

EVALUATING THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON BODY IMAGE PERCEPTION AND DISORDERED EATING BEHAVIOURS AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

Original Research

Nisha Qureshi^{1*}, Zainab Saeed¹, Andleeb Shakoor¹

¹Department of Human Nutrition and Dietetics, Riphah International University

Corresponding Author: Nisha Qureshi, nishaqureshi8sq@gmail.com, Department of Human Nutrition and Dietetics, Riphah International University

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ABSTRACT

BACKGROUND: Excessive use of social media has been associated with negative body image and disordered eating behaviors among young adults. Exposure to appearance-focused content and peer comparisons on social platforms may influence self-perception and promote unhealthy eating attitudes.

OBJECTIVE: To evaluate the influence of social media on body image perception and disordered eating behaviours among university students aged 18–25 years.

METHODOLOGY: A cross-sectional analytical study was conducted at Riphah International University, Lahore, involving 200 students selected through convenient sampling. Data was collected using self-designed demographic questionnaires and standardized tools: Social Media Disorder (SMD) scale, Body Appreciation Scale-2 (BAS-2), and Eating Attitudes Test (EAT-26) questionnaires. Data was analyzed using SPSS-26 with descriptive and inferential statistics to assess associations between social media use, body appreciation, and eating disorder risk.

RESULTS: Most participants (72%) exhibited problematic social media use. Participants with problematic use predominantly reported low (51.4%) or moderate (48.6%) body appreciation, while non-problematic users mostly reported moderate (35.7%) to high (64.3%) body appreciation ($p = 0.00$). Additionally, 69.5% of problematic users were classified at high risk for disordered eating, compared to 37.5% of non-problematic users ($p = 0.00$).

CONCLUSION: Problematic social media use is significantly associated with lower body appreciation and higher risk of disordered eating among university students. These findings highlight the impact of excessive social media engagement on mental health, emphasizing the need for awareness programs and interventions to promote healthy usage habits.

KEY TERMS: Social Media, Body Image, Eating Disorders, University Students, BAS-2, EAT- 26, SMD

INTRODUCTION

Social media has emerged as a dominant force in shaping communication, interaction, and self-expression in the modern digital era. Unlike traditional media, which primarily relies on one-way communication and professionally curated content, social media platforms enable users to both create and consume content in real time, fostering dynamic and interactive engagement¹. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, and Facebook emphasize visual communication through images, videos, and short-form content, making them particularly influential in shaping perceptions and attitudes among users. With approximately 61.4% of the global population actively using social media, these platforms have become deeply embedded in everyday life, especially among young adults and university students². The widespread adoption of social media is particularly evident among young populations, where usage patterns reflect high engagement with visually driven platforms. Studies indicate that a large proportion of individuals aged 18–29 years actively use platforms such as Instagram and Snapchat, with increasing adoption of TikTok, highlighting the central role of these platforms in daily routines³. Similar trends are observed in Asian countries, where social media use among university students is not only prevalent but often excessive, with approximately 22.8% of students demonstrating problematic or addictive usage patterns⁴. In Pakistan, this trend is equally pronounced, with a vast majority of undergraduate students actively engaged on social media platforms, spending significant portions of their daily time interacting with digital content⁵.

One of the most critical areas influenced by social media is body image perception. In the contemporary digital landscape, individuals continuously engage in self-presentation and evaluation through likes, comments, and visual feedback, which contribute to the construction of self-identity⁶. Social media platforms, particularly those centered on visual content, often promote idealized and curated representations of beauty that may not reflect reality. These portrayals encourage users to compare their physical appearance with unrealistic standards, leading to dissatisfaction and distorted self-perception⁷. The process of internalizing such ideals is further reinforced by peer interactions and algorithm-driven content, which repeatedly expose individuals to appearance-focused material. University students are especially vulnerable to these influences, as this stage of life is characterized by identity formation and heightened sensitivity to social validation. Female students tend to engage more frequently in appearance-based comparisons, which significantly shapes their perceptions of beauty and self-worth⁸. Research suggests that repeated exposure to idealized images on platforms such as Instagram can foster self-objectification, lower self-esteem, and increased body dissatisfaction⁹. These effects are not limited to passive exposure; rather, active engagement, such as comparing oneself with peers or influencers, plays a critical role in intensifying negative body image outcomes¹⁰. Moreover, stressful academic environments may amplify these effects, as students often turn to social media for validation or escape, thereby increasing their exposure to harmful content¹¹.

Body image perception, defined as an individual's thoughts, feelings, and attitudes toward their physical appearance, is a multidimensional construct influenced by both internal and external factors¹². When individuals perceive a discrepancy between their actual and ideal body image, it often results in body dissatisfaction, a condition associated with psychological distress and reduced self-esteem¹³. Negative body image has been strongly linked to adverse mental health outcomes, including depression, anxiety, and impaired social functioning¹⁴. In the context of social media, these effects are further intensified by continuous exposure to idealized representations of beauty and the pressure to conform to societal expectations. A significant consequence of negative body image perception is the development of disordered eating behaviors. Disordered eating encompasses a range of irregular eating patterns, including restrictive dieting, binge eating, and compensatory behaviors, which may not meet the full clinical criteria for eating disorders but still pose serious health risks¹⁵. Research indicates that social media exposure contributes to the adoption of unhealthy eating behaviors by promoting unrealistic body ideals and dieting practices¹⁶. Mechanisms such as appearance comparison, thin-ideal internalization, and social reinforcement play a crucial role in linking social media use to disordered eating outcomes¹⁷. Furthermore, studies have demonstrated that the type of content consumed, particularly weight-loss and appearance-

focused material, has a stronger impact on body dissatisfaction and eating behaviors than the duration of social media use itself¹⁸. The relationship between social media, body image, and disordered eating is complex and influenced by multiple psychosocial factors. Evidence suggests that social comparison and objectification are central pathways through which social media affects body image and eating behaviors¹⁹. Additionally, sociocultural pressures from peers, family, and media contribute to the internalization of ideal body standards, further increasing the risk of disordered eating²⁰. These influences operate across diverse populations; however, their manifestation may vary depending on cultural context. While extensive research has been conducted in Western settings, findings cannot be directly generalized to non-Western populations due to differences in cultural norms, values, and media exposure patterns. In many low- and middle-income countries, including Pakistan, there is a notable lack of empirical research examining the relationship between social media use, body image perception, and disordered eating behaviors among university students. Cultural expectations related to modesty, gender roles, and family dynamics may shape how individuals engage with social media and interpret appearance-related content. Despite the rapid increase in social media usage in Pakistan, limited studies have explored its psychological and behavioral impact within this specific context. This gap in literature restricts the development of culturally appropriate interventions and awareness programs aimed at promoting healthy body image and eating behaviors.

Addressing this gap is essential, as the rising prevalence of stress, anxiety, and unhealthy eating patterns among university students highlights the growing public health significance of this issue. Understanding how social media influences body image and eating behaviors within the local context can provide valuable insights for the development of targeted strategies, including digital literacy programs, counseling interventions, and policy initiatives. Such efforts are crucial to mitigate the negative effects of social media

and promote overall well-being among young adults. Therefore, this study aims to assess the association between social media use, body image perception, and disordered eating behaviors among university students.

METHODS

A cross-sectional analytical study was conducted among 200 university students aged 18–25 years at Riphah International University, Lahore, over a period of four months from October 2025 to January, 2026. Participants were selected through a convenient sampling technique. Inclusion criteria comprised students currently enrolled at the university, actively using social media for at least 30 minutes daily or engaging with two or more platforms, and willing to provide informed consent. Individuals with diagnosed eating disorders, severe psychiatric illness, or those unable to complete the questionnaire were excluded. Data was collected using both self-designed and standardized instruments, including a demographic and anthropometric questionnaire, the Social Media Disorder (SMD) Scale²¹, the Body Appreciation Scale (BAS-2)²², and the Eating Attitudes Test (EAT-26)²³. Data collection was carried out through printed questionnaires distributed on campus after obtaining institutional permission and informed consent, ensuring confidentiality and voluntary participation. The collected data was coded and analyzed using SPSS version 26. Descriptive statistics were applied to summarize variables, while the Chi-square test was used to assess associations, with a p-value of <0.05 considered statistically significant.

RESULTS

Participant Demographics: A total of 200 university students participated in the study. The majority of respondents were female (80%), while males comprised 20% of the sample. Most participants were aged 20–21 years (44.5%), followed by 22–23 years (23%), 24–25 years (18.5%), and 18–19 years (14%). In terms of education, 85% were enrolled in or had completed a Bachelor of Science degree, whereas 15% were pursuing postgraduate studies. Most participants belonged to the middle socioeconomic class (91%), with only 9% from the lower class.

Body Mass Index Distribution: The distribution of participants according to BMI showed that over half had normal weight (51%), followed by underweight (24.5%), overweight (21%), and obese (3.5%). This indicates that while most participants maintained a normal BMI, a considerable proportion fell outside the normal range.

Social Media Use: Assessment using the Social Media Disorder Scale revealed that the majority of participants (72%, n = 144) exhibited problematic social media use, whereas 28% (n = 56) had non-problematic use. This suggests a high prevalence of problematic engagement with social media among the study population.

Body Appreciation Levels: Analysis of body appreciation levels indicated that 45% (n = 90) of participants had moderate body appreciation, followed by 37% (n = 74) with low body appreciation, and only 18% (n = 36) demonstrating high body appreciation. This reflects that a substantial proportion of participants experienced suboptimal body image.

Risk of Eating Disorders: Based on EAT-26 scores, 60.5% of participants were categorized as being at high risk of eating disorders, while 39.5% were at low risk. This highlights a considerable prevalence of disordered eating tendencies within the sample.

Disordered Eating Behaviors: Nearly half of the participants (47.5%) reported episodes of binge eating, while 57% engaged in exercise for more than 60 minutes daily. Compensatory behaviors such as self-induced vomiting (12.5%) and laxative use (7.5%) were less frequently reported. Additionally, 10% of participants experienced significant recent weight loss. These findings indicate the presence of disordered eating-related behaviors among a notable proportion of participants.

Association Between Social Media Use and Body Appreciation: A statistically significant association was observed between social media disorder levels and body appreciation (p = 0.00). Among participants with non-problematic social media use, 64.3% reported high body appreciation and 35.7% moderate appreciation, with none reporting low appreciation. In contrast, those with problematic use predominantly reported low (51.4%) and moderate (48.6%) body appreciation, with no participants reporting high appreciation. This suggests that higher problematic social media use is associated with lower body appreciation. Association Between

Social Media Use and Eating Disorder Risk: A significant association was also found between social media use and eating disorder risk ($\chi^2 = 29.5$, p = 0.00). Participants with problematic social media use were more likely to be at high risk of eating disorders (69.5%) compared to those with non-problematic use (37.5%). This indicates that problematic social media engagement is significantly associated with increased risk of disordered eating behaviors.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Participants (N = 200)

Demographic Data		
Gender of Respondents		
Gender	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Males	40	20%

Females	160	80%
Age of Respondents		
Age Categories	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
18 – 19 years	28	14%
20 – 21 years	89	44.5%
22 – 23 years	46	23%
24 – 25 years	37	18.5%
Education Level of Respondents		
Education Levels	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Bachelor of Science (BS)	170	85%
Master of Science (MS)/ MPhil	30	15%
Socioeconomic Status of Respondents		
Socioeconomic Levels	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Lower Class	18	9%
Middle Class	182	91%
Divorced	1	0.5%

Table 2: Body Mass Index (BMI) Distribution

Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Underweight	49	24.5
Normal	102	51
Overweight	42	21
Obese	7	3.5

Table 3: Social Media Disorder (SMD) Levels

Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Non-problematic	56	28
Problematic	144	72

Table 4: Body Appreciation Levels (BAS-2)

Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Low	74	37
Moderate	90	45
High	36	18

Table 5: Eating Disorder Risk (EAT-26)

Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Low Risk	79	39.5

High Risk	121	60.5
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Table 6: Disordered Eating Behaviors

Behavior	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Binge Eating	95	47.5
Exercise >60 min/day	114	57
Self-induced Vomiting	25	12.5
Laxative Use	15	7.5
Significant Loss	20	10

Table 7: Association between Social Media Disorder and Body Appreciation

SMD Category	Low (%)	Moderate (%)	High (%)	p-value
Non-problematic	0	35.7	64.3	0.00
Problematic	51.4	48.6	0	

Table 8: Association between Social Media Disorder and Eating Disorder Risk

SMD Category	Low Risk (%)	High Risk (%)	p-value
Non-problematic	62.5	37.5	0.00
Problematic	30.5	69.5	

DISCUSSION

The present study examined the relationship between social media use, body appreciation, and eating disorder risk among young adults. Chi-square analysis revealed significant associations between social media disorder levels and body appreciation ($p = 0.00$). Participants with nonproblematic social media use (SMD 0–4) mostly reported moderate (35.7%) to high (64.3%) body appreciation, whereas those with problematic social media use (SMD 5–9) predominantly reported low (51.4%) or moderate (48.6%) body appreciation, with none reporting high appreciation. Similarly, problematic social media use was significantly associated with higher eating disorder risk ($p = 0.00$), with 69.5% of problematic users classified at high risk compared to 37.5% of nonproblematic users. These results indicate that greater problematic social media engagement is linked to lower body appreciation and increased risk of disordered eating among young adults.

Consistent with the present findings, Mushtaq et al. reported that social media addiction was significantly associated with disordered eating attitudes among youths aged 14–25, showing weak but positive correlations with bulimia and food preoccupation ($p \leq 0.001$)²⁴. Similarly, Çınaroğlu et al. (2025) found that problematic social media use was associated with greater body image disturbance ($p < 0.01$), emphasizing self-objectification as a mechanism linking social media engagement to negative body image outcomes²⁵. Zogaj et al. (2024) reported that higher social media engagement among university students was linked to increased body dissatisfaction and disordered eating attitudes ($p < 0.001$), aligning with the current study's findings using BAS-2 to measure body appreciation²⁶. Sanzari et al. (2023) highlighted that exposure to weight loss and appearance-focused content on social media correlated with lower body appreciation and increased disordered eating behaviors ($p < 0.001$), reinforcing the importance of content type in influencing body image outcomes²⁷.

Amin et al. (2025) similarly found that higher daily social media use predicted lower body appreciation among university students, with females reporting lower BAS-2 scores than males, demonstrating gender differences in body image perception²⁸. Unlike the present study, Amin et al. examined continuous social media use and mediating factors such as FOMO, but both studies support the negative impact of excessive social media on young adults' body image. Contrarily, some studies reported non-significant associations between social media use and body image. For example, a study of health science students found no significant relationship between duration or frequency of social media use and body dissatisfaction ($p > 0.05$)²⁹. Likewise, a study of Lebanese female adolescents reported that social media attention alone did not directly predict negative body image; indirect pathways such as appearance comparison were more influential³⁰. These discrepancies suggest that measurement methods, sample characteristics, and cognitive mediators can affect observed outcomes.

Supporting the present findings, Baloglu & Akin (2024) reported that higher social media disorder scores were associated with emotional eating, food addiction, and weight changes among adolescents, highlighting that digital engagement negatively impacts eating behaviors even without direct BAS-2 assessment. Yu et al. (2025) further demonstrated that social media use predicted body dissatisfaction and lower physical activity, which mediated unhealthy eating behaviors ($p < 0.001$), suggesting that social media impacts body image through both psychological and behavioral pathways (31). Finally, a correlational study of female

undergraduates confirmed that higher social media engagement was negatively associated with positive body image and positively correlated with body dissatisfaction and disordered eating behaviors ($p < 0.001$), further supporting the link observed in the present study³¹. The findings of this study align with a growing body of evidence indicating that problematic social media use is associated with poorer body appreciation and elevated risk of disordered eating among young adults. Variations in results across studies may reflect differences in social media measurement, content exposure, cognitive mediators, and cultural contexts. These results underscore the importance of interventions that promote healthy social media use, enhance body appreciation, and prevent maladaptive eating behaviors.

CONCLUSION

The study demonstrates that problematic social media use among university students aged 18–25 is associated with lower body appreciation and a higher risk of disordered eating. Students with non-problematic use showed more positive body image, while those with excessive use were more vulnerable to unhealthy eating behaviors. These findings align with prior research and underscore the role of social media in shaping body image and eating attitudes. Promoting mindful and balanced social media engagement may help reduce disordered eating risk among young adults.

AUTHOR'S CONTRIBUTION:

Author	Contribution
Nisha Qureshi	Conceptualization, Methodology, Data Collection, Formal Analysis, Writing – Original Draft, Data Curation, Validation
Zainab Saeed	Conceptualization, Methodology, Data Collection, Formal Analysis, Writing – Original Draft, Data Curation, Validation
Andleeb Shakoor	Supervision, Methodology Guidance, Writing – Review & Editing, Project Oversight, Final Approval

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