Girls, Instagram, and the Glamorization of Self-loathing

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In this paper, I explore a complex, perplexing, and somewhat disturbing subculture that exists on the social media platform, Instagram. Within this subculture, adolescent girls share photos which depict and in many ways promote eating disorders and self-harm. By analyzing the images themselves as well as identifying patterns in identity of the profiles that host these images, I raise several questions which require further discussion. First, who is sharing these images? Why are they being shared? What can be done to help the girls suffering from these serious psychological issues? And finally, what is happening in our culture and in our world to push young girls to these extreme behaviors? Discussion and analysis of these topics is not easy, but it is necessary if we as a society hope to protect girls from experiencing such troublesome and worrying adolescent years; it is crucial if we hope to create a society full of strong, psychologically healthy women. With this essay, I use my voice to dissent against a culture that damning girls and young women to lives plagued by years of self-hatred, hurt, and sadness.

Note to readers: This photo essay contains graphic images which depict emaciated bodies, promotions of eating disorders, and self-harm including cuts and blood. If you feel that you may be triggered or made upset by these images, you may choose not to continue reading.

If you or someone you know is currently struggling with these issues, help is available. See Appendix A for some suggested resources.
Introduction

Feminist scholars have long been interested in the challenges that young girls face growing up in a patriarchal society. In fact, an entire field, Girl Studies, has developed as research on the lives of girls has accumulated. In 1994, Mary Pipher wrote a book titled Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls. In this book, readers are presented with stories from adolescent girls who Pipher encountered in her career as a clinical psychologist. A prominent issue discussed throughout this particular work is the increasing rates of depression and eating disorders among young girls in America. Though Pipher was certainly not the first to discuss this phenomenon, her book became a prominent one among feminist circles, especially among those interested in studying the lives of girls. Now eleven years later, the very serious issues discussed in this book and others like it remain prominent in the lives of young women, but the stories are often being told in a different way.

In modern Western culture, social media outlets are a force to be reckoned with. In small towns and populous cities alike, one would be hard-pressed to go an entire day without seeing a Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, or Instagram symbol on anything from a cup of coffee to a car insurance advertisement. Social media has invaded the American lifestyle, and virtually no one is immune. This invasion may be particularly pronounced among teen and pre-teen girls, however. One popular social media platform called Instagram functions almost exclusively through a mobile app for one’s smart phone or tablet. It allows users to share images with their “followers” and to build a network of friends. According to Instagram’s website, since their launch in 2010 they now host 300 million active members and over 30 billion photos (Instagram, 2015c). Alongside everyday Instagram users, companies, celebrities, and politicians (including Barack and Michelle Obama) use the photo-sharing tool to connect with average citizens. The popularity of Instagram becomes extremely important when we learn more about how and why some young people are making use of this particular digital space.

Instagram does not allow anyone under the age of thirteen to use their app. However, it takes no more effort than lying about one’s birth-year to get around this restriction. Although nearly all social media companies place age restrictions on who can sign up to use their platform, these numbers become
arbitrary to any young person on a mission to be included in digital social spaces. Similar to most modes of media today, Instagram hosts content which can be inappropriate (or at least questionable) for children. While Instagram has rules about the types of photos that can be shared, as explained in their “community guidelines,” these rules are often broken. Some images may fall somewhere on the border of these rules, bending them with their problematic content. One guideline for which this is particularly true is their ban on content promoting self-harm and disordered eating. Figure 1 is a screenshot of Instagram’s policy regarding such photos.

Although this explanation may seem concise but unambiguous, the matter becomes much more complicated when considering exactly what kinds of images represent a coming together “to create awareness or find support”. Further, Instagram’s commitment to remove images “encouraging or urging people to embrace self-injury” is one difficult to uphold when all images depicting self-injury and eating disorders can be argued as encouraging these behaviors. In collecting images for this essay, I have found that these issues create a grey area, full of questions without definitive answers and problems without definitive solutions.

- **Maintain our supportive environment by not glorifying self-injury.**

  The Instagram community cares for each other, and is often a place where people facing difficult issues such as eating disorders, cutting, or other kinds of self-injury come together to create awareness or find support. We try to do our part by providing education in the app and adding information in the Help Center so people can get the help they need.

  Encouraging or urging people to embrace self-injury is counter to this environment of support, and we’ll remove it or disable accounts if it’s reported to us. To protect people, we may also remove content identifying victims or survivors of self-injury if the content targets them for attack or humor.

Figure 1. Instagram’s Community Guidelines (2015a).

**Background**

As a double major in psychology and women’s studies with a minor in sociology, looking at the social interactions and patterns regarding psychological issues among girls and women is something I am highly interested in. I’ve always found eating disorders fascinating and, in choosing to research the Instagram sub-culture in which young girls glamorize these, it became evident to me that I could not
do so without also addressing the promotion of self-harm. Finding images which represent this sub-culture of self-deprecation in relation to one's weight was easy; separating self-harm from disordered eating was not. In addition, choosing which images to use in my essay was made difficult due to the surprisingly vast amount of disturbing images I came across. Many of the girls who use Instagram in the manner that I am examining state that they have mental illnesses such as depression and anxiety, whether professionally or self-diagnosed. Some of them have attempted or look as if they plan to attempt suicide, often sharing images which suggest suicidal ideation. Many girls discuss binging and purging, the primary symptoms associated with bulimia nervosa. These conditions coupled with cultural and societal factors, which I will address later in this essay, push many girls to unhealthy coping mechanisms such as cutting, hitting, or starving oneself in the pursuit to be thin.


In the last year, the individual has, on 5 or more days, engaged in intentional self-inflicted damage to the surface of his or her body, of a sort likely to induce bleeding or bruising or pain (e.g., cutting, burning, stabbing, hitting, excessive rubbing), for purposes not socially sanctioned (e.g., body piercing, tattooing, etc.), but performed with the expectation that the injury will lead to only minor or moderate physical harm (p 803).

Most girls who share depictions of their own self-harm on Instagram likely fit this official diagnosis. For the purposes of this paper, I will be using the term “self-harm” to refer to images which show cutting or which discuss the desire to engage in cutting.

Eating disorders are somewhat popular in terms of their discussion in pop culture and among lay people. Terms such as “anorexia” and “bulimia” are frequently used but the official criteria for the disorders which they represent are generally somewhat misunderstood. The Center for Eating Disorders at Sheppard Pratt (2015) cites
the DSM V (2013) in three criteria used to diagnose Anorexia Nervosa:

Restriction of energy intake relative to requirements leading to a significantly low body weight…, Intense fear of gaining weight or becoming fat, and disturbance in the way one’s body weight or shape is experienced, undue influence of body weight or shape on self-evaluation, or denial of the seriousness of the current low body weight” (para 1).

Bulimia Nervosa is characterized by episodes of bingeing followed by purging food from the body, usually by vomiting or the use of laxatives. The diagnosis also might include feeling out of control of one’s eating while bingeing, eating beyond the point of fullness, inappropriate compensatory behaviors following a binge, frequent dieting, and extreme concern with body weight and shape (The Alliance for Eating Disorder Awareness, 2013).

Identifying Patterns

The Problem

The intended purpose of Instagram is similar to that of any social networking outlet—to allow users to connect with other users. Instagram is somewhat unique in that it functions exclusively by hosting profiles on which users are able to share photos with brief descriptions. In addition, the photos can be added to public lists with the use of “hashtags.” The average Instagram user shares photos of their everyday lives—pets, friends, concerts, meals they eat—but photos can also include things like inspirational quotes and motivational images. Many users participate in sharing images revolving around fitness and health. In these instances, people are typically promoting healthy life advice and ways in which they feel they are bettering themselves. However, there is a disturbing sub-culture that can be found alongside this one on Instagram; one in which young people are sharing messages which promote dangerous (even deadly) behaviors. Finding these images requires nothing more than a search for specific hashtags used among young people who participate in this community, some of whom fall below the age requirement to create an Instagram account.

These numerous images feature depictions of extremely thin bodies and “thinspo” (which is an abbreviated term for the slang “thin-spiration.”) Some images feature sayings used to encourage girls to starve themselves or tips on how to eat as few calories as possible (or burn as many calories as possible) as part of an extreme diet.
plan. Others show images of cuts on arms and legs, many of which also feature words describing what it is like to live as someone who cuts and hides it from everyone they know. Unfortunately, these images collectively serve to promote these debilitating mental health issues and almost certainly encourage young people who have not yet engaged in these behaviors to try them as a means to cope with issues in their own lives. However, in looking at and contemplating each of these photos, the question of why girls share these types of things is repeated over and over. The answer is as difficult to find as a moving, invisible target, but in considering some patterns that are found in this subculture, we are able to theorize some possible reasons why girls participate in this relatively new method of sharing their stories.

All of the profiles and images I collected are public, but only some of them give details about the owner of the profile. I had hoped to be able to see more of the girls’ ages but I did see profiles belonging to girls ranging from as young as 12 to about 23.

**Coded Language**

In order to analyze the phenomenon of self-harm and eating disorder glamorization on Instagram, one has to have a basic understanding of the language being used among girls who participate in this particular subculture. This is an important place to start because the knowledge of what code words are used by the members of this community allows one to locate the problematic images which are included in this essay. As I dug deeper into my research, I would come across new nicknames being used for various psychological disorders and problematic behaviors. These words are most often found among the many “hashtags” used by the girls who post these public images. Hashtags function as both a descriptor for individual images and, according to Instagram’s website, “After you tag your post with a hashtag, you'll be able to tap the hashtag to see a page that shows all photos and videos people have uploaded with that hashtag” (Instagram, 2015b). In addition, one can locate all images which are tagged with a specific word by doing a search on the Instagram app. In Table 1, I’ve shown what coded hashtags are being used by girls and what the words stand for.

In addition to the use of coded hashtags, girls who participate in this culture of glamorization of disordered eating and self-harm often use coded abbreviations in their profile.
descriptions. This is due to both Instagram’s limiting the number of characters which can be used in profile descriptions and as a means to communicate only with people who understand the coded language.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hashtag / Code Word</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ana</td>
<td>Anorexia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mia</td>
<td>Bulimia</td>
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<tr>
<td>Deb</td>
<td>Depression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ed/Ednos</td>
<td>Eating Disorder/ Not Otherwise Specified</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cat</td>
<td>Self-harm/cutting</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sue</td>
<td>Suicidal</td>
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<tr>
<td>Thinspo</td>
<td>Thin-spiration</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Coded Language on Instagram.

On many profiles, girls struggling with their weight will use abbreviations such as “HW, SW, CW, LW, GW, UGW”. These mean “heaviest weight, starting weight, current weight, lowest weight, goal weight, and ultimate goal weight,” respectively. Most often, the “ultimate goal weight” falls into the double digits, a weight at which few adults are considered healthy. Some girls also list their height and their body mass index (BMI) in their profile descriptions. Other common features in these profile descriptions are the number of suicide attempts they’ve had in the past, the disorders they have, and, for girls who struggle with self-harm or bulimia, the number of days since they’ve cut or had a binge/purge. Figures 2 through 5 show examples of profiles utilizing these methods.
Using an online BMI calculator hosted by the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services and the National Institutes of Health, I found that the Figure 3 profile with the heading “Ana Mia” had a BMI of 22.7 at her highest weight. She lists her current BMI at 15.2, but my calculation found her to fall at 14.6. The Figure 4 profile for “xanax” had a starting BMI of 21.1. Her goal weights, in order, would decrease her BMI to 20.6, 19.7, 18.0, and ultimately, 16.3.

Although the Body Mass Index system of measurement has been heavily critiqued as an inaccurate measure of health, many doctors still use this method to determine general health status of a patient. In the BMI Categories chart (Table 2), we can see that these numbers place the owners of these profiles within the Normal Weight category to start, and deeply within the Underweight category as their current weight and ultimate goal weight. These unhealthy goals can only be obtained using the unhealthy method of starving oneself to lose weight. Therefore, the images that encourage such behaviors are encouraging anorexia in girls.

![Figure 5. Instagram Profile “Xanax” (2015).](image)

Table 2. Body Mass Index (BMI) Categories (National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute, 2015).

**Image Features**

In addition to noticing the specific language used among members of the subculture I examined, I began to notice patterns in the types of images girls were sharing which promoted both eating disorders and self-harm. The first detail that becomes immediately obvious is the frequent use of grayscale rather than full-color. I believe that this detail stems from the desire to express a profound sadness among the girls suffering with these issues. The following images 1-2 are examples of the use of greyscale accompanying messages which epitomize a self-
depricating mindset in relation to one’s weight.

In addition to these types of images which directly convey a message of wanting to be thin, many of the graphic images of self-harm cuts and scars are made greyscale. In considering this, I began to theorize that the pictures may be changed to greyscale in order to diminish the shocking effect of the color of blood and fresh cuts. Due to this, I believe that taking the color from the images serves to decrease the shock value and limit negative reactions to even some of the most drastic images of self-harm. To illustrate this point, Image 3 features two full-color images that I have juxtaposed side-by-side to their greyscale versions. In both images, the greyscale version appears much less alarming. I believe that this method of dulling the senses to self-harm visuals could potentially encourage young people to feel as though cutting oneself is not a serious behavior. In fact, they may even view the dulled greyscale images as artistic.

Another important pattern that I noticed when looking at images of super-thin women is that they are generally reduced to body parts. Examples of these types of images are presented in Images 4-5. There are two main areas of the body which girls seem to focus on most when they adopt a disordered view of eating: the legs and
the midsection. More specifically, girls often demonstrate a longing for protruding collarbones and hipbones, and a sort of worship of the “thigh gap”. The latter term is one which refers to having thighs that do not touch one another when standing up straight with the feet together. In fact, the hashtag “feet together, thighs apart” is very popular among the members of this sub-culture.

Images which promote cutting or hurting oneself are frequently without words, but those that do include words are a clear illustration of the type of mentality that exists among many of the girls involved in this behavior. For example, they often communicate the idea that cutting relieves negative emotional states, such as stress, anxiety, loneliness, and depression. While people who self-harm do really experience a sense of relief when they engage in behaviors like cutting (Pipher, 1994), these images are problematic in that they send the message to those who have never self-injured that doing so will help relieve feelings of sadness, anger, or other feelings of pain and distress. That said, these images potentially serve as encouragement to start engaging in self-harm; and as Pipher states, “Once girls begin to cut
and burn themselves, they are likely to continue” (p.158).

Images similar to those that encourage trying self-harm as a means of relief also exist in relation to using disordered modes of eating as a way to lose weight. For example, in one image I came across, the words “Hey, I’m Ana and I’ll be your Best Friend” are written over a black background. Another image features a thin model standing by the words “Every time you say no to food, you say yes to thin.” These two photos are just a minute example of the number of photographs that can be found in this thin-obsessed culture on Instagram. Many girls share images which promise that they will avoid food in a particular way based on the number of “likes” the photo receives. The example in Image 8 promises that the Instagram user will fast for one hour per every like the photo receives. One other common image that I’ve found says something along the lines of, “Name a food and I won’t eat it for a month.” Further, the participants in the pro-anorexia community share photos with tips on dieting, such as how many calories to eat per day, ways to exercise excessively, and how to burn calories...
using unconventional methods, such as soaking in a cold bath (Images 9-10).

What It All Means

Just as the illnesses associated with the sharing of pro-eating disorder and self-harm photographs are not new, the Instagram community of pro-anorexia is not a new invention, and it is not an isolated one either. The self-harm images are newer, which might be explained by the historical and cultural factors that push girls to engage in self-harm in the first place. I have read stories from girls and women who self-harm and who have had eating disorders. These stories tell me that while individual causes lead girls to choose these behaviors, there is a greater cultural and societal force at work which is pushing not just a few, but hundreds of thousands of girls into the territory of self-loathing.

Why Should We Care?

The beauty industry and modern media both contribute to the phenomenon of self-hate that is plaguing American girls and young women. The pressure to be thin has pushed many girls to extreme measures of weight loss and some have lost their lives due to eating disorders and the many health complications that come with them. While disorders such as Anorexia Nervosa aren’t new, the external pressures that cause girls to starve themselves for thinness are evolving at an unprecedented rate. Girls are exposed to messages that demand beauty from them almost from birth. Diet industries bank on the knowledge
that increased feelings of unhappiness with one’s appearance prompt consumers to spend money on products that they hope will change the way they look. As such unhappiness festers within young girls who feel that they will be unlovable if they are anything other than what society encourages them to be, they become prone to depression and anxiety. Such psychological distress coupled with the turmoil that comes with growing up and figuring oneself out, girls who feel they have no outlet for their suffering have turned to inflicting physical harm on the bodies that society pressures them to despise.

The pain that adolescent girls are feeling in today’s media-saturated culture is a sort of torture that is creating women who are forever scarred by the sadness that is forced upon them. Self-hatred is an enormously toxic force and is one that is difficult to overcome. The pressure to be perfect is overwhelming. Girls feel that their physical presence is one to be minimized and at the same time, their voices become muted. They punish themselves when they feel embarrassed, disliked, or ashamed of how they look. Sometimes, that punishment comes in the form of cutting or burning oneself. Sometimes it is a massive food binge followed by vomiting or taking laxatives to prevent weight gain. At any rate, girls are feeling enormous amounts of negative emotions day in and day out. They wear long sleeves and pants in the summer to hide the cuts on their arms or legs, they tuck razors under their mattresses, and they use their allowance to purchase diet pills. All of this suffering among girls in America and other developed countries is impacting everyone in society. Women who grew up struggling with eating disorders or self-harm often do not get better until someone pushes them to do so. They bring the psychological distress with them into their relationships; they bring it to work and they bring it into their parenting. They are essentially leading lives fractured by the issues that girls spend time promoting on their Instagram pages.

It can, and rightfully should, be said that American Instagram users have a right to share whatever content they’d like, per their first amendment right to free speech. Girls using Instagram to share thinspo or self-harm promoting material aren’t outright hurting anyone. They aren’t explicitly threatening lives and they aren’t aggressively causing harm to others. However, it can also be said that messages which encourage starving oneself or harming oneself
physically are nearly as dangerous. When a pre-teen girl who was called fat by someone at school comes across an image with a saying like “No one loves a fat girl,” aren’t those messages threatening their wellbeing by attacking their capacity to maintain a normal self-esteem and sense of self-worth? When a teenage girl whose own family makes fun of her for being moody comes across an image suggesting that cutting oneself will relieve her feelings of loneliness and being misunderstood, isn’t Instagram allowing their users to encourage unhealthy coping mechanisms that can even prove deadly? Free speech is an enormously important part of modern society. It can be used to create lasting, positive change in so many ways. However, free speech that encourages eating disorders, self-harm, and even suicide is not a positive thing in society.

While social media continues to grow in size and influence, the lives of Americans are being impacted in new ways. It is everyone’s responsibility to question the ways that social media can benefit and harm members of society. Regardless of their users’ age, race, class, gender, or culture, Instagram profits from the idea that a picture is worth a thousand words. With 30 billion photos on Instagram, it’s time to seriously question what those 30 trillion words are.

References


Appendix

If you or someone you know is currently struggling with these issues, help is available.

For SUNY Brockport students:
• Hazen Hall Counseling Center: (585) 395-2207
• counselingcenterquestions@brockport.edu

For non-Brockport students in the United States:
• S.A.F.E. Alternatives (Self-Abuse Finally Ends) information line: 800-DONTCUT (366-8288)
• National Eating Disorder Association: 800-931-2237 or 212-575-6200
• National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 800-273-TALK (8255)
• National Suicide Helpline: 800-SUICIDE (784-2433)
• Suicide Prevention Center Hotline: 877-727-4747

For further resources visit:
• nationaleatingdisorders.org
• teenlineonline.org/yyp
• adolescentselfinjuryfoundation.com/page18
• treatmentadvocacycenter.org/get-help/
• twloha.com/find-help/local-resources/