

Relationship Between Social Media, Body Dissatisfaction, and the Development of Eating
Disorders in Adolescents

Introduction

Since its creation in the late nineties, social media has only grown and evolved into the societal influence it is today. In addition to the rise in social media, society has seen an increase in eating disorders and body image issues. The goal of this research paper is to explore the connection between social media and body image as it pertains to the development of eating disorders. While the presence of eating disorders has been around much longer than the internet and social media, it is possible that social media could become another factor contributing to their development in adolescents. Eating disorders form in people of many ages, but the adolescent period is the most influential on an individual in their growth. Overall, this paper will argue that social media use negatively contributes to the development of body dissatisfaction and eating disorders in adolescents.

Overview of Eating Disorders

In today's day and age, many people are concerned about body image and weight, which can negatively contribute to a person's mental and physical health. When someone hyper-focuses on their body and weight, this can open the door and lead to the development of an eating disorder. Eating disorders can present in many ways, such as starvation, binge-eating, and purging, however the commonality between all eating disorders is control; whether it be the need for or lack of, it plays a large role in someone's eating habits. There are many things that can

cause or contribute to the development of an eating disorder. Some of these factors include genetic disposition, family life in regards to attachment style and history of sexual abuse, environment in regards to social pressures, culture and societal standards, and temperament in regards to personality and other mental illness diagnoses (Morton, n.d.). The most common and well-known eating disorders include Anorexia Nervosa, Bulimia Nervosa, Binge Eating Disorder and Eating Disorder Not Otherwise Specified (EDNOS). In a longitudinal study that followed 496 girls from the age of 12 to 20 found that 5.2% met DSM5 criteria for anorexia, bulimia or binge eating disorder; with nonspecific symptoms included, 13.2% suffered with an eating disorder (*Statistics & Research on Eating Disorders*, 2018).

The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, fifth edition (DSM 5), recognizes Anorexia Nervosa and Bulimia Nervosa as the two types of eating disorders. The diagnostic requirements for Anorexia Nervosa include the refusal or inability to maintain at least 85% of the expected body weight, and intense fear of gaining weight, dissatisfaction with the weight or shape of one's body, and in women, amenorrhea. There are two subtypes of Anorexia Nervosa: restrictive type and binge-eating/purging type. The binge-eating/purging type consists of "regularly engaging in binge-eating or purging behavior (i.e., self-induced vomiting or the misuse of laxatives, diuretics, or enemas)," while the restrictive type consists of not partaking in those behaviors to expel calories and instead, not intaking enough calories or nutrition to support the body and maintain a normal weight (Shapiro, 2011). The diagnostic requirements for Bulimia Nervosa include recurrent episodes of binge eating, which is characterized by "eating, in a discrete period of time, an amount of food that is definitely larger than most people would eat during a similar period of time and under similar circumstances" in addition to a "sense of lack of control over eating during the episode" (Shapiro, 2011). Similar to Anorexia Nervosa, there

are two subtypes of Bulimia Nervosa: purging type and non-purging type. The purging type involves the person regularly partaking in purging behaviors such as self-induced vomiting, and the misuse of laxatives and diuretics. Those with the non-purging type uses other “inappropriate compensatory behaviors” such as excessive exercise and fasting, but they do not partake in the same behaviors as the purging type (Shapiro, 2011). The diagnostic criteria for Binge Eating Disorder includes binge eating episodes like those involved in Bulimia Nervosa, in which one eats faster, until uncomfortably full, when not physically hungry, and feels disgust or embarrassment after overeating. The EDNOS category describes those that do not fit the full criteria for Anorexia Nervosa or Bulimia Nervosa, but still exhibit behaviors of one or the other., In a longitudinal study that followed 496 girls from the age of 12 to 20 found that 5.2% met DSM5 criteria for anorexia, bulimia or binge eating disorder; with nonspecific symptoms included, 13.2% suffered with an eating disorder (*Statistics & Research on Eating Disorders*, 2018). To put this in perspective, nearly one out of every eight adolescent females currently have an eating disorder or has suffered from one in the past.

Social Media History

For the past 30 years, social media has grown and evolved to be the influential online presence it is today. Evidence of social media first appeared in 1997 with the Six Degrees profile uploading service, in addition to online communication in the form of message boards, email and online chatting (“The Evolution of Social Media,” 2020). The first major site that is still widely known and used today, LinkedIn, was created in 2001 as a networking site for employers and large companies and businesses. Myspace, launched in 2003, kickstarted the type of stereotypical social media being used today (photo, music sharing). After five years, Myspace was taken over

by Facebook, the first major photo-based social media platform. Many other social media platforms such as Instagram, VSCO and twitter have based their platforms after Facebook's.

There are many different types of social media platforms for discussions, shopping, blogging and media. For the purpose of this paper, only social media platforms that involve media (photos, videos, etc.) and discussion boards/blogs will be discussed. The first type of platform is a true social network, that includes websites like Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn. The main purpose of the social network platform is to “encourage individuals and businesses to interact online and share data and thoughts for ensuring mutually productive relationships” (Kakkar, n.d.). The second platform is media sharing networks, which includes apps like Instagram, Snapchat, YouTube and Tik Tok. These apps are mostly photo-based or video-based, which means users share photographs, videos, and other forms of media on their own personal account. The big source of attraction is that these platforms allow users to develop their own brand and gain popularity among other users from what they post. Another type of social media platform is a discussion forum, such as Reddit and Quora, that are created to be “used for finding, sharing and discussing different kinds of information, opinion, and news” (Kakkar, n.d.). The discussion forums help to bring together groups of people who share similar interests, despite the distance between them.

Since these many platforms all have different purposes, they attract different groups of people. According to a recent study from the Pew Research Center in 2019, 75% of adults aged 18 to 24 years old use Instagram, 73% use Snapchat, and 76% use Facebook (Perrin et al., n.d.). Out of all adolescents in high school or younger, 33% use Instagram, 22% use Snapchat, and 61% use Facebook (Perrin et al., n.d.). When comparing genders, 43% of women use Instagram, 24% use Snapchat, and 75% use Facebook, compared to the 31%, 24%, and 63% of men that use

Instagram, Snapchat and Facebook, respectively (Perrin et al., n.d.). Out of the adults who reported using these social media platforms, about 74% visit Facebook once a day, and 51% of those visit several times a day; this is comparative to the 63% that visit Instagram at least once a day (42% several times) and the 61% that use Snapchat at least once a day (46% several times) (Perrin et al., n.d.). Adolescents and adults make up a majority of social media usage, but it is important to be aware of the social media presence of younger ages. Children aged between 8-12 spend an average of 6 hours a day on social media, which is just three hours less than teens aged between 13-18 who spend an average of 9 hours a day on social media (Common Sense Media Inc., 2015). All this data puts into perspective how many people are actively using social media: over three quarters of the U.S. adult population.

Social Media and Body Image

As social media grows in popularity, body image dissatisfaction and self-esteem have become more prominent in the country. According to a research, engagement with photo-based social media has had a negative effect on body image. One of the main instigators is the ‘selfie’ where users post a photo of only themselves. Experimental research finds that posting selfies on social media has worsened body image in women, especially “perception of fatness, physical attraction, and body size satisfaction” (Mills, Musto, Williams, & Tiggemann, 2018). When someone prepares to post a photo of themselves, the photo itself is scrutinized by the subject and often edited heavily to be perfect or worthy enough to be posted. Women who report this photo-based social media behavior of editing photos, in addition to other behaviors such as making comparisons to friends’ photos and archiving old photos, were reported to have greater disordered eating habits and attitudes (Mabe, Forney, & Keel, 2014). A study conducted by

Lonergan et al. further examined the correlation between these social media behaviors and eating disorders in adolescent males and females (ages 11-19). The study narrowed its focus to the manipulation of photos involving people, and how alterations to photos may impact one's internal feelings toward their body. The major finding was that avoidance of posting selfies, use of photo manipulation, and investment in others' selfies was associated with negative body image and increased risk for meeting criteria for an eating disorder (Lonergan et al., 2020). This study reveals a correlation between social media use and disordered eating habits that have a high potential to progress into an eating disorder.

A similar study by Jiotsa et al. looks at how often someone compares their physical appearance to someone in the media, and how that relates to their body dissatisfaction. Participants with a diagnosed eating disorder and participants recruited through social media completed questionnaires about their social media usage and their perception of their own body image. One finding of the study was that body satisfaction was associated with people that posted more selfies (Jiotsa et al., 2021). However, only 9% of the participants posted selfies once a week or more, while 57% posted only once or twice a month, and 34% never posted (Jiotsa et al., 2021). This means that the women who often post selfies and are satisfied with their bodies are in the minority, and near 90% of women felt body dissatisfaction. One major contributor to body dissatisfaction is the societal standard of beauty set and advertised by social media. About 7 out of 10 females report a decrease in body confidence that they attribute to pressure for perfection from social media's standards of beauty (Tiggemann & Slater, 2013). The presence and popularity of social media has exacerbated the influence of beauty standards because it allows for immediate access of comparisons.

Comparison of Different Populations

While this paper is mostly analyzing adolescent females, it is important to note that social media and eating disorders have an impact on all genders. Males are often overlooked when it comes to eating disorder awareness, treatment, and research despite making up 10-25% of all eating disorder cases (Sweeting et al. 2015). Many men don't end up receiving treatment or even an evaluation because they are either turned away for not 'looking' excessively over or underweight, or they fear seeking help because of the stigma around eating disorders. Eating disorders are often perceived of as feminine, and those who are diagnosed may sometimes be perceived as weak. Despite the difference in thoughts and emotions toward eating disorders between men and women, they both have the same risk factors and motivation for developing disordered eating habits. One thing that was interesting to note was the gender differences when it came to social media types and what had more of an impact on body image in girls compared to boys. A study by Wilksch et al. looks at the relationship between social media use and disordered eating in young adolescents aged 13-14. The study had middle school boys and girls complete a disordered eating questionnaire that focused on 4 subscales: shape concern, weight concern, restraint, and eating concern. The subjects then filled out a social media questionnaire about their hourly usage, platforms, and content. The study found that for girls, Snapchat and Tumblr were associated with higher disordered eating, and for boys, all social media was associated with higher levels of disordered eating. Breaking it down further, for girls, all platforms were linked with strict exercise, Snapchat was linked with meal skipping, meal control and little eating, Tumblr was associated with higher inclination for binge eating. For boys, all social media was associated with meal skipping, and Tumblr was linked with undereating (Wilksch et al., 2020). Despite the disparities between knowledge and acknowledgement of

eating disorders among men and women, it is important to note that eating disorders are serious and should be treated equally and fair among all genders since everyone is affected in similar ways.

Comorbidities

Aside from the obvious harm of an eating disorder alone, they are also incredibly detrimental because the presence of an eating disorder makes a person more susceptible to comorbidities and developing other mental illnesses. One possible co-occurring illness is depression. About 32-39% of individuals with anorexia nervosa, 36-50% of individuals with bulimia nervosa, and 33% of individuals with binge eating disorder were also diagnosed with major depressive disorder (Hudson et al., 2007). Another possible co-occurring illness is anxiety. About 48-51% of individuals with anorexia nervosa, 54-81% of individuals with bulimia nervosa, and 55-65% of individuals with binge eating disorder were also diagnosed with generalized anxiety disorder (Hudson et al., 2007). What this means in the grand scheme of things, is that social media leading to the development of eating disorders can lead to the development of other mental illnesses or disorders indirectly.

Adding onto the comorbidities, suicidal ideation increases with the presence of eating disorders. People with eating disorders “often will have a false sense of reality, may feel unworthy or hopeless, battle with disordered thoughts, have feelings of being emotional trapped and feel as if they are a burden,” all feelings and emotions that could make a person more susceptible to developing suicidal thoughts or making attempts (“Suicide and Eating Disorders,” 2017). A meta-analysis of the data from 1999-2016 shows that the rate of suicide attempts in patients with eating disorders is 20.8% (Udo et al., 2019). Putting it all together, this increase of

suicidal ideation and attempts prevalent among patients with eating disorders can be attributed to a chain reaction of events that stems from social media. As people increase their social media usage, they are more at risk for engaging in disordered eating habits that could result in an eating disorder. This is due to body dissatisfaction brought on by comparing one's physical features to someone else online. This person is then predisposed to other mental health comorbidities such as anxiety and depression, which can contribute to the development of suicidal thoughts. To lower the negative mental health complications that arise from eating disorders such as depression and suicide, it is key to remove the common denominator of social media that links everything together.

Conclusion

To conclude, the purpose of this research paper was to argue that social media use negatively contributes to the development of body dissatisfaction and eating disorders in adolescents. The evidence presented regarding the correlation between social media use and disordered eating, as well as the studies looking at body satisfaction and perceived body image support the thesis. While it is nearly impossible to completely eliminate all social media to prevent these negative outcomes, precautionary measures can be taken to prevent the development of disordered eating and other behaviors related to body image. For one, regular eating disorder testing in adolescents would help to catch any negative behaviors arising during developmental years and allow for early intervention. Additionally, being aware of the harmful effects of social media on body image dissatisfaction allows you to better put things in perspective and to avoid behaviors that negatively contribute to body image perception.

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