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Physical Culture and Sport. Studies and Research, 2022, 94, 46–55
DOI: 10.2478/pcssr-2022-0005

OPEN ACCESS

The Culture of Narcissism: A Philosophical Analysis of "Fitspiration" and the Objectified Self

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Authors' contribution:

A) conception and design of the study
B) acquisition of data
C) analysis and interpretation of data
D) manuscript preparation
E) obtaining funding

Received: 27.04.2021
Accepted: 13.01.2022

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Abstract

This article is a philosophical examination of the social media culture of fitness and the behavior which most distinctly characterizes it. Of the numerous and varied digital subcultures emerging with the rise of photo-based social media during the 2010s, the culture surrounding fitness, or "fitspiration," stands out as one of the more notable. Research has identified the phenomenon as consisting to a large extent of users engaging in behaviors of self-sexualization and self-objectification, following, not unexpectedly, the inherent focus within fitness on the body, its maintenance and ultimately its appearance. Research also demonstrates that, for many, viewing and engaging in this behavior is linked to a deterioration of body-image, general self-perception and mental well-being. In this article, I analyze the phenomenon within a philosophical framework in which I combine the philosophical theory of Jean Baudrillard on media and the consumption of signs and the psychoanalytic perspective of Jacques Lacan on subjectivity, narcissism and desire. Using this framework, I discuss the body assuming the properties of a commodified object deriving its cultural value and meaning from the signs which adorn it, resulting in the "fitspiration" user imperative becoming the identification with an artificial object alien to the self, necessitating a narcissistically oriented, yet pernicious self-objectification. I argue that "fitspiration," as well as the photo-based social media which both enables and defines it, indulges narcissism, detrimentally exaggerating the narcissistic inclinations lying at the center of subjectivity.

Keywords: Fitness, fitspiration, social media, narcissism, Baudrillard

Introduction

"The medium is the message," wrote the media critic and philosopher Marshall McLuhan in *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (2001, p. 30). He posited that for all media – past, present and future – the medium itself would be of greater significance to a society and the way its people think and behave than any message transmitted through it could ever be. The medium has characteristics and properties of its own that mold and modify the contents and experiences it gives rise to. As mirrors of reality, we see ourselves and the world, albeit distorted, in media, and it is the medium that defines how and what it is that we see. If used enough, a medium can even change us as we slowly adapt to the distorted version of reality the mirrors show (McLuhan, 2001). As we currently find

ourselves in a society increasingly saturated by the prevalence of photo-based social media, we ought to wonder: what does this medium tell us?

This article is a philosophical analysis of the social media culture of fitness from the perspective of Baudrillard's philosophy on signs and media, and Lacan's theory on subjectivity through desire. I argue that photo-based social media promotes the narcissistic tendencies of individuals in general and fosters a culture of masked narcissism within the digital fitness phenomenon specifically. I attempt to show that the distinctive behavior characterizing "fitspiration" constitutes a profound objectification of the self through viewing the body as an object having assumed the properties of a commodity, enveloped in the culturally ascribed signs through which its value is determined, and rooted in a narcissism detrimentally fueled and enhanced through the medium of social media.

Background

One of the defining trends of the last decade has been the rise of social media. The various social media platforms presently have a combined active global population of approximately 4.2 billion (Tankovska, 2021a), 1.2 billion of which are active users of the popular photo-sharing app Instagram, making it the world's largest platform of its kind (Tankovska, 2021b). Among the abundance of digital cultures that have emerged from this virtual landscape, the culture of fitness is one of the most prominent. "Fitspiration" (an amalgamation of the words fitness and inspiration; also "fitspo," used more frequently on Instagram but less in the research), as it has become known among scholars, refers to the digital culture of fitness that has predominantly developed on Instagram since around 2012 or 2013. A search for the corresponding hashtags *#fitspiration* and *#fitspo* in March 2021 returned 19.1 and 72.7 million posts, respectively. This type of content obviously attracts large crowds of users both posting and/or viewing content, millennials and the so-called Gen Z (people born around the turn of the millennium) in particular. It also attracts more women than men, for whom both the culture of "fitspiration" and photo-based social media in general are most widespread (Pew Research, 2019; Carrotte et al., 2015; Carrotte et al., 2017).

The "fitspiration" trend revolves in large part around the appearance of the body; posts in this category primarily depict fit bodies, or those aspiring to have one, commonly adopting static poses rather than exercising, or inspirational quotes overlain on a picture of a body or a neutral background (Deighton-Smith & Bell, 2018; Santarossa et al., 2019; Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2018). One can imagine how engaging in behaviors where unrestrained attention and focus is directed towards one's body, by oneself and by others, would foster an environment where objectification and sexualization are encouraged, both of which appear as highly prominent features of "fitspiration" (Carrotte et al., 2017; Deighton-Smith & Bell, 2018; Murashka et al., 2020; Santarossa et al., 2019). In fact, as noted by Tiggemann and Zaccardo (2015), photo-sharing social media platforms such as Instagram might be construed as inherently self-objectifying given their very nature and how users interact with them – by posting photos, often of themselves, for the explicit purpose of being viewed by others. Posting thus presupposes and is dependent on an intended observer, without whom the act loses its purpose. After all, why even perform any sort of interaction publicly on social media, be it posting photos or statements, if not for the explicit purpose of the post being viewed by others, thereby conferring a consciously or unconsciously desired effect on the originator? Delimiting the contents of these posts to photos of the body, or even specific body parts, further enhances the objectification features inherent in the medium. The bodies in these pictures are often lightly dressed and posed in suggestive manners, seemingly socially legitimated and sanctioned in their self-presentation by their textual or otherwise conspicuous connection to fitness. A leisurely scroll through the contents of "fitspiration" reveals the normalization of this online self-expression within the community. It clearly garners a lot of appeal among young adults, who make up the majority of users (Carrotte et al., 2015; Carrotte et al., 2017), despite it rather explicitly constituting a behavior of objectification and sexualization – or perhaps because of it.

"Fitspiration" and its philosophical elucidation

"Fitspiration" has been labeled "a wolf in sheep's clothing" (Uhlmann et al., 2018). The same sentiment also seems to be echoed quite unanimously among the rest of the research community. Results from existing research on "fitspiration" have been overwhelmingly one-sided in their findings of its harmful potential. Two themes are particularly pervasive and appear in most of the articles published on the topic. Firstly, scholars report harmful effects on mental well-being, body image and general self-perception, usually by way of social comparison (e.g. Anixiadis et al., 2019; Arroyo & Brunner, 2016; DiBisceglie & Arigo, 2019). Secondly, they highlight sexualization and objectification as traits featured heavily in the images posted. These two themes naturally overlap and are invariably

connected, with the former normally viewed as a consequence of the latter when directly engaging in the types of behaviors "fitspiration" entails.

As most of the research on "fitspiration" tends to focus on young women (as the majority of "fitspiration" users are female [Carrotte et al., 2017] and most "fitspiration" posts are of women [Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2018]), the objectification theory by Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) is often invoked as a means of interpretation. The theory provides a framework for analyzing how girls and women, to varying degrees, are socialized into behaviors of bodily self-objectification by a society saturated with messages of beauty and media images depicting idealized bodies of women. It is a process that is argued to be particularly aided by the internalization of media depictions of individuals as dismembered entities (i.e. faceless, focusing on specific body parts) stripped of their personality and enhanced in their function as physical or, often, sexual objects to be viewed and evaluated – a media phenomenon with many similarities to those of Instagram fitness photos. These kinds of depictions can be viewed as a norm when it comes to self-portrayal within the context of "fitspiration" (Carrotte et al., 2017; Deighton-Smith & Bell, 2018), where objectification is usually a prominent feature, and naturally enhanced by the overt focus on the body inherent in the culture. Again, Instagram can itself also be understood as an inherent medium of objectification by its explicit function as a platform whereby individuals, inevitably disassembled into mere base characteristics, are exhibited for others to view and evaluate.

Thus, in adopting this behavior of self-objectification and, by extension, involuntarily attempting to become an object, one's subjective value is also determined through the exteriorly knowable features presentable through the medium of the image. The emphasis is placed squarely on appearance and positions the person in direct relation to and comparison with other people presenting in the same way. This primes them for disappointment and dissatisfaction with themselves if they fail to achieve a certain look, while simultaneously causing them to feel the pressure to conform to that look, leading to the deterioration of their self-perception and mental well-being. At face value, self-objectification, we can deduce, becomes part of a compensatory endeavor in response to feelings of inadequacy or in the attempt to obtain something one does not possess. This, of course, is neither a new phenomenon nor isolated to the confines of social media, but rather has long been a feature of society. It appears, though, that through social media it has evolved into a behavior with an increasingly strong allure for people, particularly young women (Talbot et al., 2017). According to two comprehensive reviews by Haidt and Twenge (2019a; 2019b), the evidence strongly supports the fact that social media generally has the potential to exert a negative influence on its users. Furthermore, it appears to be precisely the features which, although generally omnipresent, are especially prominent within "fitspiration" that harbor the greatest potential for harm.

Baudrillard and the consumption of signs

A key focus of the theorizing of Jean Baudrillard concerns the abstraction of the value of objects from use-value to sign-value, and even the diffusion of the logic of economy and consumption into non-objects and everyday practices. Through the influence of the ever-increasing presence of mass media, he argued that commodities have ceased to be defined by their functional use. Instead, he asserted, they are defined by what they signify; furthermore, what they signify is defined not by what they do, but rather by their relational position in the system of significations (Baudrillard, 1998). The effect is that consumers, by unconsciously reading the code for the system of consumption, come to consume signs and messages, psychological experiences, as much as (or instead of) commodities themselves, turning signs and symbols into hyperreal commodities. This consumption of signs does not, in Baudrillard's view, correspond very well to the usual notion of needs sometimes attributed as the logic of consumption (Baudrillard, 1998), the view that we consume in order to fulfill tangible and physical needs. Needs, by definition, can be satisfied, and the increasing insatiability of consumers reveals the fallibility of needs as the logic of consumption. Rather, what Baudrillard views as the consumer imperative is the search for differentiation. If needs apply, they do so only in reference to personal differentiation through the system of signification and its artificial associations and meanings, thereby seemingly making themselves unending. In keeping with Baudrillard's advocacy for an expansion of the concept of needs and for an increase in the explanatory potential it provides, I suggest that the psychoanalytic concept of desire be introduced instead.

Lacan, desire and narcissism

In advocating for a return to Freudian psychoanalysis, the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan reintroduces desire as the basis of analytic experience (De Battista, 2017). As subjects driven by desire, desire lies at the center of our subjectivity. Beyond basic needs and wishes, the more fundamentally rooted desire is what creates subjectivity, manifesting as striving for validation and self-realization through things such as social status and the forming of

relationships, things that cannot be accomplished by virtue of a subject's agency alone. These are the desires that channel us into the world and require the world in order to be satisfied. For Lacan (2006), desire, as opposed to needs, is inherently obstructed from consciousness and is a means by which we project ourselves into the future we want to see realized. Subjectivity is therefore based in our narcissistic relationship to ourselves and is fundamentally constituted in absence – in what we unconsciously designate ourselves as lacking.

Narcissism should not be interpreted here merely as a derogatory description. In *On Narcissism: An Introduction*, Sigmund Freud describes it as "the libidinal complement to the egoism of the instinct of self-preservation" (2014, p. 1). Drawing on Freud, Lacan (2006) further views narcissism as one's relation and attraction to one's image and connects the emergence of subjectivity to the development of the narcissistic tendency of the individual, beginning with the mirror stage (to be discussed later). It is precisely the relationship individuals have to themselves when they are, in common terms, characterized as narcissistic that must always exist, albeit less intensely, for any desire, concerning the preservation, cultivation and aspiration centered around the self, to materialize. Desire thus always includes a narcissistic dimension. It then changes forms and adapts while corresponding to the outside world, over which we have no agency or control. As this world is in constant flux and is never stagnant, it renders our pursuit of the realization of these desires ultimately futile. This means that, and is Lacan's explanation as to why, we will never be truly satisfied. As Baudrillard writes, "There are no limits to man's 'need' as a social being (i.e. as a being productive of meaning and relative to others in value)" (1998, p. 64).

Self-realization and social comparison

This speaks to our nature as human beings. After all, is it not so that social differentiation is itself woven into the very fabric of the self-realization to which we all naturally strive? For Lacan, I think, this is the case. What then, if not the value-hierarchical structuring and organization of society – its culture and commodities by which we measure ourselves, our possessions and accomplishments – constitutes the framework for operating in our search for said self-realization? In *The Righteous Mind* (2013), social psychologist Jonathan Haidt, drawing on evolutionary psychology, describes how the human mind, developed and shaped over tens of thousands of years of early humans' tribalistic living, evolved through competition with individuals within the group and collectively as groups with other groups. In the comparatively few years since the development of modern society, our brains have not changed much, which ultimately means that ingrained deep within us as part of our biological heritage is the logic of interpersonal competition and hierarchical structuring. This parallels the social comparison theory by Festinger (1954), oft-cited in the research on "fitspiration" as a way of understanding its effect on users (e.g. Fardouly et al., 2018; Lewallen & Behm-Morawitz, 2016; Peng et al., 2019). It states that we automatically and unconsciously evaluate ourselves on a number of parameters by comparing ourselves to the people around us, thereby gauging our social standing in an inevitably hierarchical fashion through "upwards" and "downwards" social comparison. In turn, as noted by Reaves (2011), social comparison has its evolutionary roots in the systems of social rank found in animal behavior. According to Klein (1997), this subjective social comparison even seems to influence one's perceptions and judgements more than objective benchmarks do, if and when they are available for comparison, further adding to its significance in how the human mind creates its perception of itself. Hence, it seems it is really only in relation to our perception of others that we are able to create ourselves and define our own worth and subsequent subjective sense of place in the social hierarchy – a philosophical position shared by Lacanian psychoanalysis.

In striving for self-realization, we are simultaneously striving for personalization, a whole that can be reduced to its constituent parts and their sign-value, each of which is assigned a place relative to others in a system of status. In Baudrillard's (1998) view, objects and their production of meaning as signs and differentials are profoundly hierarchical. In personalizing oneself, one interacts with the order of significations, which occurs on both a conscious and an unconscious level, and then consumes according to it. It specifically becomes a process of differentiation through the consumption of the *significations* of objects, the meaning ascribed to them in the system of signs, and it is as signs that they gain the ability to distinguish a person through affiliation with their corresponding value markers. This is fundamental to the construction of identity and the process of self-realization "by which everyone takes their place in society" (Baudrillard, 1998, p. 61). In this sense, the consumer object is able to assume not only a physical form, but also an immaterial and abstract form. Baudrillard, for example, viewed time, in our modern sense of the word, as having assumed the properties of a commodity to be used, spared or wasted in leisure. A similar process of commodification of the non-conventional can be argued to be occurring on Instagram. When employed for personal expression, this medium is intrinsically linked to identity and the process of differentiation through which that identity is formulated and maintained. As such, it becomes a unique vessel for the transfusion of the same logic of

economy and consumption into the *objects*, the commodities, that are currently being marketed so fervently within "fitspiration." They become applicable to the *body* and its representation.

Signifying the "real"

Mass media, through which consumption is not only enacted, but also infused with meaning, is the great architect of our code of significations, the provider of archetypes with which we cannot help but model our lives and behaviors around. While this process was long dominated by traditional media, today it has arguably in large part been substituted for various instances of social media. When fed the never-ending stream of signs and images through screens that lay claim on an increasingly large portion of our waking lives in today's social media saturated climate, and paired with our propensity for conformity to outside influence, the images begin to be internalized and melded with our perception of reality (Baudrillard, 1994). Although we, for example, no longer subscribe to the ill-founded illusion of the Earth being the center of the cosmos, we are now instead generally uncritical subscribers to an illusory perspective on reality that is distorted by signs and images, created within mass media and, increasingly in recent years, within social media. While certainly not everything (or even most things) said or seen on social media are taken to be true, it still, assuming the position taken by Baudrillard, transmits significations which enter our consciousness and become integrated with our frame of reference. Slowly supplanting what they signify, they then become our perception of reality, perceived as more real than reality itself. As the historian and philosopher Richard Weaver wrote of the most influential medium of his time, "The newspaper is a man-made cosmos of the world of events around us at the time. For the average reader it is a construct with a set of significances which he no more thinks of examining than did his pious forbears of the thirteenth century […] think of questioning the cosmology" (Weaver, 1984, p. 93).

Regarding the age of the internet, studies have, for example, shown that information received through new media is generally highly influential on the behavior of young people (Ettel et al., 2012). Beauty standards too have long been known to exert great influence on individuals and to propagate and become normalized through the media. In their meta-analytical review of data from 156 studies, Myers and Crowther (2009) found that women tend to compare themselves to media images of women as frequently as they compare themselves to their peers with a more similar appearance. This tendency also appeared stronger in women than in men, echoing the position taken by most of the research published on "fitspiration," which has chosen to focus primarily on the effect it has on women (e.g. Seekis et al., 2020; Sherlock & Wagstaff, 2019; Slater et al., 2017). Conducting this self-comparison on social media involves the melding of the two – the media depictions and the real – into one, conflating the one with the other. As Verrastro et al. (2020) note, the incongruity between the world of the images online and the reality outside of the screens creates appearance anxieties and emotional dissatisfaction as individuals, females in particular, become so immersed in the virtual representation that the distinction between it and reality start to become blurred. The model is confused with an original that never truly existed. Yet it is precisely the model, and the signs which envelop it, that is internalized and against which the social comparison is then conducted.

The finest consumer object

If we retain the view of photo-based social media in general, and its culture of fitness specifically, as inherently self-objectifying, through the reduction of its subjects into signifiable visual characteristics, it is only logical that the body would become its most valued object. "Fitspiration" can be viewed as an extension of the narcissistic self-investment inherently fostered by photo-based social media, a culturally and socially sustainable pretext for capitalizing on the symbolic sign-value attributed to the body as an object – one that conveniently circumvents the prevailing norms and social codes surrounding nudity and the conspicuous flaunting of the body as a sexually desirable object.

Baudrillard viewed the sexual liberation of the twentieth century as having "liberated" the body as something to be groomed and enhanced, thereby turning it into an object (Baudrillard, 1998). Having taken its place in the system of objects, and by being the most personal and subjectively representative thing we possess, it became the "finest consumer object" (Baudrillard, 1998, p. 129). By fusing ourselves with the object of the body, we have become consumers of ourselves, increasingly narcissistically invested in ourselves as objects to be manipulated as just another signifier of social status. While we once competed for this precious social currency with our peers primarily in instances of real physical interaction, and to a lesser extent with anonymous models and nameless entities in the media, we now have the whole world to compete with; and it is available to us around the clock. The possibilities for social comparison become endless, and the more we engage with the medium in this way, so too grow our "needs" in the Baudrillardian sense as social beings – or perhaps more aptly, our outwardly directed desires in the

Lacanian sense. In 1970, Baudrillard prophetically wrote that "When the whole social world becomes urbanized, when communication becomes total, 'needs' grow exponentially – not from the growth of appetite, but from competition" (1998, p. 65). The fact that over 4 billion people are now connected via social media (Tankovska, 2021a) surely makes any relevancy embedded in this statement in its original form all the more potent today.

The fusion of the immanent and the transcendent

Baudrillard (1998) viewed the locus of consumption as the separation of a total praxis into the sphere of the immanent, one of closed and private everydayness, and the sphere of the transcendent, one of the social, the cultural and mass communication. This division, I would argue, has today been completely shattered within the culture fostered through fitness on social media. The users within this space no longer have, or are expected to have, private lives or private bodies, thereby displacing them from the sphere of the immanent. Instead, everything about a person is exhibited for the viewing of others, exposing it all to the inescapable demands of social desirability and thereby rendering the individual an entirely Lacanian mirage of a person – a Baudrillardian simulation and "sham object," "offering an abundance of signs that they are real, but in fact they are not" (George Ritzer in Baudrillard, 1998, p. 12). It is this collapse of the divide between the public and the private sphere which allows for the narcissistic tendencies fundamental to the forming of identities to become unrestrained and grow uninhibited. This can be likened to the societal tendencies described by philosophers Bard and Söderqvist (2018) and termed *pornoflation* – a social-pornographic, narcissistic behavior of increasing exhibitionism of even the most intimate in order to garner attention. Unchecked, as is arguably the case with "fitspiration," this behavior risks degeneration into a state of *hypernarcissism*, a pathological and highly defining characteristic of the contemporary network society of which social media has become a constituent element (Bard & Söderqvist, 2018). However, this indulgence in narcissism does not result in a celebration of singularity, as Baudrillard puts it (1998), of differentiation through personalization, despite outward appearance. It is rather a refraction of features, of signs collected and reassembled, first found in the "fitspiration" collective and then reintroduced through personal, narcissistic expenditure.

From social cognitive theory (Bandura, 2001), we can gather that in mass communication, behaviors, thought patterns and values are retrieved from the substantial modeling found in mass media, meaning that individuals observe the actions of people and their symbolic translations and learn from their consequences in social contexts. They then adapt their own behavior in accordance with what has been proved to be socially rewarding. As social arenas today are as much virtual as physical spaces, users literally model their striving for differentiation on signs and meanings flowing from social media, giving rise to the process repeating itself as they in turn come to embody the model.

"Fitspiration" is a clear example of this, as the myriad of identical pictures reveal, with users all differentiating themselves by the same means. The signs beckoning seductively for users' narcissistic assimilation are already there when their desire projects them outwards, as media models, produced en masse and composed of identifiable signs. "Everyone finds their personality in living up to these models" (Baudrillard, 1998, p. 96). If everyone seeks themselves in the same codified models, it presupposes that everyone's true, differentiated self; their personality (which they do not yet possess – hence their desire – but somehow still "know" to be theirs truly), already exists as signs. This means it exists only artificially, and thus, in attempting to become oneself, one is further fragmenting one's identity despite the intention to do the opposite. As people imitate each other's representation while striving for personalization, they are locked in a perpetual loop of subconscious dissatisfaction, compensated for by the ceaseless development of desires needing to be satiated. In theory, this is a recipe for a profound sense of absence and negative mental feedback loops; judging by the trends highlighted in the research on "fitspiration" in particular, as well as on social media in general (Haidt & Twenge, 2019a; 2019b), these are the results in practice as well.

This is a process which certainly appears to have intensified as the metaphysical distance between us and what we are presented with in the media has been drastically reduced. A sociocultural model commonly used for understanding negative appearance-related self-evaluation is the Tripartite Influence Model (Thompson et al., 1999). This model holds that the perceived ideal appearance to which one strives is the combined result of the influence of three primary sources: family, peers and the media. However, the media of today has shed its former anonymity. In doing so, it has shed its formerly held place in our consciousness and become a form of two-way communication. Now the media *is* us; it is made up of family, friends and people just like us. In combination with the fusion of the spheres of the immanent and the transcendent within "fitspiration," the three-fold distinction arguably no longer holds, but is rather combined into one. It is consequently personalizing, while also bridging the distance to the entire system of significations propagated by the media, through which its influence is made all the greater.

The mirror stage and fictionalized self

Although Instagram is a tool for communication between individuals, it is also, and perhaps more so, characterized by its function as a form of mass media, especially as social networks have grown to reach mass audiences rivaling those of traditional media. It is the consumption of signs and images, and by virtue of its user interactivity, it also serves as a platform for the expression of our own self-objectification, our misrecognition – *méconnaissance* (Lacan, 2006) – of ourselves as objects and our desire for that object to be consumed by others as signs, to become the thing we have already convinced ourselves of being. One of the central concepts in Lacanian theory is what he refers to as the mirror stage (2006), the stage of development where the young child misrecognizes their reflection in the mirror as an object in the world of objects through a kind of dialectic of objectifying identification. The child sees the representation of themselves in the mirror, which, in comparison with themselves, is already viewed as a complete unity, an imaginary gestalt of themselves as an organized whole. This is the point at which the child becomes a subject, fundamentally intertwined with the hereby emerging narcissism, by beginning to project desire towards this misrecognized image of themselves. Lacan (2006) also refers to this as the *imago*, referring precisely to the idealized mental image of the self, constituting both something other as the "Ideal-I" and its misrecognition as that which one already identifies with. This is the origin of the fractured subject wanting to become whole, creating a discordance as the child adopts this externalized image of themselves as the object of their self-identification, constituting the self in an imaginary alienation (Lacan, 1989). However, an object is defined by its material attributes, by its *lack* of desire, while a subject, by contrast, is an abstraction established precisely *upon* desire, and this fact serves as the inescapable distinction of our internal experience as separate from the world of objects.

Instagram is a medium through which users are given distinct tools to attempt to make themselves into their "Ideal-I," the entity serving as the imagined resulting object of their fulfilled desires, by mimicking and reflecting select aspects of the system of significations through which their desires are mediated and directed. "Fitspiration" represents the cultural value assigned to the body as an object of sexuality and status, resituated and codified within the system of significations as something beyond narcissistic self-indulgence, which in turn is codified as something undesirable. One's "Ideal-I" is then informed by and becomes intertwined with the signs constituting this cultural value, making it readable to consumers of the system of significations. The success of the endeavor to merge oneself with this imagined "I" can now easily be gauged and quantified through the number of likes accrued. Presenting "oneself" as an image on social media is the continuation of the same misrecognition of oneself as an object that began during the mirror stage; in attempting to be oneself so as to represent this entity, one must be seen as a complete whole, as an object alongside other objects.

Herein lies the irreconcilable paradox, as one sees and imagines oneself as "the finest consumer object" (Baudrillard, 1998, p. 129), internalizing this objectified view of oneself and projecting it onto social media for it to be validated as such by the imagined other. Lacan uses the concept of the gaze, "[…] not a seen gaze, but a gaze imagined by me in the field of the Other" (Lacan, 2004, p. 84), its function being to externally construct the subject as if gazed upon by an external observer, in the same way that the child first viewed themselves from the outside, as an object in the mirror. And yet, we can never be objects precisely because of that which makes us subjects in the first place – our outwardly projected desire towards that fictionalized unity of the self observed in the mirror. This is the desire for the impossible, the constitution of ourselves as subjects based on a profound *lacking*, an absence within us that can neither be filled nor removed.

According to Lacan (2004), we pour into the imagined gaze of the crowd our desire to be realized in the roles we assume, to be seen as the "I" with which we identify and which has already appeared before us as the mirrored gestalt reflected in the image, yet forever remains beyond our reach as the illusive projection of our ever-fluctuating desire. Therefore, part of the process of trying to become this "I" is the desire for our self-projection to be seen by others and, most importantly, as can be concluded from Haidt (2013), to be seen as desirable by others, the way we desire our misrecognized image in the mirror. What is deemed desirable is of course determined by the value-hierarchy according to which the system of signification with which one interacts is structured. However, we can never truly experience the desire of others, that which constitutes the origin of their subjectivity. For us, even the very idea of "others" becomes internalized as part of us, originating in the mirror stage as the external observer and then externalized by us as the gaze of the imaginary crowd. It therefore follows that the external observer for whom one projects will always be imaginary, despite the eventuality of the presence of a real crowd actually watching or viewing the images one posts. Obviously, this will never satiate one's desire for recognition, leading to ever more self-objectifying behavior, of which the "fitspiration" trend could be considered a contemporary embodiment. Continuing along this theoretical argument, it should hold that the more one indulges one's narcissistic tendencies and

self-objectifies in this way, the more at risk of further fragmenting and alienating oneself one becomes, leading to a perpetual loop of anxiety and feelings of internal disunity and dissatisfaction with oneself.

Furthermore, when self-projecting on social media, one assimilates the signs and images consumed and internalized from interacting with the medium and reintroduces them into the system as signifying the personalized and complete self, the "Ideal-I," the realization of which is the object of one's desire (Lacan, 2006). This desire to be complete must ultimately be the desire to become an object in another's eyes, with whom the sole power to validate the fiction of ourselves lies. However, it can only ever be little more than another failed attempt to turn ourselves into complete beings. As what we are desiring is the desire of others – desire being constituted in absence – the result is that we are trying to rectify one negation with what is fundamentally another negation. Clearly, this will never resolve the underlying problem of the fractured subject. Rather, I would argue, the problem is amplified by the intensified process of objectification manifested through fitness on social media, where subjects are both further objectified and further alienated from their idealized and highly codified self-projections as objects than has ever been possible before. There is a clinical term in psychoanalysis called pathological narcissism, defined as being driven by repressed feelings of self-hatred and inflated self-grandeur masking an intense yearning for approval (Lasch, 2018). Following Lacan's views on the objectification of the self, the term might serve here both as a description of the culture of pornoflation being cultivated by "fitspiration" and as an indication as to what the consequences of indulging these impulses might be, while also providing an explanation for the already well-established rise in negative self-perceptions among its users and the negative impact on mental well-being that it seems to exert.

Concluding remarks

Situating the phenomenon of "fitspiration" within a philosophical framework combining Baudrillard and Lacan allows for a deeper level of understanding and explanation of the philosophical underpinnings and implications of the behavior characteristic of "fitspiration."

On Instagram as a visual medium, and within "fitspiration" in particular, one is compelled with a rare level of conspicuousness to indulge one's narcissistic impulses through the projection of one's imaginary form as the "Ideal-I," codified as an object adorned with all the cultural signs which constitute it. In the age of digitalization, "fitspiration" can be described as a natural extension of the cultural attribution of sign-value afforded to individual appearance and beauty. Beauty has become an absolute imperative – the capitalization on the body through narcissistic reinvestment – and is expressed on a broad cultural scale through erotic appeal. It imbues the whole field of sign consumption with a sexualization deeply engrained with narcissistic tendencies. Sexualization enhances the allure of social media, and social media enhances the allure of sexualization, carrying with it the signs with which it is assigned its cultural meaning, reaching a state of ubiquity in "fitspiration." Sexualization then turns into objectification. In succumbing to the easily accessible gratification on social media of displaying oneself as being in possession of the finest consumer object to the gaze and perceived attention of the crowd, one is exacerbating the processes of self-objectification and allowing one's further alienation through identification with an object far removed from oneself and forever trapped in the imaginary. The phenomenon of "fitspiration," which appears on the surface to be a benign sheep, enabling free and emancipated self-expression without restraints or inhibitions, seems in fact to conceal a malicious wolf, ready to prey on the cracks in the façade of the self – beneath which is exposed the frail and vulnerable human subject.

Narcissism always originates from a drive to attend to the interests of the subject and inevitably grows along with the subject's unfulfilled desires. The growth of narcissism must thus always be a response to some underlying sense of insufficiency, described here as the disparity between the imaginary, unitary self-identification mediated through the medialized code of significations and projected onto the image and the disunity of the internal subjective experience of the self, defined by infinitely fluctuating desires. I have argued that rather than providing the recognition desired and manifested as narcissistically oriented self-objectification, overindulging one's innate narcissistic inclinations through the mechanisms enabled within the context of "fitspiration" provides no rectification of that *lack* from which desire emanates, and thus no remedy for the anxiety which it generates. The incompleteness of subjects can never be mended in this way.

While hardly unique to "fitspiration," self-sexualization and self-objectification in contemporary society, as has been described here, seemingly finds a natural and self-legitimizing culmination in the culture of self-realization that "fitspiration" promotes. As the divide between the spheres of the immanent and the transcendent crumbles, as narcissistic "self-preservation" becomes ubiquitously engaged, seeking to reconcile the incompleteness which lies

at the heart of subjectivity by submitting to the urge to embrace this narcissism rather than resist it appears, by all accounts, to be an ill-advised way of adapting to the interconnected and image-centered society we now find ourselves in. McLuhan once declared the medium of communication itself to be the true message. What, then, is the message harbored in the very essence of photo-based social media? Does it speak of narcissistic self-inflation and the pampering of ourselves for the viewing of others? If so, then rarely has it been spoken as loudly as within the social media fitness culture, to the unwitting detriment of its members.

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