Adolescent Eating Disorder Risk and the Online World

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KEYWORDS

- Internet • Online • Eating disorders • Body image

KEY POINTS

- Internet and social media are important to consider as contexts contributing to the promotion and maintenance of eating disorders.
- The online space contains high levels of appearance pressures, but also hosts extreme content, promoting eating disorder behaviors that may be harmful.
- Clinicians should explore their patients' use of Internet and broaden their knowledge of useful online resources that may be helpful to clients or their families.

The media has been proposed to constitute an important source of sociocultural appearance pressures, and the detrimental effects of exposure to unrealistic and unrepresentative body types, and messages regarding the importance of achieving a thin and toned appearance have been highlighted.[1] The pressure to achieve such unrealistic ideals is increased by the fact that the bodies portrayed in the media are highly unrepresentative of the general population and are accompanied by a discourse that exaggerates the extent to which body weight and shape are controllable through diet and exercise, as well as a food environment that is conducive to overeating.[2] The reciprocal relationships between media use and eating disorder risk have been well documented over the past 2 decades in relation to traditional forms of media, primarily print and television content.[1] However, over the past years, the proportion of media content that is viewed online rather than via these traditional types of media has increased, particularly among youth who are at the highest risk of eating disorders.[3]

In recent years, Internet usage has increased exponentially, with 93% of teenagers now possessing Internet access at home.[4] Youth are the highest Internet and social media users, with up to 89% of 18 to 29 year olds using a social network site, largely through their mobile phones.[5] In response to this, an emerging body of literature has started to document the relationships between Internet and social media use and eating disorder risk.

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GENERAL INTERNET USE AND EATING DISORDER RISK
Internet and Social Media in the Context of Eating Disorders

Many theoretic frameworks have been used to ground investigations of the relationship between sociocultural influences, such as traditional media and eating disorders, including sociocultural theory, social learning theory, self-objectification theory, social identity theory, and uses and gratifications theory. These theories focus on examining the ways that media serves to increase the exposure to harmful appearance ideal, reinforces the centrality and importance of appearance, and models unhealthy appearance-altering behaviors and practices. Social identity theory additionally highlights how the salience of appearance or eating-related behaviors as a condition for group membership may serve to promote eating disorders.

Online forms of media, including social media, have attributes that make them particularly relevant to eating disorders. The first is their highly visual nature. Most online content comprises images rather than text, which makes it saturated in appearance-related content. Furthermore, youth may use types of social media that are particularly picture oriented and that encourage them to spend time curating the images of themselves that appear online, and examining images of their peers or celebrities. The second is its capacity to tailor itself to a person's interests, building on previous content through targeted advertising, search histories, and so forth, leading to an online environment that becomes increasingly person specific the more time that is spent online. For example, a large number of Web sites will have advertisements that are selectively produced based on a person's past search history, meaning that someone who has looked for dieting or weight loss–related content will be likely to view advertisements for weight-loss products.[6] Similarly, a content analysis of advertisements on popular Web sites targeting teenagers highlighted the high proportion of cosmetic and beauty products being promoted.[7] The third aspect is the interactive nature of the online world. In this way, and particularly with social media, the online world combines aspects of traditional media influence as related to eating disorders but also interpersonal influences, including peer relationships, teasing, and such. Finally, the Internet provides the opportunity for access to a wider variety of social groups than the offline world, particularly for youth. Furthermore, through facilitating the coming together of people with marginal interests, the Internet provides a space for groups with attitudes and opinions that are on the more extreme ends of the spectrum. One example of this is pro–eating disorder communities, which is discussed in greater detail later.

Two of the broader characteristics of the Internet that are also relevant are the lack of capacity to moderate Internet content as well as its principal use for commercial purposes. One illustration of the consequences of this is the proliferation of weight-loss products, applications (apps), and methods being sold on the Internet. Most of these products or apps are not empirically based or supported,[8,9] making it unclear whether they can be helpful in any way. Furthermore, for individuals at risk of eating disorders, such products or mobile apps may promote behaviors such as calorie counting that can precipitate or maintain eating disorder behaviors.

In this way, the Internet presents many relevant aspects to the development and maintenance of eating disorders. Given this, the relationship between eating disorders and Internet and social media has received increased research attention. In later discussion, the authors provide a synthetic review of the empirical studies examining this relationship. Overall, the literature provides support for such a relationship with small effect sizes. It is important to remember, however, that social media use occurs in addition to exposure to traditional media and its detrimental effects on body image (Box 1).