

## Social Media and Eating Disorders

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“I have neither given nor received help on this work,  
nor am I aware of any infraction of the Honor Code.”

Along with the invention of the internet, social media came about as a way to stay in touch with your old roommate from college or to make connections with famous influencers, but has our mindless scrolling through other peoples lives began to cause problems in our own? Setting the obvious perks of social media aside, it isn't hard to see the possible drawbacks of the information age we are currently living in. In the past few years we have made incredible advancements in internet safety in regards to keeping users safe from internet scams and online predators but another, often less discussed danger, is the psychological effects social media can have on its users and how it is being used to perpetuate unrealistic and unhealthy beauty standards across the internet. What are we doing to protect ourselves and others from these hidden dangers of the social media websites we access every day?

The evidence showing the psychological harm being done by social media has become increasingly common and difficult to ignore. Countless studies have been done to show that social media has adverse effects on users mental health and ultimately on their life. For example, one study that focused on body image uncovered significant evidence linking time spent using various social media websites to participants diminishing self-image (Holland & Tiggemann, 2016). This means that the more time participants spent on social media platforms, the worse they felt about themselves and their bodies. There are an incredible amount of evidence-based studies that can be found that all display the same harmful data: visual platforms on social media are targeting vulnerable users and harboring a culture that perpetuates unrealistic body standards and ideals for all parties involved. All of these platforms are allowing users to promote unhealthy behaviors online to thousands of people every day,

and the psychological harm that they have done in peoples lives over the years is truly incalculable.

We hear it time and time again, “don’t always believe what you read on the internet”, but what about what we see? Social media is littered with photoshopped and edited photos that blur out imperfections and put unrealistic ideas of beauty and perfectionism in the minds of its users. Before social media and the advancement of the internet, people could find images of professionally photoshopped stomachs and thigh gaps on the magazine rack while waiting in line at the grocery store or on a billboard you ride past when driving on the highway, but now these images are virtually everywhere and can be accessed at our fingertips in seconds. These techniques that once filled magazines and advertisements have now made their way back to the forefront of our lives, but with one significant difference: these editing tools once utilized by professional photographers and editors are now in the hands, or more often times pockets, of anyone with access to the internet. This means that anyone with a computer or smartphone has the power to fundamentally change the way that they choose to present themselves to others online with the click of a button. A recent study to investigate the effects of digitally edited Instagram photos on young girls body image was conducted with 144 young girls between the ages of fourteen and eighteen (Kleemans, Daalmans, Carbaat & Anschütz, 2018). In this study, participants were randomly exposed to Instagram selfies that were either edited or not edited. Across the study, the edited photos were scored more positively by participants than the photos that had not been edited and the results showed a clear link between edited Instagram photos and lowered reported body image among participants (Kleemans, Daalmans,

Carbaat & Anschutz, 2018). This means that users are comparing themselves to the unrealistic pictures that they find on social media which often triggers body insecurity and in return may inspire them to edit their photos to line up with these unrealistic ideals that have been presented to them. This creates a vicious cycle of comparison and self-hatred that is especially prevalent in the lives and social media accounts of vulnerable young women and girls.

One of the most troubling aspects of the social media boom is one that was initially created with seemingly good intentions: the “wellness” industry. Although this was started as a way to help inspire fitness and clean eating across the internet, this industry has taken a dark and unhealthy turn as the rise of social media platforms continue to take over our lives. This toxic craze highlights things like “#thinspiration”, “#meanspo”, and “#fitspiration”, which are all demeaning terms to inspire unhealthy weight loss methods that are often hidden as hashtags at the end of a post. When these tags are searched for on any social media website the viewer is instantly overwhelmed with thousands of triggering images that promote unhealthy habits and disordered eating behaviors, with hundreds more images being posted every second. Although the “wellness” movement can now be readily accessed on all forms of social media, all of these ideas can also be found on websites dedicated solely to weight loss, over-exercising, and disordered eating behaviors. More specifically, a content comparison of fifty “thinspiration” and fifty “fitspiration” websites was done which showed content that focused almost entirely on unhealthy weight loss, food restraint messages, and the glamorization of thinness (Boepple & Thompson, 2016). The messages displayed on these “wellness” websites marked with the seemingly harmless hashtags “#fitspiration” and “#thinspiration” are often

indistinguishable from posts tagged with more clearly damaging hashtags such as “#proana” (short for pro-anorexia), and “#promia” (short for pro-bulimia). Categorizing these posts and websites as ones that are promoting wellness and healthy lifestyles for users is just another way to cover up the terrible role that eating disorders play within the fitness community.

It’s not just the promotion of these specific behaviors that are causing harm, but also the toxic foundation of comparison that all of these social media websites are built on. Social media users are utilizing these platforms as a distraction from their own reality and are seeking approval from others through their social media, rather than in their real lives. Many people are so consumed with the likes and followers they receive online that it takes over their entire life. They hide behind their social media accounts and start to lose the ability to make any real connections with those around them in the real world. A study done on the contingencies of self-worth and social-networking-site behavior showed that college students, specifically females, who spent prolonged periods of time consumed by social media found themselves more likely to attribute all or most of their self-worth to their looks (Stefanone, Lackaff & Rosen, 2011). After seeing the “perfect” lives of everyone on social media, it can be easy to feel inadequate and compare your day to day life with someone else’s highlight reel. This often causes users to create an image of what they feel is the “perfect” body or an “extravagant” life online, to overcompensate for what they may feel they are lacking in their real life.

When faced with all this information, it is easy to look at social media as the enemy rather than the tool for change that it has the potential to become. While social media can be

used to learn about and connect with people who may be promoting these unhealthy behaviors, it can also be used as a resource to reach out for support and follow people and accounts that are choosing to spread positive messages about self-love, acceptance, and body positivity. These accounts are just as common as the ones spewing toxic and hateful messages about our bodies, you just may need to seek them out more. With the rise of social media that is affecting our generation, it is important that we, as social media users and influencers, use the power we have for good by choosing to promote realism and tolerance on our timelines rather than allowing ourselves to fall victim to filters and good angles. There are many ways we can fight back against these realities. Research is being done to find new ways to harness the power of social media to help at-risk groups overcome the unrealistic standards that have been presented to them by using media interventions, combating social norms, and creating campaigns for change across social media (Perloff, 2014). We have the power to take back the internet and start a continual conversation surrounding healthy body image, self-love, and equal body size representation across the media. Social media and the internet is a great place to encourage and inspire change among our generation, but if we want real change for the future we have to start having these conversations early by showing examples of self-acceptance and transparency with future generations both in the classroom and at the dinner table. So many people are falling victim to these harmful beauty standards every day, and it's going to keep happening until we choose to fight back and raise our voices together to promote love and positivity within our own lives and across the internet.



### References

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