Cognitive Processing of Social Media
“Fitspiration” Material is Linked to Disordered Eating Symptomology
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Social media is a routine part of everyday life for millions of people. Content featuring food and fitness, widely known as “fitspiration,” has become increasingly popular on social media platforms. Prior findings indicate that commenting on social media posts boosts memory for those posts, while other work has revealed links between eating disorders and attentional bias of food and body-related stimuli. Here, two experiments extend prior work to social media and explore whether the act of commenting on “fitspiration” content on Instagram differentially affects memory according to disordered eating symptomology. Across two experiments, 510 participants viewed 3x3 arrays of real Instagram posts featuring “healthy” food and people engaging in fitness activities. For each array, participants were asked to comment on one target image. After a distractor task, participants completed a memory task. Participants then completed the Eating Disorder Questionnaire (EDE-Q). In general, participants remembered images that they commented on better than others viewed in the same array ($p < .0001$). However, analyses of individual differences revealed the memory boost for target images was negatively related to EDE-Q global scores in Experiment 1 ($p = .001$) and Experiment 2 ($p = .001$), such that individuals with more symptomology had less boost, potentially suggesting that these individuals distribute attention across all “fitspiration” material regardless of level of engagement. These findings indicate that engagement with social media “fitspiration” material differentially affects those with disordered eating, and that cognitive processing of this material is linked to offline behaviors and psychopathology.