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Health, Exercise, and their Motivations

Knowledge regarding physical activity and the benefits it can have on an individual's health has become increasingly prevalent. These benefits can be the leading motivator in the reason as to why individuals participate in physical activity and exercise. There are, though, different forms of motivations that are prevalent within society as to why individuals may choose to participate in physical activity of different kinds. Some of these motivations are positive, and some can become negative. It is important to understand the perceptions an individual may have on exercise and wellness, and to comprehend why certain people choose to participate in exercise. Social media, web-based programs, and fitness influencers can all influence exercise and wellness perceptions in both positive and negative ways. Social media and web-based programs tend to have different effects on individuals of different age groups. This paper will focus on the good, the bad, motivating factors and barriers that individuals develop in relation to exercise and wellness with the use of social media and web-based supports.

Fitness, health, and wellness all fall into an important category that may be difficult to attain for some, and easier for others. Creating and maintaining a lifestyle that focuses on health should be a priority to all individuals in some way, whether it is exercising regularly or incorporating nutrient dense, healthy foods into the diet. This is because of the tremendous benefits that exercise and wellness practices have on an individual's overall well-being. There are several platforms which people utilize daily that can act as a motivation, or in some cases the

complete opposite, when making decisions to incorporate exercise and wellness into their routines. Some of these platforms include Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, or Snapchat. Social media has become a powerful platform that is utilized for the promotion and advertisement of different trends, including health and fitness.

Social media platforms are used by virtually all individuals of different ages and backgrounds. For this reason, certain posts affect different people in different ways. Often times, individual's behaviors are influenced based on things shown and posted throughout a social media platform. ¹ This can become both a positive as well as a negative tool, as it is easily accessible to the public, and people tend to use the information viewed in their daily lives. Fitness and health motivations are often presented in multiple ways throughout these platforms. One study explored the intentions behind motivational factors which included perceived norms regarding behavior, personal agency, and attitude towards a behavior. ¹ Essentially, if an individual witnesses' posts about health and fitness and become intrigued by the topic, they will be more inclined to participate in such behavior. The use of social media to encourage health behaviors is different across many spectrums. When using twitter, it has been shown that individuals were more motivated to stick with health-related behaviors to improve their own intrinsic motivations in losing weight. ²

Exercise has a wide-range of benefits to all individuals both physically and mentally. Some of these benefits include the prevention of chronic illness and disease, improved cardiovascular health, increased energy, improved mental state, and leads to maintaining a healthier weight. ³ Exercise has also been shown to improve anxiety and depression amongst those who suffer from such mental disorders, as well as increasing self-esteem, confidence, self-efficacy, and is prevalent in stress management. Another important factor to consider is the

increased prevalence of obesity rates in the United States. If exercise becomes more of a priority, this increase can drop significantly.² Obesity is linked to a number of diseases in which can affect the well-being and quality of life for individuals. If obesity rates are cut down, so will the prevalence of these underlying conditions associated with it.² A major barrier that is associated with those who are overweight or are at an increased risk of underlying health conditions is their lack of knowledge of the benefits of exercise as well as their own self-efficacy in participating in exercise.³ It is crucial that all individuals begin exercise at an earlier age, and are educated about the benefits in order to avoid these health conditions and to maintain a healthy weight.

Exercise in general can be motivated both internally and externally. The importance of exercise behavior becoming an intrinsic motivation is crucial, as this will lead to more adherence and an increased desire to participate in healthier habits. Internal motivations have been shown to increase adherence to exercise programs and acts of wellness.⁴ If an individual truly wants to exercise for the right reasons, it will overall be a better experience for them rather than exercising due to outside factors. Some internal factors can include the positive feeling associated with exercise, the physical benefits of feeling energized after a workout session, being able to interact with others, and decreased stress and anxiety amongst other things. An external motivation becomes negative when an individual may feel forced into participating in healthy habits, and does not truly enjoy it. This will lead to a decreased exercise adherence, negative psychological effects, and increased anxiety.⁴ This can occur from other individuals forcing unsatisfying activities on another individual, a social media influencer providing incorrect information regarding health and fitness, or a negative perspective on body image. All of these factors are associated with motivation, which is why it is important to explore the different

motivations individuals have in order to get the upmost benefit from health and exercise practices.

When observing individuals who utilize Twitter and their motivations to participate in healthy behaviors, there is a positive outcome in overall mentality and exercise performance.² On Twitter, there are certain influencers, or fitness enthusiasts, who post about their journeys of weight loss and their healthy, active lifestyles. When others were exposed to this health and fitness community, they became inspired to participate as well.² When individuals feel part of a community, or feel as if their journey is important to others, it kept them motivated to continue healthy behaviors and to participate in exercise more regularly. This falls under the category of social support, where people with similar interests meet through social media and motivate one another to exceed their norms, creating a positive environment for those involved. This is an example of an intrinsic motivating factor, which will lead to greater adherence and the continuation of incorporating healthy habits and exercise within their daily lives whether they continue to post about their journey on twitter or do it for themselves.

When observing male and female motivations in exercise, there are few differences encountered overall. Males tend to be greatly motivated by their own ego, and for competitive purposes.⁴ When males witness other males look more masculine, leaner, and overall in good shape through exercise, it makes them want a similar physique and therefore leads to greater participation in exercise. Males tend to have a greater confidence regarding their physical appearance than females. This is why their ego is a main motivating factor when it comes to exercise.⁴ When males participate in regular exercise, their body satisfaction is enhanced as compared to males who do not regularly exercise.⁵ Females on the other hand, do not always have this increased level of self-confidence when it comes to physical appearance. For them, the

want to exercise goes hand in hand with the desire to achieve the social standards of what the female physique “should” look like. Many individuals praise those who have extremely slim and lean stomachs, which is not always attainable to all females. This is predominately due to genetics, but also with diet and exercise habits. This is a negative motivating factor that circulates throughout the fitness world. Comparing one’s self and only exercising to try and look like another individual is unhealthy, and can deteriorate one’s body image. This is an example of how an external motivating factor can become destructive when referring to health and fitness practices.

There has been a number of different findings regarding social media and web use in the motivation of individuals to participate in health and fitness. A positive outcome has been seen with the use of web-based health support in the workplace amongst middle-aged individuals.⁶ This is a crucial environment where health and exercise awareness should be prevalent, being that most jobs require long hours each day sitting in a desk, and not participating in much physical activity. Promoting and incorporating opportunities to participate in healthy habits during the workplace would be extremely beneficial to those who spend majority of their days in an office.⁶ Such behaviors can occur by eliminating barriers within the day. An example of this has shown to be an extended lunch break so that workers can have time to take a walk or do an easy body-weight exercise mid-shift. By eliminating barriers, increased adherence to exercise will increase significantly.⁶

Utilizing this idea, certain companies have actually incorporated virtual web services to influence physical activity amongst their employees in the workplace. Following the use of these virtual services, employees began to sit less, and found more time to move throughout the work day.⁷ Based on similar studies as this one, it is evident that amongst the workplace population

virtual web services are a positive way to motivate individuals to participate in more physical activity. This is crucial as many people spend most of their days at their jobs, and then have either minimal time or energy later in the day to exercise how they would like. This strategy within the workplace was shown to benefit individuals of all fitness levels. ⁷

Body image plays an important role when it comes to exercise and the motivation to live a healthy lifestyle. ⁵ Body image is essentially the way one views their own physical appearance. Issues with body image are mainly seen within females, but can be prevalent in the male population as well. Women who present with a higher BMI and may be classified as overweight tend to have the highest degree of body dissatisfaction. ⁵ Having a negative body image can cause women to avoid wanting to exercise at all, as they feel embarrassed and uncomfortable in their own body. Studies have shown, that with an increase in knowledge of the health benefits that exercise provides, an increase in the participation of exercise develops. ⁵ With this, it is important that individuals are educated with factual information regarding exercise and how it is beneficial to their well-being. This can encourage exercise adherence as well as a decline in body dissatisfaction. Body dissatisfaction and body image issues are associated with a negative mental health, which can become detrimental in other ways, leading to eating disorders or unhealthy habits. ⁸ The best way to decrease these negative effects, is through exercise itself. Men and women both have an increase in body satisfaction when regularly participating in exercise and physical activity. ⁵

Fitspiration on social media demonstrates the negative side of health and fitness as it is associated with exercise and health motivation in the young adult population. All young women, or close to all, have accounts on apps where the main source of content comes from images. ⁹

This is now a concern for the well-being of this population, given the different mental struggles

females may inherit through trends which are seen throughout these apps. The main app used to display fitspiration is on Instagram, where millions of individuals post photos of their lives and of themselves. Fitspiration is a trend where fitness influencers try and inspire other women to participate in healthy habits and exercise, based on their own physical results and diets that may have worked for them to gain a lean figure.⁹ Though this seems like a practical approach, and does most of the time encourage women to exercise, it becomes extremely detrimental when associating photos of these influencers with body image.⁹ Being that genetics play a crucial role in one's body-type, it is often difficult to attain these "perfect" fit physiques that are being posted all over the media.⁹ Fitspiration influencers tend to have similar body types, which is typically very slim, lean, minimal to no body fat, and toned musculature.⁹ Research has shown that depicting these images to women has increased rates of body dissatisfaction and a greater negative mood.⁹ This is the opposite of what these influencers claim they wish to achieve by posting their fitness journeys on social media.

Based on one study, 92.3% of participants were exposed to fitness posts on Instagram, while 59% directly followed fitness accounts.⁹ Though being exposed to these images daily, it did not necessarily increase their exercise time. Instead, it made women inspired to exercise and get fit, but did not lead them into the direction of doing so. On the other hand, those who did exercise as a result of viewing these images felt they needed to exercise on a more rigorous scale, or exceed their typical exertion. This was done in order for them to feel like they were working towards the "ideal body" that they saw on their Instagram feed.⁹ Many fitspiration influencers post ranges of images/videos, including selfies in workout gear, posed exercise photos, physique updates and healthy foods. The posts with the upmost influence on motivation were those of influencers physically active in videos performing a workout.⁹ With this finding, it may be more

beneficial for fitspiration influencers to post content that will actually apply motivation to their viewers, rather than mainly dissatisfaction and negative moods.

The body types presented through fitspiration are often athletic ideal images. In order to achieve these body types, one must maintain a strict period that consists of heavy weight lifting and strict dieting.⁸ This is an extremely difficult and often unattainable way of life for some individuals, whether it is due to lack of resources, time, or overall obedience to follow suit with high fitness demands. An important component which arises with fitspiration is the social comparison theory.⁸ This theory emphasizes an individual comparing themselves to others in terms of success and levels of ability.⁸ Comparing one's self to others, in terms of physical appearance and physical success, is a negative external motivation. This is the main reason behind why fitspiration throughout social media has been scaled on a negative side when it comes to motivating young women to participate in exercise and healthy behaviors.

Exercise and health-related behaviors are often overlooked as a priority to many individuals. It is important that people begin to understand the importance of participating in exercise, as it can decrease the chances of attaining negative health effects, such as cardiovascular disease or obesity. Social media and web-based programs have been major platforms for the use of motivating others to participate in exercise, with an internal motivating factor being the major key in adhering and maintaining a healthy lifestyle. Web-based support programs throughout twitter of regular daily individuals, as well as the promotion of exercise in the workplace through virtual services, have been shown to provide a positive motivating factor to exercise. On the other hand, Instagram influencers who post fitspiration on their pages often leave young adult women with body dissatisfaction and a negative mood. They also begin to compare themselves to other women who have society's "ideal" physique. This is both

detrimental to one's mental health as well as to their outcomes with exercise and health. With this, it is important to understand that social media and web-platforms can provide a benefit in health and fitness promotion, but the type of content portrayed can sometimes become detrimental to certain populations.

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