

Does Social Media Have an Effect on the Development of Eating Disorders?

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Today, social media plays a huge role in our daily lives. Whether it is used occasionally or used every day, it impacts how we view things as well as the things we surround ourselves with, what we see as popular or what other people are doing, wearing, eating, or going. Usually, we change to form what we think is perfect or ideal. We see what our friends are doing on Facebook, we make posts on Instagram, we tweet about what's going on in politics on Twitter, we make videos on TikTok, we read magazines, and we idolize those in the spotlight. We see celebrities and athletes as these examples of what we want to be. This could be positive and encouraging, but it could also have a negative impact. The media has pushed people to live a certain way with their likes, dislikes, hair color, skin color, and most importantly, body types. The media paints being tall and skinny with long legs as the perfect body for a woman or being muscular and bigger for a man. The media has been doing this for as long as anyone can remember. The question of whether social media influences the development of eating disorders can be answered in many ways. By trying to achieve the perfect body, some people can develop eating disorders or other mental health issues. They can develop body dysmorphic disorder, or they can have a lack of body confidence which could then cause anxiety and depression. However, this may not be the case with everyone who is exposed to social media; there can be other issues that can cause these mental health issues. Even though this is true, the media should be more accepting of all body types and have more diverse models. Over the past few years, the media has been more inclusive, but it still has a long way to go. The topic of whether social media has an impact on the development of eating disorders is very controversial and there are different points of view. Based on the information, there seems to be a correlation between social media and eating disorders.

Identifying Eating Disorders

Eating disorders have affected many different people for years. There are multiple eating disorders as well as many different unhealthy eating habits that can progress or lead to an eating disorder. The article “Protect Me From my Selfie: Examining the Association Between Photo-Based Social Media Behaviors and Self-Reported Eating Disorders in Adolescence” gives a brief explanation of what eating disorders are. The article states, “Eating disorders are a group of mental health conditions characterized by maladaptive eating behaviors and body image concerns” (Lonergan, et al., 2020, p. 756). Eating disorders are classified as mental health illnesses or disorders. Although the effects are physical, the factors that are incorporated in the development of an eating disorder stem from one’s mental health and confidence level.

One eating disorder is called anorexia nervosa (AN). An individual who suffers from this illness usually has the following elements that focus predominantly on food restrictions: “an intense fear of weight gain, becoming “fat” and exhibiting behavior which demonstrates a fear of weight gain; and a disturbance in perceptions of one’s body that results in a lack of recognition and denial of being underweight” (Zastrow, 2018, p. 132). A person struggling with AN is consumed by restricting their food intake and what they eat. They experience their weight loss by not eating or even excessive exercise because they feel as if they are overweight or too big. Someone with anorexia nervosa will not take part in purging or binge eating behaviors. The severity of this disease is put into different levels based on the person’s current body mass index (BMI). The categories are mild, moderate, severe, and extreme. The onset of AN is related to stress, and the onset usually occurs during adolescence or young adulthood (Zastrow, 2018).

Another example of an eating disorder is bulimia nervosa (BN). A person who is suffering from BN is obsessed with weight gain prevention. They also partake in bingeing or

purging behaviors. “Other hallmark characteristics include poor compensatory measures to avoid weight gain such as laxative use, vomiting, medication misuse, excessive exercise, abstention from food in addition to a sense of self based on body perception of shape and weight” (Zastrow, 2018, p. 133). A person with bulimia nervosa not only will starve but will forcibly make themselves throw up to satisfy their impulse to make sure that they don’t gain weight. They are so overtaken by their illness that they will consume a lot of food in a small time frame, and then they will force it out of their system without gaining any of the nutrition or energy from the food they ate. Many of these episodes will be sparked by stress or even a loss of sense of control. This disorder makes them feel as if they have authority over what they are eating, giving them a sense of power or fulfillment. Similar to anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa is also categorized into levels of severity. However, the level of severity for BN is based on the episodes of purging per week. The categories are mild, moderate, severe, or extreme. The ages that are most impacted by this illness are adolescents and those in young adulthood. Bulimia nervosa is also triggered by stress but more predominately by multiple stressors.

The physical effects of these two eating disorders can be grave, and serious medical complications can be a result of suffering from these illnesses. The incidence of death occurs more so with individuals suffering from anorexia nervosa than those with bulimia nervosa. Some serious medical conditions that can be results of both disorders are changes in brain function, anemia, cardiac abnormalities, gastrointestinal problems, altered blood chemistry, and osteoporosis. Other symptoms that could be experienced due to eating disorders are depression, fatigue, and sleep difficulties. Individuals who take part in binge behaviors that include vomiting can experience dental complications such as teeth enamel loss and gum disease due to the hydrochloric acid in the vomit (Zastrow, 2018).

The third eating disorder that is thoroughly discussed in the *Introduction to Social Work and Social Welfare: Empowering People* textbook is binge-eating disorder (BED). An individual living with a binge-eating disorder will have recurring episodes of binge-eating at least weekly for a period of three months. This disorder can affect someone with average weight, someone who is underweight, someone who is overweight, and even someone who is obese. This illness is usually more common to see in individuals who are pursuing weight loss. “This disorder is characterized by rapid consumption of food until uncomfortably full, distressed feelings over this behavior, and a lack of self-control with food consumption” (Zastrow, 2018, p. 133). Someone dealing with BED feels shame due to the existence of this disorder. Like the other disorders, binge-eating disorders predominantly affect adolescents and people in young adulthood, but it also greatly affects those in later adulthood. This disorder is also organized into levels of severity such as mild, moderate, severe, and extreme. The level of severity is based on the number of binge-eating episodes per week (Zastrow, 2018).

The Effects of Eating Disorders

These examples of eating disorders are not the only types of eating disorders but they are the most known, the most common, as well as the most researched. The article “Study Shows Social Media May Play a Role in Eating Disorders Among Teens” explains how many people are affected by these illnesses. Eating disorders affect a large number of people. The article points out that there are 30 million people in the United States that are affected by eating disorders with an average age of 18 to 20 years old (Kapil, 2020). Although there are more instances of eating disorders among teenagers and young adults, it still can affect someone at any age. Another thing to keep in mind is the fact that long-term medical issues can affect an individual for the rest of their life.

There are many unhealthy eating habits or behaviors that can have an immense as well as negative affect on someone's life. Unhealthy eating disorders could stem from a diet where someone must watch their calories. Some people who go on diets become obsessed with counting their calories to the point where they don't get the amount of nutrition that they need. The article, "Study Shows Social Media May Play a Role in Eating Disorders Among Teens" by Rubina Kapil (2020) shared the experience of a vegan food blogger named Jordan Younger. Younger shared her struggles while being an influencer on Instagram and the impact it had on her life. She explained that her healthy eating lifestyle quickly developed into an eating disorder. Like others, she became obsessed with what she was eating, counting calories, not eating certain meals, and even lacking nutritional foods. A quote from the article that came from Jordan really helped put a person to the unfortunate circumstances of eating disorders. "The obsession with my diet took up my every waking hour. It was stopping me from leading a normal life full of social activities and other interests," she said" (Kapil, 2020, p. 4). Younger realized how much her diet was taking over her life.

Another eating behavior that is very obstructive to one's health is skipping meals. Whether or not it starts as an accident, some people start to develop the unhealthy habit of skipping meals throughout the day. Skipping meals is a very common habit that many people have experienced. For a personal example, I went for a year or two only eating one meal a day, and that began to affect not only my physical health, but it also had a negative impact on my mental health. The same article that explained Younger's struggles also went on to discuss skipping meals. The article talked about how common the habit of skipping meals is within adolescents and even young adults. There was a study performed in the hopes of finding what things influenced someone's eating behavior as well as what type of behaviors occur in

adolescents. In this study, they found that eating behaviors related to eating disorders, especially skipping meals, occurred in many of the adolescents who participated in the study. About 52% of the girls and 45% of the boys that participated in the study reported that they either skipped meals or had some other types of behaviors that are associated with eating disorders (Kapil, 2020).

Along with skipping meals, there are other behaviors that are associated with either the development of an eating disorder or the continuation of an eating disorder. The article “Protect Me from My Selfie: Examining the Association Between Photo-Based Social Media Behaviors and Self-Reported Eating Disorders in Adolescence” explains some of those types of behaviors. One example is called body checking. Body checking behavior consists of “compulsive scrutiny of perceived appearance flaws or areas of overvaluation” (Lonergan, et al., 2020, p. 756). Body checking can be a big factor in a negative body image which can lead to unhealthy eating behaviors. By focusing on flaws or disliked features, people develop more of a pessimistic mindset, and start to put themselves down. Rather than picking at what is wrong with their body by body checking, one can focus on what they like about how they look to avoid developing unhealthy habits. Another behavior that is discussed in this article is avoidance. Avoidance may be self-explanatory within itself, but the explanation in the article is “avoiding one's reflection” (Lonergan, et al., 2020, p. 756). When people put pressure on themselves to not look at their reflection, they begin to lose who they are. By focusing only on their physical state, they lose a sense of their mental state.

Body Image and Body Confidence

Body image and body confidence are crucial to one's happiness and mental health. Without having confidence in how they look, one can retreat into a feeling of self-loathing which

can lead to depression, unhealthy behaviors, as well as other mental health issues. “Body Image, Eating Disorders, and the Media,” which was written by Hogan and Strasburger (2008), puts a huge emphasis on how crucial a positive body image is for children and teenagers. The article states, “Body image is a merging of one’s outer appearance with perceptions derived from personal and cultural factors; body image is a “multidimensional construct that is influenced by biological, psychologic, and social factors” (Hogan & Strasburger, 2008, p. 521). Thus, an adolescent will construct his or her body image in many ways, incorporating input from family, peers, and media.

Another article “Does Social Media Drive Eating Disorders,” which was written by Alison Escalante (2019), dove into the importance of body confidence and a positive body image. The influence from social media can have a huge impact on someone’s body image and how they feel about how they look. This article discussed a study that was published in the *International Journal of Eating Disorders*. This study explored the effects spending time on social media had on kids. Like other studies, this study found that there was a clear link between the use of social media platforms and unhealthy behaviors such as eating disorders. They also found that this occurred at younger ages than previous studies have shown. Another topic discussed in this article is the fact that it isn’t only impacting women, but men also suffer from eating disorders and negative body images almost as much as women (Escalante, 2020). For many years, it was believed that only women were exposed to the negative world created by the media, but men are being subjected to similar expectations from the media.

Gender Differences

For women, the expectations created by the media generally lean towards a thin or slimmer body, tall, and being physically fit. The expectations for men are a bit different. Men are

expected to be bigger or more bulky, muscular, toned and strong. The article titled “The Impact of the Media on Eating Disorders in Children and Adolescents” discusses the body types that have been favored by the magazines. “Over time the cultural ideal for women’s body size and shape has become considerably thinner and leaner and men’s body size and shape has become stronger and more muscular” (Morris & Katzman, 2003, p. 4). The media creates these outlines for what is attractive and what is not. They highlight people that they consider attractive, whereas body types that don’t fit this mold are thought of less than.

When people are constantly told that to look a certain way is more attractive or more worthy than a different way, it starts to affect them not only on an emotional level, but on a physical level. They begin to change how they look to look like the ideals created by the media. Those who have a negative body image, unhealthy eating behaviors, or those who lack self-confidence can be a member of any social class, any age, gender, or race. Anyone can be subjected to criticism of their body, how they look, or whether they are physically fit. “Body image and dissatisfaction with one’s body vary across ethnic and racial groups in America” (Hogan & Strasburger, 2008, p. 535). Whether someone is one race or another, everyone is subject to scrutiny for not looking a certain way.

The Influence of Western Television

For as long as anyone can remember, magazines, television, and social media have shown the spotlight on specific body types. Showcasing only a few body types can have a negative effect on the way one may view themselves. This shows true in the article, “The Media’s Influence on Eating Disorders” which was written by Cowden and Goldman (2020). This article discussed a study that had taken place in Fiji when Western television was introduced to the island. This study was published in 2002, and it assessed how television influenced females in

Fiji. The effects of Western television being introduced to women in Fiji changed how they looked at themselves. Prior to the introduction of television, curvy bodies were valued, and diets were discouraged. In 1995, they conducted a survey of adolescent girls in Fiji. This survey found that almost none of the girls had been dieting in order to lose weight. Along with that, none of the participants had been having unhealthy behaviors such as self-induced vomit.

However, after being exposed to television, women wanted a slimmer body and began dieting as well as starting bad eating habits. They repeated this survey in 1998, which was three years after the introduction of Western television. They found that 11.3% of the girls had reported self-induced vomiting in order to control their weight. 69% of girls had reported that they were dieting and 74% had reported that they felt “too big” or fat most of the time (Cowden & Goldman, 2020). There is a huge difference between the two surveys. Not only does the media push the perfect body types, but so do all platforms of promotion or platforms that relate to picture-based things. The influence of magazines has a huge impact as well. Another survey discussed in this article was a survey that was conducted on girls from grades 5-12th. This survey found that about 69% felt that the pictures in the magazines influenced their idea of the perfect body or body shape. About 47% of the girls in this survey also reported that they wanted to lose weight because of the pictures in the magazines (Cowden & Goldman, 2020). Only showing or posting certain body types can have a large and negative impact on adolescent girls.

Social Media

A huge contributor to a negative body image is picture based social media platforms. The image based social media platforms have the biggest impact because one can look at the pictures and compare themselves to what they see. This creates a negative environment for adolescents (Escalante, 2020). Most social media sites now consist of sharing or posting pictures. The media

creates ideas of what we should look like or what we want to look like. All media platforms that are image based play a role in how one views different body types. In the article “Body Image, Eating Disorders, and the Media,” Hogan and Strasburger (2008) discuss the role that media plays on the opinions of different body types and what society makes us think about other body types:

Media images and messages offer powerful cues about how we need to look, what we need to eat, and what we must buy. Whether on the television, movie screen, or the front page of teen-focused magazines or *People*, we see graphically which bodies are beautiful, which shapes are “hot,” and who is successful or not. (Hogan & Strasburger, 2008)

We base our views of body types on what is in the media. We look to see who’s on the front cover of the magazine, who is being highlighted in fashion, who has the most likes on Instagram, or who is the “Heather” on TikTok.

As a society, we influence one another to look a certain way, act a certain way, eat a certain way, and we all want to be the “it” person. We want to have the positive attention on us and have the love that many celebrities receive for their looks or their bodies, when in reality, those in the spotlight are dealing with the same issues as us. They compare themselves to each other and they get scrutinized if they look a certain way or gain weight. When we put that pressure on someone to be perfect, they start to feel as if they must be perfect, so they end up hurting themselves to make their fans or the media happy or for them to think of them positively again. As pictures are being posted on social media, those that post those pictures are subject to criticism from not only people on social media, but themselves. “Posting selfies on social media worsened women’s body image, including perception of fatness, physical attraction, and body

satisfaction” (Loneragan et al., 2020, p. 756). People look for validation from others to feel confident or attractive. We base our confidence level on feedback and comments from others. If someone posts a picture that they feel confident in but they don’t receive reassurance from others or they get negative reactions, they begin to question whether they look good or attractive. An individual is their own worst critic. They can focus on all of their flaws and can put themselves down. An obstacle that is now being faced on social media and other media platforms is photoshop or picture editing. For years, magazines have been photoshopped to make someone look good and to hide flaws. This has added to the negative environment. Due to the constant use of picture based social media apps, now everyone uses editing apps or edits their pictures in hopes of looking better and getting more likes or attention.

Commercial advertising is one of many media platforms that promote certain things whether it be materials, cars, clothes, or food. Commercials have been a big influence on body image among people in society. “Historically, there has been an association between advertising and disordered body image and disordered eating. Interestingly, as advertisements for diet-food products increased on television between 1973 and 1991, a rise in eating disorders occurred as well” (Hogan & Strasburger, 2008, p. 529). The pressure from advertisements and commercials to lose weight created this negative environment. Women felt that they had to be a certain size to be pretty and attractive, so they began to start developing eating disorders due to their want to be smaller. Modeling is another huge culprit when talking about the negative environment made by the media. Unfortunately, models are known to be underweight and to also have poor mental health due to constant scrutiny from the media. “They found that there was a significant decrease in the models’ body weights and measurements, with 70% of the women being underweight and greater than 75% of the women were less than 85% of their ideal body weight” (Morris &

Katzman, 2003, p. 4). The pressure to look a certain way not only affects people looking at the material in the media but also the people in the pictures and advertisements. They are affected just as much or even more so than the viewers.

Family and Peer Pressure

Although social media plays a big role in our lives, it is not the only thing that people are influenced by to look a certain way. The answer to whether or not social media has an impact on the development of eating disorders is not a simple yes or no answer. Our family members, peers, and friends also help create body ideals. “An adolescent constructs her or his body image in many ways, incorporating input from family, peers, and media. Pressure to emulate the Western body ideal, ultra-thin for women and muscular for men, comes from parents, friends, and the media” (Hogan & Strasburger, 2008, p. 521). Not only do we look at the media when figuring out what is perfect, we are also greatly influenced by the people we surround ourselves with. In a lot of cases, parents are a big factor in how we build our body image. There have been many studies that have shown that many adolescents take their parents' judgements and views into consideration. A study found that many boys and girls revealed that their parents play a huge role in the development of concerns of weight as well as weight control practices.

Another study discussed in the same article found that many adolescents reported that their peers play a huge role in how they view weight and bodies. This large study found that about 7000 girls from the ages of 9 to 14 years old had reported that they found their peers to be very influential on someone's desire to lose weight or even gain weight (Hogan & Strasburger, 2008). We compare ourselves to our friends and our peers. We also ask them for advice or their opinions. They could have a certain view of body types that were influenced by their parents, that could be different from someone else's. All in all, most teenagers want to be the “it” person

so they will adjust to whatever the norms or the most attractive qualities are. Unfortunately, peer pressure is a huge issue for many young kids and teenagers. Another factor that should be taken into consideration when trying to find out what factors influence a negative body image or an eating disorder is biology. There has been some correlation found that connects these disorders to genetics.

Education is Important

Whether social media has an effect on the development of eating disorders, is still a topic that needs more research and more data in order to give a definitive answer. Some people may oppose the idea that I am supporting, which is that social media does have an effect. There are many sources that support the idea that social media has an influence on eating disorders, but there are also sources that say it is a factor, but it is not the only piece of the puzzle. Either way, eating disorders have been an issue that many people have had to endure. There needs to be more people educated about these disorders that can cost people their life. As a society, we need to positively encourage one another to embrace the way we look. Social media platforms are beginning to incorporate more body types, but there is still a long way to go if we want to solve this issue.

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