

Chapter 61

#Childathlete: Examining the Ways in Which Children are Being Presented and Perceived on Instagram

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ABSTRACT

The present study aimed to examine the tone and focus of the conversation associated with #childathlete on Instagram. Additionally, the visual content of five child athlete Instagram accounts were analyzed to determine if fitspiration (e.g., exercise, healthy eating, inspiration, showcase strength, and empowerment) or objectification (e.g., emphasis of specific body parts, suggestive posing, or emphasis on appearance) were promoted. Using Netlytic, a text analysis was conducted to analyze the conversation surrounding #childathlete and the top five child athlete accounts (based on likes) that were managed by parents were selected for visual content analysis. The text analysis revealed that the conversation was positive in tone and focused on sport/exercise. Analysis of the visual content indicated that the child athlete accounts focused athleticism, activity, and fitness, with little presence of objectification. Future research should further explore social media as a strategy for promoting and improving physical activity among users.

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INTRODUCTION

Social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) suggests that one may engage in comparison with others to fulfill the basic human need for self-evaluation (Engeln-Maddox, 2005). Comparison to media ideals is often prominent among children (Harrison, 2001), as media ideals may be perceived as a goal against which one can evaluate their own appearance (Engeln-Maddox, 2005). However, engaging in (social) comparison with ideal images, such as *fitspiration* imagery (Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015), often results in individuals criticizing themselves, rather than the unrealistic ideal characteristics (Harrison, 2001). Thus, children who use Instagram may perceive the individuals depicted in *fitspiration* imagery as ideals, prompting children to engage in comparison, potentially leading to a host of negative outcomes (e.g., internalization of ideals, body dissatisfaction, eating pathology, and preoccupations with physical appearance; Engeln-Maddox, 2005; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Mills et al., 2002). Furthermore, as children encounter the challenges and changes of puberty, such as increased fat deposition in women, the value placed on thin and toned bodies becomes more salient, as prior to puberty children are only in the process of internalizing ideals (Harrison & Hefner, 2006). Consequently, as children develop their adult bodies, they may become at an increased risk of problematic eating, depressive symptoms, and body dissatisfaction, among other negative mental health outcomes (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997).

It has been suggested that girls, as young as five years of age, who compete in sports may be at a greater risk for unhealthy weight loss behaviours and eating disorders (Davison et al., 2002). The prevalence of weight concerns may be especially elevated among girls who participate in aesthetic sports (i.e., sports that promote leanness), such as cheerleading and gymnastics, as these activities often suggest or imply that appearance is important for success (Davison et al., 2002; Kong & Harris, 2015). Thus, aesthetic sports may place greater emphasis on achieving the ideal body (i.e., thin and toned; Davison et al., 2002; Kong & Harris, 2015). Weight concerns may also result from appearance based comments made by parents, coaches, and peers (Davison et al., 2002). The impact appearance based comments may have on health behaviours could be particularly important to consider within the context of child athletes on Instagram, as this social media site enables users to view, like, and comment on visual posts (Instagram, 2019). Thus, children's use of Instagram and exposure to *fitspiration*, in combination with participation in (aesthetic) sports, may place them at a greater risk for negative health consequences.

Although research has examined the presentation of children in traditional media (e.g., magazines, television), a paucity of literature has examined the ways in which children are being presented and perceived on social media, specifically Instagram. Therefore, the purpose of this study was:

1. To determine the tone of the conversation surrounding #childathlete (e.g., positive or negative), and the conversation focus (e.g., on appearance or athletics/healthy behaviour); and
2. To investigate if visual content from five child athlete Instagram accounts, managed by parents, were promoting *fitspiration* (depict exercise, healthy eating, inspiration, showcase strength and empowerment) or objectification (emphasizes specific body parts or features, depicts suggestive posing, or emphasizes appearance and the 'ideal' body).

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