Social Media, Body Dissatisfaction, and Social Comparison Theory

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Eating disorders are a serious and potentially life threatening mental illness. In the United States, 20 million women and 10 million men suffer from an eating disorder at some time in their life (Wade, Keski-Rahkonen, & Hudson, 2011). The risk factors for eating disorders are largely beyond a person’s control. Risk factors for developing an eating disorder include having a family history of disordered eating, being a woman, being an adolescent, having mental disorders like depression and anxiety, having high levels of stress, and being prone to perfectionism. While many of the risk factors for developing an eating disorder are hereditary, factors like media consumption can be controlled. Body dissatisfaction and poor body image are key components to eating disorders, so understanding how preventable factors like media consumption impact body dissatisfaction is important to understanding eating disorders (Ferguson et al., 2014). Early research on the media and body dissatisfaction focused the thin ideal, meaning media that featured emaciated models or actresses. While this kind of media did prove to be harmful, more recent research argues that widely used social media is far more harmful. According to the Social Comparison Theory, people are far more likely to compare themselves to similar others. This means that when young women use websites like Facebook, or popular applications like Instagram, they are likely looking at how they compare to their friends. This is particularly dangerous when the people using social media are at a vulnerable age, as eating disorders often onset in adolescence. While thin-ideal media can be very damaging to the body image of young women, the worst damage to self-esteem and body image is done by consuming media consisting of peers and similar others. For this reason, monitoring the use of social media in young women is critical in preventing permanent damage to self-esteem, body image, and body satisfaction. This paper aims to separate previous research by the methods in which the research was conducted (experimental vs. correlational), while also offering a direction for future research. Examining previous research on this topic is important because by identifying damaging social media use patterns, parents and teachers will be better able to support the young women in their lives, and protect them from popular and potentially harmful social media content.

Research has shown that social media exposing young women to images of similar others is significantly more damaging to self-esteem, body image, and body satisfaction than traditional thin-ideal media (Cohen & Blaszczynski, 2015). Cohen’s study first separated female college aged participants into groups that consumed either conventional thin ideal media or spent time on Facebook. Thin ideal media incorporates images of emaciated models and actresses that perpetuate the societal standard that thin is beautiful, while the other group simply looked at their own Facebook friends. Cohen and the team then provided both groups of participants with self-report surveys on body dissatisfaction. While traditional thin ideal media did have a negative impact on body image, the impact of viewing similar others was found to be significantly worse. Cohen explained this concept using the Social Comparison Theory, the idea that people are more likely to compare themselves to similar, more attainable, others than to extraordinary models and far away figures. This concept of social comparison is especially dangerous in popular social media. The age of onset for most eating disorders is adolescence, which is also a time that teens spend large amounts of time on social media (Ferguson et al., 2014). This research used an experimental design, in that it randomly assigned participants to two different groups and conditions. However, like most research on body dissatisfaction, it relies on self-report to measure participant’s body dissatisfaction. Self-report is one of the least scientifically valid forms of collecting data, as participants can easily misrepresent true feelings. Another limitation of this research was that paarticipants were drawn from a convenient sample at the local university. This means that results are less generalizable to the overall population, as it only included a narrow age group from a small geographic area.

While many studies on media use and body image are conducted in similar ways, it is important that each study builds on the last to contribute new and improved ideas to the literature. When conducting experimental research, it is important to have a control group as a standard for comparing the experimental conditions. In a 2015 study, Fardouly et al. used a control, appearance-neutral, source of media to compare the thin-ideal and social media to. The findings of this study were consistent with previous research, showing that social media was significantly more harmful than traditional media, but both forms of media were more harmful than appearance-neutral media (Fardouly et al., 2015). Fardouly’s experiment involved female participants being randomly assigned to spend 10min browsing their Facebook account, a magazine website, or an appearance-neutral control website. After browsing, participant’s completed state measures of mood, body dissatisfaction, and appearance discrepancies. Appearance discrepancies referred to how participants felt about their weight, facial features, hair and skin. Participants had the lowest mood and highest rates of comparison after being on Facebook over the control groups. (Fardouly et al., 2015). This research is significant in that it gave further support for the Social Comparison Theory in relation to body dissatisfaction. This study had similar limitations, in that it also relied on self-report.

Much of the research done on disordered eating is correlational, as it would be unethical to assign participants to eating disordered groups. However, this research is still valuable as it can show factors associated with disordered eating that may not have been previously considered. In a 2014 study involving female Hispanic adolescents, researchers investigated the relationship between peer, television, and social media influences on body dissatisfaction and disordered eating (Ferguson et al., 2014). This study found that social media use was strongly related to peer competition, which was associated with lower life and body satisfaction. This correlation is not surprising because eating disorders have an extremely high comorbidity with depression. This research is consistent with the previously mentioned experiments in that it shows social comparison and social media are related to high body dissatisfaction. This study is significant in that it does not make the common mistake of focusing primarily on white women, but it is also limited in its scope because it includes Hispanic women exclusively.

Another correlational study aimed to examine the relationship between the use of Facebook and disordered eating. Unlike previous research, this study examined the use of Facebook in participants that already suffer from eating disorders. This study found that the use of social media, like Facebook, had a negative impact on the recovery of those suffering from disordered eating (Mabe et al., 2014). These findings are consistent with the literature involving people who do not already suffer from eating disorders, showing that the use of social media is harmful to body image across both populations. People who suffer from eating disorders are very inclined towards peer competition, so social comparison online can be especially damaging. As social media becomes more popular, the general population is more susceptible to this competition, putting everyone at a greater risk for developing an eating disorder. Like all correlational research, this study has its limitations in that the correlation does not imply a causal relationship between Facebook use and disordered eating. As previously mentioned, there are many risk factors for developing an eating disorder, and most people suffering from eating disorders fell victim to many of the risk factors.

A final correlational study on body image and social media examined the relationship between the use of hash tags and damaging content. Unlike previous studies, this one involved no participants. This research looked at pro-eating disorder(pro-ED) content. Pro-ED content is used by people suffering from eating disorders and poor body image to “motivate” each other to continue down a destructive path. Pro-ED content often encourages restriction, starvation, purging, and other extreme and disordered behaviors. The images often contain either text or photos of extremely underweight women. In this study, researchers used key words for pro-ED content to discover the most commonly used hash tags, and which yielded the most damaging content. Researchers coded how to identify content from positive and helpful to triggering and harmful. Research found that sites tagged as “thinspiration” led to the most damaging content (Lewis & Arbuthnott, 2012). This content was interesting because it added a new element to the impact of social media. While most of the research focused entirely on this use of similar others in media, this looked at the kinds of ways similar others classify content. This research could be applied in both home and school settings, as parents and teachers would know what kind of tagged content their children and students should be avoiding. Though this research is different from the other sources, it does still show that social media can have an extremely damaging impact on its consumers.

The literature regarding social media use and body dissatisfaction is consistent in that it all finds that the use of social media has a negative impact on body image. However, there are still gaps in the research that should be addressed. Much of the research on social media and body image uses exclusively female identified participants. This excludes all men and non-binary members of the population from the research. While women are far more likely to suffer from eating disorders than men are, there should still be research that is applicable to men.

Another limitation in the current research is that the participants are largely young and white. This is a problem because while the age of onset for eating disorders is fairly young, older people suffer from them, too. Many people who have eating disorders are up against a life long struggle. It would be interesting for future research to look at outcome data. As this current generation is growing up with the constant influence of social media, it would be interesting to see if this impacts later disordered eating into adulthood.

A final limitation in the current research on body dissatisfaction, social media, and disordered eating is that the methods for conducting this research are not the most empirically valid. Correlational research, though valuable, does not imply causation. While an experiment can determine an exact causal relationship between two variables, a correlational study can only show that the two variable influence each other. The studies mentioned above rely heavily on self-report, meaning that participants have to rank their own feelings and behaviors. Participants can easily lie, exaggerate, and omit behaviors from surveys if they are embarrassed, apathetic, or looking to please the researchers. This can lead to biased data, making the results less applicable to the general population.

Despite the limitations, it is very clear that social media does have a harmful impact on body satisfaction, and is a risk factor for future disordered eating. To combat the damage that this media could cause, parents and teachers should utilize empirically supported intervention strategies. A recent study found that by having women describe the models in the media they consumed in non-appearance based descriptions, the women’s own body dissatisfaction decreased (Lew et al., 2007). If parents encouraged their children to describe their friends in dimensions that are not appearance based, parents may be able to reduce body dissatisfaction in their own children.

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