



Social Media Usage and Its Correlation with Eating Disorders, Body Image, Self-Esteem, and Perceived Social Support in Young Adults

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Abstract: The pervasive use of social media among young adults has raised concerns about its potential psychological impacts. This study examined the relationship between social media usage and key psychological variables: eating disorder symptoms, body image concerns, self-esteem, and perceived social support. A sample of 200 young adults completed standardized self-report measures assessing these constructs. Descriptive statistics indicated moderate social media use and varying levels of psychological well-being. Correlational analyses revealed that higher social media usage was significantly associated with increased eating disorder symptoms and body image concerns, as well as decreased self-esteem and perceived social support. However, results from a multiple regression analysis indicated that when controlling for body image, self-esteem, and perceived social support, social media usage was not a significant independent predictor of eating disorder symptoms. Instead, self-esteem and body image emerged as the strongest predictors. These findings suggest that the influence of social media on disordered eating may be indirect, operating through its effects on body image and self-worth. Implications for intervention and digital media literacy are discussed.

Keywords: *Social Media Usage, Eating Disorders, Body Image, Self-Esteem, Perceived Social Support, Young Adults*

1. Introduction

In recent years, social media has become an integral part of daily life for millions of people worldwide, especially young adults. Platforms such as Instagram, Facebook and Snapchat offer constant streams of curated images, lifestyle content, and social interactions. While these platforms enable communication and self-expression, growing evidence suggests that excessive social media usage may also contribute to various psychological and emotional challenges. Among the most pressing concerns are its potential associations with body dissatisfaction, low self-esteem, disordered eating behaviors, and perceived social isolation.

Young adults are particularly vulnerable to the influence of social media, as this stage of development often involves identity formation and heightened sensitivity to social comparison. Exposure to idealized body images and appearance-related content may foster unrealistic standards of beauty, contributing to body image concerns and eating disorder symptoms. Additionally, the validation-seeking nature of social media interactions may affect self-esteem and perceived social support.

Despite increasing awareness, empirical research exploring the complex relationships between social media usage and psychological well-being is still evolving. There is a need to understand not only whether social media use is linked to negative outcomes but also how it may correlate with specific psychological variables such as eating disorders, body image, self-esteem, and social support among young adults.

The purpose of this study is to examine the correlations between social media usage and four key psychological variables—eating disorder symptoms, body image concerns, self-esteem, and perceived social support—in a sample of young adults.

1.2 Hypothesis

H1: Higher social media usage is positively correlated with increased symptoms of eating disorders among young adults.

H2: Increased social media usage is associated with higher body image concerns.

H3: Higher social media usage negatively impacts self-esteem, contributing to eating disorder symptoms.

H4: Perceived social support moderates the relationship between social media usage and eating disorder symptoms, such that individuals with higher perceived social support exhibit lower susceptibility to disordered eating behaviors.

2. Review of Literature

The rise of social media has transformed the way individuals interact with each other and with their self-image. Particularly among young adults and adolescents, social media platforms serve as both a source of connection and a potential catalyst for mental health issues, including eating disorders, body image concerns, and self-esteem challenges. This literature review synthesizes recent research findings related to social media usage and its correlation with these psychological factors, while also identifying knowledge gaps and suggesting directions for future research.

This study by Jaruga-Sękowska, Staśkiewicz-Bartecka and Woźniak-Holecka (2025) examines ED risk, eating behaviors, and self-esteem among individuals aged 16–25 and ED risk was identified in 47% ($n = 123$) of participants, with the highest prevalence in high school students (56.6%, $n = 64$). Significant gender differences were observed ($p < 0.001$), with males in the high school group showing elevated ED risk (64%, $n = 32$). Body dissatisfaction and frequent social media comparisons increased ED risk ($p < 0.001$); 45.7% ($n = 102$) of participants who often compared their bodies online reported heightened risk. Photo manipulation correlated with higher ED risk ($p = 0.005$). Regression analysis revealed a significant relationship between ED risk and restrictive dieting (estimate = 0.9239; $p < 0.001$), while self-esteem had no significant effect (estimate = 0.00503, $p = 0.977$). This study highlights high ED risk driven by social media and body dissatisfaction. Interventions should focus on body image issues, self-acceptance, and media literacy.

The study by Frieiro, González-Rodríguez and Domínguez-Alonso (2022) examined the influence of self-esteem and socialization through social networks on eating disorder behaviors in adolescence. Low self-esteem was shown to increase behaviors linked to eating disorders globally. Likewise, high socialization through social networks was also associated with a general increase in eating disorders during adolescence. The findings of the study provide empirical support for the need to develop prevention strategies that address the improvement in self-esteem and adequate socialization through social networks during adolescence. The development of effective interventions along these lines could be helpful to treat the behaviors and attitudes that are observed in eating disorders.

Review by Vandenbosch, Fardouly and Tiggemann (2022) presents recent trends in social media and body image research, with a particular focus on different social media platforms,

features unique to social media, and potentially positive content for body image. First, it was found that visual platforms (e.g. Instagram) were more dysfunctional for body image than more textual platforms (e.g. Facebook). Second, taking and editing (but not posting) selfies resulted in negative effects on body image. Positive comments intensified the effects of exposure to idealized content. Third, of the forms of potentially positive content examined in recent research (i.e. fitspiration, disclaimer labels, and body positivity), only body positivity content had a positive effect on body image. Recommendations for future research are offered.

Evidence from 50 studies in 17 countries indicates that social media usage leads to body image concerns, eating disorders/disordered eating and poor mental health via the mediating pathways of social comparison, thin / fit ideal internalisation, and self-objectification. Specific exposures (social media trends, pro-eating disorder content, appearance focused platforms and investment in photos) and moderators (high BMI, female gender, and pre-existing body image concerns) strengthen the relationship, while other moderators (high social media literacy and body appreciation) are protective, hinting at a 'self-perpetuating cycle of risk'. Social media usage is a plausible risk factor for the development of eating disorders. Research from Asia suggests that the association is not unique to traditionally western cultures. Based on scale of social media usage amongst young people, this issue is worthy of attention as an emerging global public health issue. (Dane & Bhatia, 2023)

Cingel, Carter and Krause (2022) said that the relationship between social media and self-esteem is complex, as studies tend to find a mixed pattern of relationships and meta-analyses tend to find small, albeit significant, magnitudes of statistical effects. One explanation is that social media use does not affect self-esteem for the majority of users, while small minorities experience either positive or negative effects, as evidenced by recent research calculating person-specific within-person effects. This suggests that the true relationship between social media use and self-esteem is person-specific and based on individual susceptibilities and uses. In recognition of these advancements, we review recent empirical studies considering differential uses and moderating variables in the social media–self-esteem relationship and conclude by discussing opportunities for future social media effects research.

Despite the growing body of literature, significant knowledge gaps remain. For instance, while several studies have established correlations between social media use and negative body image or disordered eating, causal relationships are not well understood. Future research could

benefit from longitudinal studies that track social media behaviors and their psychological impacts over time.

3. Method

3.1 Participants

Participants included 200 young adults (100 males, 100 females), who aged between 18-24 years and actively used social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and Snapchat. Individuals with *diagnosed severe psychiatric disorders (excluding eating disorders)* or those who do not use social media regularly were excluded from potential participants.

3.2 Materials

The research used five psychological tests for each of the five variables. Social media usage was assessed using Social Media Disorder Scale (SMDS) (van den Eijnden, R. J. J. M., Lemmens, J. S., & Valkenburg, 2016), a 9-item scale measuring adolescents' degree of addiction to social media, based on scale from Internet Gaming Disorder found in the DSM-V, for preoccupation, tolerance, escape, persistence, withdrawal, conflict, problems, deception, and displacement.

Eating disorders and related symptoms were assessed using **SCOFF Questionnaire** (Morgan et al., 2002), a five-question screening tool designed to clarify suspicion that an eating disorder might exist.

Body image concerns were assessed using **Body Shape Questionnaire (BSQ-8A)** (Evans & Dolan, 1993), an 8 item self-report measure of the body shape preoccupations typical of bulimia nervosa and anorexia nervosa.

Self-esteem was assessed using **Rosenberg Self Esteem Scale (RSES)** (Morris Rosenberg, 1965), a 10-item scale measuring global self-worth by measuring both positive and negative feelings about the self.

Perceived Social Support was assessed using the **Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS)** (Zimet, Dahlem, & Farley, 1988), a 12-item measure of perceived adequacy of social support from three sources: family, friends, & significant other; using a 5-point Likert scale.

3.3 Procedure

The research was conducted entirely online using Google Forms. After providing informed consent via online form, participants completed a brief demographic questionnaire followed by the

main questionnaires, for which instructions were displayed on-screen prior to each section. Completion of the form took around 10 minutes.

4. Results

Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics were computed for the key study variables. As shown in Table 1, the mean score for social media usage was 3.46 ($SD = 2.51$), indicating moderate engagement. Eating disorder symptoms averaged 2.32 ($SD = 1.37$), while body image concerns had a higher mean score of 20.05 ($SD = 10.41$). The average self-esteem score was 21.47 ($SD = 2.79$), and perceived social support was moderately high with a mean of 57.57 ($SD = 17.15$).

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Study Variables ($N = 200$)

Variable	Mean	SD	Min	25%	Median	75%	Max
Social Media Usage	3.46	2.51	0	1.00	3.00	5.00	9
Eating Disorders	2.32	1.37	0	1.00	2.00	3.00	6
Body Image	20.05	10.41	8	12.00	17.00	25.75	47
Self-Esteem	21.47	2.79	10	20.75	22.00	23.00	26
Perceived Social Support	57.57	17.15	18	44.00	59.00	72.00	84

Correlational Analysis

Pearson correlation coefficients (Table 2) revealed that **social media usage** was significantly:

- **positively correlated** with **eating disorder symptoms** ($r = .318, p < .01$) and **body image concerns** ($r = .189, p < .01$),
- **negatively correlated** with **self-esteem** ($r = -.476, p < .01$) and **perceived social support** ($r = -.355, p < .01$).

Table 2. Correlation Matrix

Variable	Social media Usage	Eating Disorders	Body Image	Self-Esteem	Perceived Social Support
Social Media Usage	1	.318**	.189**	-.476**	-.355**
Eating Disorders	.318**	1	.252**	-.540**	-.439**
Body Image	.189**	.252**	1	.067	-.470**
Self-Esteem	-.476**	-.540**	.067	1	.514**

Perceived Social Support	-.355**	-.439**	-.470**	.514**	1
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($p < .01$ for all marked correlations)

Multiple Regression Analysis

A multiple regression analysis was conducted to examine the predictive power of social media usage, body image, self-esteem, and perceived social support on eating disorder symptoms. The overall model was statistically significant, $F(4, 195) = 29.28$, $p < .001$, explaining approximately 37.5% of the variance in eating disorder symptoms ($R^2 = .375$).

As shown in Table 3:

- Body image** was a significant **positive predictor** ($\beta = .274$, $p < .001$),
- Self-esteem** was a significant **negative predictor** ($\beta = -.544$, $p < .001$),
- Social media usage** ($\beta = -.005$, $p = .941$) and **perceived social support** ($\beta = -.032$, $p = .693$) did **not** significantly predict eating disorder symptoms in the presence of other variables.

Table 3. Regression Analysis for Predictors of Eating Disorder Symptoms

Model Summary						
Model		R	R Square	Adjusted R Square		Std. Error of the Estimate
1		.613 ^a	.375	.362		1.09686
a. Predictors: (Constant), perceived social support, social media usage, body image, self esteem						
ANOVA ^a						
Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	140.915	4	35.229	29.282	.000 ^b
	Residual	234.605	195	1.203		
	Total	375.520	199			
a. Dependent Variable: eating disorder						
b. Predictors: (Constant), perceived social support, social media usage, body image, self esteem						
Coefficients ^a						
Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized	t	Sig.

				Coefficients		
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	7.515	.751		10.000	.000
	Social media usage	-.003	.036	-.005	-.074	.941
	Body image	.036	.009	.274	3.817	.000
	Self esteem	-.268	.039	-.544	-6.859	.000
	Perceived social support	-.003	.007	-.032	-.396	.693
a. Dependent Variable: eating disorder						

5. Discussion

This study explored the relationship between social media usage and key psychological variables—eating disorder symptoms, body image, self-esteem, and perceived social support—among young adults. The findings provide important insights into how digital behaviors may be associated with mental health and self-perception in this population.

Correlational analyses supported both hypotheses. Consistent with **H1**, higher social media usage was significantly and positively correlated with increased symptoms of eating disorders. Similarly, in line with **H2**, social media usage was positively associated with body image concerns. These findings align with prior research suggesting that exposure to idealized body images and appearance-related content on social media platforms may contribute to disordered eating behaviors and dissatisfaction with one's body (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016; Tiggemann & Slater, 2013).

Additionally, social media usage was significantly negatively correlated with self-esteem and perceived social support. These results suggest that while social media platforms are designed for connection, they may paradoxically foster feelings of inadequacy and isolation, possibly due to social comparison and superficial interactions (Vogel et al., 2014).

However, the multiple regression analysis revealed a more nuanced picture. While bivariate correlations showed social media usage was significantly associated with eating disorder symptoms, it did not remain a significant predictor in the regression model after accounting for body image, self-esteem, and perceived social support. This suggests that the influence of social media on disordered eating may be indirect, operating through its impact on other psychological factors, particularly body image and self-esteem, both of which emerged as strong predictors.

These findings highlight the mediating role of internal psychological factors, such as self-esteem and body image, in the relationship between social media use and eating pathology. They suggest that interventions aimed at reducing eating disorder symptoms in young adults should not only address social media consumption but also focus on strengthening self-esteem and promoting a healthy body image. Additionally, raising awareness about the unrealistic and often digitally altered nature of social media content could mitigate its negative psychological effects.

While the study provides valuable insights, several limitations should be noted. First, the cross-sectional design precludes any conclusions about causality. Future studies employing longitudinal or experimental designs could help establish directionality. Second, the study relied on self-report measures, which are susceptible to social desirability bias. Third, the generalizability of the findings may be limited to similar demographic groups and cultural contexts.

Future research should explore potential moderators (e.g., gender, media literacy, or personality traits) and mediators (e.g., internalization of beauty ideals) to better understand the mechanisms by which social media influences psychological well-being. It may also be beneficial to differentiate between types of social media use (e.g., passive scrolling vs. active engagement) in future analyses.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study adds to the growing body of evidence suggesting that social media usage is associated with psychological outcomes in young adults. Although social media usage alone was not a significant direct predictor of eating disorder symptoms when controlling for other variables, its influence through body image concerns and self-esteem is clear. These findings underscore the importance of developing educational and psychological interventions that address the broader context of social media use and its psychological correlates.

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