

How Diet Culture's Digital Environment Facilitates Eating Disorders



Health Apps and Diet Fads

Aims

- **Help people** with eating disorders understand the driving forces behind their own experiences.
- Assist companies with creating **safer** and more conscious **platforms**.
- Expand the academic scope of available **research** covering the link between health applications and **eating disorders**.
- Create a **discussion** around lesser-known, dangerous health and diet applications and their **potential impact** on their users.

Rationale

- There is a significant lack of research based on the detrimental impacts of health applications on people with and without eating disorders.
- There is a clear need for more in-depth discussion around diet culture acting as a driving force for the success of health applications.
- Internalised belief systems such as misogyny, weight stigma and 'the thin ideal' set the precedent for the success of health applications.
- I wanted to answer '*Why is this happening?*' and '*What can we do to stop it?*'.

7.8% Global Population



The rates of eating disorders are rising across the world. According to *Beat*, eating disorders now affect around 1.25 million people of the UK population and 7.8% of the global population.

259,000 *Health, Diet and Fitness Apps*



Across the digital realm, there are over 259,000 health applications, on both Apple and Android products, available for download and use.

Main Themes

- **Diet Culture**, a term used to describe a “rigid set of expectations about **valuing thinness** and attractiveness over physical health and emotional well-being.” (*Arzt, 2021*).
- **Weight Stigma**, “the **discriminatory** acts and ideologies targeted towards individuals because of their weight and size” (*World Obesity Federation, n.d.*).
- **Misogyny and the Patriarchy** “a culture fixated on female thinness is not an obsession about female beauty, but an obsession about female obedience. Dieting is the most potent political sedative in women’s history; a quietly mad population is a tractable one.” (*Wolf, 1998: 187*).
- **The Thin Ideal**, a concept referring to the **glorification** of the thin body, despite the fact that this may be unhealthy, unnatural and, in some instances, **fatal**.

Methods

- Primary research through interviewing a former inpatient at an eating disorder ward and a former CAMHS Mental Health Practitioner. Additional anonymised survey completed by 33 people.
- Secondary research was gathered from eating disorder charities, such as *Beat* and *NEDA*, to gather statistics and analysis of eating disorders, including their behavioural and physical symptoms.
- Journals sourced from *PubMed* and *JSTOR*, were collected and analysed in order to establish an academic foundation for my own research.
- Historic texts such as William Banting's *Letter on Corpulence: Address to the Public* (1864) and Naomi Wolf's *The Beauty Myth* (1998) were used in efforts to understand the history of diet culture and its criticisms.

Findings and Results

- The two interviews unanimously agreed that health applications pose a significant risk to the mental and physical well being of their users.
- Interviewee 1 detailed the significant complications that arose throughout their use of *MyFitnessPal*.
- Interviewee 2 could not see how health applications could be used in a healthy way, based upon their treatment of people with eating disorders.
- The questionnaire produced varying testimonials, however, 90% reported that they would not recommend a health application to friends or family.
- Research concluded that the presence of diet culture has enabled a cultural obsession with achieving thinness, promoting greater suffering for those with eating disorders and ultimately ensuring the success of health applications.

“I was admitted to a psychiatric eating disorder unit before the diet app told me I had lost enough weight”



- Interviewee 1, former patient of an eating disorder ward

“Thinking about the young people I’ve worked with, I can't see how [diet apps] would be helpful”



- Interviewee 2, former CAMHS Mental Health Practitioner

Through my research, the potential impact of health applications identified include the following:

- Development of eating disorders including Anorexia, Bulimia and Orthorexia.
- Preoccupation with weight and size.
- Unreliable perception of body image.
- Obsessive traits concerning food consumption.
- Obsessive preoccupation with exercise and weight loss.
- Significant and dangerous weight loss.
- Increased risk of fatality.

Conclusion

- This dissertation was written with the primary goal of **helping people**: sufferers of eating disorders, researchers or the companies behind the creation of health applications.
- It provides accurate and well-researched material to generate wider, much needed conversations surrounding mental health.
- Issues surrounding eating disorders and health applications are often overlooked and the research often underfunded.
- Whilst we are now within the era referred to as a “**silent epidemic**” (*Bordonaro, 2015*) of eating disorders, it is now more crucial than ever to address these issues and ensure that no one else falls victim to the damaging impacts of health applications.

Thank you for your time,
any questions?