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The Impact of Social Media Use on Body Appreciation and Eating Behaviors in Youth

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to determine the impact of social media use on body appreciation and eating attitudes in youth. The research is of a descriptive nature. The sample of the study consists of 400 young participants attending university. Data were collected using the Personal Information Form, Social Media Use Integration Scale (SMIS), Attitude Scale for Healthy Nutrition (ASHN), and Body Appreciation Scale (BAS). The data were analyzed using descriptive statistical analysis, along with Student's t-test, one-way ANOVA, and Pearson correlation analysis to compare certain quantitative characteristics. The average age of the participants is 18.56 ± 4.40, with 61.7% being female. The participants' total score averages for SMIS, ASHN, and BAS are 48.52±10.64; 76.42±10.40; and 28.46±6.28, respectively. A strong positive correlation was found between social media use and attitudes towards healthy eating, and a strong negative correlation between social media use and body appreciation. It was determined that female participants were less satisfied with their bodies compared to males, and those who defined their income as 'high' used social media less and had higher healthy eating attitudes compared to those who defined their income as 'low.' Participants with daily social media usage duration of ≥ 7 hours were found have lower healthy eating attitudes, and be less satisfied with their bodies. A statistically significant negative correlation was found between participants' age and SMIS total score average, and a statistically significant positive correlation was found between ASHN and BAS score averages. Based on the data obtained, it was determined that participants had above-average levels of social media use, high levels of attitudes towards healthy eating, and below-average levels of body appreciation.

Keywords: Body appreciation, Healthy nutrition, Social media, Youth

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Introduction

Social media is defined as an internet platform that allows users to share visuals, ideas, photos, videos, music, or comments. Interest in social media is increasing globally, with applications such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, Snapchat, and TikTok being used by millions of people daily. Over the past decade, global social media usage has tripled, rising from 0.97 billion to 2.96 billion people (Brown, 2019). The prevalence of social media use among adolescents/youth is higher than in other age groups. Data shows that a significant majority of adolescents (92.9%) have at least one or more social media accounts (Barry et al., 2017). Approximately one-third of TikTok users are under 14 years old (TikTok Statistics, 2021). In the United States, around 4.8 million (4.5%) of Instagram's 107 million users are adolescents aged 13-17 (Tankovska, 2021). Social media creates social, cultural, societal, and economic impacts on users. Millions of interactions on these platforms also affect human health in various ways (O'Keeffe et al., 2011; Uhls et al., 2017; Guinta & John, 2018; Anderson & Jiang, 2020). Some positive health effects of social media include easy access to needed information and social support networks, encouragement to gain new ideas and experiences, and its potential to enhance individuals' self-esteem and well-being. However, risks associated with social media use include privacy violations, sexual violence, and cyberbullying. Social media use for entertainment purposes can lead to unhealthy food consumption and the development of a negative body image (O'Keeffe et al., 2011; Uhls et al., 2017; Guinta & John, 2018). In recent years, social media platforms have increasingly been seen as profitable for thousands of food and beverage companies. Marketing tactics and product placement on social media raise the risk of adolescents/youth being exposed to the digital promotion of unhealthy foods and beverages (Bragg et al., 2020; Zhong & Frenkel, 2020). Unhealthy eating behaviors, such as consuming high-calorie, low-nutrient foods and beverages, increase the risk of obesity. Obesity makes adolescents/youth more prone to cardiovascular diseases, hypertension, pulmonary health problems, type 2 diabetes, and other chronic illnesses, and increases the risk of mortality (Poirier et al., 2006; Xu et al., 2020).

Social media posts that impose ideal body measurements or a zero-size image contribute to the prevalence of eating disorders (such as anorexia nervosa

and bulimia) among adolescents/youth and create a foundation for the emergence of psychological pathologies such as body dissatisfaction, distorted body image, and lowered self-esteem. Body dissatisfaction, defined as "negative feelings and thoughts about one's body," is a leading cause of eating disorders, disordered eating, decreased self-esteem, and reduced psychological well-being. Body appreciation refers to one's perspective on the appearance of their body and how it compares to societal standards. Social media platforms are filled with individuals presenting themselves in the best and most beautiful ways, exposing users to countless images and messages that may cause them to feel negatively about their body image. A negative body image leads to unrealistic expectations of how one's body should look, intensifying unhealthy behaviors such as disordered eating (Mahon & Hevey, 2021). There are a limited number of studies in both international and national literature examining the impact of social media use on adolescents'/youths' body image and eating attitudes and behaviors (Sampasa-Kanyinga et al., 2015; Baldwin et al., 2018; Murphy et al., 2020). Data from these studies indicate an increase in the consumption of unhealthy foods or beverages following social media use (Sampasa-Kanyinga et al., 2015; Baldwin et al., 2018; Murphy et al., 2020) adolescents using social media are significantly more likely to consume sugar-sweetened beverages and energy drinks (Sampasa-Kanyinga et al., 2015). Additionally, studies have shown that the more time spent on social media, the more likely it is for negative body image and disordered eating behaviors to emerge (Jiotsa et al., 2015; Vandenbosch et al., 2022).

Protecting and promoting the health of adolescents/youth, a target population for public health, is important. When used correctly, social media applications can serve as an effective channel to influence, inform, raise awareness, persuade, and encourage the adoption of healthy lifestyle behaviors. At this point, it is crucial to disseminate content that contributes to positive body image development and the ability to make healthy food choices, increasing knowledge and awareness among youth. Another important point is the need for studies evaluating the impact of social media use on eating habits and body image. Findings from such studies can contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the effects, risks, and potential health problems associated with social media use on body image and eating attitudes in adolescents/youth. This study aims to examine the impact of social media use on body appreciation and eating attitudes in youth.

Material and Methods

Design and Setting

This research is of a descriptive type. The population of the study consisted of 2,986 students enrolled in the Vocational School of Health Services at the relevant university. Using a formula employed to examine the frequency of occurrences in a known population, the sample size was calculated as 341 (with 95% confidence, α=0.05 margin of error). The sample consisted of 400 participants who were willing to participate in the study and completed the data collection tools in full. Participants who met the research criteria (aged 15-24, had at least one social media account, had internet access, and were willing to participate) were included in the study.

Instruments

The data for the study were collected using the Personal Information Form, Social Media Use Integration Scale, Attitude Scale for Healthy Nutrition, and Body Appreciation Scale.

Personal information form

The form developed by the researchers contains 15 questions aimed at identifying the sociodemographic characteristics of the participants (age, gender, economic status, educational status, parental education, frequency of social media use, purpose of use, etc.).

Social media use integration scale (SMIS)

The scale, developed by Jenkins-Guarnieri, Wright, and Johnson (2013), is a 6-point Likert scale composed of two sub-dimensions: social integration and emotional connection, and integration with social routines. The first six questions of the scale are related to social integration and emotional connection, while the last four questions are about integration with social routines. Item 8 is reverse scored, and the total score on the scale ranges from a minimum of 10 to a maximum of 60 points. Higher scores indicate higher levels of social media use. The original scale's Cronbach alpha internal consistency reliability coefficient is 0.91. The Turkish adaptation of the scale was carried out by Akın and colleagues, with a Cronbach alpha internal consistency reliability coefficient of 0.87 for the Turkish version. In this study, the reliability coefficient (Cronbach's Alpha) was found to be 0.82.

Attitude scale for healthy nutrition (ASHN)

This scale, developed by Tekkurşun Demir and colleagues, consists of 21 items. The positive items are rated as "Strongly Disagree," "Disagree," "Neutral," "Agree," and "Strongly Agree." Positive items are scored as 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5, while negative items are reverse scored as 5, 4, 3, 2, and 1. The scale includes 10 positive (items 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 12, 13, 14, 15, and 16) and 11 negative items (items 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 17, 18, 19, 20, and 21). The scale is structured around four factors: Knowledge About Nutrition, Emotions Toward Nutrition, Positive Nutrition, and Poor Nutrition. The total possible score ranges from 21 to 105, with scores of 21 indicating very low attitudes towards healthy eating, 23-42 indicating low, 43-63 indicating moderate, 64-84 indicating high, and 85-110 indicating ideal attitudes. In this study, the reliability coefficient (Cronbach's Alpha) was found to be 0.78.

Body appreciation scale (BAS)

Developed by Tylka and Wood-Barcalow (2015) and adapted into Turkish by Anlı and colleagues (2015), this scale is a 5-point Likert scale consisting of 10 items. Participants respond to each item (1 = never, 5 = always) by selecting how much they agree with each statement. The internal consistency reliability coefficient of the

original scale is 0.88. The total score is calculated by summing the points from all items, with a possible range of 10 to 50. Higher scores indicate higher levels of body appreciation. In this study, the reliability coefficient (Cronbach's Alpha) was found to be 0.90.

Ethical Considerations

Before starting the research, approval was obtained from the Sivas Cumhuriyet University Non-Interventional Clinical Research Ethics Committee and consent was obtained from the participants (2023-10/19). The data collection tools, created using Google Forms, were delivered to the participants online during the spring semester of the 2022-2023 academic year. Participants who read and approved the information page about the subject and purpose of the research were able to access the data collection tools.

Data Analyses

The SPSS for Windows 22.0 (IBM Corp. 2013) statistical software package was used for statistical analyses. The data were analyzed using descriptive statistical analyses (mean, standard deviation, frequency, minimum, maximum), as well as Student's t-test, one-way ANOVA, and Pearson correlation analysis for comparing some quantitative characteristics. The results were evaluated at a 95% confidence interval, with significance considered at $p<0.05$.

Results

The participants had an average age of 18.56 ± 4.40 years, with 61.7% being female, 3.2% married, and 51.5% describing their income level as moderate. Of the participants, 91.5% had a limited / quotaised internet subscription, and 33.7% reported using the social media (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, TikTok) for 7 hours or more per day.

The participants' total score and sub-dimension scores for the SMIS total, social integration and emotional connection, integration with social routines were 48.52±10.64, 28.02±9.26, and 19.16±10.28, respectively, indicating that participants had an above-average level of social media usage. The participants' total score and sub-dimension scores for the ASHN, knowledge about nutrition, emotion towards nutrition, positive eating, and poor eating, were 76.42±10.40, 18.61±4.61, 16.86±4.40, 17.40±4.20, and 18.08±4.53, respectively. It can be said that the participants had a high level of attitude towards healthy eating. The participants' total score on the BAS was 28.46±6.28 (Table 1).

Pearson correlation analysis was applied to examine the relationship between participants' social media usage, attitudes towards healthy eating, and body appreciation. Accordingly, a positive relationship was found between young participants' social media usage and their attitudes towards healthy eating; a negative relationship was found between social media usage and their body appreciation (Table 2).

It was determined that male participants used social media less and had higher attitudes towards healthy eating compared to females, and those who described their income as 'high' used social media less and had higher healthy eating attitudes compared to those who described their income as 'low.' Participants who used the social media for 7 hours or more per day, had lower attitudes towards healthy eating, and appreciated their bodies less. Additionally, it was found that female participants appreciated their bodies less compared to males. A statistically negative relationship was found between participants' age and their total SMIS score, while a statistically positive moderate relationship was found between their ASHN and BAS scores ($p<0.05$) (Table 3).

Table 1. Total and subscale mean scores of the scales

Scales and Subscales	Scale (Min–Max)	Study (Min-Max)	m (sd)
SMIS			
Social integration and emotional connection	**6-36**	6-35	28.02±9.26
Integration with social routines	**4-24**	5-23	19.16±10.28
Total	**10-60**	12-58	48.52±10.64
ASHN			
Knowledge About Nutrition	**5-25**	6-25	18.61±4.61
Emotions Toward Nutrition	**6-30**	6-27	16.86±4.40
Positive Nutrition	**5-25**	5-24	17.40±4.20
Poor Nutrition	**5-25**	5-24	18.08±4.53
Total	**21-105**	23-103	76.42±10.40
BAS			
Total	**10-50**	14-48	28.46±6.28

Abbreviations: Social Media Use Integration Scale (SMIS), Attitude Scale for Healthy Nutrition (ASHN), and Body Appreciation Scale (BAS)

Table 2. Correlation of scale total scores

	ASHN		BAS	
	r^a	p	r^a	p
SMIS	0.748	0.000	-0.786	0.000

Abbreviations: Social Media Use Integration Scale (SMIS), Attitude Scale for Healthy Nutrition (ASHN), and Body Appreciation Scale (BAS)

Table 3. Correlation of scale total scores according to some characteristics (n=400)

Characteristics	SMIS	ASHN	BAS
	m (sd)	m (sd)	m (sd)
Sex			
Female (n=247)	48.02±9.48	72.04±10.46	25.10±4.18
Male (n=153)	46.42±9.02	71.14±10.24	28.06±6.10
t/p	**0.490 / 0.018**	0.348 / 0.456	**0.308 / 0.002**
Married status			
Married (n=13)	48.40±8.10	72,10±7,80	27.24±4.40
Single (n=387)	48.86±9.82	71,16±8,48	28.10±5.48
t/p	2.350 / 0.069	4.282 / 0.0234	0.786 / 0.480
Economic level			
Low (n=83)	48.04±9.42	68.20±12.30	26.42±4.46
Moderate (n=206)	45.10±8.18	74.12±10.40	27.64±5.12
High (n=111)	45.62±8.12	88.26±7.86	27.68±4.48
F/p	**5.190 / 0.000**	**12.042 / 0.000**	0.555 / 0.115
Internet Subscription Status			
Limitless (n=34)	46.26±9.64	75.80±12.10	27.60±4.00
Limited/quotaised (n=366)	46.72±10.02	76.10±8.20	27.92±6.56
F/p	8.640 / 0.120	8,227 / 0.058	3.826 / 0.146
Daily Social Media Usage Duration			
1-3 hours (n=24)	45.12±10.00	80.16±6.42	27.98±4.18
4-6 hours (n=241)	46.18±9.46	74.18±12.10	26.42±3.40
≥ 7 hours (n=135)	48.24±9.18	66.46±10.42	25.14±3.60
t/p	**7.248 / 0.001**	**9.660 / 0.000**	**8.240 / 0.33**
	r / p	r / p	r / p
Age	**- 0.694 / 0.001**	**0.424 / 0.000**	**0.520 / 0.000**

Abbreviations: Social Media Use Integration Scale (SMIS), Attitude Scale for Healthy Nutrition (ASHN), Body Appreciation Scale (BAS), a Pearson Correlation Analysis

Discussion

In this section, the data obtained are discussed within the framework of the relevant literature. When examining statistics related to social media use, it is evident that the usage rate is increasing day by day and has become an indispensable part of human life. In this study, it was found that 1 /3 of the participants reported using social media for 7 hours or more per day. It is possible to say that this duration is above the global average. According to the We Are Social (2022) report, which presents digital data worldwide, the population defined as Generation Z (ages 16-24) spends an average of 4.5 hours per day on social networks. According to the same report, as of January 2022, the average internet use in Turkey is 8 hours per day, while the time spent on social media is 2 hours and 59 minutes.

It is known that users prefer social media applications mainly for accessing entertainment, news, shopping, and messaging. This study determined that participants tend to use social media for 'social integration and emotional connection' and 'integration with social routines,' with an above-average level of social media use. Globally, the primary reasons for internet use include accessing information (55.8%), staying connected with family and friends (53.7%), and following current events and news (50.9%), while in Turkey, the main reasons for internet use are accessing information (73.2%), following current events and news (67.6%), and researching how to do things (63.9) (We Are Social, 2023). The frequency and duration of use of specific social media platforms can vary by gender. In our study, it was found that women used social media more than men. Universal data also show that women use social networks more than men, regardless of age. According to GWI (2023), women aged 16-24 are the group that uses social media the most, with an average of nearly 3 hours per day. Women use social media approximately 16 minutes more per day than men, which means women use social media about 12% more than men. In Turkey, 58.7% of social media users are male, and 41.3% are female (We Are Social, 2022).

Exposure to social media content depicting typical eating behaviors of others can influence users' own eating behaviors. For example, interacting with content that promotes a healthy lifestyle on social media can raise awareness and contribute to the adoption of healthy eating habits. However, the presence of unhealthy or misleading information on social media can lead to the development of negative attitudes toward nutrition. In this study, it was found that as young participants' social media use increased, they developed more positive attitudes towards healthy eating. Hawkins (2020) found that individuals who followed healthy eating accounts on social media for just two weeks consumed more fruits and vegetables and less junk food. However, Serenko et al. (2021) reported that social media use among the young population in the UK led to a decrease in healthy eating. Albert (2017) found that in a sample predominantly consisting of middle school students, social media use

showed a negative correlation with fruit and vegetable consumption and a strong correlation with fast food and junk food consumption. In Stamatiou's (2022) study, although 38% of users reported that their food choices were moderately influenced by social media and that images of tasty but nutritionally poor foods created a desire to consume such foods, 51% stated that they ultimately did not consume these foods.

In this study, it was found that as young participants' social media use increased, their body image was negatively affected. Stamatiou (2022) also found that social media users experienced moderate emotional pressure regarding body image, with their stress mostly related to achieving a 'fit body' (32%) or 'perfect body' (31%) and a desire to lose weight (27%). It can be said that in our study, as age increased, social media use decreased, while the level of having a high attitude towards healthy eating and body appreciation also increased. Globally, individuals aged 55-64 are the least interested in social platforms (We Are Social, 2022). Based on this data, it is necessary to consider the younger population, who use digital platforms more, as a priority group for healthy living and body image issues and to provide more support in health awareness. Thus, reaching young audiences through social media and creating awareness about healthy living could be a more effective strategy.

Conclusion

In this study, it was determined that there is a high-level positive relationship between participants' social media use and their attitudes towards healthy eating, and a high-level negative relationship between social media use and body appreciation. Social media is widely adopted by young adults, and therefore, health professionals should continue to work on developing interventions related to social media use and its potential effects. It is important to use social media as a potential tool to support positive effects on body image and to encourage and facilitate positive attitudes towards healthy food choices.

Limitations

The data obtained from the study were collected solely from university students. It can be assumed that university students might have a more developed ability to establish cause-and-effect relationships and have greater access to accurate information. Educational level could be a variable that positively affects healthy eating attitudes, body image, and the ability to use social media correctly. Therefore, it is recommended to conduct similar studies with participants from different educational levels.

Conflict of Interest

The authors report no actual or potential conflicts of interest.

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