

Impact of Social Media on Body Imaging and Eating Disorders among Youth in Islamabad



Farhan Ahmed Faiz *

Mudasar Ali Nadeem †

Muhammad Umar Zafar ‡

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Abstract: *This study examines the impact of social media on the body image views of adolescents and investigates its potential association with the onset of eating disorders. Two main inquiries are examined: This study aims to investigate three key aspects related to social media and body image: (1) the influence of body shaming on social media platforms, and (2) the effects of exposure to idealized body images and comparison with influencers on social media. The qualitative approach encompasses the utilization of in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted with individuals between the ages of 18 to 26 who exhibit a high level of engagement with social media platforms. Overall, 5 female students were interviewed from the capital territory of Islamabad. The study concluded that the prevalence of disordered eating and body dissatisfaction among young adults and adolescents can be attributed to their exposure to idealized body ideals and the activities of influencers.*

Key Words: Body Shaming, Social Media

Introduction

From a gendered perspective, the phenomenon of body imaging on social media refers to the representation, dissemination, and ingestion of images of the human body across numerous social media platforms. This phenomenon is notable due to its association with gender identity and the impact of societal norms on these activities. The complex relationship between social media and body image perception has emerged as a major concern with the advent of the digital age. The regulated nature of the content shared on these platforms presents a distorted depiction of reality, frequently highlighting individuals in their most favourable moments and employing aesthetically appealing perspectives, filters, and edits. As individuals navigate online platforms featuring scrupulously curated images and immaculately toned bodies, a nuanced and detrimental social comparison phenomenon emerges (Kim, 2021). The advent of technology has significantly transformed interpersonal dynamics, information sharing, and the ability to

influence public sentiment. The emergence of social media platforms has facilitated the dissemination of personal thoughts, emotions, and experiences to a worldwide audience, thereby dismantling barriers and fostering connections that were previously unattainable (Seekis & Kennedy, 2023). In contemporary times, influencers, and organizations perceive social media as an essential instrument for effectively engaging with their target audiences. The advent of this technology has significantly transformed advertising techniques by enabling the implementation of tailored campaigns and permitting real-time engagement with customers. Due to the aforementioned transformation in the marketing domain, social media has gained widespread recognition as a crucial element of contemporary communication (Baceviciene et al., 2023)

The alarming rise in eating disorders, particularly among adolescents and young adults, exhibits a significant association with the detrimental impact of social media on self-perception. Eating disorders, such

* Assistant Professor, School of Sociology Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad, Pakistan.

† Lecturer, Department of Sociology, Government College University Faisalabad, Chiniot Campus, Punjab, Pakistan.

‡ Lecturer, Department of Sociology, Government College University Faisalabad, Chiniot Campus, Punjab, Pakistan.

as anorexia, bulimia, and binge eating disorder, represent several pathological conditions. These conditions are characterized by fluctuations in eating patterns and a strong focus on one's physical appearance. The development of many disorders is influenced by a combination of genetic, psychological, social, and cultural variables. In recent years, there has been a growing recognition of the substantial impact that social media exerts on the emergence and perpetuation of mental health disorders (Zeng et al., 2023). The advent of social media has significantly transformed the way individuals engage and disseminate information within contemporary society. Nevertheless, it is imperative not to overlook the profound influence it exerts on individuals' perception of their physical appearance and the pervasiveness of eating disorders. As individuals allocate an increasing amount of time within the visually oriented realm of online interactions, they experience heightened societal expectations to adhere to established norms of physical attractiveness. The impact of social media on mental health, particularly in relation to body image, is significant and should not be underestimated, despite its extensive reach (Zeeni et al., 2023). The rising prevalence of eating disorders, specifically among adolescents and young adults, exhibits a strong correlation with the detrimental effects of social media on perceptions of body image. Anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, and binge eating disorder are classified as eating disorders (Rodgers & Rousseau, 2022). These disorders are distinguished by atypical eating behaviours and a preoccupation with one's physical appearance. The etiologies of these disorders are multifaceted and encompass genetic, psychological, social, and cultural factors. In recent years, there has been a growing recognition of the significant impact that social media exerts on the development and perpetuation of mental disorders (Peebles & Sieke, 2019).

Problem Statement

The broad adoption of social media has been associated with potential adverse impacts on mental health, particularly in relation to body image concerns and an elevated susceptibility to developing eating disorders (Berryman et al. 2018). There has been a growing concern regarding the impact of idealized body types and lifestyles portrayed on social media platforms, particularly among vulnerable demographics such as teenagers and young people (Kross, 2021). The necessity for producing effective

intervention techniques and regulations necessitates a comprehensive comprehension of the intricate relationship between social media use, self-perception, and the emergence of eating disorders, despite the increasing acknowledgement of the associated concerns. There has been an increasing focus on the influence of social media on matters pertaining to anorexia and body image, although numerous inquiries persist without resolution (O'Reilly et al., 2018). Establishing causal linkages and identifying long-term repercussions of social media use on eating disorders and body image problems pose significant challenges due to the predominant utilization of cross-sectional data in existing research on this topic. There is a substantial amount of research examining the impact of social media on body image and eating disorders. However, it is noteworthy that the majority of these studies primarily concentrate on Western settings, so neglecting significant cultural and gender variations that warrant consideration.

Significance of Study

Conducting research on the phenomenon of body image and eating disorders on social media has the potential to address significant knowledge gaps, enhance public awareness, and improve intervention strategies. This research has the potential to provide valuable insights and address existing gaps in knowledge. The investigation of the impact of social media on eating disorders and body image can potentially provide insights into the psychological, societal, and technological dimensions involved in this phenomenon. This fresh knowledge can provide a deeper understanding of the detrimental impacts associated with idealized body images and the pervasive culture of comparison. Through the identification of these pathways, researchers can offer treatments that are more focused and specific in nature (Bekalu et al., 2019). Numerous extant research predominantly concentrates on Western societies, so neglecting to consider the regional variations in cultural norms and gender dynamics within the local context of Pakistan (Nasir & Imran, 2023). This study addresses a notable gap in the existing knowledge by investigating the diverse effects of social media on eating disorders and body image within different cultural contexts and among individuals of varying gender identities. Acquiring this knowledge is crucial for the formulation of therapies that demonstrate efficacy across diverse cultures. There exists a notable disparity between the

acknowledgement of a problem and the successful execution of feasible solutions. The results of this study have the potential to address this gap in knowledge by offering evidence-based suggestions for reducing the harmful effects of social media on eating disorders and body image. Several examples encompass media literacy campaigns, internet resources pertaining to health and wellness, and theoretical frameworks relevant to counselling and therapy (Zainab et al., 2023). The study has the potential to illuminate the ethical considerations that arise from the development of content, algorithms, and targeted advertising on social media platforms. The results of this study can be utilized by platforms to suggest policy modifications that emphasize the well-being of users, encourage responsible production of content, and establish secure virtual environments for individuals who are particularly susceptible to harm. The results of this study have the potential to enhance the level of knowledge in public discussions regarding the impacts of social media on mental well-being. Armed with this information, individuals can enhance their ability to advocate for constructive transformations within the digital realm and engage in a discerning manner with the platforms they utilize.

The investigation of the impacts of social media on eating disorders and body image necessitates interdisciplinary collaboration among several academic disciplines, including public health, psychology, sociology, and related topics. The identification of comprehensive solutions to a given problem might be facilitated through interdisciplinary collaboration among specialists from diverse professions. The research ultimately functions as a catalyst for advancement. By shedding light on the influence of social media on body image and eating disorders, this research has the potential to initiate dialogues, initiatives, and policies aimed at fostering healthier digital spaces and promoting mental health.

Research Questions

1. How social media impacts creating ideal body images and fosters dissatisfaction among you adults
2. How social media content, profiles, likes and comments influence individuals' own body and develops eating disorders among them.
3. What role can social media-based self-acceptance and body positivity content play in reducing the negative effects of conventional

beauty standards and fostering better body image attitudes among users, especially those at risk for eating disorders and body dissatisfaction

Theoretical Underpinnings

The pervasive influence of social media on individuals' self-perceptions and interpersonal dynamics has become an indispensable component of contemporary culture (Perloff, 2014). This theoretical framework explores the significance of social comparison theory in elucidating the complex dynamics between social media, idealized body ideals, and the development of eating disorders.

The theory of social comparison, originally formulated by Leon Festinger in 1954, posits that individuals engage in the process of evaluating their own self-worth by comparing themselves to others. This theoretical framework posits that individuals engage in both upward and downward comparisons of their own lives with those they view as being more advantaged or disadvantaged, respectively. Within the realm of body image and eating disorders, social media presents a conducive environment for the occurrence of comparison processes. Social media platforms are inundated with meticulously edited photographs showcasing individuals' aesthetically pleasing physiques. Individuals commonly engage in self-comparisons between their own physical appearances and these idealized constructs, which are purely fictional, with the aim of achieving a desired social standing (Oeldorf, 2016). Individuals may experience self-doubt, develop negative body image, and have diminished self-esteem as a result of these unattainable societal expectations. The societal pressure to uphold an unattainable physical standard, stemming from these comparisons, has the potential to contribute to the development of eating disorders. The availability of a continuous flow of visual content on social media platforms enables users to readily assess their comparative standing against a wide array of individuals. Exposure to photos depicting bodies that appear to be flawless has the potential to heighten the inclination to engage in comparative evaluations (McComb et al., 2023). The capacity to portray oneself in an optimal manner can result in a distorted perception of reality, particularly considering individuals' tendency to share exclusively their most appealing and meticulously chosen visuals on social media platforms. Engaging in such biased self-

promotion may potentially have adverse consequences on an individual's self-perception and contribute to the perpetuation of upward social comparisons. A comprehensive comprehension of the Social Comparison Theory's significance within the context of social media can facilitate the formulation of efficacious measures for mitigating its potential negative effects. Moreover, the matter of idealizing things through media either for body perfection, relationship goals, desires, choices and lifestyle shaping is an emerging issue in the contemporary world (Sharif, 2023). In order to enhance one's understanding of the prevalence of unrealistic social media images, it is imperative to foster media literacy and cultivate critical thinking abilities. The implementation of strategies aimed at fostering healthy social media usage, fostering constructive discourse on body image, and enhancing public knowledge regarding the potential repercussions of excessive social comparison represents a crucial endeavour in mitigating the influence of social media on eating disorders and body image perceptions (Roberts et al., 2022). The present study used the theoretical lens of the Social Comparison Theory to investigate the impact of social media on body image and eating disorders. Similarly, due to media and idealizing the standard of the body and its related eating practices, the elderly population is drastically affected (Sharif et al., 2022). By recognizing the pervasive prevalence of upward social comparisons on social media and implementing proactive interventions, it is conceivable that we can foster a more agreeable digital milieu wherein individuals can foster positive body attitudes and mitigate the likelihood of developing eating disorders.

Materials & Methods

This qualitative research endeavour aims to gain a comprehensive understanding of the impact of social media on individuals' body image judgements and the development of eating disorders in Islamabad, Pakistan. Researchers have employed a phenomenological methodology to examine the perspectives and lived encounters of individuals in relation to their utilisation of social media platforms. The researchers employed purposive sampling as a method for participant selection in order to ensure a diverse range of backgrounds and experiences. The sample has been consisting of individuals aged 18 to 26 who frequently employ social media platforms, encompassing both males and females. The study employed in-depth semi-structured interviews as a

means of gathering comprehensive narratives from participants regarding their experiences with social media and its impact on their body image and eating behaviours. Open-ended questions were employed to study many aspects related to participants' social media usage patterns, the type of content they consume, their attitudes about their bodies, and potential behavioural changes. The saturation point of the study was 5 respondents. In order to discern fundamental concepts and patterns within the dataset, first codes were generated. The codes utilised in this study have been derived from both inductive processes, where they emerged from the data, and deductive processes, where they were formulated based on the research objectives. The codes have been classified into many thematic categories that correspond to the participant's perspectives and encounters with social media and body image. The research has been carried out in adherence to ethical guidelines, including the preservation of participant confidentiality, obtaining informed consent, and granting the right to withdraw from the study at any given point. Eating disorders, which are considered sensitive topics, have been the focus of particular attention, with participants being provided access to support services as necessary.

Results and Discussion

Idealized Body Images and Comparison

The prevalence of social media in contemporary society gives rise to significant apprehensions over its impact on individuals' body image and the perpetuation of societal expectations surrounding idealized beauty standards.

The examination of individuals' lives reveals a regular pattern of engagement with social media visuals that endorse an unattainable and excessively idealised notion of beauty. The participants in the study frequently conveyed discontentment over media portrayals of individuals embodying an idealised standard (Buote et al., 2011). One of the respondents remarked that:

I encounter a sense of discontent whenever I see influencers on various social media platforms, specifically Instagram (Respondent 2)

Researchers have discovered, using a theme approach, that individuals utilising social media platforms tend to modify their accounts in order to align with prevailing societal norms and standards of

attractiveness. The study conducted by Hallward et al. (2023) revealed that individuals have a tendency to share and express approval towards photographs of themselves that accentuate their most favourable perspectives. This is achieved by the strategic use of poses and attire, with the aim of presenting an image that aligns with prevailing societal ideals of attractiveness. This form of deliberate self-presentation contributes to the construction of a digital identity that meticulously adheres to societal standards, hence reinforcing the idealisation of flawless physical appearances.

I always try to copy my favourite stars on social media, I pretend to look like them and I do everything to achieve it. (R5)

One of the noteworthy discoveries pertained to the high frequency with which individuals employ filters and editing software to modify their photographs before sharing them on digital platforms. As per the statements provided by the participants, these technologies enable the production of photographs that align with prevailing ideals of beauty by altering bodily proportions, complexion, and facial characteristics (Gayle, 2023). The aforementioned manipulation often exhibits a nuanced nature, although it significantly contributes to the process of establishing unattainable beauty standards as the norm for the majority of individuals. The participants recounted their encounters with the practice of comparing their physical appearance to meticulously maintained and digitally manipulated collections of photographs on online platforms. The act of individuals engaging in social comparisons frequently resulted in diminished self-esteem and a distorted perception of their bodily attributes. The compounding detrimental effects of idealised body images on self-perception occur when individuals have the opportunity to juxtapose their authentic selves with the flawless selves of others. The findings of the study revealed the psychological impact of excessive exposure to idealised images on the internet. The participants conveyed emotions characterised by bodily discontentment, diminished self-worth, and a sense of inadequacy in meeting artificially constructed societal ideals. The individuals who often participated in comparison activities on these platforms experienced the most significant emotional impact. Continuous exposure to and comparison with idealised body images can potentially contribute to the development of body image

dissatisfaction and, in severe cases, eating disorders (Momade, 2023).

Social Comparison and Upward Comparison

The dynamics of social comparison, namely the ubiquitous phenomenon of upward comparison, carry a dual significance in the digital environment as they reflect the complexities of human conduct in the era of social media. The prevalence of constant comparisons with peers and influencers has become a common occurrence as individuals are exposed to meticulously crafted depictions of others' lives. The inclination to assess one's own worth based on the accomplishments, physical attractiveness, and lifestyle choices of others is an expression of the inherent human need for validation and a feeling of inclusion, which is prominently displayed in the realm of online social media. The continual act of comparing oneself to the seemingly impeccable standards set by others can result in feelings of inadequacy and unhappiness, as seen by this observed inclination (Jarman et al., 2021).

It is a sense of contentment to wear attire, to make the body shape like people I use to idealise on social media (Respondent 7)

The psychological consequences of engaging in upward social comparison are complex and can have both motivational and demotivational impacts on individuals. Regular exposure to individuals who are idealised and showcase seemingly flawless lifestyles has the potential to serve as a source of inspiration, ultimately fostering personal growth and development for the individual involved (Durkin & Paxton, 2000).

It provides me psychological satisfaction to develop body traits, irrespective of how difficult it is to achieve (Respondent 6,1)

The dual perspective posits that societal comparison and upward comparison serve as reflections of our frailties and aspirations. The inherent need for self-improvement is universally present, however, its impact in the contemporary era characterised by digital amplification necessitates the practice of moderation.

Impact on Body Dissatisfaction and Self-Perception

The escalating occurrence of body dissatisfaction has become a prominent subject in contemporary society, as recent studies shed light on the intricate

mechanisms via which the internet can contribute to the development of an unfavourable perception of one's own body. Analysing Idealised Benchmarks An essential element of this thematic area is to investigate the impact of exposure to idealised body photos on individuals' body image perceptions. The deliberate curation of photos disseminated through social media platforms might perpetuate an unattainable standard of beauty, thereby fostering feelings of inadequacy. The widespread availability of meticulously edited body images presents an unattainable standard of beauty to individuals. Excessive comparison to unattainable norms portrayed on online platforms may result in the development of body dissatisfaction (Roberts et al., [2022](#)).

I have changed my whole routine life, my eating habits and life patterns. My social media exposure has cultivated my thought to be smart and beautiful at any cost (R3, R4, R7).

Individuals frequently experience heightened self-consciousness regarding their imperfections and disparities when they engage in comparisons between their own physical appearance and that of others they encounter on internet platforms. The perpetual process of comparing oneself to others perpetuates negative emotions such as discontent and dissatisfaction with one's body, ultimately leading to a mistaken picture of oneself (Pedalino & Camerini, [2022](#)).

I feel anxiety and frustration and other negative emotions regarding myself after I fell in comparison on social media (R1, R6)

Frequent exposure to digitally altered depictions may potentially result in experiences of diminished self-worth and depressive symptoms (Jiotsa et al., [2021](#)). Many users internalize the belief that their physical appearance is insufficient when compared to the idealized standards presented on the internet. The discrepancy between actual physical appearance and desired digital standards leads to feelings of discontentment with one's own body and a diminished sense of self-esteem.

Thinspiration and Fitspiration Content: Unmasking Digital Influences

The themes of "Thinspiration" and "Fitspiration" explore the significant impact that these movements have on individuals' self-perception and behaviours.

Furthermore, today's internet trends offer valuable perspectives on the manner in which they facilitate potentially detrimental behaviours and perpetuate skewed standards of beauty. There has been considerable discourse surrounding the prevalence of "thinspiration" and "fitspiration" content shared on various social media platforms (Hogue et al., [2023](#)). This subject explores the manner in which representations of physical forms and lifestyles provide insight into the essence of these social movements. Thinspiration content frequently advocates for the attainment of an excessively thin physique and endorses detrimental methods of weight loss, whereas fit inspiration content centres around the cultivation of well-defined bodies and the pursuit of demanding fitness regimens. Both movements place significant importance on an idealized notion of beauty that has the potential to induce feelings of self-doubt and uneasiness over one's own physical attributes.

I lost 15k weight because I felt my looks were not according to the perceived beauty standards (R2).

Comparisons that are negative in nature, such as those stimulated by the aforementioned content, have the potential to intensify emotions of inadequacy and dissatisfaction with one's body. Individuals may endeavour to attain the physique characteristics shown in these prevailing patterns, thereby potentially resorting to extreme dietary practises, excessive physical exertion, or detrimental approaches to weight control (Chansiri et al., [2022](#)). This particular action serves as an illustration of the potential hazards associated with adhering to societal norms, as it can have a profound impact on an individual's psychological and physiological welfare.

Influence on Disordered Eating Behaviors

The appeal of well-selected images, popular diet trends, and the prevalence of incorrect health information significantly shape individuals' attitudes towards food and body image. The perpetuation of unachievable body ideals and the associated pressure to conform to these standards contribute to a recurring cycle of comparison, often resulting in the adoption of unhealthy eating habits as individuals strive to achieve these aspirations (Rounsefell et al., [2020](#)).

My dietary practices have changed from time to time, and my craze for unique physical traits has yielded detrimental effects later (R3, R5).

Numerous studies have consistently demonstrated that prolonged exposure to content pertaining to extreme dietary practices, intense physical exercise, or detrimental body image expressions heightens the susceptibility to developing disordered eating behaviours (Tylka et al., 2023). It elucidates the continued prevalence of bad dietary habits within the realm of digital media. Online forums are commonly utilised as platforms that foster these habits since individuals are able to seek validation and endorsement for their detrimental choices inside these spaces. The perpetuation of detrimental behaviours that negatively impact individuals' physical and emotional health is facilitated by the normalisation of extreme practises and the widespread dissemination of inaccurate information, so contributing to a recurring pattern of distress.

Mental Health Support and Awareness

The growing concern regarding the detrimental impact of social media on mental well-being has been amplified in tandem with the advancement of the digital age. In the contemporary interconnected world, the implementation of initiatives aimed at offering mental health support and enhancing public consciousness regarding the potential ramifications of excessive engagement with social media platforms is imperative for the promotion of psychological well-being (Braghieri & Makarin, 2022).

Efforts aimed at mitigating the psychological harm induced by social media platforms prioritise the provision of individuals with the necessary resources to effectively navigate and address issues (Chancellor & Choudhury, 2020). Online platforms are increasingly incorporating mental health tools such as helplines, crisis intervention programmes, and educational materials on coping strategies. Individuals whose experiences of social isolation, anxiety, or depression (Hussain et al., 2021) have been intensified as a result of their online interactions will really appreciate the immense value offered by these services.

Often comparisons with the influencers and celebrities have fostered a sense of social isolation and anxiety, it has developed a sense of inferiority and meaninglessness as well (R5, R7).

Mental health specialists, including counsellors, psychologists, and therapists, are increasingly recognising the significance of acquiring knowledge

regarding their patients' online engagements. Therapists create inclusive and non-judgmental spaces for patients to express their emotions regarding the internet and articulate their concerns or distressing experiences encountered during online activities. Social networking platforms present distinct emotional obstacles, although there are available resources that can assist individuals in cultivating constructive online habits, implementing coping mechanisms, and managing such concerns.

Concerted endeavours are also being undertaken to disseminate knowledge among the general populace regarding the potential hazards linked to overindulgence in social media platforms. Through engagement in these projects, individuals will develop an enhanced capacity to identify instances where their online activities are adversely affecting their mental well-being due to factors such as exposure to curated content, cyberbullying, or social comparison. It is imperative to make concerted efforts to eradicate the social stigma associated with seeking professional mental health care. By fostering a conducive climate that promotes the act of seeking assistance, a greater number of individuals will be inclined to avail themselves of such support when required.

Conclusion

The mental well-being of young adults and adolescents is significantly impacted by the influence of social media on eating disorders and body image. The association between influencers and the idealised representations of body images portrayed on social media platforms has been correlated with the increase in disordered eating behaviours and body dissatisfaction. The pervasive inundation of images that propagate unattainable standards of beauty fosters a climate of social comparison, prompting individuals to scrutinise the adequacy of their own physical appearances (Hussain et al., 2023). Consequently, a considerable number of individuals jeopardise their physical and emotional well-being by striving to achieve objectives that are unattainable (Lund et al., 2018).

The presence of visual content, engagement metrics such as likes and comments, and carefully curated profiles are characteristic aspects of social media platforms. These elements possess the potential to significantly influence individuals' perception of their own body image and increase the probability of developing an eating problem. The

proliferation of meticulously crafted and manipulated visuals on social media platforms might engender distorted perceptions of one's personal allure, hence fostering feelings of inadequacy. The act of measuring engagement establishes a positive feedback loop wherein an individual's perception of self-worth and the validation received from others become closely interconnected. The societal pressure to have a physically idealised figure and the imperative to comply with these standards are further magnified by carefully constructed online profiles that present an apparently flawless lifestyle (Pera et al., [2020](#)).

Recommendations

It is imperative for educational institutions and parents to prioritise the importance of media literacy education and provide guidance to their children on the critical evaluation of internet information. There exist multiple strategies to accomplish this objective, including acquiring knowledge on the curation of profiles, developing an awareness of the prevalent portrayal of idealised beauty standards, and acquiring the ability to

discern indications of image alteration. By providing consumers with these functionalities, we may educate them to exercise discernment when perusing body photographs on the internet.

Limitations of the Study

Given the potential emphasis on particular user or demographic categories in this study, the generalizability of the findings may be limited compared to a more representative sample. Enhancing the dependability of the study's findings could be achieved by incorporating a sample that is both more diverse and representative. Certain aspects of the research, such as the participants' subjective evaluations of their own bodies, possess an inherent susceptibility to varying interpretations. The existing gaps in our understanding can be addressed using rigorous study methodologies and a steadfast dedication to continuous research pertaining to the associations between social media, body image, and eating disorders.

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