A Content Analytic Comparison of Fitspiration and Thinspiration Websites

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ABSTRACT

Objective: “Pro-ana” or Thinspiration websites are internet sites that support weight loss and eating disorders. Fitspiration websites are a newer type of site that supposedly advocates a fit and healthy lifestyle.

Method: The first 10 images from a sample of 50 Fitspiration and 50 Thinspiration websites, chosen using a standard internet search protocol, were rated on a variety of weight, eating, and appearance characteristics. \( \chi^2 \) analyses were conducted to compare website content.

Results: Thinspiration sites featured more content related to losing weight or fat, praising thinness, showing a thin pose, and providing food guilt messages than Fitspiration sites. However, sites did not differ on guilt-inducing messages regarding weight or the body, fat/weight stigmatization, the presence of objectifying phrases, and dieting/restraint messages. Overall, 88% of Thinspiration sites and 80% of Fitspiration sites contained one or more of the coded variables.

Discussion: Prior research has examined Thinspiration websites and noted the potentially hazardous messages contained on these sites. This content analysis indicates that sites supposedly devoted to healthy pursuits (fitness) may also contain thematically similar content.

Keywords: eating disturbance; media influences; internet sites; thinspiration; fitspiration

Introduction

Recent evidence suggests that internet exposure is linked to body dissatisfaction and disordered eating symptomatology in women. Bair et al. (2012) found a significant relationship between levels of image-focused television- and internet-use and body dissatisfaction in undergraduate women, however the effect sizes were small. Tiggemann and Miller (2010) conducted a similar study examining media (television, magazines, and internet) usage of adolescent females. Magazine and internet exposure were found to be significantly related to internalization of thin ideals, weight dissatisfaction, and appearance comparison.

Results of these studies signal that internet exposure may play some role in increased body image and eating issues in women. In 2013, 78.5% of women lived in a household with an internet connection; the average American spends 184 min online per day. Given the internet’s pervasiveness, determining what aspects of internet exposure contribute to body image and eating issues is necessary.

Some internet-based content analytic research has attempted to explore this issue. Borzekowski and coworkers reported that “pro-ana” websites emphasize “Thinspiration,” or content showcasing idealized images of thin women, negative portrayals of overweight women, and motivational quotes meant to motivate viewers’ weight loss. Internet-based Thinspiration content differs from typical presentations of thin ideal messages present in other media sources because of the extremity and salience of these messages. A 2007 experimental study investigated the impact of exposure to pro-anorexia websites on undergraduate females’ negative affect, state self-esteem and disordered eating variables. Participants were randomly assigned to view one of three kinds of website. Participants exposed to pro-ana sites experienced lower self-esteem, and greater negative affect and desire to engage in disordered eating and exercise behaviors, compared with individuals who viewed other content. Given that this was experimental research, the findings are especially significant as they indicate pro-ana websites may directly impact disordered eating psychopathology.
Based on these findings, there is a likelihood that content present on “pro-ana” sites may be dangerous for women; however, these sites may not be entirely responsible for the effects of increased appearance-related issues in women who spend more time on the internet.

A few internet servers prohibit “pro-ana” websites. However, websites containing “Thinspiration content” still exist. Recently, other internet sites started disseminating “Fitspiration content,” defined by the authors as content promoting fit/healthy lifestyles. “Fitspiration” includes objectifying images of thin/muscular women and messages encouraging dieting and exercise for appearance, rather than health, motivated reasons. Such content may normalize compulsive exercise, and guilt-inducing messages may contribute to poor body image. In their content’s extremeness and pervasiveness, internet-based Fitspiration sites seem to share commonalities with Thinspiration sites.

No work to date has investigated the similarities of these two types of internet media (Fitspiration vs. Thinspiration). Given research findings that exposure to both thin and muscular ideals may negatively impact women’s body satisfaction and disordered eating-related-variables, it is important to understand (1) what other potentially dangerous content exists on the internet and (2) how this content compares to other harmful internet content.

This study evaluated the material present on Thinspiration and Fitspiration websites, using standard content analysis strategies. Given the lack of any previous work comparing Fitspiration and Thinspiration sites, prior to the study, we conducted an exploratory examination of both Fitspiration and Thinspiration websites. We hypothesized that content on both types of sites would emphasize dietary restriction and harmful messages regarding women’s body ideals, but Thinspiration sites would place a stronger emphasis on idealizing “thin” bodies.

**Method**

**Selection of Websites**

To attain our sample of websites, keywords “FitSpo,” “Fitspiration,” “Thinspo,” and “Thinspiration” were entered separately into three online search engines (Google, Yahoo!, and Bing). For each keyword entered, results of the first three webpages of results were compiled. Search result order is based on a search-engine dependent algorithm. To be considered for inclusion into the sample, the website had to explicitly label itself as a “Thinspiration” or “Fitspiration” website (in the webURL, the name of the website, or in the website description). This process produced a total inventory of 164 websites. Sites were removed from this list if they overlapped (i.e., duplicate websites, or websites initially included more than once in the sample as the result of appearing in the search results of multiple keywords, were removed from the sample) or had been deactivated. These methods produced a sample of 50 Fitspiration and 56 Thinspiration websites. Finally, the total number of websites coded from each category (Fitspiration and Thinspiration) was matched, to ensure that each group had the same sample size, generating a final sample of 100 websites (50 Fitspiration and Thinspiration websites).

**Ratings of Websites**

To code our sample, the first 10 images and text present on the images were rated on eight characteristics used in our previous content analysis of “healthy living” blogs (see Table 1). Websites were rated on the presence or absence of each characteristic, i.e., when coding messages related to losing fat/weight, websites received either a “1” or a “0” in that category depending on the presence or absence of the message. The total number of websites from each category was then compared for
each variable. Two raters coded the variables. One rater was blind to the research question, although both raters previously received training for the above-mentioned content analysis of healthy living blogs. Cohen’s Kappa, a measure of inter-rater reliability, was good to excellent for all variables for both Thinspiration (range: 0.79–0.96) and Fitspiration (range: 0.65–1.0) websites.

### Analyses

χ² analyses were conducted to compare website content.

### Results

More Thinspiration than Fitspiration websites contained content for four of the coded variables. Thirty-four Thinspiration and 21 Fitspiration sites featured content related to losing fat or weight, χ² (1, N = 100) = 6.83, p = 0.009. Positive comments about being thin were present on seventeen Thinspiration and 5 Fitspiration sites, χ² (1, N = 100) = 8.39, p = 0.004. Moreover, thirty-three Thinspiration and 21 Fitspiration sites contained images of women posing in a way to appear thinner or smaller, χ² (1, N = 100) = 5.79, p = 0.016. Guilt-inducing messages related to food were present on four Fitspiration websites and 11 of Thinspiration sites, χ² (1, N = 100) = 3.84, p = 0.05.

Sites did not differ on four other variables. Fat/weight stigmatization content was present on 10 Fitspiration and 10 Thinspiration sites, χ² (1, N = 100) = 0.000, p = 1. Further, 16 Fitspiration and 18 Thinspiration sites contained objectifying messages (i.e., messages that encourage viewership of the body as an observable object, for example, an image of women’s stomach with measuring tape around it), χ² (1, N = 100) = 0.18, p = 0.67. Eighteen Fitspiration sites and 13 Thinspiration sites featured guilt-inducing messages regarding weight or the body, χ² (1, N = 100) = 1.17, p = 0.28. Twenty-three Thinspiration sites and 14 Fitspiration websites featured content related to dieting or restraint, χ² (1, N = 100) = 3.46, p = 0.062. See Table 2 for absolute percentages and χ² statistics.

Overall, of the Thinspiration sites, 44 of the 50 contained one-or-more of the variables coded; 28, at least two-or-more; and 16, at least 3-or-more. Of the Fitspiration sites, 40 of the 50 contained one-or-more of the variables coded; 10, at least two-or-more; and 3, at least 3-or-more; indicating that while both types of sites promote harmful messages, overall, Thinspiration sites may be more intense in their messaging. Of the 6 Thinspiration websites that did not display any of the variables coded, all solely contained images of thin women, not posing to appear thinner or smaller.

### Discussion

As hypothesized, both types of sites contained thematic content about women’s body weight, thinness, weight, and eating guilt, restriction, stigmatization, and objectification. Generally more of the content was present on Thinspiration sites; however, despite the lack of website-type differences on 4 of the 8 coded variables, analyses that demonstrated significant effects for Thinspiration over Fitspiration sites still indicated the presence of such content on Fitspiration sites. For instance, even though more Thinspiration sites (34) had content related to losing weight, 21 of the 50 Fitspiration sites also had such content.

Of note, rates even for Thinspiration sites were relatively low for some variables (see Table 2). This may reflect the fact that many Thinspiration sites solely contained images, while most of the variables coded for this study were reflective of text (such as guilt inducing messages related to food, which is difficult to conceptualize via image).

Research has noted the hazardous messages contained on Thinspiration sites. The current study also indicates that sites supposedly devoted to healthy pursuits may contain dangerous content. As content on the internet changes rapidly, replication and extension of these findings is necessary. Future research may explore the effect that viewing “Fitspiration” vs. “Thinspiration” content has on viewers’ body satisfaction and eating-related behaviors. Given the nature of the messages present on both types of websites, it is entirely possible

### Table 2. Absolute percentages and test statistics of websites containing at least one potentially harmful message

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Harmful Messages</th>
<th>Thinspiration Percent</th>
<th>Fitspiration Percent</th>
<th>χ²</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Losing fat or weight</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>6.83</td>
<td>0.009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thin praise</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>8.39</td>
<td>0.004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thin pose</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>5.79</td>
<td>0.016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harmful messages about the body</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body/Weight guilt</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>1.17</td>
<td>0.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Objectifying messages</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td>0.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fat/Weight Stigmatization</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harmful eating messages</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dieting/Restraint messages</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>3.46</td>
<td>0.062</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food guilt messages</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>3.84</td>
<td>0.05</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
that viewing both types of websites may negatively impact these variables in women. Experimental studies to examine the interaction of content with pre-existing vulnerabilities, given the likelihood that such websites are pursued by individuals with significant body image and eating issues, is a necessary avenue of future research.

References