Social Media and Eating Habits in Female Teens

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ABSTRACT

Social media usage has increased in the lives of adolescents and also affects adolescents' mental health. (1) The number of pro-eating disorder communities on social media has increased, which encourages users to participate in disordered eating behavior. Many parents and educators are unaware of the scope of these pro-eating disorder communities and how these communities affect teens. (2) In Western societies, specifically the United States, mass media contributes to the appearance, body shape, and weight concerns of individuals. This dissemination of ideal body imagery in the mass media, such as magazines and social media, increases the likelihood of an individual developing an eating disorder. (3) New data suggest that there is a relationship between an individual's body perceptions and their perceived "perfect" body type, such as a smaller waist and a larger bust for females, and a muscular figure for men. (4) The data linking media exposure to eating disorders (EDs) has increased over the last decades after the rise of supermodels in the 1900s. Women's body anxieties have increased when they consume images of supermodels with idealized body mass indexes and weight proportions. (5) Many young adults post content on social media related to exercising, and this can be both a motivation or a barrier to exercising. (6) Another negative behavior that has been observed is the moderation of diet based on others' dieting posts. (8)

INTRODUCTION

Social media has become a vital part of teenagers' lives, with parents, educators, and healthcare professionals unaware of the ease of access to social media among teenagers. In recent years, content on social media promoting eating disorders has surfaced and become a concern for teenagers using social media, such as Snapchat, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and Pinterest. (1, 2) Throughout history, the "ideal" body image has been determined by mass media. The "ideal body" for females is a smaller waist and a larger bust, and for those who perceive themselves to be larger busted, the "ideal body" is a smaller bust and a smaller waist (3, 4). In relation to achieving this "ideal body," social media posts can encourage exercising or act as a barrier. It is common for young adults to post status updates on their exercise routines or diets. (6) Researching deeper into this topic, medical conditions such as obesity have been linked to an excessive desire to lose weight. (7) The scientists in the study used a focus group to qualitatively measure how social media impacted the eating habits of female teens. Upon my own investigation, I found the connection between social media and eating habits is a more relevant issue today due to the ability to globally communicate and the increased usage of social media platforms in the adolescent age groups. Since social media is common in the lives of teens, I wanted to raise awareness about the potential negative and negative impacts of social media on teens. I also wanted to see how idealized body proportions, weights, and eating habits promoted by social media impacted my generation.

METHODS

The screener, named the "pre-survey", asked participants their ages, names, emails, and types of social media platforms used. The pre-survey was sent to potential participants who were between ages 14-17, female, and used social media. The screener was distributed through mutual friends and family connections. After participants filled out the screener, participants were emailed the parental consent survey to ensure they had parental permission to participate in the focus group. The participants were promised anonymity. The participants were not compensated.

The focus group, which is a moderated discussion for research purposes only, was held on Padlet. The participants were asked to join an online call with their cameras off, which was done using the platform Zoom. There were five participants in the focus group. Every question asked in the focus group biased the question after it, therefore the questions which needed the

least biased answers were asked first. The participants were not given a range of possible answers. The answers were open-ended, and the question order was designed to ask a combination of lighthearted to heavy questions. Answers that had one word were probed when the participants were asked to give more detail. For the purpose of this research project, the participants answered the questions of the focus group anonymously. Padlet, a tool where respondents can anonymously post answers, was used to collect anonymized data from the participants. The questions asked participants about themselves and social media.

A post-survey was sent to the participants to ask them if there was anything they did not feel comfortable mentioning in the focus group. All responses in the Padlet were exported in a PDF. The answers to each question were coded for positive, negative, and neutral answers. A word cloud generator was used to find which words were used more often than others.

RESULTS

The main finding was that social media showed a negative pattern on the body image and eating habits of participants. Respondents were females from ages 14 to 17 and recruited through mutual friends and family connections. The majority of the respondents lived in Texas, and there were five participants who participated in the focus group.

Some questions were eliminated from the results because their answers were not relevant to the hypothesis. An example of one of those questions is the word association game, which served as an "icebreaker" and allowed participants to become comfortable with the process.

The COVID-19 pandemic was a common environmental influence potentially impacting all participants. Living through the pandemic and being isolated from normal life may have caused all participants to have feelings of loneliness and detachment. Understanding how the pandemic influenced the participants' eating habits, along with social media, was vital to the focus group because of its biasing factor. The pandemic most likely influenced the results because of participants' stronger feelings of loneliness, which caused them to be more influenced by social media's negative posts.

When presented with a fill-in-the-blank exercise about the pandemic, stating, "The pandemic has made me feel _____ about life." Responses were divided between grateful and underwhelmed. This shows that perspectives about the pandemic vary among participants. A participant, whose answer was on the positive side, wrote:

"Grateful- i feel grateful about life because of the pandemic because after being isolated for a while, i can see the beauty to form back into our life. I feel grateful to be able to have good health and grateful to be able to breathe in the fresh air each day."

A participant, who had a negative perspective about the pandemic, wrote:

"Underwhelmed - it caused a lot of anxiety in the beginning that it caused me to eventually stop caring about things even if they're important."

On question 7 (Figure 1), participants were asked if they had any emotional support. Emotional support also may have influenced the results because if the participants lacked emotional support, they may have been more strongly influenced by negative social media posts because they have no one to talk to about it [negative social media posts]. Most participants counted on close friends and family members for emotional support, though one participant wrote:

"No one really- it makes me feel a little alone but also safe because then I never have to worry about someone judging me."

Question #7: Who do you count on for social-emotional support? Why do you count on them?	1 very pos, 3 pos, 1 neg
Responses	Pos-Neg
My boyfriend. He has been through and seen the worst of me and understands my patterns and myself and why I do the things I do. He always knows what to say.	very pos
my family	pos
my friends	pos
my family - they´re always there to help me feel good about my decisions	pos
no one really - it makes me feel a little alone but also safe because then I never have to worry about someone judging me	neg

Figure 1: Question #7 was, "who do you count on for social-emotional support? Why do you count on them?" The answers were ranging from mostly positive to one negative.

From the data on question 13 (Figure 2), the participants most likely felt distrustful of social media. One of them wrote:

"You have to be careful- it is an extremely dangerous place were [where] I have made many mistakes in."

Question #13: What advice would you give your younger self in regards to social media?	
Responses	**Pos-Neg**
good job on not getting it at that time - you didn´t need all that extra influence/pressure	pos
be confident in your own skin, it's your life, not anyone else's.	pos
don't get instagram	neg
don't get tiktok	neg
live life without a device.	neg
you have to be careful- because it is an extremally dangerous place were I have made many mistakes in	very neg
social media is completely fake. Never look up to celebrities or influencers, they are normal people just like us. Money can do anything.	vey neg
stop trying to be older- live life as you are in your own age. I'm 15 and I have always tried to act 20. Now that i'm actually getting older, i wish i could slow time down. Time goes by so fast. Be a kid, don't try to grow up faster because of what you see online or what seems more "fun" or "grown up".	very neg

Figure 2: Question #13 was, "what advice would you give your younger self in regards to social media?" The answers were ranging from positive to negative, the negative answers making up the majority of the responses to Question #13.

In question 5 (Figure 3), the participants were asked about a time when social media made them feel insecure about themselves. In regard to food and body image, a participant wrote:

"I feel insecure when celebrities post these pictures because natural bodies do not look like this. The social media community normalizes "perfect bodies" like celebrities [celebrities]. since they are not natural and all money, it makes us want to strive for that [perfect bodies] because we don't have it."

Question #5: Talk about a time that social media has made you feel insecure about yourself.	3 neg, 1 very neg
Responses	**Pos-Neg**
people posting college decisions/reactions	neg
when celebrities post pics of their bodies, skin, hair, nails, ect.	neg
people posting their college stats and the colleges they were denied from	neg
i feel insecure when celebrities post these pictures because natural bodies do not look like this. The social media community normalizes "perfect bodies" like celebrities. since they are not natural and all money, it makes us want to strive for that because we don't have it.	very neg

Figure 3: Question #5 was "talk about a time that social media has made you feel insecure about yourself". The responses were ranging from mostly negative to very negative.

When participants on question 8 (Figure 4) were asked about what they have seen on social media regarding food, one participant wrote:

"Eating disorders- sad and relatable posts about influencers making teens insecure about bodies. Thus, leads to diets and eating disorders. Snowball effect."

Question #8: What are some things you've seen on social media regarding food?	1 pos, 3 nuetral, 2 neg, 1 very neg
Responses	**Pos-Neg**
Food pics - yum... Ads too sometimes	pos
I see videos recommending/rating restaurants or people trying new foods	neutral
healthy alternatives for food	neutral
vegan recipes	neutral
food art doesn't look appetizing	neg
eating disorders	neg
eating disorders- sad and relatable posts about influencers making teens insecure about bodies. Thus, leads to diets and eating disorders. Snowball effect	very neg

Figure 4: Question #8 was "what are some things you've seen on social media regarding food?" The answers ranged from positive, neutral, and negative.

Although most participants have seen negative things on social media regarding body image and food, during question 10 (Figure 5), when asked about content seen on social media regarding working out, participants wrote:

"Body positive content, workouts and tips- people saying to work out for your own health, not to fit into standards."

Question #10: What are some things you've seen on social media regarding working out?	1 very pos, 1 pos, 3 nuetral, 1 neg
Responses	**Pos-Neg**
body positive content, workouts and tips - people saying to work out for your own health, not to fit into standards	very pos
influencers giving tips to be fit	pos
work out apparel	neutral
gym outfits	neutral
journey of becoming fitter	neutral
quick too-go-to-be-true solutions	neg

Figure 5: Question #10 was, "what are some things you've seen on social media regarding food?" The answers ranged from mostly neutral and positive, to one negative.

Question #2: The pandemic has made me feel _____ about life.	1 very pos, 1 pos, 1 neg, 1 very neg
Responses	Pos-Neg
grateful- i feel grateful about life because of the pandemic because after being isolated for a while, i can see the beauty to form back into our life. I feel grateful to be able to have good health and grateful to be able to breathe in the fresh air each day.	very pos
thankful	pos
scared	neg
underwhelmed - it caused a lot of anxiety in the beginning that it caused me to eventually stop caring about things even if they're important	very neg

Figure 6: Question #2 was "the pandemic has made me feel _____ about life", and the answers were divided between positive and negative.

Question #4: Talk about a time that social media made you feel good about yourself.	2 very pos, 3 pos
Responses	Pos-Neg
when i posted a singing video and the comments were very positive.	very pos
seeing people similar to me/seeing people uplift others	very pos
when I am in others' pics - when others tag me, I feel appreciated as a friend	pos
seeing people similar to me (similar looks and/or similar personality)	pos
when i get responses on my stories of pictures of myself.	pos

Figure 7: Question #4 was "talk about a time that social media made you feel good about yourself", and the answers were all ranging from positive to very positive.

Question #11: Rate the following activity from 1 to 4: Working out to lose weight.		4 neg, 1 very neg
Responses		Pos-Neg
it's all about diet/health.		neutral
	2	neg
	2	neg
	2	neg
	2	neg
	1	very neg

Figure 8: Question #11 was "rate the following activity from 1 to 4 (1 being the least useful and 4 being the most useful): working out to lose weight seen on social media regarding working out?" The answers ranged from 1-2.

Question #12: Rate the following activity from 1 to 4: Working out to be healthier.		3 very pos, 1 pos, 1 neg
Responses		Pos-Neg
4 - having the goal to be healthier is understandable and it's important to stay healthy. But working out for the goal of becoming skinnier is just degrading on a person		very pos
	4	very pos
4 - working out for my personal health always makes me feel more confident and I also feel happier after exercising		very pos
	3	pos
	2	neg

Figure 9: Question #12 was," rate the following activity from 1 to 4: Working out to be healthier." The answers were higher than the ratings of question 11.

DISCUSSION

This study shows that social media, depending on the content, can promote disordered eating habits and body dysmorphia and social media can also promote body positivity and healthy eating habits.

Since social media has a strong influence on the lives of teenagers, and on teens' mental health, further research is needed to understand the extent to which social media has a deleterious effect on mental health. A future experiment can study the relationship between social media and the stigma surrounding the diagnosis and treatment of mental illnesses, including eating disorders.

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