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“Instafamous” Women and the Question of Empowerment: Feminist Reading of Popular Constructions of Female Bodies on Instagram

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**“Instafamous” Women and the
Question of Empowerment:
A Feminist Reading of Popular
Constructions of the Female Body
on Instagram**



Honors Thesis

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Department: English

Advisor: Susan L. Trollinger, Ph.D., Professor of English

April 2016

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Abstract

Instagram has skyrocketed in popularity over the last few years, catapulting some of its users into a new type of fame--"Instafame." Female users who achieve "Instafame" do so in large measure by carefully constructing an identity that articulates a popular ideal of the female body. Many commentators see this presentation of self as a new means of empowerment. But others argue that these "Instafamous" women are pressured to objectify themselves in order to accumulate thousands of "likes" to create and sustain their celebrity status. In this presentation, I analyze the images on some popular fitness Instagram accounts using the feminist works of Kate Millett and Sut Jhally.



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Introduction to Instagram

They say a picture's worth a thousand words. If that's true, how much can we learn from the 80 million pictures shared on Instagram every day?

More than you might think.

Instagram is quickly growing, and its reach is expanding. In September 2015—just five years after its launch in 2010—Instagram announced that it had reached 400 million active monthly users (“Celebrating a Community of 400 Million”). To put that in perspective, the number of monthly Instagram users is greater than the population of the United States.

Though this number may seem paltry compared to Facebook's 1.5 billion active monthly users (“Company Info”), Facebook's reach with teens and tweens is on the decline. In 2014, Facebook lost 6% of its active teens, falling from 94% of teenagers in 2013 to 88% actively using Facebook the following year (Lang). In 2015, 33% of teens ranked Instagram as their most used social media site, compared to just 15% who chose Facebook, which came in fourth after Instagram, Snapchat, and Twitter (Seetharaman). Teens are leaving Facebook at a rate of about a million a year, according to some estimates (Bradley).

There are many theories about why teens are leaving Facebook for more specialized apps. Some claim that there is no reason beyond the fact that it is no longer “cool.” Others blame parents. Teens don't want to be hanging out in the same online communities as their parents, who started using Facebook to police their children's online activity and stayed because they found friends for themselves (Lang). In this respect, Instagram is definitely a place for teenagers to escape the watchful eye of their parents

and to belong to a new kind of community of their peers. Currently, 41% of Instagram users are 24 years old or younger, and 90% of users are under the age of 35 (Instagram, Science Daily).

Defining Empowerment

Given the rising population of Instagram, the question of this paper is to examine female fitness Instagram accounts to determine whether or not they are “empowering” to women as they are so often marketed. In order to do this, a definition of “empower” and specifically “female empowerment” must be determined in order to have criteria by which to judge the accounts. The Oxford English Dictionary defines “empower” as,

To confer power on, make powerful; (in later use) *spec.* to give (a person) more control over his or her life or circumstances, by increasing civil rights, independence, self-esteem, etc.; to give (a person) the confidence to control his or her life or circumstances, esp. as gained from an awareness of or a willingness to exert her or his rights (OED).

To empower, therefore, is to give a person more power and control over their own life through increasing his or her self-esteem, independence, and confidence. Specifically, the OED definition uses the words “self-esteem,” “confidence,” “control,” and “gained from an awareness of...her rights.” Without a certain level of awareness of her circumstances, a woman cannot be empowered. The very lack of knowledge prevents her from being able to reach her full potential and to take full advantage of all the rights that she has.

To use a different, more specific lens, United Nations provides a definition of “female empowerment.” This definition provides a measuring stick for the existence or lack thereof of female empowerment in a society:

Women's empowerment has five components: women's sense of self-worth; their right to have and to determine choices; their right to have access to opportunities and resources; their right to have the power to control their own lives, both within and outside the home; and their ability to influence the direction of social change to create a more just social and economic order, nationally and internationally (UN).

The notable characteristics of this definition are “self-worth,” “control their own lives,” and “ability to influence the direction of social change.” Without these specific powers, women are not fully empowered. In the context of this essay, it is important to look below the surface of what people see in today’s Western society to see if women are truly in control or if their actions are being influenced by others or circumstances outside of their control.

Why Instagram?

Instagram, as stated before, has a growing influence over the teenage population both in the United States and around the world. The social media’s reach and the lack of an adult presence allow adolescents and teens to interact with their peers in an unsupervised environment. In addition, the ability for people to connect and “follow” almost anyone else who has an account has allowed for a new sort of popularity and fame to occur, “Instafame.” According to Alice Marwick in her article, “Instafame: Luxury Selfies in the Attention Economy,” “Instafame” is “the condition of having a relatively great number of followers on [Instagram]” (Marwick 137). While this definition seems and is vague, there is hardly a more concrete one available. Teenagers simply know “Instafame” when they see it.

Currently, many of the accounts that have the most followers are already run by celebrities who are famous outside of the app. However, there is a growing population of those who are only widely known because of the pictures that they post on Instagram. Generally, to be considered “Instafamous,” an account needs to have at least a few thousand followers and have a “good ratio.” A “ratio” is the difference between the number of followers and number of accounts he or she is following, and ideally, there is a greater number of followers. While a good ratio is what the majority of young Instagramers aim for, “Instafame”-worthy ratios are merely a dream to most. The “Instafamous” accounts usually have tens of thousands of followers, sometimes even millions, and they follow only a few hundred accounts.

Fitness on Instagram

Within the larger Instagram community, there are many smaller, informal communities in which members post pictures to contribute to the conversation and give themselves a specific identity. These communities have no strict boundaries. Anyone who wants to can become a member of any community they choose, and they can determine the amount of interaction that they have with that community. One of the largest communities on Instagram is the fitness community. There are easily hundreds if not thousands of accounts on the app that are solely dedicated to fitness. Most of them are easily identifiable because they have some version of “fit” in the account name and post pictures from the gym, videos of workouts, inspirational quotes, and even photos of healthy meals.

Even accounts that are not only dedicated only to fitness can join in the conversation by choosing to post related images. In order to get them seen by others that

are into fitness on Instagram, many of them use hashtags. Some of the most popular fitness hashtags are #fitness, #fit, #fitfam (meaning fitness family), #fitspo (meaning fitness inspiration), and even #fitnessmodel. All of these have been tagged in posts millions or tens of millions of times. For example, #fitness has been tagged over 129 million times and that number is constantly growing as new posts are added. And there are many more fitness related hashtags that can be used as well. The fitness community is large and easy to identify by the common tropes that appear in the images and their captions, in addition to the hashtags. Given the scope and the power of influence that this genre can have, it is important to analyze the images and take a closer look at what is going on beneath the surface.

Current Conversation

In current academic conversation, there is very little discussion about rhetoric and communication on Instagram or content analysis of the types of images posted by women. The majority of academic research about the media is psychological, exploring why users post what they do and how using Instagram affects them mentally and emotionally. This is very important information, especially when looking at the effects of the rhetoric used on Instagram. However, there is a lack of analysis regarding the content of Instagram posts. The essays that attempt to examine the content tend to not completely understand the media and the discourses that are used on it. The writers themselves are not a part of that discourse and miss many of the norms that regular user would understand. This thesis seeks to begin to fill the gap and start a conversation about the ways of reading Instagram images, especially the ways in which female bodies are constructed using social media.

Kate Millett and Sexual Politics

Kate Millett was a prominent second-wave feminist and writer who promoted sexual equality between men and women. This essay is founded on her 1970s work in *Sexual Politics* where she discusses the sexual inequality that exists between men and women in all facets of society. Her book provides a definition of “sexual politics” and goes through the history of sexual politics in the Western world, and primarily in America. When looking at sexual politics, she defines “politics” as referring “to power-structured relationships, arrangements whereby one group of persons is controlled by another” (31). Millett continues to discuss the nature of sexual political relationships, saying, “What goes largely unexamined, often even unacknowledged (yet is institutionalized nonetheless) in our social order, is the birthright priority whereby males rule females” (33). She finishes by analyzing some prominent male authors, D.H. Lawrence, Henry Miller, Norman Mailer, and Jean Genet. In their books, they all depict scenes where men are sexually dominant and superior to women, and women are submissive to the male sexual will and discussed as simply objects, albeit sexual objects. Millett writes about literature that “of all artistic forms in patriarchy it is the most frankly propagandistic. Its aim is to reinforce both sexual factions in their status” (62). Literature, especially written by male authors, has served to further propagate the social and sexual norms for both genders.

Millett also gives a history of the sexual revolution, which is supposed to have given women more sexual freedom and, if that was the case, would change the nature of the discussion about male and female sexuality. She writes:

The sexual revolution had done a great deal to free female sexuality. An admirably astute politician, [D.H.] Lawrence saw in this two possibilities: it could grant women an autonomy and independence he feared and hated, or it could be manipulated to create a new order of dependence and subordination, another form of compliance to masculine direction and prerogative. The frigid woman of the Victorian period was withholding assent, the 'new woman' could, if correctly dominated, be mastered in bed as in everywhere else (338).

Though women were gaining sexual autonomy and independence, men recognized that this too could be used to their benefit. Instead of women being passive sexual objects for men, they could now actively work to be sexually pleasing for men. Rather than being free to fulfill themselves sexually, women are "free" to actively and passionately sexually gratify men.

Sut Jhally and the Dream World

Sut Jhally's work is heavily based on Millett's ideas of sexual politics. In *Dreamworlds III*, Jhally examines the construction of female sexuality in music videos. He uses clips from a number of different music videos to show popular and sometimes industry-wide standards for femininity and female sexuality. Most importantly for this paper, Jhally examines how female bodies in music videos are only used to portray male sexual fantasies. In *Dreamworlds III*, he says, "Music videos make clear that the most important part of a woman is her sexuality." Women are *only* portrayed as sexual objects, not like subjective humans with other qualities.

The women in music videos are positioned in the videos for maximum exposure and so that men are able to see certain parts of their bodies much more easily. Many of

the most popular shots include focusing on only one part of a woman's body, most commonly her butt, abdomen, breasts, or legs. This fragmentation can be seen today in social media, with women posting images of certain parts of their bodies. Jhally says that the "way in which women are filmed...communicates messages and ideas about them." Specifically focusing on only one physical aspect of them detracts from the ability to think about them as real persons. They are denied subjectivity and are instead just "legs in high heels."

Instagram Images

There are two large, umbrella categories of the types of pictures that these women share on Instagram: "selfies" and traditional pictures. Selfies—pictures that one takes of oneself—have been a staple of social media since the rise of MySpace. iPhones have been designed with a front-facing camera simply to make taking selfies easier. Selfie-sticks, an extendable plastic arm to take selfies from farther away, were the "gift of the year" in 2014, the year it was released (Advertising Age). One of the most popular types of selfie is the "mirror selfie," which is, as it sounds, a selfie captured by taking a picture in a mirror. The selfie allows the viewer to see the object of the image as she sees herself. The viewer who is aware of the concept of selfies understands that the subject took the time and the effort to construct the image so that she appears as she wants to be seen and that she then willingly posts it on social media.

The ability to freely take and post a selfie can be innocuous or even empowering depending on its content; the control is in the hands of the woman who is simultaneously the object in the photograph and the photographer. However, appearing to be in control can become problematic when the content of the image is itself problematic. In

Dreamworlds III, Sut Jhally shows how women in music videos are only shown in the form of sexualized bodies, fragmented into its parts and, therefore, dehumanized. However, in music videos, viewers understand that there are directors and others who are in charge of how the female bodies are constructed and presented. The problem with sexualized selfies is that women are doing it to themselves. The images can be read as evidence that these women want men to view them as sexual objects since that is exactly how they choose to present themselves. They invite the male gaze by showing that it is acceptable to look at them that way since the women are presenting themselves as sexual objects. Paul J. Wright, Analisa Arroyo, & Soyoung Bae define the “male gaze” as, “Men directing their eyes at women’s bodies to derive sexual gratification from their physical attractiveness” (Wright 2).

It is interesting that selfies are not the only or even necessarily the majority of the types of image of the female body on these social media accounts as some might expect. Selfies are a product of the rise of social media, but as Instagram accounts become professionalized, there has been a reintroduction of traditional images of women’s bodies, photographs that are taken by others, not the person in the picture. Many of these photographs are taken by professional or at least proficient photographers other than the woman herself. This return to traditional images has also spilled over from verified accounts—accounts popular enough that Instagram makes sure that the person posting is actually who they say they are and not just a fan or other person—into the accounts of “normal” Instagram users. Women post pictures of themselves, but it is clear that someone else took them. However, given the nature of social media, viewers still (correctly) assume that the image was constructed and approved by the subject. Since

social media accounts are run, at least theoretically, by individuals who own the account, they still have the ultimate posting power. In music videos, for example, it can be argued that women implicitly give their consent to be seen that way by choosing to appear in the video, but the viewer understands that it is ultimately up to the director to construct the vision and approve the final product. Now that women appear to have the power over how they are portrayed, there is a new and much bigger problem with their compliance to the male gaze than in previous media.

However, the control and power over how they are constructed on Instagram is not as real and complete as it appears. Women do not have the true freedom that many might assume they have though they are the ones apparently in control over what they post. In order to amass a large audience, the women are expected to construct a very specific appearance of themselves on their accounts. It is by exposing themselves to the male gaze, and showing other women how to achieve the male gaze as well, that women are able to get a large number of followers. Evidence for this can be found in Jen Selter's nearly 9 million followers and the InTouch article, "Exclusive: Jen Selter: My Butt Made Me Famous!" (InTouch). Further discussion of Selter will be later in this paper. If a woman's goal is to become "Instafamous" and build a brand through social media, then she has a very narrow range of signification through which to present herself to her followers.

The Women and Their Accounts

This paper examines the accounts of the three most popular women in fitness on Instagram: Emily Skye, Kayla Itsines, and Jen Selter. Each of these women have millions of followers and have in their distinctive ways developed themselves, their bodies, and

their lives into a brand. This branding is how the women make their money. All three of them use their accounts to promote various products. In the end, however, the main product they are selling is their body. All three get paid to do media appearances and to promote products, literally using their body to sell objects. Itsines and Skye also sell workout programs and accompanying food guides so that other women and girls can strive to have the same body that they do. Thus, they are also selling their body type to their female followers.

While there are many similarities among the three accounts, there are notable differences in the personalities of each, which can appeal to a range of Instagram users. All of them construct their bodies in the pictures and videos posted on their accounts to sell their brand and to make money. But their brands, while all related to fitness, are slightly different. Skye is fun loving, (physically) strong, and friendly. While interactions with her audience are minimal, she projects the appearance of being your friend through sharing information about her life and her open personality with her followers. Itsines is colorful, thin, and cute, continually interacting with her followers. She re-posts her followers' progress photos, talks directly to them in her captions, and surprises them at events that they have organized for all her fans to get together. Selter is chic, cool, and rarely interacts with her audience. She maintains a distance from them, remaining as unattainable as her flat stomach and round behind.

Emily Skye

Emily Skye, a former model turned fitness trainer, is the most humanized of all three accounts. She consistently posts images and videos of her having fun and living her everyday life in addition to posts related to fitness. She is constructed as a woman with

other interests, though fitness-related images are by far the most prevalent on her account. Her account handle too is directly related to fitness: @emilyskyefit. She has 1.5 million followers on Instagram and almost 8.5 million on Facebook. Over 200,000 subscribers pay for her product, F.I.T., a food and workout plan that promises users will become more “fit, healthy, and confident” (Saul, Skye). Skye claims that she is promoting body positivity and mental health through fitness, based off of her own struggle with depression. In a March 2016 article about Skye, Heather Saul, an *Independent* journalist quotes Skye’s blog, saying, “My active lifestyle is not only about my body and being fit, it’s just as much about my mind. I feel set free from the person I was previously. I was no longer preventing myself from living the best life possible.”

On Instagram, the vast majority of her posts are images of herself. Of 100 consecutive posts, 73 of them featured an image or a video of herself. The other 27 feature a mix of inspirational quotes, videos from her trips around the world, and videos from her life where she can be heard laughing in the background. Recently, she began to post “transformation” pictures, which are two pictures next to each other, where one is from before doing a workout program and the other is from after completing the program. The transformation pictures have been of both herself and of some of her followers. However, she stresses that it isn’t about what her body looks like, but how she feels about her body. Skye claims that she would rather use personal narratives of her own history of finding happiness through fitness than through using before-and-after photos to promote her lifestyle and product.

As stated before, two main types of the images of her appear on her account: selfies and traditional images. The content of her selfies span a relatively broad range.

Many of them are related to fitness and body image, but there are also some that depict her life beyond exercise. There are videos of her being silly, images of her just smiling into the camera, and selfies with her boyfriend. By contrast, most of the traditional images are related to fitness or how her body looks. Many are accompanied by paragraphs-long captions that say things like, “Each day you eat nutritious food and get moving is another day closer to your fitness goal,” and “Think of your dream or goal right now... Now think of all the reasons why you can’t achieve it. Now get all that CRAP out of your head.”

Many of the traditional images that she posts are of her full body; usually she is wearing a sports bra and spandex shorts or leggings. The focus in most of these images is on her flat abdomen and her small waist. Psychologists have found that these types of images have a negative effect on their viewers. Even as Skye is preaching positive mental health, she is not actually contributing to an increase in the happiness of the women and girls that follow her when she posts these pictures. In “‘Exercise to Be Fit, Not Skinny’: The Effect of Fitspiration Imagery on Women’s Body Image,” Marika Tiggerman and Mia Zaccardo examine the effect of “fitspiration” photos, photos of the ideal female body which are supposed to inspire women to go work out, on the women who view them:

The great majority of women in the [fitspiration] images exhibit one particular body shape: a relatively thin and toned figure. While this figure is less thin and more muscular than that of the models typically found in fashion magazines, it is still unattainable for most women. Further, the repeated promotion of only this one body shape carries the implication that only thin and toned bodies can be fit

and healthy. In addition, the images are of everyday women rather than fashion models, and hence likely to give rise to greater social comparison (Tiggerman).

Social comparison theory, Tiggerman and Zaccardo say, argues that women compare themselves and their body to the beauty standards and cultural ideals that are portrayed in the media. Social comparison has been linked to “greater negative mood, body dissatisfaction and lower appearance self-esteem” in previous experiments (Tiggerman). This research suggests that by constantly posting pictures of her own ideal body, Skye is negatively affecting the happiness and self-esteem of her viewers. Since “increasing...self-esteem” is an important aspect of “empowerment,” Skye is not empowering women by posting images of her body. Instead, she is potentially causing greater unhappiness and a feeling of dissatisfaction with themselves and their bodies, contrary to what she says in her captions.

Furthermore, “fitspiration” images also tend to objectify women, rather than to uplift them as a human person. Tiggerman and Zaccardo write, “A number of the [fitspiration] images have objectifying features, such as particular poses or a focus on particular body parts (e.g., washboard abs). Exposure to objectified images has been associated with self-objectification and body dissatisfaction” (Tiggerman). When Skye posts images of her body with the focus of the image on her abdomen or on her butt, she is objectifying herself and, as the research suggests could simultaneously be causing her followers to objectify themselves could.

Finally, Skye also posts many images of her showing her strength and her muscles, not just the traditional feminine standards of beauty, such as being thin and toned. She posts images of herself flexing her arm muscles, which are much larger than

the average woman's, and showing herself smiling. She is promoting an alternative body type to the usual and impossible cultural ideal of thin-but-curvy, one in which she is strong. This strength is important especially given that women have historically been seen as weak and therefore dependent on men. Skye's physical strength can be read as a visible manifestation of her proclaimed mental strength. Strength gives her and other women the ability to be independent of men. So even though Skye could be contributing to her female audience's unhappiness through social comparison, she is also promoting and celebrating a female body that is different from the norm and is strong by itself. However, on Instagram the focus is still necessarily on the appearance of her body rather than her ideas because it is primarily a photo sharing media.

Kayla Itsines

Kayla Itsines was recently named one of *Time's* top 30 most influential people on the Internet (TIME Staff). She currently has over 4.6 million followers on Instagram, many of whom see themselves as part of #KaylasArmy, a hashtag used in over one million posts. While there are other accounts that have more followers, there are few who have such loyal fan bases as Itsines. She is highly interactive with her fans, talking directly to them in her posts' captions and sharing some of their transformation images after using her "Bikini Body Guide" (BBG). Many followers use "bbg" in their name to be easily identified as part of her fan base and post photo after photo of their progress using her program, many with captions that are paragraphs long and that talk about how great Itsines and her programs are. Her fans go so far as to organize meet-ups for followers to do a BBG workout together. Itsines herself has made surprise visits to these events, and the girls respond with shrieking cheers and many overjoyed tears.

The “Bikini Body Guide,” is the workout and meal-planning regimen that Itsines and her fiancé put together and sell to women and girls who want to look like her Instagram posts. The homepage of her website, “kaylaitsines.com”, is headlined, “Get **Bikini Body** Confident” (emphasis in original). The use of the term “Bikini Body” has been highlighted many times by feminist thinkers. Using this term to describe her body implies that there is only one type of body that is worthy of being seen in a bikini--hers. Unless a girl has her flat stomach, thin arms, and thigh gap, her body is not a bikini body. Itsines has tried to defend her use of the term, saying that it is simply a synonym for “confidence” (Rubin). However, this reading also proves extremely problematic. The implication that “bikini body” and “confident” are synonymous indicates that in order to be confident, a woman must also have a “bikini body,” which by Itsines’ definition is a body like hers. The pressure from critics caused Itsines to release her app under the name “Sweat with Kayla” (Rubin), but her workout guides are still named “Bikini Body Guides,” and her followers use “#bbg” to identify themselves.

Itsines has a few distinct genres of images and videos that she routinely posts on her account. The two biggest categories are pictures and videos of herself and pictures of her followers. However, she also posts a smattering of images of her dogs, travel destinations, and healthy food as well. She also posts the occasional inspirational quote such as, “Health is not about the weight you lose, but about the life you gain” and “You don’t have to love it. You just have to believe it’s worth it in the end.” The images of herself and of her followers can be broken down into two categories: selfies and traditional pictures.

In the pictures that Itsines shares of herself, there are a few common themes that can be seen throughout. There is a major focus on her flat, muscular abdomen. Most of her selfies and many of the traditional images that she shares show her in a sports bra and shorts with her abdomen in the center of the photo. There are also many photographs of her taken from behind, with the focus on her muscular, upper back. The most prominent theme throughout her images is that we rarely see her full face in pictures that she shares. Out of 100 consecutive posts of herself, her face was either cut out or purposefully covered in 71 of them. This ratio grows when looking only at selfies that she shares. Out of 100 consecutive selfies, her face is only fully visible in 6 of them. The methods of obscuring the face range from using the phone to cover the majority of her face to completely cutting her head out of the frame. The majority of her selfies are taken from the mirror in her personal gym, wearing a sports bra and shorts with her phone covering her face.

By obscuring her own face, it is clear what the focus of the image is truly on. Her face, which distinguishes her from other human beings, is hidden because her personal identity isn't the main message, her body is. The face is the part of the human body that humanizes a person to others that they encounter. The philosopher Emmanuel Levinas theorized the significance of the face in an ethical context. "The face of the Other," as Levinas referred to it, forces one to confront the humanity of the Other. The face begs recognition and the acknowledgement of a shared humanity. The face-to-face interactions between two people are the primary ways of communication between humans (Bergo).

The importance of the face in humanizing the other has also been scientifically studied. Yehonatan Nizan Turner and Irith Hadas-Halpern did a study titled, "The Effects

of Including a Patient's Photograph to the Radiographic Examination," which studied the effects of including photographs of patient's faces with their charts on the radiologists that received them. The radiologists felt more empathy with the patients when their photographs were included with their results. They reported that they were more meticulous with their examination of the results, though their examinations did not take more time than usual. All of the radiologists in the study recommended that photographs be standard because the photos encouraged them to better empathize and view patients they don't see in person as individual human beings.

With such importance placed on the human face, the deliberate lack of face in Itsines' images becomes much more prominent. Itsines' posts are not there to promote her as a human being with the subjectivity that comes with humanity, but simply as a body to be looked at as viewers please. As mentioned above, the implicit agreement in posting photographs is that the poster approves of the image and invites the viewer to look at them in the way that they are portrayed in the image. This becomes problematic when the female body is constructed in such a way as to dehumanize it.

The problem intensifies with the introduction of social media, a media which everyone has access to and the ability to post on. Previously, viewers could only see models or actresses in magazines and on television, but could not reproduce the images, at least not for a public audience, in the way that the professionals could. Now, however, anyone with an Instagram account can attempt to mimic the tropes and constructions that they see in popular accounts that they follow. Itsines takes this ability a step further and shares her followers' posts on her own account, providing them a greater audience. It also acts as a reward for those who are working to transform their own bodies into one that

looks like hers and who have learned to take pictures of themselves in the same way that she does. It is difficult to get a complete idea of the types of images that her followers generally share, but if Itsines chooses to share only one type of photograph, those become the important images. She, one of the most influential people on the Internet, is reaffirming the choices that her followers make when she deems their post worthy of being shared on her own account to over 4.6 million followers.

All of the photos that Itsines shares of her followers are “transformation photos”: a photo on the left from before doing her Bikini Body Guide, and the photo on the right from after. The faces of her followers are much more likely to be in the photographs, though there are still many that imitate her by using their phone to hide part of their face or by cutting their heads out of the frame completely. Out of 100 consecutive posts, the faces of her followers are obscured or cut out in 53, a number much smaller than Itsines’ own ratio. Notably, if the face is covered in only one half of the image, it is usually the “after” image. Itsines claims to be selling “bikini body confidence,” and with confidence, one would assume that they would be more likely to want to show their face. However, her followers more often imitate Itsines’ own poses in their after images, showing that they are influenced by her posts and attempt to mimic her in multiple ways.

When her followers’ faces are visible in her reposts, their expressions indicate their own thoughts and feelings about their bodies. In their “before” pictures, many times they are frowning or at the very least are expressionless. The only time that many of them are smiling in the before pictures are when the pictures were taken out of context, at some other event where they were not consciously thinking about their body. In the “after” pictures, there are many more of them smiling, at least when their faces are not being

covered or cut out of the frame. The implication here is that happiness is only for those who have the body of Kayla Itsines or are at least much closer to looking like her than before.

Jen Selter

Jen Selter is known for her “belfies”—butt selfies—that have skyrocketed her to fame on Instagram. She has almost 9 million followers, a number that is constantly growing, and posts almost exclusively pictures of herself and her body. She also posts much less often than the other two accounts. Itsines and Skye post a few Instagrams a day, but Selter only posts images every few days to Instagram. However, even with less activity and interaction between her and her followers, she has the greatest number of followers of all three accounts. Her fame is international, with many news media throughout the world writing about “la reina del fitness,” or “the queen of fitness” (Vistazo).

Selter has been an Internet sensation since at least 2014 when InTouch Weekly featured the fitness model in an article, saying, “For Jen, a big butt means big bucks” and calling her an “Instagram sensation” (InTouch). And it is without a doubt because of her body that she has such a large following. Out of 100 consecutive images of herself, 85 of them either prominently featured her butt, abs/waist, or both. That leaves only 15 photos in which she was the subject but these specific body parts were not the focus. In these images, she is sometimes selling a product, using her name brand to promote other companies’ products, such as a mattress for Leesa. In others, she is still wearing skimpy clothing, such as leotards, low-cut shirts, or crop tops.

Much like Itsines, Selter covers her face in the majority of the pictures of her. In 66 out of 100 consecutive pictures of herself, her face is either covered or she is facing away from the camera. In many where her face is visible, she is usually looking to the side or away from the camera so that it is difficult, though not impossible, to see her face. There is even one selfie of her face that is so overexposed it is almost impossible to see the majority of it. Notably, however, she does not cut out her head completely from selfies as much as Itsines. She does post pictures of specific body parts without her face, but there are very few, if any, pictures of her full body with her head cut out of the frame.

There are a handful of poses that Selter uses in the majority of the images that she posts. One of them is her standing and sticking her butt out while holding her hair and covering her face with her arms. Another popular position is a photo taken from behind while she is sitting down and sticking her butt out. There are also a fair few that are selfies of only her abdomen or butt. Instead of taking the conventional selfie of her face, she takes them of other parts of her body. She also popularized a pose she calls “Seltering,” in which a woman keeps her legs straight, bends over to either touch her hands on the ground or reach them out parallel to the ground, and lifts one leg up in the air. A picture is then taken from behind or from the side. This pose, like many that she uses, immediately draws attention to her butt. Selter has also posed for professional photo shoots, and posted the photos on her website and on her Instagram. In the professional images, her body is constructed to even more closely resemble traditionally pornographic poses. In one shoot done for Vanity Fair, she is dressed in a fishnet body suit, stilettos, and in one image, a black corset, all of which are pieces of clothing strongly associated with sex and pornography. In these images, she looks seductively at the camera while her

body is positioned into poses of submission and suggestion, such as on her hands and knees or standing and looking at the camera from over her shoulder.

Her poses are extremely problematic and only serve to call attention to her as a sexual object or to parts of her body that are easily sexualized on their own. Selter presents her body so that her butt, abdomen, waist, and occasionally her breasts are easily viewed. Her message to her female followers is that she is able to enjoy so much success because she has made her body pleasing to the male viewer. In this way, Selter embodies what Millett noted about D. H. Lawrence's view of the sexually liberated woman: she and her work are completely dominated by male sexual desire while under the guise of being free in her choices. In her situation in life, she is presumably free to work out and mold her body into whatever shape she wants to. However, she chooses to work hard to maintain a body that is pleasing to the male gaze and at the same time takes the effort to position it in pictures on social media so that any person, male or female, is able to look at it.

While some call her a "fitness model," Selter posts relatively few fitness-related posts compared to both Skye and Itsines. She does post some mirror selfies of herself in gym clothes, such as leggings and sports bras, but those are accompanied by captions such as, "I always look so serious in my pictures, but I am the complete opposite of serious in person!!" and "Some serious ab lighting!" which are not directly related to fitness or health. However, most of her selfies are of herself in bikinis or her underwear and are only related to fitness inasmuch as other girls are inspired or motivated to look like her. She does occasionally post videos of herself working out, but they all have one thing in common: she is working out her gluteus muscles. All of the work outs that she

posts are in some way instructional to other girls about how to get a butt like hers, as well as to prominently display her own butt for maximum exposure to the male gaze. In “Resisting the Male Gaze: Feminist Responses to the Normalization of the Female Body in Western Culture,” Diane Ponterotto quotes Morag MacSween saying that “fitness of women means being fit to be looked at rather than fit to act.” By calling herself a “fitness model,” Selter is changing what the definition of fitness means. Fitness does not mean being strong, having good endurance, etc. Rather, it means that having a body that looks like hers. As MacSween puts it, fit for the male gaze even if not fit in health. This is not to say that Selter is not fit and healthy, but that she is promoting a specific body type and image, and not a healthy lifestyle, to her female followers.

Conclusion

Throughout all three of these accounts, there are a few common themes and tropes that they all use that reinforce the definition of what it means to be fit and attractive. In the majority of their photos, each woman wears clothing, usually sports bras and shorts or leggings, that allow as much of their body as possible to be seen. All three of them wear clothes that reveal and celebrate their flat, toned abdomen and small waist; Selter and to a lesser extent Skye also show off their butt with tight shorts and leggings and images taken from the side or behind that allow the viewer to see it clearly. These images show their fitness conscious followers what exactly it means to be fit: it means to look like they do, and they look sexually desirable to men.

Their popularity and visibility determine and show to other women what it means to be fit as well as what it takes to become “Instafamous.” For decades, the media has celebrated women whose bodies and looks have been pleasing to the male gaze, and with

the rise of social media, that hasn't yet changed. Women now theoretically have the freedom to determine how their bodies are constructed and presented on their own social media accounts, but those constructions are still influenced by the desire for the male gaze. Instead of being sexually liberated to exercise their own sexuality for their own pleasure, their sexuality is redirected to show themselves as desirous to men who can derive sexual pleasure from them. Talking of sexual freedom is not true female liberation, but simply a mask to hide the underlying truth of a continued male dominance in society.

These three accounts are not a scientific sample of female, fitness-related accounts, but rather an example of the most popular fitness accounts on Instagram. The number of followers on each account shows the extent of their influence on society. Specifically, Itsines' account also demonstrates its influence by reposting pictures of the countless women who are working to look more like her. The women's popularity demonstrates what society values, while at the same time reinforcing those values to their followers. They have reached "Instafame" because they have bodies that society sees as being sexually desirable, and they are willing to continue to post images showing off their bodies to keep gaining followers and making money from their bodies. The followers look up to the women as role models for what a woman should be. By posting images of their ideal bodies and talking of very little else but how their followers can also look like them, they are establishing a very narrow definition of "woman." This definition includes that for women, a primary concern is appearance and changing their bodies to be sexually desirable to men. To be a woman is not to be political, academic, compassionate, religious, or spiritual. To them, true women work out and then take pictures of their own bodies, displaying them as sexual objects.

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