

Digital Persuasion and the Normalization of Eating Disorder Content: Gen-Z Engagement with Online Eating Disorder Communities of X (Formerly Twitter)

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ABSTRACT

Recent research trends have shown increasing visibility of eating disorder-related content on social media. This has raised concerns about how persuasive communication promotes the normalization of harmful narratives among young users. The purpose of this study is to examine how digital persuasion is constructed and experienced within online eating disorder communities on X (formerly Twitter) and how Gen-Z users interpret and engage with such content. Drawing inspiration from rhetorical persuasion theory, the study concentrates on the use of ethos, pathos, and logos in community-generated content and their role in shaping users' engagement and meaning-making. This study employed a qualitative research design, using in-depth interviews with 10 participants who actively engage with eating disorder-related content on X. The findings of the research show that emotional appeals, peer credibility, and shared experiential narratives play a central role in sustaining engagement and contributing to the normalization of eating disorder behaviours within these online communities. Participants reported that repeated exposure to such content fostered feelings of belonging, validation, and perceived understanding. Furthermore, they highlighted that even when the users were aware of the potential harm associated with the content, they still felt persuaded. This study contributes to communication scholarship by demonstrating how persuasive strategies function within harmful online communities to shape users' interpretations and engagement practices. It highlights the importance of addressing digital persuasion in media literacy efforts and communication-based interventions aimed at reducing the normalization of harmful health-related content among young audiences.

Keywords: *Digital persuasion, eating disorder content, online communities, Gen Z, X (Twitter).*

INTRODUCTION

The prevalence of eating disorders worldwide has drawn the attention of the World Health Organization (WHO), which urged them to conduct research to determine the severity level of the problem across countries. By June 2022, the WHO had identified 14 million people who were

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suffering from eating disorders (Mushtaq et al., 2023). Experts believe that the COVID-19 pandemic is partially responsible for the increased number of eating disorder cases, due to the increased social isolation, decreased access to medical care, and changes to routines (Devoe et al., 2022). Another factor that contributes to the rapid increase in eating disorder cases is the reliance on social media. Increased Internet use can result in constant exposure to inappropriate, disturbing, and insensitive content, which may be triggering for some individuals. Some of this content glamorizes an ideal slender figure (Vaccaro et al., 2021).

Research shows that idealization of body images on social media has increased over the years, which can be seen by the constant romanticising of thinness for its women audience and muscular figure for its men audience that can leave a distressing effect on its viewers, as it pressures the viewers to conform to its unrealistic beauty standards (Lerman et al., 2023). It has now become increasingly difficult to distinguish content that is curated for its intended audience, which is the eating disorder community, from content that is meant for the public. The public usually stumbles upon this content when searching for health and fitness information (Dane & Bhatia, 2023). This occurrence is recognized as a problem because this method could potentially rope people into the #edtw community, which could eventually lead to them unconsciously developing unhealthy eating habits that could kill them in the near future (Dane & Bhatia, 2023). While some content is more direct in its intent, it takes the form of strange trends that cultivate competitiveness among its audience through body comparisons. The best example that demonstrates this point is the #A4WaistChallenge, where people compare the width of their waist to the size of A4 paper. These trends can become triggering for some groups of people, but the effects are most alarming among people with eating disorders.

Strangely enough, the audience that consumes this content sometimes receives minimal backlash despite the trends and practices being inappropriate and insensitive. A lack of negative feedback on such dangerous practices and trends can lead to their integration into social norms and practices (Zhao et al., 2023). Such glorification of extreme thinness should not be normalized in our society, as the process of achieving the ideal body presented online has dangerous and destructive effects on people, especially adolescents and younger adults (Suhag & Rauniyar, 2024).

It's more common to see younger audiences fall for such a trap, especially Gen Z. Experts believe that excessive Internet usage also contributes to the emergence of body dysmorphia, which leads to one developing an eating disorder as they feel the immense need to achieve their ideal slim figure (Šablatúrová et al., 2021). Hence, Gen-Z becomes a primary target, as most people are not only the most active social media users, but the majority of them are within the age where they are most vulnerable to crises of identity, body dysmorphia, or concerns relating to achieving physical traits of perfectionism (Galletta et al., 2022). As skinny figures are associated with ultimate beauty, it's expected that the Gen-Z audience will immediately feel drawn to a community that shares content on how to achieve the skinny appearance that is well-loved within the community. However, it has been observed that there's a blurred line between the contents that promote a healthy approach to diets, weight loss, fitness, and body perception, and the contents that are shared within the eating disorder community. By understanding the persuasion strategies used by the eating disorder community, many audiences can fully

understand the intention and purpose of each piece of content posted on social media, which prevents them from becoming prey to a dangerous community.

Despite the rising popularity of #edtwf among Gen-Z individuals, the limited number of studies makes it challenging to establish a link between Gen-Z's social media addiction, unrealistic sense of perfectionism, and loneliness, and their proneness to join #edtwf. What can be to blame for this cause is the community's self-protective nature, which limits accessibility for researchers and clinicians to understand the causes and factors relating to eating disorders and #edtwf (Zhou et al., 2020). This leads to less research on #edtwf, making it difficult for researchers to provide evidence of its detrimental effects on people, particularly the Gen Z audience.

While previous research has examined eating disorder communities through psychological outcomes such as body dissatisfaction and social media addiction and sociological perspectives such as online community formation (Linardon et al., 2025; Gerwin & Ashraf, 2025), less attention has been given to how persuasion operates within the content itself. The normalization of harmful practices does not occur merely through exposure, but through the way messages are framed and interpreted. This study, therefore, adopts a rhetorical perspective to examine how ethos, pathos, and logos are embedded in #edtwf content and how these appeals shape Gen-Z users' engagement and meaning-making.

LITERATURE REVIEW

a. Social Media and Free Speech Culture

The extant literature has demonstrated that social media is a multifaceted tool that can distribute information to large audiences, facilitate communication, and create and maintain connections with others (Cao & Matsuoka, 2025; Morshed et al., 2025). However, it needs to be acknowledged that social media is also a platform that needs to be held accountable for the detrimental effects that it inflicts on the users' personal, professional, and social lives, especially when social media usage reaches excessive levels (Cataldo et al., 2022; Soedarsono et al., 2020; Morshed et al., 2023).

One of the severe cases relating to social media is online bullying, harassment, and harmful content (Weir, 2023). Some of those affected by these severe cases are adolescents and young adults. Frequent exposure to harmful and insensitive social media content can lead to a negative perception of the environment and one's own lifestyle. According to Jaruga-Sękowska et al. (2025), common evidence related to these severe cases of social media use includes increased problems with body dysmorphia and unhealthy eating habits, which are exacerbated by excessive social media use. This drawback causes an increase in adolescents and young adults developing eating disorders, which are increasing over the years (Jaruga-Sękowska et al., 2025). According to Nawaz et al. (2024), these increased problems may be related to a lack of caution in content consumption while browsing social media, which can lead to physical and psychological well-being issues for users. This effect can worsen for people who are already experiencing poor perceptions of body appearance, food consumption, or weight.

It needs to be acknowledged that social media by itself is not directly at blame for causing eating disorders or any symptoms relating to eating disorders, in adolescents and young adults. However, excessive use without moderation can become a catalyst for such problems, especially when the user frequently consumes harmful and insensitive content. But both need to be held

accountable. While users should exercise greater caution when consuming content on social media, most social media platforms need to exercise greater supervision over the content produced.

b. The Concept of Eating Disorder

An eating disorder is defined as a serious mental illness, which is manifested in persistent disturbance of eating behaviour and severe weight-control behaviour, which is primarily influenced by an immense need to achieve thinness (Klein et al., 2021). This desire can reach extreme levels, to the point of resorting to methods that pose harm to the body, such as long duration of starvation, excessive weight loss, and other self-harming methods.

In some cases, this can also trigger intense hunger, leading the individual to consume large amounts of food. This approach will put the individual into a torturous cycle: they will continually restrict themselves from eating, which results in insatiable hunger that causes them to binge eat; to cope with the guilt from overeating, the individual will avoid eating. As different victims have different perceptions and relationships with body appearance, food consumption, and body weight, eating disorders also come in different types. Some of the common ones are anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, binge-eating disorder, and avoidant restrictive food intake disorder (Klein et al., 2021). Each of these eating disorders is connected to the others, as the subject migrates from one disorder to another.

c. Eating Disorder Community Culture on X

This community can be discovered by browsing through content relating to health and fitness. But there are also other methods available for searching for the community, some of which include using the following hashtags: #edtwit, #anorexia, #bulimia, #compulsiveeating, #thinspo, #thinspiration, #bodycheck, and similar hashtags (Lerman et al., 2023). The other method is to look up accounts that upload, share, or engage with content related to #edtwit, or any posts that promote unhealthy approaches to weight loss, eating habits, physical fitness, psychological health, and other areas (Abuhassan et al., 2023). What differentiates them from other accounts that speak on the same subject is that most of them add '#edtwit' to their biographies to signify their role within the community. This approach curates an approachable and trustworthy impression, resulting in a massive following.

However, users are at risk of difficulty differentiating between accounts that are pro-ED and pro-recovery, as both communities share many similar characteristics. One trait that differentiates them is the linguistic styles, slang, and language usage they use when presenting themselves online (Wang et al., 2018). Pro-recovery accounts have a more optimistic, supportive tone when engaging with other users and content, as reflected in their interactions and responses in their tweets. In simpler terms, these accounts usually exhibit signs of recovery, as evidenced by their ability to navigate environments heavily saturated with diet culture and weight stigma (LaMarre et al., 2024). While pro-ED is much more hostile and vulgar, with most of their content consisting of self-destructive tendencies and hatred towards both one and others. Their content often shows a lack of interest in recovery. These accounts are usually responsible for promoting unhealthy weight loss methods, diet culture, and negative perceptions of both the physical and mental aspects.

As the hashtag implies, this is a group of people that forms a group with the intention of creating a safe environment for them to share their experiences in struggling with an eating disorder. To fulfill this need, several members within the community would create group chats. These group chats are usually hidden in plain sight and may require an invitation from the group's founder. Before accepting the new member into the group chat, the founder would usually evaluate them based on the criteria list. The reason for this approach is to minimize the risk of encountering Internet trolls, who would invade pro-ED group chats to invalidate, discriminate against, or shame them for self-entertainment (Nova et al., 2022).

d. Eating Disorder Community Content on X

The #edtw community on X is well-recognized for its content that holds a critical viewpoint towards body appearances and self-image, followed by discussions that value thinness, adopt unhealthy eating habits and relationship with food, unhealthy practices of workout routines, and dangerous weight loss tips that usually has glaringly signs of self-harm (Lerman et al., 2025). To avoid becoming victims of online bullying and discrimination, most members of the community use hashtags not only to gain mutual support within their own community but also to speak up against the mainstream side of social media (Sánchez & Brunner, 2024).

Though the #edtw community is often associated with malice and self-destruction, some members have now adopted different approaches to communicating with other members. With the rising popularity of memes, it's common to see these members use different memes to deliver their messages to the audience. These memes can range across any media type and time period, but they are usually very popular in mainstream media. The memes commonly contain both direct and implied references towards eating disorders, which consist of unhealthy eating habits, concerns of weight gain, commitment to weight gain, dissatisfaction with body appearance, or struggles with lower self-esteem. At times, these kinds of posts would gain rapid, massive popularity among the general audience. While the general audience would likely find these posts amusing, the lack of moderation can lead to new problems.

The general audience risks having their perspective swayed by these posts, leading to a distorted perception of their body image, eating habits, weight, or lifestyle. Without the practice of precaution, the general audience that consumes this kind of content can become a potential member of the #edtw community, which leads to them developing eating disorders. This occurs frequently among the younger audience, specifically the Gen-Z generation group, as this content can easily affect those who suffer from social media addiction, as studies have shown that there's an alarmingly close relationship between the development of eating disorders and social media addiction. Studies also confirm that most Gen-Z individuals are likely to develop eating disorders from excessive usage of social media, as they are exposed to this kind of content in unhealthy amounts (Mushtaq et al., 2023).

e. The Rhetoric Theory

The concept of rhetoric is seen as the ability to discern in any given situation, the available means of persuasion (Kennedy, 1991). Rhetoric is the theory that encompasses three appeals: logos, ethos, and pathos. According to Pereira (2026), rhetoric is a technique employed by authors to persuade the audience's perception. The tactics integrated into these messages come in the form

of intellectual, moral, and emotional approaches. The intention of these approaches is to elicit a response in accordance with the author's expectations (Borchers & Hundley, 2018). Rhetorical appeals can come in the form of texts. But in the modern age, rhetorical appeals can also be integrated into social media content, such as visual images, memes, statistics, percentages, tone, and language. When applied, these tactics can evoke the desired reactions in the audience that the author hopes for.

In micro-blogging platforms such as X, ethos may be constructed through perceived authenticity, consistency of posting, and visible engagement from followers. Emotional appeal often operates through shared vulnerability, struggle narratives, or motivational framing (Drori et al., 2025). Logical appeal may take the form of numerical precision, calorie counts, or structured diet advice that creates the impression of rationality (Ross & Caldwell, 2020). Understanding how these appeals function in compressed, algorithm-driven spaces is essential to examining how harmful content can be framed as motivational or informative rather than destructive.

f. Gen-Z's Relationship With #edwt Community

By 2025, it can be estimated that the majority of Gen-Z is within the range of 12 to 27, given that Gen-Z is categorized by the number of birth years, which in this case is around the late 1990s and early 2010s (Ho et al., 2022; Andleeb et al., 2026; Bhutto & Rütelióéi, 2026). This information confirms that most Gen-Z are likely teenagers and younger adults. What they have in common is their well-versed knowledge of the online world, as their generation was given early exposure to the Internet, social media, and smartphones at a very young age. According to Prakash Yadav and Rai (2017), the majority of Gen Z perceive communicating with other online communities through social media platforms as appealing. Most social media platforms include useful features that enable communication with individuals worldwide, followed by other interesting attributes that sustain users' interest in online communication (Chang et al., 2025). Some of them include having a customizable username and profile, uploading and sharing videos and images, participating in various trends, browsing through different content, and even joining a community that matches their interests. This clarifies why most of them develop a gravitational bond towards the online world. As their online activities play an integral part in their lives, it can be assumed that some of them are well-acquainted with other social media platforms, especially X.

Based on the information gathered, it can be deduced that Gen Z is more likely to join the #edwt community on X. Studies have shown that higher social media use can affect body image (Lavell et al., 2024). Some of the signs include body dissatisfaction, which stems from scrolling through triggering content that induces a tendency to compare. Given that Gen Z individuals have the highest social media usage among other generations, it can be assumed that they are most prone to feeling affected by discussions of physical figures on social media, which can lead to a distorted perspective on their own appearance.

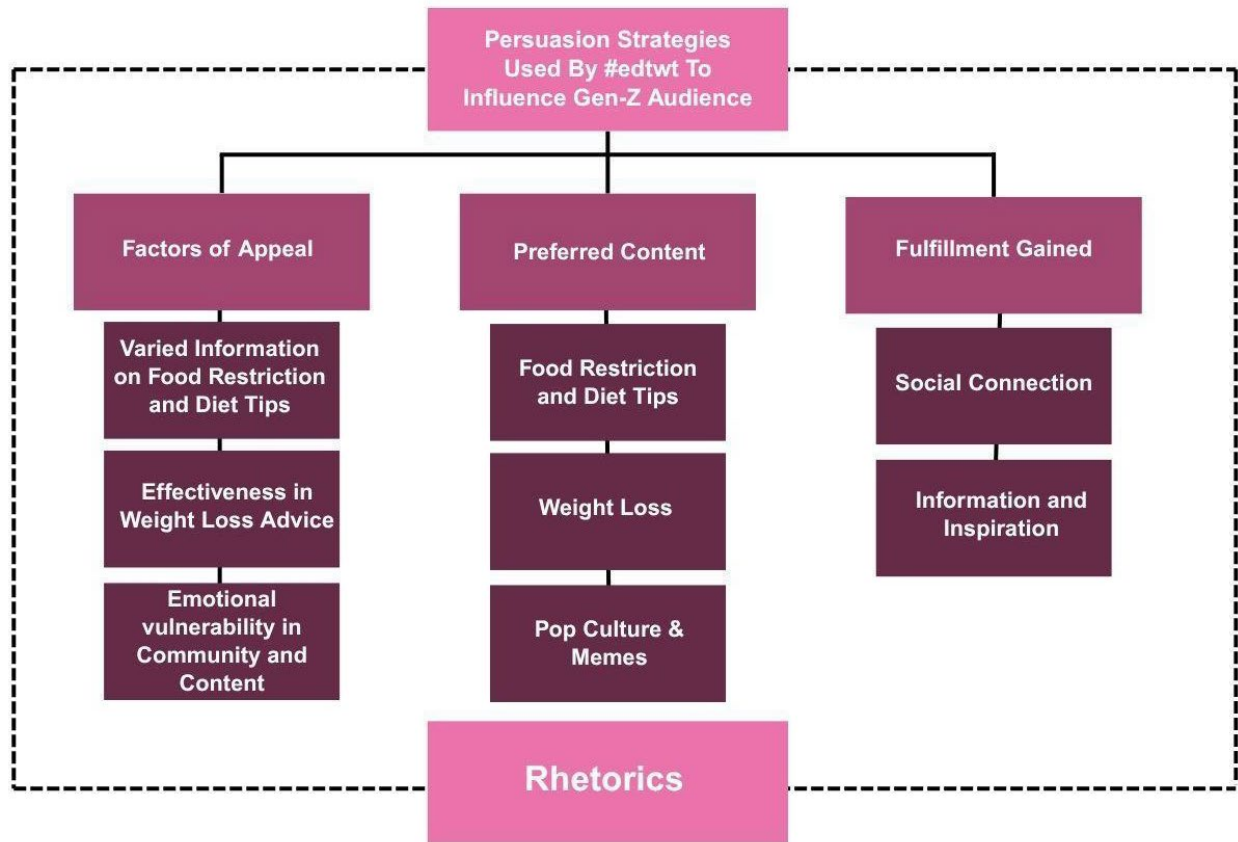


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

Conceptual Framework

This study proposes that rhetorical appeals embedded in #edtw content influence how Gen Z users interpret and engage with the material. Emotional validation, perceived peer credibility, and numerical or structured framing interact with users' personal vulnerabilities and social media habits. Over time, repeated exposure to these appeals may contribute to the normalization of harmful eating-related behaviors.

METHODOLOGY

The research method used to obtain data and information relevant to the paper is qualitative. What differentiates the qualitative method from the quantitative method is that it offers richer depth and insight into research by capturing human experiences and perspectives. Thus, the qualitative method is more suitable for complex phenomena that require more individual opinions and interpretations than data, experiments, and statistics (Lim, 2024). A semi-structured interview was conducted when gathering information on the issue addressed. The reason for this approach is that semi-structured interviews allow the interviewer to assess the credibility of participants' answers by uncovering their motives and perspectives on the issue (Horton et al., 2004).

Procedure

All the participants were provided with two documents before the interview. The first document shared was the questionnaire, which contained a series of questions divided into different categories. The main topics that were discussed during the interview is their experience in engaging with #edtw community and/or consuming content from #edtw, the effectiveness of persuasion strategies utilized by #edtw community, social media addiction, and recommendations and suggestions. The second document was a consent form. After the participant has read through both documents and signed the consent form, the interviewer will prepare the participant for the next stage of the interview.

The interviews were conducted online via Google Meet. Participants were provided with the meeting link via WhatsApp or Telegram. They will be briefed again on the research objective and the questions it seeks to answer. This was followed by a discussion of participants' rights and privacy to ensure they were fully prepared for the interview. All the interviews lasted from 25 to 55 minutes. Participants were mostly asked about the primary subjects of the interview, with follow-up questions throughout to reconfirm their answers and gain further clarification on their opinions. The interview ended with feedback on the interview and an expression of gratitude for their contribution to the research.

Sample Design and Technique

Recruitment was conducted through a public call for voluntary participation posted on X. The call invited Gen-Z individuals who had experience engaging with #edtw content to participate in an interview study. Interested individuals contacted the researcher privately. The sampling method used is purposive, as the number of participants to be gathered is predetermined and they must meet the set criteria (Mweshi & Sakyi, 2020). The intention of this approach is to make sure that the participants need to have a good familiarity with #edtw, followed with a liking for using social media, specifically X. If the participants don't match with the criteria, it might be difficult to elicit accurate information, as this participant might give answers that contradict, disrespects, or invalidates the experience of both people with eating disorder and someone who is on #edtw community.

Moreover, they must also be well-acquainted with X, as it might be difficult to communicate with them if they are a new user as they might not be familiar with the culture and trends that have been surfacing on X. This is followed with other criteria with similar reasoning, which is that they must be active on X. Inactive users might not know the culture of #edtw at a richer depth, and there's also a good chance that they are unfamiliar with some of the trends and discussions within the community. Lastly, it's essential for them to clarify their age before joining the group chat to ensure they are within the target generation.

The online interview included 10 participants. Studies have shown that a range of 9-17 participants is an appropriate number for reaching a defined objective while avoiding saturation (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022; Adamu et al., 2018). Saturation is described as a point at which the data lack any new codes or show repeated codes, which can be problematic because they do not contribute much to the study (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022; Sathappan & Adamu, 2022). Given the sensitivity of the subject, the number is also considered sufficient, given the self-protective nature of the #edtw community.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Qualitative data from the online interview were analysed using a thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The reason for this approach is to understand the core themes that will be considered the main factors in the persuasion strategies used by the #edtw community to produce content deemed appealing to the Gen-Z audience. The thematic analysis was carried in six steps: (i) data familiarization (understanding the primary ideas by reviewing through all the transcripts obtained), (ii) initial coding (carrying coding in several transcripts and later followed with pinning down the initial codes), (iii) searching for themes, (iv) reviewing themes (the core themes can be defined when recurring patterns are seen, which can be done by reviewing through all the data received from the transcript), (v) defining and naming themes (the themes will be defined based on the common patterns among the initial codes), and (vi) producing a report. Prior to analysis, all interview transcripts were imported into NVivo Version 15.

FINDINGS

The themes from the interview were based on the three research questions: to identify the factors that contribute to the appeal of #edtw to the Gen-Z audience, what content the Gen-Z audience prefers, and how consuming content from #edtw can make them feel fulfilled. By basing on the research questions, around 9 themes were created: (1) Duration of Content Consumption, (2) First Discovery, (3) Frequency of Consuming Content, (4) General Experience, (5) Culture and Trends in #edtw, (6) Non-Preferred Content, (7) Preferred Content, (8) Fulfillment Gained, (9) Unfulfillment Received.

While participants' frequency and duration of engagement with #edtw provide useful context, this analysis focuses on how persuasive meaning is constructed within the content they encounter. The findings, therefore, examine how participants interpret emotional tone, credibility cues, and structured information in posts, rather than simply how often they use the platform.

a. Theme 1: Duration of Content Consumption

In all interviews, participants were asked to report the duration of content consumption. This refers to how long they had been consuming #edtw content. Of the 5 participants, 4 had been on #edtw for more than 1 year, while the other had been on #edtw for less than 1 year. Furthermore, participants described many #edtw posts as emotionally relatable. Posts often expressed frustration, guilt, or a desire for control. Because these feelings felt familiar, the content seemed understandable rather than harmful. The emotional tone made the messages easier to accept.

b. Theme 2: First Discovery

First discovery refers to when a participant encounters #edtw content or interacts with the #edtw community. Most participants discovered #edtw by scrolling their X timeline. While 2 of the participants had shared that they had been recommended by others to check out #edtw. 1 participant revealed that #edtw content tended to overlap with other content, such as high fashion. As these two were frequently paired together across many X posts, the participant discovered #edtw. The purpose of the first discovery is to understand what can draw the Gen Z

audience into the #edwt community and its content. According to Participant J, #edwt was very active during the COVID-19 pandemic, which lasted from 2020 to 2023. The content from #edwt can usually be recognized by the hashtags used in their tweets. Sometimes, #edwt content overlaps with other content available on X (formerly Twitter).

According to Participant D, #edwt has had its viral moments previously. People were discussing this community and the content that the members uploaded and shared among themselves. Initially, Participant D only heard snippets of this community. But when they were recommended to check it out, they eventually gave it a try. Participant G said that #edwt was already known even before X (formerly Twitter) became popular. #edwt was more active on Tumblr previously, which is how Participant G knew it. But what piqued Participant G's interest was when others had claimed that Twitter offered more unfiltered content of the ED. Similar to other participants, Participant E discovered it on their timeline as well. The difference was that Participant E learned about #edwt through a quote tweet by a friend commenting on the #edwt community and its content, which intrigued them. Therefore, trust was based on personal experience rather than expertise. Participants tended to believe accounts that consistently shared routines, calorie tracking, or progress updates. Regular self-disclosure made these users appear authentic and reliable.

c. Theme 3: Frequency of Consuming Content

Participants' information on the frequency with which they consume content is used to evaluate how long they have been consuming content from #edwt, which helps the researcher determine participants' level of knowledge in the research area. More specifically, many posts included calorie counts, weight goals, and daily plans. This structured information made restrictive practices seem organized and controlled. The presence of numbers and routines gave the content a sense of legitimacy. Participant A reported that, daily, they would try to limit themselves to consuming 1-3 posts. Participant H confirmed that they consume #edwt content every day. According to Participant D, they normally engage with the #edwt community and their content weekly, but they have been trying to limit their consumption lately. There was not much clarification on the reason, but Participant G said they would check the #edwt community and its content around 3 days per week. Participant J confirmed that they are not consuming #edwt content as much as they did back then, so it is now monthly.

d. Theme 4: General Experience

Participants were asked about their experience relating to consuming #edwt content. Some shared that their experience on #edwt has been negative, while others shared positive experiences. The purpose of asking participants about their general experience is to gain insight into their perceptions of #edwt content and the reasons for those perceptions. Participant C acknowledged that #edwt content is not entirely healthy to be consumed. However, they believed that #edwt content does offer other benefits. Some examples include that the #edwt community has recovery-based accounts, where individuals regularly post different types of motivational posts. According to Participant D, the #edwt community motivates them to take better care of their body. It allows them to have this moment of realization that losing weight is crucial for their health. For that reason, they do think that #edwt has its good perks.

For Participant G, the #edtw community is perceived as a safe space for people who struggle with ED, body image, relationship with food, or other insecurities and concerns. Participant G recalled that some parts of the community have also actively tried to help others. For Participant B, many points are shared. Participant B dislikes the brutal and insensitive language that is seen in many #edtw content, where they would shame others and associate people with bigger figures as pigs, whales, or other degrading terms equivalent to that. Participant C believes that #edtw content is very addictive, despite acknowledging it as very toxic. Their experience can be like a *'trainwreck effect'* in which they are well aware that the situation on their screen is revolting to them, yet they find it difficult to look away. Similarly, Participant I believed that #edtw is a vast place for people to share recommendations on food replacements. For a more specific clarification, some foods may not be healthy to consume regularly. Members on #edtw would share alternatives to unhealthy food. An example given is replacing crisps with baked vegetable chips.

e. Theme 5: Culture and Trends on #edtw

Culture and trends on #edtw explore what is commonly found on or associated with #edtw. Some of this includes group chats, account profiles, and so on. Some participants shared trends they have seen on #edtw, while others chose to share their experience solely with the content on #edtw or had no recollection of any trends. The difference between trends and other celebrity-related themes is that trends lean more towards content that commonly has high engagement and variety on #edtw. For instance, a celebrity can represent a type of diet, lifestyle, weight loss goal, body image, and so on.

Participants B and C recalled that many #edtw accounts have K-pop idols as their profile pictures. They also note that Wonyoung is a K-pop celebrity commonly associated with #edtw. Participant G revealed that there are group chats for people to join. Typically, these group chats allow them to discuss sensitive subjects more privately. You can try to join them by asking the group chat admin or by requesting to join under the tweet that promotes the group chat. Participant F has a more general opinion on this subject, but they share that #edtw enjoys using celebrities to glamorize.

Overall, persuasion within #edtw did not appear to operate solely through direct encouragement. Instead, it emerged through emotional identification, peer-based credibility, and the structured framing of restrictive practices. These elements worked together to shape how participants interpreted and normalized the content over time.

DISCUSSION

This research seeks to answer what content is deemed most appealing to Gen-Z, what content is preferred among the Gen-Z audience, and how consuming content from #edtw makes the Gen-Z audience feel fulfilled. The interviews with 10 participants have yielded several answers to the research questions, thereby allowing this study to be explored further, drawing on evidence from individuals who have previously consumed #edtw content and engaged with the #edtw community.

The content deemed most appealing to Gen Z is food restrictions and diet advice. The reason for such a strong preference is the participants' great interest in types and methods of diets, which have been proven effective by the community members of #edtw. What influences their desire to diet is the desire to lose weight faster, which is why the second most preferred content is body image and insecurities. Most of the content on food restriction and diet has also been described as not only helpful but also very direct and straightforward, with the instructions given, which makes it easier for some participants to follow through.

It was shared in the interview that each recommended diet content shared within the #edtw community is also very specific about calories. Logos and ethos are apparent appeals in this sub-theme. The logo is relevant because most participants look for the number of calories per serving when dieting. Regarding ethos, the participants have shown a belief in content that is much more straightforward and direct, as this tone and language style reflect a good level of knowledge in the area. It's also mentioned that feedback from others on the effectiveness of food restriction and diet advice boosts the content's credibility, which fits the ethos category.

The content that earns the most dislikes as the least preferred is digital visuals of body comparisons, which can be found on #edtw. Most participants cited malicious intent behind the posts as the reason for their dislike. According to the participants, it's common for this kind of content to use images of people with bigger figures to uplift people with thinner bodies. This kind of content has been shown to evoke discomfort in participants due to its lack of sensitivity. A participant has even described it as 'icky' when asked about their personal opinions on this content.

Although participants reported discomfort with explicit body comparison posts, they were more receptive to aspirational content framed as personal motivation. This suggests that persuasion operates differently when content is framed as self-improvement rather than as a direct comparison. Posts that humiliate others may disrupt identification, while motivational framing allows users to internalize the message without perceiving it as hostile.

When asked about how the participant determines the credibility of the content, the majority prefer content that has looked up to health professionals and diet experts' advice before. This is because most food restrictions and diet advice content on #edtw have a history of not only sharing misinformation but also sharing recommendations that are dangerous to their health. Because of that, participants would prefer content, specifically food restriction and diet advice, to conduct initial research with health professionals and diet experts to minimize the risk of taking up advice that could put their health at risk. Based on these findings, it can be said that ethos is also a relevant factor.

IMPLICATION

The research explores the persuasive strategies used in most social media content, including posts uploaded to X and shared within the #edtw community. Throughout the exploration, it helps in understanding which rhetorical appeals are most preferred by the Gen-Z audience. The exploration also uncovers what content Gen Z prefers and their personal reasons for that preference. This discussion also addresses whether excessive social media use and reliance contribute to a stronger tendency to consume harmful, insensitive content on #edtw, with most participants' responses leaning towards agreement.

This research highlights the importance of gaining valuable insights and perspectives from participants from diverse backgrounds, especially in terms of culture, social class, education, and age. Each person from a different background might have different experiences with body dysmorphia, body image, weight perception, and diet, which influence how they consume content from #edtw and how they perceive both the #edtw community and the content produced. Furthermore, #edtw posts often appeal to emotions, show peers' routines, and present information in an organized way. This makes the content feel relatable, trustworthy, and "legitimate," so users don't question it too much. Together, these strategies quietly normalize restrictive behaviors and shape how Gen Z users perceive what's acceptable in the community.

This study is unfortunately flawed by limitations in global research, which can be attributed to time constraints and the #edtw community's self-protective nature. Without the involvement of participants from different parts of the globe, the research will be at risk of bias, stereotypes, and overgeneralization, which can affect its validity. Future researchers should ensure a larger sample size and a more diverse selection, including participants from different parts of the world. In this way, the research can increase its validity and reliability, which also helps in overcoming the stigmatization of people who suffer from eating disorders, or symptoms that are equivalent to the disorder, and people who are negatively affected by the harmful content uploaded and shared on social media.

LIMITATION

Although the research offers nuanced insights into the participants' experiences, it is important to acknowledge that it is flawed due to a small sample size. What can be blamed for the smaller sample size is due to the stigmatization of people who suffer from eating disorders, or any symptoms that relate to experiences like having an eating disorder, followed by time constraints. According to Downs, (2026), the stigma and misconception around eating disorders result in an immense feeling of shame and guilt, which causes them to avoid speaking of their experiences openly, even in research. This is also a common flaw in qualitative research: a smaller, more specific sample size. A smaller, more specific sample size may not adequately represent the broader population, potentially rendering the research inapplicable to demographics or other findings (Lim, 2024). Given this risk, future researchers are recommended to employ triangulation methods to ensure that interpretations of the data are as accurate and nuanced as possible. With this approach, it combats issues relating to one-dimensional findings or biased viewpoints (Lim, 2024). It can also provide justice to victims who have been misunderstood for their own disorders or have been negatively influenced by misconceptions and misrepresentations relating to the disorders.

CONCLUSION

Overall, the interviews carried out with the participants help in answering the three research questions: (1) what makes #edtw content appealing to Gen-Z audience, (2) what kind of content is preferred among Gen-Z audience, and (3) how does consuming such content leave Gen-Z audience feeling fulfilled. The research objectives also identify: (1) what content is preferred, (2) what content factors contribute to the reason for engaging with the #edtw community, and (3) determine the persuasion strategies that are preferred among the Gen-Z audience.

The type of content that shows the strongest preference for is food restriction and diet advice. Recommendations, methods, and examples were shared throughout the interviews. Participants shared that the reason for this inclination is their urgency to lose weight, as most of the food restrictions and diet advice shared on #edtwit have been said to be effective by many. They are more persuaded by results shared within the community, which come in varied forms, from visual evidence of body changes to the number on the scale, to even a weight-loss journey.

In general, this research explores how a community with a culture that is deemed triggering and uncomfortable by most gains a huge following. It appears that #edtwit succeeds in gaining wide recognition from the Gen-Z audience by thriving on their desire for a skinnier appearance, providing vast solutions to their problems through straightforward, short diet content that is credible, reliable, and entertaining. In this way, they can maintain their audience for a long time.

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