CONCEPTUAL METAPHORS FOR EATING DISORDERS
ON INSTAGRAM

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By

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ABSTRACT

Those who have not experienced an eating disorder first-hand may never completely understand the ways it impacts your life. However, analysis of the language used to talk about food, diet culture, body, eating disorders, recovery, and relapse can provide meaningful insight into the experience of having an eating disorder. This study analyzes Instagram posts made on publicly accessible accounts that focus on eating disorder awareness and recovery. A Conceptual Metaphor Theory approach is used to identify metaphors for food, diet culture, body, eating disorders, recovery, and relapse. Examples of metaphors identified within the collected data include: FOOD AS MORALITY, DIET CULTURE AS A PERSON, BODY AS AN ENEMY, EATING DISORDER AS A PERSON, RECOVERY AS A JOURNEY, and RELAPSE AS AN OBSTACLE. In total, 84 examples of 28 different conceptual metaphors between the 6 target domains were identified in this study. The ability to identify conceptual metaphors for is beneficial in a broader cultural context so that harmful metaphors that contribute to our society’s disordered ideas about food and bodies can be rejected and replaced with helpful alternatives. An understanding of metaphors for eating disorders and associated domains is also practical for treatment providers because metaphor is a highly useful communicative and therapeutic tool.
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1 INTRODUCTION

Eating disorders are devastating illnesses that negatively impact all aspects of a person’s life: physical, social, mental, and emotional (National Initiative for Eating Disorders (NIED), n.d.). Eating disorders are widely misunderstood, overlooked, and even glorified in our weight-loss driven Western society. I intend to highlight the importance of understanding how people talk about eating disorders, namely the conceptual metaphors that are used in eating disorder discourse on social media. Dr. Anita Johnson, a clinical psychiatrist who specializes in eating disorders, perfectly captures the importance of understanding not only the language used to talk about eating disorders, but metaphors specifically:

We have to learn the language of metaphor. We have to figure out what our eating behaviors are trying to express, what needs are not being met, what emotions are going unacknowledged. When we start learning this language, we understand that our disordered eating served a purpose, it was trying to tell us something, but there is another way. A better way. A more sustainable way. (Johnson, 2022)

Metaphor is a powerful tool that makes complex concepts more accessible by allowing us to understand a concept in terms of a more familiar one. Therefore, metaphor lends itself to health discourse. Furthermore, metaphor analysis provides insight into individuals’ unique experiences of mental illness just as it does with any physical disease.

This thesis is structured as follows: Chapter 2 will provide an overview of the literature on eating disorders, diet culture and the thin ideal, conceptual metaphors, and metaphor and (mental) health. Key research regarding metaphors for eating disorders is also summarized in this chapter. The methodology is described in Chapter 3. Chapter 4 is the Data Analysis & Discussion chapter, wherein conceptual metaphors along with specific examples from the data will be discussed. This chapter will also include a discussion of larger metaphor systems found within the data. The cultural and clinical significance of this research and findings will be discussed in Chapter 5, followed by the study’s limitations in Chapter 6. Finally, Chapter 7 contains a summary.
2 LITERATURE REVIEW

As the title suggests, the three primary areas of research that this thesis is concerned with are eating disorders, metaphors, and social media – Instagram in particular – and how they are interconnected. The first section of the literature review will provide an overview of eating disorders, their diagnostic criteria, and information about the populations that they affect. The next section will describe diet culture and the notion of the “thin ideal”, as well as how social media and other forms of media not only perpetuate the idea that thinness is valuable but have a direct impact on people’s mental health and self-esteem. The next several sections describe conceptual metaphor in general before discussing specific areas where metaphor plays a significant role: health, mental health, food/eating/body/hunger, and eating disorders. The literature review chapter will conclude with a summary of the each of the areas mentioned above, as well as discuss the gap that this thesis seeks to bridge within the existing research.

2.1 Eating disorders

The fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, or the DSM-5, lays out the diagnostic criteria for the clinical diagnosis of mental disorders. Eating disorders are described in the DSM-5 as “a persistent disturbance of eating or eating-related behavior that results in the altered consumption or absorption of food and that significantly impairs physical health or psychosocial functioning” (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013, p. 329). Two eating disorders, anorexia nervosa (AN) and bulimia nervosa (BN), are more widely known among the public compared to other diagnoses (Polivy & Herman, 2002). There are three criteria that must be met for a person to be given a diagnosis of anorexia nervosa: restriction of food intake resulting in significant weight loss and a low body weight; fear of weight gain and/or behaviour that interferes with weight gain; disturbed perception of one’s body shape and size, self-evaluation that is disproportionately influenced by body weight and appearance, and/or denial or lack of recognition of consequences of maintaining a low body weight (APA, 2013). Individuals diagnosed with bulimia nervosa also meet three criteria: recurrent episodes of eating large quantities of food in a short period of time, also known as “binges”; binge-eating episodes that are followed by purging or other compensatory behaviours to prevent weight gain such as laxative or diuretic use, exercise, and fasting; self-evaluation that is disproportionately influenced by body weight and appearance (APA, 2013, p. 345).
While the more well-known eating disorders have already been described, it is important to discuss the other recognized eating disorders as well. Lesser-known eating disorders that are recognized by the APA include pica (consumption of non-food substances with no nutritional value), rumination disorder (regurgitation of food that is not associated with any medical condition), Avoidant/Restrictive Food Intake Disorder or ARFID (avoidance/restriction of eating foods based on sensory characteristics such as texture or a fear of adverse consequences to eating such as vomiting, choking, or allergic reaction), binge-eating disorder or BED (recurrent binge-eating episodes where the individual eats a significantly large quantity of food in a short period of time, more than most people would consume in the same time period under the same circumstances), and Other Specified Feeding or Eating Disorders or OSFED (presentations that meet most, but not all, diagnostic criteria for a clinical diagnosis of a specific eating disorder) (APA, 2013). Examples of OSFED diagnoses include atypical anorexia (the individual maintains a normal or above normal weight, despite significant weight loss and severe food restriction) or purging disorder (the individual engages in purging behaviours without episodes of binge-eating) (APA, 2013).

For this thesis, I will be focusing on eating disorders with diagnostic criteria centering on excessive/insufficient food intake and the use of compensatory measures (purging, laxative abuse, excessive exercise, etc.) with a goal of losing weight/preventing weight gain. It is important to note that while obesity is often perceived by the general public as an eating disorder and it may co-occur with various eating and mood disorders, the APA does not classify obesity as a mental disorder (APA, 2013).

After opioid addiction, eating disorders represent the second highest mortality rate of all mental disorders (Chesney et al., 2014). There is an elevated suicide risk in individuals with anorexia and bulimia (APA, 2013). Suicide is reported as the second highest cause of death for those suffering with anorexia nervosa, with a suicide risk of 12 per 100,000 annually (APA, 2013; NIED, n.d.). There is some similarity between symptoms reported by individuals with eating disorders and those reported by individuals with substance use disorders, including compulsion and cravings (APA, 2013). According to the APA, “this resemblance may reflect the involvement of the same neural systems, including those implicated in regulatory self-control and reward, in both groups of disorders” (2013, p. 329). Depression, bipolar disorder, anxiety
disorders, OCD, and/or substance use disorders may also co-occur with an eating disorder (APA, 2013). The various factors that contribute to the development of both substance use disorders and eating disorders alike “remain insufficiently understood” (APA, 2013, p. 329). A variety of sociocultural, genetic, environmental, and individual factors all contribute to the development of an eating disorder (APA, 2013; NIED, n.d.; Polivy & Herman, 2002).

Approximately 1 million Canadians meet the diagnostic criteria for an eating disorder at any given time (National Initiative for Eating Disorders [NIED], n.d.). An unknown number of individuals suffer with eating disorders that go undetected or do not fully meet DSM-5 diagnostic criteria. Anyone can develop an eating disorder regardless of age, race, or gender (Mitchison et al., 2014; National Eating Disorders Association [NEDA], n.d.; Smink et al., 2012) but according to the APA, anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa both have a staggering ratio of 10:1 female-to-male (2013). This ratio is “far less skewed” for binge-eating disorder, though no exact ratio is given (APA, 2013, p. 351). Anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, and binge-eating disorder diagnoses are more prevalent in industrialized countries such as many countries in Europe, Canada, the US, Australia, New Zealand, and Japan (APA, 2013). The APA notes that when compared to white populations, “the prevalence of anorexia nervosa appears comparatively low among Latinos, African Americans, and Asians in the United States,” but indicates that this may have to do with the fact that “mental health service utilization among individuals with an eating disorder is significantly lower in these ethnic groups” (2013, p. 342). In recent years, there has been an increase in disordered eating across all demographics (Mitchison et al., 2014). In fact, this increase has been at a faster rate among men, people of low socioeconomic status, and older individuals (Mitchison et al., 2014). Development of anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, and binge-eating disorder typically occurs in adolescence or young adulthood (APA, 2013). However, younger and younger children are engaging in disordered eating behaviours such as dieting. It is estimated that between 12-30% of 10–14-year-old girls and 9-25% of 10-14-year-old boys in Canada have reported dieting with the intention of losing weight (NIED, n.d.). There have even been cases of eating disorders being diagnosed in children as young as 5 years old (NEDA, n.d.).

The adolescent and young adult populations that are increasingly engaging in disordered eating behaviours are also the same populations that are largely active on social media platforms,
which may be one of the reasons to account for the rise in dieting and other harmful behaviours in younger age groups.

2.2 Diet culture and the thin-ideal in (social) media

Diet culture is a term that, until recently, has not had a clear and unified definition (Jovanovski & Jaeger, 2022). Jovanovski and Jaeger (2022) set out to provide an overarching definition for diet culture that can be used by “anti-diet” researchers, activists, and health professionals alike. In a blog post written for the Butterfly Foundation, Jovanovski and Jaeger (2022, August 10) summarized the results of their study:

Ultimately, we found that diet culture is a set of ever-changing myths about food and bodies, promoting the idea that one’s body weight automatically equals health and that foods can be simplistically categorised as ‘good’ and ‘bad’. It also comprises a moral hierarchy of bodies that preferences the thin-ideal while masking a fear of fat. These cultural ideas are driven by broad systems and structures of power, such as patriarchal ideals about women’s bodies, racialised ideals around thinness and health, and capitalist industries that profit from body dissatisfaction and confusion around food and eating” (Jovanovski & Jaeger, 2022, August 10, paras. 7-8).

Diet culture perpetuates unrealistic health and beauty myths and then prescribes unhealthy behaviours such as calorie restriction or over-exercising to meet an impossible standard, and any foods or bodies that do not fit into this standard are stigmatized (Chastain, n.d.). Diet culture is harmful to everyone; however, it is especially harmful to individuals who have or are predisposed to develop eating disorders (Chastain, n.d., para. 15).

The “thin-ideal” is a key aspect of diet culture that can loosely be defined as the deeply rooted cultural belief that thin bodies are better and more attractive (Byrne, 2022, p. 10). Thin-ideal internalization is a person’s individual belief in and pursuit of achieving this ideal (Bair et al., 2012). Interaction with images of the thin-ideal on social media is linked with internalization of the thin-ideal, causing increased body and weight dissatisfaction due to being unable to meet unrealistic thin-ideal standards (Christensen et al., 2021; Fardouly et al., 2017; Tiggemann & Miller, 2010). Many posts on social media are intended to inspire users who interact with the content to pursue this thin-ideal – this content has been dubbed as “thinspiration” and
“fitspiration” (Boepple and Thompson, 2021; Christensen et al., 2021; Ghaznavi & Taylor, 2015).

Ghaznavi and Taylor (2015) describe thinspiration as “thin-ideal media content (i.e., images and/or prose) that intentionally promotes weight loss, often in a manner that encourages or glorifies dangerous behaviors characteristic of eating disorders” (p. 54). These images often depict young women with extremely skinny, bony physiques in revealing clothing that highlights and accentuates their thinness (Ghaznavi & Taylor, 2015). Fitspiration is a more recent version of thinspiration that “reinforces the thin-ideal by featuring toned and low-fat bodies, promoting excessive, or inappropriate attitudes toward exercise, and inducing guilt through stigmatizing messages about body sizes” (Christensen et al., 2021, p. 1308). Research shows that interaction with thinspiration and fitspiration content online not only has a negative impact on viewers’ body image and self-esteem, but those who interact with this content are more likely to engage in disordered eating and exercise behaviours or even meet the criteria for a clinical diagnosis of an eating disorder (Bardone-Cone & Cass, 2007; Boepple & Thompson, 2021; Christensen et al., 2021; Ghaznavi & Taylor, 2015; Harper et al., 2008; Lonergan et al., 2020).

It has been well-documented that social media, particularly image-based social media, has an impact on self-esteem and body image. Tiggemann and Miller (2010) surveyed 156 female high school students between 13-18 years old on their media consumption – magazine, television, and internet – and asked them to rate their own internalization of the thin ideal, comparison of their appearance with others’, satisfaction with their body weight, and their desire for thinness. They found that of all forms of media, internet exposure had the highest correlation with thin ideal internalization, appearance comparison, weight dissatisfaction, and a drive for thinness. (Tiggemann & Miller, 2010).

Fardouly et al. (2017) surveyed 276 women between the ages of 18-25 years old on their Instagram usage and viewership habits as well as their body image, self-objectification, appearance comparison, and thin ideal internalization. It was found that general Instagram use is correlated with self-objectification and internalization of the thin ideal, but that viewing fitspiration content specifically while using the platform is associated with increased body dissatisfaction and increased desire for thinness (Fardouly et al., 2017).
Lonergan et al. (2020) surveyed 4,209 adolescents between 12-18 years old on eating disorder criteria as well as their photo-based behaviours on social media: avoidance of posting photos of oneself, photo investment (amount of effort put into choosing the right photo to post based on how others will respond to it), manipulation or editing of photos, and investment in others’ photos (amount of energy spent examining another person’s photo and the interactions with it such as likes and replies). This study found that individuals who engage in the above photo-based behaviours on social media are more likely to meet one or more diagnostic criteria for eating disorders (Lonergan et al. 2020).

The photos that people share on social media platforms like Instagram are often “carefully selected, edited, and enhanced and may contain idealized representations of women’s physical appearance” (Fardouly et al., 2017, p. 1390). This opens the door for self-objectification, peer comparison, and even peer competition (Fardouly et al., 2017; Padín et al., 2021). However, social media sites are just one form of media that encourages and rewards thinness. Other forms of media such as magazines, television shows, movies, and commercials all have an affect on body image and a desire for thinness (Ata & Thompson, 2010; López-Rodríguez, 2016; Silverstein et al., 1986; Tiggemann & Pickering, 1996). Magazines and tabloids are notorious for displaying unflattering photos of celebrities accompanied by harsh headlines and captions that shame them for their body size, something that is especially true for female celebrities (López-Rodríguez, 2016). Magazines feature numerous articles and advertisements that pitch weight loss pills and diet foods to their readers (Silverstein et al., 1986). As Silverstein et al.’s study was conducted in 1986, we can see that attempts to sell us diet and weight loss products through media such as magazines has been an unwavering constant in our daily lives for the last 40 years!

In TV sit-coms, overweight characters are less likely to have romantic partners (Greenberg et al., 2003, as cited in Ata & Thompson, 2010). These characters are also more likely to be used as the punchline with negative comments on their weight or appearance from other, thinner characters being reinforced by laughter from audience (Fouts & Burggraf, 2000, as cited in Ata & Thompson, 2010). Weight loss program infomercials use “before” and “after” images to sell their product. Inevitably, the person in the “before” image is miserable until they use the company’s miracle cure, lose weight, and are shown beaming with happiness in the
“after” photo (Geier et al., 2003, as cited in Ata & Thompson, 2010, p. 44). Reality television shows such as The Biggest Loser not only encourage dangerously rapid weight loss that is unrealistic and unsustainable, but they also blame individuals for their own obesity and reinforce stereotypes that overweight people are lazy and lack motivation (Thomas et al., 2007, as cited in Ata & Thompson, 2010). Weight stigma is so normalized that it even exists in media intended for children: Animated children’s cartoons depict thinner characters as more attractive, intelligent, healthier, and happier than overweight characters (Klein & Shiffman, 2006 as cited in Ata & Thompson, 2010). Overweight characters in these shows are also more likely to be portrayed as the villain (Klein & Shiffman, 2006, as cited in Ata & Thompson, 2010).

There are so many examples of weight stigma and glorification of diet culture in the various forms of media that we consume every day. Whether through product advertisements, character archetypes, or photoshopped images on social media platforms, diet culture praises thinness and encourages disordered behaviours to achieve it. Our society has become largely numb to diet culture, accepting it as normal or not even noticing its presence at all. However, the analysis of metaphors can help demonstrate how deep-rooted diet culture has become in our lives. In addition to identifying metaphors for eating disorders, recovery, and relapse in this thesis, I will also identify metaphors for diet culture, food, and body.

2.3 Metaphor

Conceptual metaphors are a way of understanding one domain in terms that are typically associated with another domain (Gibbs, 2017; Gibbs 2020; Kövecses, 2002; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). The notion of conceptual metaphor was popularised by Lakoff and Johnson in their book Metaphors We Live By (1980). They demonstrate that the way we think about and understand the world around us is highly metaphorical in nature (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). While we are not typically cognisant or self-aware of our thought system, the metaphorical nature of these systems is evident in the language we use everyday (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). ARGUMENT IS WAR, TIME IS MONEY, and LIFE IS A JOURNEY are some of the most prevalent conceptual metaphors in English (Kövecses, 2002; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). We use conceptual metaphor to make abstract, complex concepts more accessible by understanding them in terms of a more familiar concept (Gibbs, 2017). We also use conceptual metaphor to accentuate certain aspects of these concepts, often in an effort to downplay or shadow the other aspects. Emphasizing one
aspect of a concept while drawing attention away from other aspects is referred to as highlighting and hiding (Kövecses, 2002; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

Kövecses (2002) provides a simple formula for conceptual metaphors: CONCEPTUAL DOMAIN (A) IS CONCEPTUAL DOMAIN (B). The two conceptual domains within a conceptual metaphor are called the target domain and the source domain. The target domain is the concept that is understood, thought about, and talked about in terms associated with the source domain; the source domain is, as the name suggests, the source of the metaphorical language and expressions used for the target domain (Kövecses, 2002). The formula then becomes TARGET DOMAIN IS SOURCE DOMAIN (Kövecses, 2002). Returning to the three common metaphors mentioned previously, the target domain (ARGUMENT, TIME, LIFE) is talked about metaphorically in terms and expressions relating to the source domain (WAR, MONEY, JOURNEY) (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

Metaphor is not merely a rhetorical device, it also provides a framework for “how we perceive, how we think, and what we do” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 4). Take the target domain of arguments for example:

It is important to see that we don’t just talk about arguments in terms of war. We can actually win or lose arguments. We see the person we are arguing with as an opponent. We attack his positions and we defend our own. We gain and lose ground. We plan and use strategies. If we find a position indefensible, we can abandon it and take a new position of attack. Many of the things we do in arguing are partially structured by the concept of war. Though there is no physical battle, there is a verbal battle, and the structure of an argument – attack, defense, counterattack, etc. – reflects this. It is in this sense that the ARGUMENT IS WAR metaphor is one that we live by in this culture; it structures the actions we perform in arguing. (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 4)

As highlighted in the above excerpt from Lakoff and Johnson (1980), we see that the target domain is not only talked about but is perceived and performed in terms of the source domain. Additionally, some conceptual metaphors are highly conventionalized: “this is the ordinary way” of talking and thinking about the target domain (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 5). In a nutshell, “we talk about arguments [or any other concept] that way because we conceive of them that way – and we act according to the way we conceive of things” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 5).
Kövecses (2002) explains that these conceptual metaphors can also “fit together to make up larger systematic groupings – that is, metaphor systems – that incorporate individual conceptual metaphors” (p. 121). In other words, multiple metaphors group together to form a broader overarching metaphor. These metaphor systems are based on metaphorical entailments, which Kövecses (2002) describes as “rich additional knowledge about a source [that] is mapped onto a target” (p. 94).

While we use metaphor every day, these metaphors are not permanent. As Gibbs (2017) explains, “the metaphors we live by are not necessarily dictated to us in ways that are unchangeable. People can resist dominant metaphorical concepts and come to discover alternative conceptual metaphors that better meet with our needs and goals” (p. 152). In the case of eating disorders and recovery, there is a mixture of helpful and harmful metaphors. By identifying harmful metaphors (i.e., those that reinforce diet culture, promote unrealistic beauty ideals, glamourize eating disorders, etc.), we can then shift the narrative and adopt different, healthy metaphors that support individuals with eating disorders, promote recovery, and encourage healthy relationships with food and body.

### 2.4 Metaphor and health

Metaphorical language makes complex and abstract concepts easier to contextualize and understand, so it is no surprise that the field of health makes use of its own metaphors. Gibbs (2023) reiterates that “metaphor is no mere linguistic ornament,” and in the realm of healthcare, metaphors “reveal the particularities of what it is like to be ill or healing” (p. 770) Metaphors in healthcare can make medical concepts more accessible to laypeople: doctors and other healthcare providers can utilize metaphors as “time-efficient tools for helping patients understand complex biological processes” (Gibbs, 2017, p. 150). However, while some metaphors are useful tools to aid in understanding, other metaphors are harmful.

Sontag’s (1978) essay *Illness as Metaphor* deals with metaphor and health, specifically discussing the metaphors used for tuberculosis and cancer. The previously mysterious and misunderstood nature of these diseases lends itself to metaphorical language. Sontag notes that tuberculosis and cancer are viewed not just as a disease but as “an evil, invincible predator” (1978, p. 7). Tuberculosis is talked about in terms of consumption, as something that causes the body to fade away and disintegrate; cancer is talked about in terms of invasion, something that
sneaks in and attacks the body or an intruder that must be stopped (Sontag, 1978). Tuberculosis is a disease associated with the lungs and therefore associated with breath and life, making tuberculosis “a disease of the soul”, while cancer is a disease of the body and nothing more (Sontag, 1978, p. 18).

Today, the language used to talk about cancer can be summarized into the overall metaphor ILLNESS IS WAR: cancer is perceived as an enemy or invader, treating cancer is referred to as a fight or a battle, people who get the disease become victims of cancer, etc. (Gibbs, 2017; Sontag, 1978). When someone dies of cancer, we say they lost the battle. The ILLNESS AS WAR metaphor places undue blame and responsibility on the individual, rather than on the illness that is truly at fault (Gibbs, 2017; Sontag, 1978). It implies that the person simply did not fight hard enough, that they could have survived if only they had continued to battle the disease (Gibbs, 2017). Additionally, the war metaphor “ignores the existential, psychological, and social facets” in a person’s experience with illness (Gibbs, 2017, p. 151). Holmes (2011) summarizes why the ILLNESS AS WAR metaphor was not helpful to her when she was diagnosed with cancer and the importance of using a metaphor that resonates with the individual: “It’s not that battling was distasteful or reprehensible to me […] it just didn’t fit. But without a fitting metaphor, I had no story” (p. 266).

Instead of militaristic metaphors, many people employ the use of journey metaphors to conceptualize their illness and their unique experience with treatment and recovery and to contextualize it within the whole of their life (Gibbs, 2017). This way of conceptualizing illness and disease “opens up discussion about their own goals, directions, and progress, with physicians serving as trusted guides rather than as authoritative generals in a war scenario” (Gibbs, 2017, p. 151). The journey metaphor does not apply the same blame on the individual that is associated with the war metaphor. Instead, it implies a sense of agency rather than the chaos that is associated with war: the individual has the freedom to choose their pace and their path.

2.5 Metaphor and mental health

There is a clear divide between the mind and the body in Western thought. This is evident in the differing ways we talk about and treat mental illnesses compared to physical illnesses. Lakoff & Johnson (1999) reject this notion of duality between brain and body, stating that “there is no Cartesian dualistic person, with a mind separate from and independent of the body” (p. 5).
They propose the notion of “the embodied mind” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999). Conceptualization and cognition do not exist in a vacuum, totally separate from the physical world: “Mind is always and inevitably based on bodily perception and sensorimotor experiences” (Skårderud, 2007b, p. 244). Levitt et al. (2000) studied instances of “burden” metaphors for depression as a marker of progress in psychotherapy. Burdened metaphors included expressions like “carrying a heavy burden”, “weight of the world on my shoulders”, and “lump in my chest” while metaphors of unloading the burden included “getting it off my back”, “the pressure has lifted”, and “things are getting lighter” (Levitt et al., 2000, p. 29). This study found that patients making progress in treatment of their depression displayed a shift from using burdened metaphors to using unloading metaphors (Levitt et al., 2000).

Magaña (2019) examined the metaphors used in mental healthcare interactions with Spanish-speaking patients and identified several metaphors for anxiety and depression, including ANXIETY/DEPRESSION IS A TRAVELER and ANXIETY/DEPRESSION IS AN OPPONENT. In the traveler metaphor, patients conceptualized their depression or anxiety as “an external visitor” that enters their body (“nerves came to me”, “a lot of depression started to enter my body”, “three years after depression entered me”) (Magaña, 2019, p. 2194-2195). The opponent metaphor conceptualizes the depression/anxiety as “an enemy that is capable of capturing, attacking, and hitting” (“nerves started to grab me”, “depression attacked me”, “depression hits me a lot”) (Magaña, 2019, p. 2195).

Beck (2020) described metaphors for interactions between mother and baby during postpartum depression, identifying eight conceptual metaphors: POSTPARTUM DEPRESSION IS A THIEF (“I felt robbed”, “that real deep joy that you should have was stolen from me”), A ROBOT (“I was just like a robot”, “everything was mechanical”), ENVELOPING FOGGINESS (“the fog would roll in”, “the fogginess had set in”), BEING AT THE RACES (“a lot of racing thoughts”, “rapid fire in my mind”), AN ACTOR (“you are not the same person”, “you are an actor”), AN ERUPTIVE VOLCANO (“something was exploding in me”, “my anger erupted”), SKIN CRAWLING (“my skin literally was crawling”, “everything was stirring around inside”), and A WALL (“had to separate myself”, “put up some kind of wall between myself and my child”) (pp. 111-114).
Coll-Florit et al. (2021) analyzed the language used in online Spanish blogs regarding four severe mental disorders – major depressive disorder, schizophrenia, obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), and bipolar disorder. This study identified four main conceptual metaphors for severe mental disorder: MENTAL DISORDER IS A LIVING ENTITY, DARKNESS, DESCENT, and A CONTAINER (Coll-Florit et al, 2021). Coll-Florit et al.’s (2021) study also identified the use of the “SPLIT-SELF” metaphor where “patients conceptualized themselves as a divided entity […] or as coexisting personae […] In these conceptualizations, the subject was the healthy persona and the other self/part of the self was the ill persona” (p. 97). The difference between subject and self is described below:

The Subject is the locus of consciousness, subjective experience, reason, will, and our ‘essence,’ everything that makes us who we uniquely are. There is at least one Self and possibly more. The Selves consist of everything else about us – our bodies, our social roles, our histories, and so on. (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999, p. 268)

When we have conflicting beliefs, values, etc., we conceptualize it using the SPLIT SELF metaphor (Lakoff, 1992). This SPLIT SELF metaphor gives way to Lakoff & Johnson’s (1999) Multiple Selves metaphor: “The Multiple Selves Metaphor conceptualizes multiple values as multiple Selves, with each Self instantiating the social role associated with that value” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999, p. 280).

McMullen and Conway (2002) discussed metaphors for depression and present four main metaphors: DEPRESSION IS DARKNESS (“a black cloud”, “feeling dark”), WEIGHT (“carrying a load”, “feel heavy”), CAPTOR (“feel trapped”, “want to be free of it”), and DESCENT (“at rock bottom”, “in the gutter”, “slipping/falling into a depression”) (pp. 170-173). The DEPRESSION IS DESCENT metaphor is particularly interesting because “down” is directly associated with so many “bad” things in our culture: negative emotions (“feeling down”), lack of status/wealth (“lower class”), poor health (“fell into a coma”, “health is declining”), death (“dropped dead”), etc. are all expressed using descent/down as the source domain (McMullen & Conway, 2002, p. 174-175). Additionally, while four main depression metaphors were identified in the corpus, the DEPRESSION IS DESCENT metaphor accounted for more than 90% of the corpus while the other three metaphors combined only accounted for 10% (McMullen & Conway, 2002). In fact, McMullen and Conway (2002) claimed that the
DEPRESSION IS DESCENT metaphor “is so much a part of the fabric of our culture that it is simultaneously trite (and virtually inaudible) and associatively rich” (p. 167). In other words, expressions of this metaphor are so commonplace that references to depression may go unnoticed or be dismissed even though the descent metaphor conveys such powerful imagery (McMullen & Conway, 2002).

Another area of mental health where metaphor is prominently used is the field of substance addiction and recovery. Shinebourne and Smith (2010) interviewed six female participants dealing with alcohol addiction and conducted an interpretive phenomenological analysis of the metaphors used in the interviews. Their analysis identified four main metaphors: ADDICTION AS AFFLICTION, ADDICTION AS SUPPORT, RECOVERY AS GROWTH, and ADDICTION AND RECOVERY AS A JOURNEY (Shinebourne & Smith, 2010). Though four themes were identified, only the first, ADDICTION AS AFFLICTION, is discussed “as it most intensely reflects the participants’ engagement with their experiences” (Shinebourne & Smith, 2010, p. 62). Analysis of this metaphor identified sub-themes of pain and futility (“pain in my heart”, “poison”, “a wounded animal”), emptiness/the void (“a dark hole”, “downhill”, “a deep well”, “mist”), emotional detachment (“blocking” or “blacking out”, “killing”, and “boxing up” emotions), and battle (“fighting the demons”, “fighting for my life”, “holding the white flag up”, “I completely surrendered”) (Shinebourne & Smith, 2010, pp. 63-66).

Johnson (2019) interviewed three professionals who specialize in the field of addiction to identify metaphors they use for the different stages of addiction: becoming addicted, being addicted, and recovering from addiction. Johnson (2019) found that the dominant metaphor across all stages of addiction is ADDICTION IS A JOURNEY. Johnson (2019) states that the metaphors used by professionals are either empowering or disempowering for the addicted individual: “when used to portray substance dependent individuals as having a sense of purpose, degree of control over their illness, and positive self-identity,” metaphor is supportive and helpful (p. 105). However, “when they emphasise the vulnerabilities rather than strengths and agency of the addicted individual,” metaphors can do more harm than good (Johnson, 2019, p. 105).

Listening to the metaphors used by individuals with mental illnesses has multiple benefits. In broad terms, identification of the metaphors used by individuals struggling with
mental illnesses such as eating disorders can help care providers “understand where patients are coming from” and by extension understand how best to help them (Gibbs, 2023, p. 778). In McMullen’s (1989) study on the use of figurative language in psychotherapy, it was noted that patient-introduced metaphors “often revealed a great deal about their major concerns, their interpersonal relationships, their perceptions of self and others, and their affective experiences” (p. 221). McMullen (1989) further states that “client metaphors are important diagnostic and therapeutic tools that should not be overlooked”, and that carefully paying attention to the metaphors used in therapy sessions might serve to inform the therapist about these concerns, relationships, perceptions, and experiences (p. 223-224). Mathieson and Hoskins (2007) argue that metaphors used in counselling sessions serve to facilitate relationship-building between counselors and clients, provide insight and allow clients to assign new meaning to their experiences, and allow clients to explore new solutions and opportunities to address conflicts and solve problems. Johnson (2019) explains that clinicians are “subtly forming a trusting relationship” by using metaphors that resonate with their patients, and these patients are therefore “more likely to effectively engage in the recommended treatment or therapy” (p. 105). Johnson (2019) encourages healthcare providers “to conceptualise the recovery process in ways that generate labels which empower rather than disempower those who are in recovery, pointing them in the right direction to how they can heal from their addiction” (p. 108).

As mentioned earlier, the metaphors we use are not fixed (Gibbs, 2017). Thus, by paying attention to which metaphors people experiencing mental illness choose to use to conceptualise their own experiences we can change the way we as a broader society talk and think about mental illnesses. Adopting the use of metaphors that resonate with individuals who have lived experience with mental illness such as eating disorders helps to provide a supportive and empowering environment for healing and recovery.

2.6 Metaphor and food, eating, body, and hunger

Food is often talked about as if its nutritional value is directly linked with having moral value. Backett (1992) interviewed 28 middle-class families with 2 children between the ages of 3-10. Both the adults and the children were interviewed in this study. Backet (1992) found that “healthiness was defined on moralistic grounds by respondents. This not only involved judgements about 'good' and 'bad' behaviours, but could also readily slip over into judgements
about 'good' and 'bad' individuals” (p. 261). Respondents felt inclined to apologize and make excuses for what they perceived to be – or believed the interviewer would perceive to be – unhealthy behaviours and one couple even described their apprehension about participating in the interview and feeling “like the priest was coming to check up on them” (Backett, 1992, p. 261). These religious undertones were present in much of the discourse, taking on “a confessional mode” and making frequent use of words such as “conscience” and “guilt” whilst discussing unhealthy practices (Backett, 1992, p. 261). Levenstein (2012) suggests an explanation for the strong association of morality with food, particularly with the denial or restriction of food:

The residual Puritanism of the American middle class also helped make them more susceptible to food fears. A culture that for hundreds of years encouraged people to feel guilty about self-indulgence, one that saw the road to salvation as paved by individual self-denial, made them particularly receptive to calls for self-sacrifice in the name of healthy living (p. 3-4).

While describing food as morality – or more often, immorality – is common, there are other ways that food and bodies are conceptualized using metaphor which have also been described in the literature.

Spoel et al. (2012) interviewed 55 adults aged 47-70 about healthy living and identified a handful of metaphors for food and healthy eating: HEALTHY EATING AS BALANCED EATING (“a balanced diet”, “a good balance of fruit and vegetables”, “balance out with something healthy”), FOOD AS FUEL (“fuel for your body”, “put fuel in the tank”, “burning calories”), FOOD AS JUNK (“garbage food”, “junk food”, “rubbish”), and FOOD AS A DRUG (“junk food junkie”, “addicted to salt”) (pp. 2-6).

A study by López-Rodríguez (2016) looked at print magazines and identified numerous animal-based metaphors that portray a negative view of women and food such as PEOPLE ARE ANIMALS and HUNGER AS AN ANIMAL (López-Rodríguez, 2016). Examples of the PEOPLE ARE ANIMALS metaphor in this study appear in magazine headlines that refer to women as “pigs”, “cows”, or “whales” and describe them eating as “pigging out” or “wolﬁng down” (López-Rodríguez, 2016, p. 81). Metaphors for hunger include referring to it as an
“uncontrollable beast”, something you must “tame” before you “fall prey to a snack attack” (López-Rodríguez, 2016, pp. 83-84).

Barry et al. (2009) conducted a study in which participants were asked to read examples of metaphors for causes of obesity to examine whether agreement with these metaphors affected support for various public policies intended to lower rates of obesity. Seven metaphors were used in this study: OBESITY AS SINFUL BEHAVIOUR, ADDICTION, TIME CRUNCH, EATING DISORDER, DISABILITY, INDUSTRY MANIPULATION, and TOXIC FOOD ENVIRONMENT (Barry et al., 2009). These metaphors exist along a continuum of high to low individual blame as the root cause of obesity (Barry et al., 2009). For example, OBESITY AS SINFUL BEHAVIOUR places the highest amount of blame on the individual while the metaphors at the other end of the spectrum, OBESITY AS INDUSTRY MANIPULATION and TOXIC FOOD ENVIRONMENT, blame external factors rather than the individual (Barry et al., 2009).

2.7 Metaphor and eating disorders/recovery

As with other mental illnesses, there have been several studies concerned with the metaphors used by individuals with eating disorders. However, research that looks specifically at the metaphors used for eating disorders or by those who have eating disorders is much less prevalent than those for other mental illnesses. Some of these studies investigate the metaphors used to describe the eating disorder itself, while others look at the metaphors used for recovery from an eating disorder. Skårderud (2007a) interviewed 10 women with anorexia nervosa between the ages of 16-35, revealing their use of “concrete metaphors” that relate the body with emotional experiences:

Sensorimotor experiences and bodily qualities and sensations, like hunger, size, weight and shape, are physical entities that may also represent non-physical phenomena. This is highly relevant in anorexia nervosa. In ‘concretised metaphors’ such bodily metaphors do not function mainly as representations capable of containing an experience, but as presentations which are experienced as concrete facts here-and-now and are difficult to negotiate with. (Skårderud, 2007a, p. 164).

The participants were asked to describe “mind-body relations in their own lives” to better understand “the body’s symbolic role in anorexia nervosa” (Skårderud, 2007a, p. 163). The
The author identifies 6 specific body metaphors and 3 compound body metaphors in their data. Skårderud (2007a) explains the distinction between specific and compound body metaphors: specific body metaphors “directly refer to one domain of physical experience relating to an emotional and cognitive experience” (p. 169) while “compound body metaphors are more ‘global’ than the specific ‘local’ ones” and can be made up of a combination of specific body metaphors (p. 171). Specific body metaphors include emptiness/fullness, purity, spatiality, heaviness/lightness, solidity, and removal while the compound metaphors are control, vulnerability/protection, and self-worth (Skårderud, 2007a). Skårderud (2007a) suggests that understanding these concrete metaphors “may help us to realise why anorexia [or other eating disorders] may be difficult to understand, and that the patient may be difficult to engage, because she or he is trapped in the concreteness of body symbolism” (p. 173).

One of the most in-depth of all the literature currently available on the topic of metaphors for eating disorders is a meta-synthesis of 34 studies published between 2002-2012 conducted by Goren-Watts (2011), discussing several metaphors for eating disorders. Six main categories were identified: “Perceived Precipitants of the Eating Disorder, Experience of the Eating Disorder, Reasons for Seeking Treatment/Starting Recovery, Experiences in Initial Stages of Recovery/Treatment, Experiences of Recovery, and Experiences of Being Recovered” (Goren-Watts, 2011, p. 50). Metaphors were not utilized when describing the first category, but metaphors did appear under the remaining five categories (Goren-Watts, 2011). Goren-Watts (2011) identified the following metaphors in their synthesis: EATING DISORDER (ED) AS PACIFIER/TRANSLATOR/CONTAINER/DICTATOR/COMPANION/SHIELD/SOLUTION were used while experiencing the eating disorder; ED AS ILLNESS/PRISON/DEMON/LIAR/ENEMY were utilised while in the very early stages of recovery from the eating disorder; ED AS TRAUMA/BADLANDS/IMBALANCE occurred while in recovery; ED AS CLOSED CHAPTER/BUILDING BLOCK/GIFT were used when recovered. Goren-Watts suggests that the language and metaphors women use may be useful in identifying where they are at in their individual eating disorder and recovery stages (2011).

While Goren-Watts’ (2011) study was remarkably in-depth in their identification of metaphors for eating disorders from different perspectives based on varying stages of recovery, the opportunity to also identify metaphors for that recovery was missed. There are a handful of
studies that do focus on the metaphors used for eating disorder recovery specifically. Lamoureux and Bottorff (2005) interviewed 9 women between the ages of 19 and 48 with an anorexia nervosa diagnosis who described themselves as being recovered from their eating disorder. The participants were asked to describe their recovery from anorexia and to describe what their lives were like now that they were recovered. Analysis of the interviews identified several metaphors for recovery, and the overarching theme of these metaphors was a reclamation of the self or “becoming the real me” (Lamoureux & Bottorff, 2005, p. 183). One of the participants described an increased sense of self that allowed her to begin recovering: “The other part of me was beginning to grow. The real sense of me and (a sense of) life in that part. So I think I was ready to begin to let go a little bit more of the anorexia” (Lamoureux & Bottorff, 2005, p. 181).

Mathieson and Hoskins (2007) interviewed 10 adolescent girls in a treatment program for disordered eating and identified metaphors for change and agency, including metaphors such as RECOVERY AS A JOURNEY and RECOVERY AS FINDING YOURSELF. Examples of journey metaphors in the adolescents’ language largely describe the “road to recovery”: “moving in the right direction”, “I’ve hit a few potholes”, “something went downhill from there”, and “your emotions can be all over the map” (Mathieson & Hoskins, 2007, pp. 267-268).

RECOVERY AS FINDING YOURSELF metaphors primarily centered around participants finding out who they “really were” once they were able to separate themselves from the “packaged identity” of the eating disorder (Mathieson & Hoskins, 2007, p. 269). One participant described her experience of finding herself while recovering from her eating disorder: “everything that you are gets kind of jumbled around and it gets really hazy because all you can kind of see is the eating disorder […] in a lot of ways you kind of lose touch with who you are. And you forget certain parts of you and certain characteristics that you have and certain likes and dislikes and so [recovery’s] kind of just a matter of sorting through that mess and figuring out who you really are again” (Mathieson & Hoskins, 2007, p. 269).

2.8 Summary

Conceptual metaphor is a well-documented occurrence within the realm of healthcare discourse (Gibbs, 2017; Gibbs, 2023; Holmes, 2011; Sontag, 1978). The existing body of literature about metaphors and mental health has also been well documented (Coll-Florit et al., 2021; Lyddon et al., 2001; McGuinty et al., 2014; McMullen, 1989). This is especially true of
metaphors for depression (Beck, 2020; Levitt et al., 2000; Magaña, 2019; McMullen & Conway, 2002) and addiction or substance use disorder (Johnson, 2019; Shinebourne & Smith, 2010).

Of the existing literature that focuses on metaphors for eating disorders (Goren-Watts, 2011; Lamoureux & Bottorff, 2005; Mathieson & Hoskin, 2005; Shemory, 2019; Skårderud, 2007a; Skårderud 2007b), the primary focus of many of these studies is solely on recovery. Research that looks at metaphors at any other stages of the eating disorder (Goren-Watts, 2011; Shemory, 2019) is severely limited. Additionally, there is a disproportionate focus solely on anorexia (Lamoureux & Bottorff, 2005; Skårderud, 2007a; Skårderud 2007b), with very few studies explicitly indicating other diagnoses as being included among participants with an anorexia diagnosis (Goren-Watts, 2011; Shemory, 2019). Most of the existing studies on eating disorder metaphors are conducted via verbal interviews (Shemory, 2019; Skårderud, 2007a; Skårderud 2007b).

There is a large pool of prior research into the effects of social media, especially photo-based social media, on mental health and body image (Bair et al., 2012; Bardone-Cone & Cass, 2007; Boepple & Thompson, 2021; Christensen et al., 2021; Fardouly et al., 2018; Ghaznavi & Taylor, 2015; Harper et al., 2008; Lonergan et al., 2020; Padín et al., 2021; Tiggemann & Miller, 2010). Three of these studies look specifically at “pro-ana” or “pro-anorexia” websites: forums or blogs that are targeted towards promoting eating disorders as a lifestyle or diet choice as opposed to a serious mental illness (Bardone-Cone & Cass, 2007; Boepple & Thompson, 2021; Harper et al., 2008). Only two studies look at Instagram specifically for their data (Christensen et al., 2021; Fardouly et al., 2018) None of these studies are concerned with identifying or analyzing metaphor use.

None of the literature discussed above addresses all three research areas (conceptual metaphors, eating disorders at multiple stages, and social media, specifically Instagram). This is what lead me to conduct the present study, the primary aim of which is to identify the conceptual metaphors used for eating disorders at various stages including recovery and relapse on Instagram. Additionally, this study aims to identify the conceptual metaphors for three external factors: food, body, and diet culture.
3 METHODOLOGY

The data for this analysis was collected from Instagram, an image-based social media platform. All data compiled and analyzed for this project was taken only from public accounts, meaning that anyone with or without an Instagram account can access them at any time. Public Instagram accounts are highly curated: posts are intended to be seen by the public, as opposed to private accounts which are restricted and inaccessible to anyone who the account user does not approve. Data for this project was searched for and compiled while logged in to a separate account created specifically for this purpose.

There are several reasons why I chose to use Instagram as the source for data for this study. The first is that it is primarily photo-based: while other social media platforms are primarily text-based, “Instagram provides users with a unique ‘image first, text second’ experience” (Hwang & Cho, 2018, p. 1311). This format allows for the analysis of not only the captions but also any text that appears in the associated photo which, because the photo appears before the caption, is designed to capture other users’ attention and convince them to read the caption then continue on to view the rest of the account’s content. Secondly, the highly intentional and curated nature of the content that is posted to public Instagram accounts as well as the option for users to make their account private at any time eliminates any doubt that the content posted to these accounts is clearly intended to be seen by the public, which removes any question about ethical implications.

The data was found by making use of Instagram’s search feature and searching for hashtags to find individual posts as well as searching keywords to find entire accounts that focus on eating disorder awareness and recovery. Hashtags or keywords (identical except for the hashtag before the search term) used in my searches included #anorexia, #bingeeating, #bingeeatingdisorder, #bulimia, #dietculture, #disorderedeating, #eatingdisorder, #eatingdisorderawareness, #eatingdisorderrecovery, #edawareness, #ednos, #edrecovery, and #osfed. I made sure to include search terms for multiple eating disorders to try and avoid an oversaturation of posts focusing on anorexia. I chose to exclude any terms that included explicit uses of metaphor (such as #edwarrior or #edfighter) while searching for data. Posts were clicked on/chosen at random, the caption or photo text briefly skimmed for relevance, and relevant posts were compiled using Instagram’s save feature to be further analyzed. This save feature functions
like a bookmark saved posts to a private folder/collection so that posts are easy to find and return to as needed. Relevance was determined based on easy identification of at least one conceptual metaphor for eating disorders, recovery, relapse, body, food, and/or diet culture.

Conceptual metaphors were identified using a method that can be compared to Phase 1 of Coll-Florit and Climent’s (2019) “Annotation Method” for the identification of conceptual metaphors. The first phase is the selection phase, in which metaphorical expressions are identified using various clues within the text. Coll-Florit and Climent (2019) describe the clue used to identify conceptual metaphors:

An indirect or non-literal use is made of a word or a group of words that, in the context, seems to express some kind of comparison or resemblance between concepts in such a way as to make the discourse more expressive or understandable. (Coll-Florit & Climent, 2019, p. 61)

Posts that had at least one instance of a conceptual metaphor with a target domain of food, diet culture, body, eating disorder, recovery, or relapse in either the caption or the photo itself were saved for further analysis, and posts that did not were rejected. In total, 79 Instagram posts from 24 different public accounts were selected for later analysis. The final number of posts was determined based on reaching a point of data saturation – that is, subsequent searches were not turning up new examples of apparent conceptual metaphors for these topics.

Once the posts were compiled, the metadata for each post was recorded in an Excel spreadsheet. Username, date posted, URL, post caption, hashtags, photo text, account type and subtype were all documented. All the posts compiled for this project were uploaded between January 2021 and September 2023. Account type was classified as either a business/organization or as one individual person. Account subtype for business/organization accounts was either an eating disorder treatment center or a support network/community and subtype for individual accounts was either professional (therapist, dietician, recovery coach, etc.) or personal (has an eating disorder, in recovery, or recovered). Of the 79 posts that were compiled, 28 of them were posted to business/organization accounts (9 support network, 19 ED treatment center) and 51
were posted to individual accounts (18 personal, 33 professional). This information is displayed visually in Table 1 below.

**Table 1**

*Number of Compiled Instagram Posts by Account Type and Subtype*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Account type</th>
<th>Business</th>
<th>Individual</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Account subtype</td>
<td>Support network</td>
<td>ED treatment center</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of posts</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The 79 total posts came from 24 unique Instagram accounts. Of these, only 5 were business accounts (2 support network, 3 ED treatment center) while 19 were individual accounts (8 personal, 11 professional). See Table 2 for a visual representation of this information.

**Table 2**

*Number of Instagram Accounts by Account Type and Subtype*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Account type</th>
<th>Business</th>
<th>Individual</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Account subtype</td>
<td>Support network</td>
<td>ED treatment center</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of accounts</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Several account demographics were recorded and are shown in Tables 3 and 4 below. Username and number of followers was recorded for all accounts. Location information was included when it was available for both business and individual account types. Location was determined whenever possible from the account’s bio, the geo-tagged location on specific posts, or through the links in the account’s bio.
Certain demographic information was only applicable to individual accounts and not business accounts: gender and profession. Gender was identified based on pronouns listed in the account’s bio, which are specified by the account user. This was applicable to both personal and professional individual account types. If this information was unavailable (such as if the account owner had not added their pronouns to their bio, then a determination on gender was assumed by the researcher based on the user’s given name if possible. Instances where a determination was not possible (no pronouns listed in bio, ambiguous/gender neutral name, etc.), then gender was omitted. Profession was determined based on information listed within each professional individual account’s bio. Accounts that were originally tagged as personal accounts do not include profession information, even though several of these users have since gone into eating disorder or mental health related professions such as therapy or dietetics.

Table 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Username</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Profession</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Followers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>@authenticaly_lauren</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1,367</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>@bingebreakers_bulimia</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>ED recovery coach</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>12.5K</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>@bodybybreakfast</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Registered dietician</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>50.6K</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>@dranitajohnston</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Psychologist</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>5,566</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>@dylanmurphy.rd</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Registered dietician</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>25.1K</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Username</td>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Profession</td>
<td>Location</td>
<td>Followers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------</td>
<td>--------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------</td>
<td>----------</td>
<td>-----------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>@fighting.myself.to.stay.alive</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>UK</td>
<td>1,418</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>@flourishwithvicki</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>11.5K</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>@im_powering</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>97.2K</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>@intuitively.eaten</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Intuitive eating and body image coach</td>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>34.1K</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>@jennifer_rollin</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Therapist</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>122K</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>@lovelucyclaire</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>South</td>
<td>23.5K</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>@megandenosrd</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Registered dietician</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>@millyisliving</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>UK</td>
<td>15.8K</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>@recoveryrebecca</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>16.4K</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>@summerinnnanen</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Body image coach</td>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>16.7K</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>@tear.salted</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>@thewellful</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Registered dietician</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>63.9K</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>@whatmiadidnext</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>ED recovery coach</td>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>21.3K</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>@wholistic_health_and_wellness</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Nutritionist</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>15.3K</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Analysis of the data first involved thoroughly examining the content of each saved post (caption and photo text) and identifying the conceptual metaphors present in each. Several posts contained more than one example of metaphor. These metaphors were then recorded in the Excel spreadsheet containing the metadata. Wherever possible, similar metaphors were grouped together under a larger metaphor. Once each post had been analyzed and the conceptual metaphors had been identified, the metaphors were grouped into six main topics: metaphors for food, metaphors for diet culture, metaphors for body, metaphors for eating disorders, metaphors for recovery, and metaphors for relapse.

From the original 79 compiled posts, 46 of them were used for further in-depth analysis and discussion. See Table 5 for a breakdown of the number of posts by account type and subtype for the posts that were used in the final analysis.
Table 5

*Number of Instagram Posts Used in Final Analysis by Account Type and Subtype*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Account type</th>
<th>Business</th>
<th>Individual</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Account subtype</td>
<td>Support network</td>
<td>ED treatment center</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of posts</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Many of these posts contained multiple instances of metaphor, and metaphors from more than one of the main themes. The next chapter provides specific examples from post captions and photos and a discussion of these metaphors. Each post that is discussed in the chapter below is given a unique identifier. These identifiers are designed to make it as easy as possible to locate the full citation for each post within the appendix of examples, as well as to make it clear when the same example is discussed more than once (i.e. cases where a post contains examples of more than one metaphor). These unique identifiers were created using the following format:

- first letter of each discernable word in the username – this includes alphabetisms (i.e. “RD” meaning “registered dietician”), abbreviations (“Tx” meaning “treatment”), and instances of numbers representing a word (i.e. “4” meaning “for”).
- date of the post in numerical ‘MMDDYY’ format, preceded by an underscore.

Note that punctuation and special characters such as underscores found in some usernames were omitted for clarity. Numbers within a username that did not represent a distinct word were also omitted for clarity.
4 DATA ANALYSIS & DISCUSSION

Analysis of the data gathered for this paper uncovered numerous conceptual metaphors (28 metaphors across the 6 target domains, taken from 46 Instagram posts from the originally compiled 79). I have organized the data into categories based on the target domain: food, diet culture, body, eating disorders, recovery, and relapse. It is important to note that many of the posts contain more than one metaphor and therefore they will be discussed more than once throughout this chapter.

Table 6

Frequency of Target Domain by Account Type and Subtype

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Target domain</th>
<th>Account type</th>
<th>Business</th>
<th>Individual</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Support network</td>
<td>ED treatment center</td>
<td>Personal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diet culture</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eating disorders</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recovery</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relapse</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Additionally, it becomes obvious throughout this analysis that certain metaphors tend to appear together. This is because they are part of a larger metaphor system (Kövecses, 2002). A more detailed discussion of the various metaphor systems found in my data will be presented in section 4.7. A total of 84 examples/instances of metaphor were identified among the data across all 6 target domains and their respective concept domains. Examples are italicized and the words and phrases that help to identify the metaphor are bolded. Each example is followed by the unique identifier for the Instagram post it is associated with. In cases where the photo was included in the analysis, the image is provided along with the just text from that image, posted beneath the photo. In cases where one post contained two instances of the same metaphor in both
the photo and the associated caption, the photo was included and was followed by the text from
the image and the text from the caption. These were counted as two separate examples/instances
of metaphor.

4.1 Metaphors for food

In total, there were 8 instances of food metaphors identified in the data, and each usage
came from an individual account (6 from professional accounts, 2 from personal accounts).
Metaphors for food are strongly associated with, but are not limited to, eating disorder discourse.
Metaphors that appear include FOOD AS (TOOL FOR) SUPPORT, FOOD AS (TOOL FOR)
CONNECTION, and FOOD AS A PERSON. Diet culture is so pervasive in our society that
some of the metaphors for food have become a part of our collective vocabulary. FOOD AS A
REWARD is one example of how diet culture has influenced and shifted the way we think about
food. FOOD AS MORALITY is the most common metaphor for food in my data, accounting for
4 out of the 8 instances of food metaphors. This metaphor is directly associated with diet culture
and its black-and-white mentality of food being either “good” or “bad”.

4.1.1 FOOD AS (TOOL FOR) SUPPORT

The first example of a metaphor for food that will be discussed is FOOD AS (TOOL FOR)
SUPPORT. The most common expression of this metaphor in everyday language is the
term “comfort food” to refer to satisfying, often high calorie and high carb foods such as ice
cream, macaroni and cheese, or French fries. Food is more than something required to sustain
life, it functions as a tool for emotional support.

“Food is many things and one of those is comfort. We hear the term ‘comfort food’
being demonised all the time, as if it’s something to stop or fix.

I’m a recovered intuitive eater and tonight I made myself this dinner purely because it is
comforting/easy and endo[metriosis] was kicking my butt. It reminds me of my
childhood, is delicious and only took 20 minutes to get on my plate.

Food being a comfort to you is totally normal. Think of how we comfort others when
they go through loss, illness or heartbreak. We bring them food, cry into pints of ice
cream with them, make sure they are fed and loved.

You deserve that same care and comfort.” ID: wmdn_031523
This post (wmdn_031523) describes food as something that provides emotional comfort and support in difficult situations and provides examples of how food is used as a tool to help others. The photo posted along with the caption is of a plate with chicken strips, French fries, and coleslaw that the author of the post describes as a childhood favourite, further emphasizing the comforting aspect of the meal.

4.1.2 FOOD AS (TOOL FOR) CONNECTION

“Comfort food” is not only comforting because it tastes good, but also because it reminds us of shared experiences with loved ones. Preparing, cooking, and eating food is closely tied with social interaction and connection. (wmdn_031523) in the section above demonstrates that food is a way to connect with and support other people. The following example illustrates how food is not only a tool for support, but it is also a tool for connection.

“The eating experience is supposed to be pleasurable and food not only helps us connect to our culture, but it plays a large role in many social events.” ID: whaw_082122

Food plays a central role in socializing and connecting with the people in our lives. Friends meet each other for a chat over coffee, couples go to the movies and share popcorn and snacks while they enjoy the show, groups of friends gather with pizza and chicken wings to cheer on their favourite sports teams on TV. Religious holidays like Christmas or Easter are often a time to gather with loved ones and eat a large meal. Some holidays even have specific foods that are associated with them. Thanksgiving meals often include turkey and pumpkin pie, Valentine’s Day gifts include chocolate, and Halloween requires that we hand out all sorts of colourful candy. All of this demonstrates how integral food is not just to sustain life, but to experience it.

4.1.3 FOOD AS A PERSON

In some ways, food is conceptualized and described as a person: a companion that we share a social and emotional relationship with. The phrase “relationship with food” is the way the FOOD AS A PERSON metaphor is expressed in the data I collected.

“When most of us decide that we are done with diet culture and we want to have healthier relationships with food and our bodies, we are hoping to quickly get to a place of food freedom where we feel at peace with our bodies.” ID: whaw_040222

29
This example (whaw_040222) clearly personifies food and shows that we have a relationship with it. Like the romantic or platonic relationships in our lives, some relationships are good for us and provide support and encouragement, but others are harmful and wear us down or hurt us. Our relationship with food is no different, it can either be unhealthy and harmful or it can be healthy and nourishing.

4.1.4 FOOD AS MORALITY

The labelling of foods as “good” or “bad” attaches moral value to the foods we eat and by extension to ourselves based on which foods we choose to eat. Advertisements and product packaging perpetuate this FOOD AS MORALITY metaphor by labelling low calorie, low carb, low fat, or low sugar foods as “guilt-free” while calling high calorie, high carb, high fat, or high sugar options as “junk.” The fitness industry constantly pushes the idea of a “cheat day” or a “cheat meal” where people are allowed to “cheat” on their diet and eat “bad” foods without feeling “guilty” about it, so long as they “eat clean” for the rest of the day or the rest of the week. We have already seen one use of this metaphor in a previous example: wmdn_031522 in the FOOD AS COMFORT section describes comfort foods as “being demonised all the time.”

The example below perfectly encapsulates the FOOD AS MORALITY metaphor, with uses of the metaphor found in the photo as well as throughout the caption.

“‘Guilt’ is not an ingredient” ID: tw_032121
“One thing that applies to everything you eat: Every single thing you eat is 100% guilt-free! Because guilt is not an ingredient.

All foods are guilt-free and none are ‘bad’ or ‘good’. Food has different nutritional content, yes. We eat different foods for different reasons, yes. But when we label a food as ‘bad’ or ourselves as ‘bad’ for eating that food we all lose.” ID: tw_032121

The photo associated with this Instagram post shows a pan of brownies decorated with red icing that reads “‘Guilt’ is not an ingredient”. The choice to scrawl these words on top of a chocolatey dessert is intentional and powerful because dessert is one of society’s favourite foods to label as “bad” or even “sinful”.

The next example contains more of the negative adjectives used to describe sweet and sugary foods, foods that we have become convinced are somehow bad.


Let’s stop talking about food like it’s a crime.

It’s cake. Not murder.” ID: wmdn_020721

“Food has no moral value.” ID: wmdn_020721

This example is one of many in my data that was posted on a solid light (in this case pink) background with plain black text, allowing the words to stand out. This example shows that certain foods are demonized or villainized, viewed as immoral or wrong.
A snippet of the caption from the next example, whaw_082122, was previously discussed in section 4.1.2 because it highlights food as an important part of many social events. However, the overall theme of the post is an excellent example of the FOOD AS MORALITY metaphor. Specifically, whaw_082122 focuses on the “guilt” aspect of this metaphor.

“What diet culture says is ‘guilt free’

[images of various “healthy” foods]

What’s also guilt free

[images of various “unhealthy” foods]” ID: whaw_082122

“We’re not born feeling guilty, especially when it comes to food.

Food guilt is taught and often stems from the black and white mentality that food is either good or bad.

But just because guilt around food seems to have become socially acceptable, doesn’t mean it’s healthy or normal.

[..]

It’s great if you genuinely enjoy apples and peanut butter or zucchini noodles, but you shouldn’t feel guilty for eating the many foods that diet culture demonizes.
I've had clients afraid to eat mango because of the sugar content and others who feel so guilty after eating their favorite foods that they decide ‘the guilt just isn't worth it.’

Only once we remove guilt from the eating experience can we fully heal our relationship with food!” ID: whaw_082122

The image posted along with the above caption focuses on how some foods are labelled as “bad” and therefore we should feel “guilty” for eating them. The image displays two sets of foods; the first set is labelled as “What diet culture says is ‘guilt free’” and shows images of rice cakes, apple slices, cauliflower chips, and zucchini noodles. The other set is labelled as “What’s also guilt free” and includes images of foods such as chocolate, a hamburger, ice cream, potato chips, and pasta.

The FOOD AS MORALITY metaphor is further enforced in eating disorder discourse with use of the word “purge.” Purging in this sense is “the act of getting rid of food from your body, for example in order to stop yourself gaining weight, either by making yourself vomit or by using laxatives”, but it is also defined as “the act of getting rid of something unwanted, harmful, or evil” (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.). Merriam-Webster (n.d.) defines purging as “to clear of guilt” and “to free of moral or ceremonial defilement”, listing synonyms such as purify, cleanse, and sanctify. The association of purging with purification, cleansing, and morality perpetuates the belief that certain foods are inherently “bad” and must be “purged” from the body. Starving or a lack of food is associated with the notion of purity and morality. This is shown in the following example:

“I just want to starve so I can purge myself of any impurities.” ID: ts_060522

The FOOD AS MORALITY metaphor appears in the literature. Spoel et al. (2012) identified FOOD AS FUEL and FOOD AS JUNK as prevalent metaphors in their data (pp. 2-6). These metaphors perpetuate the notion of “good” foods and “bad” foods. If food is considered fuel, then the body is considered a machine that requires fuel in the tank to run. However, if you put junk into the tank, the machine will not run as smoothly or efficiently, or it may even stall. In this way, fuel is “good” while junk is “bad.”
4.1.5 FOOD AS A REWARD

The FOOD AS MORALITY metaphor also gives way to other metaphors. “Bad” food is viewed as a reward for eating “good” food or doing other “good” behaviours such as restricting or limiting calorie intake, burning calories by (over-) exercising, fasting for long periods of time, etc. This is the case with individuals with and without eating disorders alike due to the ever-present diet culture surrounding us and leads to the FOOD AS REWARD metaphor. The following example shows an attempt to dismantle this metaphor.

“I deserve to eat if
I deserve to eat after
I deserve to eat but.” ID: dmrd_041822

“I deserve to eat. Period. End of sentence.” ID: dmrd_041822

Both the image and the caption repeat the word “deserve” which highlights the notion that in a diet and weight loss focused culture, food is considered a “treat” or a “reward,” something that must be “earned.” In the photo, crossing out the words “if”, “after”, and “but” further emphasizes that eating should never come with terms and conditions.

4.2 Metaphors for diet culture

Having discussed examples of metaphors for food that appeared in my data, I will now provide a handful of examples of metaphors for diet culture. Metaphors for diet culture in my data fit into one of two categories: DIET CULTURE AS AN ANIMAL or DIET CULTURE AS
A PERSON. In both cases, diet culture is conceptualized as a living, breathing, thinking creature. Only 4 examples of diet culture metaphors appeared in my data (3 from individual account, 1 from a business account), but are nonetheless worth mentioning.

4.2.1 DIET CULTURE AS AN ANIMAL

Examples of DIET CULTURE AS AN ANIMAL are not as common as the personification metaphor that will be discussed next – indeed only one example of this metaphor appeared in the collected data – but this metaphor is still worth briefly examining. By highlighting animalistic features, diet culture is conceptualized as something wild, unpredictable, and dangerous.

“[…] know that this is just another way for diet and wellness culture to hook their claws into you […]” ID: jr_041823

The imagery of diet culture “hooking its claws into you” is frightening, but effective at demonstrating the harm it causes.

4.2.2 DIET CULTURE AS A PERSON

There were 3 instances of the DIET CULTURE AS A PERSON metaphor in the data. In the realm of eating disorder awareness and recovery discourse, diet culture is personified in ways that highlight that it is harmful.

“Diet culture is alive and well on college campuses. The constant conversation about the “freshman 15” is not helpful to those predisposed to eating disorders.” ID: edtla_060721
As demonstrated above, edtla_060721 refers to diet culture as a living person that is “alive and well on college campuses,” almost as if it is a member of the student body itself. This highlights that diet culture and disordered eating is a very real issue on college and university campuses. The text from this example is part of the photo, not just the caption. It is posted in a white text box on a light purple background with darker purple dotted accents.

One of the previous examples from the FOOD AS MORALITY section (whaw_082122) also contains a DIET CULTURE AS A PERSON metaphor. Recall that the very first line of text in the image reads “What diet culture says is ‘guilt free’,” which portrays diet culture as someone capable of talking and having something to say about what is and is not “guilt free.”

The next example demonstrates diet culture not only as a person, but as someone we are in a close personal relationship with and who plays a significant role in our every day lives.

“When most of us decide that we are done with diet culture and we want to have healthier relationships with food and our bodies, we are hoping to quickly get to a place of food freedom where we feel at peace with our bodies.” ID: whaw_040222

Note that this example (whaw_040222) was also discussed previously in section 4.1.3 as it includes the FOOD AS A PERSON metaphor. This example also contains the BODY AS A PERSON metaphor that will be discussed in the next section.

4.3 Metaphors for body

The following section details a small handful of metaphors for the body. In total, there were 4 instances of metaphors for body found in the data (3 from individual accounts, 1 from a business account). Dieting and other disordered eating behaviours are directly attempting to change the body by changing its weight and/or aesthetic appearance. Recovering and working to overcome the eating disorder is not only healing the mind but healing the body as well. Metaphors for body that I identified in my data include BODY AS HOME and two contrasting forms of the BODY AS A PERSON metaphor: BODY AS AN ENEMY and BODY AS AN ALLY.
4.3.1 BODY AS A HOME

The BODY AS A HOME metaphor demonstrates the divide between mind and body in Western thought. The body is perceived as a vessel, a container for our mind and who we are. The BODY AS A HOME metaphor is therefore an example of a container metaphor.

“But you are making an investment – putting a deposit on a house you will eventually call all your own. And when the house is yours, you will live in it forever.” ID: wmdn_080822

In expressions of the BODY AS A HOME metaphor, the body is not the physical part of the self, rather a physical container for the self. The self lives within the body, just as people live in houses. Furthermore, the separation between self and body is more evident in this example in that the body does not inherently belong to the self. Rather, it must be bought and can “eventually” be called “all your own”.

4.3.2 BODY AS AN ENEMY

The examples in this section and the next section are examples of the BODY AS A PERSON. Rather than the body being part of the self or a container for the self, it is conceptualized as a separate entity entirely. In this section, the body is personified as an enemy, something that must be outsmarted and overpowered.

“After years of dieting and being at war with our bodies, it can take several months, years, or even longer until we reach a place of body acceptance and are able to fully eat intuitively.” ID: whaw_040222

This example (what_040222, which was previously discussed in sections 4.1.4 and 4.2.2 above) depicts the body as the enemy and likens dieting to a war. The following example again demonstrates the separation between body and self.
“If you are under-eating/over-exercising, your body will fight back.” ID: si_042423

When you withhold nourishment from your body, it will “fight back” with things like hunger pangs and food cravings to try to get you to eat. Our bodies even go so far as to cause episodes of binge eating:

When we restrict our food intake, we indicate to our bodies that we are at risk of going into starvation mode. The physical and psychological effects of restriction can confuse our hunger cues, intensify our thoughts about food, increase feelings of depression and anxiety, and therefore make us more likely to binge. (Grant, 2020)

This notion of the body “fighting back” is not inherently a negative thing. As shown in the next section, this retaliation is actually in your favour. This is described in the next section.

4.3.3 BODY AS AN ALLY

The BODY AS AN ENEMY metaphor above places emphasis on the adversarial relationship between the self and the body. On the other hand, the BODY AS AN ALLY places emphasis on the body as supportive and helpful. Each of these metaphors focuses on two opposing aspects of the broader BODY AS A PERSON metaphor. While the body is considered the enemy when the battle is to lose weight with dieting and disordered eating, the body is an ally when the battle is recovery and healing.
“No matter the day, time, season, or struggle, your body is always working in your favor. Take a deep breath and remember that your body is on your side.” ID: bhh_012323

The human body is remarkable in its ability to heal itself: fractures heal, blood clots, and wounds close. The body has the capacity to heal and recover from the damage that disordered eating causes, both physical and mental, and in this way, it is truly “on your side” in eating disorder recovery.

4.4 Metaphors for eating disorders

The most prevalent metaphors identified in my data were those for eating disorders, with 37 instances recorded (22 from individual accounts, 15 from business accounts). Among the metaphor for eating disorders, the most common were uses of the EATING DISORDER (ED) AS A PERSON metaphor which accounted for 33 of these instances. The ED AS A PERSON metaphor can be further subdivided into more specific metaphors that highlight and hide different aspects of the eating disorder. These include ED AS AN ENEMY, ED AS A LIAR, ED AS A THIEF, ED AS A COMPANION, and ED AS SELF. The remaining 4 instances were examples of the ED AS A PLACE metaphor.

4.4.1 ED AS A PERSON

Whether used by someone during the illness, in recovery, recovered, or from an outside perspective such as a therapist or dietician, people frequently use the ED AS A PERSON metaphor throughout the data I collected. In examples of this metaphor, the eating disorder is described as having wants, preferences, and emotions.
“Eating disorders ❤️ routine, they hate change.” ID: rr4y_072822

“If your eating disorder is excited about fasting for Yom Kippur it’s a sign it could be detrimental for you to fast.” ID: edtla_091421

Both examples above were posted on light-coloured backgrounds with simple, minimalistic designs that emphasize the text.

Instances of this metaphor also include examples where the eating disorder is in situations or performing actions that are associated with humans. The following examples demonstrate this.
“You cannot live a full, meaningful life with your eating disorder at the steering wheel.”
ID: edtl080921

“I made it. I graduated. And anorexia was not invited to this celebration.” ID: mil_070122

“I’m looking for 5 women ready to break up with bulimia for good in the next 90 days”
ID: bbb_042121
This example, like so many others in my data set, consists of a pink background with the emphasis placed on the words. This image is slightly different from other examples because rather than being a pale or pastel colour, the author chose to use a bold and bright shade of pink.

Another way that eating disorders are conceptualized as people is by having a voice and speaking. This is one of the more abundant examples of the ED AS A PERSON metaphor in my data.

“We know an eating disorder’s voice is loud and hard to ignore [...]” ID: bt_072922

“No matter what your eating disorder is saying to you...

You are worthy today, right now. [...]” ID: jr_081222

The two examples above describe the eating disorder as a person because it has a voice of its own and has something to say. As the example below will demonstrate, an eating disorder is almost exclusively negative, degrading, and harmful in the way it speaks to the individual it affects.
If you find yourself being heavily critical, judgemental and perfectionistic about your recovery, that's probably your eating disorder talking.

“If you find yourself being heavily critical, judgemental, and perfectionistic about your recovery, that’s probably your eating disorder talking.” ID: wmdn_011721

“An eating disorder is clever, manipulative and its number one aim is its own survival. It will tell you that you’re not doing well enough, fast enough, perfectly enough so you burn out or give up.

There is no way the healthy part of you would shame or judge you for trying to get better, no matter what that looks like.

Tough love and constructive criticism - sure, sometimes. Abuse and nastiness - never.

If you wouldn’t set these expectations for someone else going through recovery, they are your eating disorder’s attempt to sabotage you.

If you wouldn’t speak to someone else going through recovery this way, your eating disorder is the one doing the talking.” ID: wmdn_011721

Many people who have experienced an eating disorder liken its presence to an internal voice, usually self-described as either the “ED voice” or “ED thoughts.” This is another form of the ED AS A PERSON metaphor. Specifically, it is a case of THE PART FOR THE WHOLE metonymy (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Lakoff & Johnson (1980) describe metonymy as having “a referential function, that is, it allows us to use one entity to stand for another. […] in the case of
the metonymy THE PART FOR THE WHOLE there are many parts that can stand for the whole. Which part we pick out determines which aspect of the whole we are focusing on” (p. 36). Using the “voice” or “thoughts” to stand in for the eating disorder brings attention to the harmful narratives and negative thought patterns that the eating disorder causes.

“I’m so proud of anyone working to disobey the eating disorder voice! It will pay off!”
ID: jr_081622

Eating dinner when an eating disorder voice is yelling at you is brave.
Skipping a workout when the voice in your head is telling you not to, is true strength.
Reaching out to seek help when your mind tells you that 'you're not sick enough' is courageous.
Here's to you and to the battles you fight daily that no one sees.

JENNIFER ROLLIN, MSW, LCSW-C

“Eating dinner when an eating disorder voice is yelling at you is brave.

Skipping a workout when the voice in your head is telling you not to, is true strength.”
ID: jr_112521

One individual’s post described the eating disorder voice as being an angel or devil on their shoulder, speaking into their ear and telling them what to do. The eating disorder is acting as a conscience in this way.

“Thinking about my ED voice conjures up the image of an angel and devil sitting on my shoulders, and in the early days of my recovery I could never seem to figure out which one the ED voice was.

This is because that ED voice can be so good at convincing you that your behaviors are good for you, that you’re just being healthy and that others don’t understand.” ID: rr4y_080921
One individual used the analogy of a bad tenant represented by the eating disorder voice:

“The worst tenant in an apartment building is usually the loudest, but the landlord has the power to evict them.

Your mind is the apartment building. The nasty voice is the tenant. And you are the landlord.

Who is getting an eviction notice?” ID: wmdn_06222

This example is complex because it has multiple layers of metaphor (MIND AS APARTMENT, SELF AS LANDLORD, ED AS TENANT). Furthermore, the mind is separate from the self in the wmdn_062221 example. Lakoff & Johnson (1999) explain the difference as the mind having to do with thinking, thoughts, and cognition while the self has to do with “the structure of our inner lives” and “who we really are” (p. 267). In wmdn_062221 above, the mind is a container for both the self and the eating disorder, each of which represent two conflicting values. Therefore, this is also an example of the SPLIT SELF or Multiple Selves metaphor.

Each of the thirteen examples above demonstrate the conceptualization of an eating disorder as a person in broad terms. However, there are several more specific metaphors that emphasize specific aspects of the personified eating disorder using highlighting and hiding. This is evident in the ED AS AN ENEMY, ED AS A LIAR, ED AS A COMPANION, and ED AS SELF metaphors discussed in more detail below.
4.4.2 ED AS AN ENEMY

The most numerous subtype of the ED AS A PERSON metaphor is ED AS AN ENEMY metaphor, which appeared 7 times in my data. It is important to recognize that depicting the eating disorder as an enemy allows us to conceptualize ED recovery as a fight against this enemy. This metaphor will be discussed in a separate section below.

"Your eating disorder is not on your side. " ID: edtla_080921

"It’s tempting to look at the eating disorder with rose colored glasses and forget about what life is actually like when you’re sick so here’s your reminder that your eating disorder does not have your best interest at heart." ID: edtla_080921

The image that accompanies the caption above reads “Your eating disorder is not on your side.” The word “not” is underlined, which strongly emphasizes the point the post’s author is making: eating disorders do not want what is best for you and are not helping you, even if that is what they try to convince you of.

“[...] they are your eating disorder’s attempts to sabotage you.” ID: wmdn_011721

The use of the word “sabotage” in the example wmdn_011721 shows that the eating disorder is actively and intentionally working against the individual and their best interests.
“Having an eating disorder is like living with a bully in your brain. It is exhausting.”
ID: llc_032322

“I have so much adoration for everyone fighting against an eating disorder every day. The focus often seems to be on the physical but it is the mental and emotional part that can be the most debilitating. I know sometimes it doesn’t feel like it but you can overcome the bullying voices.” ID: llc_032322

Use of the word “bully” to describe the eating disorder in this example implies both emotional and physical abuse. This example is unique from the others in this section in that it describes the eating disorder as “living with” the individual, like a roommate. As with some of the other metaphors examined thus far, there is also a container metaphor in this example. The brain is a container for the “bully” or eating disorder. The caption posted along with the photo further highlights not only the “bullying” aspect of the ED AS AN ENEMY metaphor, it also further emphasizes the fact that eating disorders are devastating to a person’s physical and mental health, not one or the other.

One final example depicts an even more sinister aspect of the ED AS AN ENEMY metaphor.
“Your ED doesn’t want you skinny it wants you dead.” ID: mil_082222

“Your ED never wanted you skinny, it wanted you dead.” ID: mil_082222

Both the caption and the photo posted along with it demonstrate that the eating disorder is so much more harmful to the individual than just being a bully or sabotaging them: the eating disorder is in fact actively trying to kill them. The image for this example is one of very few in the data set that includes a photograph and not just a pattern or solid colour background with the text as the focal point.

4.4.3 ED AS A LIAR

The next most frequent example of the ED AS A PERSON metaphor (6 instances) results from the eating disorder using the voice we have already discussed to intentionally mislead and deceive the person who has the eating disorder. This can be identified as the ED AS A LIAR metaphor.
"Your eating disorder is a liar. You cannot believe or listen to anything it says." ID: bt_072922

By underlining and bolding the word “not” in the phrase “thoughts not facts”, the photo posted along with the caption for bt_072922 emphasizes that the things the eating disorder tells us may sound awfully convincing, but that does not mean they are the truth.

"The eating disorder often promises that you’ll be so much happier if you give into it but your eating disorder is lying to you." ID: edtla_080921

"Eating disorders give us a false sense of control when, in reality, they are the ones controlling us with the lies the tell us day in and day out." ID: bt_082122

"Recovery can teach you so much about your eating disorder.

Probably one of the biggest things it’s made clear are all the lies my eating disorder convinced me of. All of the lies that I thought were facts. That I never stopped to question.

No matter how powerful or certain those eating disorder thoughts seem, remember that your eating disorder is wrong. It is always lying." ID: rr4y_073121
“Eating disorders make A LOT of false promises.
Recovery actually delivers. 🌈” ID: jr_102221

As is evident from the examples above, the ED AS A LIAR metaphor is abundant, especially in discourse that is looking back at one’s time dealing with an eating disorder from a healthier vantage point of being recovered.

4.4.4 ED AS A THIEF

The ED AS A THIEF metaphor describes the eating disorder as taking away whatever it can from the individual such as happiness, security, relationships, time, control, etc.
“That’s because EDs make your world small, colorless and rob your capacity for joy and connection.” ID: bt_082222

The final sentence of text in the photo for bt_082222 above demonstrates that the eating disorder is stealing something from the individual. Even the background image behind the text box contains a washed out, low saturation image of an already monochromatic room, emphasizing the “colorless” aspect of life with an ED. The caption that was posted along with the image also contains an example of this metaphor.

“It isn’t uncommon for people with an eating disorder to spend so much time thinking about their next meal or working out that they do not get to be present and enjoy what they are doing now. It may not seem like it at the time, but constantly having these thoughts takes away from so many areas of your life.” ID: bt_082222

While it is not specifically the eating disorder itself that is doing the stealing in the caption for bt_082222, I have chosen to include it withing the ED AS A THIEF metaphor because “having these thoughts” is a symptom of the eating disorder and, as discussed above, this is an example of THE PART FOR THE WHOLE metonymy.

“No one chooses to have an eating disorder.
Eating disorders suck the joy out of life.

“Eating disorders suck the joy out of life.” ID: jr_081522
This example could be identified as ED AS A VAMPIRE, but since vampires also take something from their victims similar to how a thief or robber does, I have chosen to include it within the ED AS A THIEF metaphor.

4.4.5 ED AS A COMPANION

Eating disorders are not likely to be described as having positive traits by anyone other than people in the middle of their eating disorders or in the very early stages of trying to recover, but those that do conceptualize their eating disorder in this way often use the ED AS A COMPANION metaphor. This metaphor was also identified by Goren-Watts (2011) as being used by individuals during their eating disorders. This metaphor is much more uncommon in my data than the metaphors using negative traits discussed above, only appearing twice in the data. This is perhaps because people who are in the midst of their eating disorder are less likely to be posting openly about it on social media than those who are working towards recovery or who have already recovered. Additionally, those who are actively dealing with an eating disorder are unlikely to admit to having an ED and in fact may not even realize or believe that they do. In this way, eating disorder recovery is somewhat like 12-step alcohol addiction programs: the first step is admitting that you have a problem (Alcoholics Anonymous, n.d.). Uses of this metaphor tend to be subtle and are usually referring to the eating disorder as something that is or was a companion in the past.

“Nostalgia or ‘missing’ your eating disorder is, I think, quite common as you progress into recovery.

When we reflect on memories of the time we were ill, we often look through the eating disorder's rose tinted glasses.

But do you REALLY miss being unwell?

[…]

Don't fall for it.

You don't miss your eating disorder, your eating disorder misses you.” ID: mil_072822

The example above describes a feeling of longing for the companionship that the eating disorder provided. While “nostalgia” is associated with places or times gone past (and the ED AS A
PLACE metaphor will be discussed later), “missing” someone or something is often associated with people. To miss someone is “to feel or regret the absence or loss of” them, such as a close friend (Collins Dictionary, n.d.). In this sense, the eating disorder is not only a person, but a person close to the individual who shared some sort of relationship.

“This is because that ED voice can be so good at convincing you that your behaviors are good for you, that you’re just being healthy and that others don’t understand.” ID: rr4y_080921

Here, the eating disorder is personified as a companion who tells you that they are the only one who understands you and what you are going through. It convinces you that everyone else is judging you and shaming you for your ED behaviours (restricting food, counting calories, purging after meals, etc.) but the ED voice understands and comforts you, urging you to continue.

The examples above are closely tied to the ED AS A LIAR metaphor because the things the eating disorder is “convincing” you of or making you “fall for” are lies, however they are also examples of ED AS A COMPANION due to the nuanced feeling that the eating disorder is/was there for you, even if that feeling is false.

4.4.6 ED AS SELF

People who have experienced an eating disorder would describe it as being or having been “a part of them,” if not their entire identity. This is yet another instance of THE PART FOR THE WHOLE metonymy, but in this case the whole is the self, not the personified eating disorder.

“There is no way the healthy part of you would shame or judge you for trying to get better, no matter what that looks like.” ID: wmdn_011721

This example describes “the healthy part” of an individual, which implies that the eating disorder is “the unhealthy part”, but a part, nonetheless. In other cases, the individual’s mind and eating disorder are one and the same.
“Reaching out to seek help when your mind tells you that ‘you’re not sick enough’ is courageous.” ID: jr_112521

The ED AS SELF metaphor is also a prime example of Lakoff’s (1992) SPLIT SELF metaphor and Lakoff & Johnson’s (1999) Multiple Selves metaphor. The self is divided into two parts: the “healthy” part and the “unhealthy” part or the real self and the eating disorder self.

4.4.7 ED AS A PLACE

Moving on from the ED AS A PERSON metaphor, we also have a handful of instances of the ED AS A PLACE metaphor. The conceptualization of an eating disorder as a place such as a cage, a prison, or a deep hole is frequently used by those working to recover from their eating disorder or who are recovered. Being “outside” of the eating disorder allows individuals to look back at the eating disorder with a different perspective than the one they held while trapped “inside.” This shows that the ED AS A PLACE metaphor is yet another form of container metaphor: the eating disorder is a container, and the individual is either “inside” or “outside” of it.

“It may be hard to believe this when deep in an eating disorder [...]” bt_031622

This first example talks about the eating disorder as a place where the individual is “deep” within, which implies that it is difficult to get out. This sense of inescapability is also demonstrated in the next example.
“Purging is keeping you stuck.

It’s not resetting anything.” ID: bbb_090621

“I know it feels like your only option after a binge.

But purging is not resetting you.

It’s keeping you stuck.

Stopping purging won’t cure your bulimia.

But continuing to purge and seeing it as an effective form of compensation is a sure as hell way to keep you IN bulimia.

Don’t be fooled. Don’t believe the justifications. Purging won’t help.

The trade off is not worth it.” ID: bbb_090621

This example describes the eating disorder (bulimia) as a place, but it also describes the eating disorder behavior (purging) as something keeping the individual in this place, like a lock on a cage or a warden in a prison.

One individual used the metaphor of being in a scary haunted house to describe the experience of having an eating disorder:
“Being trapped in an eating disorder is like living in a Halloween style haunted house. EXCEPT you have no idea that the threatening voices, and scary things lurking in the shadows (aka your eating disorder thoughts) are not real.

So, you feel anxious a lot of the time living in this haunted house (i.e. ED thoughts). And to try to feel 'ok' and 'safer' you start doing a bunch of behaviors (ED behaviors). You check under your bed to make sure no one is hiding under there, you ask your friends repeatedly if 'they think the monsters will harm you.'

These behaviors provide short term 'relief' but in the long term only serve to increase your anxiety, misery, and sense of feeling trapped.” ID: jr_103121

The haunted house metaphor conveys the feeling of being unable to escape the eating disorder, as well as the fear and anxiety that accompany this feeling. This example also includes instances of THE PART FOR THE WHOLE metonymy that was discussed in the ED AS A PERSON subsection above.

4.5 Metaphors for recovery

Metaphors for recovery were the second most common target domain in the data gathered for this paper, following eating disorders. There were 23 instances of recovery metaphors (8 from individual accounts, 15 from business accounts). The most widely used metaphors were RECOVERY AS A JOURNEY/DESTINATION (7 examples) and RECOVERY AS A FIGHT (6 examples). Examples of RECOVERY AS FREEDOM, RECOVERY AS MONETARY...
VALUE and RECOVERY AS BRIGHTNESS appeared but were less common (2 examples, 3 examples, and 3 examples, respectively). There were also two metaphors that only appeared once in the data but are creative uses of metaphor and thus are included in this paper: RECOVERY AS A TEACHER and RECOVERY AS FROSTBITE.

4.5.1 RECOVERY AS A JOURNEY/DESTINATION

The RECOVERY AS A JOURNEY metaphor is widely used to describe the process of eating disorder recovery. RECOVERY AS A JOURNEY can be described as falling under the larger LIFE AS A JOURNEY metaphor discussed by Kövecses (2002) and Lakoff & Johnson (1980). Uses of this metaphor for recovery are most often associated with recovered individuals and/or clinicians such as dieticians or therapists and they typically take the form of affirmations or encouragement.

“Recovery can look different for everyone – we do not all share the same path or journey.” ID: rr_082222

“Your direction is more important than your speed (it’s okay to slow down).” ID: bt_030322

“Recovery is not a race. Do not compare where you are in your journey to someone else.” ID: bt_030322
The image posted along with the caption for bt_030322 above further illustrates the journey and direction metaphor by including an illustration of road signs and using words such as “direction”, “speed”, and “slow down”. This imagery is quite fitting when we consider a subtype of the RECOVERY AS A JOURNEY metaphor: RECOVERY AS A DESTINATION.

While the RECOVERY AS A JOURNEY metaphor highlights recovery as being a process, other expressions of the journey metaphor conceptualize recovery as the destination, highlighting the aspect of recovery as being the goal or a place to move towards during the journey. The cliché phrase “road to recovery” is the most obvious instance of the RECOVERY AS A DESTINATION metaphor.

“There isn’t A road to recovery, there’s only YOUR road to recovery. Everyone’s eating disorder recovery GPS is different.” ID: bt_081822

“No two eating disorders are the same, so it makes sense that no two roads to recovery will be the same.” ID: bt_081822

Both the RECOVERY AS A JOURNEY and DESTINATION metaphors often point out that recovery from an eating disorder is unique to each individual and there is not a one-size-fits-all approach.

Example bt_081822 is a bit of an outlier in the data: while none of the Instagram users that my data were collected from were identifiable as being males (refer to Table 4 in section 3), the author of the screenshotted post included in bt_081822 appears to be a male based on the profile picture.
An interesting subtype of the RECOVERY AS A JOURNEY/DESTINATION metaphor is the RECOVERY AS AN OBSTACLE metaphor. One post’s caption and image described eating disorder recovery as getting to the other side of an obstacle:

“Having a bigger & happier life is on the other side of fear & discomfort” ID: bbb_091323

“This client is terrified to push her boundaries with food and give up behaviors. But I know, and I hope she will soon experience this knowledge too, that there is happiness and much better things on the other side of that terror.

Your life will be better without bulimia.” ID: bbb_091323

This caption was posted beneath a photo of a dog on a green background, which is uncommon among the data I collected as most of the posts that I collected that had text on theme were on pastel pink or purple backgrounds, or plain white. In both the image and the caption, the choice of words suggests that the eating disorder is on one side of a great obstacle, and recovery is what lies “on the other side” of that obstacle and overcoming it.

4.5.2 RECOVERY AS A FIGHT

Recovery is also talked about in terms of battle. If the eating disorder is the enemy, then recovering from the eating disorder is a fight. Individuals who are recovering from their eating
disorder are called “warriors” or “fighters” and there are numerous captions and posts containing the RECOVERY AS A FIGHT metaphor.

“Keep fighting, and know you deserve a life of food freedom without these thoughts tagging along with you. 💖

How will you fight eating disorder thoughts this weekend?” ID: bt_072922

“[Image]

I am no longer ashamed to admit my eating disorder. I am proud to say I’m a fighter 👊” ID: bt_081422

“Being in recovery and unlearning disordered behaviors shows what a fighter you are.” ID: bt_081422
"An eating disorder will fight for its life. Until the very end.

The good news?

It does end. And fighting back gets easier."  ID: wmdn_080822

“When recovery feels like an uphill battle, it can feel like it might not be worth it.”  ID: wmdn_080822

The image and caption for this post (wmdn_080822) both contain the RECOVERY AS A FIGHT metaphor, describing it not just as a fight to recover, but a fight against the eating disorder in its own attempts to survive.

Eating dinner when an eating disorder voice is yelling at you is brave.

Skipping a workout when the voice in your head is telling you not to, is true strength.

Reaching out to seek help when your mind tells you that 'you're not sick enough' is courageous.

Here's to you and to the battles you fight daily that no one sees.

JENNIFER ROLLIN, MSW, LCSW-C
“Eating dinner when an eating disorder voice is yelling at you is **brave**.

Skipping a workout when the voice in your head is telling you not to, is **true strength**.

Reaching out to seek help when your mind tells you that ‘you’re not sick enough’ is **courageous**.

*Here’s to you and the battles you fight daily that no one sees.*” ID: jr_112521

The final line of text above clearly describes eating disorder recovery as a daily battle. However, other wording in this post also alludes to the RECOVERY AS A FIGHT metaphor, such as through the use of “brave” and “courageous” to describe making choices that go against the eating disorder’s wishes.

The widespread use of the RECOVERY AS A FIGHT metaphor makes sense when we consider the broader ILLNESS AS WAR metaphor (Gibbs, 2017; Sontag, 1978) that is prevalent in our society. By extension, the same implications that arise from the ILLNESS AS WAR metaphor also arise from the RECOVERY AS A FIGHT metaphor; the responsibility and blame for “losing the fight” is placed on the person “fighting” the eating disorder, rather than on the eating disorder itself.

4.5.3 **RECOVERY AS FREEDOM**

Recovery from an eating disorder is sometimes described as freedom from the place that the eating disorder was keeping an individual stuck or trapped in. Recovery reminders and affirmations are full of uses of this metaphor.

“We know it can feel easy for someone to feel like they are ‘recovered enough’ from their eating disorder, but you deserve more. **Full freedom is possible, and you deserve the chance to experience and live without your eating disorder thoughts and behaviors.**”

bt_081622

“We hope you keep fighting because you deserve **full freedom and peace from your eating disorder.**” ID: edtla_042721

In the second example here, the word “peace” is used. This suggests that the word “freedom” is being used in the sense of liberation and harkens back to the overall ILLNESS AS WAR metaphor: being recovered is conceptualized as being the end of the war.
Additionally, there are many mentions of “full” freedom with the RECOVERY AS FREEDOM metaphor (shown in both bt_081622 and edtl_042721 above, for example), implying there is also “partial” freedom. This is likely in reference to something known as “quasi recovery” from an eating disorder, where you are doing better than you were, have regained some weight and learned new coping strategies, but you still cling to some of your old ED behaviours and thought patterns (Eating Disorders Victoria, n.d.; Kozlova, 2021). Therefore, “full freedom” is when you have moved past this stage of quasi recovery.

4.5.4 RECOVERY AS MONETARY VALUE

Some descriptions of eating disorder recovery conceptualize it as something valuable, something with monetary worth.

“Discovering yourself in recovery is like discovering a pot of gold.” ID: bt_031622

“We at BALANCE hope you feel the happiness you deserve when you discover what your life can be like without an eating disorder. It will really feel like you just found a pot of gold 🌟.” ID: bt_031622

“But you are making an investment – putting a deposit on a house you will eventually call all your own. And when the house is yours, you will live in it forever.” ID: wmdn_080822
Each of the above examples demonstrates the value of recovery, comparing it to money and gold. In the first example, recovery is a pot of gold at the end of a rainbow. You can find it if you follow the path. In the second example, working towards recovery is like making a down payment on a house or paying off a mortgage. When you are fully recovered is when you have paid off the mortgage and can proudly say you own the home – after all the hard work you are healed and at home within your own body.

4.5.5 RECOVERY AS BRIGHTNESS

The metaphor relating recovery to brightness contrasts light with dark. Below are some examples of RECOVERY AS BRIGHTNESS metaphors:

“How has your life been brighter in recovery? ☀” bt_081622

This author of this post emphasizes their focus on the brightness of recovery over the darkness of the eating disorder with their use of the sun emoji in the caption.

“You may not be able to get back lost time, but you [...] deserve a bright, ED-free future.” ID: bt_082222

The uses of the RECOVERY AS BRIGHTNESS metaphor in the above examples also implies the ED AS DARKNESS metaphor. There is, however, a second sense of the word “light” found in my data: lightness as in the opposite of heaviness. The following example demonstrates both meanings of “light”:

Recovery is hard work, there is no doubt about it, but there is also joy in the process.

The joy comes when the lights start to come on. It really is enlightening, not just in terms of illumination but also in terms of levity. Things lighten up.

You will start to see the lights in others eyes. You start to see the lightness of their step. And it’s such a beautiful thing.

- DR. ANITA JOHNSTON
“\textit{The joy comes when the lights start to come on. It really is enlightening, not just in terms of illumination but also in terms of levity. Things lighten up. You will start to see the lights in others’ eyes. You start to see the lightness of their step. And it’s a beautiful thing.}” ID: daj_042622

The darkness and heaviness of the eating disorder is replaced with lightness in both senses when recovered. As so many eating disorders include a preoccupation with weight loss and trying to achieve lightness, it is interesting that the experience of an eating disorder is conceptualized as heaviness.

4.5.6 RECOVERY AS A TEACHER

While there was only one example of this metaphor in the data, it is worth briefly discussing.

\textit{“Recovery can teach you so much about your eating disorder. Probably one of the biggest things it’s made clear are all the lies my eating disorder convinced me of.”} ID: rr4y_073121

In this example, eating disorder recovery is personified as a teacher with lessons to share with the student, or the individual recovering. This examples also contains the ED AS A PERSON metaphor, more specifically the ED AS A LIAR metaphor.

4.5.7 RECOVERY AS FROSTBITE

Arguably the most creative use of metaphor for recovery in my data is the RECOVERY AS FROSTBITE metaphor. Again, there was only one post that used this metaphor, but I found it worth discussing.
“Recovery is like frostbite. It hurts more as it heals.

But remember: nobody ever got better from frostbite by running back into the blizzard.”

ID: edtla_042721

This example compares the experience of living with an eating disorder to being in a harsh winter storm. Recovering from the eating disorder is escaping the blizzard and healing from the damage caused by the bitter cold. This example also implies the ED AS A BLIZZARD metaphor. Extreme cold is an obvious connotation when we think of a blizzard, but blizzards also cause a lack of visibility. When you are caught in a blizzard it is all too easy to lose your bearings and find yourself wandering blind, unsure of where you are or where you are going. But once the blizzard blows over, the path becomes clear, and you can navigate safely once again.

4.6 Metaphors for relapse

Relapses in eating disorder recovery bring about their own metaphors, based on how the process of recovery is conceptualised. Relapse in eating disorder recovery is normal, however it is not talked about as frequently in the data (only 6 instances were identified, all from individual accounts). Perhaps this is because relapses are perceived as a failure in recovery. Individuals recovering from an ED may not be as forthcoming about their relapses as they are about their success in recovery. That being said, there are a handful of metaphors for relapse that appeared in my data: RELAPSE AS AN OBSTACLE, RELAPSE AS A RABBIT HOLE, and RELAPSE AS STRIKING A MATCH.
4.6.1 RELAPSE AS AN OBSTACLE

If recovery is conceptualized as a journey or a destination, then relapses are obstacles in the “road to recovery.” A fork in the road, a speedbump, a detour. Relapsing into disordered behaviours during recovery is just part of the journey and these relapses can either stop you dead in your tracks or provide the chance to re-chart your course.

“Picking yourself back up after bulimia relapses.” ID: bbb_072622

“Recovery isn’t a straight line, and lapses are merely bumps in the road – opportunities to develop the ability to recognize that you’re slipping, to stand up, dust yourself down, and get back on track [...]” ID: fmtsa_083121

“If you do lapse, it doesn’t mean you have failed recovery. You can get back on track.” ID: mil_121622

4.6.2 RELAPSE AS A RABBIT HOLE

Some examples of the RECOVERY AS AN OBSTACLE metaphor get more specific and describe relapse as a rabbit hole. The expression “falling down a rabbit hole” is not inherently negative, it has other connotations as well. It describes the process of becoming deeply fascinated with or pouring all your attention into one thing, which depending on the circumstances may be a good or a bad thing. The RELAPSE AS A RABBIT HOLE metaphor in eating disorder discourse highlights one of the tricky parts of recovery: there will always be traps designed to lure you back into the depths of the disorder.
“How many times must I fall down the rabbit hole before I learn that just because my eating disorder hands me a match, it does not mean that I must strike it and set myself on fire?” ID: fmtsa_083021

The example above depicts relapsing into disordered behaviour as a repetitive cycle of going down rabbit hole, getting out of it, and then falling right back in over and over until the cycle is broken. The same individual, in the same post, further elaborated on their RELAPSE AS A RABBIT HOLE metaphor by comparing an ED relapse to the rabbit hole that Alice fell into that brought her to Wonderland:

“A lapse is peering down into the enticing darkness of the rabbit hole, one foot tripping; slipping; stumbling; reaching your hands out to save yourself and then getting back on your feet.

A relapse is that initial stumble abruptly evolving into a fall straight back down the rabbit hole, tumbling head over heels until you hit the ground, immediately gulping down the contents of the glass bottle labelled “drink me” and losing yourself completely in your determination to shrink yourself.

Recovering is becoming aware of the lure of the rabbit hole and – despite temptation to peek into its depths – purposefully stepping over it, walking around it and, ultimately, discovering a whole new route and avoiding that rabbit hole completely.
Lapses may be part of the process of recovering from an eating disorder, but a lapse doesn’t mean that you must descend into a full-blown relapse. [...]” ID: fmtsa_083021

In this complex example, the ED AS A PLACE metaphor is specified as ED AS WONDERLAND and the RELAPSE AS RABBIT HOLE demonstrates that the relapse is one potential cause of the individual ending up back in their eating disorder. This allows us to realize that the temptation to “throw yourself back down the rabbit hole” can be avoided.

4.6.3 RELAPSE AS STRIKING A MATCH

The same individual that used the RELAPSE AS A RABBIT HOLE metaphor above also described relapse as striking a match and igniting a flame. The RELAPSE AS STRIKING A MATCH metaphor highlights the self-destructive nature of eating disorders.

“How many times must I fall down the rabbit hole before I learn that just because my eating disorder hands me a match, it does not mean that I must strike it and set myself on fire? That I have the ability to blow out that flame, or simply never light it at all? That I do not have to give my eating disorder the satisfaction of standing back and watching as I burn myself to the ground? Darling, you were not born with self-destruction as your default setting, that urge to destroy yourself is a paradoxical survival instinct, whereby your ultimate demise is precipitated by your urge to stay alive.

“"How many times must I fall down the rabbit hole before I learn that just because my eating disorder hands me a match, it does not mean that I must strike it and set myself on fire?"

That I have the ability to blow out that flame, or simply never light it at all?

That I do not have to give my eating disorder the satisfaction of standing back and watching as I burn myself to the ground?” ID: fmtsa_083021

As is the case with the RELAPSE AS A RABBIT HOLE metaphor, the match metaphor does not have to have purely negative connotations. Fire is destructive and dangerous, yes, but it also
provides a source of light and warmth. While the author of this example focuses on the negative aspects of relapses, there are positive aspects as well. Using the RELAPSE AS A MATCH metaphor, we can also consider the flame to be a guiding light. If you lose your way in recovery and have a relapse, you can take the match that the eating disorder hands you and use it to find your way back to the path of recovery.

4.7 Metaphor systems

Whilst conducting the data analysis for this thesis, it became evident that several conceptual metaphors tended to co-occur or to share entailment relationships with one another, or the presence of one metaphor implies the existence of another metaphor that can fit within the same grouping. Thus, overarching metaphor systems can be identified. I will briefly discuss these metaphor systems in this chapter.

One of the larger metaphor systems found in my data is the ILLNESS AS WAR metaphor. This system includes RECOVERY AS A FIGHT, RECOVERY AS FREEDOM, ED AS AN ENEMY, BODY AS AN ENEMY, and BODY AS AN ALLY. See Figure 1 below for a visual representation.

**Figure 1**

*ILLNESS AS WAR Metaphor System*

As previously discussed in the literature review section, the ILLNESS AS WAR metaphor emphasizes an individual’s responsibility to fight their illness and to win the battle against it. Additionally, the ILLNESS AS WAR system relies heavily on personification. In the case of eating disorders, both the body and the eating disorder can be personified as either the enemy or
as the ally depending on what stage of the eating disorder the individual is in. For example, if the individual is in recovery, then the ED is the enemy and the body is the ally. However, if the person is still in the clutches of their eating disorder, then they may believe that their body is the problem and thus the enemy.

Another example of a larger metaphor system in my data is the LIFE IS A JOURNEY metaphor. This metaphor, shown below in Figure 2, includes RECOVERY AS A JOURNEY, RECOVERY AS A DESTINATION, ED AS A PLACE, and RELAPSE AS AN OBSTACLE.

Figure 2

*LIFE AS A JOURNEY Metaphor System*

In this system, the illness is conceptualized as a starting point on a map, the process of recovery is the journey one takes to move away from the illness, and being recovered is finally arriving at the destination you were moving towards during the journey. This metaphor system emphasizes the process of recovering and recognizes that relapses are part of that process.

There are also examples of pairs of opposing metaphors. These pairs of metaphors either occur together or one implies the existence of the other. RECOVERY AS BRIGHTNESS and ED AS DARKNESS or RECOVERY AS LIGHTNESS and ED AS HEAVINESS are examples of these contrasting metaphors. These metaphors highlight the opposing highs and lows of life with an eating disorder and working to recover from it.
5 PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS

Understanding the metaphors used in eating disorder discourse has both cultural and clinical implications. I will begin with discussing the wider societal and cultural impacts before describing how metaphor can be utilized in clinical settings. In a broader cultural context, examining the way we talk about eating disorders can help us to remove the stigma surrounding them as well as start to change the discourse from harmful to helpful. Some metaphors (such as RECOVERY AS A FIGHT) place responsibility and blame on the individual, rather than on the illness that is truly at fault (Gibbs, 2017; Sontag, 1978). Other metaphors (such as FOOD AS MORALITY or BODY AS AN ENEMY) contribute to a cultural acceptance and even expectation of disordered eating behaviors. Identifying the harmful metaphors that perpetuate stereotypes or place blame on the individual is the first step towards shifting the way we think and talk about eating disorders and work towards healthier discourse about food and body.

Looking more specifically at clinical applications, metaphor’s “propensity to elicit insight and change” makes it a valuable tool in therapy (Shemory, 2019, p. 19). Lyddon et al. (2001) argue that the use of metaphor in counselling facilitates change by playing a significant role in “(a) relationship building, (b) accessing and symbolizing emotions, (c) uncovering and challenging clients’ tacit assumptions, (d) working with client resistance, and (e) introducing new frames of reference “(p. 270). McGuinty et al. (2014) summarize why metaphor is so crucial in the treatment of mental illnesses:

Metaphoric communication between therapist and client has been, and continues to play, an integral part in all therapies as metaphors have transformative and powerful properties encapsulating and encoding experiences, past, present and future. Metaphors are part of language systems, a way of perceiving, communicating and experiencing, as a gestalt effect. They may encompass our cognitions, affect and behaviours. (McGuinity et al., 2014, p. 22)

Gibbs (2023) explains the benefit of understanding not just metaphors, but client/patient-initiated metaphors specifically: “Paying attention to client-generated metaphors, and the embodied simulation thought processes from which these arise, is critical for therapists to understand where patients are coming from and how best to address their needs” (p. 778). Gibbs (2023) explicitly states that this “is critical when working with anorexia nervosa patients” (p. 778). Metaphors
may also be useful in identifying what stage they are at in their individual ED recovery journey, whether that be still in the early stages and hesitant to let go of the eating disorder, or approaching complete recovery (Goren-Watts, 2011). Additionally, understanding co-occurring metaphors can help clinicians identify which larger metaphor system an individual uses. For example, if someone refers to their eating disorder using expressions that fit into the ED AS A PLACE metaphor, then use of the RECOVERY AS A JOURNEY metaphor may resonate more with them than the RECOVERY AS A FIGHT metaphor. However, if an individual is prone to using expressions of BODY AS AN ENEMY and ED AS AN ENEMY, then perhaps referring to recovery as a fight or battle would be more helpful to that individual.

Another way that the use of metaphor may aid in the clinical treatment of eating disorders is by providing patients with an externalization tool:

By utilizing externalizing methods, one can objectify the problem; thus, separating and liberating the mental health concerns of a person from the problem are the first steps towards improved mental health. [...] The externalizing process can be viewed as a phenomenon occurring in a brief period through, first, naming and, second, objectifying a problem. (McGuinty et al., 2014, p. 382).

When it comes to mental health, “identities and problems are frequently merged as one and people are often defined by their mental health condition(s)” (McGuinty et al., 2014, p. 382). Therefore, externalization tools allow the individual to separate and differentiate the problem from themselves and their own identity, which in turn allows the individual to address and manage the problem; after all, “the person is not the problem, the problem is the problem” (McGuinty et al., 2014, p. 382). McGuinty et al. (2014) argue that metaphor is the most effective externalization tool (p. 382).
6 LIMITATIONS, SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH, & CONCLUDING REMARKS

It is impossible for one study to adequately address a topic as vast and complex as this and therefore this study has several limitations that invite further research. The first and most obvious limitation is the small scale of this study, necessitated by the time constraining nature of manual, “one-by-one” collection and analysis of each example. The data set for this study was only 79 total posts, and of these only 46 were used in the final analysis. The timescale of this study was also quite limited, as the posts used in this study were posted to Instagram between 2021 and 2023. It would be quite interesting to compare this to posts from earlier years to see how the conceptual metaphors may have changed with time, particularly pre- and post-COVID-19 pandemic. Additional, larger scale studies are warranted. It would also be beneficial to conduct further quantitative analysis, as the present study was primarily qualitative in nature.

Furthermore, the impermanent nature of social media posts is another important consideration with studies of this nature, and this did come into play with some of the data that I collected. While a post on Instagram may be public, the user can change their settings to private at any time thus removing access from anyone who is not following the account. The user can also edit their caption at any point, altering or even removing the conceptual metaphor that was identified in the first place. The user might choose to delete their post at any point, or even their entire account.

I was also limited by what data is publicly available on Instagram. There are surely many more conceptual metaphors in content posted to private accounts, however these posts are intended only for specific members of closed communities, such as other individuals who are actively struggling with an eating disorder. Accessing these posts for research purposes would certainly be a worthwhile endeavor and would uncover metaphors that likely do not appear in publicly available discourse, but this would prove more difficult from an ethics standpoint as the private nature of these closed accounts is a clear sign that the account owner does not want outsiders/non-community members interacting with their content. Future studies may also include conducting interviews, focus group discussions, or internet surveys with people at various stages of an eating disorder, as the results may vary with a different data collection
method, especially if the source of the data shifts from online discourse to verbal communication.

The overall aim of this study was to identify the conceptual metaphors for food, diet culture, body, eating disorders, recovery, and relapse on Instagram. While the sample size of data was relatively small (79 posts compiled originally, and only 46 used in the final analysis), this study identified 84 instances/examples of 28 different conceptual metaphors across all 6 of the target domains. By identifying the prevalent metaphors for eating disorders and other relevant target domains, we can begin having healthier discourses about food and body image and fostering a more supportive environment that promotes healing and recovery rather than one that encourages disordered eating behaviours.
REFERENCES

https://www.aa.org/the-twelve-steps


https://doi.org/10.1177/0844562119897756


Byrne, E. (2022) #Thinspo: The effects of social media on disordered eating and body image among adolescent middle school girls (Publication No. 29254918) [Master’s thesis, Saint


Johnston, A. [dranitajohnston]. (2022, April 26). *There’s a part of us that is speaking and trying to say something that for one reason or another, we* [Instagram post]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/Cc0LdzxuFDc/


## APPENDIX

### Table 7

List of Post Identifiers (ID) and Corresponding Citations

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<td>bt_072922</td>
<td>BALANCE Eating Disorder Treatment Center. [@balancedtx]. (2022, July 29). Be sure to save this Friday reminder post to remember all weekend long. ♥️ We know an eating disorder’s voice [Instagram post]. Instagram. <a href="https://www.instagram.com/p/Cgm_YVeBpSh/">https://www.instagram.com/p/Cgm_YVeBpSh/</a></td>
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whaw_082122 | Goldstein, H. [@wholistic_health_and_wellness]. (2022, August 21). *We’re not born feeling guilty, especially when it comes to food. Food guilt is taught and often stems from the* [Instagram post]. Instagram. [https://www.instagram.com/p/Chhbx86OGTM/](https://www.instagram.com/p/Chhbx86OGTM/)
whaw_040222 | Goldstein, H. [@wholistic_health_and_wellness]. (2022, April 2). *I think sometimes we forget that there is a journey that takes place before we can find true food freedom.* [Instagram post]. Instagram. [https://www.instagram.com/p/Cb2YOM-vTl7/](https://www.instagram.com/p/Cb2YOM-vTl7/)