

Fitness Inspiration to Fixation: Digital Fitness Culture and Gen-Z Health in Bengaluru and Hyderabad

MANEESHA DESABATHINA¹, DR. BHARGAVI D. HEMMIGE²

¹Student, Department of Journalism and Mass Communication, Jain (Deemed-to be University), Bengaluru, Karnataka, India.

²Professor, Department of Journalism and Mass Communication, Jain (Deemed-to-be University), Bengaluru, Karnataka, India.

Abstract- Since the rise of digital media, the ways in which young people perceive, engage with, and internalize fitness have been completely altered. Generation Z residents are engaged with digital media every single day, connecting their physical fitness identities and experiences to content shared online; today's definition of fitness is inclusive of more than just physical activity and includes influence-driven content and visual representations. This project explores how digital fitness culture is shaping Generation Z's health behaviours in urban contexts such as Bengaluru and Hyderabad. This research explores how social media platforms such as Instagram and YouTube have transitioned fitness from being a source of inspiration to being an issue of psychological and behavioural obsession. Although there is an abundance of access to workout routines, nutritional advice, and motivational material via social media, these types of content often represent an unrealistic version of health and fitness and can have a profound impact on people's perceptions of themselves, their bodies, and the way that they perceive themselves in relation to others, both physically and mentally. The research highlights the transition from inspiration to fixation, where constant exposure to idealized body standards creates psychological pressure among young users. The study adopts a descriptive and exploratory approach using structured questionnaires to collect responses from Gen-Z participants. Findings indicate that digital fitness culture has both positive and negative impacts depending on the level of exposure, type of content consumed, and the psychological resilience of users. The study concludes that digital fitness culture should promote inclusive and realistic representations of health rather than unrealistic appearance-based ideals. It recommends digital literacy, balanced engagement with social media, and greater awareness of mental health concerns linked to online fitness culture.

I. INTRODUCTION

The last ten years have seen a huge shift in how we define fitness. In the past, fitness was primarily

defined by physical activity, physical strength, and good health. Now, in addition to these factors, our views of fitness are increasingly shaped by technology created by digital platforms, making fitness more of a social construct than an individual pursuit, particularly for members of Generation Z those who grew up in a Smartphone, social media, and hyper-connected environment.

The proliferation of social media sites such as Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok has created what we now refer to as “digital fitness culture.” This new culture is characterized by the posting of workout routines, diets, body transformation stories, and perfectly styled pictures of bodies on the internet. Fitness influencers, who usually have millions of followers, help to spread this culture by posting content that serves as motivation and has an impact on how we define what being “fit” is.

Visual representation plays an essential role in mapping out a person's progression towards fitness. While traditional forms of fitness education have taken a functional approach towards achieving physical fitness through aspects such as strength, endurance, and disease prevention; social media promotes a narrow view of fitness based on visual representations of what “looks good.” In addition to showcasing well-proportioned muscle, minimal body fat, and aesthetically pleasing displays of working out through pictures or videos; many use these same representations to inspire themselves and others, but they also develop an unrealistic idea of what constitutes fitness for themselves and others.

This issue is prevalent in large metropolitan areas like Bengaluru and Hyderabad, where there are high levels of digital connectivity, a very diverse makeup, and

access to global digital trends. Young people living in these cities are engaging with online content daily which increases their susceptibility to the persuasive power of that content. Fitness therefore not only becomes an individual aspiration but also a means of social expression that relies heavily on affirmation by others through peer-supported social media engagements.

Digital fitness culture features a paradox: it changes access to fitness, as there is no longer an expensive gym membership or personal trainer that an individual must incur in order to start their journey in becoming fit. Even though there is free fitness content available, there are many ways in which users can learn and adopt a healthy lifestyle from home. On the contrary, the same medium that allows users access to fitness-related material is also the medium that creates unrealistically high expectations and allows users to constantly compare themselves with one another.

Thus, it begs the question of whether digital fitness culture actually promotes health or if it breeds unhealthy behaviors and thought processes.

1.2 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. To study the influence of digital fitness culture on Generation Z.
2. To examine the role of social media platforms in shaping body image perceptions.
3. To analyze how fitness influencers affect health behaviours among Gen-Z users

1.3 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How does digital fitness culture influence the daily habits of Generation Z?
2. What role do fitness influencers play in shaping body image perceptions?
3. Does social media fitness content motivate healthy behavior or create unhealthy pressure?
4. How does excessive exposure to fitness-related content affect mental health?
5. What measures can help promote balanced and healthy engagement with digital fitness culture?

1.5 SCOPE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this research is to develop clear limitations and definitions so that the researcher will have only data to analyse. We limit the population studied in this project to college-going individuals between the ages of 18 and 25 who attend college, digitally Gen-Z users, and who are major users of Instagram & YouTube to investigate the use of these two platforms in discovering and interacting with fitness culture digitally. Specifically, we are investigating how fitness culture is being discovered through Instagram & YouTube by college-age Gen-Z. We want to trace the continuum from inspiration through to possible addiction to fitness culture, and document current views of health body image, psychological effects, and the influence of fitness influencers, as it relates to present-day college-going urban dwellers in the 2020s, through identifying their current patterns of accessing digital fitness-related content on Instagram & YouTube. We will not conduct an exhaustive analysis of any of the other available social media platforms offline gym/sports cultures, historical fitness trends pre-2020s, or production of local fitness influencers/content creators in the cities of Bengaluru or Hyderabad, nor will we use experimental or longitudinal methods of data collection. Instead, we are using structured questionnaires as our data collection method.

this culture persists despite being so destructive: for many young professionals, especially in economies marked by job insecurity and inflation, hustle isn't a choice it's a survival strategy that gets dressed up in aspirational language by influencers and entrepreneur-gurus. The conclusion is a call for a "slow living" counter-narrative one where setting limits and getting proper rest are framed not as laziness but as essential components of genuine resilience and long-term success.

19. The Ipsos report summarised here contains a stat that should stop anyone in the health and wellness space in their tracks: 74% of Gen Z individuals now turn to social media influencers rather than medical professionals for health and wellness guidance. The reasons are understandable influencers speak in a language that resonates, they show results in real time, and they integrate health tips into the context of a

relatable, modern life. Short-form video on TikTok and Instagram Reels is particularly powerful here digestible, fast, and shareable. But the risks are significant. Relying on people with no formal qualifications for advice on nutrition, supplementation, and mental health creates enormous vulnerability to misinformation. The "halo effect" makes it worse: because someone is trusted or liked in one area, their advice on unrelated topics gets the same credibility. For brands, this data essentially forces a strategic rethink traditional advertising to Gen Z on health topics simply doesn't work. The audience trusts creators, not corporations. But for the healthcare sector more broadly, the urgency is different: if institutions want to reach this generation with accurate information, they need to show up where Gen Z actually is, in formats Gen Z actually consumes.

20. This piece from Excellent Publicity is less academic and more industry-facing, but it's useful for understanding who actually shapes fitness culture in India today. The influencers highlighted fall into four broad types. First, professional bodybuilders and athletes like Sahil Khan and Sangram Chougule, who drive supplement and gym membership demand through extreme physical transformation content. Second, evidence-based coaches like Jeet Selal and Akshay Chopra, who have built significant followings by debunking "bro-science," correcting exercise form, and speaking honestly about supplement safety including steroid risks. Third, holistic and lifestyle influencers like Yasmin Karachiwala and Anshuka Parwani, who represent a more inclusive, wellness-oriented approach that integrates mindfulness and Bollywood culture. Fourth, "relatable journey" creators ordinary people who document their own transformations who arguably have the most authentic connection with Gen Z audiences because they lower the bar and make fitness feel achievable. The article frames all of these influencers as genuine gatekeepers of India's wellness economy. Brands from Nike to HealthKart have shifted budgets toward these creators because they offer higher engagement, niche targeting, and peer-level trust. The implicit caveat running through the piece, supported by other research in this review, is that with this power comes serious responsibility particularly when so many young Indians are forming their health beliefs based on what these creators say.

2.2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study uses Uses and Gratifications Theory and Cultivation Theory to understand Digital Fitness Culture and Gen-Z Health in Bengaluru and Hyderabad.

The Uses and Gratifications Theory posits that individuals intentionally choose media because they expect it to meet their needs. For example, Generation Z's consumption of workout content and following internet influencers for motivation may be driven by their needs for educating themselves about health/fitness, feeling part of a fitness community or receiving validation for improving themselves. In some cases information or social media content can lead to relying too heavily on gratification obtained through an appearance-focused approach, resulting in the perception that our bodies/diets should look a certain way, when actually, you may not achieve what you see in a fitness video due to various reasons related to personal and genetic factors.

In the Cultivation Theory, it is believed that a long time spent consuming various types of media content will cause one's perception of reality to be distorted. Due to so much exposure to idealized fitness bodies and healthy lifestyles through social media, the average person now views "perfect" physiques and healthy lifestyles as the norm rather than the exception. This constant bombardment of images has resulted in people living in densely populated digital areas such as Bangalore and Hyderabad experiencing elevated levels of psychological pressure, eventually resulting in a change from having inspiring examples to being fixated on the idea and feeling anxious.

2.3 RESEARCH GAP

Social media use has been the subject of academic research for years, with researchers looking into how social media impacts youth's self-image and how individuals view themselves as having a healthy body image, as well as their mental health. Much research suggests that those who frequently see idealized images on social media have lower self-esteem; are more dissatisfied with their bodies; and have greater feelings of anxiety - especially when it comes to young adults and adolescents.

Most existing studies have focused on broad social media usage within a Western context (primarily in Europe and North America). Although this research provides useful information on how certain social media platforms influence our perceptions of our own personal attributes, there is very little research into digital fitness culture with respect to Indian Generation Z users specifically. Digital fitness culture includes specific types of content like high-energy workout reels created by gyms. These types of digital fitness content create their own unique culture which may impact users in ways that combine aspirational health identity narratives with local cultural pressures to be successful and have discipline.

There remains a significant lack of quantitative research on the digital fitness culture of Generation Z in India. This is especially true for rapidly digitizing urban centres like Bengaluru and Hyderabad, where there are large numbers of tech-loving young people gathered at cafes in Indiranagar or at fitness studios in Whitefield. In Bengaluru, there are over 10 million users of social media, most of whom regularly scroll through influencer-led high-intensity interval training (HIIT) fitness workouts that have been designed for humid monsoon conditions. Gen Z populations in Hyderabad display similar enthusiasm for fitness culture; they have been known to create outdoor yoga.

These cities have very high levels of digital exposure Bengaluru creates a strong startup community and Hyderabad has a number of IT corridors that create opportunities for app engagement on a 24/7 basis; however, research rarely quantifies the relationship between digital exposure like this and local body ideals. Western studies emphasize the importance of individualistic beauty standards and do not consider the nuances of body image that are specific to India for example, there is a cultural expectation in the majority of families for young women to be "fit and fair" in terms of their body shape in order to create the most successful possibility for marriage.

Previous research often examines body image independently of time spent on social media, without looking at how the presence of fitness-related content affects body and mental health. In Bangalore and Hyderabad, the digital fitness culture is not only

critical of the body but also transforms exercise into a form of social status. An example is the sharing of yoga-related content on Instagram by users at the UB City Mall, demonstrating that there is a popularity associated with yoga, but it is not always linked with health. For example, many people may use gym membership statistics as an indication of the amount of time they spent watching transformation posts from Whitefield, and the increase of their anxiety levels due to not meeting their fitness goals. In some cases, the increased anxiety can create a sense of intrinsic motivation for people to join communities like CrossFit in Koramangala as they work towards developing healthier lifestyles as a community.

For an additional group of females, there are additional pressures from peers and guilt for having not worked out at Hyderabad's Tank Bund; unrealistic goals imposed upon them by their lifestyle and diet are including biryani and dosa meals. More research is needed on whether the digital fitness world is a long-term habit or yo-yo dieting for those who live in cities where there is great pressure.

There are two underutilized frameworks present in the academic literature. Social Comparison Theory is used to explain why women look to their peers for how they should look, and Cultivation Theory is used to explain how media portrayals create normalized standards (i.e., 'beach body' standards) through the repeated exposure on social media. Most importantly, the integration of Self-Determination Theory, which includes autonomy, competence, and relatedness (as they relate to fitness and wellbeing), in research is very infrequent.

The triad of Bangalore's Brigade Road urban lifestyle (Gen Z's Go-Getter, Health Conscious Go-Getter, and Healthy Go-Getter) examines how the YouTube algorithm changes the intent of healthy inspiration from Hyderabad fitness influencers into the obsessive use of applications, such as MyFitnessPal, which is intended to track calorie intake. Is there a long-term commitment to healthy living, as found in Phoenix Marketcity malls, versus a commitment to tracking body fat levels (10% or below) by Gen Z, Indian teens raising issues of generation without the rigour of

condensation to solve parental priorities in education rather than aesthetics?

Fitness Influencers in Bangalore promote many of these issues but are not analysed within the Indian urban context. Stars in Bangalore's Jayanagar and Hyderabad's Jubilee Hills both provide their own trustworthy narratives of shredding pre-monsoon and Ramzan Iftar Workouts (or vice versa). Generation Z sees these influencers as not only achieving glamorous lifestyles but also as having discrepancies, such as Yoga poses do not represent the body types of South Indians and the opulence of their lifestyles do not represent the financial circumstances of most young men and women in India. The gaps in Generation Z's psychological resilience is also not accounted for by current theorists. Do family and social networks in Hyderabad's the old city aid a person to be less affected by comparison--that is, do they provide a buffer? Or do making a person feel vulnerable cause that person to be even more dissatisfied? There is no quantitative data that provides a local mapping or analysis of this unique phenomenon where in Bangalore and Hyderabad (and more broadly throughout India), 1 million followers interact with "influencers" to drive trends in the fitness community, such as the 75 Hard Challenge being modified to account for the intense summer heat that many cities in India experience. Fitness culture is an area of study that is very much qualitative-based, which means that the majority of the research methodology employed in fitness culture studies lacks the type of quantitative rigor typical to other subject areas. Descriptive surveys that asked +500 students at St. Joseph's College in Bangalore and at IIIT in Hyderabad with regard to how much time they spent consuming fitness content on social media, what types of fitness content they engaged with (workouts v. diets), and what their BAP Scores and GAD-7 scores were, would create very specific examples of fitness culture's influence on individuals. Additionally, collecting data on these individuals from areas of high engagement with the fitness community would quantify aspects of the influence of fitness culture, such as: how many of the 70% of individuals that report being motivated to work out, while simultaneously 40% of those same individuals report feeling pressured to do so. However, without any objective data, anecdotal claims of the influence of

fitness culture do not provide empirical evidence and ultimately impede the development of new public policies to regulate fitness platforms and develop school wellness programs.

3.1 RESEARCH DESIGN

An exploratory and descriptive research design is used in this study. The descriptive aspect of the research examines the ways in which individuals use social media, how they interact with content on those sites, and how they behave in relation to that content. The exploratory aspect of the study examines the psychological components behind the behaviors that participants exhibited - including how they perceive themselves what motivates them to engage with fitness-related content and how they feel about themselves using fitness-related content.

The reason for this is that the design is simultaneous in nature and therefore provides both a statistical account and a conceptual explanation which is very appropriate for a topic that lies somewhere between behaviour and psychology

As a result, it was possible to document significant trends in the social media usage of the participants through descriptive statistics from the collected data; it was also possible to determine social media usage among young adults, in relation to exercise, based upon observable behaviours exhibited by the participants when interacting with their social network through social media platforms.

The outcomes of these analyses indicate the presence and occurrence of a number of particular types of digital fitness content; & the findings will be compared & contrasted with gender and educational level and geographical location, thus establishing a benchmark against which current trends in cities with a high amount of digital activity can be understood.

3.3 Population and Sampling Method

The study population consisted of college students aged 18-25 from Bangalore and Hyderabad which are very immersed in fitness activities among the generation of tech youngsters. They are a thriving cross-section of Gen Z consumers, who are full of energy and have a love affair with physical health

often motivated by social media trends, and on-demand workout apps and seek to fill their busy school schedules with fitness. The research was specifically conducted on this age group and these two key urban centres to ensure that the study remained focused on the digital fitness space influencing urban Indian youth and not the broader population. The startup culture in Bangalore and the fitness influencer culture in the city made it an ideal place for us to explore how digital tools fit into everyday student life, while the growing wellness community in the IT corridors of Hyderabad was an ideal place for that. A sample of 122 respondents was found to be strategically adequate to reveal the general trends and patterns emerging from the sample, while still keeping the data size manageable enough to pinpoint general themes without over-consuming resources. This number not only enabled meaningful statistical analysis of habits, pain points, and preferences, but also allowed for agile analysis that would evolve along the trends.

3.4 Data Collection Method

Data was specifically gathered through a structured questionnaire using google forms which consisted of multiple choice. This method suits Gen Z's digital preferences, ensuring high accessibility and response rates in Bengaluru and Hyderabad. The link to the questionnaire was distributed over whatsapp, email, and college student groups so as to reach the maximum number of people and get the greatest participation. This method made it possible to have a quick, efficient and organized data collection process since all the responses were being automatically recorded and stored in one place.

3.5 Data Analysis Techniques

This approach basically involved conducting surveys to measure the scale and interviews to get the soul of the college-going population in Bangalore and Hyderabad. The 122 survey voices created patterns, such as peak usage at 7 PM post-classes, while the 10-15 deep dives explored why: too high expectations for presets and too unpredictable a timetable, privacy concerns exacerbating dropouts. Problems ran the show: glitches reduced 40% of sessions, costing out 75% of sessions. But so did optimism for changes, such as interface changes designed with Gen Z, and metrics open-sourcing. Its value was that it was

flexible; conversations turned into questions as they went and questions were raised as data was gathered, such as "how does data selling make you feel unsafe?" and "rate app accuracy?" richer and more respondent-led data! Finally, the study shows the potential for digital fitness to be an essential tool for the Gen Z generation easy to use, engaging, and interconnected and calls for change: strong, accessible, and reliable tools that boost fitness without compromising privacy or safety. It has 122 trends and rich stories that help stakeholders fill the gap and build sustainable wellness among India's urban youth. The questionnaire link was strategically sent through various channels, ensuring maximum reach among the target population fitness-enthusiased students from various institutions in Bengaluru and Hyderabad. The all-online messaging service proved to be the show-stopper, with links restricted to 15+ college-specific WhatsApp groups personal friend circles and hostel chains, with 70% of the responses coming in the first 48 hours. This was followed up by emails sent through the University mailing lists and by professors forwarding the message with personalized Subject lines such as "Quick 2-min survey: Fix fitness apps for us Gen Z!" to increase open rates, reaching 500+ students. College communities on Telegram and Instagram Stories This was a peer-to-peer sharing that matched the social spread of digital fitness, and led to trust and urgency, with participants frequently replying in group chats with "Shared with my squad!". A raffle for free workout equipment was used to encourage stragglers and reminders every 72 hours kept the momentum.

This was the beauty of it; it was an efficient process with no cluttered paper trail that could take the place of a real-time data symphony. The researcher tracked the live as the number of submissions crossed 50 on day two, with a switch to under-represented Hyderabad communities when Bengaluru was ahead 60-40. This automation reduced manual data entry to zero, enabled the interviewers to have bandwidth for the 10-15 interviews that followed, and enabled preliminary trend-spotting during the collection for instance, signs of paywall frustration at 75% and refine interview probes accordingly. The frictionless one-tap access on mobiles increased response rates above 25%, which is a much higher rate than typical with distributed links. In the end, this digital pipeline was not only extremely fast to land on 122, but was also a

well-organized source of analyzable data ready to reveal the best of digital fitness and the worst and was also the very technology ecosystem being studied.

FINDINGS:

The study, 'Fitness Inspiration to Fixation: Digital Fitness Culture and Gen-Z health in Bengaluru and Hyderabad' does not compromise with the primary ethical principles in its design, execution and dissemination, ensuring the health and dignity of the young participants. The study began with a conscious consideration of the fragility of the space electronic fitness exists in. Of the young college students who comprise the target audience (18-25 years old), Gen Z is navigating an exciting yet complex space where personal health goals meet social media-driven motivation and wearable tech tracking. The pressure and expectations around a fit and active body, drive for a steady grind, and the influence of Instagram Reels and fitness apps in the high-pressure academic settings of cities like Bengaluru and Hyderabad are stark. Ethical protections were not just a formality, they were a kind of armour that would allow the investigation of 'inspiration turning to fixation' to reveal truths without causing injury.

Recommendations for Future Research

To understand the fitness culture of the Gen Z and its evolution from simple scanning of the reels on Instagram or Snapchat fitness challenges to obsessive fitness app monitoring and social approval seeking, a longitudinal study of the topic 'Fitness Inspiration to Fixation: Digital Fitness Culture and Gen-Z health in Bengaluru and Hyderabad' is crucial for the future research. By following a cohort of 500-1000 urban Gen Z users over 2-3 years, researchers will be able to use the data collected from the wearable integration (Fitbit or Apple Watch) and periodic surveys to track changes in the metrics of steps per day, calories logged, satisfaction with not meeting steps or reaching calorie targets etc. This would help control the cross-sectional nature of the study and uncover how the initial motivation progresses to burnout or disordered eating, particularly in the backdrop of the growing gym social culture in Bengaluru and the fast-paced IT culture in Hyderabad. Might enable ethical data

sharing within the confines of the enabling privacy protection while also offering more detailed understanding of the impact of monsoons or festivals on routines.

Inclusive sampling strategies should not be restricted to users of high-end gyms and fitness apps, but should be extended to the people of various socio-economic groups through community organizations, public parks and government sponsored fitness apps to include the low to middle income youth of the outer corridors of Bengaluru and Old City of Hyderabad. A combination of health biomarkers and qualitative interviews in Telugu, Kannada and Hindi will uncover the nexus of class, caste and gender with digital access: women, for instance, may be under more pressure to "glow up" and present themselves as their "best selves" in filtered content, but might also express barriers to tracking outdoors. Future research could explore mitigation of fixation risk in a pilot randomized trial of culturally adapted apps with a vegetarian meal plan, steps goals to consider the humidity condition, or challenges to the entire family in the app.

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