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*Short communication*

# Social media use and eating disorder risk among young people in North Macedonia

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## Introduction

Eating disorders are serious conditions that affect both physical and mental health and can lead to significant long-term consequences (American Psychiatric Association). Their prevalence has been increasing, particularly among adolescents and young adults. At the same time, the development of the internet has made social media an integral part of everyday life, with young people being the most frequent users (Franchina and Lo Coco, 2018).

Social media platforms expose users to a large amount of visual content, often promoting idealized body standards and unrealistic perceptions of appearance. Through mechanisms such as social comparison and the internalization of these ideals, individuals may develop body dissatisfaction and unhealthy eating behaviors, which are associated with an increased risk of eating disorders (Dane and Bhatia, 2023; Franchina and Lo Coco, 2018). Therefore, the aim of this study was to examine the association between social media use and eating disorder risk among young people in North Macedonia.

## Materials and methods

A quantitative cross-sectional study was conducted to investigate the association between social media use and eating disorder risk among young people in North Macedonia. The study aimed to identify potential correlations between the frequency of social media use, body image perception, and eating habits, as well as to explore attitudes toward dietary regimes, use of food supplements, and awareness of risks related to social media content. Data were collected using a structured online questionnaire distributed between June and August 2025. The study included 163 participants aged ≥ 15 years, primarily adolescents and young adults living in North Macedonia. The survey was administered via Google Forms and distributed through social media platforms (Instagram, WhatsApp, Telegram). Participation was voluntary and anonymous.

The questionnaire consisted of 37 questions organized into several sections covering demographic characteristics, social media use, body image, eating behaviors, dietary practices, and awareness of potential risks associated with social media content. Most items were Likert-scale based, allowing the construction of composite variables for key domains, including social media use (independent variable), body image, and eating behaviors (dependent variables).

Descriptive statistics were used to summarize participant characteristics and response patterns, while correlation analysis was performed to examine

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relationships between social media use, body image, and eating-related behaviors.

## Results and discussion

The study sample consisted of 61.3% female and 38.7% male participants. The majority of participants (66.3%) were aged between 19 and 23 years, followed by 17.8% aged 15–18 years and 16% above 23 years. This indicates that the sample was primarily composed of adolescents and young adults, a group considered at increased risk for developing eating disorders. The results showed that nearly half of the participants had followed a dietary regime at least occasionally. The most common patterns were high-protein diets, intermittent fasting, and ketogenic diets, reflecting current trends widely promoted on social media. Social media was also identified as the main source of information (34.4%), followed by general internet sources and recommendations from friends and family, while consultation with health professionals was relatively low (10.4%). In addition, 46% of participants reported adjusting their macronutrient intake based on recommendations seen on social media, indicating a direct influence on eating behaviors. Regarding supplement use, 28.8% reported regular use and 48.5% occasional use. Notably, a large proportion of participants reported not consulting a healthcare professional before using supplements, highlighting a potential risk related to uninformed decision-making. Despite these behaviors, participants demonstrated a relatively high level of awareness regarding the potential risks associated with social media content ($M = 4.29$, $SD = 1.06$). Most respondents agreed that not all online information is reliable and that dietary advice without professional consultation may be harmful. However, an inconsistency was observed between awareness and actual behavior, as many participants still engaged in practices influenced by social media without professional guidance.

Correlation analysis revealed a statistically significant positive association between social media use and body image dissatisfaction ($r = 0.26$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that higher levels of social media use were associated with more negative body image. Similarly, a statistically significant positive correlation was found between social media use and disordered eating behaviors ($r = 0.24$, $p = 0.0018$).

These findings are consistent with previous research showing that exposure to idealized body standards and diet-related content on social media may negatively influence young individuals (Dane and Bhatia, 2023). Based on distorted body image perceptions leading to unhealthy eating, Suhag and Rauniyar (2024) highlighted the need for targeted interventions and educational programs aimed at improving body image among youth in the context of social media influence.

## Conclusion

The findings of this study indicate a statistically significant, although weak, positive association between social media use and both body image dissatisfaction and disordered eating behaviors among young people in North Macedonia. These results suggest that increased exposure to social media content may be linked to negative perceptions of body image and unhealthy eating patterns. In this context, body image dissatisfaction and disordered eating behaviors can be considered important risk factors for the development of clinically significant eating disorders. Overall, the findings highlight the importance of promoting critical evaluation of media content, as well as the need for targeted educational and preventive strategies aimed at reducing the potential negative impact of social media on young populations.

## References

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