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The Role of Social Media in Shaping the Understanding of Eating Disorders

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ABSTRACT

In today's digital age, social media significantly shapes how individuals perceive themselves and others, especially concerning body image and eating behaviors. Visual platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube are influential in framing the public understanding of eating disorders—at times glamorizing harmful behaviors, while at other times contributing to the reduction of stigma (Perloff, 2014; Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015). This research investigates how different online communities, including pro-anorexia ("pro-ana") networks and body-positivity movements, influence discussions surrounding eating disorders. Through interviews and content analysis, the study examines how these groups portray themselves and the effects they may have on people's perceptions of body image and mental health. The findings aim to support mental health professionals and social media companies in identifying harmful content and fostering more positive, supportive online spaces (Levine & Murnen, 2009; Rodgers et al., 2020).

Introduction

Social media has become a powerful part of how we talk about body image and eating disorders. Platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube now shape much of today's public conversation. These spaces offer users the chance to build curated experiences—some that support recovery and self-acceptance through body positive communities, and others that promote harmful behaviours, such as pro anorexia ("pro ana") or pro bulimia ("pro mia") content (Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015; Ging & Garvey, 2018).

While media influence is not new, with print advertisements and television long contributing to rigid beauty standards, social media has intensified these pressures. Its highly visual nature, driven by likes, shares, and algorithmic ranking, makes idealized images more frequent and harder to escape (Perloff, 2014). Social media users are exposed not only to celebrity culture but also to everyday influencers whose posts often blur the line between health advice and unrealistic beauty ideals (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016).

The impact of this content is not one sided. While some individuals find motivation, community, or education that supports healthier relationships with food and body image, others may begin to normalize or even romanticize disordered eating behaviours (Rodgers et al., 2020). Hashtag movements, influencer trends, and viral posts can either challenge the stigma around eating disorders or quietly reinforce harmful patterns under the label of wellness or discipline (Rounsefell et al., 2020).

This study explores this dual impact of social media—how it can both challenge stigma around eating disorders and, at the same time, encourage or normalize disordered behaviours. By analyzing user generated content and conversations within online communities, the research aims to understand what kind of content is shaping public opinion the most and in what direction. The goal is to offer insights that can help mental health professionals and social media platforms respond more thoughtfully to the content users are exposed to every day.

Theoretical Framework

To understand the influence of social media on public perception of eating disorders, this study draws on two key psychological theories: **Social Cognitive Theory** and **Social Comparison Theory**.

Albert Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory emphasizes the role of observational learning, suggesting that individuals model behaviors they see rewarded or frequently displayed in their environment (Bandura, 2001). In the context of social media, young people often witness influencers or peers sharing content related to dieting, fitness, or specific body types that are presented as desirable. Over time, these repeated exposures can lead users to internalize certain beauty standards and even adopt similar behaviors in the hope of achieving the same perceived success, acceptance, or self-worth.

Social Comparison Theory, introduced by Leon Festinger (1954), adds another layer of understanding. According to this theory, individuals naturally evaluate themselves by comparing themselves to others. On social media, where content is highly curated and idealized, this often results in **upward**

comparisons comparing oneself to those who appear more attractive, thinner, or more successful. These comparisons can contribute to lower self-esteem, increased body dissatisfaction, and in some cases, trigger or worsen disordered eating behaviors (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016).

Together, these frameworks provide a lens through which this study examines how social media not only reflects but also reinforces societal norms around body image and eating. They help explain why certain online content, whether positive or harmful, can shape attitudes, influence behaviors, and even affect mental health outcomes related to eating disorders.

Review of Literature

Recent research shows that social media plays a complex and sometimes contradictory role in influencing body image and eating behaviors.

Marks, De Foe, and Collett (2020) explored how the wellness culture promoted on social media often masks dangerous narratives about weight, health, and beauty. Their work emphasizes that while these platforms frequently celebrate "fit" bodies and restrictive diets, they may also contribute to chronic stress, psychological distress, and body dissatisfaction. In response, they propose the *Health at Every Size (HAES)* approach, which promotes self-acceptance, intuitive eating, and movement for joy, rather than weight loss.

Berryman, Ferguson, and Negy (2018) provided a more nuanced view, finding that while general social media use does not necessarily harm mental health, specific behaviors such as vaguebooking (posting vague, attention-seeking content)—may be associated with suicidal ideation. Their findings suggest that the type and intent of social media use matter more than the amount of time spent on it.

Focusing on adolescents, **Fatima (2024)** investigated the relationship between social media use, self-esteem, and body image among 128 teenagers. Her study found a strong negative correlation between social media engagement and self-esteem, but an insignificant relationship with body image perception. This highlights the need to explore other mediating variables, such as content type and peer feedback, in understanding how adolescents internalize online influences.

Au and Cosh (2022) turned their attention to positive uses of social media, studying Instagram-based recovery communities. They found that users, many of whom suffered from various types of eating disorders, sought out these communities for emotional support, validation, and representation. However, the researchers also noted potential drawbacks, including exposure to unmoderated or triggering content. This demonstrates how social media can simultaneously offer healing spaces and reinforce harmful norms.

Competiello, Bizer, and Walker (2023) examined how exposure to stigmatizing content on social media affects people's attitudes toward mental health treatment. Their findings suggest that even brief exposure to negative posts, such as mocking tweets about therapy or eating disorders, can increase self-stigma and decrease willingness to seek help—particularly among women with lower identification with traditional gender roles.

In their study on adolescent girls, **Tiggemann and Slater (2014)** found that time spent on Facebook was linked to increased body dissatisfaction and disordered eating. The girls were frequently exposed to images and messages that promoted unrealistic beauty standards, further reinforcing insecurities and unhealthy comparisons.

Fardouly and Vartanian (2016) echoed these concerns, reviewing evidence that idealized images on social media can intensify body dissatisfaction and drive harmful behaviors. They also highlighted the unique aspects of social media such as filters, photo editing, and algorithm-driven exposure that amplify its influence compared to traditional media.

A comprehensive review by **Holland and Tiggemann (2016)** confirmed that repeated exposure to thin or "fitspiration" content contributes to body image issues and disordered eating, especially among young women. They argue that the highly visual and interactive nature of social media exacerbates these effects more than static, traditional forms of media.

Finally, **Perloff (2014)** offers a theoretical overview of how social media affects body image, particularly in young women. He connects media exposure with body dissatisfaction and eating disorders, while also proposing a framework for future research to better understand these relationships and develop appropriate interventions.

Research Design

This study follows a **mixed-methods design** to explore how social media influences public perceptions of eating disorders. The approach combines both qualitative and quantitative methods to gather a well-rounded understanding of the issue.

The **quantitative component** was carried out using a Google Forms survey. The form was shared with young men, women, and teenagers who are active social media users. The questions focused on their exposure to body image and eating disorder-related content online, how it made them feel, and how often they see or engage with such content. A total of **36 responses** were collected within a short time frame, offering valuable initial insight into how common these experiences are.

The **qualitative component** included basic content analysis of posts from platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube. Relevant hashtags such as *#proana*, *#bodypositivity*, and *#fitspiration* were used to identify common patterns in how eating disorders are portrayed online. In addition, a few informal conversations and follow-up comments from survey participants were considered to better understand personal reactions to this content.

By using both survey data and social media observations, this design allowed for a more balanced understanding combining what people experience personally with what is being publicly shared. This method was suitable for the limited time and resources available, while still giving meaningful insight into the research topic.

Methodology

Study Type

This research used a **mixed-methods approach**, combining a short-form online survey with a basic qualitative content analysis of social media posts. The mixed design helped capture both numerical data and personal insights about how social media influences perceptions of eating disorders.

Participants

Participants were **young men, women, and teenagers** aged 15 to 25 who are frequent users of social media platforms. A total of **36 people** responded to the survey, which was circulated online through WhatsApp, Instagram, and email. Participants were chosen using **purposive sampling**, targeting individuals who are highly aware of or exposed to social media content related to body image.

Data Collection Tools

1. **Google Forms Survey**:

   A 20-question Google Form was created and distributed online. It included multiple-choice, Likert scale, and short-answer questions focusing on:

   - Daily social media use

   - Exposure to body image or eating disorder-related content

   - Emotional and behavioral responses to that content

   - Opinions about body positivity and influencer culture

2. **Social Media Content Analysis**:

   Public posts were collected from Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube using relevant hashtags like **#proana**, **#bodypositivity**, and **#fitspiration**. The goal was to observe patterns in how eating disorders are represented online — whether they promote awareness, recovery, or harmful ideals.

Data Analysis

- **Survey responses** were analyzed using **descriptive statistics** (percentages and frequencies) to identify common patterns and opinions.

- **Thematic analysis** was used to identify recurring ideas, tones, and messages in the social media content.

Ethical Considerations

Participation in the study was **voluntary**, and responses were **anonymous**. Care was taken to ensure that no personally sensitive or triggering content was included in the survey or analysis.

Results

The findings from the Google Forms survey and social media content analysis provide insight into how social media influences public understanding and perception of eating disorders.

1. Survey Findings (n = 36)

Participants ranged from ages 15 to 25, with 61% identifying as female, 33% male, and 6% choosing not to disclose. The following data reflects common trends:

- **Social Media Usage**:

  - 78% of participants use social media for over 3 hours per day.

  - Instagram and TikTok were reported as the most used platforms.

- **Body Image & Self-Perception**:

  - 64% admitted to comparing their body to others they saw online.

- ○ 58% reported feeling worse about themselves after such comparisons.

- ○ 36% said social media content influenced them to change eating or exercise habits.

- **Content Exposure**:

- ○ 41% had seen or come across *pro-ana* (pro-anorexia) content.

- ○ 55% followed body-positive influencers or pages.

- ○ 47% believed that body-positive content helped reduce stigma around eating disorders.

- **Behavioral Impact**:

- ○ 33% unfollowed influencers who made them feel insecure.

- ○ 28% had used social media to talk about or seek support for body image concerns.

2. Visual Representation

The data from the survey was also visualized in the bar chart below to highlight the percentage of participants who reported specific experiences:
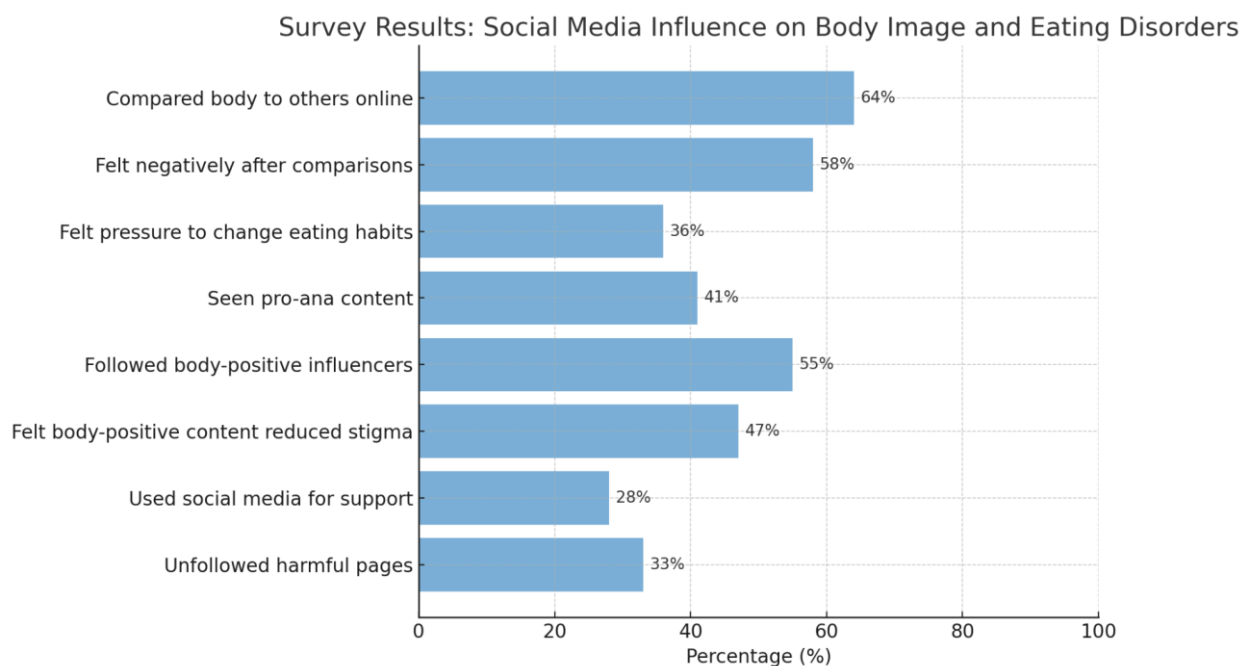

Figure 1: *Survey Responses – Social Media's Influence on Body Image and Eating Disorders*

(Bar graph showing percentages of participants reporting key experiences)

☐ Compared body to others online – 64%

☐ Felt negatively after comparisons – 58%

☐ Felt pressure to change eating habits – 36%

☐ Seen pro-ana content – 41% ☐ Followed body-positive influencers – 55%

☐ Felt body-positive content reduced stigma – 47%

☐ Used social media for support – 28%

☐ Unfollowed harmful pages – 33%

3. Social Media Content Analysis

A small sample of posts from Instagram and TikTok under hashtags like *#proana*, *#fitspiration*, and *#bodypositivity* were analyzed. Two contrasting themes were found:

- **Harmful Content**:

#Proana and *#fitspiration* often included idealized thin bodies, extreme diets, and calorie-counting. These posts tended to normalize unhealthy weight loss behaviors under the guise of "fitness" or "clean eating."

- **Supportive Content**:

    In contrast, posts under *#bodypositivity* and *#edrecovery* featured messages about self-love, therapy, and mental health awareness. These posts supported recovery and promoted acceptance of diverse body types.

Summary of Key Findings

- Social media can shape both harmful and healing perceptions of body image and eating disorders.

- A majority of participants reported that comparison and content from influencers negatively affected their self-image.

- At the same time, many also engaged with positive communities and unfollowed harmful pages as a form of self-protection.

- These results support the hypothesis that social media plays a dual role — both **normalizing disordered eating** and **destigmatizing recovery**.

Discussion

The findings of this study suggest that social media has a strong and complex influence on how eating disorders are perceived and experienced by young users. The data showed that a large portion of participants (64%) compared their bodies to people they saw online, and more than half (58%) felt negatively about themselves afterward. These results support previous research showing that visual-based platforms like Instagram and TikTok can worsen body dissatisfaction and promote unhealthy standards (Tiggemann & Slater, 2014; Holland & Tiggemann, 2016).

The appearance of harmful content — including *pro-ana* and *fitspiration* posts — was reported by 41% of participants, indicating that such content is still easily accessible despite platform guidelines. Many of these posts subtly promote restrictive eating, idealize thinness, and disguise disordered behavior as "fitness" or "clean eating," which aligns with previous concerns in the literature (Perloff, 2014; Marks et al., 2020).

At the same time, the study also highlighted a positive trend: 55% of respondents followed body-positive accounts, and 47% believed these pages helped reduce stigma about eating disorders. This suggests that body-positive and recovery-centered content is gaining visibility and offering a more supportive environment online. This finding mirrors recent research showing how online recovery communities and body-neutral movements can help foster self-acceptance and reduce mental health stigma (Au & Cosh, 2022; Competiello et al., 2023).

Importantly, some participants (33%) said they had unfollowed accounts that made them feel insecure. This may reflect a growing awareness among users to actively curate their feeds, avoid toxic content, and protect their mental health — a shift that wasn't as common in earlier studies (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016).

However, the study also found that only 28% had used social media to talk about their own experiences or seek support, suggesting that despite increased awareness, open conversations about body image and eating disorders remain limited. This points to the ongoing stigma and discomfort surrounding these topics, even in online spaces.

Overall, the findings support the hypothesis that social media both challenges and reinforces public perceptions of eating disorders. While harmful ideals still circulate, especially through influencer-driven content, there is growing resistance in the form of body-positive movements and intentional digital behavior (e.g., unfollowing toxic pages).

Suggestions

Based on the findings of this study, the following suggestions are proposed for future research, social media platforms, mental health professionals, and general users:

1. For Social Media Platforms

- **Stronger content moderation** is needed to identify and limit the spread of harmful content promoting eating disorders, especially under subtle tags like "fitspiration" or "thinspo."

- Platforms should **promote verified recovery and mental health pages**, especially for younger audiences.

- **Trigger warnings** and **reporting tools** should be made more accessible and visible for users who may encounter distressing content.

2. For Mental Health Professionals

- Therapists and counselors should ask clients about their **social media use** during intake sessions to understand its impact on self-image and behavior.

- Mental health campaigns should be extended to **digital platforms**, using relatable content to spread awareness about eating disorders and recovery support.

3. For Educational Institutions

- Schools and colleges can introduce **digital wellness programs** that help students understand how to use social media mindfully.

- Workshops on **body neutrality, media literacy**, and **mental health awareness** can equip young users with tools to resist harmful beauty standards.

4. For Content Creators

- Influencers and creators in the fitness, fashion, and lifestyle spaces should promote **balanced, inclusive content** and avoid glorifying extreme diets or appearances.

- Body-positive and mental health creators should be given **algorithmic support** to reach wider audiences.

5. For Future Research

- Future studies should aim for **larger and more diverse samples** to generalize findings across different regions and age groups.

- More in-depth **interviews or longitudinal studies** could reveal how perceptions evolve over time due to continued social media exposure.

- Exploring how **AI-generated content** (filters, editing apps, etc.) shapes body image may be a relevant area for further investigation.

Conclusion

This study explored how social media influences public perception of eating disorders, especially among young individuals who are highly engaged with platforms like Instagram and TikTok. The findings suggest that social media plays a complex and contradictory role: while it can promote harmful body comparisons, unrealistic standards, and disordered behaviors, it also offers space for support, recovery, and destigmatization through body-positive communities and mental health awareness.

From the survey responses and content analysis, it became clear that many users are affected by the content they consume often comparing themselves with others and feeling pressure to alter their appearance or eating habits. However, it was equally evident that some users are becoming more conscious of the content they engage with, unfollowing harmful accounts and choosing more positive, supportive communities.

While the study was limited by its small sample size and short time frame, it still offers valuable insight into the digital realities that shape how eating disorders are understood today. These insights can help mental health professionals, educators, and platform moderators develop better interventions, promote healthier online behavior, and protect vulnerable users.

In a world where online spaces often influence offline behaviors, understanding these patterns is an important step toward creating more inclusive, balanced, and informed digital environments.

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