

## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# Exploring the perceived influence of social media use on disordered eating in nutrition and dietetics students

Rebecca Law | Emily F. P. Jevons Department of Clinical Sciences and Nutrition,  
University of Chester, Chester, UK**Correspondence**Emily F. P. Jevons, Department of Clinical  
Sciences and Nutrition, University of Chester,  
Parkgate Road, Chester, CH1 4BJ, UK.  
Email: [e.jevons@chester.ac.uk](mailto:e.jevons@chester.ac.uk)**Funding information**

None

**Abstract**

**Background:** Social media use (SMU) is increasingly widespread. More recently, SMU has been associated with increases in disordered eating; however, few qualitative studies have explored this issue in nutrition and dietetics students specifically, where susceptibility to disordered eating may be particularly high. The present study therefore aimed to investigate the perceived impact of SMU on disordered eating in nutrition and dietetics students.

**Methods:** One-to-one, in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with nutrition and dietetics students from universities across the UK. Interviews explored students' views on the potential influence of SMU on their eating-related thoughts, feelings and behaviours. Data were thematically analysed to identify key themes.

**Results:** The findings suggested that SMU may provide students with a useful tool for the exploration of new recipes, ingredients and health-related information, thus enabling them to improve their eating behaviour and diet quality. However, students also showed high levels of objective awareness regarding the problems associated with SMU, including the presence of misinformation, body image dissatisfaction, social pressures and disordered eating. Interestingly, despite enabling them to detect sources of misinformation, students also discussed the negative impact that their course had on their eating habits, suggesting course content may be an additional risk factor for the development of disordered eating for this particular group.

**Conclusions:** Future research should investigate ways to mitigate the negative impact of SMU and course content on disordered eating in nutrition and dietetics students.

**KEYWORDS**

dietetics, disordered eating, nutrition, social media, students

**Key points**

- Social media use may serve students as a useful tool for the exploration of new recipes, ingredients and health-related information, thus enabling students to improve their eating behaviour and diet quality.
- Students also showed a high level of objective awareness regarding problems associated with social media use, including the presence of misinformation, body image dissatisfaction, social pressures and disordered eating.

This is an open access article under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs License, which permits use and distribution in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, the use is non-commercial and no modifications or adaptations are made.

© 2023 The Authors. *Journal of Human Nutrition and Dietetics* published by John Wiley & Sons Ltd on behalf of British Dietetic Association.

- The present study suggests that having a nutrition and dietetic background protects students from the harmful effects of social media when it comes to dietary behaviours. However, despite mitigating the risks posed by social media, the course itself was believed to negatively impact students' eating habits.
- As such, course content may be a more relevant risk factor for the development of disordered eating than social media in nutrition and dietetic students.

## INTRODUCTION

In the UK alone, over 53 million people actively use social media (SM),<sup>1</sup> with an average user spending more than 2 h on SM per day.<sup>2</sup> For those starting at university, SM engagement may be particularly high, with students using it to cope with the challenges of fitting into a new environment at the same time as maintaining existing relationships with friends and family.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, students are often encouraged to use SM as a means to connect with peers and engage in course content as part of the distance learning environment.<sup>4</sup>

However, as SM has become part of daily life for many, some have raised concerns about the impact that excessive social media use (SMU) could have on users' psychological wellbeing.<sup>5,6</sup> SMU has been shown to influence the decisions that people make,<sup>7,8</sup> and may have negative impacts on physical and psychological wellbeing more broadly.<sup>9</sup> Recently, research has also started to explore the influence of SMU on eating-related thoughts, feelings and behaviours. As such, strong correlations between SMU and disordered eating traits have been observed in young adults<sup>10</sup> and, specifically, increased time spent on Instagram and Snapchat has been strongly associated with increased disordered eating behaviours.<sup>11</sup> Thus, with 90% of 18–29 year olds being active on SM, the majority of young adults may be exposed to this potential risk.<sup>12</sup>

Disordered eating is a broad umbrella term that includes many symptoms and behaviours of eating disorders.<sup>13</sup> Behavioural signs and symptoms of disordered eating can vary between individuals, but these include food restriction, obsessive dieting, self-induced vomiting, binge-eating and laxative abuse.<sup>14</sup> Because of this wide range of potential symptoms, disordered eating has been conceptualised on a continuum between a healthy relationship with food and clinically diagnosed eating disorders,<sup>15,16</sup> with a lack of official diagnosis meaning that it is often overlooked by medical professionals.<sup>17</sup> However, despite not being classified as an eating disorder by the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders,<sup>18</sup> disordered eating still represents a significant health concern and warrants attention when it comes to prevention of more serious and potentially life-threatening eating disorders.<sup>19</sup> Accordingly, it is

important to further explore relationships between SMU and disordered eating to clarify how SMU may influence or exacerbate an individual's propensity towards unhealthy eating behaviours.

For students on nutrition or dietetics programmes, SMU could be an additional risk factor for the development of unhealthy eating behaviours because the constant exposure to conflicting ideas around food, diet, health and course content has been linked to increased paranoia and pressure around food choices.<sup>20–22</sup> Furthermore, the decision to enrol on courses may already be influenced by a desire to cope better with pre-existing disordered eating, highlighting their vulnerability.<sup>23</sup> Consequently, it is important to understand how SMU may influence eating behaviours in this population. Determining the positive and negative influences of SMU on students' eating decisions might help when guiding the promotion of healthy eating and prevention of disordered eating behaviours within student populations.

One way that SMU may increase the risk of developing disordered eating symptoms is by presenting a link between food consumption and unrealistic body image goals.<sup>24</sup> Food-related posts often convey the 'eat like me to look like me' ideology, where SM users are encouraged to follow specific dietary habits to achieve a certain body image, which in turn can result in body dissatisfaction and unfair self-assessment.<sup>24,25</sup> Providing a digital platform where users can be selective with their online self-presentation may further exacerbate upward social comparisons,<sup>26</sup> with food-related content shared by influential people probably comprising an inaccurate representation of that person's overall diet and lifestyle beyond food consumption. They might intentionally leave out foods considered 'unhealthy', thus creating unrealistic beliefs and expectations about food consumption in others.<sup>27</sup>

However, despite evidence linking SMU to negative eating thoughts, feelings and behaviours, SMU can also have a positive impact in regard to the promotion of healthy eating. Accessing recipes online provides a convenient way of expanding dietary choices and assisting in healthy meal planning among young adults aged 18–25 years.<sup>28</sup> With the option to save favourite dishes in a readily available digital format, SM can

provide a convenient alternative to the traditional cookbook through apps such as “Tasty” and “Yummly”. Furthermore, video platforms have become increasingly popular to demonstrate recipes with visual, audio and subtitle aids. These video recipes, with their step-by-step instructions and easy-to-follow format, have been shown to increase food skills and build cooking self-efficacy.<sup>29</sup> Accordingly, positive reinforcement and the endorsement of healthy eating behaviours by online peers can ‘nudge’ users towards healthier choices. It has been demonstrated that, when exposed to socially endorsed images of low- and high-energy-dense foods with ‘likes’, those exposed to heavily endorsed low-energy-dense foods, such as fruit and vegetables, consumed a larger proportion of low-energy-dense foods compared to participants in the control conditions, suggesting that the type of endorsements featured on SM platforms could cultivate healthier food choices.<sup>30</sup>

Overall, SMU may play an important role in shaping users’ eating behaviours. Although SM can engage users to maintain healthy diets and learn about nutrition, an increased exposure to image-related content could also negatively impact body image and relationships with food, which is something that may be particularly problematic among nutrition and dietetics students who can be especially susceptible to disordered eating behaviours. As such, the present study aimed to conduct semi-structured interviews with twelve nutrition and dietetics students who regularly use SM to explore the following research questions. (1) How does SMU facilitate and/or inhibit healthy eating behaviours among nutrition and dietetics students? (2) Which elements of SM platforms impact thoughts and behaviours related to food and eating? In accordance with the current literature, it was predicted that interviews would elicit themes relating to positive aspects of SMU, as well as negative aspects, which in turn would help to explain the influence of SMU on eating behaviours in nutrition and dietetics students.

## METHODS

### Ethics and recruitment strategy

Participants were recruited via not-paid-for advertisements on SM through posts and ‘stories’ (brief images or videos that are accessible for only a limited time). Participants were eligible if they were (1) aged 18–29 years; (2) a nutrition and/or dietetic student; (3) a SM user (2+ hours per day); (4) a UK resident for 5+ years; and (5) not seeking treatment for an eating disorder. After providing written consent, a one-to-one interview was arranged. Participation was anonymous and participants were assured that all personal information and interviews would be kept confidential. The study was

approved by University of Chester Ethics Committee (1828/22/RL/CSN).

### Participant characteristics

After providing informed consent, 12 nutrition and dietetics students from universities across the UK (10 females and two males, aged 18–29 years; five undergraduate and seven postgraduate students) interviews were conducted by one of the investigators (EFPJ). Seven of the participants were studying nutrition-based courses, two were studying dietetics-based courses, and three were studying a combined nutrition and dietetics course.

### Data collection

Data collection took place from March to April 2022. Interviews lasted approximately 20–30 min and were conducted over the video platform Zoom. All interviews were audio-recorded using a handheld digital voice recorder. Key notes were taken by the researcher immediately after each interview. The participant sample size was determined based on the most widely used principle of achieving data saturation.<sup>31</sup> In the present study, no new themes emerged after 12 interviews, which aligns with research suggesting that 12 qualitative interviews are sufficient to reach saturation in a relatively homogenous population.<sup>32</sup>

A semi-structured interview question guide was developed to explore the opinions and experiences related to SMU and its impact on eating behaviours. A qualitative approach was used to gain an in-depth understanding of participants’ thoughts and opinions that cannot be obtained by a quantitative approach.<sup>33</sup> The researcher conducted a pilot interview, and some minor amendments were made to the question wording and order. The interview guide consisted of open-ended questions and was followed with flexibility to generate dialogue and keep respondents on topic, at the same time as allowing probes and follow-up questions to elicit further information and clarify responses. The questions used within the present study were unique to this research but informed by previous research.<sup>34,35</sup> Because the topic under investigation is potentially sensitive in nature, one-to-one interviews were most appropriate for the study.<sup>36</sup> The initial questions were broad and open-ended to help put participants at ease, build rapport and generate rich data further into the interview.<sup>37</sup> The questions were ordered with respect to their intrusiveness; for example, the first question, “Can you tell me about your social media use?”, was non-threatening and helped establish a safe and comfortable environment for the participant to share their thoughts and experiences. Further into the interview, more sensitive questions were asked, such as, “How would you describe your

relationship with food?" These were more likely to be answered considerably than if they were used as initial questions.<sup>38</sup> The interview concluded with time for participants to ask questions and to check whether there were any other details they wanted to add.

## Data analysis

Interviews were transcribed verbatim from the audio recordings and checked for errors by one of the investigators (EFPJ). Capturing every word of the interview dialogue helps understand the emotional state and thought process behind the words spoken. Transcriptions of the interviews were imported into NVivo, a widely used tool for organising, analysing and finding insights in unstructured data in qualitative research.<sup>39</sup> Reflective thematic analysis, with a combination of both a deductive and inductive approach, was applied for data analysis to gain a more thorough understanding of the topic. The aim of this research was therefore not only to offer credible themes informed by previous research,<sup>24,28,30</sup> but also to identify novel themes to establish generativity.<sup>33</sup> This approach allowed utilisation of prior knowledge at the same time as allowing flexibility for themes to emerge from the data.

## RESULTS

Semi-structured interviews with nutrition and dietetics students provided insight into the influence of SMU on disordered eating behaviours. The major themes that arose consistently from the data were: (i) Provides inspiration and ideas; (ii) Information resource; (iii) The influence of influencers; (iv) The role of body image; and (v) Disordered eating risk.

When discussing how SMU influences their own eating behaviours, participants generally described the positive aspects within each theme, such as sourcing healthy recipes, accessing nutrition information and using influencers to motivate health-related behaviour change. Interestingly, participants described the negative impact of the nutrition and dietetics course on their eating behaviours. Instead of SMU contributing to the development of disordered eating, participants believed that the course content is a more important risk factor in this population.

### Theme 1: Provides inspiration and ideas

When asked about the benefits of SMU, participants shared how it can be used for cooking inspiration and meal ideas. Participants described how the accessibility of recipes on SM helps find and organise recipes as an alternative to traditional cookbooks:

I might like screenshot and save the recipe if I like the look of it. Yeah, I think it's an ever-changing recipe book for me! (Participant 11)

It makes it like a lot more accessible than going out and buying like 50 recipe books (Participant 11)

It also emerged that video content on SM platforms was the most captivating medium for inspiring users to try a new recipe or food ingredient:

It's more fun to show recipes on a video, and if it's a more enjoyable process, you're more likely to adhere to the diet (Participant 4)

I'll get quick ideas to kind of eat or cook something different from watching a little reel or watching a cooking tutorial (Participant 11)

Some participants acknowledged that SM could expose users to new ingredients and could even be used as a tool to help people overcome food neophobia and adopt healthier eating habits:

If someone is, I don't know, in a bit of a routine with food and they, you know, want to improve, or change things up, I think social media is a good place to go get inspiration to make those changes. They might see, you know, a different vegetable they haven't used before, something like that to add in that they wouldn't have had without going on social media (Participant 1)

If someone's an avid unhealthy eater and eats a lot of junk food and then, you know, they've seen something online that's a bit healthier, it might have a positive impact (Participant 2)

### Theme 2: Information resource

Most participants were found to use SM as a source of information. SM was described as a convenient way to access nutrition information for a "relaxed approach to learning". Participants described how SM offers a wide range of information with different viewpoints that they may not see in mainstream media:

Without having to, you know, go on Google and search and go through websites, it's just like easy, quick information (Participant 1)

It can make you have insights that you wouldn't normally have, whether it's, you know, an online article or a journal or paper (Participant 8)

Most participants had awareness of misinformation online and sought evidence-based information on food and nutrition from qualified professionals:

I'm more likely to buy into something if I know that that person has some sort of qualification or some sort of research that went into it (Participant 4)

Participants reported that their nutritional background helped them identify false information and showed concern for those who may not have the same knowledge:

For me, it wouldn't affect it at all because of my background knowledge of, you know, the nutritional properties of food ... I think I'd spot like a fad or like a really, umm, like inaccurate sponsorship or like misinformation (Participant 6)

There are people that will not have my background and won't know the right sources of information and the right people to listen to (Participant 10)

### Theme 3: The influence of influencers

This theme shows how online connections can influence knowledge, attitudes and behaviours of SM users. Some participants described how close friends and family can play a key role in positively shaping food-related decisions:

I think that for people who see that their friends are doing something, and people that they trust personally, I think they'd be more inclined to like, you know, think about doing that like behaviour or diet themselves (Participant 6)

Although close connections appeared to be influential, the impact of traditional celebrities and SM influencers was strongly conveyed by participants. In the few situations when participants discussed their personal experiences, influencers appeared to inspire positive health-related behaviours:

I follow quite a lot of fitness influencers as well, umm, which is usually combined with if

they're vegan and an athlete or whatever, I find them quite inspirational (Participant 11)

Participants reported that the content shared around food choices and eating behaviour can negatively affect users' body image and relationship with food. When participants talked about this correlation, they tended to describe the impact on others rather than themselves:

I think it's likely that people see what other people are eating online and go away and copy it or try and mimic their kind of diet (Participant 2)

I feel like, umm, you know, people like, you know, influencers and stuff like that sharing stuff, umm, that can be harmful to people, you know like, or different foods or supplements and stuff like that can make someone think like "oh I don't have to eat because I can take this supplement" (Participant 9)

Participants alluded to being less susceptible to the influence of SM influencers due to their nutrition and dietetics education. They described how they would critically analyse their social connections to ensure the content they viewed on SM supported healthy eating behaviours:

As a student dietitian, I always try and have doubts [in regard to influencer nutritional content] nibbling away (Participant 6)

I've filtered my Instagram as well and my feeds to follow people that would, umm, advocate a good relationship with food (Participant 10)

### Theme 4: The role of body image

When asked what elements of SM could influence eating behaviours, a common response referred to the effects of being over-exposed to certain body types. Participants noted that SM platforms, particularly Instagram, promote unrealistic beauty standards that can damage users' perspectives of their own bodies:

I think obviously it gives people a warped perception about, you know, different things. One of the main ones is body image, umm, how people are living their lives, what you see on the screen isn't necessarily true (Participant 8)

I think Instagram is terrible for this but it's all about body image and like what is

socially desirable ... It's really just created this horrible sense of new norms for people (Participant 6)

Participants reported that exposure to thin and toned body types and certain eating behaviours could lead to users changing their diet to achieve a body ideal:

Umm, if ... If someone that you like or think is attractive or you like the way they look, then I think if you know what they eat, I think that's more likely to influence what you eat if you want to look like them (Participant 2)

The “what I eat in a day” posts were frequently described by participants as harmful because they promote guilt and comparison among viewers. As they may not reflect an accurate portrayal of what someone eats in a typical day, participants suggested that such content encourages users to restrict food intake and exclude entire food groups:

Umm, I think like for reels and “what I eat in a day” can be quite harmful, and potentially transformational photos as well which may not have context at times (Participant 10)

It will essentially be like “a day in the life of whoever”, and they'll be eating like quite restrictive things ... They kind of like trivialise the exclusion of foods (Participant 6)

Exposure to such content was believed to exacerbate unhealthy relationships with food and contribute to the development of disordered eating:

I think if someone has or had had disordered eating behaviours or tendencies before, it can obviously exacerbate that, it can trigger it, it can make it a lot worse depending on maybe the page they follow (Participant 11)

If there's like a susceptibility to disordered eating, it will ... it will sort of amplify that, I think. Maybe even put that into somebody's head to begin with (Participant 7)

### Theme 5: Disordered eating risk

Participants were unanimous in the view that they personally had a positive relationship with food.

However, participants used filler words in their responses and answered ambiguously:

I'd think on the whole it's quite good, umm, probably not as good as I would like it to be (Participant 8)

When asked about their relationship with food before they started studying nutrition, participants believed that they previously had healthier eating behaviours. Since starting their degree, they appeared to experience feelings of shame and guilt around certain foods:

Umm I think just because of everything I know, there are times when I think I shouldn't like be as restrictive as I perhaps am (Participant 3)

Umm, do you know what, sometimes I think maybe it was better, I don't know. Like I feel like now I maybe over-analyse quite a lot and I'm like ... I should be eating better because I'm studying to be a nutritionist (Participant 7)

Participants agreed that nutrition and dietetics students were more likely to engage in unhealthy eating behaviours than other students. Some felt that healthy eating may have started as an interest, but the increased nutritional knowledge could lead to overthinking and obsessive-compulsive tendencies:

Nutrition students are more susceptible than anybody because it's an interest and it can become quite obsessive quite quickly (Participant 7)

The more you learn about [nutrition], the more you sort of think “I can never get this right, like, how can I ever ...” – it's almost like you start to overthink it rather than just doing what you were doing anyway, which was fine (Participant 5)

One participant described experiences from her dietetics course in which she was required to measure and compare their calorie intake and body mass index with others on the course, and therefore considered such courses to be “breeding competition”. The most striking observation to emerge from the interviews was that nutrition and dietetics courses were believed to contribute to the onset of disordered eating and eating disorders:

I do feel like at least from when I started dietetics, umm, it's been making me more prone to an eating disorder. I guess I feel that, and I'm trying really hard not to have

an eating disorder, but I feel like this course is encouraging me to have an eating disorder (Participant 4)

## DISCUSSION

In response to the lack of research exploring associations between SMU and disordered eating in nutrition and dietetics students, the present study aimed to address this research gap and elucidate how SMU may facilitate and/or inhibit disordered eating behaviours. The interviews led to five key themes being identified in relation to SMU: (i) Provides inspiration and ideas; (ii) Information resource; (iii) The influence of influencers; (iv) The role of body image; and (v) Disordered eating risk. Overall, nutrition and dietetics students perceived SM to be a positive source of food-related ideas and information but were also aware that it could be problematic in terms of misinformation, negative social influence, body image and disordered eating.

In the present study, students discussed the positive impact of SMU for cooking inspiration and meal ideas. Specifically, the motivation to try new foods or recipes was triggered by visual content, mainly on the photo-based SM platform Instagram where people commonly post and share food photos and videos. This finding is consistent with findings from Easton et al.<sup>34</sup> who examined the experiences and perspectives of “fitspiration” content in young adults. Their findings suggest that SM could be used as a tool to support positive behaviour change and despite the negative effects that exposure to “fitspiration” content can have on psychological well-being, participants still reported an increased motivation to eat healthily. For example, as reported in the present study, SM content could provide students with recipe ideas and inspiration to encourage healthier food choices. This exposure has been shown to have a positive impact on food choice<sup>30</sup>; therefore, SM could help this specific population establish improvements in dietary habits in an engaging way to improve food and nutrition knowledge.

Although SM can be a good source of information, students were aware of misinformation and credibility. They expressed concern around the prevalence of incorrect content on SM and how it can impact audiences without a nutrition background. They were also conscious that some SM users may have an ulterior motive and intentionally share false information for financial gains associated with brand endorsement. The spread of misinformation as a negative aspect of SM has been identified elsewhere. In a study by Easton et al.,<sup>34</sup> participants talked objectively about misinformation risks and showed a high level of caution towards SM content. This “media literacy” emerged as a protective factor. Equally, some participants in the present study

believed that their background knowledge helped them determine which information could be trusted. It might be that the knowledge gained from being a nutrition or dietetics student mitigates the impact of SM misinformation in this population.

Students also reported that online connections can influence dietary behaviours of SM users. This theme aligns with research by Flannery et al.,<sup>35</sup> who investigated the effects of SM use on body image and eating behaviours in physically active men. In their study, participants were influenced by peers, celebrities, and fitness models, mainly in a negative manner. Consistent with the findings of Flannery et al.,<sup>35</sup> students in the present study generally framed online SM celebrities as negative influences on eating behaviours. Although participants saw high-profile SM users as motivational, they also expressed concern around how others might compare themselves against unrealistic body standards, which could negatively impact food behaviours and body image. This finding aligns with the social comparison theory in which individuals engage in specific behaviours they perceive to be the social norm.<sup>40</sup> More recently, research has demonstrated that SMU predicts upward social comparisons, where people compare themselves to those perceived to be superior, and negatively influences individuals’ wellbeing.<sup>41</sup> According to Saunders and Eaton,<sup>42</sup> who explored how SM platforms contribute to the development of disordered eating, participants who engaged in upward comparisons had a greater likelihood of body dissatisfaction and disordered eating tendencies than those who engaged in downward comparisons. This finding was also reflected in a study by McLean et al.,<sup>43</sup> where thin-ideal and upward appearance comparisons on SM negatively affected body image. However, media literacy skills, such as critical thinking, appeared to mitigate the negative effects of idealised image exposure. Similarly, in the present study, students believed that their education helped them build an online social network which led to stronger positive than negative consequences. This supports the idea that nutrition and dietetics courses may protect this population against the negative impact of exposure to idealised images on SM.

When asked about their relationship with food, all participants in this study offered generally positive descriptions. However, filler words such as “um”, “err” and “you know” were frequently used by respondents on this question. Because filler words are often caused by heightened anxiety,<sup>44</sup> the hesitant responses could indicate participant vulnerability to disordered eating, though participants became more at ease when discussing their own eating behaviours as the interviews progressed. When probed for further details, participant responses suggested feelings of guilt after eating certain foods. For example, one participant said, “I should be eating better”, which implies self-judgement around their own food choices. Further research could aim to determine whether self-critical statements offered by

participants suggest an unhealthy relationship with food, considering the guilt and shame that often coincides with disordered eating behaviours.<sup>45</sup>

As discussed, Easton et al.<sup>38</sup> identified “protective factors” as a theme to mitigate the negative impact of viewing “fitspiration” content on SM. Similarly, in the study by Flannery et al.,<sup>39</sup> “media literacy” was described as a moderating factor for creating scepticism of SM content. Although the levels of media literacy were not defined in the study, research suggests that it is a form of critical thinking for analysing media messages and may be linked to education level.<sup>46</sup> Considering this alongside the present study, it may be that critical analysis skills gained from any university-level course protect students from SM content likely to trigger disordered eating. However, nutrition- or dietetic-specific education may offer more robust critical tools for dismantling claims about food. A comparative study investigating the impact of SMU on eating behaviours of students enrolled on nutrition and dietetics courses and those across other courses is needed. This would help to determine whether a nutrition and dietetics background poses an increased risk of disordered eating.

Although the negative impacts of SM use were discussed with a high level of awareness and objectivity, students reported more subjective concerns regarding changes in personal eating habits as a result of their course. For example, one participant felt that their dietetics course was encouraging them to develop unhealthy eating behaviours as a result of the focus on body size and appearance. Consequently, in contrast to the positive ways in which students reported engaging with SM, being a nutrition or dietetic student was highlighted as a risk in itself through exposure to the course content. Indeed, although knowledge and expertise may be a protective factor that moderates the negative influence of SM on eating habits, this did not appear to buffer the negative influence of the course itself. Thus, course content may be a more relevant risk factor to consider when it comes to disordered eating behaviour within this population. Future research interviewing nutrition and dietetics students could therefore explore how course content influences eating habits to further understand and mitigate the risk of disordered eating in this particular population.

## Limitations

The present study is subject to several limitations. First, potential participants may have been put off taking part in the research because the interview was audio recorded. As a result of the sensitive and personal nature of the topic, individuals may have been concerned with how their privacy and confidentiality would have been maintained. Furthermore, those with disordered eating behaviours may have chosen not to participate to avoid

potentially distressing discussions. Further to this, despite asking participants about their own opinions and experiences relating to SMU and eating behaviours, many tended to respond from a third-person perspective, particularly when reporting the negative impact of SMU. For example, the prevalence of nutrition misinformation on SM was discussed with concern for other users. Although this is a potential limitation of the present study, in that the aim was to explore how SMU affects the eating behaviours in nutrition and dietetics students, the findings demonstrate a high awareness of the risks associated with SMU.

In qualitative research, the quality of data depends on participants providing honest, detailed responses.<sup>47</sup> Although the transcriptions were anonymised, audio recording the interviews may have created an environment in which participants did not feel comfortable to respond openly and honestly and could have contributed to why students responded in a third-person perspective. With the increased importance on building and maintaining rapport with the participants, it would have been intrusive and inappropriate to take notes during interviews. However, this meant that non-verbal cues, such as eye contact and facial expressions, were not recorded. Because nutrition and dietetics students may feel pressured to practise health promoting behaviours themselves, participants may have concealed their true opinions to present themselves in a socially acceptable way.

## CONCLUSIONS

The present study explored how nutrition and dietetics students in the UK perceived SMU to influence eating habits. The results from the study revealed that students used SM in a positive way to source recipe ideas, nutrition information and peer support, suggesting that SM can serve as a useful tool for improving food choice and dietary behaviour. However, students also showed a high level of objective awareness regarding the negative influence of SM on eating behaviours, such as the presence of misinformation, social pressures and body image dissatisfaction. Therefore, the present study suggests that having a nutrition and dietetics background may help to protect this population from the harmful effects of SMU when it comes to the development of disordered eating behaviours. However, despite mitigating the risks posed by SMU, the course itself was believed to negatively impact students’ eating habits and contribute to disordered eating behaviours. As such, course content could be a more relevant risk factor for the development of disordered eating in nutrition and dietetics students versus SMU. Further research is needed to understand how SMU impacts eating behaviours of students enrolled on nutrition and dietetics courses compared with other courses. In addition,



research investigating the ways to mitigate the negative impact of course content on nutrition and dietetics students is needed to reduce the prevalence of disordered eating in this population.

### AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

The study was approved by University of Chester Faculty Research Ethics Committee (1828/22/RL/CSN). Rebecca Law designed the research project under the supervisor of EFPJ. RL collected and interpreted data. Rebecca Law and Emily F. P. Jevons edited and prepared manuscript.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We thank all of the participants who gave their time to participate in this research. This research was conducted as a postgraduate research project at the University of Chester with no associated funding.

### CONFLICTS OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

### DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

### TRANSPARENCY DECLARATION

The lead author affirms that this manuscript is an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study being reported.

### ORCID

Emily F. P. Jevons <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8902-3708>

### PEER REVIEW

The peer review history for this article is available at <https://www.webofscience.com/api/gateway/wos/peer-review/10.1111/jhn.13212>.

### REFERENCES

1. Statista Research Department. Active social media audience in the United Kingdom (UK) in February 2022. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/507405/uk-active-social-media-and-mobile-social-media-users/>. (2022). Accessed 1 July 2022.
2. Statista Research Department. Daily time spent on social networking by internet users worldwide from 2012 to 2020. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/433871/daily-social-media-usage-worldwide/>. (2022). Accessed 1 July 2022.
3. Hartnup B, Dong L, Eisingerich AB. How an environment of stress and social risk shapes student engagement with social media as potential digital learning platforms: qualitative study. *JMIR Med Educ*. 2018;4:e10069.
4. Chawinga WD. Taking social media to a university classroom: teaching and learning using Twitter and blogs. *Int J Educ Technol Higher Educ*. 2017;14:3.
5. Dhir A, Yossatorn Y, Kaur P, Chen S. Online social media fatigue and psychological wellbeing—A study of compulsive use, fear of missing out, fatigue, anxiety and depression. *Int J Inf Manage*. 2018;40:141–52.
6. O'Reilly M, Dogra N, Whiteman N, Hughes J, Eruyar S, Reilly P. Is social media bad for mental health and wellbeing? Exploring the perspectives of adolescents. *Clin Child Psychol Psychiatry*. 2018;23:601–13.
7. Gilani E, Salimia D, Jouyandeh M, Tavasoli K, Wong WK. A trend study on the impact of social media in decision making. *Int J Data Netw Sci*. 2019;3:201–22.
8. Goodrich K, de Mooij M. How 'social' are social media? A cross-cultural comparison of online and offline purchase decision influences. *J Mark Commun*. 2014;20:103–16.
9. Karim F, Oyewande A, Abdalla LF, Chaudhry Ehsanullah R, Khan S. Social media use and its connection to mental health: a systematic review. *Cureus*. 2020;12:e8627.
10. Goodyear VA, Armour KM. *Young People, Social Media and Health*. London, UK: Routledge, Taylor & Francis; 2019.
11. Wilksch SM, O'Shea A, Ho P, Byrne S, Wade TD. The relationship between social media use and disordered eating in young adolescents. *Int J Eat Disord*. 2020;53:96–106.
12. Aparicio-Martinez P, Perea-Moreno A-J, Martinez-Jimenez MP, Redel-Macias MD, Pagliari C, Vaquero-Abellan M. Social media, thin-ideal, body dissatisfaction and disordered eating attitudes: an exploratory analysis. *Int J Environ Res Public Health*. 2019;16:4177.
13. Kärkkäinen U, Mustelin L, Raevuori A, Kaprio J, Keski-Rahkonen A. Do disordered eating behaviours have long-term health-related consequences? *Eur Eat Disord Rev*. 2018;26:22–8.
14. Quick VM, Byrd-Bredbenner C, Neumark-Sztainer D. Chronic illness and disordered eating: a discussion of the literature. *Adv Nutr*. 2013;4:277–86.
15. Peck LD, Lightsey OR. The eating disorders continuum, self-esteem, and perfectionism. *J Couns Dev*. 2008;86:184–92.
16. Perosa LM, Perosa SL. The continuum versus categorical debate on eating disorders: Implications for counselors. *J Couns Dev*. 2004;82:203–6.
17. Waller G, Micali N, James A. General practitioners are poor at identifying the eating disorders. *Adv Eat Disord*. 2014;2:146–57.
18. Regier DA, Kuhl EA, Kupfer DJ. The DSM-5: classification and criteria changes. *World Psychiatry*. 2013;12:92–8.
19. Pennesi JL, Wade TD. A systematic review of the existing models of disordered eating: Do they inform the development of effective interventions? *Clin Psychol Rev*. 2016;43:175–92.
20. Mahn HM, Lordly D. A review of eating disorders and disordered eating amongst nutrition students and dietetic professionals. *Can J Diet Pract Res*. 2015;76:38–43.
21. Yu Z, Tan M. Disordered eating behaviors and food addiction among nutrition major college students. *Nutrients*. 2016;8:673.
22. Rocks T, Pelly F, Slater G, Martin LA. Eating attitudes and behaviours of students enrolled in undergraduate nutrition and dietetics degrees. *Nutr Diet*. 2017;74:381–7.
23. Póinhos R, Alves D, Vieira E, Pinhão S, Oliveira BMPM, Correia F. Eating behaviour among undergraduate students. Comparing nutrition students with other courses. *Appetite*. 2015;84:28–33.
24. Mayoh J, Jones I. Young people's experiences of engaging with fitnesspiration on Instagram: gendered perspective. *J Med Internet Res*. 2021;23:e17811.
25. Raggatt M, Wright CJC, Carrotte E, Jenkinson R, Mulgrew K, Prichard I, et al. "I aspire to look and feel healthy like the posts convey": engagement with fitness inspiration on social media and perceptions of its influence on health and wellbeing. *BMC Public Health*. 2018;18:1002.
26. Zhao S, Grasmuck S, Martin J. Identity construction on Facebook: digital empowerment in anchored relationships. *Comput Human Behav*. 2008;24:1816–36.

27. Marks RJ, De Foe A, Collett J. The pursuit of wellness: social media, body image and eating disorders. *Child Youth Serv Rev*. 2020;119:105659.
28. Vaterlaus JM, Patten EV, Roche C, Young JA. #Gettinghealthy: the perceived influence of social media on young adult health behaviors. *Comput Hum Behav*. 2015;45:151–7.
29. Surgenor D, Hollywood L, Furey S, Lavelle F, McGowan L, Spence M, et al. The impact of video technology on learning: a cooking skills experiment. *Appetite*. 2017;114:306–12.
30. Hawkins LK, Farrow C, Thomas JM. Do perceived norms of social media users' eating habits and preferences predict our own food consumption and BMI? *Appetite*. 2020;149:104611.
31. Vasileiou K, Barnett J, Thorpe S, Young T. Characterising and justifying sample size sufficiency in interview-based studies: systematic analysis of qualitative health research over a 15-year period. *BMC Med Res Methodol*. 2018;18:148.
32. Guest G, Bunce A, Johnson L. How many interviews are enough? An experiment with data saturation and variability. *Field Methods*. 2006;18:59–82.
33. Braun V, Clarke V. Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qual Res Psychol*. 2006;3:77–101.
34. Easton S, Morton K, Tappy Z, Francis D, Dennison L. Young people's experiences of viewing the fitspiration social media trend: Qualitative study. *J Med Internet Res*. 2018;20:e219.
35. Flannery O, Harris K, Kenny UA. An exploration into the impact of social networking site (SNS) use on body image and eating behavior of physically active men. *J Mens Stud*. 2021;29:26–49.
36. Gill P, Stewart K, Treasure E, Chadwick B. Methods of data collection in qualitative research: interviews and focus groups. *Br Dent J*. 2008;204:291–5.
37. Melville A, Hincks D. Conducting sensitive interviews: a review of reflections. *Law Method*. 2016;1:1–26.
38. McGrath C, Palmgren PJ, Liljedahl M. Twelve tips for conducting qualitative research interviews. *Med Teach*. 2019;41:1002–6.
39. Castleberry A, Nolen A. Thematic analysis of qualitative research data: is it as easy as it sounds? *Curr Pharm Teach Learn*. 2018;10:807–15.
40. Festinger L. A theory of social comparison processes. *Hum Relat*. 1954;7:117–1140.
41. Wang JL, Wang HZ, Gaskin J, Hawk S. The mediating roles of upward social comparison and self-esteem and the moderating role of social comparison orientation in the association between social networking site usage and subjective well-being. *Front Psychol*. 2017;8:771.
42. Saunders JF, Eaton AA. Snaps, selfies, and shares: how three popular social media platforms contribute to the sociocultural model of disordered eating among young women. *Cyberpsychol Behav Soc Netw*. 2018;21:343–54.
43. McLean SA, Paxton SJ, Wertheim EH. Does media literacy mitigate risk for reduced body satisfaction following exposure to thin-ideal media? *J Youth Adolesc*. 2016;45:1678–95.
44. Duvall E, Robbins A, Graham T, et al. Exploring filler words and their impact. *Schwa Lang Linguist*. 2014;11:35–49.
45. Bottera AR, Kambanis PE, De Young KP. The differential associations of shame and guilt with eating disorder behaviors. *Eat Behav*. 2020;39:101427.
46. Livingstone S. What is media literacy? *Intermedia*. 2004;32:18–20.
47. Johnson JL, Adkins D, Chauvin S. A review of the quality indicators of rigor in qualitative research. *Am J Pharm Educ*. 2020;84:7120.

## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

**Rebecca Law** (ANutr) conducted this research as part of her MSc in Public Health Nutrition at the University of Chester.

**Emily F. P. Jevons** (PhD, RNutr) is a Lecturer in Nutrition at the University of Chester, her research interests lie in sport nutrition, exercise metabolism and eating disorders.

**How to cite this article:** Law R & Jevons EFP. Exploring the perceived influence of social media use on disordered eating in nutrition and dietetics students. *J Hum Nutr Diet*. 2023;1–10. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jhn.13212>