# Social media’s muscle obsession sparks rise in disordered eating among young men



The allure of the perfect muscular body has never been more pronounced, particularly on social media platforms where influencers and celebrities showcase their physiques to millions. This obsession with an idealized form is signalling a concerning trend: a rise in a specific type of disordered eating known as muscularity oriented disordered eating (Mode). Unlike traditional eating disorders such as anorexia or bulimia, Mode predominantly affects young men and manifests through unhealthy behaviours centred on muscle gain. This includes an extreme focus on protein intake, rigorous dietary restrictions, and excessive self-scrutiny regarding muscle development.

Research indicates that the increasing prevalence of Mode parallels the rapid ascendance of visual social media content, particularly on platforms like Instagram and TikTok. Users encounter an overwhelming number of posts that glorify muscular physiques, presenting a distorted view of health where body image trumps well-being. Notably, a study from the University of Vermont found that TikTok promotes a plethora of weight-loss narratives, which can lead to disordered eating and dissatisfaction with one's body. These research findings underscore that young users are often inundated with unrealistic portrayals of nutrition and fitness, pushing them towards unhealthy aspirations.

Several factors contribute to the gravitation towards Mode, particularly among college students who are newly responsible for their diets and frequently consume fitness-oriented content. Studies demonstrate that young men who follow stringent muscle-building diets—including the extensive use of supplements like whey protein and anabolic steroids—are at heightened risk. Alarmingly, research shows that upwards of 80% of male college students report using protein supplements, while approximately 82% of anabolic steroid users hail from this demographic. These substances can lead to detrimental physical and psychological health effects, such as mood swings, sexual dysfunction, and heightened anxiety or depression.

The implications of Mode are broad and often devastating. It not only encourages harmful dietary practices but is also linked to patterns of binge eating and orthorexia—an unhealthy obsession with "clean" eating. Additionally, social isolation becomes a significant concern, as many individuals withdraw from social activities to adhere to their strict fitness and dietary regimens. In a study involving male bodybuilders, many reported feelings of guilt and disappointment if they deviated from their extreme diets, illustrating how personal relationships and responsibilities can be overshadowed by the relentless pursuit of an ideal body.

The societal pressure emanating from social media complicates this landscape further. As studies reveal, posts featuring toned bodies can alter the perception of self-worth and contribute to unhealthy body-image issues. Young men are increasingly pressured to mirror these ideal bodies, creating a cycle of self-objectification and harmful lifestyle choices. The phenomenon of influencers promoting extreme fitness regimens as aspirational goals endorses an environment where unsustainable eating habits are normalised, often without the scrutiny they warrant. This not only harms physical health but also risks significant mental health repercussions, such as anxiety and increased feelings of inadequacy.

Conversely, while social media can perpetuate harmful body standards, it also offers a platform for promoting body positivity and inclusivity. Experts argue for the necessity of cultivating a healthier fitness culture that recognises Mode as a legitimate public health concern. Efforts are needed to educate both users and creators about the potential dangers of promoting extreme fitness ideals. Schools, colleges, and the fitness industry must strive to mitigate the risks of disordered eating while encouraging responsible health practices.

In summation, the push for the perfect muscular physique on social media is contributing to a new wave of disordered eating that predominantly targets young men. As platforms continue to be awash with idealised images, there is an urgent need for a collective reevaluation of content that glamorises extreme dietary and fitness habits. Recognising the implications of Mode and fostering discussions around body image can pave the way for a healthier, more inclusive narrative regarding fitness and wellness.

### 📌 Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://theconversation.com/social-medias-push-for-the-perfect-muscular-body-is-fuelling-a-new-form-of-disordered-eating-and-young-men-are-most-at-risk-254157), [[2]](https://www.axios.com/2022/11/02/tiktok-weight-loss-dieting-health-study)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://theconversation.com/social-medias-push-for-the-perfect-muscular-body-is-fuelling-a-new-form-of-disordered-eating-and-young-men-are-most-at-risk-254157), [[3]](https://time.com/4459153/social-media-body-image/)
* Paragraph 3 – [[1]](https://theconversation.com/social-medias-push-for-the-perfect-muscular-body-is-fuelling-a-new-form-of-disordered-eating-and-young-men-are-most-at-risk-254157), [[5]](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/37146410/), [[6]](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/29363993/)
* Paragraph 4 – [[1]](https://theconversation.com/social-medias-push-for-the-perfect-muscular-body-is-fuelling-a-new-form-of-disordered-eating-and-young-men-are-most-at-risk-254157), [[2]](https://www.axios.com/2022/11/02/tiktok-weight-loss-dieting-health-study), [[3]](https://time.com/4459153/social-media-body-image/), [[7]](https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC11722979/)
* Paragraph 5 – [[1]](https://theconversation.com/social-medias-push-for-the-perfect-muscular-body-is-fuelling-a-new-form-of-disordered-eating-and-young-men-are-most-at-risk-254157), [[4]](https://time.com/6223198/bella-hadid-tiktok-trend-eating-disorders/), [[6]](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/29363993/)
* Paragraph 6 – [[1]](https://theconversation.com/social-medias-push-for-the-perfect-muscular-body-is-fuelling-a-new-form-of-disordered-eating-and-young-men-are-most-at-risk-254157), [[3]](https://time.com/4459153/social-media-body-image/)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://theconversation.com/social-medias-push-for-the-perfect-muscular-body-is-fuelling-a-new-form-of-disordered-eating-and-young-men-are-most-at-risk-254157> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.axios.com/2022/11/02/tiktok-weight-loss-dieting-health-study> - A study published by the University of Vermont in the journal PLOS One has identified that TikTok promotes weight loss content heavily among teens and young adults, which may lead to disordered eating behaviors and body dissatisfaction. This research is the first to scale content assessment related to nutrition and body image on the social media app known for short videos. The study analysed the top 100 videos using 10 popular weight loss, diet, and food hashtags, which collectively have over 1 billion views. Senior researcher Lizzy Pope emphasises that this type of content presents an unrealistic and inaccurate portrayal of food, nutrition, and health to millions of adolescent and young users daily.
3. <https://time.com/4459153/social-media-body-image/> - The impact of social media on teens' body image is profound, functioning as a toxic mirror that exacerbates body image issues. Recent studies demonstrate a strong association between social media use and negative body image, including concerns about dieting, body surveillance, and self-objectification among adolescents. Platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat encourage teens to seek approval for their appearance and compare themselves to others, with those who post and comment on photos being the most affected. This phenomenon affects both girls and boys, leading to body image disturbance and disordered eating. The rise of 'wellness' and fitness celebrities online further drives unhealthy body ideals under the guise of health. Teens often consume more than they share, with endless access to images promoting unrealistic body standards. Parents are encouraged to engage teens in discussions about the motives behind online image modification and remind them of their inherent worth beyond appearances.
4. <https://time.com/6223198/bella-hadid-tiktok-trend-eating-disorders/> - A new TikTok trend using audio of model Bella Hadid saying, 'My name, my name is Bella Hadid,' has sparked concerns for normalising disordered eating and trivialising eating disorders. Users have repurposed the audio to create videos suggesting that restrictive eating habits can make them feel like a supermodel. These have included examples from blotting pizza to skipping meals, leading to more severe posts claiming users feel thinner after vomiting or losing appetite due to mental health struggles. Experts warn that such content could be harmful and triggering for vulnerable individuals or those in recovery from eating disorders, potentially glamorising dangerous behaviours. They urge TikTok to take a stronger stance in moderating this content and encourage users to engage with body-positive and anti-diet creators. Bella Hadid was not involved in the creation of this trend and has openly discussed her battles with anorexia and body dysmorphia.
5. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/37146410/> - This study evaluated whether social networking site (SNS) and dating app use is associated with disordered eating in young men. Forty-two men aged 18–35 who reported at least four loss of control eating episodes in the prior month completed a 14-day ecological momentary assessment protocol. The study found that dating app use was associated with higher same- and next-day dietary restraint, while SNS use was not. More SNS use was associated with lower odds of same- and next-day loss of control eating. The findings suggest that the relationship between social media use and disordered eating in young men may differ from that observed in women.
6. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/29363993/> - This study examined the association between social media use and body dissatisfaction, eating disorder symptoms, and anabolic steroid use among sexual minority men. A nationwide sample of 2,733 sexual minority men completed an online survey. The study found that Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat evidenced the strongest associations between social media use and body dissatisfaction, eating disorder symptoms, and thoughts about using anabolic steroids. The associations were stronger for image-centric social media platforms compared to non-image-centric platforms. The findings suggest that social media use is associated with body dissatisfaction and related variables among sexual minority men.
7. <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC11722979/> - This article discusses the relationship between social media use and disordered eating among young people. It highlights that social media use correlates with increased disordered eating, body image dissatisfaction, and negative mental health outcomes. The promotion of unrealistic beauty standards on these platforms intensifies social comparison and contributes to body image concerns. The article also notes that repeated exposure to idealised body images exacerbates depression, low self-esteem, and preoccupation with weight and shape, particularly among young women. The authors suggest that social media use is a significant risk factor for disordered eating among young people.