Facebook users more prone to developing eating disorders

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The results of a new study showed that the more time girls spend on Facebook, the more they suffered conditions of bulimia, anorexia, physical dissatisfaction, negative physical self-image, negative approach to eating and more of an urge to be on a weight-loss diet. Extensive online exposure to fashion and music content showed similar tendencies, but manifested in fewer types of eating disorders.

The same has been found with regard to exposure to music and fashion on the Internet, and to harmful programs on TV. The study also reveals that the risk of developing eating disorders in adolescent girls is moderated when there is more parental supervision over viewing habits.

The more time adolescent girls spend in front of Facebook, the more their chances of developing a negative body image and various eating disorders, such as anorexia, bulimia and exaggerated dieting. This has been shown in a new study from the University of Haifa.

Eating disorders include a wide spectrum of abnormal mental and behavioral conducts related to food and body weight, such as anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa. This study, conducted by Prof. Yael Latzer, Prof. Ruth Katz and Zohar Spivak of the Faculty of Social Welfare and Health Sciences at the University of Haifa, set out to examine the effects of two factors on the development of eating disorders in young girls: exposure to the media and self-empowerment.

A group of 248 girls aged 12-19 (average age: 14.8) took part in the

survey. These girls were asked to provide information on their Internet and television viewing habits. Regarding the latter, they were asked to give the number of popular shows related to extreme standards of physical image (the "Barbie" model) that they watched. The girls also filled out questionnaires that examined their approach to slimming, bulimia, physical satisfaction or dissatisfaction, their general outlook on eating, and their sense of personal empowerment.

The results showed that the more time girls spend on Facebook, the more they suffered conditions of bulimia, anorexia, physical dissatisfaction, negative physical self-image, negative approach to eating and more of an urge to be on a weight-loss diet. Extensive online exposure to fashion and music content showed similar tendencies, but manifested in fewer types of eating disorders. As such, the more the exposure to fashion content on the Internet, the higher a girl's chances of developing anorexia. A similar direct link was found between viewing gossip- and leisure-related television programs (the likes of "Gossip Girl") and eating disorders in adolescent girls. The study also revealed that the level of personal empowerment in these girls is negatively linked to eating disorders, such that the higher the level of empowerment, the more positive the physical self-image and the lower the chances of developing an eating disorder.

In this study, exposure to the media and the consequential sense of personal empowerment was found to be associated to parenting practices. Girls whose parents were involved in their media usage; who knew what they were viewing and reading and where they were surfing on the web; who watched, surfed or read along with them; and who conducted cooperative and critical discussions with their daughters about the content of their surfing habits, showed more personal empowerment, forming a protective shield against eating disorders.

On the other hand, parents who were not involved in their media

exposure, were not aware of the content that their daughters were consuming, and instead of sharing and becoming familiar with that content chose to limit or prohibit exposure, led to lower self-empowerment in their daughters. This, in turn, has a positive link to various eating problems and negative body image.

"Significant potential for future research and application of eating disorder prevention lies in an understanding of how parenting decisions can have effect on an adolescent girl's sense of empowerment and that enforcing a girl's sense of empowerment is a means to strengthening body image. This study has shown that a parent has potential ability to prevent dangerous behavioral disorders and negative eating behavior in particular," the researchers stated.

Provided by University of Haifa