

Eating Away Adolescents: Social Media

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December 4, 2020

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Social media has progressively become a source of the development of eating disorders among adolescents today. The development of eating disorders causes a variety of health complications within the body that are concerning for today's generation of social media-using teens. For instance, if the adolescent is suffering from an eating disorder such as Anorexia Nervosa, the mortality rate can increase around 5.6% for every decade that the individual remains with the eating disorder; although some can defer from the mortality rate, the consequences that the body suffers from years of malnutrition can ultimately lead to the slow decay of the body in the long run (Couturier et al., 2020). Some of the possible causes for the development of eating disorders among adolescents may include the viewing of blogs or social media posts that include ways to lose excessive weight, social media influencers providing the "ideal" body type within their social media posts through outlets such as Instagram, or even other social media users commenting or posting about others' weight or body image. A large portion of social media posts or comments can contain negative and detrimental content for an individual with low self-esteem and questioning of their body image. Individuals that are affected by this problem include specifically the adolescent or teen generation, but can also include adults, or the younger children who will experience it more as they continue to grow up. Specific groups or genders can be at a higher risk for developing an eating disorders compared to others. For example, women and individuals who identify within the LGBT+ community are at a greater risk due to the stigma and discrimination caused by their different identities. Institutions that may be affected by the problem would include households, schools, hospitals, and inpatient facilities as well. These institutions may see a wide variety of ages, genders, and races among their facilities because of the detrimental effects of eating disorders that cover a wide variety of individuals.

Possible solutions to this problem could include social media apps or programs censoring more of what individuals post to ensure that certain posts about unhealthy eating disorder methods could be removed, limiting the amount of time individuals spend on social media, and also providing more support for individuals who may suffer from eating disorders and try to limit the stigma that surrounds the topic of eating disorders and mental health. In result, social media has evolved into one of the leading causes of the development of eating disorders among the adolescent age range because of the negative content included across social media outlets.

The Setting of Body Ideals and Body Image

Body ideals and body image have been prevalent among society for hundreds of years; throughout the 20th century, women's body ideals were that women should be slender and skinny. Many women would wear corsets to make themselves appear thinner to fit into the body ideals that society set for them. "Body image can be defined as the perception that the individual has in mind about the size, structure, shape and contour of the body, as well as the feelings regarding to these characteristics and the parts that constitute it" (Freire et al., 2020, para.7). Social media feeds into this perception that men and women need to fit into specific societal standards in order to be seen as handsome or beautiful. Among social media outlets, influencers and the typical adolescent tend to post content such as photographs that include their bodies, which in turn can lead to others commenting about how perfect they look or how amazing they may look within the photograph. As a result, adolescents see posts such as these and notice that thinner and fit men and women tend to get more positive comments on how good they may look in the post. This cycle creates the trend of body ideals which adolescents tend to chase after when they see the positive affirmation that others receive on their posts. For instance, a report from the journal *Children* titled "Effects of Social Media and Smartphone Use on Body Esteem

in Female Adolescents: Testing a Cognitive and Affective Model” states that frequent usage of social media outlets reinforces the thin body image which increases the risk for female adolescents aged 13 to 18 years old (Yang et al., 2020). Social media can include negative content in which users are informing other users that being thin and fit is the proper and healthy lifestyle. Social media content can range anywhere from photographs, to videos, to blogs about how to be thin and healthy, which can be detrimental for someone with an already developed eating disorder to see because they then think that they are not thin enough and continue to damage their body. An individual being dissatisfied with how their body may look and setting body ideals for themselves can lead to consequences such as excessive exercise, non-essential medical procedures such as removal of “excess” fat, and many other harmful strategies that these individuals with eating disorders may try to use (Freire et al., 2020).

The self-building process of body image and body ideals begins to emerge around the adolescent age range, such as in teens and college students, which comes along with a whole new vulnerability to negative posts and comments about one’s body or self-image (Parra Carriedo et al., 2020). The research included in the *Journal of Eating Disorders* consisted of 911 college-aged students between 18 years old and 28 years old to observe the factors that can lead to the development of eating disorders such as Orthorexia Nervosa, a disorder that causes an individual to become obsessive over healthy eating in an unhealthy manner, including gender and age of the individual (Parra Carriedo et al., 2020). The results confirmed that adolescent aged women are more vulnerable to developing an eating disorder such as Orthorexia Nervosa; this could be attributed to the stigma that women who weigh more are not socially deemed as beautiful, especially among social media (Parra Carriedo et al., 2020). The individuals who use social media have a common tendency to bring down women who may weigh over 150 pounds; men

who comment or post about their preferred size of a woman are among the detrimental comments and posts that can make a woman question their beauty strictly based upon their weight and body shape alone. Adding in the fact that women (and men) are developing their body image at the same time and age that most individuals begin to use social media, this can cause a major effect on whether or not the individual may develop an eating disorder; individuals who can be strong enough to look past body ideals and societal idealization can make it through this difficult time of their adolescence without developing an eating disorder, but not all individuals are that lucky.

Among social media, the emergence of everchanging body ideals occurs with hundreds of photographs, comments, videos, blogs, and many other types of social media content. For instance, within the last twenty years, the wanted body ideal always consisted of skinny and slender women with a little amount of muscle on her bones (Ralph-Nearman & Filik, 2020). But as previously mentioned, the standard body ideal is everchanging as life continues through the years. Ralph-Nearman and Filik (2020) delineate the new body ideal that emerged in the recent years, “Women also have recently been shown to prefer an extremely thin and muscular body rather than merely an extremely thin body” (para. 2). This new body ideal of having a thin yet muscular body is extremely prevalent within today’s social media posts. Women workout influencers fit this exact description of extremely thin yet muscular, which provides other women with the new goal of becoming these women in these posts. This can lead to eating disorder symptoms such as excessive exercising to gain muscle while losing the weight to become skinny; this quickly becomes an unrealistic goal because it is practically impossible to gain muscle without gaining weight at the same time. In turn, this will accelerate the desire to work out even more along with not nourishing the body properly to fuel for healthy workouts.

Environmental factors can play a sideline role with social media in harming one's body image and potentially lead to the development of an eating disorder or even worsen a preexisting eating disorder. For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020, the whole world had to adapt to the rising number of COVID-19 cases around the world and begin to self-isolate within households. Due to this new adaptation to the situation of the world during the pandemic, many individuals turned to new means of preventing boredom. One of those new means of preventing boredom happened to be the increased usage of social media across the world. As stated within the *Journal of Eating Disorders* by Mohsen Khosravi (2020), spending more time on social media can cause a major impact on those who may have a developing eating disorder, or those who may be trying to recover from one. This is a result of spending more time on social media because others may post workout videos or blogs that show what the idealized body of today's society has to look like; as a result, individuals may begin to not properly nourish their bodies along with excessive exercising, which they can now do more in their homes because of the mandates that were put in place to stay within the confines of home as much as possible to limit the spread of COVID-19. Environmental factors such as the spread of COVID-19 can work alongside social media to create a detrimental negative impact that can increase the speed of development of an eating disorder.

Editing and Photoshop

Correlating with the thin body image ideal, many users on social media tend to edit and enhance their posts to make themselves look increasingly thin, or to have bigger or more muscular features, especially among men's content. Women's ideal body type tends to include one of thinness, along with larger female features such as breasts. On the male side, their social media content tends to enhance features such as abdominal and arm muscles that are said to

attract females and significant others. Social media influencers such as Cassey Ho, who creates exercise routines to post on social media, admitted to editing her workout pictures or selfies in order to limit the amount of criticism that she herself received on social media. This reveals that influencers today, whom individuals compare their bodies to on a daily basis, edit their photographs to make an idealized version of themselves that social media users today think are real and comparable to their own figures. This causes a detrimental effect because when an individual such as Cassey Ho posts these edited photos, it provides an unrealistic standard for women and men to “look up to” and compare their bodies to which can lead to excessive exercise and improper eating behaviors. These individuals believe that if the influencers can create these skinny and muscular body figures from working out a lot that they can create the same thing; this in turn creates a false hope because even the influencers who work out and create these posts cannot achieve these unrealistic body standards without using other methods such as editing and photoshop to thin out their bodies or make body parts such as the buttock to look larger and more appealing to their audience. The article titled “Eating Disorders and Body Image Concerns in Men of Color: Cultural Considerations” illuminates the point that social media tends to present idealized body types such as the “perfect” height, weight, and muscularity which can easily lead to body image concerns among adolescent males because they grow up on social media thinking that they have to look a certain way to be considered attractive (Stewardson et al., 2020). More often than not, different photoshoots for major brands or businesses enhance their photos to make a woman look thinner and a male look more muscular and masculine. Companies enhance their photos or videos to fit the ideal body type that was previously mentioned because they know that those specific body types are what consumers want to see in their advertisements. The report titled “Effects of Social Media and Smartphone

Use on Body Esteem in Female Adolescents: Testing a Cognitive and Affective Model” shared the overall broad definition of what social media truly is, it includes “highly visual social networking platforms, which promote the exchange of user-generated, aesthetically enhanced photos and videos” (Yang et al., 2020, para. 2). Enhancing photos has become a normalized task when it comes to preparing content to post which can lead individuals to create a false perception of what the socially acceptable body should look like to others. Ultimately, this can cause severe damage to adolescents who are developing their body image in this point of their lives. It can lead to the development of eating disorders at a young and fragile age because of the constant viewing of enhanced, idealized body types.

Cyber Bullying on Social Media

As social media popularizes the posting of content online along with commenting and liking other individuals’ posts, the negativity that some individuals want to bring upon others comes alongside it. Social media today can either benefit or severely hinder an individual’s recovery from an eating disorder, or bring upon the development of a new one, because of the posting of blogs, photographs, and comments that give people information on how to purge or enforce the idea that individuals should look a specific way to fit into society’s ideals (Ray, 2020). One may not realize the harm that can be caused from posting a specific comment, photograph, or video on social media; individuals can develop a sensitivity to certain comments if they are struggling with their own body image or confidence, which can lead to or hinder recovery from an eating disorder. Although many individuals will experience some kind of cyber bullying throughout their lives, identifying with certain groups, genders, religions, and many others may increase the likelihood and abundance of the cyber bullying. For instance, the LGBT+ population is at a higher risk for developing eating disorders due to the daily

discrimination and stigma that surrounds their identity. This discrimination and stigma is prevalent all throughout their lives, including their online lives in which cyber bullies take advantage of individuals and further the separation from society that LGBT+ individuals typically feel (Parker & Harriger, 2020). An individual should not have to endure potential consequences such as eating disorders because of the ongoing stigma and discrimination that surrounds something as simple as their sexual or gender identity. Society needs to work on coming together to combat physical and mental disorders such as eating disorders because if society does not work to fight disorders such as these, hundreds and thousands of individuals will continue to develop these potentially fatal disorders which is the last thing that an individual's friends or family members should have to worry about because of environmental factors such as social media.

Abstract: The Consequences of Eating Disorders

The development of eating disorders caused by factors such as social media can create a vast list of consequences that an individual may have to suffer through while being diagnosed or recovering from a type of eating disorder. For instance, some of the lasting consequences that an individual with an eating disorder can develop may include, but are not limited to,

Heart damage, failure of the endocrine system, infarction and perforation of the stomach after acute dilation, multiple suicide attempts, aspiration, injury or rupture of the esophagus, severe bleeding per rectum causing anemia due to laxative abuse, hypokalemic nephropathy, depressive disorders due to starvation, and severe erosion of the enamel of the teeth resulting in extensive loss of teeth. (Brown, 1985, para. 1)

Although the article may be of less recency, these consequences of eating disorders still remain the same. Even without looking into the leading causes of the development of eating disorders,

one needs to recognize the severity of the harm that eating disorders can lead to even after they have been in recovery from an eating disorder. Society may overlook the severe suffering that an individual with an eating disorder may be going through; more often than not one individual hears another individual, or many, tell someone who has an underlying eating disorder to just go out and eat a burger or just to eat something in general. Curing an eating disorder is not as simple as just eating a burger or going and eating a full course meal; it takes months, if not years, to recover from the physical and emotional trauma that their body has endured. It is comparable to recovering from an addiction to drugs or alcohol; the individual cannot just put down the abused substance and automatically flip a switch inside of their heads to cure their addiction. It takes countless hours of rehab and withdrawal that are incredibly challenging for the individual themselves, but also for their friends and family who have to watch them suffer in order to get better. Individuals should engage in severe questioning of their morals before posting a certain comment or photograph that can trigger the development of an eating disorder among many individuals; one individual should not be part of the reason that another individual can potentially develop these fatal consequences.

The Role of Genetics and Biological Factors

Although environmental factors such as social media may play a role in contributing to the development of eating disorders, scientists and researchers have conducted experiments and studies in which found that genetics and specific neurotransmitters play a significant role in the development of eating disorders. One experimental study conducted by Jessica L. Suisman (2012) and her team led to the conclusion that “although prior research focused on psychosocial factors, genetic influences on thin-ideal internalization were significant and moderate in magnitude” (Suisman et al., 2012, para. 4). In order to come to this conclusion, Suisman (2012)

and her team observed 343 post pubertal female twins and took assessments on each of their thin-ideal internalizations in order to determine if the development of eating disorders comes from environmental factors or genetic factors. Along with testing the impact of genetics, scientific researchers also provided insight on how serotonin, also known as 5-HT, can impact eating behaviors among individuals. Research results from the *Journal of Psychiatry & Neuroscience* delineates, “In animals and in humans, manipulations that increase 5-HT neurotransmission lead to reduced eating behavior, whereas those that reduce 5-HT activity precipitate compulsive or binge eating” (Steiger, 2004, para. 8). As a result of this conclusion, Anorexia Nervosa can be correlated with having an increased level of serotonin throughout the body, while eating disorders such as Bulimia Nervosa can be correlated with having a decreased level of serotonin throughout the body (Steiger, 2004). By finding these results, some may say that genetics and the different neurotransmitters in our bodies have a bigger role in the development of eating disorders among adolescents today, although there were some points of question within the data and information provided in Steiger’s research. For instance, the article mentioned that there were findings that fully recovered eating disorder patients (in terms of their weight) were found to also have elevated 5-HT levels, one’s that correlate with the levels of Anorexia Nervosa patients (Steiger, 2004). Steiger (2004) later states that these findings may show the correlation that “Anorexia Nervosa may actually correspond to a primary state of increased 5-HT tone...” (para. 9). These findings provide for questioning of whether or not this is a primary state of 5-HT tone or if it develops alongside the eating disorder. Although genetics and neurotransmitters such as serotonin may play a role in this development of eating disorders, it can be argued that social media has a larger negative impact on the development of eating disorders because of how prevalent social media is today among the adolescent age group.

Adolescents today can be seen using their electronic devices constantly out in public, in school and at home; the majority of this time, adolescents will be using social media platforms such as Instagram or Snapchat to know the latest details of what is going on in the world or even just within their friend groups.

Concluding Statement

Social media has progressively become the reason that individuals across the world are developing potentially deadly eating disorders. These eating disorders that develop from social media cause a wide range of harmful consequences such as depression, suicide attempts, and other medical harm. Social media blogs, platforms such as Instagram or Facebook, or even video platforms such as YouTube have created a potentially harmful environment for individuals who were recently diagnosed or recovering from eating disorders because of the idealization of body weights and types within society. Influencers, celebrities, and the typical social media users can post content or comments that may originally seem harmless but can cause serious triggers and harm to individuals who are vulnerable to societal idealizations such as society's ideal body weight and also body shapes. The upcoming and current generations of adolescents are at a specifically high risk for this problem because of their increasing use of social media outlets today, especially during environmentally challenging times such as a global pandemic in which adolescents turn to social media usage more and more as they are isolated from typical daily tasks such as going to school. Institutions such as households, schools and hospitals may see an increase in individuals affected by this issue because of the rising use of social media and other environmental factors surrounding today's adolescents such as global pandemics which lead to increased social media usage. Will society ever see a shift in the effects of social media in which individuals have a more positive experience and not question how their body may look to others?

Individuals who use social media today are asked to be more cautious when they are questioning whether to post a specific video, photograph, or even just a simple comment, especially when it may be about an individual's weight or body image. One may not think what they are posting can have such a negative effect on an individual, but that is what today's society needs to work on within the upcoming generations of social media users. It is also necessary that society tries to lessen the number of standards that are created on a daily basis. These societal standards such as what weight someone should be to be considered pretty or handsome need to be stopped before more individuals begin to develop these potentially fatal eating disorders. Although genetics and biological factors contribute to the development of eating disorders among adolescents, it is increasingly prevalent that social media is a large portion of an adolescent's life that needs to be accounted for when observing the causes of the development of eating disorders among adolescents.

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