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Will to power: Revaluating (female) empowerment in ‘fitspiration’

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ABSTRACT

Female empowerment has long been a prominent social concern in Western culture. With the rise of social media, the quest for female empowerment has become embodied in self-presentational practices, occurring conspicuously throughout the Instagram fitness subculture: ‘fitspiration’. Here, female empowerment is merged with the body-centrality inherent to fitness, and the self-sexualization that has become characteristic of both photo-based social media in general, and fitspiration in particular. Meanwhile, an extensive body of research highlights numerous detrimental effects of self-sexualization on women. Evidently, something seems awry with the implied proposition ‘sexualization as empowerment’. Drawing on Friedrich Nietzsche’s philosophy of power and its relationship to human flourishing, this article aims to critically examine the conception of female empowerment expressed in fitspiration and to conceptualize a philosophically compelling reformulation of universal *human* empowerment. I argue that what is commonly conceived of as female empowerment in trends like fitspiration—delineated in its explicit relationship to sexualization—may be seriously flawed. Rejecting this understanding in favor of a Nietzschean universal alternative may prove beneficial to individuals both within and without the contemporary fitness culture.

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1. Introduction

In debates over gender and sports, a source of criticism has long been the perceived inability of athletics to fully dispense with the pervasive sexualization of female athletes (Beaver 2016; Hull, Smith, and Schmittel 2015; Weaving and Samson 2018). Meanwhile, other cultural forces now merging with the domain of sports—expressed with particular clarity through the social media fitness culture—are injecting it with altogether different meanings. Among the most salient features of this form of photo-based social media is its incentivization of evermore curated and elaborate self-presentations, through which female sexualization is recast as empowerment.

The concept of empowerment has been prevalent in contemporary discourses for decades (Tengland 2007), not least in relation to women’s social and political status. Historically, female empowerment has been one of the central aims of the feminist

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movement (Davis 1999; Deveaux 1994; Kinsaul et al. 2014), with sports occasionally figuring as viable venues for its facilitation (English 2020; Hämäläinen 2014). Today, throughout the photo-based social media culture surrounding fitness – *fitspiration*, amalgamating the words ‘fitness’ and ‘inspiration’ – certain types of self-representation are conspicuously construed in terms of the quest for female self-empowerment (Caldeira, De Ridder, and Van Bauwel 2020; Magladry 2018; Toffoletti and Thorpe 2020). Mirroring broader cultural trends (Choi and DeLong 2019; Oppliger 2008), self-representation reliant on self-sexualization—determined by individuals voluntarily emphasizing sexual appeal via external, sexually coded traits (Johnson and Yu 2021) – appears to have become the proposed epitome of individual empowerment. Around this conception of empowerment, a consensus has seemingly formed. However, what the concept of individual empowerment really entails, and how it is achieved and expressed, has remained an object of contention in the scholarly literature (e.g. Baumgardner and Richards 2004; Gothreau 2021; Marshall, Chamberlain, and Hodgetts 2019; Oppliger 2008). This suggests an inherent level of complexity left unappreciated in the routine manner with which it is confidently asserted within phenomena like *fitspiration*. Empowerment might be more elusive than popular cultural trends like these suggest. Failure to realize the complexities inherent in truly achieving it might even result in counterproductive measures being pursued in its name.

One philosopher who has contributed greatly to our understanding of power and its relation to human flourishing is Friedrich Nietzsche. This paper draws on Nietzsche’s philosophy of power to critically examine the conception of female empowerment propagated through *fitspiration*. I will argue that empowerment can be understood as universal, non-discriminate in terms of sex, and that the purported *female* empowerment expressed within *fitspiration* is inconsistent with a more robust conception of empowerment that can be drawn from Nietzsche’s philosophy. Within *fitspiration*, a conception of empowerment is promulgated that is contingent, externally dependent, and reliant on outward social power. It thereby inverts a Nietzschean conception of empowerment, whereby psychological self-elevation is achieved through power being harnessed and directed primarily in reference to the self—i.e. ‘self-overcoming’. In the end, what *fitspiration* achieves in its failure to create genuine empowerment may ultimately constitute a form of disempowerment.

This paper aligns with calls for a return to second-wave feminist critiques of sexualization (e.g. Davis and Edwards 2021; Weaving and Samson 2018). It contributes to the argument by basing the preceding analysis on a Nietzschean reevaluation of empowerment, incorporating what has been designated ‘female empowerment’ into an all-encompassing formula for *human* empowerment. While my method here consists partly in critique, and insofar as critique implies tearing down, it does so in a Nietzschean spirit of creation, only to erect a positive framework on the foundations of what is taken to be a currently hollow structure.

The structure of the paper is twofold: First, I will briefly sketch out the phenomenon of *fitspiration*, and outline an overview of the literature on sexualization and its relation to empowerment. Second, drawing on Nietzsche’s philosophy of power, I will attempt to formulate an alternative conception of empowerment. Based on this conception, what tends to be promoted as female empowerment within *fitspiration* is rendered untenable, legitimizing claims of the necessity for reconsidering and possibly rejecting it.

2. Fitspiration, empowerment, and sexualization

Fitspiration is the term scholars use to loosely define the social media fitness culture, predominant on Instagram. It consists of users posting pictures of their bodies and viewing other people's pictures, either tangentially or directly related to weight training and fitness. People chronicle their fitness endeavors and accrue likes and followers by displaying themselves while catering to the established norms of the social media economy of attention. Photos tend to center near-exclusively around bodily appearance, as both the medium itself and the body-centrality inherent to fitness foster conditions whereby outwardly presentable attributes come to define all self-representation. As the name indicates, fitspiration outwardly celebrates and inspires fit and healthy living. However, the effects of the conditions fostered by the alliance between fitness and Instagram engender an opposition against this purported aim, detracting from otherwise potentially positive societal influences (see Daudi 2022). At the time of writing, searching the Instagram hashtags #fitspiration and one of its more frequently used spin-offs, #fitspo, yields approximately 20 and 76 million posts, respectively. Thus, little debate remains regarding its popularity.

Some studies have found that more women than men post pictures of themselves as part of fitspiration (Tiggemann and Zaccardo 2018). Several others, focusing specifically on women's posts, have found elements of self-sexualization to permeate female self-representation. While many female users who post pictures of themselves as part of fitspiration might not engage in behaviors embodying these elements, it is common enough to be considered a phenomenon worthy of attention. Evidence for this may be obtained by spending but a few minutes perusing the variety of associated hashtags that together make up the fitspiration culture, some of whom make more explicit allusion to its intended relation to empowerment (e.g. #fitnessgirls, #girlswholift, #girlswhosquat, etc.).

2.1. Empowerment and sexualization

Empowerment is a concept commonly associated with women and feminism (Davis 1999; Deveaux 1994). Within third-wave feminism, and what some call 'postfeminism' especially, empowerment is branded in terms of choice and freedom (Banet-Weiser 2015; Burkett and Hamilton 2012; Toffoletti 2014), whereby it emerges as the freedom of outward bodily display, *choosing* sexiness and physical beauty (Erchull and Liss 2013; Gill 2016). In this culturally prominent view, empowerment stands in close proximity to freedom: freedom to act on personal choice with adequate levels of control over external circumstances (Hur 2006; Narayan-Parker 2002). Displays of the body and sexual attractiveness have come to represent the breaking of repressive barriers and unshackling of undue restraints, not least in sports (Heywood and Dworkin 2003). As such, they are taken to be signs of strength, independence, and empowerment. They have become staples of photo-based social media (Burns 2015; Gothreau 2021), with fitspiration in particular turned into the staging ground for their demonstration (Caldeira, De Ridder, and Van Bauwel 2020; Magladry 2018).

The relationship between female empowerment and photo-based social media is unsurprising when considering the following: empowerment is often associated with the elevation of the social and political status of women (Davis 1999); photo-based social

media especially attracts women (Research Center 2021); and fitness, beauty, fashion, etc., parallel values stereotypically associated with women (Caldeira, De Ridder, and Van Bauwel 2020). Finally, sexualization, self-orchestrated or by others, still overwhelmingly affects women the most (Choi and DeLong 2019). Social trends fused with sexually liberal feminist attitudes have propagated the idea that a fundamental factor of women's empowerment is sexual freedom (Rollero et al. 2022), and the ensuing freedom of sexual expression. Hence, for many today, self-sexualization is integral to their self-conception as free, empowered individuals. And what better tool to exercise this freedom than the medium that potentially affords instantaneous levels of exposure and recognition rivaling what would otherwise take years to accrue?

Alas, something seems amiss with the equation that sexual self-expression in the form of self-sexualization equals empowerment, let alone female empowerment specifically. Following a longstanding cultural inflation of sexualization, sexualized behaviors and forms of self-expression have become increasingly common (Choi and DeLong 2019), the problematic consequences of which have been revealed to be numerous. Although sexualization has been 'reclaimed' by third-wave and postfeminism and now occurs through deliberate choice, an extensive body of research demonstrates its negative effects on women in a variety of domains.

For instance, internalizing the views of this cultural vogue has been shown to result in more sexualized clothing and body shame among teenage and younger girls (McKenney and Bigler 2016b), along with lower grades and standardized test scores, as physical appearance takes priority over other values (McKenney and Bigler 2016a). Such sexualization is associated with self-objectification: internalizing an observer's view of oneself as a sexual object, and fostering behaviors in line with this self-conception, leading to self-sexualization—usually with deleterious psychological consequences (De Wilde et al. 2020; Fredrickson and Roberts 1997). Similarly, the American Psychological Association's Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls (2007) reports that sexual self-objectification may cause 'cognitive diminishment', while Visser, Stiner, and Doyle (2022) has found enjoyment of sexualization to be associated with lower desire for challenging cognitive stimuli in women. If reliably demonstrated, both would clearly prove disadvantageous, even devastating. Other studies have also found women's enjoyment of sexualization directly correlated with higher levels of depression and anxiety (Grower, Ward, and Rowley 2021). Further, having others prioritize appearance-related traits is linked to increased negative emotions and self-objectification in women (Chevallereau et al. 2021), the latter of which involves basing one's own self-perception on the same external traits, thus promoting negative feedback loops.

Moreover, social media feedback appears to be a uniquely powerful behavioral motivator (Sherman et al. 2016), and passive consumption of sexualized images on social media has been shown to reduce self-esteem, 'particularly in women' (Plieger et al. 2021). This in turn drives desires for external validation, incentivizing participation in sexualized social media-behaviors that have been internalized as means of self-creation (Bigler, Tomasetto, and McKenney 2019). Consequently, self-sexualization on photo-based social media is reinforced to the point where non-participation seemingly requires conscious and deliberate restraint—especially so when it is simultaneously framed as expressing female empowerment. With Instagram being so deeply embedded in the day-to-day life of contemporary culture, its influence is vast. As are the self-sexualizing behaviors that

have become its trademark, especially within fitspiration (Carrotte, Prichard, and Lim 2017; Chansiri, Wongphothiphan, and Shafer 2022; Dignard and Jarry 2021), where the logic of photographic self-presentation and the body-centrality of fitness merge. Some theorists argue that the fact that many women report to enjoy sexualization and the ensuing sexual attention, even feeling empowered by it, demonstrates that it is healthy and empowering (Baumgardner and Richards 2004; Marshall, Chamberlain, and Hodgetts 2019). Others suggest the enjoyment derives from a false sense of empowerment (De Wilde et al. 2020; Liss, Erchull, and Ramsey 2011), involving what Weaving (2012) calls ‘smoke and mirrors’. Indeed, much evidence seems to support the latter.

Regardless, the disclosed findings surrounding sexualization and academic debates over empowerment has yet had little bearing on the broad user base of photo-based social media and, indeed, fitspiration. The pervasiveness of female sexualization in contemporary culture remains a fact, and its association with empowerment remains central to its current role in society. Sexualized images of women in sports are nothing new (Weaving 2012), but combined, notions of empowerment and sexualization branded as choice find unprecedented expression in fitspiration, through which almost everyone with an Instagram account is incentivized to participate. However, there is obviously some dissonance between the common perception of its effects, evidenced by the enthusiasm with which it is adopted into a norm, and the host of negative consequences brought to bear by the research. Although proponents exist on both sides of the argument, one can at minimum maintain that the proposition under assessment here is more complicated, and potentially more ill-conceived, than its salience would suggest.

2.2. *The social imaginary*

The consistent pattern with which this notion of sexualization is displayed throughout society almost seems to suggest it is *the* form of female empowerment *par excellence*. How did it come about that the means by which an abstract concept like ‘empowerment’ is achieved has become so seemingly axiomatic in modern culture? Why is the belief that female sexualization facilitates it so pervasive? One answer may be that it has integrated itself into what the philosopher Charles Taylor calls the ‘social imaginary’. Like Nietzsche, Taylor believes that there are deeper, unseen relations of explanans which form the mental foundations on which people imagine their social existence: normative notions and concurring expectations in social contexts on which they base their behaviors. Taylor (2002) explains that the way people usually ‘imagine’ themselves and their social surroundings are rarely expressed as thoroughly considered, rational argumentation – ‘as theory’. Rather, it is intuited, through

images, stories, and legends. But it is also the case that theory is usually the possession of a small minority, whereas what is interesting in the social imaginary is that it is shared by large groups of people, if not the whole society. [...] the social imaginary is that common understanding that makes possible common practices and a *widely shared sense of legitimacy*.

(Taylor 2002, p. 106, *emphasis added*).

Here, Taylor indicates that we typically do not conceptualize ourselves and our relation to the social world in self-conscious and critical terms. Instead, we tend to hold a priori imagined conceptions of it, comprised by the physical and, most importantly, moral

reality in which we are embedded. Moral axioms are unreflectively absorbed from the surrounding culture and intuitively embodied in our actions. Together, these make up the social imaginary, from which we draw our inferences about the world and how we are supposed to think and behave—not by way of conscious and rational assessment, but by moral intuition. In this way, the premises of social existence drawn from the social imaginary become *intuitively* true, through a ‘widely shared sense of legitimacy’.

It seems incontrovertible that the notion of sexualization as empowerment is firmly rooted in the contemporary social imaginary, expressed through fitspiration. Accordingly, the cultural ascendance of this idea does not *necessarily* indicate a sort of Darwinian process, characterized by an unwavering state of progress towards unequivocal improvement, i.e. an increasingly honed formula for empowerment. Instead, it suggests other, deeper mechanisms may be present, along with the potential pitfalls that the social imaginary itself occludes from view.

But why consistently default to sexuality as an unambiguous, natural means of expressing freedom and power? While its origins may indeed be more complex than can be adequately reflected here, part of the answer arguably lies in the residual effects of the sexual revolution and the increasingly public role of sexuality derived from it. Decades ago, the philosopher Augusto Del Noce (2014) analyzed in-depth the ideological foundations of the sexual revolution, the philosophical ideas it reflects, and—as fundamentally a transformation of sexual morality—the deep impact it would have on moral psychology in relation to sexuality. In a prescient turn of phrase, he terms its resulting social consequences ‘the ascendance of eroticism’, whereby every person embedded in the ensuing culture ‘accepts without any moral reaction displays of sexuality that [previously] were inconceivable’ (p. 157), and where eventually there would be ‘no body part that cannot be exposed in public, as long as it does not hurt our sense of aesthetics’ (p. 158). From when this was written until now, things have indeed progressed as predicted. Del Noce noted that this would give rise to a moral-philosophical context through which society not only experiences fluctuations in its sense of modesty, but even a turn towards condemnation of modesty itself as abnormal and repressive. Freedom, and by extension individual power, becomes absence of constraints, enabling unmoored self-creation through the preeminence attributed to sexual expression. Here, we see echoed the formulation of freedom inscribed into the contemporary conception of empowerment. Returning to Taylor’s terminology, these are the normative notions and axioms that exert their influence in the social imaginary, through which the residues of the sexual revolution, via the ascendance of eroticism, produce the social imaging of sexualization as empowerment.

Given that this conception of empowerment may be unreflective and flawed, an alternative view should be considered. Nietzsche’s philosophy offers a host of compelling ideas about how to conceive of power, and thus also empowerment. The next section aims to draw out a cohesive conception of empowerment from Nietzsche’s philosophy of power.

3. Empowerment as self-overcoming

What drives one to seek empowerment? A compelling answer to this question is suggested by the eudaimonistic branch of philosophical ethics: namely, to flourish. According

to Nietzsche, to flourish in life, we should esteem no value higher than power, as the good life is defined by its abundance. Its fundamental driving force he calls ‘the will to power’.

3.1. Nietzsche’s philosophy of power

Among Nietzsche’s principal ideas, the doctrine of the will to power occupies a distinct position of both fame and contention. Though some early interpretations took it to be the fundamental metaphysical principle of the world—akin to Schopenhauer’s (2014) theory of the irrational will—the will to power is best regarded as the central concept of a naturalistic, psychological hypothesis (Clark 1991; Kaufmann 2013; Leiter 2002). Psychology, Nietzsche writes, ‘queen of the sciences’, is ‘the doctrine of the development of the will to power’ (2003, §23). For Nietzsche, the self is not an ontologically independent entity acting out its will upon the world. Rather, he conceives of the self as a maelstrom of unconscious drives, all vying for power over one another and the subject. Their driving force, the irreducible governing principle of all human nature and behavior, is the will to power. It can express itself in healthy, life-affirming, and strengthening ways, or it can lead individuals to instinctively pursue actions through which they undermine themselves (Ioan 2017).

What is commonly misinterpreted, but crucial to properly understand, is that the most powerful—thus, most positive—expression of power lies not in any external discharge, as in the domination and oppression of others. Nietzsche (1997, §371) expressly regards this as an inferior form of power, even as an expression of power stemming from weakness, from a compensation for a lack of true strength and health of spirit. Viewed this way, such actions become demands for proof of one’s power, for it to be validated as such in its effects on others. Therefore, they are simultaneously admissions of disbelief in one’s own possession of power, whereby it is necessarily discredited. In contrast to this crude power, Nietzsche advocates a form of power embodied and expressed within oneself. He hails as characteristic of truly powerful individuals their acting more graciously towards others than even to themselves, not merely out of ‘kindness of heart—it is simply [their] *duty*’. ‘Uncouth manners’ are ‘unbecoming to them’, for they are ‘the most cheerful and most amiable’ (2005, §57).

Instead, true richness in power is the attainment of ‘that overflowing state of [...] health [...] which is equally self-mastery and training of the heart’ (Nietzsche 1996a, Preface, §4). Here, we see power closely associated with health. Power is thus the distinguishing mark of human flourishing, expressed as ‘self-mastery’, that is, as the mastering of one’s desires and passions. As the will to power continually discharges itself in desires, passions, and the motives for which we act, self-mastery requires harnessing these impulses and channeling them into their most life-affirming expressions. Therefore, Nietzsche urges neither submitting to, nor eradicating (1998, V, §2) these impulses, but *spiritualizing* (2003, §229, §271; 1998, V, §1, §3), or sublimating (1997, §202; 2017, §382–387) them—redirecting the will to power against oneself. This, in turn, is the instrument of self-overcoming (see Kaufmann 2013; part III; Jonas and Yacek 2019, ch. 3), and the greatest expression of power. In this ‘joy of being one’s own master’ (Nietzsche 1996b, §305), those who are powerful ‘delight’ (2005, §57). Thus, the will to power in its highest form is properly understood as self-overcoming through continual self-mastery. Indeed, it

is within this context of ‘overcoming’ (*überwindung*) that the term *übermensch* should be understood (Monahan 2007): as the one who overcomes.

For the will to power, and the drives through which it enacts itself, to realize its inherent capacity to harmonize and ‘give itself form’ (Kaufmann 2013, 238), it must submit itself to the rigors of reason—its highest manifestation. Although even reason is a manifestation of the will to power, the will itself is only *potentially* rational. Without reason, it remains like a chaotic force extending itself in many directions simultaneously, like rays of light emanating from a source. They illuminate, warm, and energize across a general area, indiscriminately. However, if intersected by a properly positioned magnifying glass, the rays of light are realigned, unified, and concentrated. In their concentration, their warmth and energy is amplified, their power enhanced. Properly employed, reason is the magnifying glass of the will to power, the means by which its energy is spiritualized to a higher nature. Nietzsche regards this potential for spiritualization of our internal drives as the only true delineator between man and beast—the art of philosophy, born of reason, being its most distinguished manifestation, ‘the most spiritual will to power’ (Nietzsche 2003, §9). All other differences, including intelligence, are differences in degree only. It is the uniquely human potential of rationally organizing the drives in the most powerful manner possible, of not allowing life to act itself out as merely a mindless impulse. By spiritualizing and ‘transfiguring’ one’s ‘existence’ (Nietzsche 2015, §1), it is raised to a higher level of capacity and control. This is the truest representation of humanity, the prerogative of the most spiritual and, crucially, *most powerful* individuals (Nietzsche 2005, §57) – able to grasp at the ‘highest reaches of the art of life’.

Hence, the process of reaching the highest expression of power is fundamentally divorced from any form of collectivity. One cannot receive this self-transfiguration from others, and one’s aesthetic value can never be a function of any collective belonging or superficial similarity with another. The rational objective of the will to power, the organizing of chaos, is a task for, and the responsibility of, the individual alone: ‘For one’s self only, in the first instance’ (Nietzsche 2015, 22). However, this does not preclude collective effects in instances that follow. As exemplars worthy of emulation, the greater spiritualization of the few is eventually intended to become the benefit of the many: ‘finally, through one’s self, for all [...] for there is much to be made better yet: in one and all’. Understood in this way, empowerment implies the development of health defined as degree of power, a function of the spiritualization of drives through self-mastery—the means by which one’s very nature may be transfigured and elevated. It is the latent potential of becoming, transformed into the manifest actuality of being: empowerment as self-overcoming.

3.2. Overcoming conformism

As the good life for Nietzsche amounts to a life rich in power, our task is to discern a way of life through which power understood as self-overcoming may be attained. Categorically opposed to this objective is the widespread conformity that was as defining of his time as it is of ours. Nietzsche’s denouncement of conformity is a recurring motif permeating his entire philosophy, from his criticism of the State and Christian morality to his decrying culture’s descent into decadence. Through conformity, the personal individuation on which the important task of self-overcoming depends is renounced, in favor of

a 'demand for a general leveling' (Kaufmann 2013, 403). In doing so, human beings remain divorced from their truly human potential, essentially remaining animals in Nietzsche's view. Only if the cultural models for which mainstream emulation is incentivized are the 'highest', most powerful types (as defined above), can general conformity be conducive to anything approximating transfiguration and self-overcoming.

Living life purposefully necessitates some form of overarching philosophy. Indeed, Nietzsche (2003, §6) believes that to truly measure the validity of any philosophy, one must go beyond words; one must internalize and live it, to gauge whether it serves life in reaching its maximum potential. For any philosophy, its measure then becomes the extent to which it serves this vision of the good life (i.e. a powerful life). Most of us unwittingly adhere to the dictums of inherited ethical frameworks nested in the social imaginary, according to which we think and act. Nietzsche recognizes that we tend to blindly abide by these inherited edicts without ever developing genuine appreciation for the ways in which they do or do not serve life. Doing so would require dedication to critical self-scrutiny beyond what society ordinarily prescribes, and occasionally beyond what it permits. For doing so means potentially breaking with given moral proclamations and received opinions, of which the underexamined yet seemingly dogmatic implication that self-sexualization constitutes empowerment is one example. When an idea is cemented as part of the social imaginary, the very conditions on the basis of which any criticism of it is formulated may cease to be recognized as legitimate.

Meanwhile, Nietzsche urges to always value the chance to verify the vitality of one's convictions by having them confronted and, if warranted, letting them justly stand corrected. Rather than celebrating 'the courage of one's convictions', one should strive for 'the courage for an attack on [them]' (1925, p. 318). For Nietzsche (2017, §456), willingness to subject even one's most dearly held beliefs to the rigors of rationality becomes a measure of power, whereas thoughtless obedience to 'unshakeable convictions' becomes that of weakness. The latter reinforces conformity, further degrading the capacity of individuals to command their constitution such that recognizing the importance of overcoming these tendencies is made possible. Because the historical precedent set by many of those inherited edicts has, according to Nietzsche, been fundamentally opposed to the values underpinning that important process of self-overcoming (here converted into our modern concept of empowerment), they must be held accountable to this conception before being held as true. As we will see, this holds true also for the edicts of empowerment propagated through fitspiration, whose cultural prominence depend on our tendencies for conformity. In other words, in seeking empowerment through self-overcoming, one is called to submit even the most deeply rooted ideas of the social imaginary to a rational self-order and negate conformity, potentially breaking the prevailing 'tablets of values' on which an inscription currently reads 'sexualization as empowerment'.

4. Will to power, or will to post

Having outlined Nietzsche's philosophy of power, a corresponding conception of empowerment, and the requirements for pursuing its highest expression, we can now examine the concept of female empowerment represented through fitspiration.

The first crucial and, from the perspective of Nietzsche's philosophy, fallacious aspect of the present notion of empowerment concerns its implied notion of power. That empowerment entails increasing power is undisputed; however, whence it derives and how it is appraised are another matter entirely. Power, as represented by empowerment through fitspiration, is solely exerted externally. As power becomes the product of sexualization, it can only constitute social power, since it can only concern power over, or in relation to, others. It is inextricably linked to those at whom it is directed, and on whom it depends. Even though it is eagerly presented as 'for the individual', it is explicitly, and irrefutably, 'for others' – not for their benefit, but for what may be gained from them. It is an inescapable factor of the very medium itself: whatever compels me to perform any action on social media, although it is performed for the benefits conferred on me, relies on the intended audience as instruments of that desired outcome. In other words, you are the tool by which I gain empowerment; you alone possess the power to grant me power. Photo-based social media deals in the currency of attention, and if one grants that female empowerment is epitomized in self-sexualization, one must accede that it does, too.

Consider, for instance, an individual in social isolation. Is not the concept of self-sexualization here deflated of all meaning? More importantly, by its implied definition and relation to sexualization, has not empowerment become an irrelevant impossibility? With the source of power eliminated, it ceases to be, until at least a hypothetical other is restored. This is an inversion of the imperative in Nietzsche's ethics of power. Not only is power, as originating in the individual, and the responsibility for managing it relinquished; what power is promoted is that which exerts itself only on others, in the social effects of the conspicuous exhibition of one's body. Following Nietzsche, this is an objectionable, crude form of power—an expression of the will to power opposite to that of its highest manifestation as self-overcoming.

Empowerment through sexualization implies that, for it to be experienced as such, it must be affirmed. Self-sexualization lacks any intrinsic value beyond what its affirmation confers. Hence, insofar as self-sexualization translates to empowerment, one can only be empowered if affirmed to be so by others. Empowerment thus ceases to be a function of the individual's agency, submitted instead to the agency of others, their impressions and evaluations. It embodies what Nietzsche regards as a reactive conception of life, whereby one acts and conceptualizes oneself mainly in reaction to the agency of others. It inverts the formula for self-overcoming, prompting one to only 'direct one's view outward instead of back to oneself' (Nietzsche 2013, I, 10). Instead of 'vivisectioning' (Nietzsche 2003, §212) one's own impulses and their psychosocial origins in order to master and overcome those which prevent self-overcoming and promote dependence, these become the very aspects assumed to be in no need of redress, in action if not in conscious thought. In the present pursuit of female empowerment, 'action is fundamentally reaction' (2013, I, 10). It finds its source and legitimization only externally—in the stimuli and influences that, by the will to conform, condemns one to ever expend one's will to power in reaction, rather than spiritualize its impulsive exertions into a harmony that serves to elevate its nature and, thus, the potential for flourishing in the individual.

4.1. Freedom

As noted, contemporary empowerment is often linked to choice (Gill 2016). Empowerment is presupposed to emerge from the freedom to choose *itself*, rather than

from any specific choices that, in their conduciveness to power, are empowering. This implies that empowerment is *causa sui* – an absurdity for Nietzsche (2003, §15) – so long as one is only unburdened by restrictions. Freedom to act freely without a proper underlying structure of internal governance can only mean acting on impulse, even as those impulses are passively attuned to cultural norms. Rather than recognizing the potentially irrational and disempowering nature of their unregulated manifestations, acting on impulse is to give free reign to the will to power through drives and desires expressing themselves outwardly in the most convenient ways culturally permissible. Without manifesting these drives in a hierarchy subject to embodied reason which redirects the exertions of the will to power, nothing indicates their behavioral influence will be empowering (foster self-overcoming). Therefore, although freedom so conceived is important, it cannot be empowering in itself. Freedom as autonomy of action (liberation from restrictive external circumstances) does not necessarily result in freedom to act in ways which enhance individuals' power over themselves, since unmastered will to power still limits the exercise of that freedom. More importantly, for Nietzsche (1998, IX, §38), being free consists in 'having the will to be responsible for oneself', and 'becoming more indifferent to hardship, harshness, privation'. This includes harshness towards oneself, submitting the internal impulses and drives to deprivation of the freedoms to which they are otherwise disposed: to master and command, rather than obey them. In short, true freedom comes from internal liberation, more so than external.

In the character of Zarathustra, Nietzsche credits that which is difficult with moral praiseworthiness. Doing what is easy lacks this inherent 'moral goodness'. However, an inverse relationship prevails via the kind of in-vogue psychological self-care underlying much of the social imaginary pertaining to empowerment and psychological well-being (what Robert Bellah (2008) calls 'expressive individualism'), infusing it with moral certitude. This relationship expresses an outlook whereby all restrictions, self-imposed or otherwise, become obstacles to empowerment; they weaken, lessen, and disempower because they inhibit freedom. The good is represented by that which does not infringe on the individual by saying 'no'. Although fitspiration as a corollary to fitness, which to some extent demands embracing adversity, embodies aspects of 'difficulty' and thus 'moral goodness', the advent of empowerment within fitspiration is marked *not* by the act of developing a muscular physique itself. Rather, it follows from the bodily demonstration, and the *freedom* inherent in choosing to do so. If this was not the case, the amount of empowerment presumably gained would have to vary proportionately to the level of physical fitness on display, something which hardly applies. This is an important distinction, which reveals the essence of the form of sexual empowerment inferred: it is not the process of 'becoming sexy' (or strong), but the 'being sexy' itself, and its subsequent outward demonstration, which supposedly bestows power. Empowerment is rendered a state of *being*, not *becoming*: the ideal self as perfectly empowered portrayed as *causa sui*, if only afforded the freedom to *be* so. Thus, empowerment within fitspiration is divorced from that Nietzschean 'moral goodness' potentially present in the sporting activity from which it emerged. And in rejecting the element of becoming, self-overcoming is necessarily rejected with it.

To display oneself in exchange for the currency of the medium—i.e. attention—requires only submitting to the universal impulse for external validation, the hedonism of indulging narcissistic pleasures (Daudi 2022). As we have seen, it is the external

discharge of the will to power in its unmastered state. It seeks to affect change outwardly, to prove itself in its effect on others, and thus be confirmed to be that which it disguises itself as: genuine power. In contrast, what is hard, 'morally good' according to Nietzsche, and conducive to self-overcoming is resisting the instinct of the will to power to always exert itself outwardly—to harness and direct it against oneself in order to spiritualize the lesser instincts which seek this furthering of social power (power over others). According to 'sexualization as empowerment', to achieve empowerment, all one is required to master is this simple proposition, then give expression to the freedom inherently connoted, narrowly defined as the manifestation of the absence of constraints.

We all carry this impulse for self-becoming through the eyes of others. Because of the narcissistic pleasure it affords, self-sexualization possesses an inherent allure. However, making virtue of impulse and necessity, Nietzsche believes, is a moral imperative compelled by the will to power of the weak. Hailing as empowering that which necessitates no sacrifice but submission to desire adheres to the same principle. Empowerment cannot follow merely from granting inborn attributes free reign to assert themselves, from mere abandonment without sacrifice. Nietzsche asserts that good is 'whatever augments the feeling of power [...] power itself in man', whereas bad is 'whatever springs from weakness' (2005, §2). Manifesting the will to power mainly externally represents just such weakness, whereas truly enhancing one's power requires engaging in the cycle of self-overcoming, self-mastery, and spiritualization of the drives and their monistic governing principle. This is 'the good'; by definition, it necessitates sacrificing the narrow definition of freedom for a truly liberating one, whereby only internal freedom enables its authentic experience in the external.

4.2. Reductive (Dis-)empowerment

Beyond the wealth of evidence of its negative effects on women, the notion of sexualization being an unambiguous expression of empowerment is also dubious in one final sense. The implied proposition that a fitspiration-user conspicuously displaying her body on social media captures the essence of female empowerment begs the following questions: Is one's sexuality simultaneously one's greatest asset of power, strength, virtue, and empowerment? Is this the highest standard against which human existence may be held? Scholars have long argued that ceaseless focus on female athletes' sex appeal detracts from perceptions of their athletic prowess and serves to delegitimize claims to equal status within professional sports (Beaver 2016). Nevertheless, in emerging avenues of digitized cultures like fitspiration, it is reclaimed, fashioned into choice, thereby signaling freedom and earning it the badge of empowerment. In effect, female empowerment becomes the result of liberated sexual self-expression. If empowerment so construed is then taken to be a condition of human flourishing, for woman to flourish, she must reduce herself to her sexuality. Primal nature, clad in modern attire, and nothing besides.

Such notions systemically embedding themselves in the social imaginary are the natural consequences of the ascendance of eroticism described by Del Noce, and they seem increasingly to be the intuition of young women participating in digital cultures like fitspiration. In this way, the idea is cemented that the form of power desirable for empowerment purposes is that which utilizes base characteristics to affect others. The greater the affect, the greater the power. Accordingly, the more views, likes, and followers

—the social media quantification of affect—the more powerful the individual. And yet, from the Nietzschean perspective, the only thing this cementation of ideas achieves is the *disempowerment* of individuals, disassociating them from their internal conditions and the possibility of psychological self-mastery, chaining them to external factors and the whims of their audience without whom they, like their sexual self-expressions, are rendered irrelevant.

5. Conclusion

This paper has critically examined the conception of female empowerment that finds conspicuous expression in fitspiration and sought a reformulation of *human* empowerment, drawn from Nietzsche's philosophy of power. I have argued that this culturally pervasive understanding of female empowerment—delineated in its explicit relationship to sexualization—may be seriously flawed and could be beneficially superseded by a Nietzschean universal alternative.

Sports are often conceived of as sites of potential for female empowerment. Usually, this refers to outdated modes of thinking about women and sport—whereby sports allow for restricting stereotypes to be resisted—as well as material inequalities between men's and women's sport. Rarely does such empowerment denote any elevation of the deeper essences of being, settling instead for freedom of action as its primary concern; alternatively, such elevation is presumed to automatically follow from greater external autonomy and freedom. The present perspective does not preclude the fact that sex-specific social circumstances may condition individual processes of empowerment differently. However, it does suggest they pertain only to external factors, maintaining that the most important, often overlooked element is the individual's relationship to and embodiment of power within themselves. Paying no heed to sex, the fundamentals of empowerment thus conceived are a function primarily of the psychological potential of the human mind. To facilitate the realization of human potential and cultivate the greatest expression of empowerment, the pursuit of power must enact itself in the cycle of self-overcoming. Nietzsche's philosophy is a call for the individual to recognize the potentially pathological nature of the mythologies into which their culture and perspectival outlook so easily involve them. He offers an ethics of power whereby empowerment ceases to be contingent on but rather precedes external freedom, can persist independently of social acclaim, and constitutes a prerequisite for truly and purposefully cultivating greater flourishing.

In fitspiration, the individual certainly becomes the focus, though not in a way which aligns with Nietzsche's philosophy. The underlying proposition 'sexualization as empowerment' is commonly treated not as a hypothesis to be tested but as a dogmatic axiom to be asserted. However, empowerment cannot emerge from a mere desire for it, nor from claims of its relation to some favored behavior, supposing it into existence. The fervor with which contemporary culture unquestioningly embraces female empowerment – 'girl power' (Banet-Weiser 2015) – by means of self-exhibitionism through social media betrays a crisis. It portrays a community in yearning for something yet unfulfilled by the means readily supplied by the culture in which it is immersed—for the fortification and self-elevation pledged by the sexualized conception of empowerment, but which it is unable to provide. Fitspiration represents not a deviation from broader Western culture, but an

embodiment of some of its present struggles: epitomized in crippling conformism and the ascendance of eroticism. Therefore, a Nietzschean understanding of empowerment, rendering its current dictates unjustifiable and usurping its place in the social imaginary, can potentially be of benefit both to contemporary fitness culture and to society at large.¹

Notes

1. It should be acknowledged that Nietzsche's oeuvre is infamously blemished by seemingly misogynistic remarks. However, whether the unflattering moniker is truly deserved is somewhat contended (e.g. Hatab 1981; Oliver and Pearsall 2010). Closer readings occasionally nuance what first impressions fail to. In any case, there is little reason to assume the intricacies of Nietzsche's philosophical insights relevant only to one sex.

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