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Article

Influence of Social Media on Eating Disorders in Adolescents—A Narrative Review of the Recent Literature

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Abstract

Background: Thinspiration and fitspiration are two social media trends that can affect adolescents and young adults in unhealthy ways. These movements and the algorithmic enhancement of related content on social media can lead to the internalization of unrealistic beauty ideals and increase the risk of the development of eating disorders. **Methods:** For this narrative review, databases of peer-reviewed journals were searched with appropriate search terms, and information from relevant papers was included in this review. **Results:** Incidence and prevalence of eating disorders among adolescents are on the rise. This is associated with social media use and more strongly with social media use featuring algorithmically enhanced display of idealized beauty ideals and unrealistic, edited pictures. Augmented-reality filters enhance these risks as they lead to the internalization of these distorted beauty ideals and self-objectification. Social distancing and lockdowns during the pandemic lead to decreased in-person social contact. This increase in social media use as a coping strategy augmented the above-mentioned risks posed by social media. Movements like #bodypositivity, educational programs, and regulatory measures can effectively counter these risks. **Conclusions:** An interdisciplinary approach that includes more diversified content through adjusted feed algorithms, educational programs to increase social media competency, and regulatory measures can counter social media-associated health risks such as internalization of unrealistic beauty ideals that increase the risk of eating disorders in adolescents.

Keywords: eating disorders; social media; thinspiration; fitspiration; body image; beauty norms

1. Introduction

The use of social media has increased tremendously in recent years. It has developed into a central platform for social exchange as a source of information and for self-presentation. Particularly in adolescents and young adults, social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat have an enormous influence on the body image and eating behaviors. These platforms use algorithms that display curated content that, via positive feedback loops, reinforces unrealistic body image and idealized beauty norms [1–4]. Movements such as “Thinspiration” and “Fitspiration” propagate restrictive eating behaviors and a focus on muscular body images with excessive fitness routines. Especially concerning is the amplification of eating disorder-relevant content through the personalized feeds and recommendation algorithms, which increase the risk of distorted body images and normalize restrictive eating habits [5,6]. Empirical studies show a significant correlation between social media use and symptoms of eating disorders in particular through social comparison and internalization of unrealistic ideals [7,8]. Differences in social status can contribute to the development of eating disorders. It has been shown that youth from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds have a 60% higher risk of developing eating disorders in comparison to age-matched youth from more stable social and financial backgrounds. This might be due to socioeconomic

barriers to access to mental health care but also to decreased access to preventative measures that can decrease the development of eating disorders [9]

From a public health perspective, the increasing discussion of social media content that propagates beauty norms and body images that increase eating disorders is a serious challenge. Eating disorders are not just a serious individual health problem but come with enormous societal and economic burdens. The Global Burden of Disease Study (2019) showed that worldwide approximately 40 million people suffer from anorexia or bulimia and an additional 42 million people battle binge eating disorders and subclinical forms of eating disorders [10]. This brings the total global prevalence to 0.7%. Underreporting due to a lack of diagnostic means indicates that this number is likely unrealistically low [11,12]. In the EU, the “Digital Services Act” in the EU is meant to increase the responsibility of social media companies and to protect vulnerable groups such as adolescents and young adults[13]. Other regulatory measures such as labeling of artificially enhanced pictures and algorithmic promotion of certain content are being discussed. In addition to preventive measures, digital strategies to actively promote positive body images in the use of social media are instruments to improve resiliency against content that promotes eating disorders and are necessary [10].

This narrative review explores platform-specific risks for adolescents and young adults, gender-specific and cultural differences, and regulatory and preventative measures in the context of social media. It shows that both individual and structural influencing factors exist for the development and maintenance of eating disorders. Special emphasis was given to actionable items that include preventative measures, education about social media, and increased regulation of social media.

2. Algorithmic Enhancement as Influencing Factor

Dissemination of social media content is largely driven by algorithmic mechanisms. This prioritized content is based on individual usage patterns and therefore enhances social dynamics and leaves alternative perspectives [1–4]. Content with high emotional relevance and visual aesthetics is particularly prioritized. This leads to the preferential showing of idealized body images in user feeds [5]. This is especially true for platforms that are used mainly by youth and young adults such as TikTok and Instagram, where algorithmic recommendations aim to present emotional and salient content [14]. The long-term exposure to idealized beauty symbols and images can lead to a distorted perception of what can be deemed attractive [15]. This in turn leads to a systematic preference for idealized beauty norms, which intensify social comparison processes and dissatisfaction with one’s own body [16]. Interestingly, according to a recently published meta-analysis, this is not primarily associated with the duration of social media use and screen time but with the kind of social media content that is consumed. Algorithmically enhanced content with extremist beauty norms is all directly associated with disordered body images [8]. The algorithms in use increase the risk of disordered eating behaviors, as social media users are increasingly exposed to content that promotes restrictive eating patterns or extreme fitness routines [17]. Youth that are more dependent on digital communities are more vulnerable to such influences because social networks are not only used as information sources but also as reference frameworks [10]. Accordingly, use of social media, in particular when the usage pattern can be considered evidence of an addiction, is associated with significantly increased symptoms of depression and anxiety [18]. Algorithmic mechanisms also increase gender-specific beauty norms such as unrealistically thin expectations for young women and girls, while male youth are confronted with expectations of muscular body ideals [19,20]. Algorithms on platforms like Instagram preferentially display idealized “perfect” body images that increase pressure on young women to be unrealistically and unhealthily thin, while young males are pressured to build muscle by adhering to excessive fitness routines [5].

3. Enhancing the Influence of Augmented-Reality Filters

The use of augmented-reality filters on social media platforms such as Snapchat and Instagram enhances the discrepancy between real and idealized self-image. This distortion of self-perception, especially in girls and young women, is correlated with increased dissatisfaction with their own bodies. It also is associated with an increased long-term risk of development of eating disorders [21]. Particularly problematic in this context is the fact that not only do augmented-reality filters enforce existing insecurities, but they also can make idealized beauty standards more attainable, which increases the desire to undergo cosmetic surgeries [22,23]. This is especially true for less invasive procedures such as lip-filling procedures and rhinoplasty that are sought after increasingly by younger female users who under the influence of augmented reality filters are particularly dissatisfied with their own natural appearance [5]. Here it is also important to mention the photo-based social media platform Snapchat that uses augmented reality filters to an unprecedented extent. Adolescents use this platform more than other age groups and are therefore at particularly high risk as users who use augmented reality filters regularly more often report dissatisfaction with their body and symptoms of depression [24,25].

4. Internalization of Unrealistic Beauty Ideals

Algorithmic priorities of social media platforms lead to the preferential display of content that glorifies thinness, restrictive diets, or extreme fitness routines [17,26]. Especially image-based platforms such as Instagram and TikTok contribute to the internalization of these unrealistic beauty ideals [5]. The internalization of thinness beauty norms in adolescent women is associated with the use of social media according to a meta-analysis published in 2017. This meta-analysis also found that posting and viewing of idealized images are strongly associated with this internalization and the risk to develop dissatisfaction with one's body and eating disorders [27]. The algorithmic prioritization of content with high amounts of social interactions leads to overproportioned presentation of idealized body images. This in turn creates so-called filter bubbles that enhance access to eating-disorder-promoting content and internalization of unrealistic beauty norms [28]. This risk is particularly high for adolescents who are vulnerable to modeling their long-term beauty ideals on these idealized images and internalizing these norms for a long time in their future [5].

5. Self-Objectification

In a society that is concerned about one's appearance, women in general, but particularly young women and girls see themselves as others see them [29]. By depending on likes and follower comments and feedback, young women who use social media are especially affected by this mechanism. Adolescents are more vulnerable than adults as they are more sensitive to social feedback and external judgment [30].

The use of image-based social media platforms such as TikTok and Instagram, with their algorithm-driven prioritization of attention-grabbing, idealized content, enhances the obsession with appearance and comparison to unrealistic beauty norms. This is especially true for young women and girls who identify with influencers and celebrities [31]. A recent poll among Austrian youth showed that 71% compare themselves more to others after consuming social media content, 65% report that social media influences their self-perception, and 27% feel worse after viewing beauty-related social media content [32].

Particularly concerning in this context is that filter bubbles increasingly expose adolescent girls and young women to unrealistic beauty norms, which in the long run distort the perception of their own body and lead to an increased risk of development of eating disorders [5]. Despite cultural differences in beauty norms, through globalization this internalization of homogeneous, normed beauty ideals increasingly influences adolescents worldwide [9].

6. Increase of Risk by Pandemic-Specific Factors

Because of lockdowns and social distancing measures that decrease in-person contact, the COVID-19 pandemic amplified the use of virtual social networks and social media platforms. During this time the incidence of eating disorders among adolescents increased significantly [33]. This might in part be due to increased stressors such as decreased social contact and decreased access to support networks, which reduced the resiliency of many affected youths [10].

People who already suffered from eating disorders pre-pandemic experienced a major increase in symptoms during the pandemic [34]. The WHO (2024) also points out that social distancing measures and lockdowns increased the incidence of eating disorders, which was attributed to the increase in social media use as a coping strategy [35]. Lacking regulatory measures allowed the dissemination of extreme fitness and diet fads that normalized eating-disordered behavior [36]. Adolescents are particularly susceptible to these mechanisms due to their still vulnerable self-image and above-average social media use [30]. Taken together, pandemic-related social isolation and increased use of social media as a coping strategy functioned as an enhancer of eating disorder-propagating behavior [36,37]. Particularly concerning was the enhanced exposure to appearance-centric content and algorithmic enhancement of social comparisons and prioritization of eating-disorder-relevant content [38].

Algorithmic enhancement of content with high social interaction potential was presented at an ever higher rate during the pandemic, which led to an increased dissemination of eating-disorder-normalizing content and extreme beauty ideals [31]. This is particularly true for image-based platforms such as TikTok and Instagram [38]. This is also the view of the Leibniz Institute for Media Research, which pointed out that image-based social media platforms have a stronger negative influence on the self-image and confidence of young users and increase their dissatisfaction with their own bodies [39]. For young males, the social and peer pressure to build muscle increases the risk for the development of muscular dysmorphia [40]. These factors were amplified during the pandemic through increased social media consumption.

7. Preventive and Regulatory Measures

To limit the negative influence of social media on the body image of young users, targeted preventive measures are necessary. Particularly effective are the promotion of media competency, regulatory measures that limit the display of eating-disorder-normalizing content, and psychological support for vulnerable groups. It has been shown that programs that teach media competency can mitigate eating-disorder-promoting processes significantly [41]. Initiatives such as “MediaSmart” or “Be Real” that target adolescents can teach them to recognize manipulated content and question algorithmic enhancement and prioritization of questionable content [10]. So-called social media detox programs where users temporarily reduce their social media use can change the perception of beauty ideals long-term [31]. Even short mindful social media breaks can significantly increase satisfaction with one’s own body. Targeted messages on social media platforms that aim to increase mental wellbeing can diminish eating-disorder-promoting mechanisms and decrease the risk of developing eating disorders [26].

In addition to preventive programs that target the individual user, regulatory measures are necessary to limit the display of eating-disorder-promoting content on social media platforms [21]. Programs such as the “Red Flag” initiative, which aims to reduce the display of deceptive advertisements for weight loss products, are not enough to protect the public, and in particular, vulnerable groups such as adolescents who tend to be more gullible compared to adults [42]. Despite regulatory efforts to limit misleading advertisement, such content is still present on social media and can have negative consequences for the body image of youth [43]. The requirement by law to label potentially harmful content with warnings is being discussed [21]. A combination of such labeling requirements with psychological support programs would be useful to support young social media users at risk [10].

In the long run, only a collaboration between politics, science, and social media stakeholders can work to develop and enable preventive measures to reduce the risk for young users [21]. Since social

media platforms operate globally, international guidelines and regulations are needed to better protect adolescents and limit their exposure to eating-disorder-promoting content [43].

Since economically disadvantaged youth have less access to preventative and therapeutic measures, they are often less savvy about their own health, which makes them particularly susceptible to algorithmically enhanced display of eating-disorder-promoting content, as such algorithms prioritize content based on previously viewed content. However, it has been shown that preventive programs are especially effective in such vulnerable populations [9] This indicates that the implementation of such programs is extremely important as it can help to alleviate social inequalities and to adapt prevention programs to socioeconomically disadvantaged groups.

These results emphasize that prevention is a multidisciplinary challenge. Only a coordinated effort in media education, psychological prevention programs and regulatory measures will limit risks of social media long-term and have sustainable positive effects [10].

8. Discussion

This literature review demonstrates that social media harbor significant risk factors for body image disorders and eating-disorder-promoting mechanisms. In particular, image-based platforms such as Instagram and TikTok contribute to the increased internalization of unrealistic beauty ideals through the algorithmic amplification of problematic content.

Social media is strongly connected to dissatisfaction with one's own body and disordered eating behaviors. A significant correlation has been shown in a meta-analysis in the past [44]. In particular, image-oriented platforms prioritize content that promotes thinspiration or fitspiration ideals [24]. This is especially true for adolescent users who are even more likely to be confronted with idealized body images, which can lead to disordered eating behaviors in the long run [5].

Not only does this affect female users, who are pressured by expectations of a thin ideal, but also young males, who are exposed to increasing pressure to internalize a muscular body image. Marginalized groups such as young homosexual males are particularly susceptible to these pressures [45]. Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok increase this effect as they preferentially show content that deals with building muscle and sculpted body images. This content increases the risk for the development of muscular dysmorphia [46]. Therefore, it is vital that the role of social media in the development of eating-disordered behaviors should be examined across genders, as new social media dynamics affect both genders.

The example of the augmented reality filters that are commonly used on Snapchat and their association with dissatisfaction with one's own body and symptoms of depression [24,25] shows that not only algorithmically enhanced content but also other technical innovations can distort the perception of self in adolescents [47].

Pandemic-specific factors such as social isolation through lockdowns and social distancing enhanced these processes as they increased the use of social media as a coping mechanism. Accordingly, dissatisfaction with one's own body image and eating-disordered behaviors among adolescents increased during this time [48]. This was particularly true for vulnerable youth from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds. Among this group, 72% of adolescents reported an increase in negative body images, while only 45% of adolescents from socioeconomically more stable households said the same [9]. This demonstrates that the pandemic-associated increase in social media use intensified social inequalities.

Taken together, this review showed that social media contribute significantly to the maladaptive internalization of unrealistic beauty ideals. A particularly high risk is conferred by social comparisons and technological developments such as algorithmic enhancement of problematic content and augmented reality filters, which promote disordered body images and eating-disordered behaviors [5]. At the same time, social media have the potential for positive change through movements such as #bodypositivity. Targeted education increases media competency, which can decrease the internalizing of unrealistic beauty ideals by up to 40% [21], and regulatory measures can contribute additionally to minimize negative effects of social media consumption. Changes by social media

platforms, such as labeling of edited pictures and changes to algorithms so they display more diversified content, are promising approaches. This is one of the measures required by the Digital Services Act of the EU aimed at reducing harmful and unhealthy social media content [13]. This shows that the most effective way to reduce social media-associated health risks is an interdisciplinary approach, in which educators, social media platforms, and regulatory bodies collaborate to achieve this goal. More research is needed into how societal beauty norms interact with social media, which long-term mechanisms are involved, and how evidence-based preventive strategies can be developed.

9. Conclusions

Algorithmic amplification of emotionally salient content preferentially exposes users to unrealistic beauty ideals, reinforcing social comparisons and self-objectification. Augmented reality filters intensify this effect by blurring the line between real and idealized self-image, further fueling dissatisfaction and the desire for cosmetic interventions.

Pandemic-related increases in social media use functioned as an additional risk amplifier, particularly among vulnerable and socioeconomically disadvantaged youth, where social isolation and stress heightened reliance on digital platforms. Both female and male users are affected, though gender-specific beauty ideals manifest differently: thinness ideals for young women and muscular ideals for young men.

Preventive strategies, including media literacy education, targeted support programs, and temporary social media “detox” interventions, have shown promise in mitigating these risks. However, individual prevention must be complemented by systemic measures, such as stricter regulation of eating disorder-promoting content, labeling of manipulated images, and algorithmic diversification of displayed content.

Ultimately, sustainable solutions require an interdisciplinary approach that combines psychological support, media education, regulatory frameworks, and platform-level accountability. While social media can propagate harmful norms, it also has the potential to promote positive body image movements such as #bodypositivity. To achieve this balance, collaboration between policymakers, researchers, educators, and technology providers is essential. More longitudinal research is needed to better understand long-term outcomes and to design evidence-based interventions that effectively protect adolescents from the adverse effects of social media.

10. Future Directions

Future research should focus on longitudinal studies that clarify the causal mechanisms linking social media use, algorithmic exposure, and body image disturbances across different age groups and cultural contexts. Particular attention should be given to vulnerable populations, including adolescents from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds and marginalized gender or sexual identity groups. Further work is also needed to evaluate the effectiveness of prevention programs, regulatory measures, and platform-based interventions such as algorithm diversification and labeling of manipulated images. Exploring how positive online movements, such as body positivity, can be sustainably integrated into social media environments may offer promising strategies to counterbalance harmful content.

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