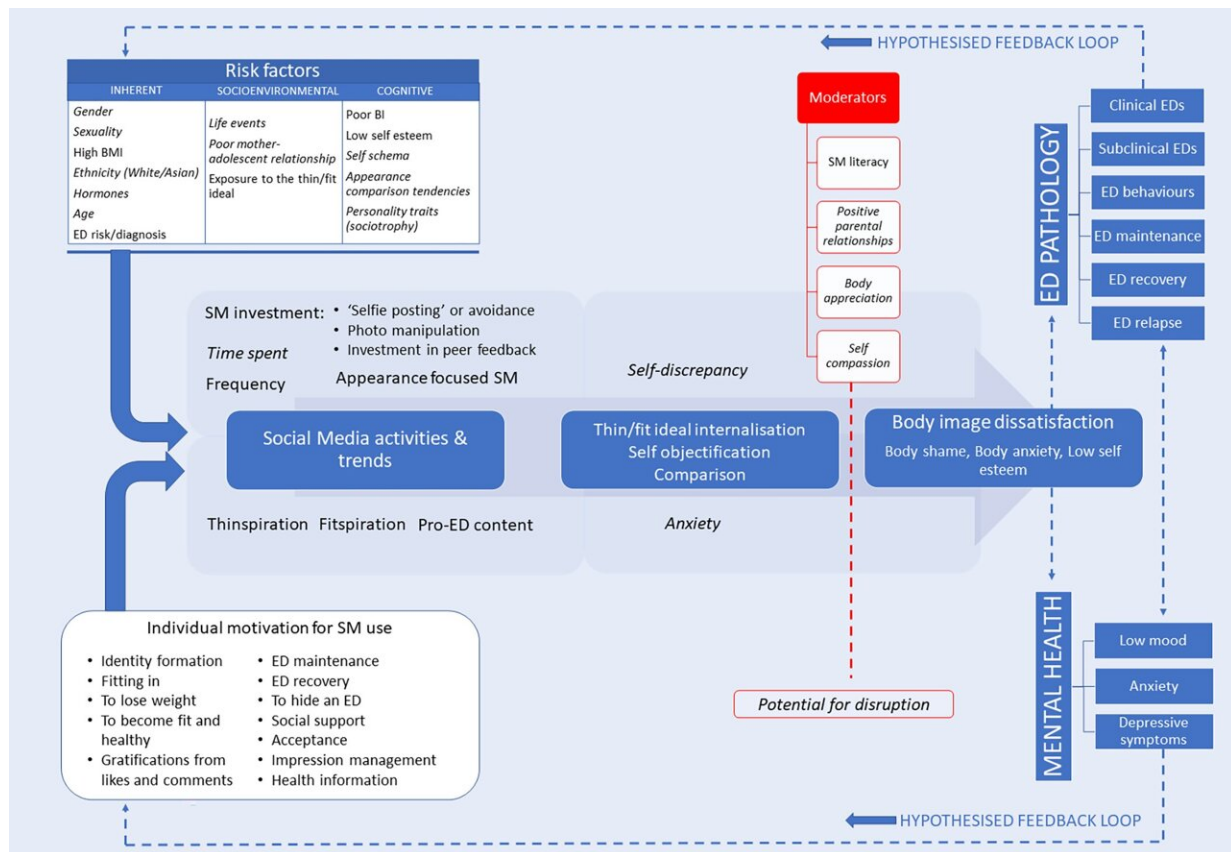


Social media and the self-perpetuating cycle of risk for body image and eating disorders

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A self-perpetuating cycle of risk to show the relationship between social media usage, body image and eating disorder pathology. Credit: *PLOS Global Public Health* (2023). DOI: 10.1371/journal.pgph.0001091

With recent reports finding that 91% of U.K. and U.S. adolescents use

social media and that over 50% check their accounts at least once per hour, researchers decided to have a look into the influence of so much social media use on body image concerns and eating pathology in young people.

Alexandra Dane, and Komal Bhatia from the Institute for Global Health, University College London, compiled and analyzed data from 50 studies in 17 countries involving [young people](#) ages 10 to 24. The papers centered around comparisons of [social media](#) exposure to physical and mental health outcomes.

Eating [disorders](#) can often be fatal illnesses. With such an overwhelming percentage of modern childhood interacting with social media, the risks could have generational consequences if ignored. Understanding factors contributing to pathology allows researchers, parents, educators, policymakers, and health care professionals to use resources proactively and preventatively.

The report, "The social media diet: A scoping review to investigate the association between social media, body image and eating disorders amongst young people," published in the journal *PLOS Global Public Health*, suggests that social media usage leads to body image concerns, eating disorders, disordered eating and poor mental health.

Specific time and frequency exposures to social media trends, pro-eating disorder content, appearance-focused platforms and investment in appearance-related activities were found to strengthen the relationship with pathology. High BMI, being female, and pre-existing body image concerns also increased this relationship, while high social media literacy and body appreciation were protective factors.

Three cross-sectional studies indicated that appearance-focused platforms, namely Instagram and Snapchat, are significantly associated

with [body image concerns](#), eating disorder pathology, anxiety and depressive symptoms.

Links between social media usage and body image dissatisfaction, including body shame, [low self-esteem](#) and body-related anxiety, were demonstrated in 33 studies. Five of these studies suggested that body image dissatisfaction preceded a subsequent eating disorder pathology.

Appearance-related activities such as "selfie" avoidance, photo manipulation, and posting edited photos were consistently associated with body image dissatisfaction and risk of eating disorder pathology in 17 studies.

Significant associations between social media usage and disordered eating behaviors, including bingeing, purging, use of laxatives and extreme dieting were seen in 11 studies.

Seven studies investigated the relationship between social media screen time and body image or eating disorder-related outcomes. High frequency of social media usage and body image dissatisfaction was supported in another two studies. Five cross-sectional studies connected social media usage to various clinical eating disorders.

Hashtag risky

Eight studies investigated the impact of a #fitspiration trend with mixed results. 50% supported the pathology relationship, 25% partly supported it, and 25% refuted it. The research found that while for some #fitspiration inspired healthy eating and exercise, others felt pressure to exercise excessively, with subsequent bingeing and disordered eating outcomes. A mixed methods study on Instagram found that 17.7% were at risk of developing an eating disorder.

Hashtag enabling

Three studies explored the relationship of the #thinspiration trend, with a study concluding that the hashtag promoted starvation as a lifestyle choice instead of a symptom of mental illness. Posts provided guidance for negative eating disorder behaviors and included tips on hiding it from others. A cross-sectional study found that 96% of included participants followed the thin-ideal on social media, of whom 86% met the criteria for a clinical/subclinical eating disorder.

The research duo from University College London also identified several additional factors surrounding individuals that facilitate the social media [pathology](#) connection.

Parents of today grew up in heavily regulated media environments and may assume that current social media is following similar guidelines. As the current study states, "...social media use amongst a developmentally susceptible age category is unprecedented and largely unregulated," pointing out that "...the plausible link between social media, [body image](#) dissatisfaction and eating disorders is alarming."

More information: Alexandra Dane et al, The social media diet: A scoping review to investigate the association between social media, body image and eating disorders amongst young people, *PLOS Global Public Health* (2023). [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pgph.0001091](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pgph.0001091)

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