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The Relationship between Social Media Engagement, Eating Disorders and Body Image Concern among Undergraduate Students

(Hubungan Penglibatan Media Sosial, Gangguan Makan dan Keprihatinan Imej Tubuh dalam kalangan Pelajar Sarjana Muda)

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## **ABSTRACT**

In the contemporary university landscape, social media stands as a pivotal force shaping the academic, social, and personal lives of students. With its ubiquitous presence, platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok have become integral tools for communication, networking, and self-expression among university students worldwide. The relationship between social media, eating behavior, and body image among university students is complex and multifaceted, influenced by various psychological, social, and cultural factors. This study aimed to determine the association between social media engagement, eating disorder severity and body image concern among undergraduate students. A quantitative cross-sectional study was conducted among 131 university students. A self- administered questionnaire was utilized which consists of socio-demographic data, social media engagement, eating disorder severity and body image concern. Analysis showed that association of social media engagement and eating disorder severity was found to be higher in female students while interestingly, body image concern was higher in male students. Moreover, eating disorder was associated significantly with social media based on correlation test(r=0.204,p<0.05). Overall, social media engagement, eating disorder severity and body image concern were positively correlated to one another. The results indicated that social media usage plays an important role in influencing eating patterns and physical appearance concern. Further studies that included concern on self-esteem in the study factors and diverse samples are highly recommended to thoroughly elucidate the relationship between social media, eating disorder, body image and self-esteem concerns among students.

Keywords: Body image concern, Eating disorder, Social media engagement, University student, Cross-sectional

# ABSTRAK

Dalam landskap universiti kontemporari, media sosial berdiri sebagai kuasa penting yang membentuk kehidupan akademik, sosial dan peribadi pelajar. Dengan kehadirannya di mana-mana, platform seperti Facebook, Instagram, Twitter dan TikTok telah menjadi alat penting untuk komunikasi, rangkaian dan ekspresi diri dalam kalangan pelajar universiti di seluruh dunia. Hubungan antara media sosial, tingkah laku makan, dan imej badan dalam kalangan pelajar universiti adalah kompleks dan pelbagai rupa, dipengaruhi oleh pelbagai faktor psikologi, sosial dan budaya. Kajian ini bertujuan untuk menentukan perkaitan antara penglibatan media sosial, keterukan gangguan makan dan kebimbangan imej badan dalam kalangan pelajar sarjana muda. Kajian keratan rentas kuantitatif telah dijalankan di kalangan 131 pelajar universiti. Soal selidik yang ditadbir sendiri telah digunakan yang terdiri daripada sosio-demografi, penglibatan media sosial, keterukan gangguan makan dan kebimbangan imej badan. Analisis menunjukkan bahawa perkaitan penglibatan media sosial dan keterukan gangguan makan didapati lebih tinggi pada pelajar perempuan manakala yang menariknya, kebimbangan imej badan lebih tinggi pada pelajar lelaki. Lebih-lebih lagi gangguan makan dikaitkan dengan ketara dengan media sosial. Secara keseluruhan, penglibatan media sosial, keterukan gangguan makan berkorelasi secara positif antara satu sama lain(r=0,204, p<0.05). Kajian mendapati bahawa penggunaan media sosial memainkan peranan penting dalam mempengaruhi corak pemakanan dan kebimbangan penampilan fizikal. Kajian lanjutan yang merangkumi kebimbangan terhadap harga diri dalam faktor kajian dan sampel yang pelbagai amat disyorkan untuk menjelaskan secara menyeluruh hubungan antara media sosial, gangguan pemakanan, imej badan dan kebimbangan harga diri dalam kalangan pelajar.

Kata kunci: Kebimbangan imej badan, Gangguan makan, Media sosial, pelajar universiti, Kajian hirisan lintang

#### INTRODUCTION

A person with eating disorders (ED) engages in eating behaviors that jeopardize their mental and physical well-being (MOH 2005). Over the past 18 years, ED has become increasingly commonplace globally. From 3.5% in 2000 to 2006 to 7.8% from 2013 to 2018, the prevalence of ED has increased dramatically (Galmiche et al. 2019). Although a formal study on the prevalence of eating disorders in Malaysia has not been conducted, it is estimated that 1% of the population has anorexia nervosa and 3% has bulimia nervosa, translating to between 250,000 and 900,000 sufferers (Rasman et al. 2018). The afflicted people have an extreme fear of being overweight, refuse to put on weight, purposefully lose weight, and experience amenorrhoea in females (Lim 2011). In the meantime, another study conducted in Malaysia revealed that among 818 participants, the prevalence of ED risk and diagnostic showed that 0.8% had anorexia nervosa, 1.4% had bulimia nervosa, 0.1% had binge-eating disorder, 4.8% had avoidant/ restrictive food intake disorder, and 51.4% had other specific feeding or eating disorders(Chua et al. 2022).

According to a survey conducted by the Malaysian Psychiatric Association (MPA), ED is more common in women than in men. For every 10 to 20 females who have ED, one male will also likely be experiencing a similar issue (Ahmed et al. 2019). However, men were less likely to disclose such disorders, which led to the misconception that EDs exclusively affect women (Andexer 2017). Furthermore, growing public awareness of the obesity epidemic fuels fears of gaining weight and being overweight, which can lead to EDs and low self-esteem in the future (Cave 2009). Due to the unhealthful weight gain that frequently happens during this stage of life, young adult women, especially those in college, may be at risk for eating disorders (Aparicio-Martinez et al. 2019).

According to Rodgers and Melioli (2016), there are a number of attributes such as social cultural, social identity, addiction, body image avoidance associated with the internet and social media that cause young people to have negative body images and eating disorders. Social media use has grown over the past few decades; according to a report, 90% of young people between the ages of 18 and 29 are active users of the platform and are constantly exposed to a variety of visual content. Furthermore, among college women, disordered eating attitudes were linked to social media use, body image, and body concerns (Aparcio-Martinez et al. 2019). Furthermore, study in Malaysia indicated that 60% of medical university student used social media for 1 until 5 hours per day and 24% has become

the cyber victim and 81% has witness cyber bullying. Male students was 2.6 times higher compared to female student becoming the cyber victim. 1.09 times students who have higher social media addiction has a risk to become the cyber victim. Among those who have social media addiction have higher tendency to have a tendency of stress, anxiety and depression (Lee et al. 2023).

According to Kaewpradub et al. (2017) and Rounsefell et al. (2020), social media use or exposure to image-related content has been associated with eating disorder(ED) behaviours such as poor food choices and negative body image. Furthermore, ED eating disorder has been associated to the maladaptive effects of social media, such as viewing and uploading photos and looking for negative feedback via status updates (Holland & Tiggemann 2016). Comparing Facebook use to traditional media like television and fashion magazines, it was discovered that using social media was associated to an increased risk of eating disorders (Mahadi 2013; Cohen & Blaszczynski 2015).

The relationship between social media use and body image-related constructs has been the subject of numerous studies over the years, but the connection between social media (SM) use and ED has gotten far less attention (Wilksch et al. 2019; Franchina & Coco 2018). Most studies have involved young adult female participants (Hummel & Smith 2015; Smith et al. 2013). Despite the pervasive influence of social media among undergraduate students, there is a lack of comprehensive understanding regarding its potential connection with mental health issues such as eating disorders and body image concerns. Existing evidence suggests a significant correlation between high social media usage and adverse psychological outcomes, yet specific studies targeting this vulnerable population are insufficient. The relationship of eating disorder, social media engagement, and body image.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is firstly to determine the socio-demographic characteristics with social media engagement, eating concerns, and body image concerns, secondly to determine the comparison of social media engagement, eating disorder severity, and body image between gender and age groups and lastly to determine the relationship of the eating disorder, social media engagement and body image.

### MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study setting and population

Undergraduate students from Universiti Kebangsaan

Malaysia and Universiti Teknologi MARA between the ages of 20 and 40 participated in a quantitative cross-sectional survey that was used for the research undergraduate students. Convenience sampling was the sampling strategy employed to determine the sample size. The Google form included a consent form, information about the questionnaire, and a statement outlining the reason for the research. The requirements for inclusion were: a) age between 20 to 40 years old and b) signing an informed consent form indicating their willingness to participate. The following conditions were grounds for exclusion: a) being treated for a medical illness that could have an impact on an eating disorder; b) being on medication for a mental health issue. The study was carried out in accordance with the referenced ethical principles. NN-2019-098. The sample size required was 166 with effect size 0.15 according to Gpower calculation.

#### Research instrument

The current survey was structured into three sections: section A consists of questions related to social media engagement (Przybylski, et al. 2013), section B for eating disorder and section C was questions on body image (Fairburn & Beglin. 1994) and section D is the demographic section such as gender, age group and year of study. Five items make up Section A, and the scores range from 0 to 7 (Not one day to Every Day). This section centred on the respondents' observations regarding their social media engagement. The category for social media engagement can be categorize into low for scoring (0-15), moderate (16-25) and high (more than 26) (Przybylski et al. 2013). There are 12 items in total in Sections B. The eating disorder and body image concerns of the respondents during the previous

four weeks (28 days) are examined in these section B. The category for eating disorder concern was (<20) as very low, (21-30) as low, (31-40) as moderate, (41-50) as high and above 50 as very high (Fairburn & Beglin 1994).

There are seven items in section C with Likert scales ranging from "not at all = 0" to "markedly = 6," and seven points in section B, which corresponds to "no days" to "every day." The cut-off point for body image concern was less than 20 indicating very low concern, 21-30 indicating low concern, 31-40 indicating moderate concern and above 40 indicating high concern on body image (Fairburn & Beglin 1994). The questionnaire has been tested for reliability and validity. The kappa coefficient ranged from 0.83 to 0.99, according to the test-retest reliability test and Cronbach alpha 0.89 for testing reliability (Fairburn et al. 1993; Rizvi et al. 2000).

### Statistical Analysis

Following the respondents' administration of the questionnaires, the data was saved in a Google spreadsheet before being exported into Microsoft Excel 2013 for data cleansing and verification. The information acquired for this study was examined using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 26.0. At this stage, the 131 respondents who completed the questionnaire had their frequency, mean score (M), standard deviation (SD), and descriptive analysis determined. Finding the data's normality is necessary to distinguish each section's and category's differences. The analysis that was selected for this study was independent t test, Pearson correlation and Multiple Linear Regression.

TABLE 1. Socio-demographic data

Socio-demographic determinants	Frequency	Percentage (%)	
Gender			
Male	26	19.8	
Female	105	80.2	
Age Group			
21 - 25	110	84.8	
>26	21	15.2	
Race			
Bumiputera	125	95.4	
Non-Bumiputera	6	4.6	

#### **RESULTS**

Socio-demographics characteristics with social media engagement, eating concern and body image concerns.

Out of the 166 students who were initially expected to be included in the sample, 131 students have completed the questionnaire in this study, representing an 80% response rate. According to Table 1, 80.2% of the students who took part in this study were female, and 84.8% of them were between the ages of 21 and 25. Malay respondents made up 95.4% of the sample. Table 2 revealed that while undergraduate students'

use of social media was moderate (74.0%), they were exhibiting concerning indicators of eating disorders, with 20.6% scoring very high and 41.2% scoring high. Similarly, it was found that undergraduate students' concerns about their bodies ranged from moderate to high, with 26.7% scoring high and 36.6% scoring moderate. Table 3 explains the comparison of social media engagement, eating disorders, and body image scoring between gender and age groups. The results indicated that there was no significant mean difference of score social media engagement, eating disorders and body image between gender and age groups (p>0.05)

TABLE 2. Distribution of social media engagement, eating disorder severity and body image concern based on categories

Category	Score	Frequency	Percentage (%)	
Social Media Engagement				
Low	0 - 15	25	19.1	
Moderate	16 - 25	97	74.0	
High	26 - 35	9	6.9	
Eating Disorder Severity				
Very Low	Less than 20	8	6.1	
Low	21 - 30	18	13.7	
Moderate	31 - 40	24	18.3	
High	41 - 50	54	41.2	
Very High	More than 51	27	20.6	
Body Image Concern				
Very Low	Less than 20	21	16.1	
Low	21 - 30	27	20.6	
Moderate	31 - 40	48	36.6	
High	41 - 50	35	26.7	

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The relationship of the eating disorder, social media engagement and body image.

Pearson correlation was implemented to assess the relationship between social media engagement, body image concern with the eating disorder among undergraduate students. The study found that there is a positive relationship between the eating disorder and social media engagement (bivariate correlation (r=0.204, p<0.05). Regarding the body image concerns, there is a positive relationship between the eating disorder and body image concern (bivariate correlation (r=0.111, p>0.05).

The study proceeds to assess the relationship between concern with body image and social media engagement among undergraduate students. It was

TABLE 3. Comparison of social media engagement, eating disorder severity and body image concern between genders and age groups

	Mean Score	p-value
Social media engagement		
Gender		
Male	$16.47 \pm 6.14$	0.144
Female	$14.42 \pm 7.11$	
Age Group		
21 - 25	$16.47 \pm 0.58$	
≥25	$15.43 \pm 1.13$	0.205
Eating disorder		
Gender		
Male	$41.49 \pm 10.98$	0.633
Female	$40.31 \pm 12.18$	
Age Group		
21 - 25	$60.61 \pm 1.41$	
≥25	$54.91 \pm 3.76$	0.096
Body Image Concern		
Gender		
Male	$16.473 \pm 5.05$	0.255
Female	$17.69 \pm 5.03$	
Age Group		
21 - 25	$16.89 \pm 0.48$	
≥25	$13.90 \pm 1.56$	0.238

found that there is a negative relationship between body image concern and social media engagement and not significant (r=-0.085, p>0.05) Then a multiple regression analysis with method Enter test was employed to predict eating disorders factors with, social media engagement and concern of body image. The coefficient of determination estimated was 0.043. The regression model is statistically significant (F=3.946, p<0.05). The eating disorder showed a

positive relationship with social media engagement and concern of body image. Nevertheless, in this analysis, it was found that social media engagement significantly predicts eating disorder. This indicated that as the social media engagement is increasing the eating disorder score is increasing, whereby a 1 unit increase in social media score will increase the eating disorder score by 0.27 significantly (p<0.05).

TABLE 4. The predictor of eating disorder

	В	Std error	t	p	95% Confide	nce interval
Constant	8.329	2.970	2.805	0.006	2.453	14.205
Social media	.270	.108	2.492*	0.014	.056	.485
Body image	.054	.036	1.504	0.135	017	.125

<sup>\*</sup>p<0.05

## **DISCUSSION**

Social media usage has been associated with eating disorders and body image, with young adult women being the most affected. Perloff (2014) states that social media constitutes a major medium for the dissemination of cultural preconceptions regarding the

beauty of body image. According to earlier American research, girls and young women who use social media are more likely to experience eating disorders, have body dissatisfaction, and have skinnier bodies or ideals (Cavazos-Rehg et al. 2020). The results in this study indicated there was significant difference of social media engagement, eating disorder and body image

score between gender. The results is parallel with previous study among university student in Malaysia whereby the result indicated there was no significant association between gender with social media and body image concern (Eow and Gan 2018). Meanwhile the result of this study is in contrast with previous study among university student in UAE indicated that female students are more concern about their body image appearance and have high tendency of social media (Hasan et al. 2018).

Our findings indicate that exposure to social media usage is associated with eating disorder tendencies and body image. It was also found that eating disorders and social media use were more common in women between the ages of 21 and 25 based on the descriptive results of this study. Women are more likely than men to post pictures on social media sites like Instagram and Snapchat, including selfies, pictures of friends, pictures of celebrities, and pictures of food, according to research by Kinkel-Rem et al., (2022). Consequently, this implies that women place a greater emphasis on food and appearance than do men, which could theoretically explain why eating disorders are more common in women.

According to previous study, body image is a mental image that consists of a perceptual and effective concept (Dahlenburg et al, 2020). Perceptual concerns in how we see ourselves meanwhile effective concept is how we fell about we see. In this study, the result showed that male students between 31 to 35 years old showed to have a higher concern on body image as compared to female students descriptively. Prior research mentioned that boys' and young men's body image concerns are strongly influenced by social media (Frachina et al. 2018). Furthermore, Galioto and Crowther (2013) also stated that adult men have been reported to have dissatisfaction with their bodies, and sociocultural factors such as media depictions influences their body image concerns. However, this report was contradicted by Meier & Gray (2014) who explained that appearancefocused activity on social media such as commenting on photos and posting photos was associated with higher levels of thin-ideal internalization, drive for thinness and weight dissatisfaction in high school females. This is also supported by Griffiths et al. (2018) whereby their findings resulted in an association of social media use with body dissatisfaction among women and girls was higher as compared to men.

The finding that social media engagement significantly predicts eating disorders is groundbreaking. It shifts the focus from traditional media influences to the digital realm, demonstrating that exposure to idealized body images and social comparison mechanisms

on platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook can directly contribute to the development of eating disorders. This underscores the urgency of addressing social media's role in mental health interventions and public health initiatives. Holland and Tiggeman's (2016) study found that the association between body image and eating concerns and social networking use was mediated by appearance-based social comparison. Users' attitudes and views about their bodies, as well as the weight and shape control behaviors that follow, are significantly impacted by social networking sites (Filice et al. 2020). Furthermore, Klien (2013) reveals a connection between the rise in disordered eating and excessive social media use.

#### CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the findings of this study underscore the profound influence of social media on body image concerns and the development of eating disorders. The pervasive exposure to idealized body images and the culture of comparison inherent in social media platforms significantly contribute to negative mental health outcomes among users. It is imperative to recognize and address these issues, as they have farreaching implications for public health and individuals. Early intervention can prevent the development of negative body image and disordered eating behaviors. Educating teens and university students about the unrealistic nature of many social media portrayals and promoting healthy self-esteem are crucial preventive measures among researchers and practitioners.

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