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Original article

Facebook Use and Disordered Eating in College-Aged Women



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A B S T R A C T

Purpose: Disordered eating behavior—dieting, laxative use, fasting, binge eating—is common in college-aged women (11%–20%). A documented increase in the number of young women experiencing eating psychopathology has been blamed on the rise of engagement with social media sites such as Facebook. We predicted that college-aged women's Facebook intensity (e.g., the amount of time spent on Facebook, number of Facebook friends, and integration of Facebook into daily life), online physical appearance comparison (i.e., comparing one's appearance to others' on social media), and online "fat talk" (i.e., talking negatively about one's body) would be positively associated with their disordered eating behavior.

Methods: In an online survey, 128 college-aged women (81.3% Caucasian, 6.7% Asian, 9.0% African-American, and 3.0% Other) completed items, which measured their disordered eating, Facebook intensity, online physical appearance comparison, online fat talk, body mass index, depression, anxiety, perfectionism, impulsivity, and self-efficacy.

Results: In regression analyses, Facebook intensity, online physical appearance comparison, and online fat talk were significantly and uniquely associated with disordered eating and explained a large percentage of the variance in disordered eating (60%) in conjunction with covariates. However, greater Facebook intensity was associated with decreased disordered eating behavior, whereas both online physical appearance comparison and online fat talk were associated with greater disordered eating.

Conclusions: College-aged women who endorsed greater Facebook intensity were less likely to struggle with disordered eating when online physical appearance comparison was accounted for statistically. Facebook intensity may carry both risks and benefits for disordered eating.

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IMPLICATIONS AND CONTRIBUTION

Facebook intensity may carry both risks and benefits for college-aged women. Facebook intensity may be protective for or reflects decreased disordered eating behavior but only in the absence of physical appearance comparisons.

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Disordered eating behavior—dieting, laxative use, fasting, binge eating—is common in college-aged women (11%–20%) [1,2]. The advent of social media has led to new lay and research questions about the role of social media use in fostering disordered eating behavior. A documented increase in the number of individuals seeking treatment for disordered eating has been blamed on the rise of social media sites such as Facebook [3,4].

The amount of time adolescents (aged 13–18 years) spend on Facebook has also been significantly associated with their disordered eating behaviors [5,6]. In an experimental study, college-aged women randomized to spend time on Facebook reported greater shape and weight concerns and state anxiety compared with the control group who viewed a neutral Web site [7]. Greater online appearance exposure—the time devoted to photo applications on Facebook—has been associated with greater thin-ideal internalization—the belief that thin bodies are more attractive and of higher status—and a greater desire to be thin [6].

Facebook has a high adoption rate in college-aged women. In the United States in 2012, 90% college-aged women maintained an active presence on Facebook, and women aged 18–29 years represented the largest cohort of Facebook users [8]. The goal of the present study was to extend the current literature on associations between Facebook use and disordered eating behaviors in three ways. First, we extended the current literature by examining Facebook intensity. Although research demonstrated that individuals who spend greater time using Facebook were more likely to engage in disordered eating behaviors, no studies to our knowledge had examined Facebook intensity, which captures individuals' emotional connection to the site and the integration of the site into their daily life [5,6,9]. Given previous research, we predicted that when college-aged women reported greater Facebook intensity, they would also be more likely to report greater disordered eating [5].

Second, we explored the role of online physical appearance. Maladaptive Facebook usage—the tendency to evaluate oneself negatively in comparison to one's Facebook friends—significantly predicted an increase in young adult women's binge eating and purging symptoms in a prospective longitudinal study [10]. However, it is unclear whether the association between maladaptive Facebook usage and disordered eating is driven by social comparisons (e.g., evaluating oneself on the basis of relationship status) or physical appearance comparisons (e.g., a downward or upward comparison to others on the basis of one's physical appearance). In previous research, online physical appearance comparison with Facebook friends and distant peers was associated with greater body image concerns, and offline physical appearance comparison was associated with greater disordered eating [11,12]. Thus, we hypothesized that online physical appearance comparison would also be associated with greater disordered eating [13].

Third, we explored the role of online fat talk on Facebook. Fat talk refers to negative talk about body size and shape while emphasizing a societal ideal toward thinness (e.g., "My thighs are so disgusting") [14]. Fat talk has become a social norm, a bid for reassurance, and even a bonding activity among young women [15]. Fat talk not only reflects body dissatisfaction but can intensify disordered behaviors [16]. We hypothesized that Facebook may represent a new public forum for online fat talk behavior, especially in comments on photos, and that engaging in online fat talk could index disordered eating behavior in college-aged women.

Thus, in the present study, we examined the unique associations between disordered eating and Facebook intensity, online physical appearance comparison, and online fat talk. We examined the associations in models accounting for physical and psychological covariates previously associated with disordered eating (e.g., higher body mass index [BMI], greater anxiety, depression, perfectionism, negative urgency, lower self-efficacy) [17,18].

Methods

Participants

We recruited a total of 169 participants via a university listserv announcement sent to all undergraduate students at a large southeastern university and through social media sites (Southern Smash blog and Twitter pages, this study's Facebook Page, Facebook pages for this southeastern university's residence halls and Exchanges, the blog for the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Center of Excellence for Eating Disorders). Participants were invited to contribute to a study examining social media activity and health behaviors in college women and directed to the study Web site connections. Participants were not compensated for their participation and were primarily drawn from colleges and universities in the U.S. southeast. Inclusion criteria included self-reports of female gender, aged 18–23 years, enrollment in college and maintenance of a Facebook account. All races and ethnicities were recruited. Although 169 participants initiated the survey, 75.7% (128 participants) had complete data.

Study overview

All participants completed the 185-item survey online through a survey web page. Participants consented to take part in the survey by reading the consent form online and checking their agreement. All questions were optional, but participants were reminded if a question was left blank. Once the survey was submitted, the participants' involvement in the study was complete. The institutional review board at University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill approved the survey and study procedures.

Dependent variables

Eating disorder examination questionnaire. The eating disorder examination questionnaire (EDE-Q4) [19] is a 36-item, self-report survey of eating disorder behaviors and cognitions. The Eating Disorders Examination (EDE) is a widely used interview for the assessment and diagnosis of eating disorders [20,21]. Participants rated their behaviors over the past 28 days on a seven-point scale (1 = No days, 7 = Every day). The EDE-Q4 demonstrates a high level of agreement with EDE in assessing eating psychopathology in the general population and measures dietary restraint, bulimic episodes, and shape and weight concerns [21]. The global score is calculated by taking the average of the dietary restraint, bulimic episodes, and shape and weight concerns subscale scores. Global scores at or above four indicate clinically severe eating disorder psychopathology. Cronbach's alpha was .92.

Independent variables

Facebook intensity scale. The Facebook intensity scale [9] is an eight-item questionnaire designed to measure one's emotional connection to Facebook and incorporation of Facebook into his or her daily life. Sample items are, "I feel out of touch when I have not logged onto Facebook in a while," and "I would feel sorry if Facebook shut down." The assessment also includes items that capture the total number of Facebook "friends" and amount of time spent on Facebook per day. Higher scores reflect greater Facebook intensity. Cronbach's alpha was .87.

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