

Eating Disorder in the Digital Age

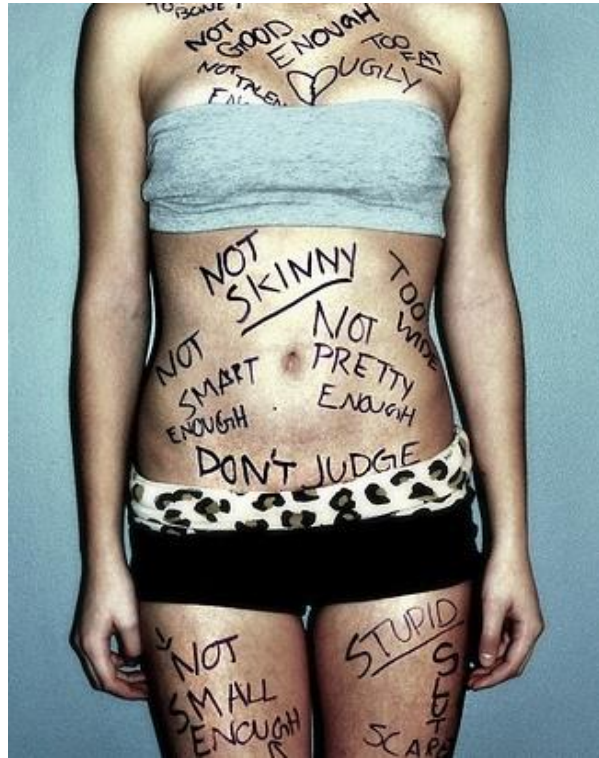
Background

Mobile applications often promote healthier living (e.g. calorie and activity trackers, healthy eating information), but can also become a source of obsessive negative behaviour, particularly for young people living in an age of 'fitspo' (fitness inspiration) perpetuated by social media. Mobile engagement itself poses significant challenge, with vulnerable populations freely accessing content without the extent of their engagement becoming visible to others. Furthermore, such applications are designed to promote continuous engagement, potentially fostering compulsive behaviours.

Eating disorders (ED) are an important issue UK-wide (affecting ~725,000 people), and for young people (an estimated 80% of 10-year-old girls are on a diet to change their body shape). Furthermore, the rise of social media has seen the emergence of new concerns, e.g. orthorexia (a fixation on so-called 'clean eating'). Since the majority of those experiencing ED may not be underweight, it can be difficult to differentiate a desire to become 'healthier' from the emergence of harmful behaviours.

Project aims

This project facilitates the development of safety measures that prevent mobile health and fitness application misuse by young people at risk of ED. It will do this by (i) developing understanding of how mobile applications are used by those with disordered eating/health behaviour; (ii) quantifying current safety measures taken by popular applications; (iii) providing responsibility guidelines for applications of this kind, (iv) developing a set of context-aware applications and tools to support developers in identifying and addressing negative behaviours, turning our guidelines into practice within their health and fitness products



Activities

- Scoping workshop with young app users
- Scoping workshop with peer educators
- Interview with experts in the field i.e. clinicians and social media bloggers
- Review of top 100 healthy/fitness apps on Google Play
- Design workshop with original participants