

THE FITSPIRATION-EFFECT: FITNESS IDENTITY OF EMERGING ADULT FEMALES ON SOCIAL MEDIA

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ABSTRACT

Social media platforms such as the fitspiration online movement aimed at inspiring health and fitness play an important role in how women internalise health and fitness ideals in their sense of self. This qualitative study recruited 14 emerging adult females using purposive sampling. Data collection focussed on gaining insight into participants' fitness identity and autophotography and photo elicitation were used. Thematic analysis was used to construct meaning from the data. Participants considered fitness beneficial to their physical and mental health and an important aspect of their recreation, socialisation and identity. The findings emphasised how emerging adult females balance social media discourses found in the fitspiration movement. Their journeys to establish a healthy and stable fitness identity included the value of fitness, inspiration, and upward social comparison, and the dangers of judgement and overemphasis on an ideal body and exercise regime. The process of fitness identity development is complex and especially challenging for emerging adult females who are trying to construct a sense of self while moving through a transitional developmental stage and contending with cultural discourses and social media messages that often prioritise weight loss and physical appearance over health.

Keywords: Emerging adult females; Fitness identity; Fitspiration; Social media

INTRODUCTION

Aspirations of fitness, healthy living, and a balanced lifestyle are prominent in the world today. These aspirations are often associated with images regarding the ideal body, concepts about fitness and exercise, and reflections related to people's sense of self. A fitness or exercise identity is a component of a person's self-concept. It can be described as the extent to which a person identifies with being an exercising person and how a person internalises ideals of fitness and exercise in their sense of self (Liardi, 2016; Rossing *et al.*, 2016). It is associated with a person's physical self, body awareness, and attitudes about fitness and exercise (Brytek -Matera & Koziel, 2015). For example, a person with a strong or salient fitness identity will regard exercising as an important and central part of who they are; they will readily engage in physical activity and exercise, portray a strong commitment to health and exercise, and be motivated to reach fitness activity outcomes (Liardi, 2016; Rossing *et al.*, 2016).

There is ample evidence of the physical and mental benefits of engaging in fitness activities and exercise. A positive attitude towards physical fitness results in higher fitness levels (Vaara *et al.*, 2016). Furthermore, physical activity assists in weight loss and creates a more positive

body image (Leone & Ward, 2013; Green, 2018). Fitness has been found to improve mood and self-esteem, decrease stress and anxiety (Powers *et al.*, 2015; Mikkelsen *et al.*, 2017), and heighten the quality of life (Cakir *et al.*, 2021). However, despite these benefits, fitness ideals can be harmfully applied. Overemphasis can lead to, for example, exercise addiction (Lichtenstein *et al.*, 2018) or body dissatisfaction (Willis & Knobloch-Westerwick, 2014). Rossing *et al.* (2016) thus emphasise the importance of recognising the vulnerabilities, fluidities, and ambiguities in the fitness identity ideal. Striving to adhere to the health and fitness discourse and to reach culturally defined ideals of a socially acceptable body can be precarious.

Identity development is relational in nature (Syed & Azmitia, 2010 ; Breen *et al.*, 2017). People define themselves in relation to others through similarities and differences. Forming a fitness or exercise identity is thus a social process often informed by social interaction, relationships with others, social context, and cultural discourses (Rossing *et al.*, 2016). Social comparisons (self-evaluations of ability based on inter-individual frames of reference), dimensional comparisons (domain-specific comparisons), and temporal comparisons (intra-individual comparisons between current performances/abilities and prior performances/abilities) are often involved when people form opinions about themselves (Möller & Marsh, 2013).

In contemporary society, social media has played a prominent role in driving discourses around sport, fitness, and ideal body images. Fitspiration (the amalgamation of the constructs of fitness and inspiration) is the online trend of media content aimed at inspiring people to exercise and pursue a healthier lifestyle. These websites often contain photo graphs, images, texts, and conversations about exercise, healthy food, and diet (Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015; Boepple *et al.*, 2016; Deighton-Smith & Bell, 2018; Prichard *et al.*, 2018). Through a thematic analysis of the nature of images and text of fitspiration posts, Deighton-Smith and Bell (2018) developed six themes: (1) Fit is sexy; (2) A fit physique requires commitment and self-regulation; (3) Your choices define you; (4) Pleasure and perseverance through pain; (5) Battle of the selves: You versus you; and (6) Here's to us! A celebration of a community. Toffoletti and Thorpe (2021) captured the affective impact of fitspiration media by describing how it both “connects” and “compels” exercising women.

Fitspiration has also been described as a potentially harmful online trend (Prichard *et al.*, 2020). Various scholars (Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015; Boepple *et al.*, 2016; Prichard *et al.*, 2018; Seekis *et al.*, 2020; Cataldo *et al.*, 2021; Fioravanti *et al.*, 2021) warn that the content on fitspiration sites often overemphasises appearance (i.e., the sites reinforce the overvaluation of physical appearance and prioritise weight loss and appearance over health) and promote problematic messages regarding exercise and diet (e.g., dietary restraint, excessive exercise, or exercise for appearance-motivated reasons). Fitspiration posts often sexually objectify the fit body and encourage self-objectification, resulting in the perpetuation of pervading sociocultural appearance ideals (Chasler, 2016; Deighton-Smith & Bell, 2018; Chansiri *et al.*, 2022; Curtis *et al.*, 2023). Objectified fitspiration may distract from health goals (Murashka *et al.*, 2021). Thus, while the aim of the fitspiration movement is to promote healthy eating, exercise and well-being, exposure to fitspiration images (especially appearance-focussed images) results in poorer body satisfaction and an increased negative mood (Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015; Prichard *et al.*, 2018; Seekis *et al.*, 2020; Rounds & Stutts, 2021; Cha *et al.*, 2022; Pilot & Stutts, 2023). Indeed, social media use in general is often associated with the

promotion of unhealthy social comparison (Haferkamp & Kramer, 2011), particularly in relation to body image (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016; Seekis *et al.*, 2020; Dignard & Jarry, 2021).

According to Arnett (2000), the emerging adult (between the age of 18 and 29 years) is in a transitional developmental period (not an actual adolescent anymore but also not entirely an adult yet). Emerging adults are predominantly focussed on the deepening of their identities and on finding their sense of self in relation to others and the world (Syed & Azmitia, 2010; Breen *et al.*, 2017). Emerging adults are also very active social media users (Coyne *et al.*, 2016; Mazur & Li, 2016; Ohannessian *et al.*, 2017; Kiracburun *et al.*, 2018), and media is an important agent of socialisation for them (Coyne *et al.*, 2016; Breen *et al.*, 2017). The more time emerging adults spend on social media, the more they engage in social comparison (Schulz, 2015).

Vulnerability to the negative outcomes of social media use is especially prevalent in young people such as adolescents (Rodgers *et al.*, 2020) and emerging young adults (Vaterlaus *et al.*, 2015; Ohannessian *et al.*, 2017). Several studies warn against the possible adverse effects of young women comparing themselves with online fitness standards and body ideals (Boepple *et al.*, 2016; Donovan *et al.*, 2020; Krug *et al.*, 2020; Jerónimo & Carraça, 2022). Young adult women are particularly vulnerable to the promotion of the “thin ideal” in fitspiration trends (Rounds & Stutts, 2021). Young females turn to social media for appearance standards (Boepple *et al.*, 2016). They frequently compare themselves with peers who look better than themselves (Hogue & Mills, 2019). Emerging adult females feel societal pressures to aspire to a fit, athletic body and are generally unsatisfied with their appearance (Williams *et al.*, 2020). Hogue and Mills (2019) found a decline in body image among young adult women who engage with their attractive peers on social media platforms that are predominantly appearance based.

PURPOSE OF RESEARCH

Considering the arguments above, the aim of this study was to address the following research question: How do emerging adult females make sense of their fitness identity through social media engagements such as the fitspiration trend?

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative approach with an exploratory and descriptive design informed the study's decisions regarding sampling, data collection, data interpretation, and knowledge production. The aim was to observe, describe, and understand aspects of human complexity and meaning-making (Stangor, 2015).

Sampling and participants

Participants were selected by means of non-probability purposive sampling. The inclusion criteria were that participants should (1) be emerging adults between the ages of 18 years and 29 years, (2) identify as female, (3) be active on social media, and (4) be proficient in English. The first author of this manuscript recruited participants and were from various environments. Some participants worked full-time, while others were registered students. Whereas all the participants identified as emerging adult females and were active on social media, they were

from diverse ethnolinguistic groups and educational backgrounds. The biographic details of the 14 participants are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION OF THE PARTICIPANTS

Participant	Age	Home language	Highest qualification
1	23	Afrikaans	Postgraduate diploma in Accounting
2	21	Afrikaans	Certificate in Sports conditioning
3	20	Afrikaans	Higher Certificate in Fitness
4	22	Afrikaans	Bachelor's degree
5	23	isiZulu	Grade 12
6	22	Afrikaans	Grade 12
7	22	English	Grade 12
8	22	Sesotho	Bachelor's degree (Bachelor of Arts)
9	21	Afrikaans	Grade 12
10	21	Afrikaans	Grade 12
11	27	Afrikaans	Bachelor's degree (Law)
12	20	Afrikaans	Grade 12
13	21	Sesotho	Bachelor's degree (Bachelor of Arts)
14	21	Afrikaans	Bachelor's degree (Accounting)

Data collection

The aim of the study was to gain information about participants' fitness identity, their views on fitness, their fitness goals, and their fitness comparisons on social media. Data were collected by the first author of this manuscript, primarily via email correspondence and mobile phones. Participants had the option to type or voice record their responses. Questions were posed to participants to gain information on aspects such as how vital participants' fitness is to them, their fitness activities and goals, their reasons for sharing fitness-related photos on social media, and their views on their own fitness identity.

Data collection combined two forms of visual methodology (Glaw *et al.*, 2017). Visual methods are gaining popularity as innovative and effective qualitative data collection instruments that use images to capture participants' ideas and expressions while valuing participants as experts in their own lives (Glaw *et al.*, 2017). Photo elicitation (Bates *et al.*, 2017) and autophotography (Noland, 2006; Yang, 2012) are often used in combination as a way of triangulating data. In both methods, participants are asked to describe their thoughts, emotions and perceptions regarding the images (Yang, 2012).

Photo elicitation uses photographs or other visual media as a technique to generate conversation or thought expression (Bates *et al.*, 2017; Glaw *et al.*, 2017). These images are presented to participants with the aim of evoking ideas, emotions and memories. In this study, four fitspiration photographs containing images of functional (gym training) and non-functional (leisure) activities were presented to each participant. Participants were asked to choose the images they identify with most / least and to explain their choices (e.g., Explain your feelings about this photo; Do you want to be like the person in this photo?; Why or why not?).

In autophotography, participants are asked to provide photographs that they have taken and feel represent themselves and their unique views on a topic (Noland, 2006; Glaw *et al.*, 2017). These photographs are regarded as actual data that capture the world through the participant's eyes. In this study, participants were asked to select two online photographs from their own social media accounts that best portrayed their fitness identity. Reflective questions were posed to elicit the participants' unique responses to the images (Why did you choose this specific photo?; How did/do people react to this photo on social media?; If you could, would you change anything about this photo?).

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance for this study was obtained from the academic institution's Research Ethics Committee (UFS-HSD2017/0230). This study formed part of a more extensive study titled *Emerging Adults in a Transitional Society*, which focusses on the various ways young people find a sense of self in contemporary society. The research was informed by the ethical principles of beneficence, respect, autonomy and justice. All participants were informed about the aim and nature of the study before signing an informed consent form. Participants were assured of the voluntary nature of the study and were allowed to withdraw from the study at any time. Confidentiality and anonymity were prioritised. Professional psychological services were available for any participant who needed debriefing/counselling during or after the study.

Data analysis

Data analysis proceeded through the guidelines proposed by Glaw *et al.* (2017) for visual methods, namely organising, coding and analysing the data through structured, detailed and interpretative analysis, creating themes and writing up the findings. Data analysis was informed by the principles of Braun and Clarke's (2019; 2022) reflexive thematic analysis. In alignment with the qualitative paradigm, this method is open, exploratory and iterative in nature. It acknowledges the researcher's subjectivity and is underpinned by the thoughtful and deliberate engagement of the researcher. Through a recursive process of reading and re-reading the transcriptions, data were coded (using both inductive and deductive coding) to identify units of meaning. Following the coding process, themes (with subthemes) were generated to capture the patterns of meaning that recurred across the data set. Themes were developed and refined through a collaborative process (between the two authors of this manuscript) and in a reflective manner in order to construct thoughtful and trustworthy themes. The construction of themes was guided by immersion in the data (to stay true to participants' meaning-making process), while also being grounded in scholarly conversations about the relational nature of emerging adult identity development.

RESULTS

The themes that were developed from the thematic analysis are summarised in Table 2. This is followed by a presentation of the themes and subthemes that are substantiated with participant quotations in italics (followed by the identifier in brackets).

Table 2. SUMMARY OF MAIN THEMES AND SUBTHEMES

	Main theme	Subtheme
1	The functions of fitness	Physical health benefits Mental health management Weight loss and body shape improvement Leisure and socialising
2	Fitness identity – a work in progress	Hesitance on the journey Social comparison
3	The faces of fitspiration	Motivation and positive reinforcement Prejudice and judgement

Theme 1: The functions of fitness

The participants in this study engaged in a variety of fitness, sport and exercise activities. While some of these activities are organised and focussed (e.g., weight training), others are more informal (e.g., recreational walking). Both individual and group activities were mentioned. Participants also articulated a variety of reasons for engaging in fitness activities, of which the four most prominent reasons were (1) physical health benefits, (2) mental health management, (3) weight loss and body shape improvement, and (4) leisure and socialising.

Most of the participants emphasised the value of fitness and indicated that “being healthy” is important to them. Although the emerging adult participants were young and healthy, they were aware of how fragile health is:

“We only get one body and we need to take care of it the best way we see fit.” (Participant 1)

They did not take their health for granted and prioritised the maintenance of a healthy body: *“I am so young, and I am in the prime of my life. And I don’t want to walk up a flight of stairs and feel completely exhausted after doing so.”* (Participant 7)

The mental health benefits from participating in fitness activities were also mentioned:

“I mostly do it for my mood...” (Participant 6)

and

“It [fitness] definitely is important to me, not just for the physical side of it but emotionally. It makes me feel good, and it just helps me get through my days. And it just gets your mind off what you are busy with.” (Participant 11)

and

“[M]y fitness identity is more about just being active, being outdoors, getting away from stress and work, and switching off ... basically from the real world and just relaxing and having fun.” (Participant 11)

One participant directly associated fitness activities with managing her depression:

“I am someone who struggles with depression, so when I exercise, the way I feel afterwards is always better.” (Participant 6)

In addition to physical and mental health, weight loss was considered important. More than half of the participants indicated weight loss or the improvement of their body shape as explicit goals they wanted to reach. Most participants expressed that they were not only concerned about physical and mental health but also weight loss and body image:

“[L]osing weight is a benefit of it.” (Participant 7)

and

“[I]t is indicative of the muscles I intend on exercising and gaining my desired outcome regarding legs and my glutes.” (Participant 4)

Participants expressed less confidence regarding this and mentioned that their weight-loss goals were not as easily reached as the physical and mental health effects:

“... definitely to lose weight, even though [laughs] like I said, it does not feel like it’s working.” (Participant 6)

Many of the participants mentioned that they enjoy leisure activities:

“In general, I prefer fitness activities which include cycling, spinning, running, or recreational walking like climbing up a mountain or a stroll on the beach.” (Participant 9)

and

“I love activities that make me feel like I am being active but not necessarily participating in this activity.” (Participant 5)

For some, leisure activities are the only fitness activities in which they participate. This causes some feelings of guilt:

“I do go on hikes. I am not a gym member, so the fitness activities that I do is [sic] mainly hiking and taking long walks, if that counts. But technically, I do not participate in any fitness activity. Oh, it sucks!” (Participant 5)

Except for two participants who prefer weight training, the majority of the participants favoured participation in team sports and group activities:

“[S]o my favourite activities will be volleyball and soccer, and then I also participate in basketball, hockey, and table tennis.” (Participant 6)

They enjoyed the social value of team and group fitness activities:

“... to spend time with people. So, it’s very social vibes as well ...” (Participant 6)

Many mentioned that they join friends on fitness activities:

“Currently, I work out every day of the week with a group of friends.” (Participant 7)

Theme 2: Fitness identity – a work in progress

When talking about their fitness identity specifically, participants were more tentative. Overall, participants were not negative about their fitness identity (only two participants replied with a solid “no” when asked whether they were happy with their current fitness identity). However, most participants were reluctant to commit to an established fitness identity and rather saw themselves engaged in a process of evolving into who they wanted to become:

“I am working towards a bigger healthy lifestyle goal ... My fitness identity, I would say, is a work in progress at the moment.” (Participant 10)

This position of hesitance (“not being there yet”) was associated with mixed emotions. Some statements indicated content; other statements were less confident or filled with confusion:

“I try to be as happy as I can be ...” (Participant 1)

“I feel like there is always room for improvement...” (Participant 6)

“I won’t say that I’m unhappy...”(Participant 10)

“I wouldn’t say that I am happy...” (Participant 11)

and

“[I]t’s not that I’m happy with it but for now, I am content. I do have goals ... I don’t think that I am really happy with my current fitness identity because it is not where I want it to be...” (Participant 5)

Participants mentioned conflicting roles and competing responsibilities as reasons for not prioritising a fitness identity:

“I am not where I want to be in terms of my fitness, and I feel like I still have a long way to go. I lack in terms of commitment to my fitness goals, and I have a lot of distractions and other responsibilities such as school that take up most of my time.” (Participant 8)

and

“...and for now, I’m prioritising other aspects of my life.” (Participant 5)

While participants clearly expressed their intentions towards more stable commitments, they recognised that their fitness identity is in a process of developing. Participants patiently accepted that this is a “journey”:

“Even though I would like to improve my fitness, I do not feel a self-hate regarding my current identity. I understand why I am not where I want to be, and I also know what is required to get there. But nevertheless, I am not in a rush to get there.” (Participant 9)

and

“At the moment, I expect more and better of myself, but fitness is a journey that requires discipline and patience to get to where you want to be.” (Participant 2)

Social comparison played a role in establishing a sense of self. Participants mentioned role models such as celebrities and fitness trainers whom they aspire to emulate. However, most participants verbalised the dangers of unwarranted comparisons:

“I don’t really compare my fitness to anyone. I do follow quite a few ... fitness models or trainers that I really like, but I just try to do my best because I feel like some of them do it for a full-time job so it creates an unrealistic expectation or stress on yourself to be more like them. So I would rather say that I do not try to look up to someone but rather be inspired by someone.” (Participant 11)

and

“[R]ecently, my motivation has decreased, and I now see the need to start looking for a role model who will be easy to relate to and someone who can inspire me to improve and who can provide me with many useful tips.” (Participant 9)

In support of this view, many participants opted to compare themselves with “realistic” role models such as friends or family members who are close to them:

“I would rather say that I compare it to those of my friends and the progress we make in this process we are in.” (Participant 10)

Interestingly, many participants preferred to use themselves (past and future selves) as a measure of comparison:

“I compare my fitness to myself because I know where I used to be and how I used to look. At this point, I would really like to look like and perform like that again and then start going bigger and better from there.” (Participant 3)

and

“I compare my fitness to myself. I have a smart watch ... to measure my current fitness level to a level of the past. I try to improve it regularly...” (Participant 9)

Theme 3: The faces of fitspiration

Participants expressed strong, varied, and sometimes contrasting views on the role of social media in their fitness identity. A combination of advantages (motivation and positive reinforcement) and disadvantages (prejudice and judgement) were mentioned.

Participants regarded social media as a source of motivation and inspiration. Overall, participants drew motivation and inspiration from the photographs of fitness influencers:

*“I really like **, which is a fitness trainer from Australia that has nice fitness programmes that I follow sometimes. And she is very positive and she also promotes body positivity rather than having a specific body size, so I like her a lot.”* (Participant 11)

and

“When I look at this picture, I feel like want to work harder in order to reach my goal and look the way I want to look.” (Participant 3)

and

“The woman in the picture serves as a motivation...” (Participant 4)

and

“The girl is stunning and looks very healthy and strong. I feel a little bit more motivated to exercise now.” (Participant 14)

In a reciprocal manner, participants drew inspiration from the fitness identity postings of others and, in turn, posted about their own fitness identity to motivate others. They shared various reasons for their postings:

“I do share a fair amount of photos of my fitness journey on social media, mostly to try and inspire other people and to show them that you don’t have to have or be something special to achieve your fitness goals. If I can do it, anyone can.” (Participant 2)

and

“I wanted to show people that you don’t necessarily need a lot to just start. You just need to be motivated in an area where you feel comfortable getting the necessary exercise.” (Participant 1)

and

“...to change the stigma that women can have muscles and still look feminine and beautiful. Women need to know that there is nothing wrong with also having a fair amount of muscle. It does not make you any less of a woman.” (Participant 2)

In addition, participants posted on social media as a way of holding themselves accountable:

“I chose this picture because it represents who I am and what I stand for. Striving to be fit and comfortable in my skin.” (Participant 4)

and

“So, I posted it on my status just to show people ... I don’t know if ‘show people’ is the right word, but ja, to put it out there that we worked out, we feel good about ourselves, we are feeling great. And ... it is also like a motivation to myself.” (Participant 7)

However, the participants were very aware of the dangers of social media . They feared prejudice and judgement, and many were reluctant to share fitness photographs on social media:

“[P]eople can get consumed by an image...” (Participant 5)

Two participants declared that they never share personal photographs. Others did share but practised care:

“I prefer not to share a lot of fitness posts on social media. This is only because a lot of people have a vision of their own on how someone who works out is supposed to look and if you don’t meet their standard, then you are considered a fake or attention seeker.” (Participant 3)

and

“I am not confident about my image yet, and I also feel like there is so much pressure on social media for a person to look a certain way. These pressures can easily affect a person’s self-esteem and self-confidence. I do not want to subject myself to judgement by people that I don’t even know.” (Participant 8)

and

“I do not often share photos of my fitness identity on social media ... I believe people judge you on the way you look, and the way I exercise and the way I look after myself is for that – it is for myself. It is not for other people to see or for other people to judge because my body type and my goals and the way I exercise may not be the same as other people’s.” (Participant 10)

When commenting on the fitspiration photos of fitness influencers, some participants expressed the type of judgements that they themselves feared:

“Every time when I see photos like this, when I see people in bikinis and everything, the first thing I always thinks is ‘OK girl, we get it’, you know [laughs]. ...but for me personally, like obviously, to have a body like that, you actually have to work for it, so I think that it is good that she is proud of it because I would never put a bikini photo ... unless it is really good angles.” (Participant 6)

and

“My feelings towards this picture is [sic] not negative but personally, I would never post a picture like this. But if that girl, if she wants to share her fitness identity like that ... and she is proud of what she has achieved with her fitness goals, that is great. Personally, I would just never post a picture like this.” (Participant 10)

DISCUSSION

The emerging adult participants in this study were all involved in activities related to fitness and reiterated the physical and mental health benefits documented in many previous research studies (Leone & Ward, 2013; Broman-Fulks *et al.*, 2015; Powers *et al.*, 2015; Vaara *et al.*, 2016; Mikkelsen *et al.*, 2017; Cakir *et al.*, 2021). The “feel good factor” of fitness that is related to leisure, sociability and relaxation was prioritised by participants. For example, while only two participants preferred weight training, the majority of the participants reported participation in team sports (such as tennis, action netball, volleyball, soccer, basketball, hockey, table tennis, jogging, cycling and fitness classes) and activities with friends. Brown *et al.* (2017) and Toffoletti and Thorpe (2021) also referred to the importance of group interaction in women’s motivations for exercising. Many participants indicated recreational walking and activities in nature (e.g., mountain climbing and walking on the beach) as their preferred leisurely fitness activities. This corresponds with other studies that associate walking and “green exercise” with improvements in general health, vitality and mental health (Barton & Pretty, 2010; Heesch *et al.*, 2015). The notions of self-compassion, health and wellness as the ultimate goals (rather than appearance-based goals) can optimise positive fitness outcomes and prevent detrimental consequences (Brown *et al.*, 2017; Rutter *et al.*, 2023).

Although participants opted to prioritise health and well-being in their fitness programmes, they were also concerned with weight loss and body image. Participants did not escape social pressures and persistent social media messages about the ideal female body, the drive for thinness, and appearance-related reasons for exercising (see Willis & Knobloch-Westerwick, 2014; Boepple *et al.*, 2016; Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016; Lichtenstein *et al.*, 2018; Seekis *et al.*, 2020; Dignard & Jarry, 2021). Most participants were, however, aware of the dangers of unhealthy social comparison and extended time spent on social media platforms, as mentioned by many researchers (Haferkamp & Kramer, 2011; Schulz, 2015; Hogue & Mills, 2019; Donovan *et al.*, 2020; Williams *et al.*, 2020). Participants were cautious of cultural discourses perpetuating stereotypical ideas about the ideal female body type and practices (as also argued by Rossing *et al.*, 2016; Mayoh & Jones, 2021; Rounds & Stutts, 2021). They were mindful of the dangers of posting messages and activities that could invite judgement and prejudice, or according to Stieger *et al.* (2012), that could give rise to virtual identity suicide.

While all the participants echoed the importance of fitness and the salience of a fitness identity in their sense of self, they were still in the process of moving towards an established identity. Participants aspired to a fitness identity but were unsure exactly what their fitness identity should comprise. This confirms emerging adult theory regarding the fluid nature of an emerging adult’s identity (Arnett, 2000; Syed & Azmitia, 2010; Breen *et al.*, 2017). Emerging adults are still in an “in-between” state of searching for an identity and are not ready to make final commitments yet (Arnett, 2000). This social moratorium (an extended space and time for self-focus and deepened exploration) is valuable in preparing young people for the challenges of adulthood in contemporary society. Still, establishing a stable fitness identity has various

benefits, such as a stronger commitment to health and exercise, more positive attitudes about physical fitness, and increased participation in fitness activities (Liardi, 2016; Rossing *et al.*, 2016; Vaara *et al.*, 2016). The internalisation of clear health and fitness goals and the resulting commitment to a fitness identity should thus remain the ultimate goal of healthy personal development.

Considering the portrayal of fitness identity on social media, the value of the fitspiration movement (Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015; Boepple *et al.*, 2016; Deighton-Smith & Bell, 2018; Prichard *et al.*, 2018) was confirmed in statements regarding the motivation found in following role models and seeing examples of positivity and success. In addition, participants reiterated the importance of telling their own stories and having others witnessing these stories as a form of positive reinforcement and validation. As explained by Pinkerton *et al.* (2017), sharing on social media was mainly aimed at keeping others informed, inspiring others, gaining recognition, inviting others to join in the activity, acquiring general social comments, or keeping themselves motivated. The findings in this study emphasise that identity is a relational construct (Syed & Azmitia, 2010; Breen *et al.*, 2017), and its embodiment can only be understood when considering context, time and interaction (Rossing *et al.*, 2016). Participants valued interaction with others (through group exercising opportunities or on social media) not only in their fitness activities but also in their exploration of their fitness identity. Reward and reinforcement, referred to as “those sweet, sweet likes” by Pinkerton *et al.* (2017, p. 128), were important. Participants provided evidence of the presence of social comparison, especially in upward social comparison with fitspiration role models, and dimensional and temporal comparison by evaluating specific aspects of their fitness against their prior selves, as explained by Möller and Marsh (2013).

PRACTICAL APPLICATION AND CONCLUSION

The process of fitness identity development is complex and especially challenging for emerging adult females who are trying to construct a sense of self (Syed & Azmitia, 2010; Breen *et al.*, 2017) while moving through a transitional developmental stage (Arnett, 2000) and contending with cultural discourses and social media messages that often prioritise weight loss and physical appearance over health (Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015; Boepple *et al.*, 2016; Prichard *et al.*, 2018; Chansiri *et al.*, 2022; Curtis *et al.*, 2023). The participants in this study all considered fitness beneficial to their physical and mental health and an important aspect of their recreation, socialisation, and identity. The findings in this study emphasise how emerging adult females balance social media discourses found in the fitspiration movement. Their journeys to establish a healthy and stable fitness identity included both the value of fitness, inspiration and upward social comparison, and the dangers of judgement and overemphasis on an ideal body and exercise regime.

This research study described the experiences of a small and purposively sampled group of emerging adult women on the contemporary topic and relatively under-researched field of social media fitness identity. It can thus be seen as a pilot study. More research in this field is needed to gain insight into the nuanced nature of fitness identity and the social media engagement processes involved in the quest for health and fitness. Devereaux and McGrew (2021) emphasised the importance of acknowledging variety, both in fitspiration images (fitspiration should not be seen as one broad category) and also in individuals’ reactions

(fitspiration impacts different people in different ways). While it was beyond the scope of the current research study, the interpretation of research findings can be deepened by including additional contextual information on social media consumption, such as active versus passive engagement (Mayoh & Jones, 2021), the frequency of intentional fitspiration use (Pasko & Arigo, 2021) and media literacy (Ahadzadeh *et al.*, 2022). The cognitive and emotional impact of social media content also warrants further exploration. Klier *et al.* (2022) mentioned sport-related content, Mulgrew and Courtney (2022) focussed on body-functionality content and Jennings *et al.* (2020) considered the blurred boundaries between pro-anorexia and fitspiration media. In addition to this, Cha *et al.* (2022) argued for the importance of representations of diverse body types (e.g., “curvy fitspiration images”). Davies *et al.* (2020) highlighted the protective value of positive social media comments and Pilot and Stutts (2023) explained how values affirmation could limit the adverse effects of fitspiration exposure. Research exploring these topics concerning fitness identity can facilitate a deeper understanding of the role of Fitspiration in identity formation. Future research can also consider personal characteristics that can mediate fitness identity experiences. For example, researchers have referred to the importance of internal locus of control, body mass index (Ahadzadeh *et al.*, 2022), self-compassion (Rutter *et al.*, 2023), self-esteem (Limniou *et al.*, 2021), narcissistic inclinations (Daudi, 2022) and social comparison orientations (Pasko & Arigo, 2021; Pryde & Prichard, 2022). Awareness of differences, prejudices, and cultural pressures is prominent in the quest for a sense of self (Syed & Azmitia, 2010) and is especially prevalent in multi-cultural environments such as South Africa (Adams *et al.*, 2018). Further research opportunities include recruiting diverse samples (e.g., older adults, men and professional athletes) to explore variations in meaning-making among various groups of individuals. Mayoh and Jones (2021) also pointed to the need for a gendered perspective to understand masculine *muscular* versus feminine *thin but shapely* ideals. Future research can build on the findings of this study by exploring how emerging adults engage in diverse cultural discourses.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors reported no conflict of interest.

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