


RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SOCIAL MEDIA AND EATING DISORDERS IN ADOLESCENCE

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Maria Mariana Cardoso Clemente¹, Geórgia Freitas Rolim Martins² and Rui Gonçalves da Luz Neto³

ABSTRACT

The growing influence of social media in the lives of adolescents has been associated with the development of eating disorders, becoming a relevant topic for public health. This study aimed to analyze the relationship between the use of social media and the risk of eating disorders in adolescence, considering factors such as body image, social comparison, and exposure to content related to food and aesthetics. This is a descriptive research of a narrative and systematic nature, based on a literature review in the PubMed, LILACS and Scopus databases. The findings demonstrate that digital platforms, especially those with strong visuals, play a significant role in internalizing unrealistic body patterns, intensifying body dissatisfaction and encouraging dysfunctional eating behaviors. In addition, engaging in online communities that promote ideals of thinness and extreme diets can contribute to the perpetuation of eating disorders. It is concluded that media literacy emerges as an essential strategy to minimize the negative impacts of social news on the mental and dietary health of adolescents, highlighting the need for preventive interventions and external public policies for this problem.

Keywords: Eating Disorders. Social Media. Body image. Adolescence. Media Literacy.

¹ Master's student in Hebiatrics - University of Pernambuco (UPE)
University of Pernambuco (UPE)

E-mail: maria.marianacardoso@upe.br

ORCID: orcid.org/0009-0006-5582-8317

LATTES: lattes.cnpq.br/8687891630481272

² Master's student in Hebiatrics - University of Pernambuco (UPE)
University of Pernambuco (UPE)

E-mail: georgiarolim.martins@upe.br

ORCID: orcid.org/0000-0003-2275-5087

LATTES: lattes.cnpq.br/8649893829703455

³ Master's Degree in Hebiatrics from the University of Pernambuco (UPE)

Catholic University of Pernambuco – PE

E-mail: rui.2022803085@unicap.br

ORCID: orcid.org/0000-0003-4780-296X

LATTES: lattes.cnpq.br/7566002056279058

INTRODUCTION

Eating disorders (ED) are prevalent in female adolescents in industrialized countries and rank third among chronic diseases. Its pathogenesis is multifactorial, including conditions such as depression, anxiety, and body image dissatisfaction (Montoya, 2015). Eating disorders are characterized as psychiatric disorders associated with dysfunctional eating behaviors and concerns related to body appearance. Although they are more prevalent among young women, recent studies indicate a more rapid increase in the occurrence of these disorders among men. Body image perception plays a significant role in the development and maintenance of eating disorders (LONERGAN et al, 2020).

The relationship between media use, body image, and the risk of eating disorders has been the subject of study over several decades. Initially, magazines and television were the main forms of media investigated in this context. However, more recently, with the advent of online media, and in particular social media, there has been an increased interest in this area of research. Online media forms, including social media, have distinct characteristics that make them particularly relevant to understanding eating disorders (WILKSCH et al, 2019).

The sociocultural theories of body dissatisfaction and food restriction state that the pressures exerted by the media, family and colleagues contribute to the development and maintenance of body dissatisfaction. As researchers explored new forms of media, such as the internet and online activities, including engagement on social media such as Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, and Pinterest, evidence emerged of their influence on body image and dietary restriction (SAUL and RODGERS, 2018).

Wilksch et al, (2019) evidenced that the use of media, especially social media (SM), has been studied in relation to body image and the risk of eating disorders in adolescents, their studies indicated that the use of SM, in particular Instagram and Snapchat, is common in the age group of 12 to 13 years.

The relationship between social media and concerns related to the body and food can be bidirectional and mutually reinforcing. Individuals who already have body and food-related concerns are more likely to engage in online activities that emphasize appearance, and in turn, engaging in these activities can further intensify these concerns. The two-way relationships between social media and concerns related to the body and eating may be more significant than those observed in traditional media, due to the personalized nature of engagement with social media and the increased opportunity for peer-to-peer interactions,

such as comparisons and conversations about appearance, which can mediate the relationship between social media and body dissatisfaction (MCLEAN et al, 2015).

A relevant concern is the fact that adolescents are using the Internet as their main source of information regarding health. Comparative studies between pro-anorexia sites and pro-recovery sites have revealed that pro-anorexia sites are more structured, comprehensive, visited more frequently, and more numerous than retrieval or professional sites (MULVEEN AND HEPWORTH, 2006).

The most used SM tools among adolescents are those with quick content, which include images and videos instead of texts, which leads them to a whirlwind of photos and videos, with the possibility of interaction, which are chosen based on the user's searches, this selection is made by an algorithm (SAUL AND RODGERS, 2018), that is, the more content about food and weight loss is being searched for on these platforms, the more videos and photos of influencers from these niches will appear in SM.

From this exposure, it is noticeable that social media can induce conditions that generate eating disorders, with the understanding and proof that adolescents are using MH tools, and that this use can be harmful to their health, this research was structured on the following guiding question: What is the relationship between social media and eating disorders in adolescence?

METHODOLOGY

To answer the research question of this study, a descriptive research of a narrative and systematic nature was carried out. The search was conducted in the National Library of Medicine - PubMed, Latin American and Caribbean Literature on Health Sciences - LILACS and Scopus databases.

The selection of studies undermines the inclusion criteria for peer-reviewed articles published in indexed scientific journals that address the relationship between social media, body image, and eating disorders in adolescents. Studies that did not have a clear methodology, duplicate articles, and publications in languages other than English, Portuguese, or Spanish were excluded.

The search strategy included the following controlled and uncontrolled descriptors: "eating disorders", "social media", "body image", "adolescents", combined by Boolean operators (AND and OR) to increase the sensitivity of the search.

The analysis of the selected studies was carried out based on the principles of systematic review, ensuring standardized data protection and the categorization of evidence according to its relevance to the question investigated (HIGGINS et al., 2022). The extracted data were organized qualitatively and presented according to the main findings related to the impact of social news on body dissatisfaction and eating behavior of adolescents.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

ADOLESCENCE AND BODY IMAGE

According to the definition of the World Health Organization (WHO), adolescence is recognized as a stage of human development that covers the period between 10 and 19 years of age. This time interval is considered crucial and requires special attention due to the physical, emotional, and social transformations that occur at this stage of life. In the Brazilian context, the legislation of the Statute of the Child and Adolescent establishes that adolescence is understood as the age group that goes from 12 to 18 years of age (BRASIL, 2002).

Body image is characterized as an individual's perception, cognition, and affects in relation to their own physical appearance, as defined by Grogan (2016). It encompasses both positive and negative aspects, which are correlated with psychological states, as mentioned by Inchley et al. (2016). The negative thoughts and feelings that a person has about their own body are described as body dissatisfaction (CI). Grogan (2016) reports that dissatisfaction usually arises from discrepancies between a person's assessment of their own size, shape, muscle tone/musculature/tone, and weight, and their idealization of the body.

During early adolescence, there is a rapid increase in rates of concern about body image and the occurrence of eating disorders among girls (ABEBE, LIEN and VON SOEST, 2012; WESTERBERG-JACOBSON, GHADERI and EDLUND, 2012). Studies indicate that more than 45% of female adolescents report body dissatisfaction (WILLIAMS and CURRIE, 2000).

The high prevalence of body dissatisfaction is of great concern, since studies have shown that this dissatisfaction predicts, prospectively, an increase in psychopathology and the adoption of behaviors that are harmful to health (NEUMARK-SZTAINER et al., 2006). In addition, body dissatisfaction has been identified as one of the two main predictors for

the development of eating disorders (STICE, MARTI AND DURANT, 2011), which further highlights its importance.

The initial phase of adolescence is a critical period of development for adolescents, with regard to their concerns about body image. This occurs due to the physical transformations associated with puberty, which tend to move them away from the ideal of an androgynous and excessively thin body propagated by the media (MCCABE, RICCIARDELLI and FINEMORE, 2002).

In addition, it is observed that adolescents are more vulnerable to media influences compared to their male counterparts, and are more likely to engage in social comparisons based on physical appearance. These two factors are considered important risk factors for the development of body dissatisfaction (KNAUSS, PAXTON and ALSAKER, 2008; WARREN, SCHOEN and SHAFER, 2010).

MEDIA AND EATING BEHAVIOR

In recent years, there has been an exponential increase in internet use, with 93% of adolescents now having access to the internet in their homes (MADDEN and ZICKUHR, 2011). Young people are the main users of the Internet and social media, with up to 89% of young people between the ages of 18 and 29 using social media platforms, mainly through their mobile devices, such as mobile phones (RODGERS and MELIOLI, 2016).

With the onset of adolescence, a greater level of autonomy and independence in food choices is observed. However, this greater autonomy in decision-making seems to be related to an increase in inappropriate eating behaviors, which goes against the desired ideal (NEUMARK-SZTAINER et al., 2011).

According to Fisberg (2000, apud BERTIN et al., 2008, p. 436), this eating behavior is associated with the patterns observed in the age group to which they belong. This includes the consumption of foods with high calorie content and low nutritional value, the lack of regularity in meals, the early onset of alcohol consumption, and the tendency to adopt dietary restrictions. These practices can contribute to changes in nutritional status.

Within this context, the understanding of eating behavior requires a reflection on a fundamental act for human survival, which is intrinsically linked to historical and sociological aspects. This includes the consideration of the subject who performs the feeding, as well as the contexts in which it occurs, how and why one eats in a certain way and not in another (KÖSTER, 2009).

Available research indicates the potential of social media platforms to perpetuate an unrealistic ideal of thinness, through the dissemination of images and texts that exalt and encourage disordered eating behaviors. In addition, harmful advice is observed in online forums, in which strategies to become and maintain thinness are discussed, known as "thinspiration", "thinspo" and "pro-anorexia" (BORZEKOWSKI et al., 2010).

EATING DISORDERS AND SOCIAL MEDIA

Eating disorders, including anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa, have a significant relevance in the health of adolescent girls in industrialized countries. These conditions rank third among the most common chronic diseases in this population group (FERNÁNDEZ, ENCINAS and ESCURSELL, 2005).

The pathogenesis of eating disorders (EDs) is not yet fully understood, since their development is influenced by multiple factors (MITCHISON and HAY, 2014). Among the associated factors are the presence of depression, anxiety and dissatisfaction with body image, the latter being the most commonly observed factor (PINHEIRO and GIUGLIANI, 2006). Dissatisfaction with body image arises due to the discrepancy between the current/actual perception of the body and the ideal body image, which is influenced by the internalization of cultural standards of ideal body widely disseminated by the media and social norms, such as popularity, fashion, sex appeal, and aversion to fat. These factors contribute to the development of a distorted and negative view of one's own body, which can trigger or aggravate the disorders.

It is important to highlight that social, cultural, and media factors play a relevant role in this issue. Social media, in particular, has proven to be an environment conducive to the spread of unrealistic beauty standards and societal pressures related to physical appearance. These factors may contribute to the development and worsening of eating disorders among adolescents, underscoring the need for comprehensive approaches to the prevention and treatment of these conditions.

At the end of the 1990s, television was the main media responsible for promoting ideals of thinness among adolescents (BECKER et al., 2002). However, from the 2000s onwards, there was an exponential growth in the use of the internet and new interactive forms of technology emerged, especially social media (SM), which became a powerful influence on the body image of female adolescents (GROSS, 2004; TIGGEMANN and MILLER, 2010). This paradigm shift highlights the importance of investigating the impacts

of social media on the construction of body perception and the development of eating disorders among young women.

Social media use has experienced a significant increase among adolescent males and females in recent years (Reid Chassiakos et al., 2016), and has been associated with and predicted as a factor of body image concern (MCLEAN et al., 2015; TIGGEMANN and SLATER, 2017), as well as disordered behaviors related to body change (DE VRIES et al., 2016; RODGERS and MELIOLI, 2016).

According to the study conducted by Stice et al. (1994), it was observed that the greater the influence of the media on the body image of the students evaluated, the greater the probability of having a higher risk of developing eating disorders. These results corroborate findings from previous studies that also indicate the relationship between media influence and the risk of eating disorders.

In addition, it is important to highlight that the influence of social media can lead adolescents to internalize the body ideals imposed by society as desirable, recognizing them as social standards to be achieved. Dissatisfaction with body image occurs when adolescents perceive that they do not have the ideal body as propagated by social media (TIGGEMANN and PICKERING, 1996; FIELD et al., 1999).

Recent studies have shown that social networks, especially Facebook, increase exposure to appearance, which is positively related to changes in body image and, consequently, to the development of eating disorders (MEIER and GRAY, 2014). This finding underscores the significant influence of social media on body perception and highlights the need for a deeper understanding of the mechanisms by which social media affect adolescent body image and mental health.

Recent findings reveal that engaging in online platforms that promote photography-centric activities is associated with higher risk factors for eating disorders. Specifically among female adolescents, those who use forms of the internet and social media focused on appearance tend to have the highest levels of risk factors for eating disorders (TIGGEMANN and MILLER, 2010). These findings highlight the importance of understanding the specific influence of online activities related to body image and the role of social media in promoting risk behaviors for eating disorders among adolescents.

Among adolescent girls, it has been observed that the act of taking selfies and concern with the careful presentation of an online identity are correlated with a higher risk of developing eating disorders (MCLEAN et al., 2015).

Engaging in Internet photography-related activities appears to be particularly associated with the risk of eating disorders. While the mechanisms underlying this association still require further investigation, appearance comparisons are likely to play a significant role. This assumption is supported by studies that identify the comparison of appearance as a mediating factor in the relationships between exposure to Facebook and concerns about body image (FARDOULY et al., 2015). Therefore, it is essential to conduct additional studies to better understand how photography-related activities on the Internet can negatively influence body image and increase the risk of eating disorders among adolescent girls.

Saul and Rodgers (2018) state that online media, including social media, have characteristics that make them relevant to eating disorders. First, the highly visual nature of online media, with a predominance of images rather than text, contributes to the saturation of appearance-related content. Additionally, young people can utilize image-oriented social media platforms, where they are encouraged to spend time selecting their own images and examining those of their peers or celebrities. Secondly, online media has the ability to adapt to individual interests, building on previous content such as targeted ads and search histories, creating an increasingly personalized online environment as more time is spent online. Third, the interactive nature of the online world, especially social media, combines elements of traditional media influence related to eating disorders with interpersonal influences such as peer relationships and teasing. Thus, online media offer a combination of influences that contribute to their relevance in eating disorders.

One of the ways in which the Internet plays a relevant role in eating disorders is through the connection of people with minority beliefs. This is manifested, for example, in pro-eating disorder content and in communities that use the Internet as a means of expressing the conviction that eating disorders are a lifestyle choice, as opposed to a mental health condition, and seek to support individuals in maintaining and, often, concealing their eating disorder (RODGERS, SKOWRON and CHABROL, 2012).

People affected by eating disorders often experience a lack of social support in their interpersonal environment, as well as reporting feelings of shame and stigma associated with this condition (SIMPSON AND MAZZEO, 2017; STEWART et al., 2008). In this context, the Internet provides a safe environment in which their behaviors and attitudes are welcomed without judgment, allowing them to meet others who share similar experiences.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Media literacy presents itself as a relevant approach in the context in which participants are encouraged to reflect on aspects such as the usefulness of making comparisons between themselves and the images conveyed in the media, the probability of manipulation of the images, the degree of internalization of the messages transmitted, the intention of the media producer to influence the perceptions of others and the engagement in activism according to their own identification (WILKSCH et al., 2015; WILKSCH & WADE, 2009). In this sense, media literacy provides individuals with the ability to make a critical analysis of media messages, questioning their veracity, intentions and psychosocial impacts. In addition, she encourages participants to adopt active postures, such as choosing not to follow accounts considered useless, thus seeking conscious consumption and a more engaged participation in the media sphere.

It is possible to identify in more recent literature that media literacy plays an essential role and is addressed as an improvement in the scenario of the influence of social media on the development of eating disorders in adolescents. Lopes and Trajano (2021) reiterate that media literacy plays an important role in preventing the risks associated with the development of eating disorders. However, it is necessary to consider that its effectiveness is limited due to the lack of education and maturity of individuals in relation to content consumption. Concomitantly, Lopes and Rodrigues Junior (2022) and Silva, Castro and Reis (2022), highlight that media literacy is an effective instrument to promote the autonomy of young people in the consumption of content, aiming at a more conscious use and minimizing the impacts on diet and the perception of body changes.

In short, we can consider media literacy as a valid alternative to avoid and prevent the development of eating disorders in adolescents, the practice will not be facilitated, especially due to the transitional period in which they are, but the benefits of applying this technique will make adolescents less susceptible to the negative influences of the media and consequently the adoption of harmful behaviors related to eating may decrease.

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