

The Struggle Over Diet Trends and Women's Nutrition in the United States

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On my honor as a University student, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this assignment as defined by the Honor Guidelines for Thesis-Related Assignments.

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Diet quality and nutritional intake in the United States is a persistent issue. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA, 2014) found that millions of American adults have at least one chronic disease due to poor diet and activity levels. This is often due to overweight/obesity, but certain conditions are unique to eating disorders (e.g. osteoporosis). Many people use social media for information about weight loss and healthy living. This is beneficial to those without access to professional resources in their community. However, there is a risk of harmful or misinformation being spread.

More women than men use social media; women's most used social media sites are YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, and Pinterest (PRC, 2024). Instagram, Pinterest, and blogs were more likely to be used by women who closely adhered to clean eating advice over other sites. Social media plays a role in body image satisfaction as it aids in social comparison (Perloff, 2014) and has become a favored source for information on specific diets (Ambwani et al., 2020). Fad diets, those which "may promise fast results, but such diets limit your nutritional intake, can be unhealthy, and tend to fail in the long run." (CDC, 2023a), easily spread online. These are commonly used to lose weight, but are lacking in nutritional quality (Braga, Coletro, & Freitas, 2019). This can result in vitamin deficiencies and may ultimately lead to anemia, osteoporosis, or other health issues (U Health, n.d.). As social media continues to increase in usership, how are women responding to the prevalence of diet trends online?

Fad diets can cause health problems and rarely sustain weight loss long term. Women are more likely to use social media, making them likely participants in diet trends online. Considering the predominant cultural ideal of thinness in America, women living here are especially likely to engage with this content. Nutritional deficiencies are more prevalent in

women and affect both physical and mental health. There is a small but growing body of psychology research on the effects of social media, although long-term effects cannot yet be determined.

The core group in this issue is women who are active on social media. Most of the U.S. population falls into this category, but usage varies among age groups (PRC, 2024). This can impact cultures of diet communities on different platforms depending on the average age of users. Subgroups can be formed based on general attitudes towards diet trends: positive, negative, or neutral. Other parties include dieting companies, such as Weight Watchers and Atkins, and influencers working with these companies. These two groups share a common financial interest, which may be prioritized over quality and efficacy of products. Dietitians and nutritionists also use social media to share their diet advice. Many women are in favor of a shift away from the idea that thinness equates to health because this prolongs the prevalence of fad diets in society. On various social media platforms, negative responses to the prevalence of diet content prevail because of the harmful health risks.

Review of Research

Diet behaviors are heavily affected by social context. Social media serves as a new outlet for sharing diet behaviors with others, especially among niche lifestyle communities (Allen, Dickinson, & Prichard, 2018; Centola, 2013). This has caused an increase in social media accounts and blogs centered around dieting and fitness. These sites often share dysfunctional eating behaviors and perpetuate the thin ideal (Boepple & Thompson, 2014). Women who diet often do so for short-term benefits and to achieve a thinner physique, while improving health long-term is the least common reason for dieting (Calder & Mussap, 2015). Long-term use of fad

diets can have lasting consequences such as development of disordered eating (Anderson et al., 2000) and body dissatisfaction. Yo-yo dieting, intentional weight loss followed by unintentional weight gain, is commonly observed among adults who frequently change their diet. This may negatively impact health (Rhee, 2017), but does not cause early mortality (Mehta et al., 2014). Allen, Dickinson, and Prichard (2018) examined common attitudes about diets that minimize processed food intake. Positive opinions focused on improving health and the importance of healthy eating, while negative opinions were due to concerns over fad diets, possible harmful effects, and difficulty of adhering to the lifestyle.

Eating disorders are a problematic outcome of diet trends. Continuous fad diet usage can cause body dissatisfaction and restriction of food intake, both of which are risk factors for eating disorder pathology (Stice & Shaw, 2002). Health consequences for eating disorders include osteopenia (loss of bone density), a weakened immune system, anemia, severe dehydration, infertility, and organ failure (NIH, 2021). As much as 50% of the U.S. population has dysfunctional relationships with food and their body (Gottlieb, 2014). Social media is a significant risk factor for developing body dissatisfaction and disordered eating (Holland & Tiggemann, 2016). Seeing or posting photos related to dieting and fitness were identified as problematic behaviors online. Higher levels of dietary restraint were found among women who closely adhered to healthy dieting guidance posted online compared to those who slightly adhered or did not follow diet advice (Allen, Dickinson, & Prichard, 2018). The women who adhered to these suggestions were more likely to consume sufficient daily amounts of fruit and meat; however, this study did not consider if fruit intake was significantly higher than advised. It is possible that fruit was over consumed among this group in place of other food groups.

Kenardy, Brown, and Vogt (2001) found that frequent and early onset dieting correlated to poorer health, more disordered eating, and body dissatisfaction.

Social influence is an important factor in the adherence to diets. The actions of others may influence the use or discontinuation of a diet through interpersonal interactions, including those online. Interpersonal and media influences account for 54% of reasons for dieting (Spadine & Patterson, 2022). Adhering to group norms is important for feeling connected to a group (Rathbone et al., 2023), so women may follow the same diets as their peers. This is worsened if these norms are derived from social media because it is generally not a complete depiction of someone's lifestyle.

Adolescents are a vulnerable group regarding dieting and body image. 95% of teens aged 13-17 report using YouTube, 66% use TikTok, and 62% use Instagram (Vogels & Gelles-Watnick, 2023). Teens may easily be exposed to inappropriate content, including dieting and disordered eating behaviors, if a parent does not manually add restrictions to their social media accounts. Body dissatisfaction, especially in females, increases throughout adolescence and young adulthood (Bucchianeri et al., 2013), which often leads to dieting and efforts to lose weight. Risk of developing eating disorders is highest among teens age 13-17 (NICE, 2020). Restrictive eating habits that begin in childhood and adolescence can be difficult to resolve later in life, and concerns over body image often continue into adulthood (Hawks, Madanat, & Christley, 2008).

Complaints, Concerns, and Counteracting Diet Culture

Some women's responses to diet culture and trends online convey a passive dislike of this content. This is typically expressed through annoyance with frequently seeing such posts or

disinterest in them. Their responses highlight the pervasiveness of diet culture in the media. This can be attributed to heavy marketing of diet and lifestyle products, especially by content creators. One user on Twitter shared that when placing an online grocery order she was recommended a “better for you option” for a spice that is not interchangeable (George, 2022). She thinks this option is asinine because spices have low nutritional impact. Her experience demonstrates how consumers are prompted to be hyper aware of the quality of their diets in everyday life. Hannah (2021) shared that she is “fed up of toxic diet culture online and in general weight related content.” Her post does not expand on why she feels this way, but exemplifies the exhaustion women experience from frequently encountering diet content. A tweet from Kayla (2024) expressed concern over people she knows dieting or trying to eat less. Again, no reasoning is given for her stance, but this could be due to concern over the health of friends and family or feeling pressure to do the same.

Another individual pointed out how prevalent diet culture is, which has led to flawed views of health and appearance (Lila, 2024). Often, lifestyle influencers will argue that processed foods are evil, and although this is true, there are millions of Americans who have no healthier alternatives. Moore (2023a) discusses how fear around food gets so much attention on social media and the frequency with which accessible foods are vilified for being unhealthy. Jordanna (2022) shared that because she unfollowed all accounts relating to dieting, she thought fad diets had decreased in popularity. By removing negative stimuli she likely has a healthier relationship to food compared to those who turn to fad diets. Christina Dickson (2023) lists reasons she unfollows people online, including posting about their diet. Kaitlin Sondae (2022) states, “Honestly I hate diet culture I hate how society/social media makes us hate our bodies.” It is

clear that many women are aware of and frustrated by the frequency with which they encounter diet content online.

Other women are actively working against diet trends online by pointing out the ways they are unsustainable long term and harmful to physical and mental health. Many share personal anecdotes of how fad diets have impacted them, and their journey to recover both physically and from disordered thinking. These responses are more vehement, but necessarily so. By sharing personal experiences, other women, especially teens, can see that they are not the only ones affected by diet culture and learn from others' experiences. Adolescent girls are highly susceptible to peer influences (Crone & Konijn, 2018), making them even more vulnerable to social norms they encounter online such as the ideal of thinness and necessity of dieting. Social media is not inherently harmful for adolescents, but can be when used improperly. Teens are still developing self-regulation and are more sensitive to social cues (Arain et al., 2013) making it more difficult for them to handle emotions that arise from online posts and interactions.

Jesse (2024) expressed concern over the prevalence of fad diets on apps heavily populated by children, such as Tik Tok, in a tweet arguing that people who promote and profit from fad diets on social media are contemptible. Another woman tweeted, "I actually hate diet culture. Diet culture is actually ruining your minds!" (Jupiter's daughter, 2024). She also shares that she regularly exercises but does not diet because she does not feel she needs to. This demonstrates it is possible to be healthy without heavily controlling food intake and that dieting is not necessary to feel confident in one's self. Moore (2023b) posted a video counteracting negative patterns of thinking often seen as a result of dieting. One woman suggested that people reflect on the types of accounts they follow and emphasized that the content they surround

themselves with should not make them feel about themselves (Realwithemma, 2022). She specified that doing so with her own Instagram account helped her eating disorder recovery.

Some social media accounts focus on challenging diet culture in opposition to accounts that share diet and weight loss tips. More Than Tracy Turnblad (n.d.) frequently posts about the issues with current diet culture while promoting body positivity. One tweet discusses how people often misinterpret being healthy as weighing less, and that whatever they need to do to reach their desired weight must be healthy because they are losing weight (More Than Tracy Turnblad, 2024a). Thinness does not always equate to being in good health (Gaesser, 2003), and losing weight by heavily restricting eating or excessively exercising can negatively impact health. In a subsequent post, it is emphasized that undereating to lose weight can be detrimental to health and lead to an eating disorder (More Than Tracy Turnblad, 2024b). She also states “when you are telling me about these disordered behaviors and mindsets as if they’re positive and healthy, I have to worry for you.” (More Than Tracy Turnblad, 2024c). This account does not share alternative advice for weight loss, it is solely focused on normalizing bodies of all sizes and self-acceptance.

Responses to Current Diets

Intermittent fasting is a diet that limits what time or the length of time someone is allowed to eat. There are few restrictions on specific foods, although it is often paired with a calorie deficit. Janaswamy and Yelne (2022) outlined many health benefits associated with this diet for treating obesity, but also identified risks for those with psychiatric disorders. Currently, most studies have only focused on short-term effects. Health professionals online generally do not recommend this diet. Reasons include not meeting nutritional needs (Wholesome Chick

Nutrition, 2023; Ruth, 2023), blood sugar imbalances throughout the day (Kristen Nutritionist, 2023), and the underrepresentation of women in intermittent fasting research studies (Sam, 2023). Others have expressed concerns about developing unhealthy eating habits (Jenny, 2023). Shaw (2022) elaborates on this point, saying “it can absolutely cause you to have a bad relationship with food because you are treating it like a diet! That’s what diets do! Diets suck!”. Many women sharing their progress using this diet show rapid weight loss; Charice (2021) claims to have lost 25 pounds in 30 days, and Amy L (2022) reports losing 50 pounds in 4 months by intermittent fasting. The CDC (2023b) states that losing weight faster than 1-2 pounds per week makes it less likely that weight loss lasts long-term.

No- or low-sugar diets have increased in popularity in recent years. It is recommended that added sugar intake is limited (CDC, 2021), but many foods contain natural sugars. Sugar is necessary for regular bodily functioning because it feeds the brain and provides energy (Wein, 2014). One registered dietitian online responded to a video about cutting out sugar, saying that it is important to fuel the body and that inaccurate nutrition information is spread in the media (Find Food Freedom, 2024). Dominguez (2023) shows how nuanced nutritional content is and argues against blindly following labels. Kelly (2022) argues that instead of choosing the low sugar option of a food, people should eat less of the regular product. This prevents normalization of diet foods, which are often more processed.

A recent trend on social media began with women sharing meals that deviate from the typical American dinner plate. Over time, women started showing how little they eat and engaging in social comparison online. One woman responded to this by saying it is “so sinister and very sick” to associate girls and women with restrictive, disordered eating (Faye, 2024). Another tweet shares a similar sentiment, asking “Is it ‘girl dinner’ or is it ‘disordered eating’?”

(Niki, 2024). Trends such as this can quickly devolve into harmful content and normalize unhealthy eating habits.

Perpetuation of Eating Disorder Comparison Online

There is a unique category of deceptively positive responses to diet culture and trends online. Many communities exist on social media that promote eating disorders in which people encourage and search for dieting advice. Posts often focus on restrictive eating or purging behaviors characteristic of anorexia and bulimia. Both disorders can cause a myriad of health problems, and over 10,000 deaths are directly related to eating disorders each year (ANAD, n.d.). Being exposed to this content is especially harmful for adolescents; 22% of teens exhibit unhealthy behaviors that may lead to eating disorders, and 12% of adolescent girls have an eating disorder (ANAD, n.d.). Rates of eating disorders in adolescents are more than twice as prevalent for females than males (NIMH, n.d.).

This content is also detrimental to people with or recovering from an eating disorder. Angel (2024) tweeted that she is often asked about her diet, but she has an eating disorder she knows is unhealthy and does not want others to have similar issues. Another user reminds people that there are tools available to avoid potentially triggering content about dieting and fitness, particularly at the beginning of the year (Pips, 2024). A tweet from a woman recovering from an eating disorder conveys how difficult it is to recover amongst diet culture and trends on social media (Deej, 2024). Despite the vast amount of harmful posts promoting eating disorders on social media, there are many accounts working to help people avoid or handle such content.

The role of dietitians and nutritionists online

A number of trained dietitians and nutritionists post on social media about diets and lifestyle habits. Women in this group are typically not fully anti-diet, but argue against fad diets and try to counteract the diet cycle. Their credentials establish trust with viewers because many include titles in their usernames or biographies such as MS (masters of science), RD (registered dietitian), and LD (licensed dietitian). Bissonette-Maheux et al. (2015) found that women are more trusting of healthy eating blogs posted by registered dietitians and see them as useful sources of information about nutrition. These professionals have the opportunity and responsibility to post information that is helpful, truthful, and does not promote disordered eating.

Danelle Olson, a registered dietitian, argues that fad diets which suggest quick weight loss by eliminating or restricting food groups are hard to sustain and can be detrimental to health (BIDMC, 2019). She shares weight loss tips that include all food groups with simple guides for portion control. Another registered dietitian posted a video with tips for recognizing fad diets and a similar warning about quick fixes and restricting food groups (Grasso, 2020). Grasso's other videos explain macronutrients and feature recipes that are low effort and cost. Kylie Sakaida is a registered dietitian who regularly posts nutrition related videos (Sakaida, n.d.). Many of her videos share easy recipes with explanations of why ingredients are included and advice on how to make meals nutritionally complete. The comments on both users' videos are generally positive, and people are able to ask questions and interact with a supportive community. These accounts improve accessibility to information about nutrition for those who cannot consult with a nutritionist or dietitian, and when used correctly are a valuable resource.

Some dietitians post videos responding to other people's posts about their diet or what they eat in a day. Sharp (2022) posted a Youtube video of this nature and explains how the meals and diets are lacking in nutritional content with suggested improvements. Her video emphasizes that the meals she is reacting to are not healthy and tries to counteract this harmful online trend. Sharp also informs viewers about the health problems that can arise from prolonged restrictive eating. London (2023) posted her own review of someone sharing what they are eating, and argued that it is not a complete meal. However, the only advice she gives to improve the nutritional quality is to add more protein. These videos teach people how to recognize when they are shown unhealthy eating habits and are a tool for individuals to protect themselves from harmful diet culture online.

Marketing Unhealthy Eating Online

Influencers are frequently given opportunities to promote a company's products as a source of income. This is one avenue weight loss companies use to reach targeted audiences and is beneficial for both groups. Such products include diet pills and supplements, detox teas, and greens/superfood powders; these may not offer long-term solutions or reasonable outcomes. They often offer rapid weight loss that is difficult to maintain. According to Bloom Nutrition (n.d.), a co-founder of the company lost 90 pounds using the product before finding self-love. There is no further information about how long it took, her diet, how much she exercises, or any side effects. This statement implies that the key to happiness is to be thin, while marketing their product that purportedly helps with weight loss.

People online object to influencers marketing diets and weight loss products and are hyper-critical on supplements or detox products. Samantha (2024) has concerns about Bloom

Greens because little is known about the science behind the product and it is not third-party tested. Soraya (2020) argues that detox teas do not cause real weight loss because they primarily cause loss of water weight. Another woman criticizes the diet industry overall for selling products that promise quick fixes but do not provide long term benefits, and for marketing towards people who are uninformed about potential side effects (Beefcake Brina, 2021). Kristina (2021) contends that diet pills and detox teas are not worth the money and time; instead, people should focus on their diet and exercise. Many women online have shared success stories with these products, but few mention other factors that contribute to weight loss such as diet, exercise, and medications. The results they share are typically over a short timeframe, providing no proof that they experienced long-term benefits. These products are frequently tied to fad diets, and very few dietitians on social media recommend them. Consumers should be skeptical of videos that promote diet products that offer fast results.

Conclusion

Women are dissatisfied with the prevalence of fad diets on social media sites. Diet culture has been present in the U.S. for decades and is heavily pushed through media outlets. The rise of social media has exacerbated this problem, making it easier to find diet guidance, but also increasing the risk of misinformation being spread. This harms many people because new diets are constantly being introduced. Women feel pressured to be thin and attempt to accomplish this by frequently trying new trends that may not be suitable for them personally. The increased presence of dietitians on social media, especially following the COVID-19 pandemic, has the potential to improve accessibility to useful information about food. Increased social media regulations for sharing fitness and lifestyle advice is crucial in reducing the spread of fad diets

online. Better marketing regulations are also needed for paid promotions of diet products because many of these are not FDA-approved or shown to aid in long-term weight loss. Individuals are responsible for the types of content they interact with online, but social media and diet companies owe their consumers transparency about what is being sold to them.

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