

Harmful or Helpful? A Comparative Analysis of News Depictions Concerning New Media and Eating Disorders

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Amid a landscape of technological change and growing concerns about the prevalence of eating disorders, news coverage has increasingly highlighted the impact of new media technologies on these conditions. In this qualitative study, using mixed methods of data analysis, we examined how new media technologies were depicted in news coverage regarding eating disorders in the United States and the United Kingdom between 2010 and 2019. In both countries, depictions of new media as harmful were more likely when articles referenced the Internet, predominantly due to the emphasis on pro-eating disorders and unrealistic beauty ideals among these stories. New media were depicted as helpful, particularly when articles referenced social media, as these platforms were portrayed as facilitating eating disorder online activism and recovery. We show how news coverage of these technologies changed over time as news stories, especially in the United States, moved away from the pessimistic coverage of the early 2010s to a more nuanced picture.

Keywords: news coverage, new media, eating disorders, comparative analysis

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Eating disorders have afflicted society for many years, resulting in serious physical and psychological harm (Galmiche, Déchelotte, Lambert, & Tavalacci, 2019). For decades, scholars have sought to understand how the media influences the prevalence of eating disorders through the widespread dissemination of unattainable standards of beauty using mass media (Ata, Schaefer, & Thompson, 2015; Hussin, Frazier, & Thompson, 2011). More recently, new media technologies, which are understood as digital forms of communication, have allowed users—including people suffering from eating disorders—to actively produce media content rather than merely observe it, engaging with other users online through posts, likes, comments, and shares (Bardone-Cone & Cass, 2007; Ging & Garvey, 2018; Holland & Tiggemann, 2016).

Over the past decade, eating disorders have become a core mental health preoccupation (Galmiche et al., 2019). Thus, examining the perceived impact of these new forms of media, in terms of both the effects and capabilities afforded by these technologies, on eating disorders is crucial. Scholarship has typically approached this by looking at the impact of exposure to pro-eating disorder content online (Bardone-Cone & Cass, 2007; Ging & Garvey, 2018), the effects of social media on eating disorders (Andsager, 2014; Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016), and the role of social comparisons in body image issues (Vartanian & Dey, 2013). More recent work addresses the rise of body positivity (Ando, Giorgianni, Danthinne, & Rodgers, 2021; Vandenbosch, Fardouly, & Tiggemann, 2022) and eating disorder recovery on social media (LaMarre & Rice, 2017). Looking at the evolution of new media technologies over the last decade, especially concerning eating disorders, provides crucial insights into the impacts of the digital revolution (Castells, 2000; van Dijk, 2006), given the various preoccupations that arise with each new iteration of these technologies (Marwick, 2008).

Moreover, scholarship has inquired into portrayals of eating disorders in newspapers, as they highlight and shape public perceptions of these conditions (O'Hara & Smith, 2007). Echoing clinical research on sociocultural contributors to eating disorders, past studies have shown how news coverage has implicated "the media" themselves in the uptick of these conditions through the imposition of unrealistic beauty ideals, with a growing interest in the role of the Internet in the late 2000s (O'Hara & Smith, 2007; Shepherd & Seale, 2010). However, these analyses preceded the proliferation of new media technologies, such as social media, which have also drawn considerable attention in relation to eating disorders and complicated previous assumptions about the top-down relationship between "the media" and audiences, as users have become crucial contributors to content production through these innovations. Here, we extend prior research to study how news media have depicted the impact of new media technologies (e.g., the Internet, blogs, and social media) on eating disorders at a time of rapid technological change.

This qualitative study uses mixed methods of data analysis to examine a decade of news coverage (2010–2019) about new media technologies and eating disorders in the United States (U.S.) and the United Kingdom (UK)—countries with similar social, cultural, and economic structures (Harlow, 2019) yet different journalistic traditions and healthcare systems (Figenschou, Thorbjørnsrud, & Hallin, 2023). This comparative research design (Harlow, 2019; Peng, 2008), spanning 10 years and two countries, enables us to examine prominent themes in news coverage about the impact of new media technologies on eating disorders and how they vary across national contexts and time. We show how news interest and concern evolved with changing technologies and how different journalistic cultures shaped evolving depictions of new media as harmful or helpful. This is important, as news narratives not only mold what public discourses emerge

around these topics but also reflect trends and anxieties around health and technology (Nelkin, 1995), which can in turn shape societal responses to these technologies and shared understandings of eating disorders.

Conceptual Framework

Media and Eating Disorders

Sociocultural approaches to eating disorders have long emphasized the role of traditional media in perpetuating the beauty ideals implicated in the development of eating disorders. Focus has been placed on environmental elements that individuals frequently encounter, emphasizing ubiquitous exposure to body-centric images and messages on mass media, such as television, magazines, and the Internet (Ata et al., 2015; Brown & Witherspoon, 2002; Hussin et al., 2011). Such research has argued that the internalization of socially constructed standards of beauty through these mediums can have strong ramifications for individuals' body dissatisfaction, the tendency to compare their appearance to subjects represented in media, and the development of eating disorders (Ata et al., 2015; Groesz, Levine, & Murnen, 2002). Examining new media within this discourse is important because the growing reliance on technologies can impact the quantity and quality of social relationships (van Dijk, 2006). The capacity of new media technologies to bring worlds together with the click of a button is made possible through features such as integration, interactivity, and digital code, impacting various social spheres, as technology plays an essential role in framing the relationships of this experience (Castells, 2000; van Dijk, 2006).

Concerns about the negative relationship between media and eating disorders have extended into more recent literature that focuses on new media technologies, including the Internet, blogs, and social media. The substantial growth of the Internet at the start of the past decade marked a dramatic shift from the era of mass media, as information could be disseminated and accessed at faster speeds, with more ease, and by larger numbers of people than ever before. This raised concerns, as observers noted how some users began creating websites and blogs to promote harmful behaviors. Some scholars have argued that online pro-eating disorder messages on the Internet (i.e., Pro-Ana, Pro-Mia) are dangerous in promoting extreme thinness (Bardone-Cone & Cass, 2007; Ging & Garvey, 2018). Moreover, this was further amplified on social media through online trends encouraging the distribution of images that promoted thin body ideals (i.e., #Thinspiration, #Fitspiration, #ThighGap), which was feared to foster dangerous ideals of thinness as social standards of beauty (Ging & Garvey, 2018; Griffiths et al., 2018). Exposure to such content on social media has been associated with high rates of internalization of body image disturbances and eating pathologies (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016; Holland & Tiggemann, 2016).

Parallel to this scholarship emphasizing the potentially deleterious consequences of new media on eating disorders, some work has begun to explore the more positive potential of new media (Rodgers, Paxton, & Wertheim, 2021). More specifically, eating disorder literature has broadened from focusing almost exclusively on social media's perceived harmful effects on body image, self-esteem, and eating disorders to also considering more beneficial uses as tools to raise awareness about these conditions (Viguria et al., 2020), subvert ideals around health and beauty (Ross Arguedas, 2022), and provide recovery assistance (LaMarre & Rice, 2017; Pereira, Quinn, & Morales, 2016). These notions exist alongside a large body of scholarship documenting the value of online support for illness experiences (Coulson, Buchanan, & Aubeeluck, 2007; Rubenstein, 2009; van

Uden-Kraan et al., 2008), especially in the context of highly stigmatized conditions such as eating disorders (Bowen, Lovell, & Waller, 2022; Kendal, Kirk, Elvey, Catchpole, & Prymachuk, 2017), where social media platforms can enable constructive conversations surrounding body image and eating disorders (Santarossa, Lacasse, Larocque, & Woodruff, 2019).

Within this renewed focus on the role and use of technology concerning eating disorders, it is important to recognize how new media differ from traditional media. Not only do they have different forms of gatekeeping due to their participatory nature (Carpentier, Dahlgren, & Pasquali, 2013; McCombs, 2005), but they also have different technological affordances, such as “immediacy, mobility, and wide dissemination” (Ingraham & Reeves, 2016, p. 462) and “low anonymity and high visibility” (Yeshua-Katz & Hård af Segerstad, 2020, p. 1) that ultimately shape user engagement. In addition, they are believed to have a heavy social and networked character (Marwick & Boyd, 2014; Wellman, Boase, & Chen, 2002), which problematizes prior conceptions of what and who make up “the media” (Gurevitch, Bennett, Curran, & Woollacott, 1982). Given the variety of tools provided through new media technologies in the current environment, different discourses arise in the literature regarding how various forms of media, both old and new, are viewed in relation to eating disorders (Andsager, 2014; Holland & Tiggemann, 2016; Seale, 2002).

Depictions of New Media Technologies

The concern about new technologies contributing to eating pathologies echoes the longstanding tradition of alarmist public discourses amid technological change (Carey, 1967). This pattern is exemplified by Marwick’s (2008) concept of “technopanic,” which is understood as a moral preoccupation centered around the specific impact of new media technologies. It is characteristic of pathologizing young people’s use of these technologies and controlling their behavior. With eating disorders, concerns about new media are often associated with vulnerable young people—especially women—at risk of developing body image issues and disordered eating tendencies (Day & Keys, 2009; Firkins, Twist, Solomons, & Keville, 2019; Yeshua-Katz & Martins, 2013). These moral concerns tend to be linked to gender-specific cultural stereotyping (Leon & Finn, 1984; Tantleff-Dunn, Barnes, & Larose, 2011), wide access to the Internet (Facer, 2012), and technological affordances as drivers of interactions online (Ingraham & Reeves, 2016). Scholarship has shown a change from solely considering new media technologies, especially the Internet, as harming users through the promotion of unhealthy imagery and habits (Holland & Tiggemann, 2016; Rodgers, 2016) to acknowledging their mobilizing potential, especially social media, in the dissemination of body positivity messages and eating disorder awareness (Rao & Lingam, 2021; Zavattaro, 2021). According to Marwick (2008), these new media technologies are not entirely new in an objective sense, but “each new panic develops as if it were the first time such issues have been debated in public and yet the debates are strikingly similar” (“Technopanics,” para. 4). This cyclical nature is illustrated by Orben’s (2020) work, which stresses that technological innovation and its accompanying concerns fluctuate from the widespread adoption of the new technology, where people familiarize themselves with innovations and collective action through regulation to mitigate the societal problems that arise (Mitchelstein, Matassi, & Boczkowski, 2020). It is valuable to examine journalistic depictions of the negative or positive impact of new media on eating disorders and how this has changed over time, given that news media have been identified as key brokers in these alarmist public narratives (Drotner, 1999; McRobbie & Thornton, 1995).

News coverage is considered a force within the public realm due to its potential to affect public attitudes and beliefs (Grabe, Ward, & Hyde, 2008; Huws & Jones, 2011; Wahl, 1995); for many people, “the reality of science is what they read in the press” (Nelkin, 1995, p. 2). Thus, the literature has examined mental health representations in the news, specifically focusing on portrayals of eating disorders (O’Hara & Smith, 2007; Shepherd & Seale, 2010). This coverage tends to fault media more generally for the increase in eating disorder incidence rates, as users are constantly exposed to images glorifying thin ideals and idealized notions of beauty (Bishop, 2001; Holland & Tiggemann, 2016; Mondini, Favaro, & Santonastaso, 1996; O’Hara & Smith, 2007; Shepherd & Seale, 2010). Emphasis has been placed on the heightened role of the Internet within news coverage of eating disorders (Shepherd & Seale, 2010), but this is not the sole focus of this study. This presents a gap in the scope of previous studies, especially as depictions of science and technology in the news “are often shifting, reflecting current fashions and prevailing fears” (Nelkin, 1995, p. 63). Examining preoccupations about the risks of new technologies on the onset of eating disorders provides a compelling empirical and theoretical case for observing technopanics within context. Understanding how journalistic depictions of new media technologies shape eating disorders is crucial to placing public discourses of technological development within context and examining how their various uses are perceived to impact eating disorders more negatively or positively over time.

This study examines variations over time in how coverage in the US and the UK depicted the impact of new media technologies on eating disorders and the various narratives that emerge alongside different types of new media. Following Shepherd and Seale (2010), we used a comparative research design to identify how news coverage across the two countries varied. The US and the UK prove to be interesting countries for comparison, given the commonalities in their levels of economic, political, and cultural development, which facilitate the examination of diverse patterns and variations in public health discourses across media contexts (Harlow, 2019; Mitchelstein & Boczkowski, 2009). More specifically, these countries have similar levels of Internet penetration (Ritchie, Mathieu, Roser, & Ortiz-Ospina, 2015); usage of social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram (Newman, Fletcher, Kalogeropoulos, & Nielsen, 2019); and eating disorder incidence rates (National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders [ANAD], 2021; Royal College of Psychiatrists, 2012). However, there are important differences between the UK and U.S. news landscapes, including the more prominent role of tabloids in the UK news setting, which Shepherd and Seale (2010) previously found to be a key driver of eating disorder coverage. Thus, it is important to examine news coverage of these topics within both national contexts, as it is pivotal to how publics understand the role of new media technologies in shaping larger discourses of moral preoccupations and health.

Technological developments have revolutionized the media landscape, raising concerns about their impact on society at large (Goggin, 2012). How the news media covers these changes is important to shaping public understandings of health and technology (Nisbet et al., 2002; Walker & Viaña, 2023), which in turn may impact how the public responds to these technologies, both at a societal (e.g., regulation) and individual level (e.g., media use). While news coverage is hardly the sole source of public information about new technologies in the current media environment—especially technologies people have first-hand experience using—journalistic discourse about these topics can still inform how people think about new technologies, including perceptions of the risks and ethical dilemmas they pose for society (Nguyen, 2023; Nisbet et al., 2002; Takahashi & Tandoc, 2016; Wilson, Bonevski, Jones, & Henry, 2009).

This study aims to examine news coverage about the purported impact of new media technologies on eating disorders—conditions that have long been associated with unrealistic body ideals in legacy media. Building on the comparative study by Shepherd and Seale (2010), we seek to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: How did news coverage in the U.S. and the UK between 2010 and 2019 portray the impact of new media technologies on eating disorders?

RQ2: How did these depictions vary between the two countries over time?

Methodology

This qualitative study used mixed methods of data analysis to examine 10 years of news coverage ($N = 1,261$) within the U.S. ($N = 626$) and the UK ($N = 635$). We analyzed articles published between 2010 and 2019, given this period's centrality in the innovation and adoption of new media technologies and versatility in tracking developments in news media content over time (Goggin, 2012). We systematically collected data from Nexis Uni that met the inclusion criteria (Nexis Uni, n.d.), comprising a subset of 20% of randomly selected sample articles from the UK, given the large volume collected, to make it comparable to the U.S. sample size. Inclusion criteria constituted the requirement of keywords in articles containing both an eating disorder term and a new media technology term.² In addition, news publications included newspapers, web-based publications, and magazines. We excluded listings, letters to the editor, transcripts, journal publications, and duplicate texts published by the same news outlet.

First, and following a preliminary reading of the articles, we conducted a content analysis of news coverage in both countries and systematically coded key features of each article, including the year of publication, the type of new media referenced (e.g., Internet, blogs, and social media platforms), and the valence of the article. By valence, we refer to whether the article depicted the impact of new media technologies on eating disorders as fundamentally negative (i.e., harmful impact), positive (i.e., helpful impact), or neutral (not establishing an impact or having a mixed impact). For example, articles focusing on new media as technologies that enable the promotion of eating disorders (e.g., Pro-Ana and Pro-Mia) or the proliferation of unrealistic beauty ideals were coded as negative. Articles focusing on these technologies as tools facilitating eating disorder recovery and body positivity content were coded as positive. Articles that did not establish an impact or address both positive and negative impacts were coded as neutral. Then, for the logistic regression model, we collapsed the valence variable into negative and non-negative. Given that the media effects literature emphasizes the negative association between new media technologies and eating disorders, we recoded the variable to reflect this (Bardone-Cone & Cass, 2007; Holland & Tiggemann, 2016). Logistic regression assumes a balance between categories, which was achieved by converting it into a dichotomous variable predicting

² Search queries in Nexis Uni included "eating disorder" OR "anorexia" OR "bulimia" OR "binge eating disorder" for the eating disorder term, and "social media" OR "social network" OR "Facebook" OR "Instagram" OR "Twitter" OR "Snapchat" OR "YouTube" OR "Internet" OR "WhatsApp" for the new media term. This method is in line with search procedures utilized by O'Hara and Smith (2007) and Shepherd and Seale (2010).

negative valence, allowing us to target results that align with this literature and foster proper model functionality while maximizing statistical power in our sample (Hoffmann, 2016).

Second, we fit two logistic regression models using Stata statistical software. *Negative article valence* put forth by the article about the perceived impact of new media on eating disorders was operationalized as the key binary outcome variable. For this analysis, we specified non-negative valence as the base category, including neutral and positive valence, as preliminary analyses did not indicate significant differences between these two valence types. Furthermore, we selected *article year* as the key predictor variable and the *Internet*, *blogs*, and *social media platforms* as additional covariates to examine the influence of these factors on an article containing negative article valence over time and within different types of new media technologies.

Finally, we examined prominent narratives in the coverage of both countries associated with negative and non-negative depictions of new media as they relate to eating disorders. We used MAXQDA software to code and categorize the most common patterns in the coverage, using an inductive approach to analyze the nuances on either side of the valence spectrum (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008).

Results

Quantitative Analysis

Throughout the decade and across national contexts, we saw substantial growth in news coverage that discussed both new media and eating disorders. Table 1 shows news publications from 2010 to 2019 in the United States ($M = 2016.11$, $SD = 2.23$) and the United Kingdom ($M = 2016.11$, $SD = 2.23$). Overall, the news coverage depicted the impact of new media on eating disorders as predominantly negative: 50.3% ($N = 315$) in the United States and 48.8% ($N = 310$) in the United Kingdom (see Table 2). Table 3 shows the frequency of new media technologies referenced in the coverage.

Table 1. Frequency Table for Article Year.

	United States			United Kingdom		
	Freq.	Percent	Cum.	Freq.	Percent	Cum.
2010	7	1.12	1.12	14	2.20	2.20
2011	10	1.60	2.72	14	2.20	4.41
2012	24	3.83	6.55	36	5.67	10.08
2013	47	7.51	14.06	40	6.30	16.38
2014	72	11.50	25.56	58	9.13	25.51
2015	74	11.82	37.38	87	13.70	39.21
2016	88	14.06	51.44	86	13.54	52.76
2017	103	16.45	67.89	97	15.28	68.03
2018	93	14.86	82.75	87	13.70	81.73
2019	108	17.25	100.00	116	18.27	100.00
Total	626	100.00		635	100.00	

Table 2. Frequency Table for Article Valence.

	United States			United Kingdom		
	Freq.	Percent	Cum.	Freq.	Percent	Cum.
Negative	315	50.32	50.32	310	48.82	48.82
Neutral	216	34.50	84.82	243	38.27	87.09
Positive	95	15.18	100.00	82	12.91	100.00
Total	626	100.00		635	100.00	

Table 3. Frequency Table for New Media Referenced in Articles.

	United States		United Kingdom	
	Freq.	Percent	Freq.	Percent
Internet	166	26.52	183	28.82
Blogs	107	17.09	102	16.06
Social Media Platforms	437	69.81	432	68.03

Table 4 displays results for the two logistic regression models carried out in this study, showing coefficients (β) in odds ratios and average marginal effects (AME) at observed values for each predictor. First, we quantitatively examined how the valence of the perceived impact of new media on eating disorders in news coverage changed over time, from 2010 to 2019, and across national contexts. In the US, results show a statistically significant negative outcome, indicating that on average, a one-unit increase in article year is associated with a 2-percentage point decrease in the probability of the article having a negative valence ($AME = -0.02$, $p < 0.05$). This is illustrated by a stark shift from negative to more positive valence between 2015 and 2016, as seen in Figure 1. As of 2016, articles shifted their primary focus from positioning new media as solely having a negative impact on eating disorders to acknowledging more beneficial outcomes or considering both the negative and positive potentials of these technologies throughout the remainder of the decade. On the other hand, the effect of article year was not statistically significant in the United Kingdom, as article valence remained more stable over time (see Figure 1).

Table 4. Logistic Regression Models Predicting Negative Article Valence in the News Coverage, Expressed in Odds Ratios (β), With Average Marginal Effects (AME).

	United States ($N = 626$)		United Kingdom ($N = 635$)	
	β	AME	β	AME
Article Year	0.92* (0.036)	-0.02* (0.009)	0.99 (0.039)	-0.003 (0.009)
Internet	2.09*** (0.43)	0.17*** (0.046)	3.22*** (0.69)	0.25*** (0.04)
Blogs	0.98 (0.23)	-0.004 (0.055)	1.10 (0.25)	0.02 (0.05)
Social Media Platforms	0.54*** (0.098)	-0.15*** (0.041)	0.37*** (0.071)	-0.21*** (0.038)
Pseudo R^2	0.044		0.100	
AIC	839.7		802.3	

Note. Standard errors are in parentheses, and coefficients are in odds ratios.

* $p < 0.05$. ** $p < 0.01$. *** $p < 0.001$.

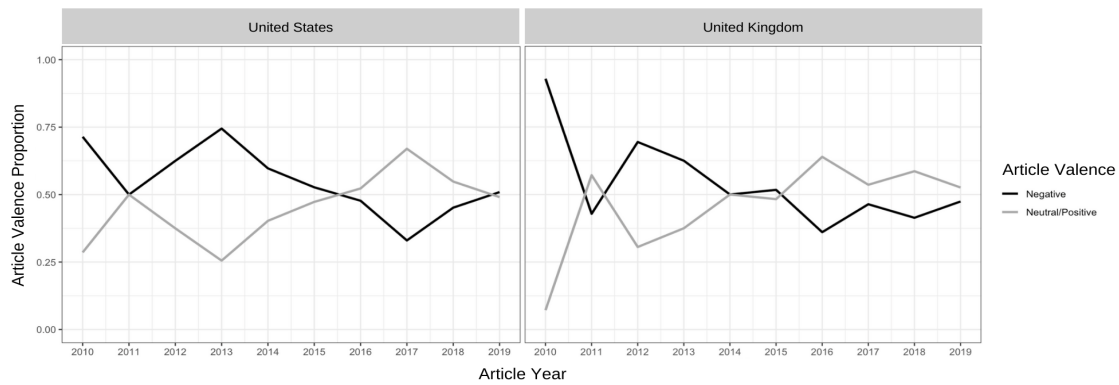


Figure 1. Valence of news coverage over time in the United States and the UK.

Second, we examined whether specific new media technologies concentrated more on articles with a negative or positive valence. Results in both countries show that having the *Internet* referenced in the article is a statistically significant predictor of negative article valence. On average, having the Internet referenced is associated with a 17-percentage point increase in the probability of the article having a negative valence in the US ($AME = 0.17, p < 0.001$) and a 25-percentage point increase in the United Kingdom ($AME = 0.25, p < 0.001$). Subsequently, the effects of *blogs* were not statistically significant in either country. Furthermore, the results in both countries show statistically significant differences in having *social media platforms* referenced in the article. On average, having social media referenced is associated with a 15-percentage point decrease in the probability of the article having a negative valence in the United States ($AME = -0.15, p < 0.001$) and a 21-percentage point decrease in the UK ($AME = -0.21, p < 0.001$).

Qualitative Analysis

We expand on these quantitative findings with a qualitative content analysis to illustrate the specific journalistic narratives arising around new media as having a negative or positive impact on eating disorders. We show that these technologies in both countries were frequently depicted as harmful when referencing the Internet more generally and as helpful when referencing social media.

New Media as Harmful

The Internet was predominantly portrayed as harmful because of its presumed contribution to eating disorders through the dissemination of pro-eating disorder content and unrealistic beauty ideals.

Articles in both countries addressed the nuances and implications of pro-eating disorder content, which promoted and glorified eating disorders. In U.S. coverage, images in pro-eating disorder sites served as “thinspiration . . . meant to serve as motivation on the quest for skin and bones” (Enayati, 2012, para. 14). The president and CEO of the National Eating Disorders Association particularly described this content as “very, very dangerous” (Chernikoff, 2011, para. 4) because it promoted eating disorders through a “growing community of anorexics and bulimics . . . [that used] the Web to encourage each other to starve themselves, vomit after

eating, and over-exercise” (Auxier, 2012, para. 3). Wide accessibility and heightened exposure to this content on the Internet was a big concern, as “when searching ‘thinspiration’ on Google, one comes across many websites with the word ‘pro-ana’ attached” (Chenoweth, 2014, para. 6).

Similarly, articles in the United Kingdom depicted pro-eating disorder content on the Internet as “popular among a secret community of body obsessives and self-starvers, ‘thinspo’ websites . . . yet another example of the Internet’s darker side” (Stroud, 2012, para. 1). Contrary to portrayals in the United States, they highlighted increased regulation as “some sites [acted] to remove content that [was] seen as dangerous” (Styles, 2013, para. 7). But there were still risks of exposure even with regulations in place, as even though “users attempting to search keywords such as ‘thinspiration’ or ‘proanorexia’ [could] no longer do so, more than 300,000 images featuring frighteningly thin women or acts of self-harm [were] still available” (Styles, 2013, para. 4).

Moreover, we found that articles in both countries highlighted the pervasive influence and repercussions of unrealistic beauty ideals. The coverage in the United States addressed that in thinspiration and fitspiration trends on the Internet, “there [was] generally only one body type represented . . . , [so] it can be so easy for people to internalize that ideal as the single way to achieve the pinnacle of beauty in our society” (Dewell, 2014, para. 10). Often, these images online “are retouched with the use of Photoshop to create an unrealistic image that many people believe represents reality” (Ianniello, 2015, para. 1). This often leads to serious consequences for younger populations by “lowering self-esteem, increasing eating disorder tendencies, and making women feel like their bodies aren’t good enough” (Summers, 2014, para. 6).

News in the United Kingdom highlighted how thinspiration trends on the Internet caused young people to become “obsessed by images they see online, particularly of women with thigh gaps . . . a sign of exquisite slimness” (Pemberton, 2015, para. 8), although most are “digitally enhanced pictures of celebrities with supposedly ‘perfect’ bodies” (Bingham, 2012, para. 3). Given that “the desirability of thinness among women . . . is undeniable” (Stroud, 2012, para. 5), this “Internet craze” (Infante, Kent-Smith, & Choudhury, 2014, para. 26) encouraging disordered eating habits to achieve the “impossible” body raised concerns (Hough, 2012, para. 7). The Internet was seen as a dangerous “gateway to websites and advertising over which parents [had] little control” (Bingham, 2012, para. 5) and could lead to “higher levels of eating disorder symptoms” (Engeln, 2017, para. 34).

New Media as Helpful

Around 2015, news coverage in both countries began to acknowledge social media as potentially helpful in supporting eating disorder awareness and recovery due to online activism and support.

Articles in both countries underscored the strong presence of online activism across digital spheres. News depictions in the United States showed young women using social media to promote body acceptance and raise awareness of eating disorders, positioning platforms as a “powerful counterweight to mainstream media messaging on beauty, fitness, and women’s bodies” (Carpenter, 2015, para. 8). These new uses were seen as opportunities to “build up the confidence within” (Schoening, 2015, para. 2) and “reject toxic

standards of beauty” (Engstrom, 2018, para. 4). In addition, the coverage commonly depicted young women sharing their experiences to “approach this sensitive topic openly and in an appropriate manner” to bring about change (Sharer, 2016, para. 26).

Similarly, coverage in the UK depicted social media as catalysts for body positivity campaigns to see bodies as “powerful and beautiful,” promoting the empowerment of “bodies [as] something to celebrate” (“Women strip to,” 2015, para. 9, 18). Moreover, users shared experiences with eating disorders on social media to raise awareness about the severity of these illnesses, as they “are one of the top killers in teenagers” (Davies, 2016, para. 13).

Furthermore, articles across countries highlighted the diverse facets of recovery support offered through various digital initiatives. The U.S. coverage acknowledged that although “social media can act as a trigger, it can also [be a] community to help individuals and their families through recovery” (Smith, 2016, para. 19). Social media accounts centering on recovery “[attracted] a wealth of comments from others with similar experiences” (Mirhashem, 2015, para. 2) and “[helped] prevent the spread of pro-ana by counteracting it with pro-recovery” (Plescher, 2019, para. 7). Starting recovery conversations in these spaces was critical, given that “online communities can be extraordinarily helpful to people struggling with these difficult conditions” (Greenfield, 2012, para. 2).

News coverage in the United Kingdom highlighted the use of social media to raise awareness, as people responding to content “had never heard of the disorder, but [thought] they might have it” (“It took me completely,” 2018, para. 27). Sharing recovery experiences ranged from showing graphic images of emaciated bodies, “[detering others] from developing eating disorders and [inspiring] those in its grips to get help” (Blott & Greatrex, 2016, para. 7), to sharing “inspirational footage” of the recovery process (O’Neill, 2015, para. 15).

Discussion

This qualitative study examined journalistic coverage of new media and eating disorders in the United States and the United Kingdom between 2010 and 2019, a period marked by rapid technological changes and growing prevalence and public awareness of eating disorders (Galmiche et al., 2019; Goggin, 2012). Findings align with existing literature highlighting the negative effects of new media on eating disorders (Bardone-Cone & Cass, 2007; Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016), as the news coverage initially and predominantly depicted the Internet as having a harmful impact on these conditions. This stems from the earlier focus on digital media, such as pro-eating disorder websites, which then gave way as social media rose in prominence. In particular, engagement with social media was seen to lead to less negative health outcomes, although it was still associated with harmful effects. The coverage acknowledged toward the end of the decade that it could also be used in constructive ways, reflecting more recent scholarly interest in the positive potential of social media to facilitate awareness-raising for eating disorders, support recovery, and subvert widely held ideals of beauty and health (LaMarre & Rice, 2017; Ross Arguedas, 2022; Santarossa et al., 2019). This change in focus was more evident in the United States, as the coverage began emphasizing more positive practices around recovery and body diversity on social media, while the coverage

in the UK remained more stable over time, with a combination of both negative and positive impacts of new media on eating disorders.

News coverage plays a vital role in disseminating medical knowledge and depicting crucial issues in society (McCombs & Shaw, 1972), given its ubiquity in public discourse and constant address of topics gaining public attention (Gandy, 1980). We have shown that journalistic depictions of new media technologies and eating disorders span various topics, ranging from generation and exposure to harmful content, such as pro-eating disorder and aspirational content (Ging & Garvey, 2018), to sharing personal struggles and raising awareness about these conditions (Coulson et al., 2007). Depictions of new media's impact on eating disorders have evolved, highlighting both risks and potential benefits, as users increasingly engage with these technologies in their daily lives. This enriches our understanding of the interplay between technological change, moral preoccupations, and media practices through the lens of "technopanics" (Marwick, 2008), allowing us to explore how health outcomes are conceptualized in relation to technologies across journalistic discourses.

That said, this study has important limitations. First, this analysis relies on news outlets included in the Nexis Uni database, which necessarily includes some outlets and excludes others. Second, it is limited to text-based news media content—excluding images or videos—and disproportionately represents print news relative to other formats, such as television and radio news (and their online presence), which play important roles in shaping public discourse, especially when considering the widespread reach of broadcasters like the BBC in the United Kingdom. Future research should examine how new media are seen to impact eating disorders across other types of media (e.g., television and magazines) and in other global contexts, especially in countries with different health and technology infrastructures. More broadly, it is important to understand how discourses around preoccupations with new technologies evolve alongside mental illnesses that they may directly impact, especially within a rapidly changing digital environment with shifting affordances and emerging cultural practices.

Conclusions

New media technologies have become staples in our daily lives, leading to increasingly mediated experiences of social reality and transforming the nature of our interactions with others, with important repercussions for our well-being (Andsager, 2014; Brown & Witherspoon, 2002; Couldry & Hepp, 2018; van Dijk, 2006). At the same time, how we perceive, understand, and use these technologies can be influenced by public discourse about them. This is often shaped by moral preoccupations arising alongside technological innovations, cyclically fluctuating from adoption and public familiarization with the technology to usage regulation once it has a notable societal impact (Marwick, 2008; Orben, 2020). This cross-country qualitative study has shown how media coverage has shifted over the decade from an alarmist tone to an optimistic tone when portraying the impact of new media technologies on eating disorders, which are increasingly prevalent issues in society, especially among young women.

Our work extends scholarly focus examining journalistic portrayals of eating disorders (O'Hara & Smith, 2007; Shepherd & Seale, 2010) and highlights how the perceived impact of new media technologies—and accompanying societal concerns about these conditions—fluctuated over time. Moreover, it shows how

two different media contexts shaped evolving concerns about these innovations as harmful or helpful. Ultimately, it provides a unique examination of news narratives that have the potential to influence societal reactions to new media technologies and understandings of eating disorders, highlighting the complex interplay between technology and health in the news.

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