

Issues With Media Consumption: The Impact of #whatIeatinaday Content on Disordered Eating Behaviours

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Abstract

Social media posts about everything a person has eaten in a day, called #whatIeatinaday videos, can lead to an increase in disordered eating behaviours. Disordered eating behaviours are behaviours that show an unhealthy relationship with food, such as excessive food restriction, anxiety related to specific foods, excessive dieting, and purging. However, it is possible that #whatIeatinaday videos could also help people in recovery from an eating disorder. A variety of studies, including surveys, interviews, and experimental designs, will be used to investigate the common themes in #whatIeatinaday videos, including misinformation and moralising food. This article examines the impact that social media, including #whatIeatinaday videos, has on disordered eating behaviours and body image. This review will investigate both the negative impact of #whatIeatinaday on disordered eating and the positive effects of social media on recovery. The present study ends by suggesting that #whatIeatinaday videos can be used to help people in recovery, but only if they are used carefully.

Keywords: *eating disorders, social media, #whatIeatinaday.*

Introduction

Social media posts about everything a person has eaten in a day, called #whatIeatinaday videos, can lead to an increase in disordered eating behaviours in people who watch them (Davey et al., 2024). This paper will investigate both the positive and negative consequences of engaging with this style of content. Disordered eating behaviours are behaviours that show an unhealthy relationship with food, such as excessive food restriction, anxiety related to specific foods, excessive dieting, and purging (Lee et al. 2025). Studies have found that social

media use can increase disordered eating behaviours (Santarossa & Woodruff, 2017). Despite the problems associated with social media, it is possible that these posts could help people in recovery. Some research has found that online support can help people who are recovering from an eating disorder (Eichhorn, 2008). Social media is a part of our everyday lives, so it is important to investigate the impact of social media on mental health, including disordered eating behaviours.

Moralization

When people talk about what they eat, they are communicating a set of values, which can be perceived as morally right or wrong. This process is called moralisation. For example, when people talk about eating salad, they might talk about the importance of health and when they talk about eating sweets, they might talk about the importance of limiting one's sugar intake. These moral standards are based on both obligations towards other people and what is desirable.

When consuming food has morality attached to it, people are more likely to feel a sense of shame about their consumption (Sandal, 2018). Feeling shame about eating often results in disordered eating behaviours (Goss et al, 2009).

Additionally, food is socially and culturally classified as clean or unclean. For example, some people attach a moral meaning to consuming meat, locally grown foods, or "natural" foods. Media is used to reinforce these values; many #whatIeatInaday videos reinforce ideas that food is moral or immoral (Sandal, 2018).

Content creators are people who post on social media regularly with the intention of reaching a large audience. When content creators talk about how they are being healthy or good, it reinforces the idea that there are ways to eat that are immoral or bad. This moralisation could place added pressure on individuals because if restriction is moral, the lack of restriction is immoral.

Moralisation may add to the stress of eating since it is no longer just about being a healthy person; it is about being a good person. Moralisation of food consumption might also result in judging people more harshly for their eating choices, which could lead to more social isolation.

Furthermore, the amateur nature of these vlogging videos creates a sense of authenticity (Sandal, 2018). This sense of authenticity and interactive aspect increases the connection the viewer feels with the content creator. If the viewer trusts the content creator more, they are more likely to take their advice seriously and try to emulate their behaviour (Sandal, 2018).

Misinformation

A recent study looking into misinformation in #whatIeatInaday videos found many videos include information that is false or presented in a misleading way (Topham et al., 2023). The study focused on #whatIeatInaday videos on YouTube. The researchers looked at recurring themes and underlying messages present in the videos, paying particular attention to health advice.

According to their data, these videos do not usually involve the creator telling the viewer what to eat. Instead, the creator will talk about why they make the food choices they do and how it relates to their understanding of health. Videos on the internet are often used as a framework for how people should view their body and health (Topham et al., 2023). Content creators often tell their audiences that they are not experts, all bodies are different, and they are just saying what works for them (Topham et al., 2023).

The researchers also found that creators would use scientific-sounding language, but it was often meaningless or misleading. For example, content creators frequently talk about chemicals or all-natural foods; however, they use these terms incorrectly. Content creators frequently suggest scientifically disproven treatments, such as detoxing.

These videos often present a problem and a diet to solve it. The content creators often claim that any problem can be solved with a diet. Content creators often use words like "light" and "airy" to describe how they feel on their diets. They mention benefits such as mental clarity or feeling light (Topham et al., 2023).

Spreading misinformation about diets or certain foods may result in an increase in disordered eating behaviours because many diets are quite restrictive. Viewers are probably more likely to follow a diet when they believe it will solve a problem. Since content creators often claim that unnecessary restriction and unhealthy diets make them feel "light" and "airy" (Topham et al., 2023), viewers might be motivated to engage in these behaviours to achieve the desired effect. If people believe that some foods are toxic and should never be eaten, this could lead to restriction.

The Impact of #whatIeatinaday videos

Being exposed to what #whatIeatinaday can promote disordered eating behaviours, as shown in a study where participants were exposed to hashtags with different styles of content. Participants were exposed to one of the following hashtags: #whatIeatinaday, #cleaneating, or the control condition, #nature (Davey et al., 2024).

The participants then had to fill out the Eating Disorder Examination Questionnaire (EDE-Q)—8-item version, which assesses disordered eating behaviour, and the Body Image States Scale (BISS), which assesses how people feel about their bodies before and after watching the content (Davey et al., 2024). The EDE-Q uses a Likert scale to assess Restraint, Eating Concern, Shape Concern and Weight Concern. A lower mean score indicates increased disordered eating behaviour. The BISS uses a Likert scale to assess individuals' experiences related to their physical appearance. A higher score indicates that the individual has a more favourable body image.

The researchers found that even short-term exposure to the hashtags #whatIeatinaday and #cleaneating resulted in a reduction in EDE-Q scores, which in this study meant there was an adverse effect. The BISS scores did not change, which suggests that viewing the hashtags did not have an adverse effect on body satisfaction.

The impact of looking at this type of content was worse for younger women, possibly because of societal pressure (Davey et al., 2024). Younger women face significant pressure from society to be slim, which can impact their behaviour and body image. Younger women might also be less able to identify misinformation and might be more easily influenced than older women because they have less life experience.

Davey and colleagues suggested that repeated exposure to these hashtags could create a cumulative effect on disordered eating behaviours. The more someone watches this style of content, the worse the effect will be.

There are possible problems associated with specific styles of content. For example, content tagged as “clean eating” would probably focus on health, and the diet followed in these videos would likely be presented as healthy. Both

#whatIeatinaday and #cleaneating videos could present the diets shown as healthy and desirable, even if they are too restrictive.

Even if the diet shown isn't healthy, watching videos that show restrictive eating could both idealise and normalise restrictive behaviour. Watching #whatIeatinaday video can be dangerous, since they encourage the viewer to engage in disordered eating behaviours.

The content included in #whatIeatinaday videos matters. A recent study investigated the impact of low-calorie vs high-calorie diets portrayed in #whatIeatinaday videos (Drivas et al., 2024). The participants were shown five TikTok videos. One of these videos was either a “low-calorie” video or a “high-calorie” video. A test pilot group categorized the videos as high-calorie or low-calorie based on whether they believed the diet would result in weight gain or weight loss (Drivas et al., 2024). In “low-calorie” videos, the creators were often thin and talked about how the foods adhered to a particular diet. The “high-calorie” videos often included a calorie counter or were tagged as unhealthy by the creator.

The participants' reactions to the videos were measured using a variety of assessment tools. Intent to diet was measured using the Dieting Intentions Scale (DIS), body dissatisfaction was measured on the visual analog scales (VAS), social comparison was measured based on the Tiggemann and McGill (2004) State Appearance Comparison Scale, and mood was rated using the Positive and Negative Affect Scale, extended version (PANAS-X). Watching high-calorie #whatIeatinaday videos was correlated with a positive effect on body image, increased mood, increased downward social comparison, and increased intention to diet. Downward social comparison refers to comparing yourself to others you believe are worse off than you (Drivas et al., 2024). While it can boost self-esteem, it can make people arrogant and negatively impact social relationships.

Watching high-calorie videos had some positive effects, since there was a positive effect on body image and mood. However, there were also adverse effects, since watching the videos was associated with increased intention to diet. Watching lower-calorie #whatIeatinaday videos was associated with decreased mood, poorer

body image, greater upward social comparison, and decreased intention to diet (Drivas et al., 2024).

These results confirm findings by Davey and colleagues (2024), which suggest that watching #whatIeatinaday videos can influence a person's diet and body image. However, extending prior research, it suggests that the content matters. While previous studies suggest that comparing oneself to someone who is eating a small amount of food would increase dieting behaviours, these results suggest that it discourages them. Conversely, comparing oneself to someone who is eating large amounts of food seems to increase the desire to diet. Perhaps the focus on the unhealthy nature of eating large amounts influences viewers.

These results suggest that if medical professionals wanted to set up an online community to help their patients recover, videos with high-calorie consumption shouldn't be included because they might increase disordered eating, and videos with low-calorie consumption shouldn't be included because they might result in reduced body image. Both styles of videos result in social comparison, which is related to poorer mental health (Ruan et al., 2023).

The Positive Impact of Social Media

Although certain types of social media content can have a negative impact on mental health, it is possible to use social media in a positive way. Eichhorn (2008) found that popular online support groups for people with eating disorders offered significant support for people in recovery. This research could be applied to #whatIeatinaday videos because it shows the possible benefits of social media on mental health. #whatIeatinaday videos could be altered to fulfill a similar role that these support groups provide.

These online support groups communicated through emails and discussion boards. Members of the group asked for and gave support by talking about shared experiences, asking for information, and making self-deprecating comments. While self-deprecating comments are generally considered negative, participants in this study often used them to communicate

how they are feeling and to try to get reassurance.

Eichhorn (2008) evaluated the amount of informational support, defined as providing assistance or guidance with a problem, and instrumental support, defined as offering resources. Most messages provide informational support than instrumental support. The members of the online community tackled shared experiences. Many of the messages were encouraging others to get better. The researchers also found that these groups were used to develop and maintain online social relationships.

The participants said that this type of social support was helpful because they could talk about sensitive topics, but since they were anonymous, they did not get embarrassed (Eichhorn, 2008). Even though social media usage often encourages disordered eating behaviour, groups like this can help people in their journey to recovery.

Medical professionals could work on developing a more organised platform designed to encourage recovery. However, although offering support and encouraging others to get better might be beneficial, these groups could also cause problems. For example, self-deprecating remarks or sharing information could encourage disordered eating behaviours. Therefore, if medical professionals do want to utilise online groups and social media posts, they should closely monitor what is being posted and shared.

While there are problems associated with #whatIeatinaday posts, they could be used as informational support, to show what life is like in recovery or what normal eating behaviours are. #whatIeatinaday posts could be used as a visual guide for healthy eating behaviours and could be used to show what healthy eating looks like in a way that feels more realistic and applicable to the patient's lives. If the videos showed examples of people who recovered, they could be more useful as inspiration for patients. #whatIeatinaday posts could be useful for sources of information and inspiration for patients.

A recent study examined the effect of body positive content on people in recovery (Pendleton-Cole, 2022). This research on the impact of social media could be applied to

#whatleatinaday content, if this content were made into body positivity content. Body positivity content revolves around talking about feeling good about one's body, and the impact of society on body image.

The researcher had participants take part in semi-structured interviews about their experiences on social media and their recovery. The interviews were focused on their experiences with body positivity content. The themes present in the interviews were identified (Pendleton-Cole, 2022).

Peer support on social media was found to have both positive and negative consequences for people struggling with an eating disorder. It normalized the experiences, providing motivation for recovery and insight into what recovery is like. However, there was also a risk of seeing triggering content or engaging with content that could make the disorder worse.

Social media was seen as a space to find resources, learn about the personal nature of recovery, and receive education on recovery. (Pendleton-Cole, 2022). If #whatleatinaday videos are used to help patients, any content shown would need to be strictly regulated. #whatleatinaday videos could be used as a form of peer support.

Providing insight into what recovery looks like might be beneficial because the idea of recovery might be scary for some people. For example, if they can't picture what it would be like or might make assumptions that their life will be much worse if they recover. Normalizing eating behaviour is an important part of treatment.

Many people develop a fear of high-fat food and are often engaged in restrictive eating such as food avoidance (Hansson et al., 2011). Therefore, normalizing eating a variety of food, including high-fat food, might be beneficial. Normalizing recovery and a healthy relationship with food is important to create positive associations with recovery and to offset the impact of social media that normalizes restriction.

Types of Social Media Use

Using social networking sites is linked to poor body image, poor self-esteem and eating disorders. Participants in a recent study

completed a survey that measured social media usage, problematic social media usage, body image, self-esteem, eating disorder symptoms, and body image concerns. (Santarossa & Woodruff, 2017). Problematic social media use was associated with lower body image, lower self-esteem, and higher eating disorder symptoms/concerns. Overall, general social media use was not related to body image or self-esteem, but it was related to higher eating disorder symptoms/concerns (Santarossa & Woodruff, 2017).

Since social media use is related to disordered eating behaviours, it makes sense that content that discusses food, often in a restrictive way, would increase disordered eating behaviours and have a negative effect on mental health. It follows that if people develop a reliance on social media, they would be more affected by it.

To neutralize the effects of problematic social media use or prevent it from becoming problematic in the first place, precautions should be put in place. To help reduce the reliance on social media, perhaps face-to-face interactions and offline hobbies should be encouraged, so that people don't rely solely on social media to meet their socializing and entertainment needs.

Implications

Any videos used by medical professionals would have to be screened for misinformation. Perhaps patients could be provided with training, in the form of educational videos, to recognize misinformation, to help them in the future. For instance, they could be provided with education on common misconceptions surrounding restrictive eating with credible sources. Credible sources should be science-based, objective, and transparent. For example, these videos could share information about how many calories people need to remain healthy and the dangers of malnutrition.

Videos could be made by nutritionists, therapists, or people in recovery. These content creators could explain why they avoid highly restrictive diets in their own lives. They could also give suggestions for eating a balanced diet without being highly restrictive or obsessive.

If the videos included citations from well-known and credible organizations, such as the World Health Organization, they might be seen as more credible. The creators could also bring attention to the credibility of the information they are sharing and explain the lack of credibility of the information often shared by content creators who are not healthcare professionals.

Conclusion

#WhatIEatinaday videos can increase disordered eating behaviours in people who watch them; however, these videos could be used by medical professionals to improve mental health if proper precautions are taken. Factors such as moralization, authenticity, misinformation, and the content of the videos can influence the impact these videos have on mental health. Online content can do harm or good depending on how it is used.

To limit the effects of moralisation, any videos provided by medical professionals should avoid moralizing language such as good and bad. The meals in the videos shouldn't be abnormally low-calorie or abnormally high-calorie, to prevent a negative impact on body image and eating behaviours. To use the benefits of authenticity and connection with the creator, videos should be casual and non-clinical. Patients should be educated on how to spot misinformation on social media. Any videos used should only include credible information. The content of the videos shouldn't include information that might increase restriction or negatively impact mental health. Any medical

professional who uses these videos should also closely monitor the patient's response to prevent possible negative effects of watching the videos. Medical professionals should also put limits on the amount of time patients should spend with the videos to minimize the negative impacts of social media.

If the videos seemed more authentic, the patients might feel more connected to the content and therefore would be more affected by it. If the content creators talked about their experiences with disordered eating, it might help build a connection with the patients. Connection is important to people, but many patients might not feel comfortable talking about their experiences either with people they know or with people they might not know who have had similar experiences. These videos could provide a connection with someone who has a similar experience while maintaining the anonymity of the patient.

However, while social media can provide a connection with others, including a connection with people who have similar experiences, it doesn't replace face-to-face connections. Therefore, patients should be encouraged to interact with people in real life as well.

Future studies could investigate the long-term impact of body positive #whatieatinaday videos on both causing and recovering from disordered eating. Future research could also investigate whether content that focuses on eating a balanced and non-restrictive diet has a negative impact on moods, self-esteem, and body image. Although it doesn't erase the negative impacts of social media on mental health, it is comforting to know that it might also be beneficial for disordered eating.

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