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## Facebook: The Newest Weight Loss Supplement?

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Facebook: The Newest Weight Loss Supplement?

Jaclyn Longo

Providence College

A project based upon an independent investigation,  
Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
For the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Social Work.

2012

### **Abstract**

This study sought to find a correlation between Facebook usage and exercise and diet habits among college-age females. A review of literature has shown the prevalence of eating disorders on college campuses and the pressures directly associated with these statistics. Eighty surveys were collected in order to measure both qualitative and quantitative data concerning the participants Facebook, eating, and dieting habits. Results revealed a strong drive among these females to stay thin through the use of diet and exercise habits, along with a correlation between viewing Facebook photos and the urge to workout. Further research on this subject should focus on the potential danger caused by extreme Facebook usage.

### **FACEBOOK: THE NEWEST DIET SUPPLEMENT?**

Social networking sites including Facebook, have transformed how we share information regarding our lives and the lives of others. For those who are unfamiliar, such sites allow individuals to “construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system” (Boyd & Ellison, 2007, pg. 425). With the introduction of Facebook in 2004, social networking sites increased to a whole new level by adding features such as photo sharing and instant messaging. Facebook now focused on a user’s personal profile, rather than as a professional networking tool. Mark Zuckerberg, founder of Facebook, originally intended for his website to “support distinct college networks only” (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). In an attempt to keep the site private, it was necessary to have a university email address in order to become a Facebook member. Because of this, users were able to connect more easily with those in similar networks. Soon after, Facebook expanded its membership to “include high school students, professionals inside corporate networks, and, eventually everyone” (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). As a result of this expansion, Facebook is currently ranked as the second most trafficked website in the United States, falling just short of Google (Alexa, 2011).

Not only can users post their thoughts and pictures instantly to the World Wide Web, but they are also left to the eyes and discretion of peers and “friends”. Due to the fact that individuals are constantly being viewed through the use of Facebook, there is now a pressure to constantly look good in order to project a particular image to others. Is it likely, then, that such users of Facebook may alter their eating and exercise habits to fit this desired image set by society. Such a question is logical when considering the pressures in American culture to stay

fit, eat right, and pursue the thin ideal projected to us through our media. Therefore, this research is focused on whether or not there is a relationship between the usage of Facebook and college females' body perception and eating habits.

This topic is significant to social work because of the prevalence of eating disorders. According to the Renfrew Center Foundation, 1 in 5 women in the United States struggles with an eating disorder or disordered eating, while 240 million people (both male and female) suffer from an eating disorder (2011). Worldwide, 70 million people struggle with an eating disorder, and almost 50% of these people meet the criteria for depression. The Foundation goes on to state that eating disorders have the highest mortality rate of any mental illness, and that the rate associated with anorexia nervosa is 12 times higher than the death rate of all causes of death for females 15-24 years old ("What is an Eating Disorder, 2011). Clearly, eating disorders are not to be taken lightly, and they are especially prevalent within Western culture, which places a premium on dieting and ultra-fitness. Due to such a high percentage of eating disorders among Americans, social workers aim to decrease these numbers and work toward addressing this problem within our society.

This research question came to me after considering the reasons why so many females on campus had lost a significant amount of weight. After discussing this with other friends on campus, we came to the conclusion that it might very well be due in part to the extreme use of Facebook and various social media websites. The fact that photos are constantly on display on a user's profile can alter the way in which one would like to be perceived. Because as many friends a user may allow can view these photos at any time, many may feel it necessary to keep only the ones that are most flattering. Therefore, it is common for many Facebook users to remove photos due to the fact that they may feel as if they do not look their best in them.

Due to the fact that social media is relatively new, the majority of research has focused primarily on how celebrity images presented by the media correlate with disordered eating. For example, an article by Harrison and Cantor (1997, pg. 45) assessed the “relationship between media use and endorsement of thinness among college women” (Harrison & Cantor, 1997, pg. 44). Their research indicated that, for women, media caused a preoccupation with thinness, body dissatisfaction, and ineffectiveness. In other words, this study suggests that the media negatively affects women by projecting thin ideal images that cause an internalization of this message.

With the increase of individuals utilizing Facebook and viewing images displayed by this website, it is my hypothesis that a relationship exists between the use of Facebook and disordered eating among college females. For the purposes of this study, disordered eating will be defined as unhealthy weight reduction practices through the use of dieting, restrictive eating habits, “extreme” dieting, “crash” dieting, fasting, slimming tablets, diuretics, laxatives, excessive exercise, and/or cigarettes (Grigg, Bowman, & Redman, 1996). Questionnaires will be distributed to a randomly selected population of undergraduate females at a small Catholic college. The survey will solicit information about Facebook usage and body image, and whether or not they are related. Interviews will also be facilitated in order to provide a qualitative aspect to the study. The data will then be analyzed to determine whether or not Facebook distorts how users view themselves compared to their peers, and therefore result in “disordered eating” habits. Additionally, a review of the literature will display previous research correlated to the subject matter of the use of Facebook and disordered eating in college females.

### **Literature Review**

#### **Prevalence of Eating Disorders on College Campuses**

Eating disorders are a virtual epidemic on college campuses nationwide. According to the National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders, Inc. (ANAD), “91% of 185 women surveyed on a college campus had attempted to control their weight through dieting,” while 22% of these women dieted “often” or “always” (2011). Of these same 185 women, approximately 58%, or approximately 107 of them, felt pressure to be a certain weight, while only 44% or about 81 women were of normal weight. An additional survey by the ANAD stated that 86% of women surveyed on a college campus reported the onset of an eating disorder by the age of 20.

Data from the National College Health Assessment’s (NCHA) Premier Student Health Survey (2010) support the ANAD’s findings. The NCHA survey annually documents changes in health issues and trends that have occurred over the past ten years. Such a survey allows institutions of higher education to “respond to questions and concerns about the health of the nation’s students and ultimately improve the health and welfare of those students” (2010). The NCHA surveyed 105,781 students from 129 different institutions nationwide. While both men and women were asked to participate, the data reported here focus mainly on the responses of the 66,691 female participants.

In their research, it was found that 33% of participants had received information from their college about eating disorders and that 32% were interested in gaining more information on this topic. The survey went on to ask participants to describe their current weight, 56% of females felt they are “about the right weight,” but when asked whether or not they were trying to change their weight, 60% of females answered in the affirmative. Such data show that while college women are aware that their body weight is appropriate, they are still striving to obtain a thinner physique. Furthermore, when asked, “within the last 30 days have you exercised to lose

weight?” 60% of females disclosed that they had, while 45% claimed they had dieted to lose weight within that same time frame. While such behaviors may seem as if they are “the norm” for college females, these behaviors actually place these young women within the category of disordered eating. Although disordered eating habits do not necessarily lead to a bona fide eating disorder, the chances of this happening are rather high. According to a study by Malinauskas et al. (2006), college females who already practice disordered eating were 18 times more likely to develop eating disorders than those with no history of dieting. Additionally, females with a history of dieting were five times more likely to develop an eating disorder (2006). If these estimates are correct, then approximately 30,011, or 45% of the female participants in the NCHA study, were at high risk for developing a full-blown eating disorder. These numbers are staggering and exacerbated by the fact that many young women fail to see the potential danger of such eating habits because “dieting strategies have become so ‘main stream’ in our society.” Moreover, many women are unaware, “unless explicitly stated,” that their “behaviors are being used to consciously lose or control” their weight (NCHA, 2010).

With such a large percentage of college females struggling with eating disorders, it is safe to assume that a much larger number of females practicing disordered eating exist. Considering such alarming statistics two questions can be proposed: why are such a large number of young women victims or potential victims of eating disorders and what are the contributing factors behind such startling rates?

### **Contributing Factors**

**Media Induced Pressures and Social Comparison.** Researchers have studied the connection between the idealized feminine image portrayed in the media and disordered eating a number of times. Several of these studies have argued that the “ultra-slender ideal-body image portrayed in



the media” (Garfinkel, Garner & Goldbloom, 1987) is the source of the problem. For example, Polivy and Herman (2004) concluded that our society’s over-exposure to the thin-ideal body image “makes women feel bad about themselves” and increases their desire to participate in restrictive eating patterns that “easily and often deteriorate into eating disorders” (Polivy & Herman, 2004, pg. 322). While this media induced pressure may not necessarily result in an eating disorder, “many women will internalize the message and strive to be thin” (Polivy & Herman, 2004, pg. 322). This internalization can become the precursor to disordered eating, restrictive eating habits, and the desire to participate in excessive exercise to obtain the thin-ideal portrayed in American culture.

Much like Polivy and Herman (2004), Anschutz, Van Strien, and Engels (2008), aimed to “explore the effects of exposure to slim images and diet-related products in commercials” on food intake and dietary restraint. Their results showed that those students who were exposed to such commercials ate less food than normal post-exposure. These results correlate with Malinauskas et al (2006) conclusion that those already struggling with disordered eating are more likely to increase restrictive eating behaviors when pressure is felt. The results also confirm the notion that viewing media which promote a thin-ideal can increase disordered eating habits or cause viewers to internalize the message and later act on it to achieve such ideals.

Smeesters, Mussweiler, and Mandel (2010) delved deeper into this same topic by examining the effects such media have on underweight females. These researchers found that “underweight consumers comprise only 2% of America’s population, they are often victims of eating disorders and therefore might be especially vulnerable to thin media images” (2010, pg. 64). More specifically, the study focused on the participants’ self-esteem level after viewing thin-ideal media images, and whether or not this level of self-esteem resulted in changed eating

patterns. Similar to previously cited research, Smeesters, Mussweiler, and Mandel (2010) found that with a decrease in body satisfaction after viewing thin media images, a decrease in food intake also occurred. After viewing extremely thin models, those with an extremely low Body Mass Index (BMI) showed negative effects in terms of self-esteem, resulting in less caloric intake later on. These results further demonstrate the negative effects America's media has on females, including college age women.

**Pressures to Avoid the “Freshman 15”.** Another contributing factor to unhealthy eating habits among college age women is the phenomenon known as the Freshman 15. This notion is the idea that those entering a college or university gain an extra 15 pounds after their freshman year due to a decrease in physical activity, and a boost in alcohol consumption, and a change in eating habits from healthy foods to those high in sugar and fat (Miller, 2009). A longitudinal study done by Vohs, Heatherton, and Herrin (1999), attempted to examine the effects of this phenomenon on college-age women. Before entering a college or university, participants were asked to classify their own body weight as “underweight,” “average,” “overweight,” or “very overweight.” A Marginal Homogeneity test revealed that “women’s self-categorization increased significantly after arriving at college” (1999, pg.1). After their arrival at college, and after having indulged in many first-year excesses, which led to an increase in body mass index (BMI), more women classified themselves as “overweight,” while fewer felt they were “average.” Vohs, Heatherton, and Herrin also inquired about individuals’ level of body satisfaction, and found that “body satisfaction changed significantly with the move to college” (1999). Those participating felt much less satisfied with their physiques in college, relative to high school. In short, their research showed “an increase in BMI from high school to college

associated with decreased body satisfaction” (1999). This decreased satisfaction was a direct result of the Freshman 15.

The threat posed by the Freshman 15 can have negative consequences. According to the study by Malinauskas et al. (2006), college females practice diet and health behaviors that contradict the 20 dietary guidelines for Americans set by the United States Department of Agriculture. Such habits are likely the result of wanting to avoid the dreaded “Freshman 15”. Because the transition from high school to college is a period of time in which women are at risk for gaining weight females entering their freshman year may diet by restricting food or change their daily schedule to affect eating and exercise (Malinauskas, 2006). Throughout the research, Malinauskas et al. (2006) found that a number of significant problems stem from the stigma of the Freshman 15. More specifically, the assumption that excessive weight gain is inevitable during college causes those already struggling with disordered eating to increase their unhealthy habits. As previously stated, it was found that those already practicing disordered eating were 18 times more likely to develop eating disorders than those with no history of dieting, while females with a history of dieting were five times more likely to develop an eating disorder (Malinauskas, 2006). Whether or not college females have experienced disordered eating, the idea of the Freshman 15 can “play a significant role in solidifying the oppressive idea that a female must be thin in order to qualify for success and happiness in our society” (Malinauskas, 2006, pg. 455).

**Social Comparison Theory.** One reason why the threat of the Freshman 15 is so powerful is that it places a “scarlet letter” on those who succumb. Indeed, those who succumb may see themselves as inadequate when they compare themselves to the many beautiful, thin others in their social circle. According to more recent research, this “social comparison” may be an even stronger force than idealized images in the media. Social Comparison Theory, initially proposed

by social psychologist Leon Festinger (1954), explains the way in which individuals evaluate their own opinions, beliefs, and desires by comparing themselves to others. Over the past decade research has begun to focus on the effects of exposure to peers rather than that of media figures. Not only are the images depicted in the media much thinner than the average woman, they are dissimilar to them on a number of levels. This extreme thinness has resulted in women accepting that such an ideal body is simply unattainable, and has led to the belief that “a thin peer is likely to be particularly threatening because she represents the standard that one should be able to attain” (Trottier et al., 2007, pg. 326). Therefore, self-evaluation is now based on the daily interaction with peers, rather than celebrities portrayed in the media. Due to the fact that peer contact occurs so frequently, such comparisons may be a significant contributor to body dissatisfaction among young women (Trottier et al., 2007). Young women, today, are in direct competition with one another for relationships, employment, and societal acceptance, and many feel as if weight is relevant to success in these areas of life. With the introduction of Facebook, social comparison is now digitized making it that much easier for young women to view their peers. This concept is important to this study because the “omnipresence” of social comparison be correlated to the widespread epidemic of disordered eating on college campuses. By browsing through the photos of others, young females may feel threatened by what they are viewing creating a sense of competition. This competitive attitude may then result in an increase in disordered eating.

Media induced societal pressures along with social comparison theory overlap with my theory that the use of Facebook and the desired image projected by users stands to reason because of the large number of students using such sites along with the fact that so many people are continuously looking to their peers’ profiles. This then potentially creates pressure within

individuals to constantly look their best. One reason this theory is logical is that Facebook is not only a medium for social comparison, but also for “social viability” and voyeuristic fulfillment. Any negative images displayed on Facebook would affect one’s viability and corrupt the image that she is attempting to project to the public.

### **Facebook as a Contributing Factor**

**Social Viability.** Going hand-in-hand with social viability and voyeurism is the idea of exhibitionism. For Facebook users on a college campus, validating oneself within the social network is of utmost importance. By browsing through one’s photos and wall posts, it is possible to gain a better understanding of one’s identity. Therefore, many feel the “need to clarify or express one’s identity” (Calvert, 2000, pg. 411) through their Facebook profile. Users are able to project an image of them that may either be accurate or false. Through establishing a “large network of friends, users can validate their social viability” (Bumgarner, 2009, pg. 412). This “need to validate oneself within the social matrix and to disclose personal information is a means of developing [relationships]” and exerting “social control” (Calvert, 2000, pg. 36). For those Facebook users on a college campus, validating oneself within their social network is of utmost importance. This validation can be done through the use of Facebook’s photo application. Users have the option to add and remove pictures they feel necessary to display on their profile, allowing them to delete photos that are not flattering or that run contrary to the image that they are attempting to project.

**Voyeurism.** Such habits may be motivated by the use of Facebook and additional social networking sites. According to a study done by USA Today (2010), Americans spend 36% of their time browsing and utilizing various social media websites, including Facebook and Twitter. Of these users, fifty one percent are between the ages of 18 and 24 (Hitwise, 2005), placing the

typical Facebook user into the life stage known as emerging adulthood (Bumgarner, 2009). With such high statistics, one cannot help but to wonder, what does Facebook offer that seems to be so satisfying to those using it? In a study done by Calvert (2000), it was found that Facebook must cultivate what he refers to as *mediated voyeurism* (Bumgarner, 2009), which Calvert (2000) defined as:

...the consumption of revealing images of and information about others' apparently real and unguarded lives, often yet not always for purposes of entertainment but frequently at the expense of privacy and discourse, through the means of mass media and internet (pg. 418).

Users, who have accepted one another's friend requests, are able to browse through the profiles of others, read various interests, and view other friends' comments on their walls or the walls of others. Facebook users are also able to view a user's photo albums and see every picture their "friends" have uploaded of themselves as well as pictures that have been uploaded by others with that user in it (Bumgarner, 2009). According to Andrejevic (2004), such "motivations for engaging in mediated voyeurism that are applicable to Facebook are trying to gain knowledge about others or boosting one's self-esteem by deriding others" (pg. 424).

Given the research provided, it seems logical to theorize that one risk factor for disordered eating is students' use of Facebook to establish "social viability" along with the Facebook's use as a tool for voyeurism. While none of the previous factors have been explored before, my research will be an attempt to prove this point.

In this study I will obtain information from undergraduate students at Providence College to further investigate whether or not there is a causal link between the use of Facebook and the increase of disordered eating among college age females. This topic has yet to be researched, but after distributing surveys along with interviews, I hypothesize a relationship between the uses of

Facebook and disordered eating habits. This study will not be limited to those currently struggling with disordered eating, but rather a variety of females on the college campus.

This study will help researchers to understand whether or not social media- more particularly- Facebook, is a leading contributor to disordered eating and negative body perception among college females. With an increasing number of eating disorders among women today, this topic is important because it may help researchers and social workers in designing preventative measures for disordered eating.

### **Methodology**

An exploratory, relational study using a mixed-method model was used to find a link between Facebook usages and disordered eating habits among college-aged females. The study covered the applications Facebook offers to find which ones may spark altered perceptions of body image in its users, such as, “tagged pictures”, “profile pictures”, and “albums”. A mixed method model was used through the analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data.

### **Participants**

Participants consisted of a convenience sample of females at a small Catholic college in Southern New England. These participants were selected through the distribution of questionnaires at dining halls, dormitories, apartment buildings, and off-campus housing units. Participants ranged from freshman to seniors.

### **Data Gathering**

In order to obtain the necessary data, a survey was distributed to female members of the college. There are no limitations to the survey in terms of age or class year, and participants will be reminded of the survey’s anonymity. Paper copies of the questionnaire were distributed throughout dining halls, dormitories, and apartment buildings on campus along with off-campus

housing. While surveys were completed by undergraduates of all ages, the primary focus will be on seniors and freshman. Participants were asked a variety of questions regarding their hourly usage of Facebook, why they are members of the Facebook community, and what they use the website for. Additional questions will be in reference to the amount of exercise they get, how they view themselves (using a Likert Scale: “overweight” etc.), and potentially rating themselves in comparison to their peers (See Appendix A). Participants will be aware of the anonymity of the survey and were given an Informed Consent (See Appendix B).

### **Data Analysis**

Once the surveys were collected, each was separated by class year. The data was analyzed through the use of SPSS and answers were compared to determine whether or not there was a direct correlation to eating habits of college females and their use of Facebook.

### **Findings**

The survey instrument created by the researcher focused on whether or not there is a correlation between the usage of Facebook and eating habits among college females. Questions referred to the amount of time they spend on Facebook, what occurs while they are on the website, how often they exercise, and the amount of calories ingested daily. Of the 80 distributed surveys, 100% of them were returned to the researcher. The age of participants (N = 80) ranged from 18 to 23 years of age, and the mean age of participants was 20.1 years of age. Of the 80 females surveyed, 78 (97.5%) were white, and 30 (37.5%) were current seniors at the college. An even amount of surveys (23.8%) were collected from both the junior and freshman classes, leaving only 15% of the surveys coming from sophomore females. From the data, the researcher was able to conclude a number of findings in terms of Facebook, dieting, and exercise habits among the individuals surveyed.



**Facebook**

In respect to the Facebook variable, the researcher found that 77.5% of participants felt compelled to check their Facebook everyday for a variety of reasons. “Staying in the loop”, “staying in contact with friends and family”, “seeing what others are doing”, “checking in on what friends may be doing”, and “looking through friends’ photos” were examples as to why Facebook users checked their social networking site. Others stated that they feel “left out” and “uninformed” if they do not check others profiles throughout the day. Of these users, 22.5% spend at least two hours of their day on Facebook. These two hours were not consecutive, and were an accumulation of the number of times the participant checked into with the site. 41.3% of participants spent between 15 minutes and an hour of their day on Facebook, while only 6.3% spent fifteen minutes or less.

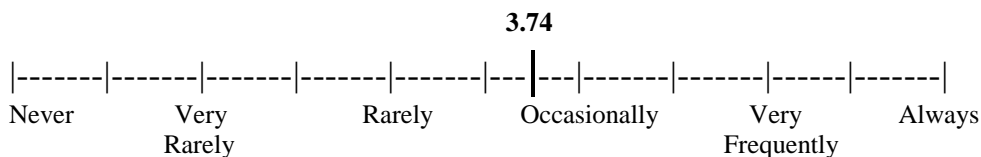
In regards to participants’ use of the “photo” application on Facebook, 42.7% of users felt that if a “bad photo” was added to their profile, they would not hesitate to remove the “tag”. To many, an example of an undesirable photo was one in which they look intoxicated or were using alcohol. If a participant was not looking at the camera, not smiling, or making a “funny face” the photo would be removed from their profile. A small percent (3%) of those surveyed mentioned that the photos on their profile are blocked from public viewing. Because of the many employers now checking on potential employees through their Facebook, many users do not allow others to see the photos in which they are “tagged”.

An interesting statistic was found when participants were asked how frequently they viewed their photos and the photos of their friends. 32.5% of those surveyed stated they check other users’ pictures “very frequently” while 40.1% of participants viewed their own pictures “very frequently.” From the data, it appears these participants scan the pictures that are viewable on their profile more often than those of their friends. Of these same participants, 58.1% post

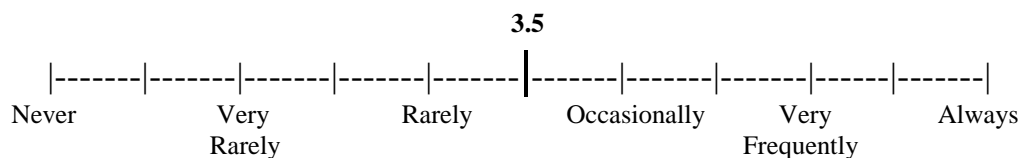
positive comments “occasionally” on pictures that they feel highlight positive aspects of that particular Facebook user. The majority of these comments pertain to the users physical appearance, clothing, hair, or smile. Participants were not questioned as to whether or not they would comment negatively about a photo.

Figures 1 and 2 displays the mean scores of the responses to Questions 5 and 6, which asked participants to rate how often they view both their tagged photos and those of their friends. The mean score for both questions ranged between 3.5 and 3.74 meaning students spent their time viewing photos on Facebook more often than rarely and less than occasionally. The scale shows that the mean does fall closer to the range of occasionally and farther from rarely.

**Figure 1: How often do you look at “friends” tagged photos?**



**Figure 2: How often do you look at your own tagged photos?**

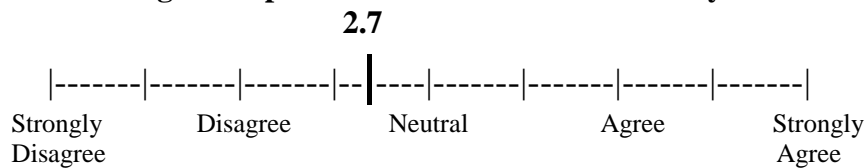


Participants were then asked two questions based on levels of self-esteem. 21.3% of female participants answered “agree” when asked if seeing a good picture of a peer decreases their self-esteem, while 18.8% of these same participants agreed that the reverse effect occurred when seeing a bad picture. Both categories had the largest percentage of participant answers fall under “neutral” (30% & 27% respectively). The survey continued on to ask for qualitative information concerning what constitutes as both good and bad pictures. The majority of

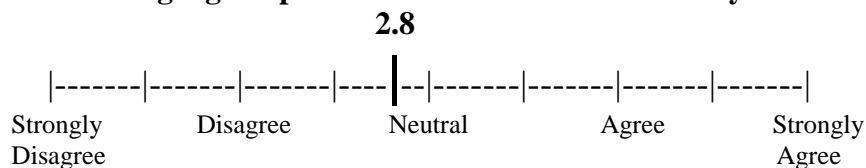
participants' felt that a good picture consisted of "looking pretty", having a "nice smile", wearing a "good outfit", and a "flattering angle." This qualitative data focused solely around the physical appearance of the Facebook user. A picture was considered "bad" when the female was "making a funny face", "looked intoxicated", "had messy hair", or if they "look unattractive." Once again, the data collected from this portion of the survey was based primarily on how they were perceived within the picture.

Figures 3 and 4 display the mean score of the responses to questions 7 and 8 regarding the participants' self-esteem level after viewing both good and bad pictures of their peers. The mean score for these questions fell between 2.7 and 2.8 displaying answers falling more toward the "neutral" end of the scale. Evidently, viewing both good and bad pictures has little impact on a Facebook users' self-esteem level.

**Figure 3: Seeing a bad picture of someone else boosts my self-esteem.**



**Figure 4: Seeing a good picture of someone else lessens my self-esteem.**



### Exercise

The results regarding participants' exercise habits revealed that more college females exercise daily than check their Facebook profiles. Of those surveyed, 40% workout on a daily basis while 35.5% of these same participants feel it necessary to exercise every day. 80% of females stated their workout sessions last between one and one and a half hours, while the mean of workout length was approximately 1.4 hours. Only 6.2% exercise for two hours or more while

11.3% have a workout that lasts less than an hour. The majority of participants stated that they exercise in order to “stay fit”, “maintain a healthy lifestyle”, “work on physical appearance”, and “to be in shape.”

Participants were asked what would happen if they were to miss one day of working out. Almost half of these individuals (43.8%) stated that they would alter their eating habits that day, and 62.5% of those surveyed said they would endure a more rigorous workout the next day. When asked to elaborate, participants stated that they would increase the length of their cardio workout and incorporate more weight lifting into their routine. Those who alter their eating habits felt it would be necessary to eliminate carbohydrates for the day and cut out any snacking in between their main meals. Many stated that they “feel lazy” or “sluggish” if their regular workout routine is interrupted. The main goal was to reduce their caloric intake for the day since they would not be doing so at the gym.

While seemingly irrelevant, participants were asked if they acquire a tan through the use of sunless tanning beds. Almost half (45%) of those surveyed reported that they do in fact tan at a salon throughout the winter months. When asked as to why they feel this is necessary, many felt it makes them “look thinner”, “feel prettier”, and “be more desirable” [to those of the opposite sex]. Such statistics prove interesting due to the high risk of cancer associated with the use of tanning beds. It seems as if there may be a relationship between the use of tanning beds and the drive to look and feel thin by college females.

### **Dieting**

The data regarding participants’ dieting habits, noted that the majority of college females eat foods that are considered healthy and that will optimize their health. 38.7% of those surveyed “agreed” when asked if eating healthy was a top priority in their everyday life. Of these same participants, 77.4% either “agreed” or “strongly agreed” when asked if they eat foods

that are healthy for them, while 80.6% stated they know both the advantages and disadvantages of the food they consume. Participants were asked how frequently they choose a “diet” product over its non-diet counterpart. Only 12.9% of participants stated they make this decision “always” while 25.8% choose “diet” products very frequently.

More than half of participants (51.6%) disagreed when asked if they were aware of how many calories they consume per day, and 32.3% were unable to give an estimate of their daily caloric intake. 29% of females agreed to this question and only 12.9% strongly agreed, but 67.7% of those surveyed were able to give a rough estimate of the amount of calories they consume per day. The mean average of calories per day for the participants who answered this question was approximately 1,450. Only 3.9% of females eat between the Federally recommended 2,000-2,200 calories (Livestrong, 2012). The majority (72.5) of participants’ caloric intake fell between 800 and 1500 calories. 37.3% of those surveyed maintain a 1,200 calorie diet or less. The researcher noted that many participants, when asked, wrote their daily intake of calories and noted that this would occur on “a good day.” When asked if participants strive to be thin, 54.8% stated that they “agree” with this question while 29% “strongly agree.” A mere 16% had neutral feelings toward this topic, and no participant disagreed with this question. It is evident that many females strive to keep their caloric intake as low as possible.

### **Correlations**

In order to support the researcher’s hypothesis that the use of Facebook impacts the exercise and dieting habits of college females, a number of correlations among the three variables were analyzed. Once these were calculated, conclusions were then drawn as to whether or not the researcher’s hypothesis was supported.

A bivariate analysis of the variable “viewing pictures of your friends” and it is “necessary to workout everyday” displayed a weak but statistically significant correlation ( $r = .233, p < .01$ ).

Such a correlation can lead the researcher to begin to draw conclusions concerning the amount of time spent viewing friends' photos and the drive to exercise daily. It appears that users viewing photos of their peers may increase their motivation to workout.

Another weak but statistically significant correlation found by the researcher was between the participants' desire to be thin and whether or not they feel it is necessary to workout daily ( $r = .434, p < .01$ ). While such a correlation makes sense, it still supports the hypothesis of the researcher. It indicates that participants have a desire to be thin and feel it necessary to exercise often. It is clear that the sample population is very concerned about their physical appearance and maintains it.

### **Summary and Implications**

This study investigated the Facebook, dieting, and exercise habits of eighty females from a small liberal arts college in southern New England. The researcher asked participants questions relating to how much time they spend on Facebook, what they do while visiting the site, how important they feel exercise is in their lifestyle, and their eating habits. The findings of this research revealed that self-esteem, workout length, and an individual's desire to be thin are affected, both positively and negatively, by their use of Facebook. These findings also described why females use Facebook, how much time they spend on the website daily, and whether or not they feel compelled to check Facebook.

The most prominent themes found within the research regarding Facebook usage were linked to users feeling compelled to check the site in order to "stay in the loop." The qualitative data revealed that the majority of females felt as if they could check on what their friends were doing, stay connected with family, and keep updated on what was happening by checking into the social media website multiple times per day. It was found that the majority of this time spent

on Facebook was used to look through photos of friends and photos that friends had added to a user's profile.

When combining such themes with those of the dieting and exercise usage, a few correlations were found. The data displayed a correlation between participants viewing pictures of their friends and feeling it is necessary to workout daily. Additionally, a correlation was found between the desire to be thin and feeling that it is necessary to exercise on a daily basis. The findings of this study reported a number of themes pointing to the importance college females place on exercising daily and eating healthy. The researcher found that such emphasis stems from the idea that the time spent on Facebook viewing others photos increases users to compare themselves subconsciously to those they are viewing. This, known as Social Comparison Theory, explains the way in which individuals evaluate their own opinions, beliefs, and desires by comparing themselves to others, and according to more recent research, this "social comparison" may be an even stronger force than idealized images in the media (Festinger, 1954) due to the fact that "a thin peer represents the standard that one should be able to attain" (Trottier et al., 2007, pg. 326). When individuals are exposed to a body image that they feel is ideal and would like to attain, they may "internalize" this image and cause them to "strive to be thin" (Polivy & Herman, 2004, pg. 322). The preliminary data was consistent with the study's hypothesis, that Facebook usage can impact diet and exercise habits of college females.

### **Limitations**

Several limitations within the study included a small sample size. The findings cannot depict an accurate picture that can be generalized to the entire college female population. Additionally, the campus in which the participants were selected may attract a certain "type" of female students resulting in a homogenous population sample that caused the survey results to be skewed.

**Implications for Practice, Policy, and Research**

Evidently, disordered eating among college females is a hidden reality in need of being addressed. According to the university's counseling services, the majority of students seen by clinicians are related to an eating disorder. While statistics on this topic are confidential and not to be released publicly, those employed in health services have stated that the college has seen a shocking number of eating disorders throughout the years. Knowing this, it is safe to wonder why such high numbers exist and what can be done to reduce them.

Currently, minimal efforts have been taken to inform students of the dangers and possible causes of eating disorders. In order to confront such an issue head on, it is vital that education on the topic becomes more prevalent among this campus, and that the brutal reality of the problem be displayed. Because it is a topic that is kept under wraps, it is important to first break the taboo associated with it. Until others are comfortable discussing eating disorders and the pressures associated with looking a certain way, programs provided will not be effective. Providing students with open conversations concerning the various causes of eating disorders can help to show that many females share similar feelings toward the subject.

However, research has shown that adding shock value to a topic is most effective when attempting to educate others. In a study done by Sarah McPartlon, it was found that participants were more inclined to receive a Human Papilloma Virus Vaccine when presented with the lethal affects of the disease rather than with the benefits of the vaccine. Similarly, programs designed to reduce alcohol abuse among teens and young adults, such as, Students Against Drunk Driving (SADD) display the shocking dangers and consequences of drinking and driving. Such presentations have been used within middle schools and high schools for many years because they present information in such a way as to instill a sense of fear within students to prevent



them from participating in dangerous actions. In terms of eating disorders, no such programs exist. Those struggling with eating disorders or currently in recovery can be brought to campuses to tell their personal story, and bring about a reality to the problem at hand. Presenting students with the rates of eating disorders on their own campus brings about awareness that directly affects them and that has previously been hidden.

An important aspect of educating students must incorporate the causes of eating disorders. An article in the Huffington Post revealed the results of a similar study linking Facebook to feeling fat and eating disorders among both men and women (Meredith, 2012). Researchers surveyed 600 users between the ages of 16 and 40 and found that “more than half said that Facebook makes them more self-conscious about their bodies and weight” (Meredith, 2012). Additional findings proved that “people are now constantly aware of their appearance thanks to Facebook” causing them to feel as if they should be thinner which directly results in “hazardous dieting” (Meredith, 2012). This study further supports the hypothesis that a correlation can be found between Facebook usage and eating disorders. Therefore, instead of attempting to keep individuals off of the website, it is important that they are educated on the dangers associated with its use. Considering the majority of Facebook users fall between the ages of 18 and 23, it is vital that universities implement programs warning their students about these risks.

In order to target the issue of eating disorders both nationally and worldwide, campuses need to start addressing the severity of the problem and the reality of their significant social and medical issue. It is clear that with the introduction of Facebook, the number of eating disorders are increasing, and it is up to the inner workings of the institution to implement preventative measures to keep this from going any further.

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APPENDIX A

Age \_\_\_\_\_

Gender: \_\_\_\_\_ Male \_\_\_\_\_ Female

Class Year: \_\_\_\_\_

Ethnicity: \_\_\_\_\_

Major: \_\_\_\_\_

*Please circle the answer that best describes your opinion.*

**Facebook**

1. I feel compelled to check Facebook: \_\_\_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No

a. Why or why not?

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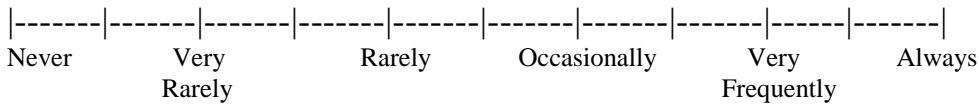
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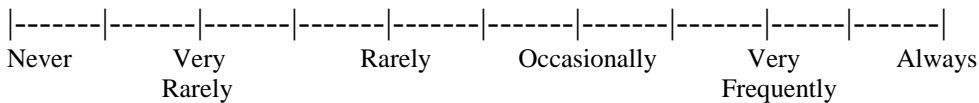
2. About how many hours a day do you spend on Facebook? \_\_\_\_\_

3. If your cell phone allows it, how many times a day do you use your Facebook application? \_\_\_\_\_

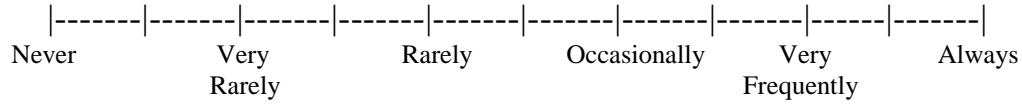
4. How often do you use Facebook’s mobile upload option?



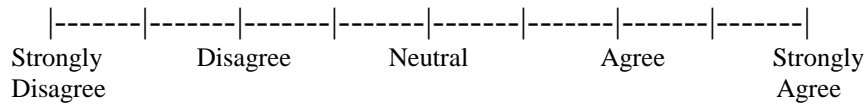
5. How often do you look at “friends” tagged photos?



6. How often do you look at your own tagged photos?



7. Seeing a bad picture of someone else boosts my self-esteem.



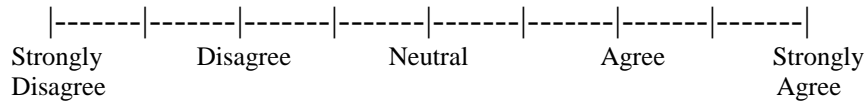
a. In general, what constitutes as a bad picture?

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8. Seeing a good picture of someone else lessens my self-esteem.



a. What constitutes as a good picture?

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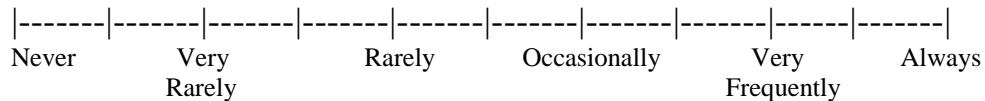
9. What criteria do you use when choosing a profile picture?

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10. Do you edit your pictures?



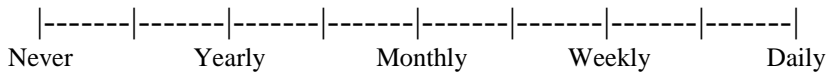
a. If so, how and why?

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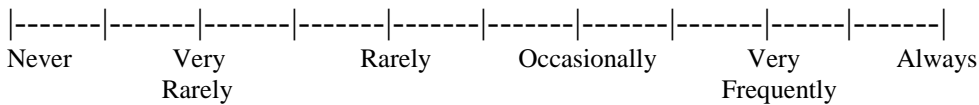
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11. How often do you create an Album on Facebook?



12. How often do you remove a Tagged Photo?

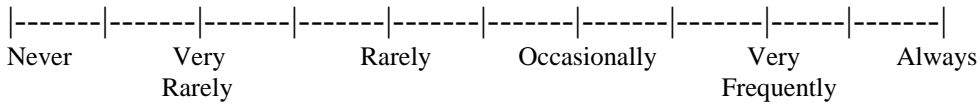


a. Under what circumstances would you remove a tagged photo? Please describe.

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13. How often do you leave positive comments on photos of Friends?



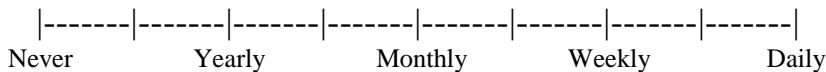
a. Please describe what these comments pertain to? (i.e. physical appearance, clothing etc.)

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**Exercise**

1. How often do you workout?



2. What are your reasons for exercising?

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3. Please specify your type of workout (i.e. cardio, weigh lifting etc.)

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4. How long do you typically exercise for? \_\_\_\_\_

5. If you workout with a friend does it motivate you or make you feel more competitive?

\_\_\_\_\_ Motivate      \_\_\_\_\_ Competitive      \_\_\_\_\_ Both

6. You feel it necessary to workout everyday.

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Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree			

7. If you miss a workout:

a. How does it make you feel?

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b. Do you alter your eating habits as a result of missing your workout?

\_\_\_\_\_ Yes      \_\_\_\_\_ No

1.b. If you answered yes, in what ways do you alter your eating habits?

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c. Do you workout harder the next day? \_\_\_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No



8. Do you tan? \_\_\_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No

a. If yes, what are your reasons for tanning?

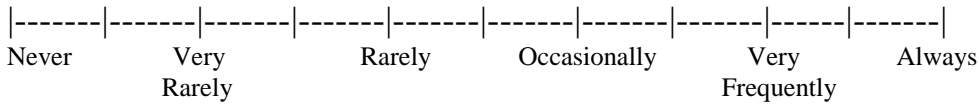
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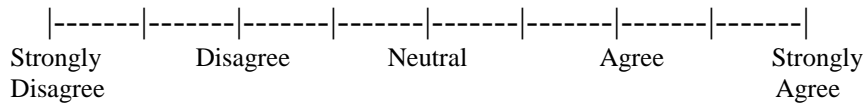
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***Eating Habits***

1. How often do you choose a “diet” product over its regular counterpart?

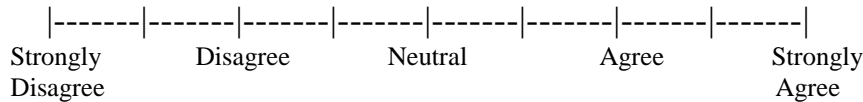


2. I am aware of how many calories I consume per day.

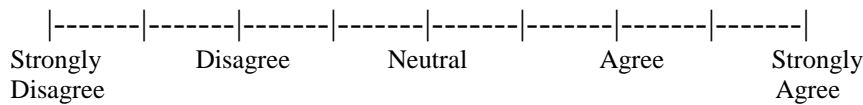


a. How many calories do you consume per day? \_\_\_\_\_

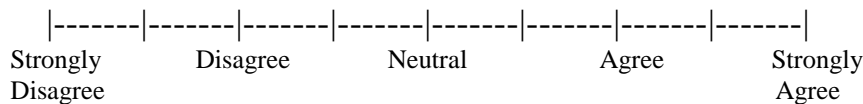
3. You consider the amount of calories in a product before eating it.



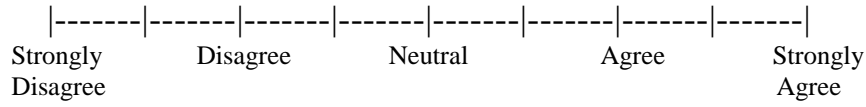
4. I eat food that I know is healthy for me.



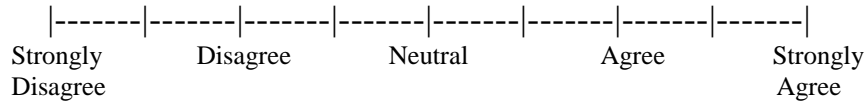
5. I research what foods to eat to maximize my health.



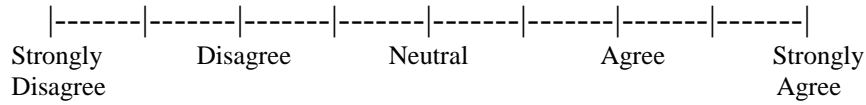
6. I know the health advantages and disadvantages in the food I consume.



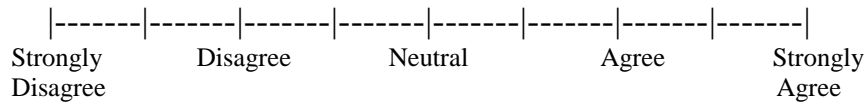
7. I have a desire to be thin.



8. I make food choices based on what will affect my physical appearance.



9. Eating healthy food is a priority in my life.



## APPENDIX B

Dear Potential Participant:

I am a social work major at Providence College, asking you to participate in a study to determine whether or not there is a link between the use of Facebook and dieting habits. Data gathered in this study will be reported in a thesis paper in a social work capstone course at Providence College. It will also be added to the Providence College digital commons database.

At this time, college females located on the Providence campus are being surveyed for this research. Participation will involve answering questions about their use of Facebook, dieting habits, and exercise habits. The survey should take no longer than 15 minutes.

There are no anticipated significant risks associated with involvement in this research. There is always the possibility that one may feel uncomfortable answering the questions asked on a survey. Participants are free to stop participation in the study at any time.

Benefits of participating in this study include helping researchers to formulate an understanding of whether or not there is a correlation between females' use of Facebook and their dieting habits.

Storing signed consent forms separately from data obtained in the study will protect confidentiality. Once the data are obtained, all identifying information linking the participant to his or her response will be destroyed so that responses can no longer be identified with individuals. Data will be reported by making generalizations of all of the data that has been gathered.

Participation in this study is voluntary. A decision to decline to participate will not have any negative effects for you.

**YOUR SIGNATURE INDICATES THAT YOU HAVE READ AND UNDERSTOOD THE ABOVE INFORMATION AND THAT YOU HAVE HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY, YOUR PARTICIPATION, AND YOUR RIGHTS AND THAT YOU AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY.**

Thank you for participating in this study.

Jaclyn Longo, Social Work Student, [jlongo3@friars.providence.edu](mailto:jlongo3@friars.providence.edu)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Signature)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Date)