavioral outcomes.

For researchers in the field of health behavior, these results highlight the importance of incorporating underlying mechanisms when examining the relationship between Fitspiration content and health behavior outcomes. From a practical perspective, the findings suggest that exercise behavior interventions should focus on health-related motivating messages rather than appearance-related messages. This is supported by the positive association found between health-related motivation and exercise behavior, whereas no such association was observed for appearance-related motivation. Understanding these relationships is crucial for developing interventions—such as media literacy programs or platform-level content guidelines—that support healthy and sustainable exercise behaviors, especially given the vital role physical activity plays in

enhancing overall well-being and quality of life. At the policy and platform level, these findings raise questions about how platforms moderate and promote Fitspiration content, and specifically whether the appearance- or health-focused nature of such content differentially shapes users' exercise motivation.

Future research should examine which specific content characteristics enhance intrinsic and extrinsic motivation and whether these relationships vary across different populations, social media platforms, or types of physical activity. An important next step is to examine the specific content that young social media users are exposed to on these platforms. The focus should be on actual user exposure rather than on general trends or content shared under hashtags, such as #Fitspiration. This targeted approach would help determine whether differences in content type or the degree of idealization might explain variations in exercise-related motivation among adolescents. Improving the understanding of these complex dynamics can help guide future research toward developing more effective strategies to support adolescents in promoting suitable exercise motivation and reducing the focus on appearance-related motivation.

Furthermore, the observed gender difference in exercise levels, with boys reporting slightly higher average minutes of exercise per week than girls, warrants further investigation. Future research should explore the underlying factors driving this gap, while also examining how both groups can be supported in developing health-related exercise motivation.

Discussion Questions

This study showed that health-related exercise motivation may serve as a partial mediator between Fitspiration exposure on visual social media and exercise behavior, whereas appearance-related exercise

motivation did not. As participants in this study were exposed to Fitspiration content without distinguishing between its health- and appearance-related motivational elements, how can researchers more accurately identify and measure them to better understand their differential associations with exercise behavior?

Given that this study found health-related exercise motivation to be associated with exercise behavior, whereas appearance-related exercise motivation did not mediate this relationship, what ethical responsibilities, if any, do Fitspiration content creators and platforms have in shaping motivational messages related to exercise?

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