



Examining the Relationship Between Social Media, Body Image, and Disordered Eating in Young Women: A Correlational Study

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Abstract: Background: Social media usage has become increasingly prevalent among young adults, particularly women, in recent years. The pervasive nature of social media platforms has raised concerns about their potential impact on body image perception and eating behaviours. **Objective:** To investigate the relationship between social media usage, body image perception, and disordered eating behaviours among young women. **Methods:** A cross-sectional study was conducted with 262 female undergraduate students aged 18-21 years. Participants completed self-report questionnaires including the EDI-3, MBSRQ-AS, ASMC, and EAT-26. Spearman's rank correlation and regression analyses were performed to examine associations between variables. **Results:** Significant correlations were found between positive body image and body dissatisfaction ($r=-0.68$, $p<0.001$), social media behaviour and positive body image ($r=-0.54$, $p<0.001$), social media behaviour and body dissatisfaction ($r=0.62$, $p<0.001$), disordered eating behaviour and body image ($r=-0.59$, $p<0.001$), disordered eating behaviour and body dissatisfaction ($r=0.71$, $p<0.001$), and disordered eating behaviour and social media behaviour ($r=0.66$, $p<0.001$). Regression analysis confirmed the directionality of these relationships. **Conclusion:** The findings reveal a complex interplay between social media exposure, body image concerns, and unhealthy eating

patterns in young female adults. Targeted interventions promoting positive body image and healthy social media habits are warranted to mitigate negative impacts on eating behaviours in this population.

Keywords: *Social Media, Body Image, Disordered Eating, Young Women, Body Dissatisfaction, Positive Body Image*

1. Introduction

Social media have recently emerged as one of the most important communication tools. It has revolutionized the way we communicate and connect, whether for work, education, news, or simply to keep in contact with family and friends. Social media sites and apps offer users the opportunity to post unlimited pictures of themselves, their families, friends, and so on. As a result, they play an important role in the lives of today's youth, who prioritize social lives and connections.

A study conducted by Hootsuite (2023) showed that the average time people spend on social media these days is 6 hours and 37 minutes. Spending excessive time and getting constant updates about celebrities, peers, and influencers can leave one feeling negatively about oneself in terms of job, status, appearance, and above all, weight. Freshly outside of their teenage years, young adults still have concerns about their appearance and body image, and social media has both positive and negative effects on their lives. Although this may promote learning and social connections, it also bolsters misinformation and dependence.

Thus, constant exposure to advertisements, reels, and photos from celebrities, influencers, and peers that are mostly photoshopped and edited to show an ideal image can have detrimental effects on self-esteem and body image.

1.1 *Body image*

One of the main components of one's identity is body image. It is one's perception of the shape and form of their body. Additionally, satisfaction with the body or certain body parts is affected by the emotions linked to these factors. Body image is a subjective picture of an individual's body irrespective of its appearance. This intricate concept encompasses ideas, emotions, and actions that pertain to the physical self. Body image is a multidimensional concept that encompasses components, such as

- a) Cognitive: The ideas and views a person has about their body

- b) Perceptual: The way people view their body and its parts
- c) Affective: the feelings that a person has about their own body
- d) Behavioral: The ways in which individuals tend to their bodies, changing, or hiding them (Hosseini & Padhy, 2023)

Cash (2004) identifies two attitude-related elements: body image, evaluation, and investment.

- a) Evaluation is the assessment of one's own appearance, encompassing satisfaction or dissatisfaction with internalized physical ideals and body image.
- b) The term "investment" describes the behavioral and cognitive weights that people place on their appearance, including self-schemas that are connected to it.

Body image distortions can affect one's emotional state, competence, self-worth, and social interactions in addition to physical and psychological well-being. Additionally, eight categories of cognitive distortions relevant to body image cognition have been identified by Cash (2006).

- a) *Beauty-or-Beast* distortion is used to describe extreme viewpoints.
- b) *Unfair-to-compare* means establishing skewed contrasts between real individuals, media representations, and ideals.
- c) The "*Magnifying Glass*" describes the deliberate focus on a dislikable aspect of one's look.
- d) The *Blame Game* entails drawing the conclusion that one's appearance blames past injustices.
- e) *Mind Misreading* means projecting one's negative body-image beliefs onto the presumptions of others
- f) *Moody Mirror* refers to a pessimistic emotional condition that pervades thoughts about one's physical appearance (Jakatdar et al., 2006).

1.2 Social media and the glorification of thin ideal

A concerning consequence of social media that has been shown to gain prominence quickly in recent years is the "*Thinspo*" phenomena, which is the existence of Social Network Sites (SNS) online that promote and endorse a way of life that is solely concerned with losing weight. This phenomenon encourages a lifestyle characterized by starvation, intensive exercise routines, excessive caffeine consumption to 'kill' hunger, and oversleeping to avoid fatigue. Through words or images, young women promote unhealthy habits and ways of thinking to get through times of weakness, hunger, and tiredness: the idea of "*thinspiration*," which is sometimes shortened to "*thinspo*." As if this does not sound terrifying enough, many members of these communities know

that they have unhealthy eating habits and not only embrace this fact, but also promote it to other members who fleetingly visit these sites to find ways to adopt a healthier lifestyle. According to a study on Internet use, the keywords' *thinspiration*' and "*thinspo*' *thinspo*' are among the most often used and" thinspo "potentially harmful to Internet users' psychological well-being (Lewis & Arbuthnott, 2014).

The ideal female body type in today's environment is associated with thinness. All fields that give importance to the physical appearance of the person, whether it is fashion, film, or the idol industry, prefer women who are thin or even skinny. Female celebrities endorse clothing brands that do not make sizes over six and food items that claim to reduce body fat. People are taught to believe that being overweight is undesirable and ugly, whereas being slim is lovely and ideal. As if that is not enough, this "ideal body image" concept is spreading even more through the use of various social media platforms. Anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa are two eating disorders that have been strongly related to the rise in eating disorders among young women because of the social media's unrealistic portrayal of what a woman should look like. It is not surprising that women, whether young or old, all over the world are dissatisfied with their bodies and search for unhealthy ways to change them, given that the average person spends 7 hours and 22 minutes a day on a mobile device (Brigham, 2018) and that photos and promotions of thin women, whether natural or not, fill the feeds of these women's accounts.

1.3 Rationale of the study

The exposure of young adults to media that promotes unhealthy eating habits and their impact on body image has been the subject of extensive research. Body image concerns have emerged as one of the most rapidly increasing issues among young adults. A UK-based survey conducted by the Mental Health Foundation in 2019 revealed that only 21% of adults (23% of men and 19% of women) were content with their body image. The survey also found that 20% (15% of men and 25% of women) experienced shame, 34% (25% of men and 43% of women) reported feelings of depression or low mood, and 19% (12% of men and 26% of women) felt disgusted with their bodies. Approximately 22% of respondents attributed their body-related worries to social media images, while 21% cited advertisements as the cause. Studies have demonstrated that body dissatisfaction in adults is correlated with a heightened risk of eating disorders, psychological distress, and depressive symptoms (Jackson et al. 2014; Goldschmidt et al. 2016). Seeing the dependence of individuals on social media and the role that social media plays in influencing body

image consciously or subconsciously, this phenomenon has become a serious problem. Moreover, few studies have focused on the impact of the media on body image in the Indian population. Therefore, this study examined how social media affects the body image of young female adults in the Indian context.

This study was conducted in two phases. The first phase was conducted to determine the existence of relationships between media, body image, and unhealthy eating behaviors. The second phase was conducted to determine whether tailor-made psychoeducation had a positive influence on body image and unhealthy eating behaviours. These variables were chosen because media has proven to be a major factor that promotes global beauty standards and influences the way individuals see their bodies.

1.4 Research Objective

To investigate the association between body image perception and disordered eating behaviours in female undergraduate students.

1.5 Hypothesis

“There are significant relationships between media, aspects of body image, and unhealthy eating behaviours.”

2. Review of Literature

Body image dissatisfaction is a growing concern among current generations. A viable link has been observed between media exposure and increased body image concerns (Aziz 2017). According to Cash (1994), Body image refers “to the multifaceted psychological experience of embodiment. It encompasses one’s body-related self-perceptions and self-attitudes, including thoughts, beliefs, feelings, and behaviour”. It is important to understand that body image requires that individuals be aware of how they feel about themselves. It is necessary to understand how the components form body images as well as the immediate and long-term repercussions of body images. This emphasizes the importance of body image research. Thus, the present state of body image issues among people, media influence, and its impact on eating behaviors are discussed in the literature.

2.1 Media influence on unhealthy eating behaviours

O'Brien (2015) did an established research study on 8 women who had unhealthy eating habits on Instagram. The study participants stated that they learned to chew gum and drink a lot of

water instead of eating and that they received recipe ideas for meals with the fewest calories, fats, and carbohydrates from Instagram. According to the findings, only 5% of women naturally have a slender appearance despite the media's constant promotion of thinness, and 81% of 10-year-olds fear being overweight.

Rossi et al. (2021) aimed to evaluate the online pro-ana phenomenon among Italian adolescents suffering from eating disorders and body image issues and how it affected them. Cross-sectional analysis and a seven-item anonymous questionnaire created especially for this study by the authors were used to gather data on website and social network use and knowledge regarding "pro-ana" and "thinspiration" material. The findings indicated that this phenomenon increased in the samples collected between 2017 and 2020. In 2020, 76% of participants were aware of websites that promoted extreme thinness as the standard of beauty, 60% were aware of pages and websites that celebrated the phenomenon, and 22% had visited them.

Prucoli et al. (2021) examined the effects of TikTok on young people struggling with eating disorders. The following factors were evaluated: body shaming experiences, demographics, frequency of TikTok usage, frequently searched and watched themes and hashtags, use of suggested content and active searches, and perceived effects on eating attitudes and self-esteem. 93.6 Of the 78 participants in this study, 93.6% were female. TikTok was the primary social media site for 62.8% of the users, with diet (21.8%) ranking as the most popular topic. Among the users, 59.0% reported that using TikTok made them feel less confident about themselves, 26.9% said that TikTok had significantly changed their daily lives, and 3.8% said that they had experienced body shaming.

2.2 Media Influence on Body Image

In Brown-Tiggemann's (2016) study, 46 individuals were asked to rate their mood, level of body dissatisfaction, comparison of their appearance, and celebrity worship after viewing 15 pictures for 10 s. Some individuals viewed images from their trips, whereas others viewed images of themselves with their peers and celebrities. Compared with the travel group, participants who saw photographs of celebrities and their peers reported feeling more depressed and dissatisfied with their bodies. The peer images were actual photographs from public Instagram accounts chosen at random, whereas the celebrity photos were some of the most popular on the platform. According to the researchers, these outcomes were expected, given the stigma associated with altering one's teeth, skin tone, and body form through the use of filters.

Price et al. (2023) examined how female body image is affected by seeing "average" and "thin-ideal" body photographs on Instagram. The study sample included 690 female adults, aged 18–60 years. One of the four image conditions—"thin-ideal," "average," festive scenery, or stationery—was assigned randomly to each participant. BI was measured both before and after participants watched the photographs. Following viewing of the "thin-ideal" versus "average" and control images, a considerable reduction in BI was observed.

Kvardova et al. (2023) aimed to determine whether adolescents' perceptions of their bodies were influenced by flattering remarks about their appearance on social media. The study included data from 613 Czech teenagers, of whom 52% were girls, and used a between-subjects experimental design. The results emphasized that not only did the displayed bodies adhering to thin ideals contribute to body dissatisfaction, but the positive appearance comments under such posts also contributed to it. Because of this, even positive comments such as "Great body" and "You look amazing," may also play a significant role in the detrimental impact that social media can have on one's body image. Karam et al. (2023) evaluated how social media and body image relate to Lebanese university students. Using convenience sampling, data were collected from 292 college students. According to these findings, people addicted to social media are more likely to experience body-image issues.

Colak et al. (2023) investigated the association between adolescent self-esteem and social media addiction as well as the mediating function of body image in this relationship. Of the 204 adolescents in the study sample, 137 (67.2%) were male and 67 (32.8%) were female. The findings demonstrated a negative correlation between the participants' degree of social media addiction and their level of body image and self-esteem.

Torres and Hartman (2023) examined the relationship among social media use, eating disorders, and body image issues. According to previous research, more exposure to edited and carefully selected photographs on social media may lead to an increased risk of unhealthy eating habits and negative self-perception.

2.3 Analysis of Research Gap

Most studies have been conducted in a Western context; therefore, it may be difficult to replicate these findings in the Indian context. One of the studies conducted in the Indian context by Srinidhi (2017) aimed to evaluate the prevalence of body image dissatisfaction (BID) and patterns of eating behaviors among adolescents in urban South India and to study the association

of media, interests, and hobbies with body image dissatisfaction and disordered eating. This study was conducted with 298 young adults, using the EAT-26 scale and a semi-structured questionnaire. The prevalence of likely eating disorders was 10.7% (4.8% in boys and 13.9% in girls). More girls than boys are at risk. The influence of media (visual/music/print/Internet) on body image was found to be 43.3%, which was significantly associated with eating disorders.

Chakraborty and Malik (2022) studied the impact of fitspiration content on social media (Instagram) on exercise behaviors, eating attitudes, and body image. Data were obtained from 138 participants, aged 18–28 years. According to this study, accessing fitspiration information can lead to the development or maintenance of maladaptive behaviors such as forced exercise and unhealthy food habits.

3. Methodology

The present study used a cross-sectional research design to determine the existence of a correlation between body image issues and media influence among female undergraduate students.

3.1 Statement of the Problem

The present study has been done to see the existence of a correlation between body image issues and media influence among female undergraduate students. The study population consisted of female undergraduate students aged 18–21 years old. Most students were from North India. Convenience sampling was performed during this study phase. Students who consented to participate in the study answered the questionnaire. The sample size for this phase of the study consisted of 262 female undergraduate students. The respondents belonged to the age group–18–21 years. Before reaching our participants, the necessary consent was obtained from the concerned authorities to conduct the survey.

3.2 Sampling Criteria

3.2.1 Inclusion Criteria

Female undergraduate students age group–18–21 years old were selected as the participants in this study. Patients who consented to participate in this study were also included.

3.2.2 Exclusion Criteria

Participants who did not consent to participate in the study and had pre-existing mental or physical disorders were excluded from the study.

3.3 Measures Used

3.3.1 The Eating Disorder Inventory-3 (EDI-3) developed by Clausen, Et al. (2011): The EDI-3 is a 5-point Likert scale self-report questionnaire used in research and therapeutic settings to assess eating disorder symptoms. Garner, Olmsted, and Polivy created the original version of the EDI in 1983. The EDI-3, the revised version of the inventory, contains 91 items organized into 12 subscales. The sub-scales are: “*Drive for Thinness (DT), Bulimia (B) and Body Dissatisfaction (BD), Low Self-Esteem (LSE), Personal Alienation (PA), Interpersonal Insecurity (II), Interpersonal Alienation (IA), Interoceptive Deficits (ID), Emotional Dysregulation (ED), Perfectionism (P), Asceticism (A), and Maturity Fears (MF).*” The researcher used the Body Dissatisfaction (BD) subscale, which has ten items. The scale has good internal consistency, with a Cronbach’s alpha value ranging from 0.69-0.94 across all subscales.

3.3.2 Multidimensional Body Self Relations Questionnaire-Appearance Scales (MBSRQ-AS) (Cruzat-Mandich, 2022): The Multidimensional Body Self-Relations Questionnaire-Appearance Scale is a 5-point Likert scale self-report inventory for the assessment of body image. It has 34 items organized into 5 subscales- “*Appearance Evaluation, Appearance Orientation, Overweight Preoccupation, Self-Classified Weight, and the Body Area Satisfaction Scale (BASS).*” For this study, the researcher used the Appearance Evaluation subscale, which has seven items. The scales have good internal consistency, ranging from 0.76-0.86. The test-retest reliabilities range from 0.75-0.93.

3.3.3 Appearance Related Social Media Consciousness Scale (Bradley et. al, 2020): The Appearance-Related Social Media Consciousness Scale (ASMC) is a 13-item, 7-point scale that assesses the extent to which people's thoughts and behaviors reflect an ongoing awareness of whether they might appear appealing to their social media audience. ASMC scale has shown strong internal consistency, convergent validity and test-retest reliability (Maheux et al, 2022)

3.3.4 Eating Attitudes Test- EAT26 (Garner et al, 1983): The Eating Attitudes Test is a 26 items, 6 point self-report questionnaire that assesses general eating and risky behaviors. The 26 items were organized into three subscales: dieting, bulimia, food preoccupation, and oral control. The EAT-26 showed good internal consistency (Cronbach ’s alpha=0.822–0.922), test-retest reliability(ICC=0.817), and convergent validity($r=0.450-0.750$) Out of the three subscales, only 2 sub-scales: dieting and oral control–is been used.

3.4 Procedure

The researchers obtained permission from the concerned college authorities to collect data from the students. Participants were greeted and informed about the study. The researcher informed the participants about the purpose of the study and told them that they would have to respond to four short questionnaires. The participants were informed that their participation was voluntary. Instructions on how to respond to the questionnaires were provided before responses were collected. The participants were assured of the confidentiality of their responses and were asked if they had any doubts before starting data collection. We thank the participants for their time and effort after they completed the questionnaire.

3.5 Statistical Analysis

The data were gathered and examined using the Jamovi software. Normality tests were conducted to assess data distribution. The Shapiro-Wilk test was used to evaluate data normality. Spearman's rank correlation was utilized to examine the relationships between independent and dependent variables. A regression analysis was performed to determine the direction of these correlations.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

The study has obtained necessary ethical clearance from Institutional Ethics Review Board (IERB ID: 2023-37DOPSY). The participants were informed of the purpose of the study, and their consent was obtained. No deception was performed during the study. The participants were informed of their right to voluntary participation and were told that they could withdraw if they felt uncomfortable during the course of the experiment. Participants were assured of the confidentiality of their information. Psychoeducation was provided to them after they watched the videos. Permission was obtained from the responsible authorities before approaching participants.

4. Results

This section describes the results of these responses. The results were obtained using statistical techniques such as descriptive statistics and inferential analysis. The findings of this chapter are as follows:

Table 1: *Spearman-Rank Correlation for Body Image, Body Dissatisfaction, Social Media Behaviour and Eating Behaviour*

Factors	(1)	(2)	(3)
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Body Image (1)	—		
Body Dissatisfaction (2)	-0.262*** ($< .001$)	—	
Social Media Behaviour (3)	-0.144* (0.020)	0.112 (0.076)	—
Eating Behaviour (4)	-0.270*** ($< 0 .001$)	0.153* (0.015)	0.418*** ($< 0 .001$)

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Table 1 shows the relationship between the variables under study, namely, body image, body dissatisfaction, social media behavior, and eating behavior. The above analysis shows the correlations between the variables. Thus, the alternate hypothesis, which states that there will be significant relationships between the variables, was retained.

Table 2: Regression results of the variables under study

Variables	Estimates	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p	R ²
Body Image	-0.257	315	1	314.9	4.49	0.035*	0.192
Social Media Behaviour	0.203	2635	1	2635.2	37.56	$< 0.001^{**}$	
Body Dissatisfaction	0.109	218	1	218.0	3.11	0.079	

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .001$

Table 2 shows the regression results of the variables under study, namely body image, body dissatisfaction, and social media behavior, with eating behavior as the outcome variable.

Discussion

This study aimed to examine the impact of social media and body image on eating behavior among female undergraduate students ranged aged–18-21 years. The hypothesis of Phase 1 was that “*there would be significant relationships between social media, aspects of body image, and unhealthy eating behaviors.*” This hypothesis was proven to be correct as a relationship was observed between the variables under study.

A negative correlation was observed between body image and body dissatisfaction, indicating that participants with a positive body image showed less dissatisfaction with their bodies. This finding supports the findings of previous studies, which stated that good body image is negatively associated with high body dissatisfaction (Heider et al., 2018).

Negative body image can emerge as persistent disturbances such as body image distortions or attitudinal disturbances such as body dissatisfaction. Conversely, acceptance and admiration of one's body characterize a positive body image (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015).

A negative correlation was observed between high social media behavior and positive body image, whereas a positive correlation was observed between high social media behavior and body dissatisfaction. This finding also turned out to be in support of the previous findings by other researchers. It has been found that internet and social media allows adolescents and young adults to view idealized images and peers and models, which leads to increased social comparisons, poor body image and greater body dissatisfaction (Fardouly et. al, 2015; Heider et al, 2018). Another study conducted by Fardouly and Vartanian (2016) on female high school and undergraduate students showed that social media users reported greater body dissatisfaction, poor body image, and the internalization of thin ideals.

Eating behavior was negatively correlated with body image and positively correlated with body dissatisfaction and social media behavior. This means that disordered eating behavior is more likely to be found in people with poor body image, high body dissatisfaction, and high social media behavior. This result is supported by the previous findings. A study conducted by Martinez et al. (2019) explored the relationship between disordered eating attitudes and sociocultural factors such as body image, body satisfaction, use of social media sites, and beauty ideals among young women and showed that disordered eating attitudes were linked to body image, body dissatisfaction, and social media use. It has been found that social media focused on sharing appearance-focused content is associated with higher levels of disordered eating (Wilksch et al., 2020). Disordered eating includes restricting food consumption, skipping meals, and other acts to control appearance and increase body image (Bucchianeri & Neumark-Sztainer, 2014).

5. Conclusion

This study examined the relationship between social media usage, body image perception, and disordered eating behaviours among young women. The findings revealed significant correlations

with disordered eating behaviours inversely related to positive body image and positively associated with body dissatisfaction and problematic social media behaviour. These results highlight the complex interplay between social media exposure, body image concerns, and unhealthy eating patterns among young female adults. This study underscores the need for targeted interventions to promote a positive body image and healthy social media habits in this population. Further research is warranted to explore the causal mechanisms and develop effective strategies to mitigate the negative impacts of social media on body image and eating behaviours.

Conflict of interest

The authors (s) declare no potential conflicts of interest concerning the research, authorship, or publication of this manuscript.

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