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R7 Research Paper

8/31/2020

How Social Media Promote Eating Disorders

Introduction

Having to care about how I looked started my eating disorder journey since I was a teenager. I suffered from both binge-eating disorder and bulimia nervosa. I started to seek comfort from online communities, and I was shocked by how many people's lives could be ruined by eating disorders. Many patients in these communities suffered from digestive issues, anxiety, depression, and many other health issues as consequences from having an eating disorder. Many of them claimed that they were lying to their close ones under the influence of an eating disorder, so they could secretly starve, binge, purge, and so on. Some of them enjoyed their eating disorders as a way to stay thin or become thinner; some of them struggled to eat normally; most of them lost their regular lives because all they could focus on was food.

On a trip back home during one of the college school breaks, I found out that a friend was eating only a few hundred calories a day, and my mother was purging to stay thin. As surprised as I was, I started to discover more people who were suffering from certain eating habits or even eating disorders. A lot more people were suffering from eating disorders. Some of them were so close to me, yet I had no clue. As I recovered from my eating disorders, I started to ponder what causes them and what can help. Eating disorders can be caused by many different things. In this paper, I will be discussing how social media can contribute to causing eating disorders, as most of the people I know who have eating disorders and myself are heavily influenced by the social media.

Context

With the increased use of social media today, people's eating habits are drastically influenced by them. Eating disorders, which can cause severe mental and physical damage, might be negatively associated with social media.

Eating disorders can cause severe short- or long-term damage for the patient. According to Edward Chesney, Guy M Goodwin, and Seena Fazel, eating disorders are responsible for the second-highest mortality rate out of all forms of mental illness, solely exceeded by opioid addiction (155). The National Eating Disorders Association (NEDA) also refers to a study that shows that 97% of eating disorder patients had co-occurring mood disorders, mainly major depression, 56% had anxiety disorders, and 20% had obsessive-compulsive disorder. It is also reported by NEDA that 36.8 % of women who are admitted to the hospital for an eating disorder self-harm on a habitual basis. Both female and male athletes have a greater risk of getting an eating disorder. According to Craig Johnson et al., more than 1/3 of female athletes revealed that they have experienced events putting them at risk of anorexia nervosa (184). While female athletes tend to be affected by eating disorders more, male athletes are also affected. NEDA mentions that in Leslie Bonci's book *Sports Nutrition for Coaches*, male athletes are in danger of getting an eating disorder, especially the ones engaging in the sports that highlight "diet, appearance, size and weight" (36%), and this number for female athletes is 62%. Besides the regular groups that have been studied more on eating disorders, the minority groups are also at risk. Some of them even have a greater risk. Based on a study by Michelle Goeree et al., young girls who are from poor families are 153% more probable to become bulimic than girls from

well-off families (13). Michelle Goeree et al. also point out that black youth are 50% more probable than white youth to manifest bulimic acts like bingeing and purging (21).

Many eating habits have become extreme in the last century: several types of eating disorders have been discovered while obesity seems to have become an incurable situation (Forgacs et al. 401). Forgacs suggests that the media started to have a notable impact on people's eating habits in the 19th century when mass-produced meals were frequently fed to children when their mothers were busy working (402). In Annalise G. Mabe et al.'s research on current trends, a positive correlation was discovered between the amount of time a female spent on Facebook and the chance of getting disordered eating because Facebook provides a space where one can actively participate in contrasting oneself with others online to strengthen the "thin ideal" (520). According to NEDA, in a study on social media, 95% of the girls agree that they perceive a large quantity of unkind criticism on appearances on social media "posts, comments, photos and videos" and 72% of the girls see them weekly but 62% of them wish social media were a place that supported "body positivity". In the documentary *The Illusionists*, beauty standards are heavily shaped by the beauty industry. *The Illusionists* mentioned that many companies market the extreme beauty standards so that the customers are always dissatisfied about themselves; therefore, more customers are willing to pay for their "perfect beauty". Such marketing can be everywhere, on TV, billboards, social media, and many other places.

Analysis

This paper analyzes how social media can promote eating disorders in four ways: the frequency of social media usage, the unconscious seeking of negative social media feedback, the romanization of eating disorders on social media, and the advertisement of beauty standards on social media.

The higher frequency of social media usage is correlated with a higher risk of developing eating disorders. A study points out that the higher frequency of social media usage (especially Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat) is correlated with more weight/shape concerns and eating disorders behaviors (Griffiths et al. 154). In another study, a small but notable positive correlation was found between Facebook usage and eating disorders (Mabe et al. 517). Facebook can be a go-to platform that allows users to regularly compare themselves with others, which may reinforce body image concerns or anxiety (Mabe et al. 520). In addition, Facebook also has the potential to cause eating disorder behaviors because most interactions on Facebook are photo-based (Mabe et al. 516). The more frequently someone uses social media, the more likely they will be exposed to body photos or certain beauty standards. Social media like Facebook provide a platform for people to share many things in life. It is natural for humans to compare themselves and become better, but social media provide a place that is more accessible and convenient for us to compare and contrast with each other. The fact that most of them are photo-based creates a greater risk of unhealthy self-comparison. Self-comparison can help reinforce self-loathing which is one of the essential factors in eating disorders.

In addition to the active comparison people might find themselves doing, people might also be seeking negative feedback unconsciously (Hummel and Smith 436). Social media have the potential to help people who are struggling with interpersonal skills; however, they also have the potential to help trigger more negative feedback for someone who has low self-regard and posts pessimistic information online (Hummel and Smith 436). People are more likely to receive negative feedback on social media if they tend to be negative in the first place (Hummel and Smith 441). Individuals might engage in eating disorder behaviors because of their failed social contact, which can worsen their interpersonal issues (Hummel and Smith 437). Having a

pessimist attitude or personality can lead to inefficient social networking and trigger eating-disordered behaviors. This can become a vicious circle in the long run. In addition, depending on one's motivation, one can choose to interpret online information that aligns with their expectation (Smahelova et al. 634). Positive thinkers might find more information that helps improve their eating disorder condition; negative thinkers might find information otherwise (Smahelova et al. 634). Depending on whether people expect to hear from social media about themselves or body images consciously or unconsciously, people might get different results. While social media become the agent for conveying information, the person's personality may play a significant role in what kind of information they are receiving.

Not only do individual's personalities affect what information is delivered and received, but communities on social media also play their part by romanticizing eating disorders. There are many pro-eating-disorder communities on social media that encourage unhealthy weight-loss or even eating disorders such as anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa and promote the "thinspiration" (Turja et al. 50). These communities romanticize eating disorders. They fantasize about the benefits which eating disorders can bring to someone, such as becoming thin, attractive, or even popular. The damages which eating disorders can bring, such as short and long term physical and mental issues, are normally not spoken of. This romanticization of eating disorders makes eating disorders more appealing to individuals and therefore promotes more eating disorders. This negative impact can affect both people with or without an eating disorder or an eating disorder history. In addition, a correlation was found between viewing pro-eating-disorder websites and having lower well-being (Turja et al. 55). Visiting pro-eating-disorder websites also has the potential to trigger dangerous eating behaviors among people who previously had no eating disorder (Turja et al. 55).

In addition to romanticizing eating disorders, social media present a lot of advertisements on beauty standards/products, offering mixed messages that can increase eating-disordered behaviors. The rate of US adult's social media usage has increased from 5% in 2005 to 79% in 2019 (Ortiz-Ospina). With the increased usage of social media, the advertisements grew to be more powerful and influential. Commercials on social media for dieting, food, and so on are common. In the US, preventing and treating obesity have become one of the biggest medical obstacles hence the massive advertisement on dieting products (Forgacs et al. 403). Most food purchases are unplanned (Forgacs et al. 406). In an experiment where words like "Eat popcorn!", "Drink Coke!" were constantly presented, the participants consumed 57.7% more popcorn and 18.1% more coke (Forgacs et al. 406). Advertising plays a notable role in convincing individuals to purchase more and eat more. It is not contradictory that two extreme advertisements, dieting, and food can together contribute to promoting eating disorders. In fact, the mixed messages from different advertisements can be one of the reasons why people develop eating disorders. These mixed messages can control "hunger signals" (Forgacs et al. 409). To eat more and stay skinnier is contradictory. To resolve such a contradiction, one of the solutions is eating disorders (Forgacs et al. 410). For example, anorexia can become the solution to these mixed messages by focusing on only one of the messages "be thin" (Forgacs et al. 410). Many advertisements are effective in manipulating people's eating habits. When many different and contradictory advertisements are presented at the same time, individuals might not be able to process the confusion well. To explain the mixed messages, also referred to as double-bind messages (Forgacs et al. 410), individuals might develop eating disorders. The documentary *The Illusionists* points out the fact that beauty standards are manipulated by the beauty industry, so that people are always dissatisfied about their bodies, always seeking to purchase more beauty

products. Many people grew up having certain expectations about what they should look like, based on all the ideals they see on the advertisements since they were very little.

All four factors contribute to the eating disorder issue. Each of them feeds into one another. The main contributors here are likely to be the advertisement aspect of social media, along with the help with the frequent usage of social media. Advertisements are commonly presented on social media without much filtering based on the group they are presenting to. With the large yet still growing audience number, advertisements on beauty standards are becoming more and more influential on people. If certain beauty standards are always promoted, people can get used to them and consider them the ideal. With the higher frequency usage of social media, the risk of having a body image concern and developing an eating disorder later becomes even greater.

Philosophy Lens

In Allegory of the Cave, Socrates demonstrates how truth can be hidden from the majority of the people, and how hard it is to spread the truth. In the dark cave, even though prisoners can see the shadow, but they do not see the fire behind it. Most of them do not question where the shadow is coming from. This is similar to our views on beauty standards. Supposedly, we know that women are supposed to look young and thin; that men are supposed to look fit and muscular. But where do these standards come from? Besides being influenced human history and human instinct for an ideal body, they also come from the people who can benefit from it, such as many of the beauty companies.

Later in Allegory of the Cave, one prisoner is able to go out of the cave and come back, the natural response from the prisoners would be to kill him before he can speak of what he saw outside. This implies the difficulty of spreading the truth. The reason why the rest of the

prisoners want to kill the one prisoner who'd like to speak of the truth is that this truth is against their belief. This belief was planted early by the rulers of the cave without the prisoners knowing. The prisoners could not see the source of the image. An illusion has been created for the prisoners. This illusion tells them that they know the truth and that they have their own control over decisions. This illusion can make them ally with their suffering. These prisoners do not want to leave the cave because this is what they are used to. Just like the prisoner who do not want to leave the cave, many of us do not want to accept that we do not need to look like the celebrities on TV. We try to justify our suffering and do not want to break the status quo because this belief or norm has been rooted in our brains.

Eating disorders are a result of a type of illusion. Beauty companies invest tons of money to make sure people know that certain beauty standards are the ultimate goal for human bodies. This is the "truth" that is rooted in many people's brains. A lot of us do not like thinking of the idea that we do not need to pursue the ideal body. However, it is not natural or healthy for everyone to look a set way. When people are trying to reach the difficult, sometimes impossible body goal, eating disorders are born. Eating disorders bring serious damage to our bodies, many of us still have the strong drive to achieve certain body goal despite the damage. At this point, we have become the allies with what makes us suffer.

The source of issue is that many people are manipulated by the massive advertisements dropped by beauty companies. The motive for these companies is profit. There are then two problems we must face: the source of the issue, advertising by beauty companies, and the resistance from the people who already believe in the beauty propaganda. The solutions will be based on these two problems.

Solutions

Possible solutions are limiting advertisements to teenagers on social media, having more body-positivity campaigns and creating more recovery communities online.

Limiting advertisements that promote certain body standards to teenagers on social media can reduce the chance of teenagers being triggered from the promotions. This limits the source of the problem. According to the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP), about 90% of teenagers have experience using social media, 51% of them used a social medium at least once a day, and the average usage of social media was about 9 hours a day, excluding their homework time. Teenagers nowadays have more access to social media, which exposes them to more advertisements. If those advertisements are adjusted based on their profile age to present products that will not be likely to cause body image concerns, it will reduce the risk for them to develop unhealthy expectations and unhealthy eating habits.

Having more body positivity campaigns can promote a healthy perspective on body images from a young age and can help people with eating disorders regain their confidence. This is to reduce the damage done by the beauty advertisements, to decrease the resistance from people who believe in beauty propaganda. While advertisement on body image and pro-eating-disorder communities can heavily shape someone's view on bodies, campaigns also have the power to do the same. Having healthy body image constantly advertised might help to reduce certain damages on people's minds from the beauty industry advertisements.

Although using social media might cause eating disorder, online communities might actually help with eating disorders. This method provides more platforms for people who are suffering from the manipulated truth about body image and eating disorders. Young people are heavily driven to help themselves, not in an in-person situation such as a therapist, but in an online form (S Kendal et al. 99). A study shows that online communities can help with eating-

disorder recovery (S Kendal et al. 107). This study points out that people tend to find their own roles in the communities, either to help others, or to express themselves, in which case both are helpful towards recovering (S Kendal et al. 102-105). If there are more support in online eating disorder communities, people might get more help from them. If there is more of these communities, people with eating disorders might be more likely to be exposed to a community which might help them.

Conclusion

Advertisements are tactically marketed to selling certain products to people. They can be powerful and truly change someone's view on certain things. Social media, a rising star that delivers the advertisements frequently, should be responsible for filtering out inappropriate advertisements for certain groups of people. Endless shopping desire and shopping power are always wanted by companies. Convincing the public that they are never good enough brings them endless profits. Many people are not aware of the power of capitalism and advertisements, and how they can shape our views on body images; hence they fall for the purchase and eating disorder trap. We need to be aware of the standards that we have in our brains. What are they? How did they form? Where did they come from? Understanding why we desire that perfect body image and finding out what is contributing to that will reduce the risk of getting eating disorders and better help each other. Beauty products should not be the reason why we can become satisfied with ourselves. Further research is needed to understand how humans are wired differently to react to information and other factors that influence the mental well-being.

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