The Impact of Social Media on Female Body Image: Eating Disorders and Instagram

by

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# Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to bring awareness and criticize the role of social media in the reinforcement of eating disorders and body dissatisfaction in college-aged women. The paper shows the impact of social media on patterns of eating disorder. I will analyze patterns of eating disorders, websites that support their “underground” activity, as well as analyze the diet culture, the weight loss industry and how media influencers and celebrities promote unrealistic beauty standards and expectations. Further, the analysis will assess the apps that contribute to unhealthy weight loss habits. I also considered the body positivity movement and how it has helped create a healthier online space for young people, bringing self-awareness and helping to survive.

As a young woman and as someone who has suffered from eating disorders and disordered eating behaviors in the past, it is crucial for me to do this research, make connections with people who have (have had) similar experiences, find a thorough answer and solutions to the central research question, and be able to look at dangerous websites that promote eating disorders (something that has deeply traumatized and affected me mentally in my adolescence) through an academic lens, and find effective ways to fight against them for the sake of millions of vulnerable young girls that fall victim to these unhealthy digital spaces.

Further in this work, you will encounter a brief analysis of Websites that promote Anorexia, which explains in detail my personal experience with body image and these websites. This analysis will be my canvas for the central research question.

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# Acknowledgements

This paper would not be possible without the help, encouragement and support of my family, friends and my professors. I would like to thank my reader, Professor Mica Hilson, for his patience, advice and positive attitude.

My family and friends are the sources of power that pointed me towards my research and kept me focused to dig deeper and wider. Even though, these past months of my life were an emotional rollercoaster I still managed to finish my work on time and did my best, given the circumstances with my health.

If you are reading this, you should know that I myself struggled from Disordered Eating and I discuss my experience in some parts of the essay. As it is somewhat hard for me to remember those times and not be triggered by it, sometimes it was extremely stressful to finish the paper. However, I believe that the close research will identify patterns and bring awareness. The change this could make and support of my friends and family is what kept me going.

In the end, thanks to the Internet for just being a thing and helping me find my sources and inspirations.

# Introduction

Not buying any magazines, trying not to read any beauty vlogs or follow them on social media – is a choice and it is a tough one. It is not always easy to not read beauty hacks that an Instagram blogger posted or scroll through her pictures where she is living her best life with majority’s dream body.

“How to Flatten Your Stomach in Two Weeks”

“10 Foods That are Guaranteed to Melt Your Fat”

“Dream Body. 10 Steps. 10 Minutes a Day”

Nearly every blog or Social Media Model has these kinds of posts in their daily routine. My feed is full of girls in sexy bikinis at the beach or at the gym. My friends’ feeds are full of infomercials of fat burning pills. It feels like we are trapped. It is very rare to see an imperfect woman that may have disproportionate body parts. And the perfect body images are the ones that wake the desire to be skinny and eventually bring self-destructive sense of personality. We always find something wrong in the way we look, but never in the way our friends or the models that we follow do. I am no exception and I always stress about my big nose, my stomach, my hair length, whether I am curvy or skinny enough, comparing myself to what I see on social media.

The research conducted in this project revolves around the Eating Disorder groups on social media. The pro-ana websites and communities have a clear goal and pattern and the research tried to identify it. These websites may seem sick and deviant for people with no eating disorders, but on the other hand for people who suffer from it find encouragement and comfort there. Moreover, one of the most popular social networking site Instagram is at the center of influence on female body. Instagram ‘influencers’ and celebrities promote unrealistic beauty standards and expectations. They also generate the promotion of weight loss products (‘fit teas’, shapewear, gadgets for spot-reducing fat etc.). Another aspect through which Instagram can have an influence on female body is the photo editing apps and the obsessions with altering pictures.

In sum, research conducted for studying the influence of social media on female body image and eating disorders shows that there are clear patterns in Eating Disorder groups in social media and that Instagram usage has its effect on self-esteem and body image on young women.

# Literature Review

In this section I will cite not only books and scientific studies done on the topic of the research question, but I will also try to include my personal perspective on each source and present notes on how the already existing research could potentially be improved by focused more on this or that specific question in the future, in order to fill in the gaps that exist in the findings today. This section only includes books and articles that are worth mentioning.

The book *Unbearable Weight* by Bordo Susan is written from an immeasurably educated feminist’s perspective. Susan Bordo is Singletary Chair in the Humanities and Professor of English and Women's Studies at the University of Kentucky. Bordo analyzes different matters connected to women’s body. That includes women’s overall weight, diets, weight loss, media images and disorders connected with it – anorexia and bulimia. Bordo bases her analyses and views on thoughts of Foucault who was a literary critic. She also talks about culture, analyzes the phenomenon of weight obsession and connects it with cultural illnesses. The images we are exposed to are dependent on social constructs. As my paper discusses the disorders that the social media can cause in young adults, I will be using this book’s huge amount of research and the views based on other analytics’ thoughts. Although the book is from 1993, it is still relevant and comprises the basis of social media hunt for ideal bodies that have become mainstream now.

While Bordo was very accurate on the above-mentioned topics in her work, which, in the essence, capitulate unique problems, since eating disorders, body image problems are nothing new. However, I find that it lacks modern view and modern-day representation of the matter. Regardless of that, this book is still a great and credible work that was very helpful in understanding the cultural and societal obsession with weight and body image.

Next is Eliza Burke’s article. “Reflections on the Waif: Images of Slenderness and Distress in Pro-Anorexia Websites”. There is a term “thinspiration”. It is used to classify figures of thinness and is used by the community that idealizes extreme slender bodies. This paper discusses thinspiration, using a thorough analysis of 1990s grunge culture. It argues that although the pro-anorexia community’s goal is to challenge the dominant gaze and its requirement for slender members, some representations of anorexia have a potential to root a cruel strategy and support a view in which a damage to women’s bodies “is promoted as a source of identity”. My paper discusses the damage done to women’s thoughts and ideals via the online platform. The thinspiration is a mass online movement that was created by women themselves. This paper focuses not only on women as consumers of idealistic images but also as creators.

I think this particular book is a very fine addition to the previous one (by Susan Bordo), as it’s a relatively new work which presents although the same, but at the same time updated ideas regarding the same topic, using and creating new terms and analyzing 1990’s grunge culture. I find this one much more relatable for women of my age and younger.

In his book “Risk and Maintenance Factors for Eating Pathology: A meta-analytic review” Stice reveals that some risk factors that can result in eating disorders have not received an observed care. For example, sexual abuse or dieting were not studied as much as thin-ideal internalization. I will not be using too many quotes or research from this book, but it has helped me understand the psychology of researchers or people involved in this field.

I chose this book in order to incorporate more inclusion into my paper, since a lot of women suffer through psychological and/or sexual abuse, which later serves, in a number of occasions, as a source for triggering or worsening eating disorders and unhealthy perception of self. It is crucial to analyze the sources and starting points of the illness just as thoroughly as the consequences, to help better understand the heavy topic and be more effective in finding solutions. Both sexual abuse and disordered eating are heavily stigmatized topics, which leads to the survivors often times being silenced and/or shamed for things they had/have no control over.

In “Reconceptualization of Body Image and Drive for Thinness.” Rob Sands examines the drive for thinness as multidimensional theories. The study included girls in grades 7-8 from Melbourne. The participants completed a set of perceptual, emotional and developmental measures that included body parts, figurine consistency, self-worth, multidimensional body image, body image dissatisfaction, social figure anxiety, eating approaches and behaviors, and physical activity. Although my paper revolves around young adults of college age, I still found this research informative as there is not much of a difference between women of different ages who have ideals when it comes to social media exposure. The only difference is the environment that can save or jeopardize them.

I appreciate Sand’s work for focusing on young girls in grades 7-8, as it is known that body perception is hugely threatened during this period of pre-teen and teen years. This is when we internalize most of our ideas about the world and about ourselves, thus, it is very important to not only study these behaviors at a young age but also strive to find preventative measures. However, it lacks research on older age groups, which I find to be just as important, since people tend to repress and bottle their struggles more when they’re adults. They simply seek help less, even though they deserve it just as much as children. The frightened, insecure child grows up to be an adult with numerous mental issues that stem from childhood trauma and learnt destructive behaviors.

Following is Rumsey, Nichola, and Diana Harcourt’s book “The Oxford Handbook of the Psychology of Appearance”. This handbook examines how people feel psychologically about their appearance and why some people are satisfied with their looks and others strive for the ideal image – reporting that these kinds of concerns affect different aspects of their lives, including health. It discusses the influence of the surrounding people and media on contemplations and behaviors. Exploring people with a defect in a society that is focused on the ideal image. This book will be my main source for the discussion of psychological outcomes. This book helped me largely to understand my own deep-rooted issues and behaviors I couldn’t otherwise find proper explanation to. It helped sort and organize every preexisting idea I had formed in my head that had to do with my own perception of my body and my looks.

Next is MacSween, Morag’s book named “Anorexic Bodies: A Feminist and Sociological Perspective on Anorexia Nervosa”. Anorexia nervosa, which affects mostly women, represents an attempted transformation of the concept of the feminine body in the modern culture. Anorexic women’s goal is to close the body from the inside - not allowing any intrusions, creating a body that is closed, unbreakable and separate. The book also argues that individual solutions to anorexia will not end the illness as a social phenomenon. This book is going to be my main source of information about anorexia. It includes the treatment of anorexia, how anorexic women explain their illness and anorexia based on limitations of social position.

As someone who has suffered through an eating disorder and distorted perception of body, this one was a tough read, but very accurate on multiple points at the same time. I especially second the idea that individual solutions to anorexia will not end the illness altogether as a social phenomenon. Which means we, as a society, have to strive to initiate more conversation about heavily stigmatized topics such as Anorexia Nervosa and its treatment, create a safer and more understanding space for the people who suffer or have suffered from it.

Glenn A. Gaesser’s book “Big Fat Lies: The Truth About Your Weight and Your Health” presents research showing that the association of health with dieting is wrong and that dieting can harm health. He basically argues that it is better to eat everything but exercise at the same time rather than starve and not do any physical activity. The book gets overwhelmed with all the studies cited but it changes the perspective of how people view diets. This book will be the basis of solution of reaching the ideal image in my paper.

While from my personal experience I do agree that it is usually less harmful to not put restrictions on what we eat while maintaining physical activity, than starve ourselves while not doing any kind of exercise (which is understandable, because when you’re starving you don’t have enough energy to exercise). However, it is important to note that both behaviors, combined with the self-destructive mindset, can be equally harmful.

The goal of study conducted by Crow, Scott J., Carol B. Peterson, Sonja A. Swanson, Nancy C. Raymond, Sheila Specker, Elke D. Eckert, and James E. Mitchell. “Increased Mortality in Bulimia Nervosa and Other Eating Disorders.” was to conclude whether anorexia, bulimia, and other eating disorders are associated with increased common trigger mortality or suicide mortality. This study also demonstrated an increased risk of suicide across eating disorder diagnoses. They used the National Death Index to indicate the mortality rates of these disorders. This research will be used to show that anorexia is not a continuous disease, meaning that people do not live with it throughout years, it eventually brings to death. Also, as the ongoing pressure from the environment and culture increases and it becomes difficult to maintain a sense of self fulfillment and confidence, people sometimes seek their peace in death.

As I have already mentioned a number of times in my paper, I have a very personal experience with eating disorders and especially Anorexia. I can recall from those times that my mind was completely blurred with these self-destructive ideas of body, beauty and happiness. I fully believed that my purpose in life was to thin myself down to the point of no return. I strived to become a “butterfly” (a term for an anorexic girl in pro-anorexia circles), and die happily, fully malnourished and gone. At that time, that was the reoccurring thought that gave me a false sense of self fulfillment and harmony.

# Research Question

As my Central Research Question, following directly the theme of my Literature Review, I have chosen **“The impact of social media on female body image: websites that promote eating disorders”**, the primary question being **What are the ways social media impacts female body image?**, and the secondary question being **How to identify and fight against websites that promote eating disorders?**.

# Methodology

The purpose of this paper is to bring awareness and criticize the role of social media in the accurance of eating disorders and body dissatisfaction in college-aged women. Furthermore, it investigated the causes and effects the social media culture has on women’s behavior and perception of themselves. To have a deeper understanding for this paper the discourse analysis research method was used in the first section of the paper. Later on, I use visual analysis and visual rhetoric for Instagram pages. These methods allowed me to dig deep into the community of pro-ana groups on social media. The pro-ana websites is where people who suffer from eating disorders are vulnerable and act like themselves. The communities have forums where people can post about their experience and get replies and reactions from their group mates. This method also provided an overall understanding of not only the patterns through which women are affected but also their reactions.

In order to perceive the information in pro-eating disorder communities, a separate profile was created on both Instagram and Telegram. A number of searches in both social networks helped to identify these groups. The searches were conducted in three language platforms Armenian, Russian and English. There were no such Armenian pages but I found lots of Russian and English groups. The search words were pro ana, pro mia, pro ana mia, thinspiration, anorexia, bulimia, anorexia and bulimia, eating disorders. In fact, Instagram blocks these specific words from searches, but it does not keep the users from changing a few letters to trick the algorithm. The number of Websites found under these searches were not more than a 100. After a few weeks of observation the groups with most activity were chosen for the research purpose.

The profile created for the websites was not faux, in fact, the closed groups were contacted and were informed that the specific profile would not be posting anything and would only be observing the interactions that take place in the community for a period of two weeks. Of those contacted, ten out of twelve groups responded willing to help the research and the remaining two did not respond at all. The creators of public groups were not informed about the research as the information posted was public.

Both of the platforms are concentrated on different aspects of women’s body image. Accordingly, Instagram I did not have the opportunity to find the pages with direct searches of words related to anorexia (bulimia, anorexia, ana, pro-ana) as the searches were blocked by Instagram. These kind of forums were mainly in Telegram and I concentrated on Instagram for influencers who and ads that promote diets, diet pills and workouts. The pages had different nicknames and styles, at one point during my research I found myself in an “Filter bubble” (a term I will later elaborate on). Ultimately, throughout my research I was working with the same computer logged on to the same Google account. Moreover, when I started searching terms like anorexia, bulimia, fit food, healthy diets, influencers, diet pills I got into a Google filter. The algorithm started to show me ads related to it. Thus, the research did itself. On the other hand, a survey was conducted between 78 women aged from 17-21 form different universities. Only the girls with active Instagram accounts who follow influencers could participate in the survey. The survey comprised multiple questioned answers. Women who were found to have a lower self-esteem were interviewed further. They were subjected to qualitative analysis. The emerging themes and patterns were tracked down.

# The Eating Disorder Community

People with Anorexia Nervosa, as defined by the American Psychological Association are explained in the following way. Disordered eating behaviors (DEB) usually occur among women in their early twenties or during adolescence. Common traits of both DEB and ED are altered/irregular attitudes, behaviors, weight perception and physical appearance. Moreover, these disruptions most commonly manifest in restricting or binging and/or purging. DEB’s are not categorized as an eating disorder, though they are considered a phase and, in most instances, the starting point of diagnosed eating disorders (APA).

The general concern is based on the fact that these types of mental disorders usually put in danger the health and well-being of the people who are affected by them. Roughly about one-third of the women in the world admit to having suffered from these mental problems at some point in their life. If they do not get an adequate treatment or help, they risk developing severe clinical disorders. Moreover, around 1% of the people with DEB’s and ED’s struggle with permanent mental and physical consequences their entire life. Out of the presentations of disordered eating attitudes, overeating takes up 16%, vomiting 20% and food restraining about 61% (APA). These frequencies change as people age and go through different stages of life, with food restriction being more common among older women and vomiting during adolescence.

Social media, in the broadest definition, are interactive computer-mediated technologies or forms of electronic communication that facilitate and fasten the creation and sharing of information, and serve mainly as a platform for self-expression (through text, image, video etc.) via virtual communities and networks. Thus, social media can become a cradle for both positive and negative impact on communities and target groups.

Eating Disorders are considered to be compound mental disorders that have the highest mortality rate among other mental illnesses. As the Internet becomes an inseparable part of our lives the online communities have become prevalent. One of the internet communities that has been receiving responsiveness is the “pro-ana” community. “Pro-ana” is a term for people who suffer from an eating disorder but consider the disorder to be their lifestyle choice (Lyons, Mehl & Pennebaker, 2006). The “pro-ana” websites have a clear structure for their websites. The websites contain data of the creator, a disclaimer asking those who do not suffer from the disease to leave the site and a forum where the disordered eaters talk to each other. (Norris, Boydell, Pinhas, & Katzman, 2006) The webpages have sections for “tips and tricks” where they share information on how to conceal weight loss or dieting information, or images of thin women triggering the readers to lose weight) (Chesley et al., 2003;Harshbarger, Ahlers-Schmidt, Mayans, Mayans & Hawkins, 2009; Norris et al., 2006).

The creators of these kind of websites found their way to integrate the disease into people’s life in a personally chosen style. Some of the websites are in the form of personal blogs. People share their daily struggles of being anorexic. They receive advice or support from their followers. However, other websites are more professional, they have photos of skinny girls, diet or exercise tips. More importantly all of the platforms have forums for discussion, so that the girls can give each other advice on how to diet secretly without drawing family and friends’ attention. Something equally concerning was the amount of followers that these blogs had, the online chat had nicknames like -anorexiasavesme- , -allieatisair- . For someone who is an outsider for this kind of websites, it is a tough community to witness. These websites have disclaimers that discourage people who are healthy to enter the website. They are claiming that the websites are solely for those who are aware of their disease and do not want to change their lifestyle. One of the websites called “Ana Boot Camp” has this message on the home page. This disclaimer is an attempt to avoid being accused of supporting anorexia.

*“If you are looking to get anorexia / bulimia by being here then please leave now. You will not find information contained within this web site, forum, or any site linked to / from this website on how to become anorexic or bulimic. [...] You have been forewarned. By entering this pro-ana / pro-mia web site you are signing a digital certificate stating that you have read and understand the above-mentioned conditions and you are entering this pro-ana / pro-mia site knowingly and willingly of the aforementioned conditions. Entering by any other circumstance is perjury and can be punishable by law.”*

A lot of people on this type of forums and these communities are likely suffering from a condition known as Body dysmorphia, which, in its simplest definition, means that your perception of your own body is morphed, distorted, and far from reality. This could have happened as a result of editing your photos for an extended period of time as a coping mechanism, or it’s a side effect that still lives with you to a certain extent, even after having recovered from an eating disorder you had. This, when triggered by certain things, can be a cause to other problems, such as depression, PTSD, anxiety etc., and in the worst-case scenario, it could potentially make your eating disorder come crawling back into your mind and into your life, leaving you feeling like your recovery journey was in vain and that you’ll never truly be able to be over it and that there’s something inherently wrong in your mind, that cannot ever be fixed.

Although it is logical to assume that these websites have only negative effects, research shows that people who already suffer from the eating disorder actually plants feelings of being understood and supports emotionally (Csipke & Horne, 2007). We can indicate that these communities create a platform for socially stigmatized individuals to share information and receive support. However, we cannot imply that these communities are beneficial for people who suffer from eating disorders (Tierney, 2008) The participators are likely to encourage each other to lose weight, diet, fast and hide it. They also have higher levels of eating disruption and self-dissatisfaction than those who are not guests of this kinds of webpages (Csipke & Home, 2007; Harper et al., 2008; Harshbarger et al., 2009).

The networking sites are a comfortable place for people with eating disorders. They may also suffer from depression and/or social anxiety, which makes it harder for them to connect with people and find friends offline. People who suffer from social anxiety or are introverts have been proven to have more presence in social networking and fewer interactions offline (Orr et al., 2009; Pierce, 2009). A typical social network user in most cases communicates with those people with whom they already have connections offline. On the other hand, users who are shy or have social anxiety are more likely to form connections with people they did not know (Pempek, Yermolayeva, & Calvert, 2009). As the individuals having eating disorder have limited social support they are tended to seek it out in online communities. (Tiller, Schmidt & Troop, 1995).

The study revealed the content of eating disorder groups on two of the most popular webpages Instagram and Telegram. My goal was to find out if my findings would differ from other pro-ana communities that have been previously researched. The analysis is general qualitative, thus I did not formulate definite hypotheses about the kinds of interfaces.

Analysis of Content

The content was analyzed for three different classifications. The communities were examined for the occurrence of pro-ana group features, specific features of the group and the content of the group. The information was analyzed using the inductive approach which helps to discover themes and concepts by summarizing and organizing qualitative information. When repeating themes and overlapping information began to be seen a more concentrated approach was used. This concentrated approach was using comparison method to establish principal themes or communication types. The posts and comments brought up two themes for analysis: “Social Encouragement and Communication” and “Eating Disorder Particular”. The first comprised “introductions and discoveries”, “statements of support” and “negative reactions”. The second included direct information about the eating disorder.

Social Encouragement and Communication

Although the community and the posts were revolving around the eating disorder the primary focus or the main matter under this theme was not the disorder. The interactions under this theme can be characterized by social anxiety and lack of social support.

*Introductions and Discoveries.* The group members provided information about their height, weight, age and reasons for participating in discussions. These introductory posts were not expecting any replies and they were lacking emotions such as:

*Name: (…). Height: 170cm Highest weight: 72kg , Lowest Weight: 51kg, Current Weight: 65kg, Goal Weight: I will never be satisfied with a lower number to be honest.*

*Statements of Support.* The posts that fall into this theme are highly emotional. The group members share their feelings about their loneliness and offer each other friendship, advice or support. One of the members posted that it is hard to be with family during holidays, another member commented:

“*You can do it! I know it is hard during the holidays with the presence of so much different dishes but think about the end results! You are strong!”*

Other offers in form of chats on the phone or one-on-one meetings are also present. The posts include venting about family problems, not always related to the ED issues. In most cases the attitudes are positive and encouraging in support of the eating disorder. Moreover, in most of the conversations the eating disorder is rather the context and not the content. On the other hand, the encouragements can also have a negative impact.

*“When I start to feel hunger I cut myself. It’s not serious I just do it with a tiny kitchen knife always in the same place on my thighs closer to my pantie line, so that my mom won’t notice it. The thing is, you have to know your boundaries. The cut has to be enough to make you feel a little sting but not deep enough that it would bleed a lot (if this makes sense).You can try it. Your brain concentrates on the little pain and you just forget that you’re hungry.”*

This is an example of a dangerous advice. In one way this community overlaps with the community of people who want to kill themselves. Both communities have the same culture of secrecy and both of the communities harm themselves in their own way.

*Negative Reactions.* This category is about negative reactions to posts asking for support. Members could be asking for advice or support and the would be getting responses with annoyance and anger. One of the posts was a girl asking for tips on how to purge, and had comments like.

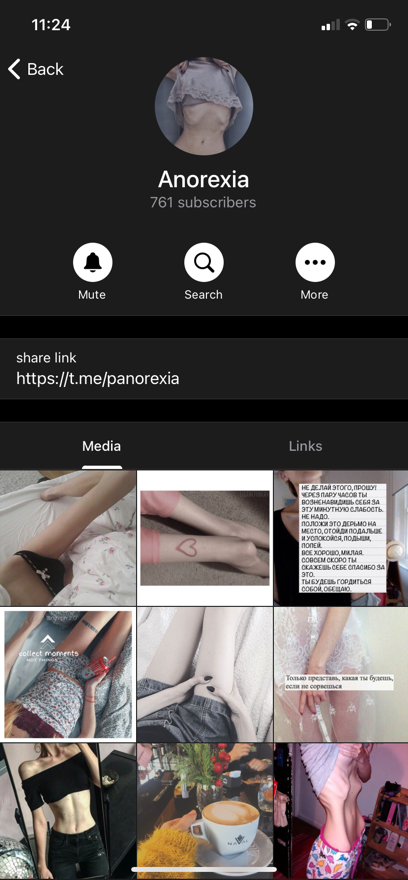
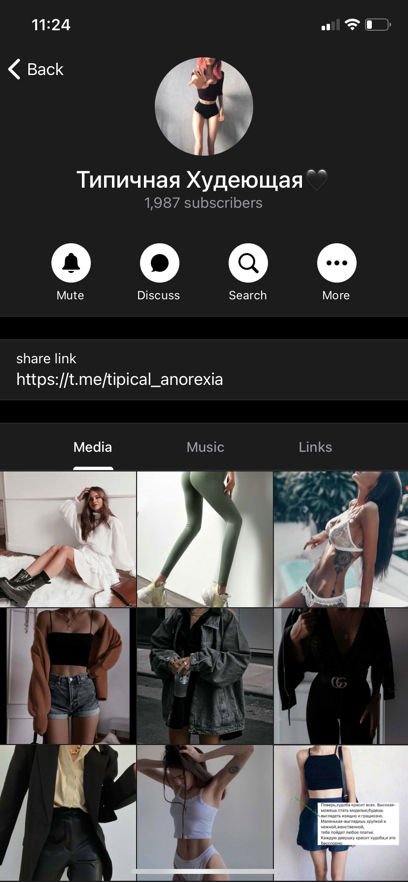
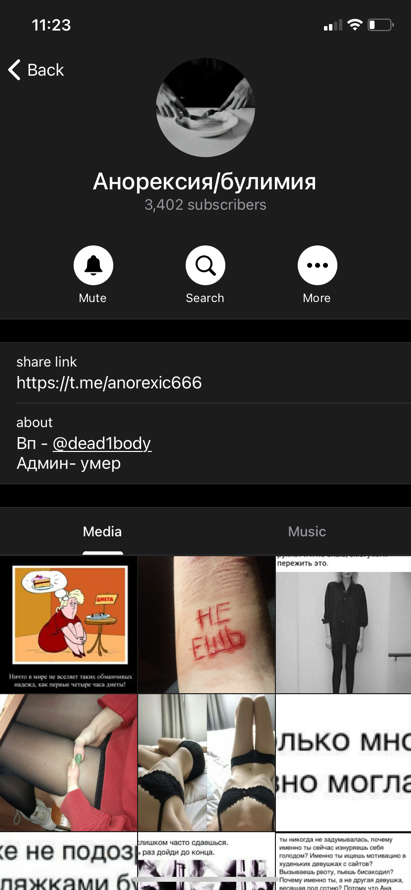
*Don’t even try it. It is a hard road to learn it but once you achieve it, sometimes it happens when you don’t want it. I hate when it happens but I can’t stop. It’s rude of you to ask this kind of advice it feels like you don’t even have an eating disorder.*

Therefore, the members are very territorial when it comes to the disease. They respond with negativity when the “outsider” cannot starve themselves successfully.

Eating Disorder Particular

*Direct Information.* Group members ask for information about the disorder and insight on how it feels. Also, members would post about the problems they were dealing with while having the disorder (hair falling out, dry skin) and would ask advice on how to deal with it without giving up their diets for losing weight. While the given information regarding tips on healthy diets (special green teas, wheat crackers) were mostly correct, the nutrition, psychology or physiology tips were often incorrect.

*Thinspiration.* Thinspiration is the use of content (photos, songs, videos) to encourage and support the disordered eating. It was more common in Telegram than on Instagram as Telegram is more convenient for channels to send multiple inspirational photos a day. It also included links to other websites that had thinspiration (YouTube).



The following screenshots are from these communities. You can see the amount of members and the shared media that both vary from group to group but the content is similar. They all share photos of extremely skinny girls (thinspiration), different quotes, thigh gaps.

*Telegram Specific.* A large portion of the conversations on Telegram were advices on how to hide the community memberships from friends and family. Users were mostly given the advice of creating faux accounts that were not shared with family and friends.

In general, the research proved that in most cases the pro-ana groups are more focused on support. Other researches have proved that people who struggle from anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa report on having a few to no friends offline (Tiller et al., 1995). Thus, these platforms can provide the support the group members seek. On the other hand, another research has shown that in long term people that suffer from social anxiety do not get the assistance from online connections (Sheldon, 2008).

# Personal Experience

It is hard for researchers to “judge from outside”. As someone who has suffered from the same disorder I can state that these communities are of great help. As someone who is an outsider to the community, one might think that the tips on how to lie to your parents and extreme starvation are harmful. However, for an insider the person who was telling me to cut myself did not want me to hurt myself. She just wanted to help me be pretty. Moreover, the girl who was telling me tips on how to purge did not want me to have stomach ache, she just wanted me to have the skinny goal I had. Dealing with this I found myself deprived from family and friends because I could not explain what was happening to me. All they were saying was “you just have to eat”. More often they would use the Armenian phrase “ախորժակը ուտելուց է բացվում” which translates to “You get the appetite DURING eating” to get me to eat something when I would say I do not have an appetite.

During my freshman year in university, I started losing weight in extreme amounts and in a very short time. I realized that I was being noticed more. After my friends told me about the “Freshmen 15”, I started to be more attentive and counted my calories. I would stand in the supermarket for hours reading all the ingredients of the items that I bought, and adding my calories. Also, I was exercising. I had alarms set up every other hour, and when the alarm went off, I had to get up and do 30 sit-ups or any other exercise. If I was at the university or in the street, I had to look for a place where I could exercise. I was restricting my diet to food with low calories and no sugar. Everyone was complimenting me on my healthy diet and no one could see the self-conscious girl that was starving herself, spending hours looking at ideal bodies on social media.

Soon enough I discovered myself not eating at all or purging what I have eaten. Some days I would be at peace with starving, I had the university, the part-time job, my friends and family to be busy with. I had a go-to answer every time someone offered me to eat or asked me if I have eaten. “I ate a couple of minutes ago” I would say. Luckily, no one would question it. The most difficult were the weekends when all of my family and I would be home. Sometimes, it would be hard to not eat and lie that I have eaten when asked. Thus, I would eat in front of my family and purge right after when I had the chance to be alone. Soon enough I started to use this technique during the weekdays also. I did not restrict myself to any food I would just eat and purge right after. After a couple of weeks I started to purge without trying and I understood that I have to tell someone. This is when I started to search for pro-ana groups on Facebook, Instagram and Telegram. As some of the pages were blocking that specific searches I had to make time and find the “underground” ones. In the pro-ana communities I felt like I could be myself and people would encourage and support me for it. While I was judged and asked to eat something when I was with my friends, the friends I had made during those times gave me advice on how to control myself and lie to people around me. While researching I found myself in a similar situation and I knew what the people in the forums were going through. Even though, my anorexia did not reach its peak and I was able to get out of it after a couple of months I remember that I was not stressed and did not have a social anxiety. I was happy when I was with my friends eating out and I did not have anxiety when I saw food. I just wanted to be skinny and had this separate life online which, luckily, did not affect my non-secret everyday life.

As I mentioned before in my paper, I was striving to become the “butterfly”. The butterfly is a particular word in the disordered eating community. The symbolism in the word is the notion of rebirth and change. Moreover, it is not only about rebirth but the notion of the butterfly being fragile. The recovery is challenging and you are tough but yet, you are still human and can be flawed and fragile. The recovery takes time and has various stages, similar to the butterfly in the cocoon stage of transformation.



# Instagram

One of the social medias that I used a lot during my hard times was Instagram. It is currently a popular social network page among young adults (Seetharaman, 2015). The website allows to upload photos and videos which are a form of presentation of oneself and are considered to be the most effective method of social online currency (Rainie, Brenner, & Purcell, 2012) This website has been a theme of u public debate. The main worry was the extreme usage of photo editing and accordingly the potential negative impact it can have on young audience. Blaming celebrities and models for using retouching techniques on photos is something both critics and fans do often. By doing so, social media influencers normalize the “perfect” looks and unrealistic body standards for young women to whom they serve as role models. (Sullivan, 2014)

In her book, Unbearable Weight, Susan Bordo argues that anorexia is the result of cultural influences of the ideal female body image. For Bordo anorexia was caused by extreme social pressure. The anorexic disorder for Bordo is “logical manifestations of anxieties and fantasies fostered by our culture” (Bordo 15). Using the word logic Bordo implies that women are so used to this frames that this is the only way they can think about their bodies. Despite the fact that appearance is important to both men and women, women are tended to be more sexualized and seen as objects and their worth can be measured by appearance (Frederickson and Roberts, 1997) Thus, women are more likely to engage in self-dissatisfactory activities as they connect their physical appearance with their sense of worth.

The expectations about the perfect female body varies across culture and time. The half of women in American population claim to be dissatisfied with their body image (Furnham, et al., 2002). In the survey conducted between 78 women only 10 were narrowed down as extremely self-conscious. These women expressed sense of insecurity as a result of comparing themselves to fashion influencers. One of the participants stated,

*“I was obese a few years back and had acnes all over my face. When I see these perfect posts I become more aware of my flaws”*

Another interviewee stated:

*“All these influencers wearing short skirts and crop tops and I’m here stuck with my belly hanging over and my cellulite down to my knees. It makes me uncomfortable to go out to social gatherings.”*

The participants were reported to have lack of self-worth and body dissatisfaction. A study carried out by Jiyoung Chae in 2018 showed that comparison is the root of jealousy which leads to low self-esteem. Accoring to the Social comparison theory, a person finds his worth by comparing himself to others. It depends on how they distinguish themselves, are they better or worse from others in various aspects. Another one of the participants wrote:

*“their skin is glowing and it makes me jealous and insecure about my own body because of my stomach fat and wrinkles”*

However, some of the women were reported to acknowledge that they were not taking care of their bodies. One of them stated:

*“I always wonder what if I took care of my body the way they did, especially after holidays. Would I be looking younger today?”*

The different worries have gotten to the point where the participants agreed that their significant others were also following different influencers as one of the participants stated:

*“I am in constant worry and I always try to keep up with new diets and exercises. When I think that my boyfriend sees the tight beautiful bodies on Instagram and may come home to my cellulite I want to run to the gym and not come back till my bones are showing.”*

This demonstrates the pressure social media and fashion influencers have on women and the desire to keep their families. They expressed their fears of losing their significant others to women with greater bodies.

f you’re someone who has the habit of mindlessly scroll through social media whenever you get a few free seconds, you’re far from alone. We’re all aware how mainstream media has presented unrealistic beauty standards, be that through photoshopped celebrities or stick-thin fashion models. That is nothing new. Now that our social media feeds are filled with influencers, it's not difficult to get the idea that social media, too, is all bad when it comes to body image. The reality, however, is more nuanced, and there may be ways to curate your social media feed to make you feel happier in your own skin or, at the very least, stop making you feel worse and insecure.

Even the popular social personalities and celebrities such as Kim and Khloe Kardashian have been exposed to having utilized Photoshop or other editing applications to post heavily edited photos of themselves on Instagram. However, this didn’t go unnoticed and nowadays social media users are much more aware and, in a way, patronizing of this. Many people now publicly criticize the celebrities for unrealistic alterations and encourage them to do better.

In regards of edited photos on social media, Dr. Luke Evans MP (a member of the Health and Social Care Committee and a GP) has recently drawn up a bill which would mean social media users would have to legally label images that have been digitally altered to change how they look. According to Dr. Evans, edited photos on social media are 'fueling a mental health crisis' and creating a "warped view" of beauty.’

Another alternative to photoshop is Instagram effects. The Instagram effects that alter faces (reshaping nose, lips, face contour, adding makeup) are thriving nowadays. As an easy alternative to photoshop this form of alteration is more popular than photoshop. Everything is already done for you and you can even take a video as the effects follow your face expressions adjusting the “surgeries” accordingly. One of the participants stated:

*“At this point I can’t even take a picture without using the Instagram effects. It feels like I am addicted. Even if I’m not taking a picture or a video I like to just open the camera and look at myself. I start to think I really look like that until I happen to see myself in the mirror and get disappointed.”*

This shows the parallel universe the photo alterations have created. This has become an addiction and a fun game of detection whether a post uses photoshop or not.

# Filter Bubble

The ways through which social media can have a positive influence on body image include health and wellness focused accounts/platforms, easily accessible mental and physical health resources etc. Through these schemes, social media users can maintain a healthy and positive perception of their body image. Over the last decade, there has been a significant increase of mental health issues, especially among young people, the most common mental problems being emotional, behavioral and hyperkinetic disorders. Among behavioral disorders, disordered eating behaviors are known to mainly affect young women. The term ‘disordered eating’ is used to describe a range of irregular eating habits, as a result of which, people suffer mental and/or physical disruptions in their eating behaviors, are usually preoccupied with food and weight. People who suffer from disordered eating may or may not receive a diagnosis of an eating disorder (ED).

Whenever you search for something, your device is storing that information in the deep memories that you cannot access. This formulates the “Filter Bubble”. This term was introduced by activist Eli Pariser in his 2011 book The Filter Bubble: What the Internet is Hiding from You. When two people search for the same term and end up having two different findings Pariser explains that such differences are due to the fact that Google and other search engines have an algorithmic personalization of search results. This proves that every user is existing in his own “personalized universe of information” (Pariser, 2015) Once I started to search for anorexia and diet related content for my capstone project I got into a filter bubble of my own. I started getting ads about exercise apps, diet pills and influencers that have a specific type of body (curvy). These pills made up a major part of my Instagram feed. One of them helps you lose approximately 10 kg in a month and the other helps you gain 8kg in the same amount of time. While exploring the page I found no specific prescriptions or side effects notice.

# The Change

In the recent years, the **Eating Disorder Hope organization** presented ways in which social media could potentially impact positively the way women view and feel about their bodies. According to these observations, the overgrowing phenomenon of body positivity on the internet has helped create a more understanding, healthy and inclusive space for women (and people in general) of all body types. As a result, body image advocacy on social media today makes a huge influence on individuals who are or have struggled in the past with eating disorders. Furthermore, social media can help some people navigate more freely the heavily stigmatized topic of weight and body image with different support groups on almost all platforms.

Whether we admit it or not, social media is constantly shaping and changing our concepts of beauty. We are consciously and subconsciously consuming images posted online all the time. As a result, those images and the way we perceive our own physical appearance have become integrally linked.

Social media influences how we perceive ourselves both positively and negatively, and it’s crucial to understand the effects of this in order to limit the impact on our mental well-being.

Similarly, according to Sarah Gervais, Ph.D. of Psychology has illustrated that Instagram has the ability to be a source of empowerment for many people, because the platform has made eating disorder specific keywords or hashtags unsearchable. When this type of positive censorship, users can focus more on a healthier representation of bodies on social media.

Beth Daley, in her article for the Conversation, reported on a research she had done on the topic of body positivity and social media. The study found that body-positive Instagram posts resulted in a more positive and realistic body image and improved mood in young women, compared to the idealized and appearance-neutral posts.

At the same time, though, Daley also noticed that the surveyed women thought about their physical appearance more in general. In other words, body positivity-focused posts could potentially boost women’s self-esteem and body image, but the same content would also put them into a position where they would generally start thinking about their bodies even more.

Project Know (a non-profit organization, focused on helping people with addictive behaviours), explored how social media could in many instances intensify/worsen eating disorders and even trigger certain genetic or psychological proneness. While there aren’t any scientific studies that prove with certainty that social media causes psychological disorders, it can surely intensify pre-existing ones.

The ways we compare our bodies to images we see in the media and the reasons behind this are other increasingly important topics for researchers. Deanna Puglia, a thriving specialist in media, stated “social media is a new avenue for individuals to engage in maladaptive body comparison processes, creating a need for health communication and behavior change interventions that address this issue, especially among vulnerable populations.

The call for more research should be headed, since more and more young women compare their bodies to altered, non-realistic and unhealthy versions of bodies.

According to a recent study by the Florida House Experience, both men and women admit to having the habit of comparing their bodies with those they see in the media. Out of the 1,000 men and women that answered the survey, 87% of women and 65% of men did this, with about 50% of women and 37% of men comparing their bodies unfavorably.

As far as it goes for measures to prevent and treat the effects on one’s body image caused by social media, there’s a need for more research as it’s an arguably new sphere that’s increasingly expanding and changing. Thus, there’s a limited number of practices for distinguishing and treating mental health problems associated with Internet and social media.

This unfavorable self-perception can lead to other severe issues because of an excess of editing software that exists today. Thanks to an excessive list of free applications, people now have the power to alter their faces and their bodies in pictures in ways that resembles surgical alteration. While this sounds like a fun thing to play around with, painstakingly editing your photos can lead to a false sense of control where we start to feel as if we can alter our bodies to get more positive attention and validation. This disconnect between perception and reality furthers the distance between what we feel about ourselves in real life and what we think about our online persona.

Users need to be aware and raise awareness of the negative effects of social media on body image because the consequences can go as far as being devastating and clinical on their mental health, which proves that it is absolutely necessary to bring more attention to the psychology of social media.

It’s an important nuance to note that research into social media and its influence on mental health, as well as on body image, is still in its early stages, and most studies are interdependent. This means that we cannot prove with a 100% certainty whether or not, for instance, Instagram directly causes someone to have negative feelings about their body, or whether or not people who are highly concerned about their appearance are more likely to use Instagram.

That being said, using social media does appear to correlate in a way with body image concerns. Research suggests that image-focused activities, such as scrolling through Instagram or posting selfies, are a significant problem when it comes to negative thoughts about the way we look.

The key is **who** we compare ourselves to.

Often times, when people decide to leave comments on internet, they feel much safer and much more entitled to do so and speak their minds, as opposed to real life. People tend to say things about others that they wouldn’t otherwise vocalize during an in-person interaction. This gives them the space to openly say negative and hurtful things to others, more often to strangers, without any real consequences. As a result of which, there’s an increasing amount of bullying and body-shaming in social media. Whether this is a projection of their own insecurities or a genuine hateful attitude towards a specific person, the effects can be very devastating.

Either way, this fixation with looks seems to be a criticism of the body-positive movement. The body-positive movement is all about loving and accepting your body the way it is, but it is still very much about focused on physical appearance and attractiveness.

Today, there’s still a lack of proper research on this specific topic. Most of the work so far has been focused on young women, as traditionally they have been the age and sex group that’s been most affected by this phenomenon. You don’t need research to show you that men and people of all ages are not immune either. For example, a brief study found that men who reported looking at male #fitspo content more frequently admitted to comparing their own appearance to other men more often and cared about having muscles more.

A takeaway that should work for everyone might be as simple as putting down our phones and taking a break, engaging in other activities that don’t revolve around appearance and beauty. Moreover, delete the editing applications on your phone, unfollow and unsubscribe from people that you catch yourself idolizing and comparing yourself to. It’s not a secret that using those apps can be really addictive. You edit your photo once, twice, get the positive feedback, and now you’re hooked, your image of yourself is altered, you’ve started to like the You in the edited photos much more than the real You. If you’re one of these people or you have been like this, you are not alone.

The purpose of this paper was not to criticize people who live their life or think that they are on the right track of achieving beauty. The purpose of this paper is to acknowledge that there are no beauty standards. For one beauty is skinny, bones and thigh gap and for others beauty is stomach rolls thick thighs and cellulite. The importance is to realize that whether or not one has the ability to see the beauty within.

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