



The role of social media in promoting eating disorders east Africa

Agbo Afred T.

Department of Public Administration Kampala International University Uganda

ABSTRACT

Eating disorders (EDs) pose significant challenges to public health globally, with rising prevalence rates observed in East Africa, particularly among adolescents and young adults. This increase can be attributed to various factors, including cultural transitions, urbanization, and changing beauty standards. Social media platforms have become integral to East African society, influencing communication, cultural norms, and economic activities. However, the relationship between social media and eating disorders is complex, with idealized images and diet culture contributing to negative body image and disordered eating behaviors. This paper explores the impact of social media on body image, the influence of celebrity culture and influencers, the proliferation of pro-eating disorder content online, the role of peer influence and social comparison, cyberbullying and online shaming, the spread of misinformation, cultural and societal factors, coping mechanisms, and support resources. Additionally, it discusses the need for regulatory measures and policy implications to address harmful content and promote responsible social media use in East Africa.

Keywords Eating disorders, social media, East Africa, celebrity culture, influencers, pro-eating disorder content, peer influence, cyberbullying, misinformation.

INTRODUCTION

Eating disorders (EDs) are severe mental health conditions characterized by abnormal eating habits that negatively affect an individual's physical and emotional health. Common types include Anorexia Nervosa, Bulimia Nervosa, and Binge-Eating Disorder. In East Africa, the prevalence of eating disorders is on the rise, particularly among adolescents and young adults. Factors contributing to this increase include cultural transitions, urbanization, and changing beauty standards. Social media, such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, TikTok, Snapchat, and LinkedIn, has surged in usage in East Africa due to increased internet penetration, affordability of smartphones, and youthful demographics. Social media has revolutionized communication, information dissemination, cultural impact, and economic opportunities [1]. The relationship between social media and eating disorders is complex, with social media influencing body image and eating habits. Idealized and filtered images of bodies can lead to negative self-comparison and body dissatisfaction, while diet and fitness culture can promote unhealthy eating behaviors and unrealistic body standards. Negative interactions, such as cyberbullying related to appearance, can exacerbate feelings of inadequacy and contribute to the development of eating disorders. Understanding the rising influence of social media in East Africa and its potential impact on mental health is crucial for developing effective public health strategies and interventions [2]. This includes promoting digital literacy, fostering positive online environments, and providing resources for those affected by eating disorders.

Impact of Social Media on Body Image

Social media platforms often display images and content that reflect Western beauty standards, which can have significant impacts on individuals' body image. These standards can be global, influencing diverse populations and overshadowing local beauty norms and cultural diversity. The internalization of these standards can lead to dissatisfaction with one's own bodies when they do not match these ideals. The dominance of Western beauty standards can result in a homogenized global beauty culture, contributing to psychological issues such as low self-esteem, anxiety, and the development of eating disorders [3]. The comparison culture on social media platforms has profound effects on body dissatisfaction. Users often compare themselves to influencers, celebrities, and peers who post idealized images, leading to feelings of inadequacy and body dissatisfaction. Social media profiles often showcase the best moments and flattering angles, creating unrealistic expectations for others. Peer pressure can also create pressure to conform to similar standards to gain social acceptance. Regular exposure to idealized images can distort self-perception, making individuals more critical of their own bodies and less satisfied with their appearance. The use of filters, editing tools, and digital manipulation on social media can alter appearance, creating

<https://rijournals.com/current-issues-in-arts-and-management/>

distorted realities and exacerbate mental health issues. The pressure to edit images perpetuates a cycle of unrealistic beauty standards and dissatisfaction.

Celebrity Culture and Influencer Influence

East African celebrities and influencers have a significant impact on shaping societal beauty standards and ideals. Their visibility and reach extend across various platforms, including television, film, music, and social media [4]. They blend local beauty norms with global trends, creating a unique hybrid that resonates with their followers. Fans often aspire to look like their favorite celebrities and influencers, leading to imitation of beauty routines, fashion choices, and body modification practices. Celebrity endorsements of extreme dieting, detox teas, and weight loss products can have negative effects on body image and health. These endorsements can boost the popularity and perceived credibility of these products, but unrealistic expectations and lack of regulation can lead to disappointment and body dissatisfaction among consumers. Additionally, misleading information about fitness routines, diet restrictions, or cosmetic surgeries can mislead followers into believing these products alone are responsible for their physical transformations. Celebrity endorsements can have profound effects on eating disorder behaviors, particularly among impressionable audiences. They can normalize disordered eating behaviors, increase pressure to conform to celebrity body standards, and influence young audiences, who are more susceptible to peer pressure and media influence [5]. Constant exposure to idealized images of celebrities can reinforce body dissatisfaction and the belief that thinness is synonymous with beauty and success. The relentless pursuit of a celebrity-endorsed body image can lead to mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem.

Social Media Platforms and Eating Disorder Content

Social media platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook have become hotspots for the dissemination of pro-eating disorder (pro-ED) content. This content often glorifies or promotes behaviors associated with eating disorders such as anorexia, bulimia, and binge-eating disorder. Instagram's visual content allows users to share photos and videos that glorify extreme thinness or unhealthy eating habits. TikTok's short-form videos make it ideal for rapidly spreading pro-ED content, as users can share videos showcasing extreme weight loss, restrictive eating practices, and "body checks." Facebook hosts numerous groups and pages where members share experiences and tips related to eating disorders, some of which inadvertently or intentionally encourage disordered eating behaviors [6]. Users can also share links to websites and blogs that provide pro-ED advice, further spreading harmful content. Hashtags play a crucial role in organizing and disseminating content related to eating disorders and body dysmorphia on social media platforms. #Thinspiration and #ProAna are commonly used to tag content that promotes extreme thinness and anorexia, helping users find like-minded individuals and content that supports and encourages disordered eating behaviors. #BodyCheck and #EdRecovery are used to support individuals in recovery from eating disorders, but recovery tags can sometimes be hijacked by users promoting disordered eating. Accessibility of harmful content on social media has profound impacts on vulnerable individuals, especially adolescents and young adults who are more impressionable and susceptible to peer influence [7]. The ease of access, normalization of disordered eating, psychological impact, influence on behavior, and barriers to recovery can all contribute to the spread of pro-ED content on these platforms.

Peer Influence and Social Comparison

Peer groups and social circles significantly impact individuals' perceptions of their bodies, especially during adolescence and young adulthood. Social reinforcement, shared norms, direct comparison, and social modeling can all contribute to body image concerns. Social media intensifies the pressure to conform to unrealistic beauty standards through curated images, constant exposure, influencers, and competition [8]. These images create a distorted view of reality, where flawless skin, perfect bodies, and glamorous lifestyles appear to be the norm. Influencers and celebrities often set the tone for beauty standards on social media, creating immense pressure for followers to emulate these practices without considering the unrealistic and unhealthy measures sometimes involved. Comparison with peers and influencers on social media can lead to disordered eating behaviors in several ways. Body dissatisfaction can result from constantly comparing oneself to the seemingly perfect bodies of peers and influencers, leading to the development of eating disorders. Unrealistic expectations set by social media can result in unhealthy eating practices. Diet culture and fitness trends promoted by influencers can lead to restrictive eating, excessive exercise, and other behaviors associated with eating disorders. Negative self-perception can damage self-esteem and self-worth, leading individuals to engage in disordered eating as a means of coping. Peer endorsement of harmful behaviors can normalize these actions, making them seem acceptable and even desirable. Overall, peer influence plays a crucial role in shaping individuals' body image concerns and promoting unhealthy behaviors.

Cyberbullying and Online Shaming

Cyberbullying is a prevalent issue that can have severe impacts on individuals, particularly those who target body weight, shape, and appearance. Online platforms facilitate anonymity and distance, which often emboldens bullies. Common experiences related to cyberbullying include derogatory comments, mocking and name-calling, body-shaming hashtags, image alteration and sharing, and targeted harassment. The impact of online shaming and

<https://rijournals.com/current-issues-in-arts-and-management/>

negative comments on self-esteem and body image can be profound and long-lasting [9]. This can lead to decreased self-esteem, increased body dissatisfaction, social withdrawal, emotional distress, and loss of confidence, affecting various aspects of life, including academic performance, social relationships, and overall well-being. The relationship between cyberbullying and the development of eating disorders is complex but significant. For some individuals, cyberbullying acts as a trigger for the onset of eating disorders, causing them to engage in unhealthy eating behaviors. Cyberbullying can exacerbate existing conditions, making recovery more difficult. Some individuals may turn to disordered eating behaviors as a coping mechanism to deal with emotional pain caused by cyberbullying, such as binge eating, purging, or excessive exercise. Cyberbullying reinforces negative body image, which is a key factor in the development and maintenance of eating disorders. Constant criticism and shaming can entrench harmful beliefs about one's body. Cyberbullying often perpetuates unhealthy beauty standards and ideals, increasing the risk of developing eating disorders.

Misinformation and Pseudoscience

Social media is a powerful platform for sharing information, but it can also be a breeding ground for misinformation about diet, nutrition, and weight loss. Misleading claims, outdated information, simplification of complex issues, and influencer endorsements can all contribute to the spread of misinformation. Fad diets, restrictive eating patterns, and dangerous weight loss methods are often promoted on social media, leading to unhealthy and dangerous practices. These include Keto, Paleo, and Atkins diets, which promise rapid weight loss without scientific evidence, restrictive eating patterns like intermittent fasting, detoxes and cleanses, and dangerous weight loss methods like appetite suppressants and laxatives [10]. Pseudoscientific claims and anecdotal evidence also significantly influence users' beliefs and behaviors. Anecdotal evidence, such as personal testimonials and before-and-after photos, can create unrealistic expectations and ignore individual differences in metabolism, health conditions, and other factors. Pseudoscientific jargon and cherry-picked data can give credibility to unfounded claims, while confirmation bias can reinforce existing beliefs. Fear-mongering, which exaggerates the dangers of certain foods or eating practices, can instill fear and lead to irrational dietary changes, contributing to anxiety around food and eating.

Coping Mechanisms and Support Resources

Promoting positive body image and self-acceptance involves various strategies, including media literacy, self-compassion, body positive messaging, healthy habits, and seeking professional help for disordered eating. Media literacy encourages individuals to critically evaluate beauty and body image messages, while self-compassion and mindfulness practices help develop a healthier relationship with their bodies [11]. Body positive messaging celebrates diverse body shapes, sizes, and appearances, and encourages inclusive representation in media and advertising. Healthy habits, such as balanced nutrition, regular exercise, and adequate sleep, are crucial for overall well-being and self-care. Seeking professional help early can prevent disordered eating behaviors from escalating into more severe conditions like eating disorders. Professional therapists and counselors can provide personalized treatment plans tailored to each individual's needs. A holistic approach to recovery may involve therapy, nutritional counseling, and medical supervision to support physical and mental health. Building healthy coping skills is essential for managing stress, emotions, and body image concerns without resorting to disordered eating behaviors. Online support groups, helplines, and mental health resources in East Africa offer access to information, guidance, and support for eating disorders and related issues. Online communities offer a sense of belonging and connection with others who share similar experiences, reducing feelings of isolation and shame [12]. Educational resources and awareness campaigns on online platforms play a crucial role in challenging misconceptions, reducing stigma, and promoting early intervention and treatment-seeking behaviors.

Cultural and Societal Factors

Cultural attitudes towards food, body image, and beauty standards are influenced by historical, social, and religious influences. Media representation and globalization can influence perceptions of beauty and body image globally, leading to the promotion of thinness as an ideal and stigmatizing larger body sizes. Cultural practices surrounding food, eating habits, and body adornment may also impact individuals' relationships with food and body image. Socioeconomic factors, such as poverty, unemployment, and lack of health insurance, create barriers to accessing healthcare and mental health services [6]. Limited availability of affordable mental health resources and trained professionals may hinder individuals' ability to seek help for eating disorders and related issues. Stress and psychosocial factors, such as financial strain and housing instability, can exacerbate psychological distress and impact body image and self-esteem. Gender norms and expectations intersect with cultural and societal attitudes toward body image, influencing how individuals perceive and value their bodies. Women may face heightened pressure to conform to narrow beauty standards, contributing to body dissatisfaction and disordered eating behaviors. Ethnic and cultural identity can shape individuals' experiences with food, body image, and beauty standards, with marginalized ethnic communities facing additional challenges related to discrimination, stereotyping, and cultural assimilation [2]. Accessibility of support services for eating disorders and mental health issues is also a challenge for marginalized communities, including LGBTQ+ individuals, people with disabilities,

and ethnic minorities. Tailored interventions and outreach efforts are needed to address these unique needs and ensure equitable access to care and support.

Regulatory Measures and Policy Implications

The need for regulation of harmful content related to eating disorders on social media platforms is urgent. Social media platforms should establish clear guidelines prohibiting the promotion of harmful behaviors associated with eating disorders, including extreme dieting, unhealthy weight loss practices, and body shaming. Public awareness campaigns should be launched by governments, advocacy groups, and mental health organizations to educate users about the risks of consuming and sharing harmful content. Social media companies should develop comprehensive guidelines to regulate the dissemination of eating disorder-related content, including provisions for content warnings, referral to mental health resources, and restrictions on certain keywords and hashtags [5] [6]. Governments should work collaboratively with social media platforms, mental health experts, and advocacy organizations to develop evidence-based policies and regulations addressing eating disorder content online. Tech companies have a responsibility to prioritize user safety and well-being by proactively addressing the spread of harmful content. Collaboration with healthcare professionals and researchers can help tech companies develop effective algorithms, content moderation tools, and reporting mechanisms to combat eating disorder-related content. Healthcare professionals, including psychologists, psychiatrists, and dietitians, should be involved in multidisciplinary efforts to address eating disorder issues in the digital realm. Collaboration between tech companies and healthcare providers can facilitate the development of online interventions, support resources, and referral pathways for individuals affected by eating disorders.

CONCLUSION

The intersection of social media and eating disorders presents significant challenges for individuals' mental health and well-being in East Africa. Understanding the multifaceted influences of social media on body image, eating behaviors, and self-esteem is essential for developing effective interventions and support systems. Initiatives to promote positive body image, media literacy, and digital well-being are crucial for mitigating the harmful effects of social media on vulnerable populations. Regulatory measures and policy implications play a pivotal role in addressing the spread of harmful content and promoting responsible social media use. Collaboration between governments, tech companies, healthcare professionals, and advocacy organizations is necessary to create safer online environments and ensure equitable access to support resources for individuals affected by eating disorders. By addressing the complex interplay between social media, cultural factors, and mental health, we can work towards fostering healthier attitudes towards body image and promoting holistic well-being in East Africa and beyond.

REFERENCES

1. Arcelus, J., Mitchell, A. J., Wales, J., & Nielsen, S. (2011). Mortality Rates in Patients With Anorexia Nervosa and Other Eating Disorders: A Meta-analysis of 36 Studies. *Archives of General Psychiatry*, 68(7), 724–731. <https://doi.org/10.1001/archgenpsychiatry.2011.74>
2. Becker, A. E., Burwell, R. A., Gilman, S. E., Herzog, D. B., & Hamburg, P. (2002). Eating Behaviours and Attitudes Following Prolonged Exposure to Television Among Ethnic Fijian Adolescent Girls. *The British Journal of Psychiatry*, 180(6), 509–514. <https://doi.org/10.1192/bjp.180.6.509>
3. Culbert, K. M., Racine, S. E., & Klump, K. L. (2015). Research Review: What We Have Learned about the Causes of Eating Disorders – A Synthesis of Sociocultural, Psychological, and Biological Research. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry, and Allied Disciplines*, 56(11), 1141–1164. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcpp.12441>
4. Griffiths, S., Murray, S. B., Krug, I., & McLean, S. A. (2018). The Contribution of Social Media to Body Dissatisfaction, Eating Disorder Symptoms, and Anabolic Steroid Use Among Sexual Minority Men. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior and Social Networking*, 21(3), 149–156. <https://doi.org/10.1089/cyber.2017.0529>
5. Holland, G., & Tiggemann, M. (2016). A Systematic Review of the Impact of the Use of Social Networking Sites on Body Image and Disordered Eating Outcomes. *Body Image*, 17, 100–110. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bodyim.2016.02.008>
6. Hudson, J. I., Hiripi, E., Pope, H. G., & Kessler, R. C. (2007). The Prevalence and Correlates of Eating Disorders in the National Comorbidity Survey Replication. *Biological Psychiatry*, 61(3), 348–358. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.biopsych.2006.03.040>
7. Karazsia, B. T., Murnen, S. K., & Tylka, T. L. (2017). Is Body Dissatisfaction Changing Across Time? A Cross-Temporal Meta-Analysis. *Psychological Bulletin*, 143(3), 293–320. <https://doi.org/10.1037/bul0000098>
8. Levine, M. P., & Piran, N. (2019). Reflections on the Role of the Internet in Disordered Eating: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly. *Eating Disorders*, 27(4), 317–321. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10640266.2019.1602556>

<https://rijournals.com/current-issues-in-arts-and-management/>

9. Mangweth-Matzek, B., Hoek, H. W., & Pope, H. G. (2014). Pathological Eating and Body Dissatisfaction in Middle-Aged and Older Women. *Current Opinion in Psychiatry*, 27(6), 431–435. <https://doi.org/10.1097/yco.000000000000100>
10. Murray, S. B., Griffiths, S., & Mond, J. M. (2016). Evolving Eating Disorder Psychopathology: Conceptualizing Correlates of Objective and Subjective Binge Episodes. *Eating Behaviors*, 22, 38–42. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.eatbeh.2016.03.020>
11. Neumark-Sztainer, D., Wall, M., & Larson, N. I. (2011). Dieting and Disordered Eating Behaviors from Adolescence to Young Adulthood: Findings from a 10-Year Longitudinal Study. *Journal of the American Dietetic Association*, 111(7), 1004–1011. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jada.2011.04.012>
12. Rodgers, R. F., McLean, S. A., & Paxton, S. J. (2015). Longitudinal Relationships among Internalization of the Media Ideal, Peer Social Comparison, and Body Dissatisfaction: Implications for the Tripartite Influence Model. *Developmental Psychology*, 51(5), 706–713. <https://doi.org/10.1037/dev0000019>

CITE AS: Agbo Afred T. (2024). The role of social media in promoting eating disorders east Africa. RESEARCH INVENTION JOURNAL OF CURRENT ISSUES IN ARTS AND MANAGEMENT 3(2):108-112.