

The Relationship Between Eating Disorder Risk and Fear of Dislike on Social Media, Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Among High School Students: A Cross-Sectional Study

Lise Öğrencilerinde Yeme Bozukluğu Riski ile Sosyal Medya Beğenilmeme Korkusu, Depresyon, Anksiyete ve Stres Arasındaki İlişki: Kesitsel Çalışma

¹ Rahime Evra KARAKAYA^a, ² Meryem ALGAN^a, ³ Hanife AVCU^a

^aAnkara Yıldırım Beyazıt University, Faculty of Health Sciences, Department of Nutrition and Dietetics, Ankara, Türkiye

ABSTRACT Objective: This study was conducted to examine the relationship between eating disorder risk, social media, and psychological factors among high school students. **Material and Methods:** In this cross-sectional study, eating disorder risk was assessed using the Eating Attitudes Test-40 (EAT-40), fear of being disliked on social media was evaluated using the Social Media Fear of Dislike Scale (SMFDS), psychological factors were measured with the Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scale-42 (DASS-42) high school form. **Results:** According to the EAT-40 scale, 15.4% of students were at risk for eating disorders. Based on the DASS-42 scale, extremely severe levels of depression, anxiety, and stress were revealed in 18.3%, 21.5%, and 10.5% of students, respectively. Female students had higher levels of fear of being disliked on social media, depression, anxiety, and stress compared to male students; however, no significant difference was observed regarding eating disorder risk. A positive and significant correlation was found between eating disorder risk and fear of being disliked on social media, depression, anxiety, and stress values ($r=0.215$, $p<0.001$; $r=0.217$, $p<0.001$; $r=0.302$, $p<0.001$; $r=0.245$, $p<0.001$, respectively). **Conclusion:** The risk of eating disorders in high school students is associated with social media use and psychological factors. These findings emphasize the need for a more detailed examination of the effects of social media use and related psychological factors on eating behaviors.

Keywords: Adolescent; anorexia nervosa; social media; depression; anxiety

ÖZET Amaç: Bu çalışma, lise öğrencileri arasında yeme bozukluğu riski, sosyal medya ve psikolojik faktörler arasındaki ilişkiyi incelemek amacıyla yürütülmüştür. **Gereç ve Yöntemler:** Kesitsel tipte olan bu çalışmada yeme bozukluğu riski, Yeme Tutum Testi-40 (YTT-40) ile; sosyal medyada beğenilmeme korkuları, Sosyal Medya Beğenilmeme Korkusu Ölçeği ile; psikolojik faktörler ise Depresyon, Anksiyete ve Stres Ölçeği-42 (DASS-42) lise formu kullanılarak değerlendirilmiştir. **Bulgular:** YTT-40 ölçeğine göre öğrencilerin %15,4'ünde yeme bozukluğu riski, DASS-42 ölçeğine göre çok ileri düzeyde depresyon, anksiyete ve stres düzeyine sahip öğrencilerin sıklığı sırasıyla %18,3, %21,5 ve %10,5'tir. Kadın öğrencilerde sosyal medyada beğenilmeme korkusu, depresyon, anksiyete ve stres düzeyleri erkeklerle kıyasla daha yüksek bulunmuş; ancak yeme bozukluğu riski açısından anlamlı bir fark gözlenmemiştir. Yeme bozukluğu riski ile sosyal medyada beğenilmeme korkusu, depresyon, anksiyete ve stres düzeyleri arasında pozitif yönde anlamlı ilişki bulunmuştur (sırasıyla; $r=0,215$, $p<0,001$; $r=0,217$, $p<0,001$; $r=0,302$, $p<0,001$; $r=0,245$, $p<0,001$). **Sonuç:** Lise öğrencilerinde yeme bozukluğu riski sosyal medya kullanımı ve psikolojik faktörler ile ilişkilidir. Bu bulgular, sosyal medya kullanımının ve psikolojik faktörlerin yeme davranışları üzerindeki etkilerinin daha ayrıntılı şekilde incelenmesi gerektiğini vurgulamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Adölesan; anoreksiya nervoza; sosyal medya; depresyon; anksiyete

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Correspondence: Rahime Evra KARAKAYA

Ankara Yıldırım Beyazıt University, Faculty of Health Sciences, Department of Nutrition and Dietetics, Ankara, Türkiye

E-mail: rekarakaya@aybu.edu.tr

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Adolescence is an important period in which psychological, physical, social and hormonal changes occur. During this phase, growth and development accelerate, leading to increased energy and nutrient requirements. Simultaneously, adolescents often experience heightened interest in their physical appearance and shifts in body image perception. Disruptions in eating behaviors during this time can negatively affect growth and development and increase the risk of nutrition-related disorders.^{1,2}

Eating disorders are psychiatric conditions characterized by disturbances in eating behaviors and body image, often involving an intense preoccupation with weight control. These disorders adversely impact both physical and mental health.³ Adolescents are particularly susceptible to eating disorders, influenced by factors such as age, sex, psychosocial challenges, and environmental stressors. Research suggests that eating disorders frequently emerge during adolescence and are more prevalent among females than males.⁴ A meta-analysis encompassing data from 16 countries estimated the rate of eating disorders among children and adolescents at 22%.⁵ In Türkiye, the prevalence ranges from 13.2% to 27.5% in some studies.^{6,7}

Social media significantly influences body image perceptions during adolescence. Platforms that idealize thin and slim body types often encourage users to compare their bodies with others, potentially fostering negative body image. This phenomenon has been linked to increased anxiety and a heightened risk of developing eating disorders.^{8,9}

Additionally, psychological issues such as anxiety, depression, and stress are commonly observed during adolescence.¹⁰ Family and peer influences, academic stress, and the impact of social media are among the factors that can lead to negative body image, intensifying psychological difficulties and heightening the risk of eating disorders.¹¹

The interplay between eating behaviors, social media usage, and psychological factors in adolescents is intricate and multifaceted. This research seeks to explore the connections between the risk of eating disorders and factors such as fear of social media rejection and psychological factors in high school students.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

STUDY DESIGN

The research was conducted on 475 high school students between the ages of 14-19 studying at Ankara Aydınlık Anadolu Lisesi between January-June 2023. People with psychiatric diagnoses were excluded from the study. The universe of the research consisted of 1st, 2nd and 3rd year students (n=540). The representative size of the population was determined by the sampling method with a 95% confidence interval and a 5% margin of error. Therefore, the minimum sample size was determined as 225 participants. The researcher used face-to-face interview technique to administer the questions to the participants. The questionnaire included general characteristics, anthropometric measurements, dietary habits and the following scales: Eating Attitudes Test (EAT-40), Social Media Fear of Dislike Scale (SMFDS) and Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scale-42 (DASS-42) high school from. From the individual responses, the participants' age, sex, education, dietary habits, satisfaction with body weight and body image were collected.

ANTHROPOMETRIC MEASUREMENTS

Body weight and height were self reported and body mass index (BMI) was calculated and classified according to World Health Organization.¹²

EATING ATTITUDES TEST-40 (EAT-40)

EAT-40, initially developed by Garner and Garfinkel in 1979, is designed to evaluate symptoms related to eating disorders, especially anorexia nervosa.¹³ The Turkish version, which was validated and tested for reliability by Savaşır and Erol in 1989, is a self-reported tool consisting of 40 items.¹⁴ It employs a 6-point Likert scale (Always to Never). A total score of ≥ 30 suggests an increased risk of eating disorders.

SOCIAL MEDIA FEAR OF DISLIKE SCALE (SMFDS)

This scale, developed by Söner and Yılmaz, evaluates the fear of dislike on social media among adolescents.¹⁵ It consists of 24 items rated on a 4-point Likert scale (Always to Never) and includes five sub-dimen-

sions: unhappiness, obsessive thinking, desirability, anonymous identity, and empathy. The total score on the scale ranges from 24 to 96, with higher scores reflecting an increased fear of being disliked on social media.

DEPRESSION ANXIETY AND STRESS SCALE-42 (DASS-42) HIGH SCHOOL FORM

The scale was developed by Lovibond and Lovibond.¹⁶ Turkish version for university students was adapted by Bilgel and Bayram, and its reliability and validity for high school students were confirmed by Akkuş Çutuk and Kaya.^{17,18} The scale includes 42 items rated on a 4-point Likert scale (Not at all to Very much). It comprises 3 subscales: depression, anxiety, and stress, with scores for each subscale ranging from 0 to 42. These scores are further classified into 5 categories: normal, mild, moderate, severe, and extremely severe.¹⁸

ETHICAL CONSIDERATION

Ethics committee approval was obtained from Ankara Yıldırım Beyazıt University Health Sciences Ethics Committee for this study (date: December 08, 2022; no: 19-1249). The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles of the Declaration of Helsinki and informed and parental consent was obtained from all participants. The necessary approvals have been obtained from the relevant authorities for the conduct of the study.

STATISTICAL ANALYSES

Data were analyzed using IBM SPSS version 26 (IBM Inc., Chicago, IL, USA). Categorical data were expressed as number (n) and percentage (%). Homogeneity of continuous variables was assessed using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test. For these variables, both the mean±standard deviation (SD) and median [Min-Max] were reported. If the assumptions for parametric tests were not met, the Mann-Whitney U test was used, and the chi-square test was applied for categorical variables. To assess relationships between continuous variables with non-normal distributions, Spearman’s correlation coefficient was used. Statistical significance was set at $\alpha < 0.05$.

RESULTS

In the study, 53.7% of the participants are female, and 46.3% are male. Of the students, 33.3% are in the 1st year of high school, 32.4% are in the 2nd year, and 34.3% are in the 3rd year. According to BMI classification, 67.4% are of normal weight, and 21.3% are underweight. EAT-40 scale showed that 15.4% of the students are at risk for eating disorders. The average score on the SMFDS is 36.61±14.64. According to the DASS-42 subscales, 18.3% of students have extremely severe depression, 21.5% have extremely severe anxiety, and 10.5% have extremely severe stress levels (Table 1).

TABLE 1: Distribution of general characteristics, eating disorder risk, social media fear of dislike, and depression, anxiety, and stress conditions

		n=475	%
Age (years)	$\bar{X} \pm SD$	15.48±1.00	
Sex	Female	255	53.7
	Male	220	46.3
Educational level	Class 1	158	33.3
	Class 2	154	32.4
	Class 3	163	34.3
BMI	Underweight	101	21.3
	Normal	320	67.4
	Overweight	47	9.8
	Obese	7	1.5
EAT-40	No risk	402	84.6
	Risk	73	15.4
SMFDS	$\bar{X} \pm SD$	36.61±14.64	
Depression	Normal	182	38.3
	Mild	62	13.0
	Moderate	91	19.2
	Severe	53	11.2
	Extremely severe	87	18.3
Anxiety	Normal	179	37.7
	Mild	39	8.2
	Moderate	85	17.9
	Severe	70	14.7
	Extremely severe	102	21.5
Stress	Normal	214	45.1
	Mild	58	12.2
	Moderate	95	20.0
	Severe	58	12.2
	Extremely severe	50	10.5

BMI: Body mass index; EAT-40: Eating attitudes test-40; SMFDS: Social media fear of dislike scale; SD: Standard deviation

Table 2 shows that females have more irregular meal times compared to males (p<0.001). The frequency of skipping main meals is higher in females than in males (p<0.001). The reasons for skipping meals differ between both sexes (<0.001). No significant difference was found between females and males in terms of dieting, body weight and shape satisfaction (p>0.05).

In Table 3, the comparison by sex shows that

EAT-40 scores are similar (p=0.574). The total score of SMFDS and its subscale scores, as well as the total score of DASS-42 and its subscales, are significantly higher in females.

In Table 4, a weak positive relationship was observed between EAT-40 and the total score of SMFDS (r=0.215, p<0.001), between EAT-40 and DASS-42 (r=0.274, p<0.001), and between SMFDS and DASS-42 (r=0.377, p<0.001).

TABLE 2: Comparison of eating habits, body weight and shape satisfaction by sex

		Female		Male		p value [#]
		n=255	%	n=220	%	
Meal times	Regular	128	43.5	166	56.5	<0.001
	Irregular	127	70.2	54	29.8	
Skipping main meal	Yes	64	69.6	28	30.4	<0.001
	No	56	35.7	101	64.3	
	Sometimes	135	59.7	91	40.3	
Reason for skipping meals	Doesn't feel like eating	188	55.0	154	45.0	<0.001
	Forgets	50	43.5	65	56.5	
	Is afraid of eating	17	94.4	1	5.6	
Dieting	Follows	21	55.3	17	44.7	0.839
	Doesn't follow	234	53.5	203	46.5	
Body weight satisfaction	Satisfied	121	55.0	99	45.0	0.593
	Not satisfied	134	52.5	121	47.5	
Body shape satisfaciton	Satisfied	139	51.9	129	48.1	0.366
	Not satisfied	116	56.0	91	44.0	

[#]Chi-square test

TABLE 3: Comparison of EAT-40, SMFDS and its subscales, and DASS-42 and its subscales by sex

	Female (n=255)		Male (n=220)		p value [#]
	$\bar{X}\pm SD$	Median[Minimum-Maximum]	$\bar{X}\pm SD$	Median[Minimum-Maximum]	
EAT-40	19.99±12.22	17.00 [3.00-102.00]	19.95±13.46	16.00 [4.00-102.00]	0.574
SMFDS-total score	39.34±14.78	35.00 [24.00-93.00]	33.44±13.86	27.00 [24.00-96.00]	<0.001
Unhappiness	12.41±5.31	11.00 [7.00-28.00]	9.86±4.44	8.00 [7.00-28.00]	<0.001
Obsessive thinking	5.40±2.50	4.00 [4.00-16.00]	5.05±2.41	4.00 [4.00-16.00]	0.001*
Desirability	7.46±3.26	6.00 [5.00-20.00]	6.60±3.13	5.00 [5.00-20.00]	<0.001
Anonymous identity	7.05±2.47	7.00 [4.00-16.00]	5.95±2.37	5.00 [4.00-16.00]	<0.001
Empathy	7.02±2.91	6.00 [4.00-16.00]	5.97±2.87	4.00 [4.00-16.00]	<0.001
DASS-42 total score	54.02±30.27	49.00 [0.00-126.00]	34.60±26.52	28.00 [0.00-121.00]	<0.001
Depression	17.59±12.01	14.00 [0.00-42.00]	12.47±11.21	9.50 [0.00-42.00]	<0.001
Anxiety	15.36±10.03	14.00 [0.00-42.00]	8.85±7.98	7.00 [0.00-37.00]	<0.001
Stress	21.07±10.58	20.00 [0.00-42.00]	13.29±9.62	12.00 [0.00-42.00]	<0.001

*p<0.01; [#]Mann Whitney-U test

EAT-40: Eating attitudes test-40; SMFDS: Social media fear of dislike scale, DASS-42: Depression anxiety and stress scale-42

TABLE 4: The correlation analysis between EAT-40, SMFDS and its subscales, and DASS-42 and its subscales

		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1.EAT-40	r value	1										
2.SMFDS total score	r value	0.215*	1									
3.Unhappiness	r value	0.198*	0.917*	1								
4.Obsessive thinking	r value	0.255*	0.763*	0.704*	1							
5.Desirability	r value	0.226*	0.887*	0.844*	0.782*	1						
6.Anonymous identity	r value	0.220*	0.865*	0.683*	0.656*	0.726*	1					
7.Empathy	r value	0.162*	0.893*	0.767*	0.682*	0.786*	0.741*	1				
8.DASS-42 total score	r value	0.274*	0.377*	0.376*	0.286*	0.353*	0.352*	0.298*	1			
9.Depression	r value	0.217*	0.309*	0.304*	0.264*	0.295*	0.291*	0.234*	0.931*	1		
10.Anxiety	r value	0.302*	0.387*	0.393*	0.315*	0.372*	0.348*	0.320*	0.911*	0.775*	1	
11.Stress	r value	0.245*	0.379*	0.386*	0.242*	0.338*	0.349*	0.302*	0.936*	0.801*	0.808*	1

*p<0.001; Spearman's correlation EAT-40: Eating Attitudes Test-40; SMFDS: Social media fear of dislike scale; DASS-42: Depression, anxiety and stress scale-42

DISCUSSION

According to the study findings, 15.4% of the students were found to be at risk for eating disorders. DASS-42 subscales revealed that, having extremely severe depression, anxiety and stress level prevalence were 18.3%, 21.5%, 10.5% respectively. Female students had higher levels of fear of being disliked on social media, depression, anxiety, and stress compared to male students, while the risk of eating disorders was similar. As the risk of eating disorders increased, higher scores in fear of dislike on social media, depression, anxiety, and stress were observed.

Eating disorders are serious conditions characterized by abnormalities in eating behavior and changes in body weight. The prevalence of eating disorders, particularly common among females, increased from 3.5% between 2000-2006 to 7.8% between 2013-2018.¹⁹ Among these, Anorexia nervosa (AN) is a common eating disorder, especially during adolescence and it is most frequently observed in individuals aged 15-19, both in females and males.^{20,21} AN is a psychiatric disorder where individuals severely restrict food intake due to concerns about body weight and body image, leading to low body weight. This condition is associated with a high mortality rate and is considered a significant public health issue.²² The prevalence of AN among adolescents is reported between ranges from 20-40%.²³

This study supports these findings, as 15.4% of high school students were identified as being at risk for AN (Table 1). Although no significant sex difference was found in terms of eating disorder risk, females were more likely to skip meals and have irregular eating times compared to males (Table 2, Table 3). The literature suggests that irregular eating habits, such as skipping meals and late-night snacking, increase the risk of AN.²⁴ Although AN risk was not observed in female students, it is important to conclude that they should be closely monitored for potential eating disorder risks, as they tend to have more irregular eating habits (Table 3).

Social media is a platform where users can express their feelings without waiting for any rules or feedback. In individuals who use this platform, it has been reported that negative body image overlaps with tendencies towards AN.²⁵ While social media can function as a platform where symptoms of AN are displayed, users can share their concerns about body image and weight. The content shared can be both supportive and harmful; while some encourage recovery, others may promote pro-anorexia behaviors. Individuals with AN may reinforce unhealthy behaviors by connecting with communities facing similar issues.²⁶ A study conducted with adolescent girls with eating disorders highlighted the role of social media in increasing body dissatisfaction and influencing eating disorder-related behaviors.²⁷ Another study with

high school students found a significant association between social media addiction and eating behavior disorder risk (Odds ratio: 1.07, 95% Confidence Interval: 1.04-1.10).²⁸

This study found that females experienced a higher fear of being disliked on social media compared to males, and a significant relationship was observed between this fear and eating disorder risk (Table 3, Table 4). These findings suggest that the fear of social media dislike contribute to anorexia nervosa tendencies among high school students especially in females. Factors such as unhappiness, anonymous identity, desirability, empathy, and obsessive thinking associated with the fear of being disliked on social media may negatively impact individuals' self-esteem, emotional well-being, and body image, increasing the risk of eating disorders. These factors may particularly trigger the pursuit of social approval and the effort to achieve an ideal body image, paving the way for psychological and behavioral problems.

Additionally, in this study, body shape and body weight satisfaction were similar in both sexes, with nearly half of both females and males reporting dissatisfaction (Table 2). These results suggest that body image concerns are prevalent in both male and female students, but the sex-specific impact of these concerns on eating disorder risk may not be as pronounced.

Adolescence is a period marked by significant changes in physical, emotional, and social development, during which psychological sensitivities tend to increase. During this time, concerns about the future, academic pressures, efforts to fit into social environments, and heightened body image sensitivity can increase the risk of anxiety and depression.^{29,30} Social media use has been observed to have an increasingly pronounced impact on adolescents' mental health. By amplifying the desire for approval and acceptance, social media can trigger the fear of being disliked, leading to increased levels of stress, anxiety, and depression.³¹ These psychological factors can also elevate the risk of eating disorders in adolescents.³² For example, in a study by Ding and Xu, they found that anxiety mediated the relation-

ship between social comparisons on social media and emotional eating ($\beta=0.546$, $p<0.01$).³³ Additionally, Caner et al. found a significant relationship between adolescents' concerns about their appearance, social media addiction, and emotional eating behaviors.³⁴

In this study, less than half of the students showed normal levels of depression, anxiety, and stress, while the frequency of those with extremely severe levels of depression, anxiety, and stress was 18.3%, 21.5%, and 10.5%, respectively (Table 1). These psychological factors were found to be related to both eating disorder risk and fear of being disliked on social media, with higher levels observed in females compared to males (Table 3, Table 4), suggesting that females may be more sensitive to the feedback they receive on social media, potentially increasing the risk of eating disorders.

LIMITATIONS

A notable limitation of this research is its cross-sectional methodology, which restricts the ability to infer causal links among the variables. Additionally, self-reported measures introduces the possibility of bias. The research was carried out within a single institution, and final-year high school students were excluded due to their demanding schedules, which may affect the broader applicability of the results. Nevertheless, a notable strength of this research is that it represents one of the few studies with a large sample size exploring the connection between social media-related anxiety, psychosocial factors, and the risk of eating disorders in adolescents.

CONCLUSION

The risk of AN in high school students may be increased by the fear of being disliked on social media and psychological factors. The higher levels of fear of dislike on social media, depression, anxiety, and stress found in female students suggest that they may be more susceptible to developing eating disorders. A more in-depth investigation of the relationship between social media and associated psychosocial factors with eating behaviors could enhance the effectiveness of interventions in this area.

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Conflict of Interest

No conflicts of interest between the authors and / or family members of the scientific and medical committee members or members of the potential conflicts of interest, counseling, expertise,

working conditions, share holding and similar situations in any firm.

Authorship Contributions

Idea/Concept: Rahime Evra Karakaya, Meryem Algan, Hanife Avcu; **Design:** Rahime Evra Karakaya, Meryem Algan, Hanife Avcu; **Control/Supervision:** Rahime Evra Karakaya; **Data Collection and/or Processing:** Meryem Algan, Hanife Avcu; **Analysis and/or Interpretation:** Rahime Evra Karakaya, Meryem Algan, Hanife Avcu; **Literature Review:** Rahime Evra Karakaya, Meryem Algan, Hanife Avcu; **Writing the Article:** Rahime Evra Karakaya; **Critical Review:** Rahime Evra Karakaya; **References and Fundings:** Rahime Evra Karakaya, Meryem Algan, Hanife Avcu; **Materials:** Meryem Algan, Hanife Avcu.

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