

How Health and Nutrition Influencers Trigger Eating Disorders in Teenagers

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ABSTRACT

Eating disorders have become progressively predominant among teenagers, with the most common ones being anorexia nervosa (AN), bulimia nervosa (BN), and binge eating disorder (BED). This paper reviews evidence and analysis from research about how these disorders develop, including sociocultural and individual factors (e.g., media influences, personality factors), and provides an extension towards how health and nutrition influencers can cause the development of EDs or trigger symptoms or partial symptoms of these disorders. This paper is divided into four categories, focusing on how the differentiation between HNIs and teenagers, individual factors, and the nature and content of HNIs affect teenagers' mentality.

Keywords: Eating disorders, Gender Differentiation, Calorie Counting, Restriction, HNI.

Subject: Nutrition

INTRODUCTION

Eating disorders (EDs) are mental disorders that associate with an individual's abnormal eating behaviours and can pose severe threats to an individual's physical and mental health. They are usually involved in focusing too much on one's "weight, body shape and food, leading to dangerous eating behaviors" (Mayo Clinic, 2022). Due to the increasingly popularized beauty standards of being slim and the increase in public awareness of the preponderance and impacts of EDs, numbers showing the prevalence of EDs such as anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa, have shown significant levels of increase in recent years, especially within teenagers (Galmiche, Déchelotte, Lambert, & Tavoracci, 2019). Negative health impacts caused by EDs include heart failure, malnutrition, gastrointestinal perforation (NEDA, 2022), higher risk of mortality (Arcelus, Mitchell, Wales, & Nielsen, 2011), reduced quality of life (van Hoeken & Hoek, 2020), and many other life-threatening consequences; hence it is crucial to investigate their causes and ways of prevention.

Following the increase in prominence of social media, social media influencers have grown in popularity and influence among teenagers, one of which being health and nutrition influencers (HNIs), which include certified dietitians, wellness enthusiasts, fitness instructors, etc. It is a common notion that these influencers help promote mental positivity in their audience towards food and fitness, yet the potential negative impacts of HNIs in triggering eating disorders in teenagers are notable but often ignored. Studies show social media influencers can cause neurological impacts on teenagers, such as increased social comparison and self-objection (Mann & Blumberg, 2022), and are correlated with emotions of envy and one's affective well-being (Polivy & Herman, 2002), which may lower self-esteem and trigger EDs. This paper will discuss the psychological effects and potential triggers posed by HNIs and their content on teenagers' behavioural and cognitive practices, specifically those associated with EDs, through interpersonal and individual perspectives.

FACTORS

Differentiation

Every individual has their own unique experiences and characteristics that may differ from many others, such as differences in cognitive and behavioral compositions. This may be due to a variety of factors, such as gender, biological, age, and personality differentiation. Hence, one's advice or experience may not apply to or work for another. However, in this case, teenagers are often unaware of the presence of interpersonal differences in the online community of social media, thus leading to deceptions that mislead their mental pathway.

Gender Differentiation

Gender differentiation implies the difference in gender between the HNI and the audience, in which case, the teenager. Studies show that EDs are significantly more prevalent in females than in males, both in the general public and in adolescents (Kjelsås, Bjørnstrøm, & Gøtestam, 2004). It is also discovered that in societies of abundant cultures, idealization of thinness and denigration of fatness are more prevalent in women than in men (STRIEGEL-MOORE, 1997).

It shows that females, especially female teenagers, tend to have a lower self-image and self-esteem towards their bodies compared to males, and they tend to idealize body types more intensely. Hence, females are often more vulnerable to the development of EDs. Since, in most cases, the cognitive components of females differ from that of males, advice from or experiences shared by male HNIs may not accurately apply to their female audiences (i.e. female teenagers), leading to misdirection in their path to fitness and health. An example would be the case of HNIs posting content that has no significant psychological impact on themselves or males but inadvertently triggers thoughts of extremity and impulsiveness towards food and body in female teenagers, contributing to the development of EDs.

Biological Differentiation

Biological differences between individuals are important factors to be aware of, as each person's physical composition can affect the method and effect of their pursuit of fitness substantially. These differences may be due to the variation of gender, age and other genetic factors between individuals. Some HNIs may have naturally slim or fit bodies on the verge of the normal weight range; some may have genetic compositions that allow them to lose weight or gain muscles more effectively with less effort or supplements. These may cause teenagers to have the illusion that they are incapable of succeeding in fitness or are not up to society's body standards, as the body shapes and lifestyles of HNIs are widely glamorized and idealized in the cyber world. Hence, teenagers' self-esteem may be lowered, and they may develop obsessive thoughts about food and the body, potentially triggering EDs.

Individual factors

Many factors specific to the individual are proposed to be contributors to the development of EDs (Polivy and Herman 1995). In this chapter, the focus will be put on the factor of personality traits, specifically perfectionism, and the factor of self-esteem deficit.

Perfectionism

A perfectionist is an individual who has difficulty accepting any form of imperfection. Besides the depressive effect of perfectionism on an individual (Lynd-Stevenson & M. Hearne, 1999), the negative impact of one's mental well-being around food may also be amplified through one's interaction with HNIs. Contents posted by HNIs, including examples of their diet, daily routine, exercise routine and more, are often short of imperfection as they are usually carefully selected and thoroughly examined by the HNIs to portray a principled, inspirational personal image and persona of themselves.

Perfectionistic teenagers are then more likely to traumatize and exemplify minor shortcomings in their planned diet or routine or make "a normal body a sign of imperfection" (Hewitt, Flett, & Endler, 1995) as a result of upward social comparison. EDs that are likely to be triggered due to this cause are BN, BED and other EDs that involve impulsiveness and uncontrollable eating, as individuals are likely to engage in bingeing of foods after concluding that their diet or routine is ruined.

Self-esteem Deficit

Self-esteem is one of the major determinants of whether a person develops ED, as EDs are mainly caused by obsessive thoughts about food triggered by a negative body image. Though studies show that individuals with high self-esteem, are more confident in becoming "better versions of themselves" after interactions with content by social media influencers (SMIs), it is also evident that on the contrary, "individuals with low self-esteem are likely to experience motivational deficits and display symptoms of helplessness from upward comparisons" (Lee, 2022). HNIs' contents often involve pictures or videos of their body, diet and lifestyle, which may lead to upward social comparison in teenagers of low self-esteem, causing detrimental effects to their state of mind and the development of body dissatisfaction. Thus, EDs are likely to be triggered.

Content of HNIs

Another major perspective from which the effect of HNIs on triggering EDs in teenagers would be from the content posted. This chapter will focus on how contents involving calorie counting and calorie restriction can lead to restrictive eating, and how those involving diet recipes can contribute to the development of ED symptoms or partial symptoms such as binge eating and dietary restrictions in teenagers.

Calorie Counting and Calorie Restriction

Calorie counting is a method for the tracking of the amount of energy intake by an individual, commonly used by fitness and wellness enthusiasts in diet and weight loss planning, including HNIs. According to the National Health Service of the United Kingdom, the recommended daily calorie intake is 2000 calories a day for females and 2500 calories a day for males, with variations depending on age, metabolism, levels of physical activity etc. (“What should my daily intake of calories be?”). HNIs that pursue and idealize slimness of the body may post contents of them restricting themselves into eating a definite number of calories each day e.g., 1500 calories a day, or contents that emphasize on the benefits of a lower calorie intake. This misleads teenagers’ perception of a healthy diet and can cause restrictive eating, which contributes to EDs like BN and BED especially.

Recipes

A significant number of HNIs post regular contents that contain diet recipes e.g., recipes of food that has a low-calorie content and a high protein content. The saturation of these contents can cause an obsession with the quality and degree of health of food in teenagers, triggering the development of EDs or disturbed eating habits such as *orthorexia nervosa (ON)*, which composes of “pathologic obsession for biologically pure foods”, which can cause “substantial dietetic limitations” and “is able to lead to obsessive thoughts about foods”, “affective dissatisfactions and intense social isolation” (Brytek-Matera 55). ED symptoms such as the obsessive collection of recipes and the constant emergence of uncontrollable thoughts about food and food making can also be easily triggered and encouraged.

Nature of HNIs

HNIs, a subset of SMIs, prioritize parasocial relationships as they are the foundations of their popularity (Lee, 2022). HNIs reinforce this sense of closeness through interactions such as posting interactive stories on Instagram, regular replies and more. This leads to a psychological, often delusional, intimacy between the HNI and their audience i.e., teenagers, who are particularly prone to external influence, compared to the traditional celebrity-fan relationship. Consequently, teenagers are more likely to “engage in social comparison” with HNIs “since people are intrinsically motivated to accurately evaluate themselves by comparison with similar others.” (1) Teenagers will hence have a higher chance of developing EDs or symptoms due to psychological reasons mentioned beforehand.

Conclusion

Reviewing literature on EDs in teenagers leads us to many extensions and applications in real life. Eating disorders have emerged rapidly in the 21st century, especially in adolescents. The increasing prevalence of HNIs and social media also leads to discussion and analysis of their potential impacts on teenagers, one of which being their tendency to trigger EDs in certain individuals. Though constraints and limitations lie unsolved in research on these areas, we should raise awareness, continue to engage in research about the neurological influences of HNIs on the eating habits of their audience and explore the ways of prevention and cure.

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