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An Exploration of Fitspiration Content on Social Media and Chinese Young People's Insight Into Their Experiences of it: Gender-Based Differences

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This study aims to identify the characteristics of fitspiration content on Chinese social media through content analysis and investigate the insight of fitspiration consumers and the effects of fitspiration on their lives from a gendered perspective through semi-structured interviews. Therefore, this study analyzed 4,142 images from 2,223 fitspiration posts and recruited 20 young Chinese adults for interviews. The study found that people's bodies are the most emphasized in this content, posts portraying muscular bodies for men and toned bodies for women have increased, and women's sexual objectification is more prolific than men's. This study found that men are critical, cautious, and goal-oriented in selecting fitspiration content, while women are more accepting and less critical of such posts. Interestingly, men were more frustrated and anxious about ideal bodies being unattainable, while women admired posters' ideal bodies and positive lifestyles.

Keywords: body image, China, fitspiration, gender, lived experience, social media

Social media platforms significantly influence the sharing of content, including images and text, across diverse social environments, making them powerful tools for disseminating social trends. This influence is particularly evident in the health and fitness domain, where young individuals actively seek information and support for maintaining healthy lifestyles (McKinley & Wright, 2014).

The term "fitspiration," which combines "fitness" and "inspiration," represents an online movement gaining popularity on social media platforms, motivating individuals toward healthy lifestyles through exercise and a balanced diet (Simpson & Mazzeo, 2017). When fitspiration emerged first in the West, academics hoped it would exert more positive than negative effects compared with "thinspiration" and "bonespiration," which promote the thin ideal and conventional societal norms resulting from appearance evaluation (Cataldo et al., 2022). In effect, some qualitative studies have underscored the positive role of fitspiration content in promoting physical activity and disseminating health and fitness education (Palmer, 2015; Vaterlaus, Patten, Roche, & Young, 2015). Moreover, scholars mentioned that such fitspiration content not only advocates health but also fosters a sense of belonging within social communities (Dibisceglie & Arigo, 2021; Raggatt et al., 2018).

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However, content analysis studies have revealed minimal differences between fitspiration and thinspiration in terms of how they display and emphasize body images (Talbot, Gavin, Van Steen, & Morey, 2017). Alberga, Withnell, and von Ranson (2018) observed similar patterns of body objectification, appearance emphasis, and diet control messages across both content types on three social networking sites. Furthermore, a growing body of evidence suggests fitspiration's potential for negative outcomes, such as eating disorders (Holland & Tiggemann, 2017), associated negative moods, and body dissatisfaction (Prichard, McLachlan, Lavis, & Tiggemann, 2017). For instance, Tiggemann and Zaccardo (2015) found negative moods, body dissatisfaction, and reduced self-esteem among female undergraduates in South Australia who viewed fitspiration. Sumter, Cingel, and Antonis (2018) also identified fitspiration exposure as leading to increased body dissatisfaction among women, particularly when used for specific purposes such as weight loss.

Along with scholars' arguments about the positive and negative effects of fitspiration content, investigations into gendered perspectives on fitspiration consumption have been conducted considering different beauty ideals between the two genders. Research on male viewers highlights the prevalence of muscular images, and fitness and diet knowledge aimed at muscle growth, albeit not universally (Carrotte, Prichard, & Lim, 2017). Furthermore, Fatt, Fardouly, and Rapee (2019) found that men's frequent fitspiration engagement did not significantly correlate with increased exercise motivation for health or greater body satisfaction, diverging from research centered on women. These studies highlight the gender differences in fitspiration consumption.

Research on fitspiration's role and effects has predominantly focused on Western content. However, exploring these phenomena is crucial within the distinct cultural norms of Asia, particularly in China, where beauty ideals differ significantly from those in the West (Stojcic, Dong, & Ren, 2020). In particular, the Tripartite Influence Model (Thompson, Heinberg, Altabe, & Tantleff-Dunn, 1999), which examines the impact of peers, family, and mass media on body image, indicates that these influences may manifest differently in Chinese settings.

For instance, Jackson, Jinag, and Chen (2016) demonstrated that Chinese/Asian media exert a more pronounced influence on body image concerns among Chinese women than Western media. This emphasizes the need for regional studies that explore the unique impacts of local media, which might reinforce or challenge global beauty standards in distinct ways. Conversely, other research suggests that Western thin-body ideals are increasingly resonating within modern Asian contexts, including Chinese, indicating the globalization of beauty standards (Jung & Forbes, 2007; Swami, 2015).

Given these mixed findings, this study specifically focuses on China, where the interplay of global and local influences on body image and beauty ideals can be distinctly observed. Jung (2018) noted that modern Chinese women are increasingly embracing thin-body ideals prevalent in the West due to the influence of mass media and Westernization. This focus is further justified by the booming fitness industry in China (Tan, Zhang, & Shao, 2019), the youth's growing engagement with physical exercise (Kercher et al., 2022), and the widespread use of social media for health and fitness-related discussions (Zhang, Teti, Stanfield, & Campo, 2017).

Moreover, the sociocultural landscape of China, profoundly shaped by Confucian philosophy and patriarchal societal structures, significantly influences perceptions of beauty and gender roles. Stojcic and colleagues (2020) specifically noted that Chinese standards of women's beauty are not only heavily influenced by these traditional values but are also closely aligned with men's perception of women's beauty and traditional

gender roles. This context highlights the importance of examining how societal norms uniquely impact the reception and perception of fitspiration content in China, distinctively diverging from Western influences.

Accordingly, this study aims to explore two key aspects: (1) the main characteristics of images and messages within fitspiration content and (2) the experiences of fitspiration users and the effects of fitspiration content on their lives from a gendered perspective within the Chinese context. These insights will contribute to a broader understanding of fitspiration's global and local impacts, enriching the discourse on the media's role in shaping fitness and beauty standards across different cultural landscapes.

Research Methods

This study used two research methods to achieve the aforementioned goals. For Study I, a quantitative content analysis was conducted to identify the systematic patterns and characteristics of fitspiration content and discern any gendered differences in its content and form. Study II involved conducting semi-structured interviews to explore young Chinese adults' experiences with fitspiration content, its practical use, and its effects on their lives.

To complete Study I, Sina Weibo, one of China's largest and most popular microblogging platforms (Liu, Guan, Yan, & Hu, 2019), was selected for fitspiration content analysis. As of 2021, Weibo had more than 600 million registered users, with young adults in their 20s being the primary and most active users (Thomala, 2024). Weibo enables users to share text, images, and videos related to their daily lives and various topics. For Study II, a total of 20 interviews were conducted, equally divided between self-identified young female and male participants, aged 21–27 years.

This research adopted a binary gender framework instead of a nonbinary approach to align with the predominant gender system in Chinese society and to facilitate data management across both the content analysis and interview components. Findings from the LGBT+ Pride 2021 Global Survey indicate that only 1% of China's total population identifies as lesbian, gay, or homosexual (Jackson, 2021). Moreover, Wang and colleagues (2020) reported widespread discrimination against non-heteronormative individuals from family members and within social services. This discrimination highlights deeply entrenched societal norms that prioritize traditional heterosexual systems and emphasize the importance of community and interpersonal relationships in China.

Study Design I: Content Analysis

Data Selection

This study conducted a keyword search on Weibo to locate fitspiration content. Since no direct Chinese translation for "fitspiration" exists, the keyword "*健身* (workout)" was selected because it describes personal health improvement and exercise training.

To ensure a comprehensive collection of fitspiration content, a nine-month period from July 2021 to March 2022 was employed. Since more than one image is often used in one fitspiration post, any images related to fitspiration, such as images of people's bodies, food, fitness equipment, health supplements, selfies, or

exercise routines, were selected as one unit for the content analysis. Additionally, a few human-like animated characters and models were included to represent the idealized images and online identities on personal blogs (Lee, Im, & Taylor, 2008). Considering the study's focus on gender differences, the observed gender of individuals in photos was coded, and photos depicting both genders together were excluded from the analysis. From 2,223 Weibo fitspiration posts, 4,142 fitspiration images were extracted. Among these 2,223 posts, 1,921 posts (86.4%) contained messages, while the remainder contained only images (302, 13.6%). Therefore, the 1,921 fitspiration posts were selected to identify fitspiration message patterns.

Coding Procedures

To analyze the fitspiration images and messages, this study developed a codebook based on the previous studies of Boepple, Ata, Rum, and Thompson (2016) and Tiggemann and Zaccardo (2018). However, the coding variables were revised based on the data collected for this study. Initially, three coders reviewed all the data to determine the need for coding category revisions. An iterative process of review and refinement ensued among the coders until a consensus was reached.

Fitspiration images were categorized into four main themes: People's bodies, food, exercise/fitness records, and recommended fitness equipment. Each theme was further divided based on different aspects depicted within each image. Given that the representation of body size on media can influence the social comparison process (Dittmar & Howard, 2004), body images were divided into categories based on size (e.g., thin, normal weight, overweight), muscle (e.g., toned, muscular), and shape (e.g., curvy). Body size used Gender Body Size Guide (BSG) (Harris, Bradlyn, Coffman, Gunel, & Cottrell, 2008) for classification: Thin (A in BSG), normal weight (B or C), and overweight (D–J), determined by the level of visible fat in the images. Therefore, images showing visible bones were coded as thin; those without visible bones or excessive fat were considered normal weight; images with extra fat were coded as overweight as mentioned in Tiggemann and Zaccardo's (2018) study. Physique with clear muscle definition in the image was coded as a toned body, while body images featuring muscle enlargement were classified under a muscular body. Curvy bodies were also included for coding purposes, and images focusing on faces or individuals wearing loose-fit clothing were categorized as indeterminate.

Additional coding variables were introduced to assess muscularity level in specific body parts and overall appearance. Particularly, a coding scheme was established to identify the body parts emphasized by posters, including abdominal or pectoral muscles, large biceps or arm muscles, lower body muscles, and back muscles, focusing on muscular body emphasis. The level of muscularity was examined to determine the extent to which it was visually represented in the images. The muscularity level in photos depicting men and women was coded using the Fit Body Scale (FBS) presented by Ralph-Nearman and Filik (2018, 2020), which employs drawings to gauge muscularity on a scale from 1 (little) to 9 (very hyper-muscular). Specifically, an individual's muscle depiction was categorized as little (1–3 scale on the FBS), visible (4–6), or high level (7–9). For instances where an individual was wearing loose-fitting clothes, making muscularity assessment challenging, an "indeterminate" category was designated for the coding purpose.

Food images were primarily coded to distinguish between light/healthy and heavy/unhealthy food, with health supplements, such as protein powders and bars, also included as a distinct coding category. For instance, meals rich in nutrition such as cereal, vegetables, fruits, dairy, soybeans, meats, and fish dishes prepared using

low-temperature cooking methods or low-fat/low-calorie content were categorized as light/healthy food. Conversely, so-called junk food, including fast food, deep-fried dishes, high-sugar drinks, or cookies, were coded as heavy/unhealthy food. This coding category was established based on the Chinese Diet Balance Index 2016 (He, Fang, & Xia, 2018), aimed at providing dietary guidelines for Chinese residents rather than specialized groups, such as professional athletes or individuals managing their diet for health reasons, given the focus of this study. Images related to exercise and fitness records, body measurements, workout schedules, and daily exercise routines were coded within the overall image category.

The analysis also included a detailed examination of self-objectification in the images according to whether the image (1) specifically focused on a certain body part, (2) was portrayed in a sexy manner, and (3) clearly showed the person's face or head. Since an image could contain multiple objectifying categories, each image was coded as "0" or "1" depending on the absence or presence of these themes, respectively. Furthermore, images emphasizing specific body parts, including legs, glutes and hips, mid-section, full body, arms, shoulders or back, and breasts or pectoral muscles were coded to identify the body parts bloggers tended to objectify. This was also coded per the overall image category. Additionally, thin-ideal images were coded depending on whether before- and after-transformation images with clear evidence to prove weight-loss success were included or whether any images using poses or camera angles to create an illusion of looking thinner were provided. Examples of the images analyzed are shown in Figure 1.

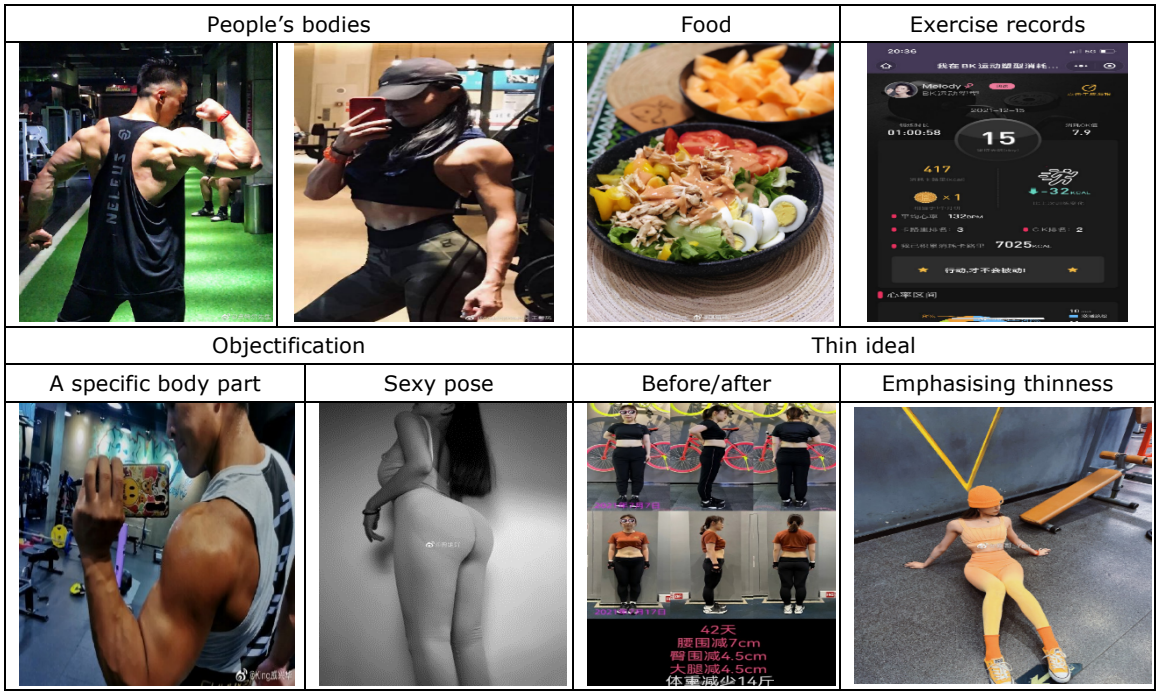

Figure 1. Images used for content analysis. Top row, from left to right: Personal communication (August 24, 2021; October 30, 2021; August 25, 2021; December 15, 2021). Bottom row, from left to right: Personal communication (December 24, 2021; November 1, 2021; August 17, 2021; December 30, 2021).

Finally, text messages accompanying the images were analyzed, focusing on two types: Inspirational and informational messages. Messages were coded as inspirational when they promoted workouts or lifestyle improvement, while messages were coded as informational when they contained recommendations for exercise programs or diets from the poster. In some cases, both types of messages were present in a single post; therefore, each message type was coded as "0" or "1" based on their absence or presence, respectively.

Intercoder Reliability

The study involved three postgraduate student coders, consisting of one male and two female students who had received training in image coding. To assess intercoder reliability, a sample of 415 images and 193 messages (approximately 10% of the total fitspiration images, N = 4,142, and messages, N = 1,921) was independently analyzed by the coders. Discrepancies in codes were discussed among the coders until a consensus was reached.

Krippendorff's alpha (K-alpha) for the main themes of fitspiration images and the subthemes of physical exercise and fitness records was 1.0. In addition, thin-ideal images scored 0.97, the coding category for muscular body parts scored 0.95, and the level of muscularity scored 0.83. For objectification images, images displaying specific body parts, or a sexy pose scored 0.96, and images without the individual's head and face scored 1. In terms of message coding, inspirational messages related to fitness scored 0.95, inspirational messages related to improved lifestyles scored 0.87, and informational messages promoting exercise programs and diets both scored 1. Generally, a K-alpha ≥ 0.8 was considered to indicate good reliability (De Swert, 2012).

Results: Study I

The analysis used IBM SPSS Version 26.0 statistic software, employing descriptive statistics and chi-square tests of independence to examine the characteristics of fitspiration images and messages from a gendered perspective, as previously outlined.

Descriptive Characteristics of Fitspiration Content

A total of 4,142 fitspiration images were identified in 2,223 Weibo posts between July 2021 and March 2022. On average, each fitspiration post contained 2.99 images (SD = 2.669), with personal accounts (99.5% of the content) significantly overshadowing official business and health organization accounts. Notably, almost half the bloggers used inspirational (5.4%) or motivational (20.1%) hashtags, or both (20.1%), while 408 posts (18.4%) included at least one fitness- or weight management–related online community in conjunction with hashtags.

The Main Theme of Fitspiration Images

Of the 4,142 fitspiration images analyzed, female users contributed 2,780 (67.1%) images compared with male users (N =1,362, 32.9%). The main theme was people's bodies (69.2%), followed by exercise and fitness records (22.6%), food (7.6%), and fitness equipment (0.7%).

A chi-square test of independence demonstrated a significant association between the gender of users (categorized as men or women) and the main theme of fitspiration images (χ^2 (3, N = 4,142) = 59.20, p < .001), indicating male users were more likely to post exercise and fitness-record images, while female users were more likely to upload images featuring people's bodies, food, and fitness equipment.

Predictably, images of healthy food were more common than those of unhealthy food across both genders. However, male users were significantly more likely to post light/healthy food photos and health supplements, while women were more likely to post unhealthy/heavy food images (χ^2 (2, N = 313) = 6.20, p < .05).

The preference for posting workout routines over workout schedules or body measurements was common to both genders. A significant gender difference was found, indicating that men were more likely to upload workout schedules, and women were more likely to post body size and workout routines (χ^2 (2, N = 937) = 19.18, p < .001). Detailed statistics are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. The Main and Subthemes of Fitspiration Images.

Variables for Main Themes	**Men *N* (%)**	**Women *N* (%)**	**Total *N* (%)**
The main theme of the image* **	**1,362(32.9)**	**2,780(67.1)**	**4,142(100)**
People's bodies	908(66.7)	1,957(70.4)	2,865(69.2)
Food	60(4.4)	253(9.1)	313(7.6)
Exercise/fitness records	387(28.4)	550(19.8)	937(22.6)
Fitness equipment	7(0.5)	20(0.7)	27(0.7)
Type of food*	**60(19.2)**	**253(80.8)**	**313(100)**
Light/healthy food	46(76.7)	189(74.7)	235(75.1)
Heavy/unhealthy food	11(18.3)	62(24.5)	73(23.3)
Vitamins and health supplements	3(5)	2(0.8)	5(1.6)
Type of fitness records* **	**387(41.3)**	**550(58.7)**	**937(100)**
Body size	11(2.8)	29(5.3)	40(4.3)
Workout schedule	99(25.6)	81(14.7)	180(19.2)
Workout routine	277(71.6)	440(80)	717(76.5)
Variables for subthemes			
Body type* **	**867(31.3)**	**1,902(68.7)**	**2,769(100)**
Thin	4(0.5)	88(4.6)	92(3.3)
Normal weight	232(26.8)	824(43.3)	1,056(38.1)
Overweight	20(2.3)	3(0.2)	23(0.8)
Curvy	0	161 (8.5)	161(5.8)
Toned	139(16)	698(36.7)	837(30.2)
Muscular	465(53.6)	123(6.5)	588(21.2)
Indeterminate	7(0.8)	5(0.3)	12(0.4)

Muscular body* **	**604(42.4)**	**821(57.6)**	**1,425(100)**
Abdominal or pectoral muscles	129(21.4)	159(19.4)	288(20.2)
Large biceps or arm muscles	231(38.2)	123(15)	354(24.8)
Lower body muscles	13(2.2)	39(4.8)	52(3.6)
Whole body balance	206(34.1)	326(39.7)	532(37.3)
Back muscles	25(4.1)	174(21.2)	199(14)
Level of muscularity* **	**604(42.4)**	**821(57.6)**	**1,425(100)**
Little	144(23.8)	706(86)	850(59.6)
Visible	175(29)	21(2.6)	196(13.8)
High level	273(45.2)	91(11.1)	364(25.5)
Indeterminate	12(2)	3(0.4)	15(1.1)

Note. *p <.05, ***p <.001.

The Subthemes of Body Images

For a more detailed analysis of body images, only images featuring men (N = 867) and women (N = 1,902) were selected. Chi-square tests revealed that images containing men emphasized muscular and overweight body types, whereas images containing women were more frequently associated with thin, normal weight, and toned-muscular body types. Curvy body types appeared exclusively in images containing women (χ^2 (6, N = 2,769) = 892.565, p < .001).

Regarding the emphasis on muscularity, a gender comparison through the chi-square analysis revealed that men's images typically highlighted abdominal/pectoral muscles and arm muscles/large biceps. Conversely, women's images were more likely to emphasize lower body muscles, balanced full-body representations, and back muscles. Significant differences were observed between the genders (χ^2 (4, N = 1,425) = 158.33, p < .001).

Regarding the level of muscularity depicted, men predominately posted images showcasing high muscle tone (7–9 on the FBS), followed by visible muscle tone (scale range 4–6) and little (1–3), while women tended to display little muscle tone, most ranked 1 to 3 on the FBS, followed by high (scale range 7–9) and visible tone (4–6) (χ^2 (3, N = 1,425) = 569.13, p < .001).

Objectifying and Thin-Ideal Fitspiration Images

As shown in Table 2, fitspiration images more frequently objectified women's bodies compared with men's. Chi-square analyses revealed that images of women were significantly more likely to depict specific body parts (χ^2 (1, N = 2,769) = 26.72, p < .001) and adopt sexually suggestive poses than those of men (χ^2 (1, N = 2,769) = 118.60, p < .001). Moreover, images in which women's faces were not visible occurred more frequently than those of men (χ^2 (1, N = 2,769) = 15.66, p < .001).

Table 2. Objectification and Thin-Ideal Images.

Variables for Main Themes	Men *N* (%)	Women *N* (%)	Total *N* (%)
Objectification* **			
A specific body part is emphasized	377(39)	241(61)	618(100)
Sexy pose	56(11.4)	436(88.6)	492(100)
Absent head or face	286(27.1)	768(72.9)	1,054(100)
Objectified body part* **	**867(31.3)**	**1,902(68.7)**	**2,769(100)**
Legs	58(6.7)	188(9.9)	246(8.9)
Glutes	88(10.1)	185(9.7)	273(9.9)
Abdominals	165(19)	260(13.7)	425(15.3)
Full body	312(36)	854(44.9)	1,166(42.1)
Arms	148(17.1)	138(7.3)	286(10.3)
Shoulders and/or back	52(6)	205(10.8)	257(9.3)
Breasts/chest	15(1.7)	38(2)	53(1.9)
Indeterminate	29(3.3)	34(1.8)	63(2.3)
People's body image: Thin ideal* **	**14(4.5)**	**295(95.5)**	**309(100)**
Before and after	12(85.7)	27(9.2)	39(12.6)
Pose emphasizing thinness	2(14.3)	268(90.8)	271(87.4)

Note. ***p <.001.

In the analysis of body part focus, a significant gender difference was found. Men's images predominantly highlighted glutes, abdominals, and arms, whereas those featuring women more often emphasized the full body, followed by shoulders or back, legs, and the breast/chest area (χ^2 (7, N = 2,769) = 106.12, p < .001).

Regarding the posting of thin-ideal images, a significant gender difference was observed. Images of women more commonly displayed the thin ideal, emphasizing slenderness through poses and angles, approximately 45 degrees, to appear slimmer, while men's images frequently included before- and after-transformation photos, showcasing actual weight loss and body size changes to demonstrate their weight-loss success (χ^2 (1, N = 309) = 71.04, p < .001). The potential for digital image editing to enhance thinness in these images suggests marked differences in how men and women present their slimness in fitspiration content.

Fitspiration Messages

No significant differences were found in the presence of inspirational messages related to fitness engagement (χ^2 (1, N = 2,223) = 0.014, p = .905) and healthy lifestyles (χ^2 (1, N = 2,223) = 0.692, p = .406). However, significant differences emerged in informational messages related to the promotion of exercise programs (χ^2 (1, N = 2,223) = 3.89, p = .049), diets (χ^2 (1, N = 2,223) = 12.31, p < .001), and fitness products (χ^2 (1, N = 2,223) = 10.26, p = .001). Male users posted more informational messages promoting exercise programs, while women used informational messages to promote diets and recommend fitness equipment more often.

Findings

Study 1 investigated the characteristics of fitspiration content and its gendered reception among Chinese men and women. Significant gender differences were observed ($p < .001$) in the various themes, including main types of images (people's bodies, food, exercise/fitness record), body types, muscularity level, objectification, and informational messages concerning exercise programs, diets, and fitness products, with a frequent portrayal of thin ideals. The types of food depicted also demonstrated significant gender differences ($p < .05$). However, no significant gender differences emerged in inspirational messages related to fitness engagement and healthy lifestyles, pointing to a universal approach in these aspects.

Study Design II: Semi-Structured Interviews

Participants

To find interview participants for this study, the following two criteria were applied: Participants had to be (1) Chinese young adults aged between 20 and 35 years living in mainland China, who regularly engage with Weibo for fitness-related information or follow fitness-related blogs as fitspiration consumers, and (2) regular exercisers who go to the gym or participate in indoor activities, like yoga or Pilates, or outdoor exercises at least three times per week since one's level of exposure to social media content is based on one's existing interests (Sokolova & Perez, 2021).

The snowball sampling technique was used to identify potential interviewees, starting with two qualifying participants contacted through Weibo during the data collection phase. Following initial interviews, participants were asked if they knew others who fit the criteria and were willing to share their experiences with fitspiration consumption. This approach resulted in 20 interviewees, evenly divided between self-identified males and females.

The interviews were scheduled based on the preferences and geographic locations of the interviewees. Twelve interviews were conducted in person, according to the interviewees' availability, while the remaining eight were conducted via phone or video calls between May and July 2022. Each session lasted 40 to 55 minutes and was conducted by a bilingual postgraduate student with experience in fitspiration research. To facilitate deep and efficient conversations, the interviews were conducted in Chinese and English. Participation was voluntary, with interviewees receiving a protein snack bar as a small token of appreciation.

Interview Procedures and Ethical Consideration

The interview questions were structured as per previous research that investigated young adults' experience of fitspiration using qualitative methods (Easton, Morton, Tappy, Francis, & Dennison, 2018). The questions were divided into four categories: (1) basic information about the interviewee's daily life, including their exercise routines and goals, social media consumption, and extent of exposure to fitspiration; (2) their attitudes toward and perception of fitspiration content as a current social trend; (3) their practical use of fitspiration content; (4) its influence on their lives.

Before beginning the main interview, two pilot interviews with one male and one female participant were performed to ensure clarity and avoid redundancy in the questions. The results of these pilot interviews were excluded from this study's analysis. Interview participants were asked to present specific examples of fitspiration content that they regularly visited or followed to allow the interviewer to verify the visual and textual messages to confirm their alignment with the established definitions of fitspiration.

For ethical consideration, participants received an information sheet detailing the purpose of the study, interview objectives, and the security of interview data; informed consent forms were provided. Participants were informed that the interviews would be recorded for analysis purposes. In the case of phone or video interviews, the interviewers read the content of the informed consent aloud, and participants received the form via e-mail for their approval.

After each interview, the audio recordings were transcribed by the interviewer, and pseudonyms such as F01 (female, participant number) and M01 (male, participant number) were used to ensure anonymity.

Data Analysis

The data analysis employed an inductive thematic analysis approach, enabling the exploration of participants' actual experiences, perspectives, and emotions regarding fitspiration content (Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules, 2017). The analysis encompassed four main steps: Identifying relevant sections and meaningful words from the interview data, sorting the identified data segments into categories, classifying categories to establish the final set of coding categories, and labeling categories with specific subthemes.

Initially, interview transcriptions were carefully read, with open coding conducted to identify relevant segments. Open coding aims to find repeated words, phrases, or relevant ideas from literature (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The subsequent step involved grouping the repetitions into categories based on their potential significance. Through an iterative process, these categories were refined by continually comparing them with the interview data to ensure comprehensive coverage of participants' experiences and perspectives. Finally, each category was labeled, and relevant subthemes were defined. ATLAS.ti (version 23) software was primarily used to facilitate the analysis of the interview data.

Results: Study II

Descriptive Information of Interviewees

Among the 20 interviewees (10 men and 10 women), most were postgraduate students whose average age was 25.1 years. Men were aged 21–27 years, while women were aged 24–26 years.

All interviewees were active users of multiple social media platforms to communicate and share experiences with friends and acquaintances. On average, they spent 3.05 hours per day on social media, ranging from 2 to 8 hours. More than half of the interviewees (N = 13) spent less than 30 minutes per day consuming fitspiration content. Five interviewees reported spending more than 30 minutes but less than 1 hour, and two interviewees reported spending more than 1 hour. The most popular platforms were Weibo and Xiaohongshu (Little Red Book) in China, followed by TikTok and WeChat Moments (see Table 3).

Table 3. Descriptive Information of Interview Participants.

Characteristics	Details	Total *N* (%)	Men *N*	Women *N*
Age	Mean = 25.1 (*SD* = 1.683) Age range: Men (21–27); women (24–26)	20 (100)	10	10
Occupation	Undergraduate students	2(10)	1	1
	Postgraduate students	11(55)	6	5
	Employed	7(35)	3	4
Usage of social media per day	1–2 hours	6(30)	3	3
	3–4 hours	9(45)	4	5
	> 5 hours	5(25)	3	2
Exposure to fitspiration content on social media	< 30 minutes	13(65)	7	6
	30 min–1 hour	5(25)	2	3
	1–2 hours	2(10)	1	1
The frequent use of social media platform[1]	WeChat Moments	6(30)	2	4
	Weibo	10(50)	4	6
	The Little Red Book	10(50)	3	7
	TikTok	7(35)	4	3
	QQ	2(10)	1	1
	BiliBili	4(20)	3	1
	YouTube	2(10)	2	0
Diet habit[1]	No control-diet	4(20)	2	2
	Balanced meal (healthy and low-kcal food)	10(50)	6	4
	Controlled diet	6(30)	2	4
	Intake of health supplements such as proteins	5(25)	4	1
Fitness routine	1–2 days per week	2(10)	0	2
	3–4 days per week	12 (60)	5	7
	> 5 days per week	6(30)	5	1
Fitness goals[1]	Good health and maintenance of healthy bodies	15(75)	7	8
	Good body shape	5(25)	1	4
	Weight loss	7(35)	2	5
	Feel a sense of achievement and increased self-confidence	8(25)	6	2
The level of interest in fitness	Medium	6(30)	1	5
	High	14(70)	9	5
Fitness-related followers	Yes	13(65)	6	7
	No	7(35)	4	3

Note. [1] Multiple answers were selected by the interviewees.

To calculate body mass index, interviewees were asked about their height and weight. Fifteen interviewees had normal weight, two women were underweight, and one woman and two men were overweight. Most interviewees aimed to maintain a healthy and balanced diet. However, a higher number of male participants (N = 4) reported following a strict diet schedule, particularly to enhance muscle strength, compared with female participants (N = 2). Most interviewees engaged in physical activities at least three to four times per week, driven by their desire to maintain a healthy body and lose weight.

The Main Themes and Subthemes of the Interviews

The analysis of interview data uncovered three principal themes: (1) attitudes toward fitspiration content, (2) the practical use of fitspiration content, and (3) the effects of fitspiration content. Each theme comprises two or three subthemes, frequently mentioned by the interviewees.

Theme 1: Attitudes Toward Fitspiration Content

The Positivity of Self-Reflection

It was revealed that both genders experienced positive feelings about constructive self-reflection from fitspiration content. Most interviewees commented that the fitspiration content prompted them to reconsider their lifestyle and fitness routines.

However, distinct gender perspectives emerged. For instance, a female interviewee commented, "It led me to think about my life and my exercise routine again" (F06), suggesting that women's fitspiration consumption was associated with an integral reassessment of lifestyle beyond just fitness. In contrast, men's responses appeared to be more narrowly obsessed with their fitness-specific aspirations: "I keep thinking about my exercise routine" (M08). These responses underline the gender-specific differences through which fitspiration content is consumed and internalized.

Moreover, women tended to highlight the multifaceted influence of fitspiration on their lives, which combined physical activity and emotional well-being: "It enriches my life with pleasure and confidence" (F04). Conversely, men showed a more instrumental approach to fitspiration aimed at achieving specific exercise routines through goal-driven sentiment: "Fitspiration posters motivate me to pursue my fitness goals" (M04). These findings suggest different interpretations of fitspiration content consumption between the genders, further highlighting the direct impact of fitspiration content on self-reflection and broader societal norms concerning gender and self-care.

The Inappropriate or Unrealistic Goals and Low Credibility of Fitspiration Posters

Both male and female interviewees indicated that the workout routines that fitspiration posters provide are unrealistic, and this eventually caused interviewees to view them as less credible: "Some bloggers say that five minutes a day is all it takes to achieve any results. [. . .] five minutes won't really change anything" (F04);

"Some fitness videos have titles that say that 30 minutes of fitness in a month changes your body shape. We know that it won't be" (M04).

The credibility doubts extended to questions regarding the fitspiration bloggers' qualifications. Especially, most male interviewees criticized the lack of professional knowledge in the fitness routines and training shared by bloggers, attributing this to a desire for increased popularity: "They [bloggers] are not professional [. . .] only focus on attracting the public's attention to enhance their popularity" (M01).

Men also expressed criticism about the authenticity of recommended exercise schedules, suspecting the influence of social media marketing: "It's possible that bloggers are sponsored [. . .]" (M06). This indicates male interviewees' concerns about the authenticity-commercialism overlap in social media's fitness culture, whereas female participants more frequently questioned the feasibility of quick results, indicating skepticism based on personal experience and a broader understanding of health and fitness.

The Reality Behind Body Images on Fitspiration

The influence of fitspiration on body images and self-perception revealed a complex interaction of emotions. Both male and female interviewees experienced anxiety and dissatisfaction when comparing their bodies with those of fitspiration posters. Specifically, some women interviewees mentioned her dissatisfaction, with one noting increased body-related anxiety through continual exposure to idealized figures: "I was getting more anxious about my poor body shape than them [the bloggers]" (F01). The sentiment was also shared by another female interviewee (F02), who experienced a decline in body confidence stemming from exposure to images of fit bodies. This suggests that, for women, the dissatisfaction stemmed from intense societal pressures to conform to media-driven body ideals.

Conversely, men described their anxiety in a competitive light, emphasizing societal expectations of physical strength: "I'm getting anxious when I feel that my body is not as good as posters [. . .]" (M08). These observations highlight a gender-sensitive response to body image comparisons, reflecting broader societal and media influences on the perception of body image.

Theme 2: The Practical Use of Fitspiration Content

Development of Fitness and Diet Knowledge and Skills

Interviewees from both genders reported frequently consuming fitspiration content on social media to learn workout methods and understand nutrition in terms of a balanced, healthy diet. Moreover, they highlighted that the most significant benefit derived from fitspiration content was the enhancement of their fitness knowledge and skills: "They're [posters] quite helpful because we don't know well how to set up exercise plans in a more effective way" (F07); "Some bloggers share their knowledge of certain movements and mistakes in detail. Thus, I can plan my training according to his description and see if I make the same mistake just like them" (M10).

While no clear difference between the genders was noted, women specifically mentioned that fitspiration content broadened their knowledge about the effects of diet and exercise: "They influence my dietary habits and encourage me to eat lighter" (F10). This reflects a wider concern with overall health and well-being: "A blogger I follow posts her fitness and diet schedule daily. [. . .] I aspire to adopt a similar set of healthy habits" (F02).

Conversely, most men noted a direct functional engagement, turning to fitspiration as a reference for honing new exercise techniques or poses. One male interviewee mentioned a proactive learning stance: "I watch fitness videos of which muscles are engaged by certain movements, prompting me to learn more" (M01). This indicates a focused consumption of content with the intent to apply newfound insights to real-life fitness scenarios.

Increased Fitness Motivation

Most interviewees across genders commented that fitspiration content motivates them to participate in exercise activities. Female participants expressed a drive toward achieving an ideal body physique, as seen online: "I saw people who are doing workouts have a great body shape in posts. Then, I want to work hard to become like that" (F06), while men found encouragement in transformation images: "Before- and after-exercise photos strongly motivate me, reinforcing my belief that I can do it" (M02).

However, interviewees questioned the lasting impact of this motivation, mentioning a tendency to lose interest in fitspiration content once personal fitness or body goals were achieved. Therefore, they pointed out that any positive or negative effects caused by the long-term consumption of fitspiration content could not be guaranteed although such content could have a short-term impact on users: "It will influence me in a short time, but the lasting rate of this effect is not very high" (F01).

Theme 3: The Influence of Fitspiration Content

Changes in Ideal Body Image

Men indicated a preference for a muscular ideal, influenced by the prevalence of fitspiration images that emphasize muscular body types. As one male interviewee noted, fitness-related posts act as "a kind of indicator to let us know what type of body shape is most popular" (M03), suggesting that social media not only reflect but also prescribe desirable physical traits.

Conversely, women expressed a desire for a lean body, perceived as the most socially accepted standard in China:

> I think the aesthetic sense is gradually being influenced by the fitness sharing content. [. . .] Having a swan neck was very popular to women in social media, and I also felt as if the swan neck is very important. (F05)

These insights suggest that how fitspiration content reinforces gender-specific body ideals and is deeply intertwined with cultural contexts. Importantly, the emphasis on the "swan neck" highlighting slender and delicate features, emerges as a prevalent ideal among women in China, as reflected in fitspiration content. This trend signifies that fitspiration content not only mirrors but also potentially shapes broad societal attitudes toward body image.

Increased Body Dissatisfaction

Both male and female interviewees expressed increased body dissatisfaction after engaging with fitspiration content, driven by comparisons with the fit or toned body images prevalent on social media platforms. Despite an awareness of the performative nature of social media—where users predominantly showcase idealized self-representations––the impact remains profound: "Watching fitness-related content affects me to reassess my body shape because I can see others' body shapes [. . .]. It sometimes makes me disappointed knowing that my body shape is not good enough" (F08); "I tend to focus a little bit more on other people's bodies than I did before since I have been viewing posts" (M06).

These accounts underline the universal effects of fitspiration content across genders, illustrating how the cultural practice of displaying idealized bodies contributes to widespread body dissatisfaction.

Discussion

This study aimed to investigate fitspiration content on Weibo in China, identifying its patterns through quantitative content analysis and exploring its influence on Chinese young adults' experiences through interviews. It specifically examined gender-based differences in fitspiration engagement, acknowledging fitspiration's significance and contrasting effects on men and women. Notably, the study broadens our understanding of how fitspiration content is perceived and used and its subsequent effects on users within the Asian context.

Consistent with previous research (Carrotte et al., 2017; Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2018), this study discovered that fitspiration content on Weibo primarily features women, with a greater emphasis on bodies of individuals, regardless of gender, followed by exercise and fitness records. Men were more likely to depict muscular body types and share images of their physical activities and health supplements, reflecting men's desire for muscularity through dietary control and rigorous workouts (Lavender, Brown, & Murray, 2017). This observation emphasizes the need for future research to examine the negative outcomes of muscular imagery exposure in the Asian context, particularly considering the potential consequences like increased muscular-ideal internalization and appearance-related comparison after viewing fitspiration content (Fatt et al., 2019) and the influence of sociocultural pressures on beauty ideals (McCreary, Hildebrandt, Heinberg, Boroughs, & Thompson, 2007).

Women's fitspiration images often depicted muscular bodies, indicating their increased concerns about muscularity (Rodgers et al., 2018) and the influence of female bodybuilders' popularity (Carrotte et al., 2017). Moreover, the transformative impact of Western influences, driven by the country's openness and the evolution of mass and digital media (Vu-Augier de Montgrémier, Moro, Chen, Blanchet, & Lachal,

2020), has led to significant shifts in traditional roles and perceptions of ideal beauty among Chinese women, diverging from established ethnic beauty ideals in China (Jung, 2018). This evolution requires further study into the growing preference for muscularity among women and the potential convergence of Chinese social media beauty standards with Western ideals, especially regarding muscularity.

Significant levels of self-objectification were observed in women's images, aligning with prior studies (Ahrens et al., 2022; Murashka, Liu, & Peng, 2021), stemming from the internalization of societal beauty and objectification norms (Fardouly, Willburger, & Vartanian, 2018). Interestingly, more than one-fourth of the male images also exhibited objectification, indicating a growing trend of self-objectification among Chinese men and suggesting further investigation into how objectification theory influences men's desires for media-portrayed ideal body types (Morrison, Morrison, & Hopkins, 2003; Strelan & Hargreaves, 2005).

No gender differences were found in the presence of fitness-related or lifestyle-related inspirational messages. However, significant differences were observed in informational message presentation: Men predominantly shared messages promoting exercise activities, while women often promoted diets. This suggests that both genders have distinct motivations for engaging with fitspiration content (Mayoh & Jones, 2021).

Semi-structured interviews revealed both positive and negative impacts on consumers of fitspiration content, consistent with findings from Western studies (DiBisceglie & Arigo, 2021), yet identified inconsistencies with previous findings on fitspiration content addiction (Easton et al., 2018). Fitspiration content enhanced users' knowledge of diet and fitness, boosted motivation, and prompted reflections on fitness routines and lifestyles, thus fostering personal growth. Nonetheless, most interviewees doubted the long-term effects of fitspiration on fitness habits and dietary patterns, which Tiggemann and Zaccardo (2018) also mentioned.

Furthermore, both genders reported losing interest in fitspiration on achieving their initial goals, revisiting it only with new objectives, consistent with Palmer's (2015) study. This supports the uses and gratifications theory, highlighting the proactive role of users in selecting fitspiration content (Tylka, Rodgers, Calogero, Thompson, & Harriger, 2023), and suggests that further exploration into the motivations behind fitspiration consumption is warranted.

Negative effects of fitspiration content were also emphasized, with content often promoting inappropriate or unrealistic diet and fitness goals, diminishing its credibility. Male participants particularly doubted the effectiveness of workout routines due to the lack of professional health evidence. In contrast, female interviewees, especially those aiming for weight loss, tended to trust posters' workout schedules without questioning their professional health credentials, especially if the poster's body matched their ideal. This suggests that women may be more susceptible to fitspiration content, which primarily focuses on body images, especially when they have appearance-related motives for consuming such content (Robinson et al., 2017).

Interestingly, this study found that men experienced higher levels of anxiety and comparison pressure than women, contrasting with Palmer's (2015) findings. Men's characteristics, such as the pursuit of physical perfection, and factors related to competition and self-enhancement (Franzoi et al., 2012) may contribute to their tendency to compare their bodies and feel anxious about failing to achieve their ideal

physique more than women. Given the inconsistent results obtained, further investigation is necessary in future studies.

Overall, this study uncovered significant gender-based differences in engagement with and impact of fitspiration content among young Chinese adults. Women were more often portrayed with toned bodies, in contrast to the emphasis on muscular bodies for men, and were more objectified. Interviews revealed that men approached fitspiration content with a critical, cautious, and goal-oriented mindset, whereas women tended to be more accepting through a less critical mindset, admiring posters' ideal bodies and positive lifestyles. Furthermore, fitspiration content's dual ability to boost fitness knowledge and motivation, however, potentially induces body dissatisfaction, which was also highlighted in this study.

The diverse responses to fitspiration, from self-presentation of body images to self-objectification, underline the complex interplay between social media content and societal beauty standards. This study enriches our comprehension of fitspiration's role within the Asian context and stresses the need for further research to dissect its multifaceted influence across different cultural settings within the broader sociocultural framework.

Despite broadening our comprehension of fitspiration content consumption and its effects within the Asian context, several limitations should be acknowledged. These include potential subjectivity in data interpretation, challenges in translating fitspiration accurately in Chinese, and the possible impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on social media behavior (Wang, Xu, & Xie, 2022). Additionally, focusing on a small sample of consumers may limit the generalizability of findings, and analyzing responses within a binary gender framework may not fully encompass the diversity of fitspiration consumption experience.

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