

An Exploration of the Psychological Impact of Instagram Marketing by Fashion, Beauty and Diet Brands on Eating Disorders

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Abstract

The rise of social media platforms such as Instagram, used by global audiences and brands across several industries, including fashion, beauty & skincare, and diet, for the purpose of social media marketing, is undeniable. The problem, however, is that many of these brands post content communicating unrealistic and incorrect ideals regarding how people should look. This can be greatly triggering from a psychological perspective. This research paper specifically aims to analyze how the themes communicated in social media marketing on Instagram by brands in the aforementioned industries are capable of triggering eating disorders. The analysis is conducted through the application of relevant psychological theories and concepts.

Keywords: Social Media, Social Media Marketing, Instagram, Eating Disorders

Introduction

The world has witnessed a rise in the use of social media, not only by individuals but also by brands. In recent times, the use of social media marketing has become more popular than ever before with brands realising the potential such platforms have for them to reach wide and global audiences. Instagram, in particular, proves to be a common choice amongst brands across the fashion, beauty and diet industries as aesthetic posts tend to work well on this platform with such brands being able to amass large followings. That being said, whilst, from a business perspective, the use of social media platforms to promote the products and services can be fruitful, unfortunately, more often than not, these brands use marketing material which endorses unrealistic standards with regard to body types and looks. Considering the large number of users these posts reach, posting such content can be dangerous especially due to its tendency to trigger eating disorders. This trigger can either be direct or even indirect whereby people may feel dissatisfaction to the extent of starting to suffer from anxiety and depression - both of which are linked with higher chances of the development of eating disorders. In line with the aforementioned, this research paper aims to answer the following question: **“To what extent does the marketing content posted on Instagram by brands in the fashion, beauty and diet industries psychologically trigger eating disorders?”**

This research paper argues that the marketing content posted by brands in the fashion, beauty and diet industries on their Instagram pages has the potential to psychologically trigger eating disorders due to the themes that they communicate and endorse

Literature Review

Eating disorders are defined as “serious and often fatal illnesses that are associated with severe disturbances in people's eating behaviours and related thoughts and emotions.” (NIMH, 2024). These disorders are extremely prevalent with an estimated 20 million girls and women and 10 million boys and men in America having an eating disorder (Cleveland Clinic, 2020). Moreover, their occurrence on a global scale has also been rising with an increase from 3.4% to 7.8% of the population suffering from some sort of an eating disorder between 2000 and 2018 (Rehman, 2020).

Some of the common types of eating disorders and their respective risk factors are analysed below:

One type of eating disorder is Anorexia Nervosa wherein people suffering from this disorder tend to restrict their food intake, fear weight gain, and have a distorted perception of their health and weight (Muhlheim, 2019). This disorder has been reported to have the highest case mortality rate and second-highest crude mortality rate of any mental illness (ANAD, 2023). For Anorexia Nervosa, the risk factor is commonly recognized as a low body mass index (BMI) (Stice, 2016). However, in recent times, specialists have questioned the reliability of using BMI as an indicator given that it is a dated, biased measure that does not account for several factors including race, gender, age, body composition, and ethnicity. That being said, in the context of Anorexia Nervosa, specifically, the disorder may still occur in individuals with a BMI in the normal range.

Another common eating disorder is Bulimia nervosa (bulimia) which is characterized by eating a large amount of food in a short span of time followed by purging - this behaviour is sometimes referred to as a binge-and-purge cycle (Amber Erickson Gabbey, 2014). This purging can occur through forced vomiting, taking laxatives or diuretics or excessive exercise. Individuals with bulimia may suffer from an obsession with achieving an unrealistic body shape or size. In line with the aforementioned, some of the risk factors associated with bulimia include thin-ideal internalisation (wherein an individual is prone to believing that thinness is equivalent to attractiveness) and having a negative body image (Stice, 2016). Similar to anorexia, bulimia can also be life-threatening - in specific, in severe cases, bulimia has the ability to create an imbalance in levels of electrolytes which can cause strokes or heart attacks.

Similar to bulimia nervosa but without the purging aspect is another eating disorder commonly recognised as binge eating disorder or BED. This eating disorder affects almost 2% of people worldwide and has been recognized and added to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders in 2013 (Mandl, 2019). An individual suffering from BED may eat a lot of food in a short amount of time regardless of whether they are hungry or not. Emotional stress specifically plays a big role and can trigger periods of binge eating during which a person may feel some sense of relief but this is usually followed up by feelings of shame or loss of control. The risk factors associated with BED in girls are body dissatisfaction in adolescence, low self-esteem and depressive symptoms (Goldschmidt et al., 2016). Furthermore, a study conducted in 2017 suggested that negative urgency, defined as a “tendency to act impulsively when distressed”, is also involved (Racine et al., 2017).

One of the key takeaways from the definition of eating disorders and the associated risk factors is that while eating disorders are perceived to be primarily concerned with ‘eating’, they are far more complex and stem not from a single cause but instead a complex interaction of biological, environmental and psychological factors (Muhlheim, 2022) - officially being recognized as psychiatric disorders. Other than the aforementioned factors, many also question the role of genetic factors in eating disorders. Firstly, with regard to family, research states that coming from a family with a history of eating disorders can increase

the chances of an individual developing an eating disorder. This positive correlation is mainly explained by the modelling of eating disorder-linked behaviours within a family such as witnessing family members dieting. Moreover, family dysfunction is also a contributor with high levels of rigidity in family functioning being associated with a higher risk of disordered eating behavior (Cerniglia et al., 2017). However, research in the realm of the genetic influence on eating disorders, specifically, is active and has also brought about some interesting findings with more clarity expected in the future. For instance, a twin study research found that around 40% to 60% of the risk of anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa and BED arise from genetic influence (Fairweather-Schmidt and Wade, 2015). Furthermore, one of the largest genetic investigations of eating disorders ever conducted, known as the Anorexia Nervosa Genetics Initiative (ANGI) is currently underway and is expected to provide more information about the genetic profile that contributes to eating disorders (Thornton et al., 2018) - implying that there may not be a single gene that contributes to eating disorders but instead individuals could inherit certain traits such as anxiety, perfectionism, moodiness and fear that have all been associated with the development of an eating disorder.

The tripartite model of body image and eating disturbance provides an understanding of the manner in which socio-cultural risk factors, such as diet culture and weight teasing, influence eating disorders. The model essentially proposes that three formative influences (peers, parents, and media) affect body image and eating problems through two mediational mechanisms: internalization of the thin ideal and appearance comparison processes (Keery, van den Berg and Thompson, 2004). Focusing specifically on social media, a form of mass media communications on the internet, the number of users on platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, Youtube, TikTok and Snapchat among others accounts for a total of 5.07 billion people around the world - approximately 62.6% of the global population (Chaffey, 2024). Some valuable insights regarding social media use can be found in the infographic below:



The reason these figures are important is because, in recent years, social media marketing (SMM) has become increasingly popular. SMM is when companies make use of social media platforms to build their brand, increase sales and drive website traffic (Hayes, 2024). The primary reason for the increased use of this marketing channel is the potential it provides to reach global audiences and also for its purpose-built data analytics that allows marketers to track the success of their efforts and identify even more ways to engage. That being said, many new brands and even older brands that used to initially rely on traditional modes of marketing are now promoting their products and services via social media platforms in a bid to reach more people than ever before. Whilst this is beneficial from a business perspective, unfortunately, many a time these marketing materials, specifically those posted by brands across the diet, fashion and beauty industries, promote toxic ideologies with regard to how individuals should look to fit into society.

This is even more dangerous given that a large percentage of Gen-Z, those aged between 18-24, spend their time on these applications and are especially vulnerable to the themes communicated in the marketing.

The remainder of this research paper aims to explore the themes communicated in the marketing materials posted by brands on social media platforms to evaluate how these can psychologically trigger eating disorders amongst the global population.

Methodology

In order to examine how the messages communicated by brands via social media marketing impact eating disorders, this research study will take a qualitative approach, utilizing thematic analysis

Data Collection

The data required for this study will be collected by analysing the type of posts and specific posts posted by brands on Instagram. A total of six brands will be included in this study, with two brands selected from each of the following industries: beauty and skincare, fashion, and diet. The reason for these industries being included in the study is that they are most commonly associated with consistently moulding their marketing material around enforcing the notion of one acceptable type of body type - whether that be directly captured or one which the products being sold promise to help the user achieve.

Selection Criteria

Whilst the brands included in the study will be randomly selected, to ensure the selected brands are relevant and impactful, the following criteria will be applied:

- *Prominence*: The brand must be well-recognized in their respective industry.
- *Social Media Following*: The brand must have a significant following, defined as having more than 50,000 followers on Instagram
- *Activity Level*: The brand must be active on its social media accounts, posting regularly.



Random Selection Process



To ensure an unbiased selection of brands, the following random selection process will be followed:

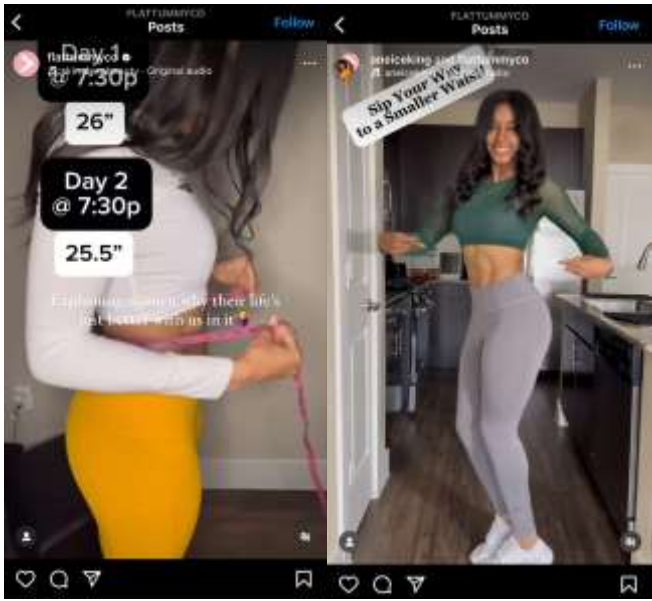
- *List Compilation*: A comprehensive list of potential brands meeting the above criteria will be compiled using industry reports and market research.
- *Number Assignment*: Each brand on the list will be assigned a unique number.
- *Random Selection*: A random number generator will be used to select two brands from each industry list.

This random selection method ensures that the brands chosen are representative of their industries without researcher bias.

Data Collected

Brand	Industry	Primary Image Reference
Brandy Melville	Fashion	
Missguided	Fashion	

<p>Kylie Cosmetics</p>	<p>Beauty & Skincare Industry</p>	 A screenshot of an Instagram grid for the account 'kyliecosmetics'. The grid consists of nine square images. The top row shows three images: a woman's face, a woman applying lipstick, and a woman's face. The middle row shows three images: a woman applying lipstick, a woman with long curly hair, and a woman's face. The bottom row shows three images: a woman applying lipstick, a woman applying lipstick, and a woman's face. The Instagram interface elements like the heart, comment, share, and bookmark icons are visible at the bottom.
<p>Glossier</p>	<p>Beauty & Skincare Industry</p>	 A screenshot of an Instagram grid for the account 'glossier'. The grid consists of twelve square images arranged in a 4x3 grid. The images show various people using Glossier products, including lipsticks and lip glosses. The Instagram interface elements like the back arrow, grid icon, play button, plus icon, and camera icon are visible at the top. The 'Follow' button is also visible in the top right corner.

Flat Tummy Co.	Diet	
SlimFast	Diet	

Data Analysis

Codes

Based on the data collected, the general codes communicated by the brands in the respective industries that have been identified are summarized below:

Industry	Codes
Fashion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Idealized thin body type ● Flat stomachs ● Body uniformity
Beauty	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Clear skin is the ideal ● Unblemished complexion

Diet	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● A slim waist is ideal and attractive ● Product reinforcement for body change ● Body transformation emphasis ● Hunger control ● Unhealthy eating practices ● Dieting emphasis
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Thematic Analysis

Theme	Associated Codes	Justification
Idealized Body Standards	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Idealized thin body type ● A slim waist is ideal and attractive 	Some of the brands included in this research such as Brandy Melville, Missguided and Flat Tummy Co. consistently promote images and messages that idealize thin body types and emphasize slim waist ideals, contributing to the reinforcement of narrow beauty standards. This theme underscores the significant influence of such marketing practices on shaping consumer perceptions of body image and beauty ideals in contemporary culture.
Pressure for Skin Perfection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Clear skin is the ideal ● Unblemished complexion 	Brands such as Kylie Cosmetics and Glossier consistently feature models with flawless skin, setting a standard that equates beauty with blemish-free appearances. Such marketing practices contribute to societal pressures by promoting an unrealistic expectation of flawless skin, influencing consumer perceptions and behaviours related to skincare and self-image. This theme highlights the pervasive influence of beauty standards perpetuated through digital platforms and their impact on consumer attitudes towards skin perfection.
Unhealthy Body Modification Practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Product reinforcement for body change ● Body transformation emphasis ● Hunger control ● Unhealthy eating practices 	Brands such as SlimFast and Flat Tummy Co. consistently reinforce products for body change and emphasize body transformation through messages promoting hunger control, unhealthy eating practices, and intense dieting. Such marketing not only promotes quick-fix solutions to achieve unrealistic body

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dieting emphasis 	<p>ideals but also encourages behaviours that may lead to negative physical and psychological health outcomes. This theme underscores the societal impact of marketing practices that prioritize rapid body modification over holistic well-being, highlighting concerns about the promotion of unhealthy behaviours in pursuit of aesthetic goals.</p>
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Discussion

There are several implications of the themes communicated in the social media marketing of the brands analysed. With the application of relevant psychological theory, it is possible to evaluate the manner in which these themes may trigger eating disorders among those who are exposed to such content.

Focusing on theme 1 (Idealized Body Standards), the fundamental issue with brands across the industries consistently communicating, with their marketing imagery, that a slim waist or flat stomach is ideal is that it triggers a phenomenon known as social comparison. The social comparison theory, first proposed by psychologist Leon Festinger in 1954, suggested that people have an innate drive to evaluate themselves in comparison to others (Cherry, 2022). The psychologist believed that individuals engage in this comparison as a means to establish a benchmark by which they could make accurate evaluations of their own attitudes, abilities and traits. In the following years, several theorists further introduced the concept of either a downward or an upward comparison. A downward comparison occurs when an individual compares themselves to others who they perceive to be worse off or inferior to them in some way (Guyer and Vaughan-Johnston, 2018). Such a comparison can boost self-esteem as the comparer is likely to feel better about themselves or their own situation. On the other hand, in an upward comparison, individuals are likely to compare themselves to others who they perceive to be better off or superior to them in some way (Guyer and Vaughan-Johnston, 2018). Whilst this comparison can be motivating with individuals striving to improve themselves, most of the time it can lead to feelings of inadequacy, low self-esteem and even dissatisfaction with oneself if the comparison brings to the surface any perceived deficiencies or unattainable standards. With regard to social media specifically, several studies have found how posts on such platforms have the power to elicit upward comparison whereby an individual's satisfaction with their own body and appearance can be negatively impacted (Fardouly et al., 2017). Of the social media platforms, considering Instagram, the focus of this study, in particular, conclusions derived from studies from the likes of Cohen et al. (2017) and Feltman & Szymanski (2018) stand relevant here as they state that Instagram use is correlated with body dissatisfaction and scrutiny. Another supporting argument is that found by Bue (2020) which confirms that spending time on Instagram increases attention to high-anxiety body regions and thus leads to body dissatisfaction. The implications of the aforementioned for this study are that by being exposed to the same theme across the imagery used by the analysed brands in their marketing material posted on Instagram, the large following of these brands and other Instagram users engage in upward comparison which leads to body dissatisfaction and a desire to achieve thinness and can indirectly lead to eating disorders (Goodman, 2005).

Referring to theme 2 (Pressure for Skin Perfection), by advertising products using individuals who have unblemished skin and enforcing the idea that clear skin is the ‘norm’, brands raise internalised standards amongst viewers with regard to what they believe is the ideal skin. The problem with the aforementioned can be explained using the Self-Discrepancy theory that was introduced by Edward Tory Higgins which explains that people experience different forms of emotional distress when there is a discrepancy between their ‘actual’ and ‘ideal’ selves. In line with this, the actual self consists of the attributes that a person or someone else believes they actually possess whereas the ideal self consists of the attributes that a person or someone else would like them to possess (Leonard, 2020). The primary issue here is that constant exposure to the advertised clear skin and complexion can generate negative emotions amongst people who start believing that their actual self is not enough or specifically that their skin condition is lacking in comparison to what society would like them to possess. These negative emotions can lead to anxiety and depression with individuals feeling anxious, inadequate and frustrated with their inability to meet the marketed standards. As mentioned in the literature review, the prevalence of anxiety and depression has been linked with a higher likelihood of developing an eating disorder. It is possible that individuals start to implement unhealthy eating practices and attempt extreme diets to modify their bodies and obtain clearer and unblemished skin. Therefore, it is likely that marketing by brands communicating theme 2 is a triggering source for eating disorders.

Finally, the communication and endorsement of theme 3 (Unhealthy Body Modification Practices) in the marketing of brands on Instagram can directly trigger eating disorders. The psychological explanation behind this can be understood using the Theory of Planned Behaviour. The Theory of Planned Behavior “distinguishes between three types of beliefs that affect an individual's intention to perform a specific behaviour: (1) behavioural beliefs, which translate into attitudes toward the behaviour; (2) normative beliefs, which relate to perceived attitudes of peers and respected figures toward the behaviour; and (3) control beliefs, or perceived ability to perform the behaviour” (Etheridge, Sinyard and Brindle, 2023). Breaking this down in the context of our study, the constant marketing of products which can enable body transformations that are perceived to be more acceptable to society can create positive attitudes towards these unhealthy behaviours with individuals believing that consuming diet products and supplements is desirable and beneficial for achieving the ideal body. These marketing materials also influence normative beliefs whereby the promotion of these unhealthy practices by the likes of celebrities and influencers, who individuals commonly look up to and try to emulate, can further encourage them to engage with such practices. Moreover, with the marketing content portraying these body modification practices to be achievable and within reach, by drinking a simple tea or shake perhaps, they are able to enhance an individual’s belief that they can successfully engage in these behaviours. Overall, positive attitudes, strong normative beliefs and high perceived control can collectively increase the intention to engage in body modification practices. The aforementioned is dangerous as these intentions can lead to behaviours such as extreme dieting, overuse of weight loss and body modification products and other unhealthy practices which ultimately can contribute to the development of eating disorders.

Conclusion

The use of social media has grown exponentially in the last few years. A big contributor towards this growth has also been brands using these platforms for their marketing purposes. Instagram, specifically, proves to be a popular platform given its reach and heavy focus on aesthetics. That being said, a lot of the marketing material posted by brands in the fashion, beauty & skincare and diet industries can trigger eating

disorders due to the themes and messages they repeatedly communicate. This research paper aimed to conduct research to find the prevalent themes in the social media marketing of some influential brands before evaluating to what extent the themes are capable of psychologically triggering eating disorders in audiences.

The findings of this paper suggest that the themes communicated in social media marketing material by brands across fashion, beauty & skincare and diet industries have the ability to psychologically trigger eating disorders to a great extent. This is confirmed by the use of ‘ideal body’ standards being displayed in the imagery and triggering social comparison whereby people can be left feeling dissatisfied with their bodies, therefore, triggering them into practising unhealthy eating habits. Furthermore, the constant use of clear skin imagery in the marketing of beauty and skincare brands specifically enforces this characteristic as an ideal and that has the ability to create emotional distress by making individuals feel there is a discrepancy between their actual and ideal selves. Once again, these thoughts and feelings are likely to trigger anxiety and depression in individuals and this creates greater chances of people struggling with eating disorders. Finally, the constant marketing by diet brands of products which can enable body transformations that are perceived to be more acceptable to society can create positive attitudes towards these unhealthy behaviours that lead to eating disorders.

Considering that the reach and use of social media by both individuals and brands across the world is unlikely to stop any time soon, it is essential that proper guidelines are developed and that brands are made to understand the influence their posting has on the audiences, specifically in the context of triggering eating disorders.

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