

Digital Health and Weight Loss Culture: Social Media Shaping Modern View of Weight Loss

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Social media continue to influence individual choices on diets considering the trends of weight loss culture. Digital platforms have been influential in reshaping the modern dietary habits where the idea of body image is emerging as a priority. For instance, users share photographs of themselves on Instagram and recipes for food that allow them to maintain their ideal body weights, usually with few to no calories, thus transforming people's approach to health and weight management and becoming extreme. Because of this, it has become necessary to understand the significance of such phenomena as mobile health applications and health-promoting communication employing social networks in transforming cultural attitudes towards beauty, health, well-being, and well-being in particular and society in general. These are social constructs that are influencing individual diet choices in pursuit of weight loss goals. In this paper, we first clarify the concept of digital health in the field of healthcare, find relevant articles in the existing literature concerning the effect of social media on body image and eating habits, present Instagram as an example, and finally, draw a brief conclusion on the role of social media in promoting dieting.

Keywords: digital health, weight loss culture, social media, communication, body image, dietary habits

Introduction

Social communication significantly impacts almost every aspect of society and dramatically affects body image and eating behavior. Users often share photos and low-calorie recipes on Instagram, influencing perceptions of health and weight management, sometimes leading to extreme behaviors. This highlights the need to examine the impact of mobile health apps and health-related communication on social media in shaping cultural attitudes toward beauty, health, and well-being. This paper explores the concept of digital health in healthcare, reviews literature on social media's effects on body image and eating habits, uses Instagram as a case study, and concludes with insights into its role in promoting dieting.

Framework: Digital Healthcare and Social Media

Digital healthcare contains numerous technologies, such as wearables, mobile apps, and social media that employ users to monitor control and improve their well-being. As Lupton (2014) observes, health-related innovations brought about the "self-quantification" phenomenon in which people utilize measurements to assess their health—work productivity or any other targets. Beato (2012) asserts that these numeric data, or "metrics", particularly in social media environments, are designed to empower users but more often than not encourage the users to be obsessed with numbers especially in health, more so in camera dominated sites like Instagram where

images of bodies are worshipped. Ajana (2017) places this phenomenon of health technology precise computing in the context of biopolitics, explaining that personal information is also extended to increasing interaction and shaping ideals about health. This promotes unhealthy behaviors where individuals are compelled to meet beauty and health ideals instilled by fellow individuals and the media.

Literature Review: Social Media, Body Image, and Dietary Habits

The effect of social media on body image and eating behavior has been the subject of extensive research, and there is enough evidence to provide a correlation between social media and body image issues. Fardouly and Vartanian (2016) claim that social networking sites promote and facilitate acts of comparison that are detrimental to one's perception of his or her body. Ahmad, Idris, and Jing (2019), who focused on the effects of social media on body image in children, also observed this trend as they found that "peers" on social media make children more vulnerable to negative body image. In the same line, Kaur et al. (2022) state that the exposure of younger audiences to such media is high, impacting their body image and increasing their tendency to compare themselves with others. On the other hand, Fardouly and Holland (2018) explain that such fictional images can be helped by placing specific disclaimer labels on them. However, such measures are of little avail as images are almost always available for viewing.

Harriger, Thompson, and Tiggemann (2023) highlight the influence of new-age platforms such as TikTok towards body image concerns and point out that this focus on idealized images is not limited to any particular form of media. Furthermore, Andsager (2014) and Skubisz, Yates, Doyle, and Pacanowski (2023) assert that in this age where one is constantly bombarded by images of idealized bodies, which is common among most adolescents and young adults, eating disorders are bound to escalate. According to Lewallen and Behm-Morawitz (2016), websites such as Pinterest promote user behavior called "thinterest", where members post images of thin and beautiful women, creating pressure to conform to body ideals.

Jane et al. (2018) argue that social media can play a positive role in health promotion and weight management but caution that such an environment will always provide sociocultural pressure of some sort to consume particular (even if unhealthy) foods. Jebeile et al. (2021) argue that young teenagers who see weight loss pictures on Instagram have higher chances of developing a misconception regarding food, especially when practicing unhealthy food restriction methods without proper nutrition. Hilken et al. (2021) add that too much attention to the promotion of slimming supplements, detox teas, and dieting through social platforms can, in turn, distort the concept of healthy eating in users.

Investigating mindful and intuitive eating provides antidotes to the controlling factors seen on social media and Anderson et al. (2016)'s and Bennett and Latner (2022)'s assertions that skills such as mindful eating, which encourage body awareness and acceptance, can prevent disordered eating behaviors. They promote a different perspective on food, emphasizing mental and physical health rather than pleasing one's aesthetic. Kiefner-Burmeister et al. (2023) add that the concern regarding body image is further exacerbated by the use of social media among members of Generation Z, thus the need for more awareness and intervention.

Case Study: Instagram and Body Image

As a visual-driven platform, Instagram impacts the construction of body image standards. Fardouly and Vartanian (2016) argue that netizens are frequently exposed to altered images and filters, which create unrealistic beauty expectations that adversely affect their self-image. Likewise, Papageorgiou, Fisher, and Cross (2022)

revealed that adolescent girls, particularly, expressed anxiety regarding their appearances after seeing images of perfection on social network sites. This “Instagram effect” is also heightened by the rising consumption of celebrity and micro-celebrity content, creating unrealistic body and beauty standards.

Research by Kiefner-Burmeister et al. (2023) reveals that this phenomenon is particularly strong for Generation Z users as they tend to use Instagram more for social comparisons, thus heightening their worries about body image. Hamid et al. (2022) opine that the effects were heightened due to the COVID-19 lockdown because there was an increase in the use of platforms, and young users came under more significant pressure due to ideal body images. Therefore, the content algorithms of Instagram favor highly engaging posts, many of which include such photos, and help create a setting that negatively affects the users’ mental health.

Case Study: Instagram and Food Culture

Aside from how people perceive their figures or physical appearance, it is apparent that Instagram also plays a huge role in food culture and people’s eating habits. Many health and wellness influencers endorse any particular practices, for instance, going on a vegetarian, a keto, or a low-carb diet within the same media campaigns that also push for detox teas, pills, and meal replacement shakes and soups that claim to flatten tummies in a week. Jabeile et al. (2021) consider, within these posts, how that conveys the societal acceptance of dieting behaviors, which, according to research, leads toward the development of risky eating behaviors in the target audiences. In the study by Jebeile et al. (2021), content analysis focused on “the best” pictures from Instagram. It revealed that images advertising dietary practices concentrated on weight loss were most common and prominent in the foreground, and adolescents were especially highly susceptible to that advertising exposure.

Food fads such as the one advocating for “clean eating” and similar others promote a very narrow and, at times, unhealthy view of nutrition (Hilkens et al., 2021). In fact, in a study by Skubisz et al. (2023), it was noted that college women who were frequently exposed to this kind of content on social media developed unhealthier eating habits because they also engaged in restrictive eating practices that could lead to nutritional deficiency and mental problems. It has been suggested by Lewallen and Behm-Morawitz (2016) that such behavior is enhanced by platforms such as Pinterest that also promote food images in a “thinspiration” manner, which in turn encourages unhealthy dietary perceptions among users.

Analysis and Discussion

The pervasive influence of social media on body image and dietary culture defines and suggests the complicated connection between digital health understandings and more expansive sociodemographic issues. On the one hand, social networking sites like Instagram lessen the prospects for health education and promotion. On the other hand, these sites are potentially damaging to women as they promote skinny images and a culture that encourages dieting (Jane et al., 2018). Users of such platforms are encouraged to look at pictures, and in turn, the images create beauty standards that may cause discomfort in one’s body and exacerbate mental health disorders (Hamid et al., 2022). This is further reinforced by the nature of social media where most of the content shared is by the visual aesthetic and the pictures shared have similar aesthetics; therefore, there is more emphasis on such content which promotes superior body and diet images (Lewallen & Behm-Morawitz, 2016).

Many studies indicate that practices such as mindful and intuitive eating help mitigate these tendencies. Anderson et al. (2016) and Bennett and Latner (2022) acknowledge the advantages of mindful eating, which is the practice of acceptance and appropriate engagement with food, in curtailing the rates of eating disorder

behaviors. This perspective opposes the prescription of diets, especially those that focus on beauty and are therefore healthier, in that it does not encourage concern for a person's appearance but rather their health.

Conclusion

The rise of social media has played a significant part in changing how we view health, body image, and eating habits today, all of which present some extreme standards and diets that can be detrimental to both mental and physical health. This is especially the case with Instagram, where young people are drawn to the platform primarily because of its pictorial nature and exposure to many images and lifestyle behaviors related to the body and eating that are often exaggerated and unrealistic. Admittedly, social media and other digital health technologies can effectively promote health. However, based on the evidence gathered from these interventions, they tend to encourage more body dissatisfaction and eating-disordered attitudes instead. Future studies should address these vices, perhaps through digital health interventions that promote realistic expectations of body size and other forms of nutrition. Promoting mindful and intuitive eating practices may serve as a helpful counterweight and enable a healthier and more realistic view of weight loss and body image on social media.

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