Are Social Media Comparisons Thieves of Joy?

Jessica F. Saunders  
*Florida International University; University of Nevada, Las Vegas, jessica.saunders@unlv.edu*

Asia A. Eaton  
*Florida International University, aeaton@fiu.edu*

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Key Implications

- Women's eating behavior is impacted by sociocultural factors, regardless of the main social networking site they use.

- Image based social networking sites offer increased opportunity to engage in body surveillance.

- Text based social media is strongly linked to social comparison.

Background

Eating disorders (EDs) are the deadliest mental illness, and 90% of individuals diagnosed are women. Eating disorders are often preceded by body dissatisfaction and disordered eating behavior. There is no one root cause of EDs, and EDs occur as a result of a combination of biological, psychological, and sociocultural factors. The expanded sociocultural model of disordered eating has been scientifically tested to explain how societal appearance ideals ultimately translate into disordered eating behavior. This model features two theoretically-based constructs, social comparison and body surveillance, as mechanisms that lead women to internalize and try to achieve societal appearance ideals. Body surveillance, or hyperfocus on appearance attributes, leads women to notice how they compare with others. Women compare themselves to others and noticing where they fall short, end up dissatisfied with their appearance and use disordered eating behaviors to “fix” their appearance. Social media sites offer opportunities to compare one’s appearance with both familiar individuals and celebrities.

Focus of Study

We aimed to understand what aspects of social media use and which social media platforms most strongly related to social comparison, body surveillance, and the resulting consequences of body dissatisfaction and disordered eating outcomes among young women. Given the divergent uses of Facebook compared with both Instagram and Snapchat, we examined differences in how the constructs interrelate based on the primary platform used by participants. We predicted users of Instagram, with its highly filtered and carefully selected images, would report the strongest relations among these constructs. We predicted this relation would be strengthened by how negative users of social media self-rated their typical experience.

Research Design

We collected survey data from 637 social media users between the ages of 18-24. None of the participants had received a clinical ED diagnosis from a medical or psychiatric professional. The women completed the survey online.
Participants were asked which social media site (Facebook, Instagram, or Snapchat) they spent the most time using. Answers to this question allowed us to divide participants into three groups: primarily Facebook users, primarily Instagram users, and primarily Snapchat users. All participants completed questionnaires to measure reasons for using social media, upward and downward appearance comparison, body surveillance, body dissatisfaction and disordered eating. Participants also rated their overall mood when using their main social media platform.

**Facebook users showed the most consistent relationship between overall use of appearance comparisons and eating disordered outcomes.**

**Results**

Our findings supported one of two of our main hypotheses. Women who spent the most time on the two image-based platforms, Snapchat or Instagram, were more likely to link a negative social media experience to engaging in more body surveillance, compared to users of Facebook. Instead of finding that the relations between the tendency to socially compare and engage in body surveillance were strongest for the individuals who primarily used the highly curated, image-based social network site Instagram, we found the weakest effect for this application. In its place, Facebook users showed the most consistent relationship between the overall use of appearance comparisons and eating disordered outcomes.

**Discussion**

This research highlights unique contributions of the three most common social media platforms on disordered eating outcomes, and reinforces the role body dissatisfaction plays in robustly predicting disordered eating outcomes. Across all three platforms, there were very strong relationships between body dissatisfaction and binge eating, purging, and cognitive restraint. These behaviors put an individual most at risk for developing a clinical ED. Therefore, the current findings serve to inform future body dissatisfaction and ED prevention and intervention programs. These results suggest that health professionals should integrate discussions about social media use into their treatment of body dissatisfaction and disordered eating. Recent research finds that less than 20% of participants in ED recovery have discussed the impacts of social media use with a therapist. Given the profound association between disordered eating and the three forms of social media, it is important that these interrelations be integrated into clinical settings.

**Learn More About This Brief**

**The Authors:**  
Jessica F. Saunders, Postdoctoral Research Associate, Women’s Research Institute of Nevada, UNLV & Asia A. Eaton, Assistant Professor, Department of Psychology, Florida International University.

**The Study:**  

**The Brief:**  