

THE PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY
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DEPARTMENT OF MEDIA STUDIES

The Impact of Branding on Disordered Eating Patterns:
An Exploration of Social Media Rhetoric and Influence

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, a rise in the prevalence and impact of social media influencers has shifted the conversation around weight – putting an increased pressure on young women (18-25 years of age) to compare themselves with the edited realities portrayed on social platforms such as Instagram. Perhaps key in understanding this obsession with body and image is to understand that this stretches beyond a want to meet the beauty standards of the day, which have always existed – rather, the recent uptick in disordered eating reflects the rebranding of disordered eating by many influencers who purport to be promoting health. The present study was an experiment aimed at capturing different discrete emotions and behavioral intentions experienced after viewing an influencer post promoting a disordered eating pattern (cutting out carbs) under the guise of health compared to an influencer post promoting the same disordered eating pattern with weight loss as the purported motivation. Results show no significant difference in perception of attractiveness, perception of trust, perception of expertise, intention to diet, and body appreciation between the two conditions. With that in mind, findings assert a slight difference in intention to diet between the two conditions – with posts promoting health experiencing a higher likelihood to engage in dieting. Further studying is required to determine if a statistically significant difference exists between the two conditions.

Keywords: Influencers; Body Image; Disordered Eating Patterns; Trust Levels; Dieting Intention

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Background

Correlation Between Media Consumption and Development of Eating Disorders

The prevalence of eating disorders in our society, specifically amongst young women, can be attributed to a variety of factors, including media consumption. With approximately 9% of the U.S. population, or 28.8 million Americans, suffering from an eating disorder today, the root cause of these disorders, including the contributions of media messages about health, diet, and fitness, must be explored to properly address prevention (ANAD, 2021).

A variety of studies have established a correlation between media consumption and disordered eating. Harrison and Cantor (2006) explored the relationship between media consumption and disordered eating, specifically as pertains to the differing effects of thin promoting media on people identifying as different genders. The researchers measured disordered eating by assessing disordered eating itself as well as motivation behind eating (i.e., dieting) and body dissatisfaction. To measure these variables, study participants were shown photos that depicted and promoted thinness. After viewing these photos, as predicted, women displayed increased levels of disordered eating and personal body dissatisfaction (Harrison, Cantor 2006). When exposed to the same images, men not only experienced personal body dissatisfaction, but also showed increased endorsement of promotion of thinness and dieting for women (Harrison, Cantor 2006).

This study displayed not only a correlation between images promoting thinness and personal body dissatisfaction, but personal promotion of dieting ideals. This clearly exemplifies a societal problem - expectation of dieting is born partly from media consumption. The study further concludes, when men buy into dieting culture and promote it within society at large, it makes it extremely hard for women to turn away from it. What is a personal issue is also a societal norm: dieting, which is a type of disordered eating, can fast lead to full blown eating disorders.

The societal issue of dieting is born from an obsession with thinness. In a 1978-88 study conducted by Katzmarzyk and Davis, Playboy centerfolds over two decades were examined. The centerfolds displayed a significant decrease in the models' body weights and measurements over the decade, with 70% of the women being underweight and greater than 75% of the women at less than 85% of their ideal body weight by the study end. This exemplified an increased promotion of not just thinness, but a promotion of unhealthy levels of thinness within media over time.

The impact of an American society obsessed with thinness is not just seen in adults – studies have shown a sharp increase in adolescent eating disorders, primarily in young girls (15-19 years of age) (Morris, Katzman 2003). Today's adolescents spend an average of 7 hours a day viewing various forms of media (Morris, Katzman 2003). This media consumption often leads to body dissatisfaction in youth, which can turn into eating disorders with time.

In a 1998 study conducted by Dina Borzekowski and Angela M. Bayer, participants' body satisfaction was measured prior to and after viewing images of thin models. As predicted, body

dissatisfaction greatly increased after viewing the models. Body dissatisfaction levels dramatically increased in adolescents 19 years of age and younger. This shows that the most vulnerable population, adolescent girls, is the most likely to experience body dissatisfaction from the media. This group is also the most likely to develop disordered habits as a result of that dissatisfaction.

Influencer Impact on Disordered Eating

While traditional media consumption, such as through magazines and television, has been linked to disordered eating, the age of social media has potentially increased the impact media has on eating disorder development. In a 2016 study, researchers assessed the social media consumption and eating patterns of 1,765 adults aged 19-32 using a cross-sectional survey (Sidani et al. 2016). Participants who spent more time on social media had a greater likelihood of developing an eating disorder over time ($p > 0.001$). These results were consistent whether social media use was evaluated using frequency or volume.

On social media platforms, influencers establish trends that can motivate others to adopt behaviors to achieve their idealized lifestyle. Many influencers who are not licensed health professionals have found a platform to speak about topics, such as body and health, for which they might not have a lot of science-based expertise. This may be part of the reason behind the correlation between social media use and disordered eating patterns.

The promotion of disordered eating habits on social media platforms primarily affects women in their early twenties (Martinez et al. 2019). Social media is a primary location where unrealistic and highly edited body standards are set, leading women to feel that they are chasing an impossible standard. The data from this study displays a link between disordered eating and consumption of social media as well as also low self-esteem and negative body image in young women (Martinez et al. 2019).

Veldhuis (2020) argues the internalization of body ideals and appearance-based social comparison are two leading theories for why viewing thinner bodies leads to discontent with one's own. The case for correlation is made by increased prevalence of eating disorders within Western society, where the media regularly portray thin bodies as the ideal (Veldhuis, 2020).

In addition to mass media promotion of thinness, social media influencer promotion of thinness is prevalent in society today. In an in-depth content analysis of over 1,000 pieces of influencer content promoting dieting and exercise, a relationship of dependency between followers and influencers was found (Pilgrim, Bohnet-Joschko 2019). The posts, overall, promoted dieting and industry-specific products to achieve happiness. Dieting and exercise were marketed as means to control one's body, making it perfect. This dynamic was formed due to the prevalence of underage, and therefore highly influenceable, followers and the attractiveness of influencer marketing to companies – such as diet pill companies (Pilgrim, Bohnet-Joschko 2019). These influencers have cleverly marketed control over one's body as a way to achieve happiness, when in reality it can lead to compulsive eating disorders.

Normalization of Disordered Eating

While most popular influencers are not knowingly promoting disordered eating, promotion of what influencers perceive as a healthy lifestyle has actually led to an uptick in a new type of eating disorder: orthorexia (Phillips 2018). Orthorexia is defined as an illness where people label foods as “good” and “bad” and eat accordingly (Phillips 2018). People with this disease are obsessed with being “healthy,” to the detriment of their own health. They feel a compulsive need to eat perfectly. This disease is not only a mental health issue, but can also lead to being severely underweight, anxiety and isolation, hair thinning, and a variety of other illnesses born from malnourishment (Phillips, 2018).

According to Phillips, the rise of this new type of eating disorder is linked to social media use, in particular, use of the highly visual platform Instagram. A study conducted by researchers at University College London found that higher Instagram use was linked to higher prevalence of orthorexia symptoms (Conquegrani & Brown 2017). Instagram promotes this idea of health through promotion of hashtags like #eatclean and #fitspiration (Phillips 2018). These hashtags appear to be promoting a healthy lifestyle. However, the people posting to them are not licensed medical professionals. Under this guise of improving their health, while also working to fit societal body norms, many young women may fall into the trap of an eating disorder without realizing they are embarking on a path that will ultimately deteriorate both their mental and physical health.

Phillips (2018) also correlates the highly posed, edited nature of social media as contributing to pressure young girls can feel to not only be, but also look, perfect. This combination of images of perfect bodies with the message that they didn't starve themselves to get that way – they just ate healthy - leads to promotion of disordered behaviors. Health is not linked to thinness, and our society often forgets that.

In addition to full blown eating disorders, young women without eating disorders still display disordered tendencies as the culture of disordered eating is glorified in society today. The implication of this normalization of disorder is a societal eating disorder – where abnormal and unhealthy eating patterns are not only praised – they become the norm.

Implications of Normalization of Disordered Eating

Societal normalization of disordered eating, especially when under the pretense of health, leads to an increase of eating disorders. According to the National Eating Disorders Association (NEDA), disordered eating patterns can often lead to full blown eating disorders (Zucker 2018).

Non-disordered eating is defined as mindfully consuming a variety of foods when hungry and stopping when full (Zucker, 2018). Disordered eating can range from simply lacking in one food group, to not responding to hunger properly by replacing food with coffee, to overeating when bored. These are usually harmless disordered actions, and it is only when actions form patterns that they pose a threat.

The things that take disordered eating from simply isolated occurrences of disorder to a full-blown eating disorder are compulsion and functionality. Compulsion refers to the thoughts and feelings around food – an eating disorder is typically all consuming, so those suffering from it are constantly thinking about food/calories/the health of what they are consuming. This compulsion can, in turn, lead to a decrease in functionality. For example, people with eating disorders may be unable to eat out or experience stress around social occasions as the food differs from their norm (Zucker, 2018).

Disordered eating patterns can quickly spiral into a place where functionality and compulsion are at play – and then become a societal problem when a generation of people are suffering from a disorder.

Research Questions

To determine whether promotion of disordered eating patterns under the guise of health leads to higher likelihood to adopt said patterns, I developed two primary research questions. RQ 1 addresses the perception of the influencer. RQ 2 directly addresses the likelihood to adopt disordered behaviors after viewing the post.

RQ 1: How does the type of influencer caption (focusing on health versus weight loss) affect Instagram users' perceptions of the influencer?

RQ 2: How does the type of influencer caption (focusing on health versus weight loss) affect Instagram users' likelihood of engaging in weight-loss behaviors?

Method

This study employed an experiment and analysis of covariance statistics in order to compare the effects of the two different experimental conditions (an influencer post with a caption that emphasized health versus an influencer post with a caption that emphasized weight loss) to address the research questions.

Sample

A total of 151 female undergraduate students from universities primarily on the East Coast of the United States (85% were White, average age of 20 [$SD_{age} = 1.375$ years]) participated. Students did not receive any compensation or incentive for their participation.

Stimuli

The stimuli involved two mock screenshots of Instagram influencer posts. One promoted cutting out carbs with health as the motivation and one promoted cutting out carbs with weight loss as the motivation. To ensure there were not distinct differences between the posts, the same photo was used for both, and the caption was only slightly changed. The only words that were altered were “I’ve been feeling so much better lately since deciding to live a healthier lifestyle” to “I’ve been feeling so much better lately since I decided to lose weight.”

Procedure

Participants were given a link to an online questionnaire. After reporting demographic information, Qualtrics software randomly assigned participants to view one of the two Instagram

posts. Afterward, participants responded to a series of questions that measured how they perceived the Instagram model in the posts. The first five questions measured their attitudes about perceived attractiveness, the following five measured their attitudes about perceived trustworthiness, and the last five questions measured their perceptions of perceived expertise. The following questions measured the participants behavioral intentions – i.e., will they take the action recommended in the post (cutting out carbs) after viewing the post. The last question measured the individual body appreciation of each participant using a 10-item scale. The measures of attractiveness, trustworthiness and expertise primarily addresses RQ 1, whereas the behavioral intention scale addressed RQ 2. The body appreciation scale established an individual baseline for each participant's body views.

Measures

Attractiveness

Participants reported how attractive they found the woman in the post by rating her attractiveness, classiness, beauty, elegance, and sexiness on a scale from 1 to 10. These items formed reliable indices for the diet caption group ($M = 5.77$, $SD = 2.11$) as well as the health caption group: ($M = 5.84$, $SD = 2.31$). The overall mean for attractiveness was 5.80 and the overall SD was 2.20. The scale was adapted from Roobina Ohanian's Perceived Expertise, Trustworthiness, and Attractiveness scale (1990).

Trustworthiness

Participants reported how much they trusted the advice offered in the post on a single scale from 1 to 10. They also rated her trustworthiness by rating her dependability, honesty, reliability,

sincerity, and trustworthiness on a scale of 1 to 10. The items formed reliable indices for the diet caption group ($M = 2.64$, $SD = 1.46$) as well as the health caption group ($M = 2.79$, $SD = 1.48$). The overall mean for trustworthiness was 2.72 and the overall SD was 1.47. The scale was adapted from Roobina Ohanian's Perceived Expertise, Trustworthiness, and Attractiveness scale (1990).

Expertise

Participants reported how they perceived the expertise of the woman in the post by rating her expertise, experience, knowledge, qualification, and skills on a scale from 1 to 10. The items formed reliable indices for the diet caption group ($M = 2.05$, $SD = 1.23$) as well as the health caption group ($M = 2.26$, $SD = 1.38$). The overall mean for expertise was 2.16 and the overall SD was 1.30. The scale was adapted from Roobina Ohanian's Perceived Expertise, Trustworthiness, and Attractiveness scale (1990).

Behavioral Intentions

Participants reported how likely they were to eat fewer carbs after viewing the post by filling in a series of 10-point scales measuring likeliness, probability, certainty of actions, and definity of actions. The items formed reliable indices for the diet caption group ($M = 2.91$, $SD = 2.01$) as well as the health caption group ($M = 3.40$, $SD = 1.86$). The overall mean for behavioral intentions was 3.15 and the overall SD was 1.95. The scale used was a semantic differential scale, which was pioneered by Charles Osgood.

Body Appreciation Scale

The BAS-2 scale (Tylka and Wood-Barcalow) assessed body appreciation of participants by having participants respond to a series of 10 body appreciation questions and ranking their answers on a 10-point scale from does not describe me (1) to describes me very well (10). The questions asked about respect of one's body, attentiveness to ones needs, love of one's body, and appreciation of one's body. The items formed reliable indices for the diet caption group ($M = 5.76$, $SD = 2.17$) as well as the health caption group ($M = 5.77$, $SD = 2.16$). The overall mean for the body appreciation scale was 5.77 and the overall SD was 2.16.

Results

To address the research questions, I conducted an Independent Samples T-Test. The purported motivation (health versus weight loss) listed served as the independent variable, and the perceived trustworthiness, attractiveness, expertise, likelihood to cut down on carbs, and body appreciation scale served as dependent variables. The results indicated a P value of .854 for attractiveness, .539 for trustworthiness, .311 for expertise, .131 for behavioral intentions, and .979 for the body appreciation scale. None of these P values were below .05, the threshold for making them statistically significant. Despite not being statistically significant, the intention to eat fewer carbs was higher in the health group than the diet group.

Discussion

The results indicate that while the two groups (health and diet motivation) did not show statistically significant differences, behavioral intention, or intention to engage in dieting, was slightly higher in the health group.

The main analyses were conducted using Independent Samples T-Tests. These results revealed a slight difference in intention to engage in disordered eating behaviors within the health group. When looking at the specific results, the means for attractiveness were 5.77 and 5.84 (diet, health respectively). A P value of .854 between the two groups indicated that the results were very similar within the two groups. This indicated that perception of attractiveness did not differ greatly between the two groups, and both groups found the influencer to be slightly more attractive than average (5).

When looking at the results for trustworthiness, the means were 2.79 and 2.64 (diet, health respectively). The P value for trustworthiness was .539, indicating that the difference between the two groups was slightly more in this area than in attractiveness. However, the score of 2-3 on a scale of 1-10, with 10 being the most trustworthy, indicates low overall levels of trust. This could be due in part to the phrasing of the caption or the nature of the photo – a girl in a bikini, which is not very relatable or personable. This could also be due in part to the fact that this influencer was created for the purpose of this assignment, and participants had no prior knowledge of her, or trust built with her. Further studies could examine the correlation between trust and familiarity with an influencer.

The results for expertise were similarly low. The means were 2.05 and 2.26 (diet, health respectively). The P value was .311, which displayed a correlation between promoting health and being viewed as an expert, as opposed to promoting dieting. However, the results were still not statistically significant. This is still a place of interest upon reflection, as even a slight change in phrasing resulted in a difference of perception of expertise. Overall, the results indicated low levels of expertise on a ten-point scale. Much like with trust, this could be due to a drawback within the study, either within the subtlety of the difference in caption wording or the insincerity of the posed nature of the photo.

The intention to diet displayed means of 2.91 and 3.40 (diet, health respectively). The P value for intention to diet was .131, which was the closest P value to being statistically significant. Even though it was not statistically significant, there was a correlation between promotion of health and likelihood to diet. As discussed in the background of this study, while most popular influencers are not knowingly promoting disordered eating, promotion of what influencers perceive as a healthy lifestyle has actually led to an uptick in a new type of eating disorder: orthorexia (Phillips 2018). There is a growing body of research in this field, and this study contributes to that body of research by further establishing the correlation between language promoting health and increased likelihood to adopt disordered eating habits.

The last measure examined within this study was the body appreciation scale, which measured how participants felt about their body. As the image was the same, the results for both groups were very similar (mean of 5.76 for diet condition, 5.77 for health condition). This is notable, however, as this question addressed if participants felt their body was valuable and deserving of

respect. The results indicate that participants did not feel that their body was especially worthy of value or respect, and most participants indicated that prompts such as “I feel love for my body” and “I feel that my body has at least some good attributes” only described them moderately well (5). This shows a societal issue – most participants did not show a deep disdain for their bodies, but they also did not seem to like their bodies, as their responses indicated.

For ease of comparison and to eliminate bias, the same photo was used for both variables. This may have, however, been a drawback. The photo used was of a skinny influencer in a bikini on a beach. The purpose of this study was to examine the correlation between influencers promoting a “healthy” lifestyle and disordered eating. By using such an edited photo, it may have taken away from the “realness” of the post and lead to distrust of the influencer, and less likelihood to adopt their actions. Many influencers promoting disordered eating under the guise of health strive to achieve a “real” image – while still being extremely curated in what they post. This image of realness is precisely what makes them so dangerous, as they are still editing their lifestyles but promoting them as unedited and real. This creates an insurmountable mission for young women – to emulate people purporting to be real who carefully edit their lives is an impossible goal.

The photo used in this study was a potential detriment to the results in that it did not keep with the current trend of Instagram – pretend realness. Pretend realness is a current trend on Instagram, where influencers post “real” photos – or photos with minimal editing and filters - where they are caught off guard or seemingly not posed. This trend is centered around perceived authenticity and perceived relatability. By using a posed photo on a beach, the photo used in this study did not exemplify the current trend of Instagram. By not pretending to be relatable, low

levels of trust and expertise were seen. In future studies, both the caption and photo should seemingly promote health (while promoting disordered eating) to study if more than just language is influencing participants perception of influencers.

This relationship between health and weight loss phrasing displayed within behavioral intention positively illustrates the impact of the purported motivation behind posts promoting disordered eating. By relabeling, and thereby rebranding, disordered eating as healthy, a slight increase in intention to diet was seen.

While this study is exploratory, prolonged exposure to posts promoting disordered eating under the guise of health could still potentially affect views on attractiveness, trust, expertise, and behavioral intention in a statistically significant way. Over time, viewers may be more likely to be influenced to engage in behaviors as trust is built with influencers they follow. Future research in this area could establish correlations between following influencers and trust being built over time. Exposure in this study was short and limited to a single post. Yet, that was enough to evoke different emotions and slight changes in behavioral intention, suggesting that posts may eventually shape behavior. Other future areas of study could include envy and shame along with the discrete emotions measured here, to see if viewers self-worth is hurt after viewing posts of influencers that they deem healthier or skinnier than them. Future studies can also employ changes in photos used, rather than just changes in captions. Studies can explore correlation between heavily edited photos and minimally edited photos to see if participants trust the messages of those with the minimally edited photos more and are therefore more likely to engage in disordered eating behavior when promoted on accounts that post minimally edited photos.

If Instagram were to launch a campaign informed by this research to better shape their platform to avoid promoting eating disorders, I would suggest adding a warning label above any health advice from someone other than a verified medical professional, much like their label that they have in place to differentiate paid content (i.e., ads) from unpaid endorsements. This label may help reduce trust placed in influencers by acknowledging their lack of expertise, and therefore it may reduce the likelihood of users to adopt the behaviors being promoted. I would also suggest an update of their algorithm, which currently works by promoting user-specific content that is similar to what the user has viewed in the past and searched for. Through the current algorithm, users who click on content that promotes disordered eating are more likely to see that type of content, which increases exposure of disordered content to the most at-risk population. I suggest Instagram reevaluate their algorithm to reduce risk in that respect. A practical take-away from this research for all Instagram users is to be wary of any health advice offered on Instagram, and to keep in mind that all content on Instagram is edited and curated. Instagram is simply a highlights reel, and to measure the entirety of one's life against the best snippets of another's is a fast path to feeling inadequate.

The study is not without limitations, many of which have been addressed above. Despite the limitations, this study contributes to the literature on the impact of social media on disordered eating, specifically focused on the purported motivation behind posts. The data suggests that behavioral intention was slightly increased in the test group exposed to the health motivation, as opposed to the diet motivation. This, over time, could lead to an increase in disordered eating when young women are exposed to social media posts that purport to promote health, while promoting disordered habits. Future work can build upon these findings to further strengthen the connection between purported health motivation and increase in disordered eating habits. While

we have established a slight tie between health motivation and increase in behavioral intention, the results were not significant and future studies should consider using different photos to see if behavioral intention increases when the photos are not as blatantly edited.

Notes

1. Means and standard deviations of dependent variables for the diet condition are as follows: attractiveness ($M = 5.77$, $SD = 2.11$), trustworthiness ($M = 2.64$, $SD = 1.46$), expertise ($M = 2.05$, $SD = 1.23$), behavioral intention ($M = 2.91$, $SD = 2.01$), and the body appreciation scale ($M = 5.76$, $SD = 2.17$).
2. Means and standard deviations of dependent variables for the health condition are as follows: attractiveness ($M = 5.84$, $SD = 2.31$), trustworthiness ($M = 2.79$, $SD = 1.48$), expertise ($M = 2.26$, $SD = 1.38$), behavioral intention ($M = 3.40$, $SD = 1.86$), and the body appreciation scale ($M = 5.77$, $SD = 2.16$).

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ACADEMIC VITA

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Education

The Pennsylvania State University | Schreyer Honors College

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Minor: Digital Media Trends and Analytics

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Work Experience

Merck

Publication Design and Social Media Intern

Upper Gwynedd, PA

May 2021 – August 2021

- Developed a comprehensive campaign establishing Merck Manuals as a key facilitator of conversation around One Medicine – a platform for scientific knowledge and collaboration on inter- and intra- species pathogen transmission
- Designed and lead implementation of an expansion plan for medical and veterinary student vlogger ambassadors
- Refined YouTube strategy by redesigning thumbnails to appeal to key stakeholders

Jamila Therapeutics

Public Relations Intern

Zurich, Switzerland

December 2020 – April 2021

- Developed content creation plans for building brand awareness and viewership through social media platforms
- Established overall objectives and quarterly KPIs for 2021-22 social media use, ran company accounts
- Revamped and published company website

The Delwik Group

Social Media Intern

Zurich, Switzerland

July 2020 – August 2020

- Oversaw Twitter handle of client Internxt, a cloud storage startup in Spain, by interacting with Tweets that mentioned their competitors and directing discussion around the company
- Analyzed key metrics & collaborated with fellow summer analysts to present findings and social media recommendations to the CEO

The Delwik Group

Nonprofit Intern

Zurich, Switzerland

May 2019 – August 2019

- Developed a strategic layout for the implementation of a financial literacy course for women, including creating the onboarding process for teachers, layout of course material, and application specifics for potential candidates
- Researched analytic services and data rooms, analyzed pricing options, and coordinated planning to drive strategy

Leadership Experience

Valley Magazine

Public Relations Committee, LinkedIn & Alumni Relations

University Park, PA

January 2020 – Present

- Expanding brand influence and alumni engagement via LinkedIn for *Valley Magazine* - a student-run fashion and lifestyle magazine on campus – by establishing LinkedIn groups and promoting content within them
- Collaborating with local businesses to design public relations campaigns that promote local brands alongside *Valley*

Penn State IECF

SAT Tutor

University Park, PA

September 2021 – Present

- Tutored three exchange students enrolled in Penn State's premier intensive English program in preparation for the writing & reading portions of their SAT
- Tailored weekly meetings to support their SAT prep course, identified areas for growth, resulting in improved scores

Skills

- Proficient in Microsoft Excel, Microsoft PowerPoint, Adobe InDesign, and Adobe Photoshop
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