



Eating Disorders and Social Media

Casidhe Gardiner, RD, MPH Student
Toronto, ON

While it has been known for some time that media may negatively affect some consumers' body satisfaction and self-esteem, much of the research on which this is based investigated content from traditional media outlets such as television, magazines, and movies¹. More recently, there has been an emergence of discourse around social media, its potential impacts on users' body image and self-esteem, and whether interaction with these platforms directly influences eating disorder (ED) behaviours.

Social networking sites, referred to in this *Bulletin* as social media, provide a unique opportunity for the public to be both consumers and creators, interacting with what is posted and posting content themselves with 24/7 access^{2,3}. With the popularity and accessibility of these platforms, experts in various domains, including EDs, have discussed the potential harms that social media use may pose, especially on young women and girls. The true effects may vary based on users' characteristics, platform, and the specific activity taking place on social media. This *Bulletin* explores what is known so far, what still needs to be studied, and potential prevention strategies. The majority of the research discussed focuses on white, cisgender adolescent girls and women, unless otherwise specified.

THIN IDEALS, BODY DISSATISFACTION, AND SELF-OBJECTIFICATION

Part of the commentary around media's influence on ED behaviour is due to its promotion of thin ideals, potentially causing self-comparison, body dissatisfaction, and self-objectification. To understand why social media may influence EDs, it is important to understand these concepts and how they increase the risk of harmful behaviours.

Experts warn that social media could increase the social appearance pressure and internalization of thin ideals⁴. One study looking at social media platforms found that nearly all participants had seen peers posting about the importance of thinness for attractiveness⁵. One concern is that those susceptible to external validation may be using social media as a way to receive self-reassurance and may start to compare themselves to the thin ideals portrayed³. This is further emphasized by other studies that found that those who use social media, particularly image-heavy platforms, are more likely to exhibit drive for thinness. This is especially true for females^{6,7}. Further research and discussion is

occurring on how lean/muscular ideals for both men and women are perpetuated by social media². In terms of ED behaviour, it is suggested that thin ideals portrayed on social media do not cause EDs, but may contribute to them, likely through their effect on body dissatisfaction⁸.

Body dissatisfaction is cited as the strongest predictor of both disordered eating and EDs⁹. Body dissatisfaction is very common among girls and young women, with at least 50% experiencing some level¹⁰. Those who engage in appearance comparison have higher rates of body dissatisfaction⁴. Social media provides access to content from peers and influencers with whom consumers may participate in self-comparison.

There are numerous studies that suggest social media use may lead to body dissatisfaction in girls and women^{2,3,8,11,12,13}. There is also evidence that it may have similar effects on sexual minority men². However, among studies, the correlation between social media and body dissatisfaction has been inconsistent³. This suggests that it may depend on the personality and external factors of

each user, and that some users may be more predisposed to experience body dissatisfaction¹⁰. A possible pathway is that social media use may lead to physical appearance comparisons and self-objectification, increasing body dissatisfaction as a result².

Self-objectification, a tendency to view one's body from an observer's perspective, is highly correlated with body dissatisfaction⁹. For college-age women, the group with the highest rate of onset of EDs, self-objectification is believed to be a major contributor to ED development and maintenance⁹. The severity of body dissatisfaction and self-objectification related to social media may depend on the specific activity, as discussed below.

OVERALL USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

It has been noted that social media allows users access to both public figures and peers to compare themselves to^{10,11}. Some researchers suggest that it is specifically peer competition that leads to negative outcomes, and that social media creates another arena for this to occur¹⁰. These concerns are particularly echoed for image-heavy platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat^{2,14,15}.

Studies have shown that higher use of social media platforms correlates with greater body image concerns, ED symptoms, and eating concerns in teens and young adults, although effect sizes have been inconsistent^{2,14,16,17}. As discussed previously, they may be dependent on the user and specific activity. For example, it is suggested that Instagram use is specifically linked to self-objectification and body dissatisfaction due to the increase exposure to celebrity and peer photos^{18,19}.

As for eating behaviours, studies of Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat use have found that its users show greater levels of ED symptoms, disordered eating, and/or strict exercise compared to non-users^{11,13,20}. The duration and frequency of use varied among studies. A study focusing on Facebook showed that users were at a significant risk of EDs and had higher body image concerns compared to non-users¹⁶. Another identified that users who placed greater value on external responses were more likely to translate this into eating pathology¹¹. Questions still remain as to whether those drawn to use social media are more likely to be at risk of harmful eating behaviours, or if the use itself triggers the risk. Regardless, it is suggested that these findings show that those with EDs may be more vulnerable to the effects of Facebook, and that it may help maintain or increase the risk¹⁶.

PRO-ED CONTENT

One of the most researched links to social media content and ED promotion is pro-ED accounts. These are accounts that promote or glamorize EDs and ED behaviours. Studies suggest that exposure to their content is linked to negative body image and has a significant impact on body dissatisfaction^{21,22}. The actual level of long-term impact this has and its translation into ED behaviours is inconsistent^{5,21}. These negative effects may impact both those with and without pre-existing EDs²¹. In one study, those suffering with EDs were more likely to look at pro-ED pages³. Messages on these pages and the way in which they are normalized may trigger and encourage ED behaviours in vulnerable individuals²¹.

“One study looking at social media platforms found that nearly all participants had seen peers posting about the importance of thinness for attractiveness.”

THINSPIRATION AND FITSPIRATION

Another type of content worth noting is thinspiration and fitspiration. Thinspiration and fitspiration are, “content characterized by idealized depictions of overtly thin and fit/lean bodies, respectively”¹⁴. Exposure to both kinds has been found to cause body comparison¹⁴. A 2018 study found a link between exposure to thinspiration and ED symptoms¹⁴. Other studies have found that, in adolescents, viewing and posting fitspiration and nutrition and exercise content was also associated with higher ED behaviour, or an increased risk of having an ED^{5,15}.

For those with EDs, more frequent exposure to both types of content is linked to more severe symptoms and physical comparisons¹⁴. The indirect link between this content and EDs is suggested to be due to the increase in physical appearance comparison¹⁴. For those already susceptible to this comparison behaviour, viewing and posting thinspiration and fitspiration may act as another trigger for this. The discourse surrounding the specific types of nutrition and fitness messages and images that pose risk warrants in-depth discussion outside the scope of this *Bulletin*.

SELFIES

The final content area for review is posting and interacting with selfies, or pictures one takes of themselves. Posting selfies is linked to decreased body satisfaction for girls and women^{23,24}. It is suggested sharing selfies may be linked to existing appearance dissatisfaction and may also result in appearance dissatisfaction⁹. For women and girls, taking and posting selfies may increase risk of disordered eating²⁰.

One risk may be the investment and manipulation of selfies prior to posting. It is reported that body dissatisfaction occurs for girls and women when posting selfies regardless of editing or not²⁵. However, women that had higher photo investment and photo manipulation showed higher ED behaviours and were more likely to meet ED criteria^{9,23}. The act of taking selfies then not posting them also was associated with ED behaviour²³.

Another risk may be the importance placed on selfie feedback. The investment into feedback from others was linked to increased self-objectification and body surveillance, impacting body image²⁴. However, these feelings may not result in disordered eating behaviours²⁴.

Women in recovery from ED have reported that selfies can increase disordered eating cycles and negative body comparisons⁹. However, they have noted selfies can also be empowering and enhance recovery⁹.

“ [Social media users] who placed greater value on external responses were more likely to translate this into eating pathology ”

SOLUTIONS AND NEXT STEPS

Many interventions for preventing the potential harms of social media to those with EDs have been suggested. Strategies include platform-integrated interventions, media literacy programs, and caregiver education.

One of the major suggestions is to have warning messages and links to resources when social media users search for or interact with potentially harmful content^{3,5,21,26,27}. Many platforms have struggled with deterring pro-ED content despite bans and blocked hashtags²⁸. This is likely due to users tweaking hashtags^{17,28}. The response to bar all ED

content would also be problematic, as it may block the pro-recovery and anti-ED content, which can be useful for those in recovery^{6,22,26,29}. Instead, warning messages and links to immediate resources could direct those in need of help to appropriate services^{5,21,27}. Recently, platforms such as Instagram have attempted this strategy³⁰. It remains difficult for platforms to keep up with altered hashtags and terminology, and determining the threshold of harm in nutrition and fitness messages is a contentious issue. This may require more investment into developing algorithms to detect harmful content, and best practices for effective online resources and supports^{5,27}.

Another suggested intervention approach is education and advocacy through social marketing campaigns and media literacy programs^{3,8,13,31}. Media literacy programs for adolescents is recognized as a leading approach to reducing risk of EDs for this age group¹³. Media literacy is the ability to critically think about what is portrayed in media with the aim to reduce its influence⁸. It is also suggested to incorporate lessons for consuming content from peers⁸. Experts and ED organizations have also shared tips for users such as knowing triggers, being mindful of who users follow, blocking harmful accounts, and limiting screen time^{4,26,29,32,33}. One study found that a classroom-based social media literacy program that addressed topics like peer influence lead to increased body satisfaction⁸. Researchers suggest that adolescent female participants may experience less pressure to alter their bodies to fit a thin ideal, but question if such programs are able to change participants' belief in the thin ideal itself⁸. Another study noted that social media literacy did not directly prevent food choices from being swayed by social media influencers; while participants were aware that social media does not necessarily reflect reality and may be harmful, they might not act in accordance with their knowledge³¹. Further research may be needed on media literacy programs' effectiveness in translating awareness to changes in internalized beliefs and behaviours.

Beyond population education, there is increasing research into the role of individual influences for youth and adolescents, including parents and clinicians. One study found that a majority of families have no rules around Instagram use, potentially due to parents' lack of social media understanding³¹. This is potentially dangerous as experts suggest that adolescents without parental oversight of social media are more likely to have poor self-image and have disordered eating behaviours³². When treating

existing EDs, social media behaviours should be assessed in treatment²³. One study, however, found that only 20% of therapists were asking about Facebook impacts in ED assessments⁵. Clinicians and parents could both benefit from education and training for spotting potentially harmful social media use and discussing self-image impacts^{24,26}.

Further research will enable better understanding of the pathways linking social media, disordered eating, and EDs. Priorities include moving beyond the consumer perspective and focusing on how posting and interacting impacts users¹⁰. Additionally, clarifying the dose-response effect and how different ethnic, gender identity, and age groups are affected are worthy of further study²². Lastly, the majority of existing research focuses on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Tumblr use. Insights into Snapchat and TikTok will be helpful as the popularity of these apps continues to grow^{2,26}. This is of particular interest to experts as TikTok users do not choose who appears on their 'For You Page', sparking concern about the inability to avoid pro-ED or harmful content^{2,26}.

CONCLUSION

Overall, there is emerging insight into how social media sites may influence disordered eating, EDs, and risk factors for both such as body dissatisfaction and comparison tendencies. Largely, it is suggested that the level of impact to the user and the likeliness to translate into harmful behaviours depends on the susceptibility of the user to body dissatisfaction and self-objectification³². For this reason, those with other risk factors for EDs may be further triggered by social media use, particularly when interacting with pro-ED content, thinspiration, fitspiration, and selfies. Experts worry that though social media may not be the sole reason for someone who is vulnerable to develop an ED, it could play a significant role³³. To decrease the likelihood for negative impacts, platforms could continue to increase the visibility of links for resources and support, and education and support could be provided to youth and adolescents at the school, home, and treatment levels. Further research on this growing form of media is critical to better capture the risks and narrow effective interventions as platforms emerge and evolve.



**NEDIC Helpline (416) 340-4156 or Toll-Free 1-866-NEDIC-20
Monday to Thursday 9am–9pm and Friday 9am–5pm EST**

Through our programming, campaigns, and national toll-free helpline, NEDIC is committed to prevention, building awareness and ensuring that people no longer suffer in silence.

SOURCES

1. Jarry, J. (2010). What does the thin media do to women? It depends. *NEDIC Bulletin*. [Achieve].
2. Griffiths, S., Murray, S.B., Krug, I., & McLean, S.A. (2018). The contribution of social media to body dissatisfaction, eating disorder symptoms, and anabolic steroid use among sexual minority men. *Cyberpsychology, Behaviour, and Social Networking*, 21(3), 149-156.
3. Perloff, R.M. (2014). Social media effects on young women's body image concerns: theoretical perspectives and an agenda for research. *Sex Roles*, 71, 363-377.
4. Levitt, K.T. (2018). The effect of social media on eating disorders. *Change Creates Change*. Retrieved from <https://changecreateschange.com/the-effect-of-social-media-on-eating-disorders/>
5. Fitzsimmons-Craft, E.E., Krauss, M.J., Costello, S.J., Floyd, G.M., Wilfley, D.E., & Cavaloz-Rehg, P.A. (2019). Adolescents and young adults engaged with pro-eating disorder social media: eating disorder and comorbid psychopathology, health care utilization, treatment barriers, and opinions on harnessing technology for treatment. *Eating and Weight Disorders - Studies on Anorexia, Bulimia and Obesity*. doi: 10.1007/s40519-019-00808-3
6. Tiggemann, M., & Slater, A. (2016). Facebook and body image concern in adolescent girls: A prospective study. *International Journal of Eating Disorders*, 50(1), 80-83.
7. Tiggemann, M., & Slater, A. (2013). NetGirls: The internet, Facebook, and body image concern in adolescent girls. *International Journal of Eating Disorders*, 46(6), 630-633.
8. McLean, S.A., Wertheim, E.H., Masters, J., & Paxton, S.J. (2016). A pilot evaluation of a social media literacy intervention to reduce risk factors for eating disorders. *International Journal of Eating Disorders*, 50, 847-851.
9. Saunders, J.F., Eaton, A.A., & Aguilar, S. (2020). From self(ie)-objectification to self-empowerment: The meaning of selfies on social media in eating disorder recovery. *Computers in Human Behaviour*, 111.
10. Ferguson, C.J., Munoz, M.E., Garza, A., & Galindo, M. (2014). Concurrent and prospective analyses of peer, television and social media influences on body dissatisfaction, eating disorder symptoms and life satisfaction in adolescent girls. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 43, 1-14.
11. Mabe, A.G., Forney, K.J., & Keel, P.K. (2014). Do you "Like" my photo? Facebook use maintains eating disorder risk. *International Journal of Eating Disorders*, 47(5), 516-523.
12. Pepin, G., & Endresz, N. (2015). Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest and co.: Body image and social media. *Journal of Eating Disorders*, 3(1).
13. Wilksch, S.M., O'Shea, A., Ho, P., Byrne, S., & Wade, T.D. (2019). The relationship between social media use and disordered eating in young adolescents. *International Journal of Eating Disorders*, 53(1), 96-106.
14. Griffiths, S., Castle, D., Cunningham, M., Murray, S.B., Bastian, B. & Barlow, F.K. (2018). How does exposure to thinspiration and fitspiration relate to symptom severity among individuals with eating disorders? Evaluation of a proposed model. *Body Image*, 27, 187-195.
15. Turner, P.G., & Lefevre, C.E. (2017). Instagram use is linked to increased symptoms of orthorexia nervosa. *Eating and Weight Disorders*, 22, 277-284.
16. Cohen, R., & Blaszczynski, A. (2015). Comparative effects of Facebook and conventional media on body image dissatisfaction. *Journal of Eating Disorders*, 3(23).
17. Sidani, J.E., Shensa, A., Hoffman, B., Hanmer, J., & Primack, B.A. (2016). The association between social media use and eating concerns among US young adults. *Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics*, 116(9). 1465-1472.
18. Fardouly, J., Willburger, B.K., & Vartanian, L.R. (2018). Instagram use and young women's body image concerns and self-objectification: Testing mediational pathways. *New Media & Society*, 20(4), 1380-1395.
19. Brown, Z., & Tiggemann, M. (2016). Attractive celebrity and peer images on Instagram: Effect on women's mood and body image. *Body Image*, 19, 37-43.

20. Escalante, A. (2019). Does social media drive eating disorders? *Psychology Today*. Retrieved from <https://www.psychologytoday.com/ca/blog/shouldstorm/201912/does-social-media-drive-eating-disorders>
21. Branley, D.B., & Covey, J. (2017). Pro-ana versus pro-recovery: A content analytic comparison of social media users' communication about eating disorders on Twitter and Tumblr. *Frontiers in Psychology, 8*, 1356.
22. Rodgers, R.F., Lowy, A.S., Halperin, D.M., & Franko, D.L. (2015). A meta-analysis examining the influence of pro-eating disorder websites on body image and eating pathology. *European Eating Disorders Review, 24*, 3-8.
23. Lonergan, A.R., Bussey, K., Fardouly, J., Griffiths, S., Murray, S.B., Hay, P.,... & Mitchison, D. (2019). Protect me from my selfie: Examining the association between photo-based social media behaviors and self-reported eating disorders in adolescence. *International Journal of Eating Disorders, 53*(5), 485-496.
24. Butkowski, C.P., Dixon, T.L., & Weeks, K. (2019). Body surveillance on Instagram: Examining the role of selfie feedback investment in young adult women's body image concerns. *Sex Roles, 81*, 385-397.
25. Mills, J.S., Musto, S., Williams, L., Tiggemann, M. (2018). "Selfie" harm: Effects on mood and body image in young women. *Body Image, 27*, 86-92.
26. Lantos, E. (2 June 2020). TikTok: Fears videos may 'trigger eating disorders'. *BBC News*. Retrieved from <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-wales-52919914>
27. Yan, H., Fitzsimmons-Craft, E.E., Goodman, M., Krauss, M., Das, S., & Cavazos-Rehg, P. (2019). Automatic detection of eating disorder related social media posts that could benefit from a mental health intervention. *International Journal of Eating Disorders, 52*(10), 1150-1156.
28. Ging, D., & Garvey, S. (2018). 'Written in these scars are the stories I can't explain': A content analysis of pro-ana and thinspiration image sharing on Instagram. *New Media & Society, 20*(3), 1181-1200.
29. Kearns, C. (2017). Social media and eating disorders. *Mirror-Mirror*. Retrieved from <https://mirror-mirror.org/eating-disorders-2-2/social-media-and-eating-disorders>
30. Instagram. (2020). *Self-injury*. Retrieved from [https://help.instagram.com/553490068054878/?helpref=hc_fnav&bc\[0\]=Instagram%20Help&bc\[1\]=Privacy%20and%20Safety%20Center&bc\[2\]=Report%20Something](https://help.instagram.com/553490068054878/?helpref=hc_fnav&bc[0]=Instagram%20Help&bc[1]=Privacy%20and%20Safety%20Center&bc[2]=Report%20Something)
31. Riesmeyer, C., Hauswalk, J., & Mergen, M. (2019). (Un)healthy behavior? the relationship between media literacy, nutritional behavior, and self-representation on Instagram. *Media and Communication, 7*(2), 160-168.
32. Fardouly, J. (n.d.). *Social Media and Body Image*. National Eating Disorder Collaboration, e-Bulletin, 46. Retrieved from <https://www.nedc.com.au/research-and-resources/show/issue-46-social-media-and-body-image>
33. Magnolia Creek. (2019). *Social media's impact on eating disorders*. Retrieved from <https://www.magnolia-creek.com/eating-disorder-recovery-blog/social-media-and-eating-disorders/>