

**SOCIAL MEDIA TRENDS:
EFFECTS ON THE MENTAL AND PHYSICAL HEALTH OF
YOUNG WOMEN**

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Abstract

Background: Social media has a strong influence in our society. Much of this influence falls into the hands of young women in their early teenage years who are more likely to fall victim to the harmful effects of social media usage than other demographics. The dangerous effects of social media trends on the mental and physical health of young women have long been known yet little to no real action has been taken to solve this issue. As social media gains more influence in our society daily it is essential to research and come up with solutions for how to make social media a safer and more inclusive space that protects young women, rather than capitalizes on them and the vulnerability present within their demographic.

Objective: This study aims to go beyond the majority conclusion of many researchers that social media is bad for mental health. It seeks to find evidence to support these conclusions and also identify ways in which these potential negative effects can be mitigated. This study investigates the potential for social media to have positive effects on women's mental and physical health. This will segue into my suggestions for solutions as well as proposed areas of future research.

Design and Method: The research method used is a literature review. The research that is included in the literature review is from both scholarly and peer reviewed sources most of which were acquired from the Purchase College Library and database. The literature spans the past 10 years and focuses on social media in our society as well as its effects on both the mental and physical health of young women. The main research question is: *How have social media trends affected the mental and physical health of young women in the past 10 years?*

Results: Social media has negative effects on women's mental and physical health which have been linked to the onset and or worsening of anxiety, depression, anorexia nervosa, bulimia and more. Social media's negative effects can be mitigated through social media fluency and education as well as limiting harmful social media exposure to those with individual vulnerability factors such as preexisting mental and physical disorders. Social media can have a positive effect when the content shared is inspirational and incentivizes fitness, health, and wellness.

Conclusions: The results show that social media trends have the ability to garner both negative and positive effects. The negative effects of social media trends on women's mental and physical health can be mitigated which shows that it is not too late to create change. This change is the collective responsibility of social media users and executives alike to create a safe and inclusive internet culture that gives us a solid foundation to work with as technology and social media gain more influence in the future.

Keywords: *Social Media, Social Media Trends, Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, Mental Health, Physical Health, Young Women, Body Positivity, Self-Acceptance,*

Chapter I: Introduction

Background and Overview

As we see our society become increasingly more dependent on technology, it can be observed that now more than ever, people consume social media at a higher and more frequent rate. It is claimed in an article by Kemp and Childers (2021) that “Social media has facilitated the proliferation of virtual interactions and social networks, and for many, engaging through a social media platform is part of their daily routine” (p. 306). In this way, it is no surprise that social media users average hours of screen time on social media daily (Kemp & Childers, 2021, p.306). Many implications are still unknown as to the short- and long-term effects of social media on mental and physical health. I am investigating the impact of social media trends on young women's psychological and physical health in their teenage years into their 20s. I chose this topic because it is one that I feel is very important and prevalent in the society in which we live. Investigating both the positive and negative effects of social media on the mental and physical health of young women in their teenage years into their 20s will allow me to gather data and curate and examine a solid hypothesis from which I can suggest future research and possible solutions where necessary. Social media is a developing platform that is not going away anytime soon. I feel that it is important to learn about, research, and critically analyze the impacts of social media trends on the mental and physical health of young women in their teenage years into their 20s to educate better and support the next generations of young women to learn how to consume social media healthily.

The topic I have chosen is one specific to the society we live in today. The literature I have found is current, and some research is still ongoing. One challenge I am faced with is finding research that is in favor of social media. Much of the research that is out there indicates

its negative effects on young women's physical and mental health. I have found it helpful to analyze areas where the data suggests possible factors which indicate that the negative effects of social media are less drastic for certain young women than for others and why this is so. I have accumulated research that is scholarly, peer-reviewed and analyzes the effects of social media on young women through various kinds of studies. Though many of my resources come to similar conclusions, there are unique developments that can be observed within the discussions that highlight the complexities of this research in a functional and informative way.

Rationale

This research is important because social media has a global influence. Millions are exposed to whatever content is shared on a social media platform, oftentimes without regulation or supervision. The younger population is left, especially young women, at risk of the dangerous effects of social media. This overdue conversation aims to protect the next generation from the harmful effects of social media on mental and physical health. It is becoming an increasing concern that “high levels of social media use may lead to negative mental health outcomes, specifically rising levels of anxiety” (Kemp & Childers, 2021, p.307) especially considering how common anxiety and depression have become in our society in recent years. There is an overwhelming amount of scientific and psychological evidence to support social media's harmful effects. However, social media is gaining more influence and prevalence in our society daily. The conclusion that social media has harmful effects, thus, should be avoided is futile and not accommodating to the technological world in which we live in 2023.

Purpose

The purpose of this Senior Capstone is to share my findings on the effects of social media trends on young women's mental and physical health and use them to inspire change for the

future of social media as we move further into a new technological age. Social media should be a place that is safe and inclusive to all. Unfortunately, when we know that social media trends are causing harm to young women and choose to do nothing about it, we are complacent. The paper's purpose is to share my findings which I consider to support that there is hope for the future of social media to make a difference. Although it is a fact that social media will continue to have more influence than ever before in the coming years, it is our collective responsibility as a society to do as much as we can to make that influence positive to protect young women from the real-life dangers that come along with consuming social media.

What To Expect

Chapter I has given you a basic idea of the foundations and motivations of my study. Chapter 2 will discuss the main findings of my literature review and give a broader scope of the topic more qualitatively. Chapter 3 will then justify using a literature review as my methodology for this study. Chapter 4 will detail my results and findings. Finally, Chapter 5 will discuss those findings and expand on them further.

Research Question

The foundation of my study is built on the following research question:

RQ: *How have social media trends affected the mental and physical health of young women in the past ten years?*

Definition of Key Terms

Social Media: Any online format where one can share, post, and view user-generated content virtually. For example, Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, and Facebook.

Social Media Fluency: The ability to navigate social media platforms, understand how to use the platform, identify its features and abilities to be manufactured, and understand social media's lack of realism.

Body Positive: Inclusive of all body types; showing self-acceptance to one's physical body.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The influence of social media on mental and physical health has been studied in numerous fashions. Because of this, the literature is vast, and there is much information to look through and analyze. For the purpose of this Senior Capstone study, I have narrowed the respective research to include resources that touch on more modern aspects of social media, such as hashtags and captions, as well as current-day social media analysis with apps such as Snapchat and TikTok. Furthermore, my research mainly includes studies that have been conducted with younger women in their teenage years into their twenties to make the analysis concise and relevant to the age group. The focus includes young women's mental and physical health, including research regarding the following mental health areas: anxiety, depression, and self-esteem. In addition, physical health aspects will be included, such as body image and eating disorders (Verma et al., 2014). to give more context about these issues and how they might be exacerbated and impacted by the potentially harmful effects of social media (Keles et al., 2020).

The preexisting literature surrounding the influence of social media on the mental and physical health of young women includes quantitative research and statistical analysis. Unfortunately, most of this research often comes to a similar conclusion that it has negative associations. This kind of conclusion, however, fails to include qualitative research that dives in-depth into the complex factors that contribute to certain elements that come into play when assessing the specific ways and functions in which social media affects the mental and physical health of young women. The literature includes but is not limited to factors such as social media fluency (Tamplina et al., 2018), individual vulnerability factors (Fernandez et al., 2012), as well as the specific trends, apps, hashtags, captions, etc. that are being consumed today which are far more complex than that of even five years ago which may alter previous findings in the pre-

existing literature (Davies et al., 2020). All of these factors have immense influence over an individual's ability to interact with and healthily consume social media.

My research makes a valuable contribution to the discussion surrounding social media's influence on young women's mental and physical health because it is inclusive of all perspectives and previous findings. It also encompasses modern research that builds upon previous findings and analyzes current trends. My research seeks to implement all perspectives argued in preexisting literature and fill in retrospective disparities in the research. It is highly evident that social media is not going anywhere any time soon; now more than ever, young women are exposed to social media with little formal education on its extremely harmful risks.

Social media negatively impacts the physical and mental health of young women. It has been known for many years that this is the case; however, no one has ever taken it into their own hands to create further research or put their ideas for solutions into action in a successful way. The next step is to, rather than conclude that social media is bad for young women, restructure the stereotype and analyze ways we as a society can create change in social media for a healthier generation. This venture includes but is not limited to working with influencers on a campaign to promote more body-positive content, working with social media platforms, and suggesting ways to protect and educate young female users about potential risks with social media before they are able to create or access accounts, and many more ideas which I have developed from the findings of my research. This research is supported by an article written by Perloff (2014) which states that "Research has documented that a variety of media interventions and persuasive regimen can have positive effects in reducing unhealthy appearance-based perceptions and eating disorder symptoms" that negatively impact the mental and physical health of young women (Perloff, 2014, p. 372).

We progress as a society in this way when we educate young girls on social media and its dangers to prevent or at least mediate the negative impacts that social media could have on their mental and physical health, including but not limited to eating disorders, anxiety, and depression. Since social media and the internet are not going anywhere soon, it is incredibly important that this topic is studied and its findings are implemented in such a way as to educate and nurture the next generation. I believe that my contribution to the research is also my personal experience as a young woman who is educated on the existing literature and wants to implement and take action that would protect young women from the harmful effects of social media.

Social Media Trends (#Fitspo Vs. #Thinspo) and Captions

In an article written by Davies, Turner, and Udell (2020), it is stated that “Social media content can negatively influence body esteem in young women by reinforcing beliefs that to be considered attractive, people must look a certain way” (Davies et al., 2020, p. 101), which indicates that social media trends in favor of a certain body type that is considered more attractive than another could have negative associations on the mental and physical health of young women. Accordingly, Social media trends are the main focus of my research. As the newer generation is more experienced with rapid social media changes, they are also accustomed to newer social media features such as hashtags. Another study that supports this conclusion conducted by Sumtera et al. (2018) focuses on how different social media trends may have various effects on young women. For example, opposing fitness ideals perpetuated by the media, such as #Fitspo (Fitness Inspiration) and #Thinspo (Thin Inspiration), will have different effects on the physical and mental health of young women. This research argues that #Fitspo could have potential beneficial impacts on the mental and physical health of young women as it seems to invoke inspiration for fitness and wellness in a positive body way. Whereas #Thinspo could have

a very negative impact on the mental and physical health of young women and encourage unhealthy and potentially dangerous lifestyle habits. The data proves what many researchers have hypothesized that “the negative effects of the social media exposure experienced by millennials may be countered with inspirational content” (Kemp & Childers, 2021, p.318), in this way drawing a common conclusion between several of my resources which emphasize the importance of body positive and health inspiring content.

From what I have seen so far while gathering data for this project is that there are very few studies conducted that gather data to analyze the other opposing viewpoint, which is seemingly the general public's consensus about the issue. One of the challenges in finding research on this topic has been finding studies that have been done in opposition to the notion that the effects of social media are harmful to the mental and physical health of young women. For a thorough and informative research project, I feel as though it is necessary to look at many different perspectives and gather as much data as possible to curate accurate findings that analyze a variety of opposing viewpoints.

In addition to social media trends, social media captions are ~~also~~ another main aspect of my research. Studies have argued that captions may also indicate whether social media will have a negative or positive impact on the physical and mental health of young women. For example, the same article written by Davies, Turner, and Udell (2020) also states:

The current study provides partial support for the idea that body positive captions accompanying images on Instagram may function in a similar way to self-compassion quotes and have some protective value for observers. However, their impact may be limited in scope with respect to specific aspects of body esteem and require concordance between the image and caption theme to be seen as authentic by observers. Body positive captioning may also be no more effective at improving mood than other captioning styles that draw attention away from physical appearance entirely.(p.105)

This quote indicates that there is support that body positive captions may also help to mitigate the potentially harmful effects of social media. Though limitations surround the scope of the research, the conclusion heavily supports areas for further research. Another limitation of the resource is that it focuses mainly on the social media platform Instagram. However, I strongly hypothesize that the findings of this study can be applied to all social media platforms-

Social Media Fluency

Social media fluency is another main focus of my research. For example, in a study done by Tamplin et al. (2018), it is argued that:

...findings have implications for prevention and early intervention approaches for body image concerns. Media literacy interventions that focus on traditional media could be modified or expanded to include a social media literacy component to highlight the salience of idealized images in the online world, the impact of idealized images on well-being, including body satisfaction, and to promote critical thinking skills to evaluate the purpose, meaning, and realism of images and social media content. (p.35)

This information suggests that though social media can have negative impacts on young women's mental and physical health, an intervention approach that advocates for social media fluency could serve a protective function. In this way, social media fluency is equivalent to social media education and awareness of its potential risks and dangers when consumed from an uneducated lens. Idealized images in the online world refer to edited or photoshopped images as well as a large number of apps and programs that allow users to post altered content. Therefore, education on Social media fluency will be a key component to achieving an answer and proposed solution to the findings of my research question.

Individual Vulnerability Factors

There is much research that supports the conclusion that the effects of social media on the mental and physical health of young women can be influenced by individual vulnerability

factors. Vulnerability factors in the realm of psychology and doctoral medicine include a wide array of circumstances and individual experiences that predispose an individual to harm. This concept can mean anything from a history of mental or physical illness to injury or disability, which could be considered an individual vulnerability factor. In the literature surrounding the negative effects of social media on the mental and physical health of young women, certain individual vulnerability factors include current and past instances of mental illness, anxiety, depression, as well as a physical illness caused by malnutrition and or self-harm. There tends to be an overlap between mental and physical health, and certain individuals may experience a combination of many individual vulnerability factors, exposing them to even more potentially harmful impacts of social media. In a study conducted by Verma and Avogoulas (2015), it is stated that “young people will often blindly follow a trend if it can provide them with the qualities they desire, such as attractiveness and popularity, while disregarding the consequences to their health.”(Verma &Avogoulas, 2015, p. 99), which highlights ways that young women especially might be vulnerable to the harmful effects of social media. The study also states that anorexia nervosa is ten times more likely to occur in females than males (Verma &Avogoulas, 2015, p. 97). Another supporting study done by Perloff (2014) emphasizes the “impact of predisposing individual vulnerability characteristics, social media uses, and mediating psychological processes on body dissatisfaction and eating disorders" (Perloff, 2014, p. 363) and how they are important to understanding social media's influence on the mental and physical health of young women.

Chapter 3

Methods

The objective of my research was to analyze and identify factors that contribute to social media's impact on the mental and physical health of young women. The analysis was applied to suggest ways to mitigate social media's harmful effects on the mental and physical health of young women. The research-question is:

RQ: *How have social media trends affected the mental and physical health of young women in the past ten years?*

The literature review was conducted to search for pre-existing sources that have been written. The study is qualitative and descriptive. I was able to analyze recurring themes and understand the significant components of how social media affects the mental and physical health of young women. In gathering my resources, I used peer-review articles as well as various studies that I found through the Purchase College Library Database. When searching the databases, I mainly used the following keywords: *social media, mental health, physical health, internet, technology, anxiety, depression, and eating disorders*. One of the difficulties I face in studying this topic is that there is a lot of pre-existing literature to sort through. Another challenge I faced was finding articles that argue for social media's potential benefits to young women's mental and physical health by inspiring healthy lifestyle choices and fitness and wellness. However, I was able to find sufficient evidence to support this perspective through my literature review. In this way, I hope to provide an alternative conclusion about social media's influence on the mental and physical health of young women that goes beyond simply saying that it is bad. Rather, I hope to change the dialogue and suggest potential ways to mitigate social media's harmful effects on the mental and physical health of young women through education.

Naturally, I have a bias on my topic, considering I am a member of my demographic, a young woman in my early 20s. I have a deep passion for this topic, yet, I am also able to keep my personal bias separate from the research and analyze my findings through a multiple-perspective lens. I advocate for seeking out opposing viewpoints and contradictions, especially when it challenges me to expand the scope of my understanding of the topic and open it up to others' experiences with it as well. I believe that I will contribute to my topic because of this as well as my motivations for pursuing a study on this topic.

Limitations of my study include that my topic extends to all forms of social media, which changes and develops daily. Another limitation would include the timeframe in which I had to come to these conclusions, which is within the span of two college semesters. Despite these limitations, I am confident that I have successfully gathered information from reliable sources and found significant results to answer my research question.

Chapter 4: Results

The aim of this chapter is to concisely state the results of my literature review in connection to my research question, How have social media trends affected the mental and physical health of young women in the past ten years? In the next section of this results chapter, I will describe and specify my findings in a few brief paragraphs. Following the findings of my literature review that answer my research question, I will go on to state discoveries that were slightly outside of my research objectives. After this chapter, I will summarize once again the key themes that were observed in my study of the literature and lead into the final chapter of my Senior Capstone, which will discuss how social media trends have affected the mental and physical health of young women in the past ten years, my predictions, and suggestions of areas for future research.

Research Question: *How have social media trends affected young women's mental and physical health in the past ten years?*

An unsurprising finding, I have come across is that social media trends have been linked to mental and physical disorders such as anxiety, depression, anorexia, bulimia, and more. Social Media trends have affected the mental and physical health of young women negatively in the past ten years by “reinforcing beliefs that to be considered attractive, people must look a certain way.” (Davies et al., 2020, p. 101), which can be done through social media trends such as the hashtag #Thinspo. Young women are a vulnerable and impressionable age demographic and often are more likely to develop physical and mental diseases from the harmful effects of social media than other users. This concept is only made worse when an individual has an already existing disorder that is known as an individual vulnerability factor (anxiety, depression, bulimia, or anorexia) that can trigger the negative effects of social media usage disproportionately to an

individual who did not have a preexisting individual factor. This result highlights the conclusion that social media trends negatively affect the mental and physical health of young women because they are more likely to participate in a social media trend without realizing its consequences when desiring qualities such as attractiveness, popularity, and gaining favor with their followers and friends on social media platforms. (Verma & Avogoulas, 2015, p.1) This finding of social media trends negatively affecting the mental and physical health of young women was common throughout the literature, as I hypothesized in my introduction. It is important that I discover results that prove the negative effects of social media on the mental and physical health of young women to frame my paper's purpose properly. The purpose of this paper, as mentioned in my introductory chapter, is to go further than to prove my hypothesis correct, that the majority of the research would state that social media is bad for the mental and physical, and search for potentially positive effects considering social media is not going anywhere anytime soon. Now that I have proven my hypothesis correct and shared my findings on the negative effects of social media trends on the mental and physical health of young women, I am pleased to be able to discuss some potentially positive effects of social media on the mental and physical health of young women.

In my analysis of the literature, I found sufficient evidence to support that the harmful effects of social media could potentially be mitigated. Though it may seem that the majority of research suggests that there are only negative effects of social media on young women's mental and physical health, my research has proven that not to be the case. Factors such as social media fluency have indicated that the more educated a young woman is on the lack of realism present on social media, the less likely she would be to be subject to negative effects. This means that education can make social trends safer to consume; young women would be less inclined to hold

themselves to unattainable and impossible body standards and dangerous standards. Thus, social media's negative effects could be mitigated. The results confirm that though social media use has many negative effects on the mental and physical health of young women, there is hope as social media will only expand as technology develops in the future. This idea led me to some exciting discoveries I made, which I found essential to complete my research paper.

Evidence supports that certain types of social media trends can have contrasting results on young women's mental and physical health. Research suggests that social media that is inspiring, encourages wellness and personal betterment can benefit the mental and physical health of young women and serve an educational purpose. For example, trends geared towards health and fitness, such as the hashtag #fitspo (fitness inspiration), can inspire and incentivize physical fitness and self-care, as discussed in the findings of Sumtera et al. (2018). Common trends in the research that support the positive effects of social media trends on the mental and physical health of young women include the benefits of body-positive trends/content, wellness trends/content, body-positive social media trends/captions, as well as mental wellness posts that advocate for self-acceptance and self-compassion. These kinds of positive social media have been found to utilize the influence of social media beneficially by advocating for and incentivizing personal wellness and providing wellness education for those who otherwise might not have access to it.

Overall the results that I found in my research confirm the negative effects of social media trends on the mental and physical health of young women as it is linked to effect disorders such as anxiety, depression, bulimia, anorexia nervosa, and more. Though there is substantial evidence to support these negative effects, there is also research to support that social media fluency can mitigate the negative effects of social media; education on the lack of realism present on social media has proven successful. Individual vulnerability factors are important to

take into consideration before using social media as they can indicate how intensely a young woman might be at risk of developing the harmful effects of consuming unhealthy social media trends. In addition to these findings, I discovered that certain types of social media trends could benefit the mental and physical health of young women by inspiring fitness and wellness, thus serving a positive and educational purpose. These findings indicate that though there is certainly reason to believe in the very real dangers of social media trends on the mental and physical health of young women, there is substantial evidence that supports that these effects can be mitigated and reversed if the content inspires fitness rather than an unattainable and unhealthy body standard.

In the next chapter of this paper, I will discuss the meaning, importance, and relevance of how social media trends affect the mental and physical health of young women in greater detail. This will indicate how my results contribute to the topic of social media and the mental/physical health of young women. I will also discuss my study as a whole and what patterns, conclusions, and interpretations I was able to make after studying the literature. Finally, in discussing the results more subjectively, I will conclude the paper and offer my takeaways from my findings, suggestions, and predictions for the future of social media as we progress into a technological age.

Chapter 5: Discussion

The results show that social media trends adversely affect young women's mental and physical health by contributing to or worsening psychological and physical disorders such as anxiety, depression, anorexia, bulimia, and more. However, the results also show that despite social media negatively impacting young women's mental and physical health, there are ways to lessen and, in some cases, reverse these effects. Education on social media's lack of realism, social media fluency, and limiting harmful social media exposure to those with individual vulnerability factors are all ways to protect young women from the detrimental effects of social media. Though the data is strong for proving the negative effects of social media trends on young women's mental and physical health, there is evidence that social media trends can have a positive impact on young women's psychological and physical health and when they inspire wellness, fitness, body positivity, and self-compassion.

So, What?

These results indicate that the type of content young women are exposed to matters. Social media is not going anywhere anytime soon and gains new users at an exponential level daily. Society has long been made aware that social media trends can cause both mental and physical harm to young women. In this way, it is a shared responsibility to try and keep social media a safe and inclusive space for all. By shared responsibility, I mean individual users and those in positions of power, such as the owners and executives of social media apps such as Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, Facebook, and more. Though social media trends can seem harmless at first, they have the ability to influence young women in ways that can seriously harm their mental and physical health. Some real-life consequences and dangers come with consuming social media as a young woman, which matters because it can be prevented. The issue of social media trends

negatively impacting young women's mental and physical health also matters because of the scale to which this affects and will continue to affect millions of women in the present and in the future as social media develops.

Now What?

The scope of my study was unable to include every single social media trend and platform that exists due to the fact that there are too many to count. I was also unable to study how social media trends affect women's mental and physical health worldwide as it would have been far too complex and required more time than possible, considering that this study was to be done in two college semesters. Other limitations include that I was unable to conduct interviews and my statistical data due to both time constraints and did not seek approval from the IRB. Despite these limitations, I believe that I have conducted research that supports and answers my research question, How have social media trends affected young women's mental and physical health in the past ten years? Social media trends have negative and positive effects on young women's psychological and physical fitness, which can be determined by the type of content they are exposed to, how educated they are on social media, and its lack of realism. In this way, a practical implementation of these findings would be for social media executives to create social media fluency programs where young women can learn the dangers of social media before joining specific platforms. I would also suggest that those in charge of making social media a safe space for all include in their code of conduct a policy where any edited or photoshopped post must be displayed as such.

Along with such a policy, I recommend that algorithms encourage more body-positive hashtags and captions to be shared and social media trends that are dangerous to be removed and censored. This policy would encourage people to make body-positive content, especially if they

know more users will like, share, and interact with it. In conclusion, I believe that when used properly, social media can positively affect young women's mental and physical health. These encouraging results support that social media's negative effects on women's psychological and physical health can be mitigated and, in many cases, reversed. The results are significant, considering social media and technology will only continue to grow. What we do about these results in the present will indicate the direction social media's influence on women's mental and physical health will go in the future.

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