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Research Paper Proposal

One of the biggest ideas surrounding youth culture and social media is the culture of fitspiration, which is essentially a person or thing that serves as a motivation for others to improve themselves on their health and fitness. With an up-and-coming generation that is known for being one of the most influential generations due to the vast number of social media personalities that have created a career out of their lifestyles, fitspiration has become the pinnacle of online culture. However, fitspiration has often caused debate relating to whether or not it is healthy for young teens to be prioritizing their bodies and their health based on what is being displayed in mainstream media. Since the world is now so focused on what’s going on behind their screens, they are exposed to a different type of mainstream media, one which enables users to relate to a person based on social personality and in some circumstances, the way they carry themselves physically, primarily dietary and fitness accolades. It is no secret that this affects women more than it does men, due to the general acknowledgement that women are typically depicted in oversexualized ways in mainstream media.

The idea of fitspiration has infused itself into the roots of media and is a big influence in all forms of it. This includes sports media and the culture of athletes, in which fitspiration has become intertwined with in terms of recognizing the body of an athlete as an object of approved performance. To compete in a professional league, one must be of a certain physical level. With fitspiration, athletes are exposed to other like-minded individuals who share similar techniques and training styles which can allow them to explore different avenues of competition. Since sports and athletes are changing as time goes on, it is important to ask whether or not fitspiration can be used as an asset for athletes, and how it can serve not as a tool of manipulation, but as a framework for how athletes can train themselves and shape their bodies more efficiently so that they may have the advantage in the top levels of competitive play.

One of the main approaches that I will address in this research paper is the concept of fitspiration and its effects on a social media-driven generation. Fitspiration is typically used in comparison to studying different effects on men and women, but for this research paper, I will use fitspiration to compare the effects on athletes at professional levels. As mentioned above, fitspiration is a person or thing that serves as a motivation for others to change their fitness or dietary habits to improve their overall health. Often, it is viewed negatively because it promotes an idealistic standard that may cause some to adapt their entire lifestyle to becoming what they believe as the standard for beauty, fashion, or fitness.

A primary course concept that I will look at is Barthes’ first and second order meanings in which denotations and connotations play a part in photos posted to social media. Denotations will be the primary focus under Barthes’ concepts as oftentimes, it is the basic level of social media. Someone takes a look at the photo and pays attention to the visual aspects of the photo, and in this research paper, I will discuss denotation with how people see something without looking into it, and they aspire to become someone that physically appears the same as a subject in the photo. I will also briefly discuss elements of social media influencing as one of the primary ways that people post and discover new trends and fad diets that can persuade them to begin tracking these type of things.

I hope to use selected sources in this research paper to argue that the concept of fitspiration is beneficial to athletes for them to become more open in their training abilities so that they may improve their athletic capacity. I hope to gather sources that can suggest that different mindsets are beneficial for different methods of training, and how they can be applied to athletes to show potential improvement in their abilities. I will primarily base my research on fitspiration and athletes, but I will also use some general research about the topic to capture a further understanding of fitspiration and its effect on social and mainstream media.

Annotated Bibliography

**Barthes, R., & Lavers, A. (1972). Mythologies. New York: Noonday Press.**

One of the most important things that I must cover in my research is how people perceive images they see and apply it to the world of social media. In his book, Mythologies, Barthes describes something he calls photography and electoral appeal where he discusses the elements of photography through electoral candidates. He speaks about denotative and connotative aspects, with denotative being what someone can see when looking at a photo directly, and connotative, which are the hidden meanings and symbols behind the initial glance of a photo. He talks about how a picture can symbolize power, so having a good photo of a supposed leader is critical in making people see the person in the photo as a status symbol. He argues that people not only see a face in a photo, but can understand motives, circumstances, and even life experiences through a single shot. Barthes’ section on photography and electoral appeal will help me establish how much a picture can influence and persuade other people, and in terms of fitspiration, how much a photo of a professional athlete can make other athletes see what it takes to make it to the next level.

**Carrotte, E. R., Prichard, I., & Lim, M. S. C. (2017). “Fitspiration” on Social Media: A Content Analysis of Gendered Images. Journal of Medical Internet Research, 19(3). doi: 10.2196/jmir.6368**

Before I create my argument, I must first define the base term of fitspiration and how the term was created to describe a movement of socially mediated people that were able to create a social personality online. This article focuses a lot on social media and how fitspiration affects the masses of users through social media websites. It also looks at the varying differences between genders and their experiences with media and how society accepts them, with women focusing on a skinnier figure, and men on a more muscular build. It also talks about another form of weight and fitness motivation known as thinspiration, which primarily focuses on weight loss and is known to promote poor eating habits. There is some research on the psychology of fitspiration and how different levels of exposure can often trigger different results for different individuals. I will use this research to increase my comprehension of fitspiration as a concept and create a basic layout of how it works in media.

**Chasler, J.K. (2016). Fitspiration: Empowering or objectifying? The effects of fitspiration and self-objectification on exercise behavior.**

This thesis approaches fitspiration in terms of sports and identifies sports into categories called lean and non-lean. Sports in the lean division are often ones that athletes are judged on, like cheerleading, figure skating, and gymnastics, and non-lean sports are ones like soccer, basketball and football. While the vast majority of sports require athletes to be in good shape, lean sports are the one where people are encouraged to be smaller so they can fit into the general body type that follows these sports. Chasler talks about these sports on television and how the audiences that view sports are always subject to what is portrayed as a healthy body type. One point that she brings up that is one of the key problems with fitspiration is the focus on what the body looks like rather than what the body can do. People are more inclined to shape themselves to the way that others see as attractive but do not always push their body in ways that would make them able to do more physical things. I hope to use some of this research to illustrate what an uninformed audience does when looking at a healthy body versus athletes who are aware of their physical capabilities and are looking to improve on them while maintaining their overall health.

**Hodkinson, P. (2017). Media, culture and society: an introduction (2nd ed.). Los Angeles: SAGE.**

There are a few chapters in this book that I will reference in this research paper, primarily, the ones that I also use the readings from, such as Chapter 13 on media, gender, and sexuality, and Chapter 4 on media content. In terms of Chapter 13, I will review issues of gender in the media with both men and women, but I may focus more on men since they make up a larger portion of the athletic world. In the final paper, I will cover both genders as I feel that my topic applies to every athlete. In terms of Chapter 4, I will look at symbols of pictures and how they are determined to have denotative and connotative meanings, which will go hand in hand with Barthes’ book. I hope to use this research to understand exactly why people are so easily influenced by photos and attempt to compare them to the athletic world and suggest that the things that make people so easily influenced can be a beneficial tool if they are an athlete looking to gain a competitive edge over others in their sport of choice.

**Rowe, D. (2006, December 29). Media Sport Culture - An Education in the Politics of Acquisition. PlayTheGame.org. Retrieved from https://www.playthegame.org/news/news-articles/2006/media-sport-culture-an-education-in-the-politics-of-acquisition/**

This article will be one of my primary argumentative pieces for my research paper due to its recognition of sports in media and how fitspiration relates to the culture of sports. It discusses how the most important thing an athlete can have is control over their own body, and how it should be treated as a temple, and as an athlete, one has a specific duty to make sure that their body is in top shape to compete on a professional level. The world of sports is always changing and in nearly every sport we see how the pace and style of the game has become different than what it was and part of these changes includes the way athletes tone their bodies for physical performance. I hope that with this information I will be able to effectively argue that because of the changing world of sports, fitspiration can serve as a tool for athletes in order to have a visual idea of what it takes to compete at top professional levels in sports across the world.

Brendan, this is not a strong proposal. There is nothing wrong with what you want to argue: I understand your project as being one of exploring fitspiration as a source of positive representations of the body in athletic contexts. But your argument does not seem, at this point, to be well supported by your sources. Isn’t Chasler emphasizing that fitspiration images focus attention on appearance *instead of* athletic capability? Rather than that fitspiration images are an important visual reference *for* athletic bodies? You have only 5 sources listed here, which is not a problem in and of itself. But your course readings are Carrotte, which clearly fits, and then Hodkinson, which you refer to in the most general terms, and Barthes which you don’t seem to have read with care at this point, because your annotation refers to the Photography and Electoral Appeal section, but in the proposal you are referring to concepts that were covered elsewhere in Barthes – or in the lecture. You still have a long way to go with this. I assume you were unable to put the requisite amount of time in this and hope that you do so between now and completion. I also recommend revisiting your topic and thesis using these resources to help you refine them:

<https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general_writing/academic_writing/establishing_arguments/index.html>

https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general\_writing/the\_writing\_process/thesis\_statement\_tips.html