

# THE DETRIMENTAL IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON YOUTHS WITH EATING DISORDERS

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A couple of years ago, I came upon the realization that I was a victim of body dysmorphia and as a result developed an eating disorder that took control of my life for an entire year. At that time, I hadn't yet realized the grounding effects body dysmorphia had on my perception of myself and my body. I just knew that the internet made me hate the way I looked. I wanted to make a change, any change, no matter what steps I had to take or what hurdles I had to go through.



This may not accurately represent a child's struggles, but it shows an example of what a child may be going through and doing because of the beauty standards set out by social media.<sup>1</sup>

No child should ever go through such a thing. The issue in our society today is that I am just one of the many people who are facing or have faced an eating disorder. And why is it that the issues concerning food still remain a topic that is so often overlooked in our society? The problem here is not just the notions

that revolve around food in and of itself but rather toxic beauty standards, which are spread by social media, that demand a person to look a certain way to be deemed attractive. As a result, there have been a growing number of advertisements encouraging anorexic<sup>2</sup> behaviors, such as purging<sup>3</sup> or excessive exercising, and fatphobic ideology. These advertisements promote an unhealthy way of thinking and lifestyle that could potentially cause great harm to the people who view them, especially teenagers. Social media poses as a platform that brings about great harm to a child's mental health concerning body image, which in turn affects their physical health.

Believe it or not, eating disorders affect at least nine percent of the population worldwide To lay the numbers right out, that is at least seven hundred million people worldwide.<sup>4</sup> In fact, eating disorders affect so many of us that it is the second deadliest mental illness, second to opioid overdose.<sup>5</sup> This is not a matter that should be handled recklessly. Many people suffer irreversible damage from eating disorders, which in turn creates a domino effect that causes other parts of a person's way of living to become even more difficult. This is why it is crucial that our society realizes the detrimental effects of eating disorders, starting with the one platform that influences people the most: social media.

Social media comes into play as being the platform that first introduces a child, teen, or person to the idea of "diets hacks". One story, in particular, belongs to Sara,<sup>6</sup> a member of the National Eating Disorder Information Centre (NEDIC). Sara's concern for her curvy body shape started from a young age due to the people around her and the shows she watched. This concern grew into action when she viewed a talk show on the topic of eating disorders, with several young girls discussing their struggles with anorexia and bulimia. Sara listened to them as they described in detail how they "made themselves sick." As a curious teenage girl,

Sara was bound to try out the things she saw, so she tried purging and stuck with it for many years. “I pulled my hair back into a ponytail, knelt over the toilet, and made myself sick. I wish, with all my heart, that I could tell every young girl or boy who is contemplating that very action for the first time not to succumb.”

It’s a disappointing thing to admit but Sara’s story is something common, even in the youths of our time. As shown in Sara’s childhood, a child can become self-aware of body image at a very young age. In a survey conducted on elementary and middle school children, forty-two percent of first to third grade girls want to be thinner and eighty-one percent of ten-year-old children are afraid of becoming fat.<sup>7</sup> It is the inappropriate body image ideas that children are exposed to at an early age from their peers and the media which causes them to think a certain way about themselves. It is sad to see a child as young as seven years old hate or dislike the way they look just because it is different from others. A child should be raised on the fundamentals of love and compassion. They should learn how to love themselves from an early age. I believe that the most important way to take care of yourself is to first accept and love yourself for who you are. Media should be a platform that spreads positivity and awareness towards eating disorders in order to prevent them as much as possible.

In Sara’s story, one of the main reasons why she eventually developed her eating disorder was the media and the depiction of eating disorders in the media. Media is such an important factor because it carries a lot of influence and persuasion. People rely on social media as a form of education and entertainment. However, as much as social media is so crucial, there is never any filter that prevents a person from viewing the negative contents of the internet. As a result, people are exposed without warning. Social media brings about new negative thinking that can easily influence others to take action.



One of Dr. Christian Jessen's cover photo for *Supersize vs. Superskinny* used on Prime Video.<sup>8</sup>

Social media depicts eating disorders as a sort of entertainment, instead of considering the severity that comes with it. An example of this can be seen in the television show, *Supersize Vs. Superskinny*, featuring Dr. Christian Jessen. The premise of the show is to create an eating clinic that swaps the diet of people suffering from an eating disorder on a different spectrum and hopes that the drastic change in diet would become the shock factor that leads the people to make a permanent lifestyle change. Dr. Christian Jessen does not realize that his own show creates more negative thinking than positive. In the article, "How "triggering" Noughties show *Supersize vs Superskinny* is troubling a new audience," by Amelia Tate, she writes: "The show's idealization of thinness, alongside its fat-shaming, can be problematic."<sup>9</sup> Just as Sara developed her unhealthy cycle of purging from watching a TV show on eating disorders, the same can be said about *Supersize vs. Superskinny*. The content on this show can be triggering and sensitive to a vulnerable audience. The show humiliates people

who are bigger by putting them out on full display and giving suggestions for “skinnier” eating alternatives to encourage anorexic behaviors. The show’s depiction of what a “healthy” diet should look like is never clearly made, and this carries misinformation to viewers, especially those who are easily influenced.

In our current society, the topic of eating disorders will never be a comfortable topic to discuss, but social media and television shows have proven ways to NOT talk about it. Instead of just suggesting “healthier” eating alternatives such as intermittent fasting, low-calorie diets, and starving, the most simple solution is to spread awareness of the topic in an educational and comfortable way. Eating disorders are not a decision people just make and can stop themselves from doing. Eating disorders stem from the mental wellness of a person and the state they are in. Everyone goes through eating disorders differently, so they must also be treated differently. For most people, their eating disorder began because they were unaware and uneducated about its harmful effects. Social media is a platform that can create harm, but it can become a platform that brings about positive changes. Though it makes a person hate themselves, we can reverse the process and spread love. Together, we all can learn and teach others about the harmful effects of eating disorders and spread positivity everywhere we go. If we do this together, then slowly, progress will be made toward a healthier self and world.

Endnotes

1. Bejealousofme. "I'll Do Anything to Look like Them." Flickr. iStock, August 24, 2008. <https://www.flickr.com/photos/thexbeautyxofxlove/2794055742/>.
2. Restricting, lack or loss of appetite for food
3. Engaging in vomiting, laxative abuse
4. Eating disorder statistics: General & Diversity stats: Anad. National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders. (2022, June 8). Retrieved November 3, 2022, from <https://anad.org/eating-disorders-statistics/>
5. Ibid.
6. Sara's story. Kelty Eating Disorders. (2022, August 8). Retrieved November 3, 2022, from <https://keltyeatingdisorders.ca/generalinformation/stories/saras-story/>
7. Eating disorder statistics: General & Diversity stats: Anad. National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders. (2022, June 8). Retrieved November 3, 2022, from <https://anad.org/eating-disorders-statistics/>
8. Jessen, Christian. "Supersize vs Superskinny:" Amazon. Channel 4, 2008. <https://www.amazon.com/Supersize-Vs-Superskinny/dp/B0867294LV> .
9. Tait, A. (2018, August 9). How "triggering" Noughties show supersize vs Superskinny is troubling a new audience. New Statesman. Retrieved November 3, 2022, from <https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/tv-radio/2018/08/how-triggering-noughties-show-supersize-vs-superskinny-troubling-new>