

**The Relationship between Social Media
and the Aspirations of Young Adults**

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Abstract

The study sought to identify social media use and its effects on young adults. Data was collected and analyzed to see the potential overwhelming effects that social media had on young adults and how the use of social media affected the unrealistic aspirational lifestyle an individual aspired for. Snowball sampling was used to gather participants. Questions such as; How much of these influences are accurate for the constructive development of young adults who endure self-esteem/perception insecurities? How much of a role does social media have on people? Lastly, how does social media influence the material possessions one may aspire for? were used for the study. Drawing on data from a survey, this paper helps fill the gap in research. Data gathered from this analysis was expected to support the original hypothesis that social media had a negative affect on young adults with their self-identity. What was discovered with the data, was that social media did not influence individuals self-identity and what they aspired for. It is understood that the age of the participants played a significant factor in the results. The information gathered from this study adds to the literature of social media and its influences on the aspirational lifestyle young adults may aspire for.

Introduction

In the post-millennial generation of smartphone users, social media plays a substantial and influential role on the aspirational lifestyle young adults may aim for. With the level of access to social media that most young adults have, they do not need to watch the news on TV or read the paper; everything they need to know to stay up to date in conversation can be found on the news feed of Instagram, Facebook, and even apps like Snapchat. These platforms such as Youtube are used by all kinds of people. According to Blog.hubspot, 46% of millennials (25-34

years old) have increased their Youtube usage; Youtube also has about 1.9 billion monthly active users. These platforms are used by most teenagers, most public figures, and certainly a fair share of celebrities. These celebrities who live a lavish life post their own versions of their personal lives. These images and the perception that it creates can lead young adults in wanting to live a kind of lifestyle that may seem unattainable to the eye.

How much of these influences are accurate for the constructive development of young adults who endure self-esteem/perception insecurities? How much of a role does social media have on people? Lastly, how does social media influence the material possessions one may aspire for? For the answers to these complexing curiosities, the study sought to understand how social media impacted young adults expectations of aspiring lifestyles. It was argued that the use of social media among young adults was correlated with unrealistic aspiring lifestyles, which could negatively affect their self-identity. In the study, it was crucial to gain insight into the varying levels of usage. A survey was distributed among social media platforms in which asked various questions regarding their thoughts and activities. The data was used to explore the connections between self-perception among post-millennial young adults and social media usage. The four sub-topics that the study focused on were; self-perception (insecurities in relation to self-identity in the public), aspirations (attainability vs reality), class (material possessions markers as success), and gender (idealized gender roles). The four sub-topics were used to reference the critical aspects of life that affected the outlook on aspirational lifestyles.

Literature Review

Self-perception:

Insecurities in relation to self-identity in the public

Erving Goffman's theory of *Presentation of Self in Everyday life* (1956) emphasizes the importance of self-identity. His theory is heavily developed on the reflection of one's own self-identity on the audience. I tied his theory of performance of a character to the discussion of self-perception through the lens of social media platforms.

Goffman spoke at length about individual identity and the way that he/she would be perceived by the audience (society). Goffman (1956) stated that, as performers, individuals will be concerned with maintaining the impression that they are living up to the many standards by which they and their products are judged. Because these standards are numerous and pervasive, the individuals who are performers dwell more than we might think in a moral world. His theory describes a person in society who changes according to a setting. He believed that individuals who are in a situation with a new or 'ideal' person, attempt to change or fix their appearance, aura, and setting in order to make a good impression on that 'ideal' individual. Goffman's theory of presentation of self is correlated with the discussion of social media and the ways in which it affects how individuals may see themselves. Goffman's discussion of a 'character' explains that people tend to put up fronts in the real world before letting the 'audience' known as society, judge and push people into categories. He talked about people performing in a way to allow others to better judge that person and it correlates with the idea of social media and the lies behind it. People who use social media platforms, may act like a different 'presentation of self' behind the computer screen than in the real world. The presentation of self relates to how people allow social media to inspire them to become a character in the real world.

Being aware of judgment of how one is constantly viewed can be self-defeating. It can lead to having low self-esteem, and a loss of self-identity. The involvement of social media platforms can adjust the way one looks at life and what one may inspire for. Young adults are constantly using the internet and involving themselves in what's trending. The attachment to internet platforms can severely damage the psychological traits of an individual. "Depressed adolescents use the internet more frequently. With regard to SM specifically, adolescents who experienced high levels of psychological distress, unmet mental health needs, and suicidal ideation were more frequent users of SM such as Facebook" (Radovic, et al. 2017). Social media platforms such as Instagram and Facebook can allow the person to create an image that they are happy with online, but internally they may suffer insecurities within themselves, triggering the psychological aspects of a person. A poll that was taken in the survey stated, social media influencers lifestyles are desirable. Why? Several participants' responses geared to negative attributes towards the desirability of such life. A participant in the study stated, *"I wish I could feel that monetarily stable, however, I would hate to be in the public eye everyday."* Another one stated, *"Through social media, people are able to share all the positive aspects of their life and create a false image of happiness to the audience."* Lastly, a third participant reinforced the false image of self-identity, *"Social media influencers typically have a virtual life but don't ever live in the moment."* Both women and men feel insecure at some point in their lives and experience moments where their identity comes into question."The Internet may serve distinct functions for socially anxious and lonely individuals" (Gross. et al., 2002). Aspects such as social media, magazine outlets, and television can all influence the ways in which one perceives self. In many ways, the survey provided participants' feelings towards the desirability that social media

influencers lives may have on the public. Other responses geared towards knowing that some influencers present different presentations of self online rather than who they truly are in day to day interactions.

Julie L. Andsager (2014) discussed several studies that were conducted on the measurement of idealized bodies and how to obtain an ideal body. But she states that the purpose of her study was to see the process by which social media may increase body dissatisfaction and result in negative affective responses. She focused on three elements to prove her study, all three addressed the potential to lend itself well to social media as a potentially ameliorative means of addressing the media-related aspects of body dissatisfaction. She found that women are more prone to having self-image issues than men and that people who suffer with self-esteem issues are more likely to be influenced by social media than others. Two assumptions were made by using the uses-and gratification approach, one being, “that the youth is seeking information about body image and the second being, that images posted on social media sites may be as influential as those found in traditional television or magazine content, which implies a similar degree of homogeneity among social media images” (2014). According to Dittar (2006), it was also found that girls' internalization of “body perfect” ideals and body size stereotypes begin when girls in Western societies are as young as 3 years-old. Also, Mass media had been implicated as an especially significant source of influence of these perceptions. Dittar stated, “Beginning with young girls’ exposure to mass communicated images of the Barbie doll— “the cultural icon of female beauty” moving developmentally to viewing of television advertisements and programs that celebrate ultra-thin models, and culminating in adolescence and early adulthood with appearance-focused Facebook conversations, picture sharing, and fashion-focused

tweets.”(Dittmar et al. 2006, p. 283). In other words, Andsager and Perloff suggest that in asserting these assumptions, it could be said that social media emphasizes the importance of a young woman's body and therefore does not shed any positive reinforcement onto the confidence of women seeking information about body images online.

A separate study was conducted by Woods, and Scott (2016) examining the correlation between social media use and the effects of self-esteem, sleep quality, and depression. The well being of young adults highly depends on the amount of self-care that they are partaking in their daily activities. In Woods and Scotts argument they developed three main factors that contributed to the overall component of their analysis. The first being; to understand the link between social media and poor sleep, the second relying on understanding how the usage of social media affects the well-being of adolescents; and lastly, how social media relates to self-esteem levels. Their study showed a greater overall social media use, nighttime-specific social media use, and emotional investment in social media were each associated with poorer sleep quality and higher levels of anxiety and depression. All three of these aspects contributed to the main factor of the distraction social media outlets can impose on individuals, especially young adults. The interaction between an individual and a social media platform can be distracting to self-identity and growth.

Andsager’s (2014) research and Wood’s & Scott’s (2016) research both contribute to the understanding how social media usage may affect an individual. However, the focus of Stella C. Chia’s study (2007) specifies the discussion of self-image ideologies within gender specifically Singapore women. Social media is a universal component and can affect anyone and everyone around the world. This study interrogates differences and similarities between Asian culture and

Western cultures. The importance of this study is the assertion that no matter where in the world one may be located, media platforms can be influential. This study was focused on the third-person perception involving effects of media images of thin bodies and how they may create or strengthen young women's desires to become thin. They found that the perceptions of media effects, at least on oneself, are likely to lead people to accommodate medial portrayals. Asserting that these young women would partake in "various weight-loss methods, such as dieting, taking dieting pills, or attending slimming centers" (Chia 2007, p.677). The authors conclude that media *can* influence self-body issues and potentially promote body image disturbance and eating disorders.

Constantly monitoring social media influencers can have a negative outlook on how an individual may view themselves. Individuals are constantly monitoring their bodies in relation to others which could affect their outlook on their lives. Aspiring to look like someone who is on the internet is unrealistic, and can disrupt the flow of emerging young adults who are trying to figure out who they are. While it is seen that the usage of social media can influence one's self-perception, I argued that extensive usage of social media platforms may not be constructive for the development of young adults. Aspirations then shift when attainability encounters reality.

Aspirations:

Attainability vs reality

Aspirations can be measured in several ways. It can be a stage in life where happiness within is complete and near to perfect. It can be a stage in life where money and success is top priority. It can also be a stage in life where a person is living the life that he/she has always

dreamt of. What young adults aspire to can range from a person, lifestyle, commodity, or life path. The roadblock that many times interrupts the ongoing highway of achieving the goal is money. Money no matter what, is a huge component in what an individual can achieve.

Aspirations therefore are left as not so much a reality, but a dream.

Hart (2016), demonstrates how young adults all have different goals and futures. “I want to be debt-free;” “I want to get out of this city;” “I want to be a drug dealer;” “I want to be a good Muslim;” “I want to go to university;” “I want to find inner peace.” These contrasting and diverse aspirations, from young people in UK schools and colleges, resonate with Arun Appadurai’s symbolic interactionism view that, “aspirations are never simply individual. They are always formed in interaction and in the thick of life” (325). Aspirations are created through the examples that individuals leave behind once he/she has accomplished them. Aspirations are supposed to inspire people in having goals in life. Hart stated, “I suggest that aspirations are vital to human development and yet their complexity presents a number of challenges. There are challenges related to the development and protection of the freedom to aspire, the challenge of supporting the transformation of aspirations into capabilities, the dilemmas related to the judgement of feasibility and the roles of aspiring in relation to both capability and functioning” (Hart 2016, p.337). Aspirations are hopes and ambitions of young adults who see more than meets the eye. Some young adults' ambitions are focused on education and successful jobs. As a kid, parents and loved ones, are looked up too for what they do on their every day basis. Some guardians have fulfilling jobs and nurture that aspect to these young adults as a life path to be taken. In the Kintrea (2015) study, the education and job aspirations are looked at in relation to economic opportunities. Kintrea stated, “Much of the literature and all of the policy interest is on

education and jobs. While aspirations for education and for jobs are clearly separable, the predominant requirement for workers in more highly skilled (and better paid) jobs to have achieved more than basic education means that in practice they are often conjoined” (Kintrea 2015, p.667). To achieve fulfillment in an individual's aspirations, money and success seem to be a key component. Money is one of the main components individuals want in their lives, therefore, young adults do not have the same opportunities as other people in society. Creating a profound discrepancy in the ability to fulfill an individual's aspirations.

Opportunity for some young adults starts with economical backgrounds, but the reality of those ambitions are true to the power behind believing in one self. Internet platforms are used world wide, making it attainable from a field of diversity. Social media has become an ‘activity’ that is used multiple times a day by a person. It has become a place of self-expression and a source of happiness for some. Social media platforms have made it possible to connect with people all over the world and view something at the same time. Although there has been a handful of good components to the internet, the usage of social media has managed its way in making a detrimental impact on some young adults. Some young adults view a ‘like’ on an Instagram picture as a validation for their self-worth. People are scrolling for hours just to measure what is being ‘liked’ by some and what is unpopular. Sherman (2016), discussed how that thought process can evoke negative responses. Sherman stated, “Previously, we dubbed Likes and similar features ‘Quantifiable Social Endorsement (QSE)’ and demonstrated that the level of QSE on Instagram photos—that is, the popularity of photographs posted online—affected both behavioral and neural responses to those images. Adolescents were more likely to Like photographs they believed to be popular, and neural responses differed as a

function of popularity” (Sherman 2016, p. 38). Sherman found in her study that young adults who constantly looked at their post to see how many likes it got, showed significantly greater activity in their brain region in contrast to viewing unpopular posts. Sherman stated, “In other words, for each photograph type, participants more frequently ‘liked’ popular than unpopular photographs” (Sherman 2016, p. 41). Sherman’s study reinforced the idea that popularity wins over the mentality of young adults. The support of peers on social media is superficial when it comes to whether or not the post was ‘popular’ enough to grab the attention of followers. Due to social media emerging as a practice for young adults, there is a factor of the over usage of social media as a distraction and interruption in development as a young adult. However, social media has also been seen as an opportunity for access to a job or public figure. Not only do four-fifths of American teens use social media, but many consider social media to be fundamental to their everyday experience. According to Stern & Odland (2017), “Young people use social media for everything from keeping in touch, coordinating social events, recording memories, and sharing art and music, to shopping, socializing, and self-expression. Social media use is embedded within teens’ daily activities and, for many, integral to managing relationships and participating in public culture” (Stern & Odland 2017, p.506). It allows the freedom to express oneself however he/she would like to online, it's easy access (for those who are fortunate enough), and it is universal. An individual can create a blog online and reach people all over the world. A person can also create a YouTube channel which reaches all parts of the world, and that person receives income from the support of other people around the world. Social media platforms have created jobs that are not traditional nine to five jobs, and young people like to be different. A lot of people do not like differences, and the older population did not grow up with the technology that

is around now, and seem to not understand the positives but rather the negatives. Stern & Odland article reinforces the idea that the older population does not necessarily understand social media outlets. “Indeed, by constructing a mediated reality that privileged an exclusively adult vantage point, the news coverage that we analyzed neglected to regard teenagers as active agents whose social media use is embedded meaningfully into their everyday lives. Instead, the press coverage highlighted dysfunction and danger as at the very core of teens’ social media interactions” (Stern & Odland 2017, p. 515). Older adults have viewed social media usage as a way to distort the youth from reality and the real world, but it has been a foundation for the future within technology.

Young adults have grown up with the technological advances that are engraved in society. It would only make sense for those young adults to utilize what has been given to them. The problem occurs when those individuals abuse the power of social media for negative ways. The highlight of social media platforms is that it provides aspirations for young adults in their lives. It could begin with an aspiring job career, and end up with a bright future. It is crucial to see the good and bad attributes of a single problem, in order to maintain conversation for improvement. Aspirations are created with attainability and black-lashes with the reality of some situations, those situations are influenced by money and status.

Class:

Material possessions markers as success

Karl Marx (1886) argued that individuals are positioned within a class hierarchy. He sought to differentiate the working class and the elite. The Bourgeoisie known as the upper class and the Proletariat as the working class. The Bourgeoisie depended on the means of production of the Proletarians. The class hierarchy that Marx discussed in his work, is extremely compatible with the class positions in today's society.

Kids grow up knowing what can be obtained and what can not be obtained due to the flow of money. The majority of what people have in their lives can tell what kind of life they are living. Young adults go to school and see what's trending within their friend groups and whatever the object may be, s/he would want it next. The construction of young adults are built from their social guidance in school and during their outside activities. The topic of the day may be a celebrity breaking news, or the new Yeezys that just came out. The world is built on having materialistic items that cause individuals to try to one up one another, which can lead to a detrimental development of young adults. Class plays an important role in shaping the possession of cultural capital, and there is a huge relation between social class and young adult's aspirations.

Peerayuth Charoensukmongkol (2018) study, focused on the role of social media use intensity on social comparison and envy in teenagers. This study focused on the intensity of social media in comparison with peers. According to Charoensukmongkol, "The results indicated that teenagers who rated themselves higher on social media use intensity measures tended to report a higher degree of social comparison and envy" (Charoensukmongkol 2018, p.76). In the study, it was discovered that the social environment influenced the competition young adults found themselves in while rating one another on social media platforms. Those social environments that individuals were in, were not up to scale to the ones that were being idealized,

causing friction in the class of young adults. When young adults felt their identity being questioned due to their social environment, it made them feel less than and not worthy enough to have aspirations. Young people from ethnic minority backgrounds are sometimes positioned as having undeveloped aspirations. That is due to the lack of exposure the people that do not have the same economical opportunities face. Building on Charoensukmongkol's study, teenagers may feel jealous of one's personal belongings if they know that it cannot be obtained. Referring to the material belongings of one, can state the kind of class s/he is living in. Additionally, several scholars have concluded that some "Whites and individuals from higher socioeconomic communities believe that these stereotypes are true and often rationalize the persistence of the inequalities in various societies with explanations influenced by their beliefs in these societal stereotypes" (Degand 2015, p. 874).

According to The Statistics Portal, 79% of the U.S. population use social media. Due to the high number in the usage of social media, it's hard to get people away from using it so much. Especially when it comes to young adults, everything is on their phones. All apps such as Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat, and Youtube can be seen as addicting for some. Lee (2008) explained that, "This generational label suggests that young people today are, irrespective of their background, surrounded by digital and interactive technologies and growing up with a sense of digital expertise, especially compared to their parents who grew up with the 'passive' medium of television" (Lee 2008, p. 142). The celebrities who post their daily activities on social media have an audience of young adults who are looking up to them. The content creators who do reckless stunts and activities are being viewed by an audience that admires that content and may

aspire to act on those same behaviors. Content creators and celebrities are looked up too and several individuals feel passionate in becoming an influencer.

Ali et. al (2017), discussed the reliance for large corporations on social media. The focus of this study was to discuss the ways in which money can impact celebrities' lifestyles. This study also demonstrates the kind of lifestyle that young adults look up too when they utilize social media platforms. According to Ali et al. (2017), “when users see the ads, the message of the company is fresh in their minds that’s why they can purchase the products early. However, it requires the trust by the individuals to purchase the specific product form specific online company. This trust leads to the purchasing behavior of the individuals” (Ali et al. 2017, p. 538). The majority of these celebrities that these young adults admire and aspire to be, are completely unattainable for individuals that do not have an income of a million dollars! These are young adults who are still going to school and working part time jobs, it is unpredictable to say when or if those people are going to achieve that false identity. Building on Ali et al. (2017) theory, by utilizing social media platforms individuals are exposed to ads that celebrities repost; therefore, making whatever the item is necessary to have. Due to the high numbers of social media usage amongst young adults, the audience that these ads are hitting are these young adults, that for the majority of the time, don’t have the means to buy the item. Class therefore clashes with the lifestyle that these celebrities and content creators have to the lifestyle that a young adult still attending school have. Celebrities and/or influencers are just regular people but because of their status, they are looked at with such uniqueness that people want. They are online personalities with a large number of followers, across social media platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, Snapchat, or personal blogs. They have influence over their followers. Their influence consists in

the fact that their ideas and their behaviors will not only be positively evaluated by their followers, but also imitated.

The widespread of companies enforcing their products on young adults, weakens the fight for economical equality. A report done on an influential vlogger on YouTube, known as Zoella, shared the institutional involvement of class. With the recent “institutionalization of social commerce in which social media technologies and practices play key roles in shaping consumer behaviors and decisions. Major cosmetics brands have come to recognize the potential of engaging and collaborating with beauty vloggers to sell their products” (Berryman & Kavka, 2017, p. 308). The relationship between a YouTube vlogger and the consumer (young adults) is created for a sense of bondage. Zoella, the beauty vlogger, along with several others, create a genuine relationship with the consumer and follower. She is known in the community to be a ‘big sister’ to the ones that view her videos about makeup and fashion. That sense of identity to some creates trust and comfort in what she endorses to buy. Those who lack the economical means to afford those products are the ones who suffer the inequality of class. Berry & Kavka (2017), explained, “By investigating the ways in which intimacy is encouraged by, or within, the content of Zoe’s videos, as well as through her interactions with fans on social media platforms such as Twitter, we propose that Zoe’s success can be encapsulated by the phrase ‘commodification through intimacy’, insofar as intimacy frames the conditions for her recent production and endorsement of a range of commodities whilst also contributing to her own commodification as a celebrity”(p.309). As an influential leader to a community, Zoe Sugg also known as Zoella, has the role of spreading commodifications to the public eye. Those who have a low socio-economic life and idealize her can fall victim to class discrimination.

Young adults do not have the means to keep up with everything that these celebrities and mentors may be selling. Class is therefore a huge factor in what makes something obtainable for the markers of success for young adults. Their aspirations therefore, are put on the back burner until they are able to achieve what they want. Another factor that is put on the back burning for several people, is how individuals are treated when it comes to their gender.

Gender:

Idealized gender roles

Influencers such as Instagram models or Youtube bloggers can portray an ideal kind of lifestyle. The popular Instagram feed displays all sorts of pictures and videos. Some include jokes on masculine and feminine behavior. Werner et al. (2004), “The media passively reinforce gender and ethnic stereotypes. Passive reinforcement of gender and ethnic stereotypes was demonstrated in a content analysis of Rolling Stone magazine, a popular adolescent periodical, which examined gender and ethnic themes” (Werner. et al 2004, p. 304). Some pictures entail how the ideal girl gender ought to look, and how muscular the ideal guy should be. In the post-millennial generation of smartphone users, social media platforms influence the appearance, behavior and lifestyle one should aim for.

Manago et al. (2014), discussed whether both young women and men using social networking sites are vulnerable to objectified body consciousness, and to extend this line of research to sexual health. In their study they sought to discover if there were any possibility for the breakdown of gender role binaries. Manago et al. (2014) stated that, “Overall involvement in the cultural milieu of Facebook is associated with higher objectified body consciousness among

both women and men. It was found that it was regardless of gender, the more young people are active and engaged in Facebook as part of their social lives, the more frequently they engage in body surveillance, the greater their self-worth fluctuated as function of their physical appearance, and the greater their enjoyment of being perceived as a sex object” (Manago et al. 2014, p. 4). Manago et al. (2014) study showed that there was no gender difference between the association of body shame and sexual assertiveness. All genders feel targeted on the internet. It may be a social media platform that asserts gender roles in the gym, or it may be a makeup channel that speaks to women and not men.

Gender role binaries are associated with the usage of social media platforms and media outlets. There is a distinction in society where men and women are supposed to act a certain way. Media platforms can allow individuals to behave any way they want. Individuals who associate as a non-binary identifying person can hide what is masculine and what is feminine on social media platforms. People who may be scared to come out as gay or lesbian could be able to reflect on the aspirational lifestyle that they may want one day. Ringrose and Barajas (2011), research study focused on the relation of gender differences through social networking sites. Researchers Ringrose and Barajas found that there are good and harsh outcomes through the process of gender identity and sexual regulation. Their data concluded that sexual identity is negotiated online. “Virtual space operates as a place of sexual freedom and play, providing opportunities for communication that open up gender and sexual identity in new ways. However it was discovered that, there are risky implications with the discourses of sexual performance. Such as the ways girls encounter sexual terms that are harsh to hear and position them to fall under the uncertainties of gender roles”(Ringrose & Barajas 2011, p.134). There are significant

gender differences in the real world and online which can lead to risk. It's hard to get away from the stereotypes that are instilled in today's society. YouTubers put out content for their audience and in a way behave like actors for their performance (Goffman, 1956). Every act can lead to a different interpretation of what was presented. There are men who put out make-up content and those creators go against the gender roles of men and women. There are also women who play video games and stream their process in the game and she too goes against the gender roles that are instilled. The gender roles of one being too masculine or too feminine can lead to people stereotyping the smallest trait of someone. Researchers such as Manago et al. (2014) and Ringrose & Barajas (2011) used their research to review the aspects that contribute to the gender socialization of society. They challenge the notion of gender roles and how those obstacles may be a factor in achieving one's goal. Their aspiration in life may be challenged when their character or sexuality comes into question.

Research has investigated the perception of self-image through social media influences. Previous research also discusses the attitudes on gender differences on social media outlets, and the ways in which class decides one's future. My research attempts to fill in the gaps that previous research on social media has left. Most of the research that I have reviewed focus primarily on the perception one holds on self-image through the impacts of social media usage. This proposal seeks to understand the ways that social media impacts the aspirational lifestyle young adults may aim for. However, there is little to no research that has been conducted on the kinds of aspirational lifestyles teenagers may want. It is important to understand that as generations change, there are different kinds of lifestyles that emerge with time. Living a lifestyle of a YouTube content creator is much different than living the lifestyle of a Wall Street

man. This study also sheds light onto the ways in which gender socialization is distributed throughout social media platforms. I hypothesize that the use of social media among young adults is correlated with unrealistic aspirational lifestyle, which can negatively affect their self-identity.

Methodology

This paper is based on a survey conducted through SurveyMonkey. The aim of the survey was to ask questions in regards to social media and how it is tied to aspirations. Participants of the survey did not provide any personal information (name, phone number, and email address) in order to ensure the privacy of the individuals. All participants' answers were anonymously submitted; therefore, allowing them to answer the questions as freely as possible.

The survey was distributed online on two separate platforms. Instagram, Facebook, and SUNY Purchase Open Forum (Facebook group). All of these posts were submitted on more than one occasion, in order to gain a wider participation count. Snowball sampling was used in order to gather participants. In total there were sixty-nine participants that took the survey.

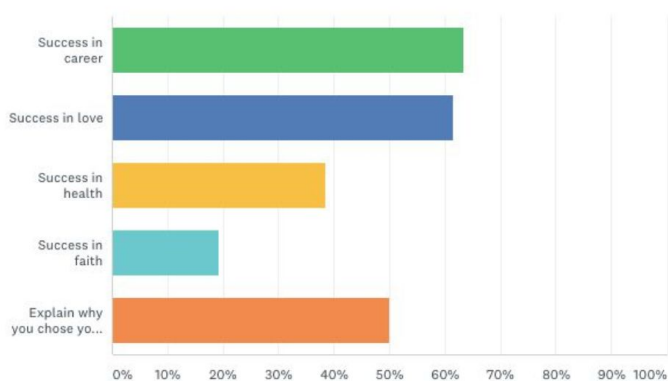
Demographics of the participants included eight males (15.38%), forty females (76.92%), three non-binary individuals (5.77%), and one gender non-conforming individual (1.92%). The survey also asked to include race and age. The average age of the participants was twenty-two years of age with a total of fifteen participants (28.85%). The participants were asked to identify their race: forty participants identified White/or Caucasian, three participants identified Black/or African American, four participants identified Hispanic/or Latino, and four participants identified with more than one race. Once the demographic of the participants was asked on the survey, the following questions sought to answer their thoughts on social media. The following

survey and questions will be down below attached to the Appendix. All of these questions were asked in order to fulfill a better understanding on the ways social media can influence the aspirations of young adults. In the findings, the explanations of some participants will be further looked at.

Findings

What is the thing you want most success in?

Answered: 52 Skipped: 17



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
▼ Success in career	63.46% 33
▼ Success in love	61.54% 32
▼ Success in health	38.46% 20
▼ Success in faith	19.23% 10
▼ Explain why you chose your answer(s).	Responses 50.00% 26

The one aspect of life that was the highest in rating was the component of success in a career. With a 63.46 percentile, it was the highest rating in the survey. It proves that several young adults aspire to be successful in their life paths and job choices. Not falling far behind, thirty-two (61.52%) participants rated success in love as the aspect of life that they wanted most success in. With a decline of importance, success in health was rated most successful with 20

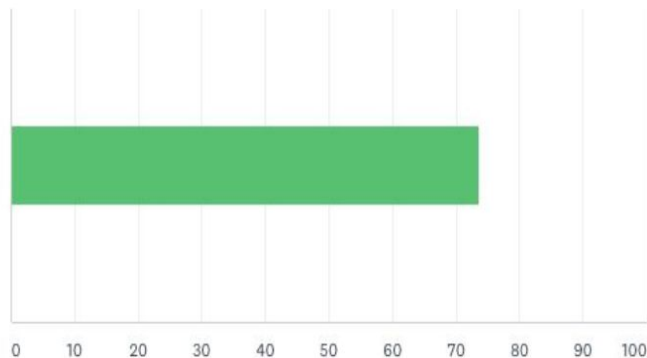
(38.46%) participants. Lastly, success in faith rated first place with 10 (19.23%) participants.

This question allowed the option to explain as to why they choose their answers. Several participants (8 to be exact) stated that they needed all four in order to have a healthy lifestyle. *“I want success in all those categories because I think life requires a lot of balance and having success in each is the key to a successful, and beautiful life.”* Another participant stated, *“I chose all four. I think a healthy balance of all four is very important. Without one, you generally can’t have the others.”* Although there were several people that identified with all four as crucial components to a healthy life. There were several people that were adamant that money and success were key. With success in career rating at a high of 63.46 percentile, several participants made remarks about success and money being the utmost important elements in a successful life. A participant stated, *“Once you have a steady career, everything else will fall into place.”* Another participant stated, *“Career accomplishments can impact the world.”*

Several individuals put their success in career choice as their prime component in life. Success in career choice can influence the type of lifestyle a young adult would like to pursue. Those who are questioning their identity and self-worth may be vulnerable to getting to that place of success. Also, those who are less fortunate do not question the career they go into. Whatever source of income that could be provided to the family would be useful, making the opportunities and aspirations for some individuals limited.

How often do you use social media platforms such as, YouTube, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, and Facebook?

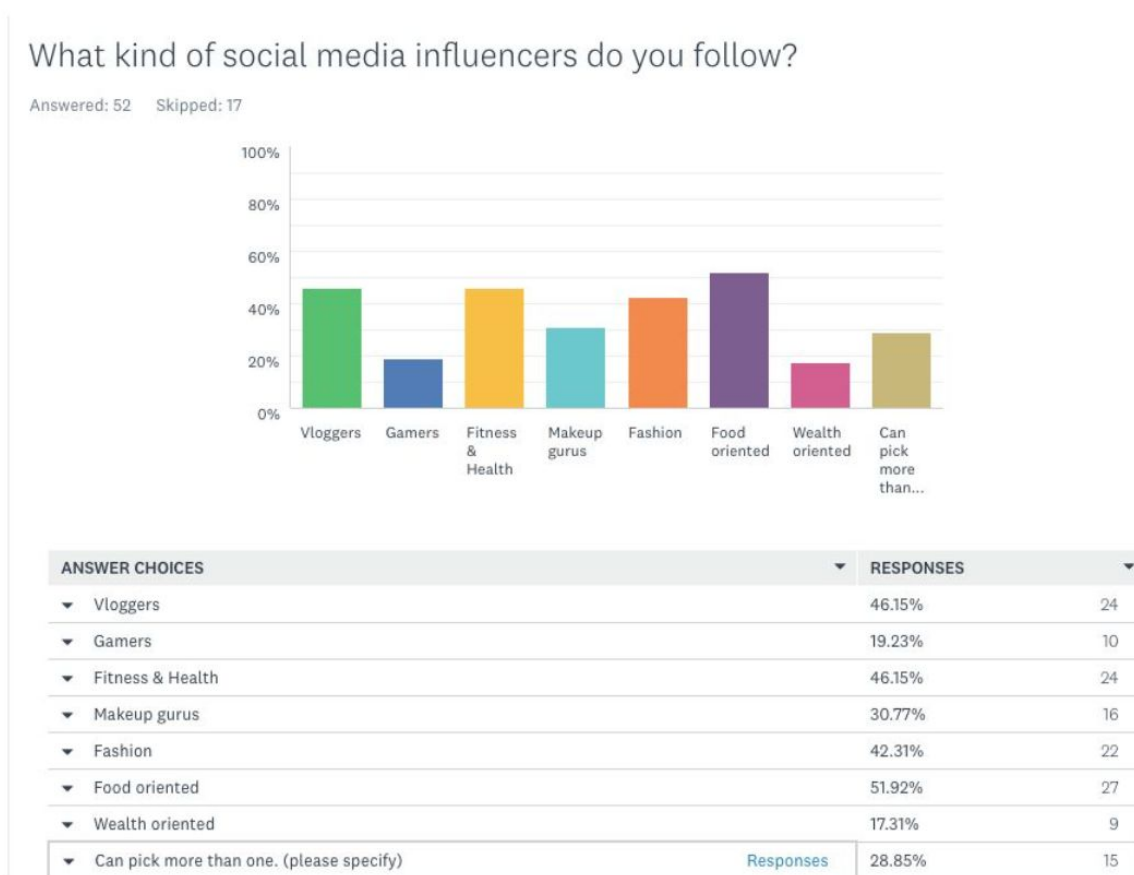
Answered: 52 Skipped: 17



ANSWER CHOICES	AVERAGE NUMBER	TOTAL NUMBER	RESPONSES
Responses	74	3,824	52

The frequency of social media usage is important to discuss because the obsession with phones and social media platforms can be highly detrimental to the development of young adults. Young adults estimated at a 74 percentile usage of social media in a day, creating social media as a true activity for the majority of young adults in this survey. Individuals who are constantly on their phones have been discovered to be fully attached to their devices. Kelly McSweeney (2019), discovered that “Just like a gambling or substance addiction, social media addiction involves broken reward pathways in our brains. Social media provides immediate rewards — in the form of attention from your network — for minimal effort through a quick thumb tap. Therefore, the brain rewires itself, making you desire likes, retweets, emoji applause and so on.” The attachment to an individual's phone can be argued as the pathway to everyday life. It has become normalized to have a phone (smartphone) in today's world. When an individual does not have a phone they are looked at as abnormal.

The question itself did not allow the participants to range their time spent on social media platforms at a realistic measure. For future research, the question should allow the participants to gauge their time spent on social media through a bar-graph or pie chart. This question failed to answer the realistic time spent on the internet. For future research, if individuals were given the option to answer what they were doing/watching on these platforms; a better discussion could be held for the research on social media tied to aspirations.



The focus of this question was to determine the types of people and categories participants were eager to follow. Vloggers was rated at 46.15% by 24 participants, Gamers was rated at 19.23 % by 10 participants, and Fitness & health was rated at 46.15% by 24 participants.

Makeup gurus was rated at 30.77% by 16 participants, Fashion was rated at 42.31% by 22 participants, Food oriented content was rated at a high 51.92% by 27 participants, and lastly, wealth was rated at a low 17.31% by 9 participants. The option to choose more than one was available and 15 individuals decided to do so. The majority of them chose to combine fashion and makeup related content together. A participant stated, "*many supermodels, fashion bloggers, all of the Kardashians, celebrity news accounts, etc.*" This statement reinforced the idea of idealizing the LA type of lifestyle that there is. Models, money, celebrities, and millionaires are aspects of life that young adults seem to admire. Several of those individuals aspire to become or have that kind of lifestyle to live.

Travel was a content that was not chosen to be evaluated by several participants stating that that content was what they were viewing on the internet. The high rated internet content of food at 51.92% by 27 individuals was a surprise to the data. In proposing the idea of having social media content be an aspiring outlet for young individuals, food related content was the last component that was expected to be in such high relevance.

Social media influencers lifestyles are desirable. Why?

Answered: 52 Skipped: 17



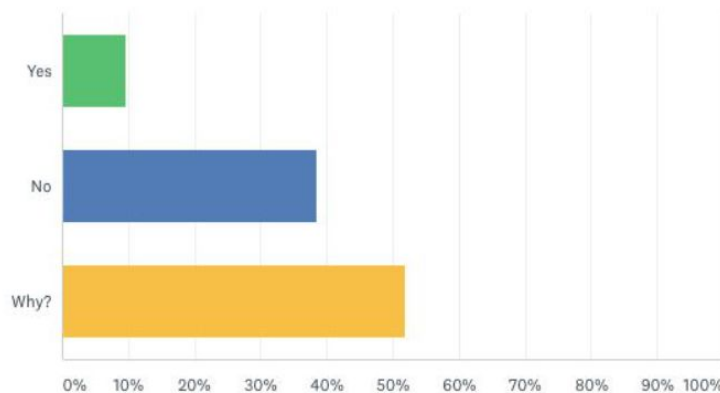
ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Extremely desirable	11.54%	6
Somewhat desirable	67.31%	35
Not at all desirable	21.15%	11
Please explain why it is or is not desirable.	53.85%	28

This question in the survey was most certainly the one that allowed more freedom of speech in regards to social media and if they felt it was something they could possibly desire. Thirty-five (67.31%) participants agreed that the lifestyle of social media influencers/creators were somewhat desirable to the eye. Six (11.54%) participants stated that their lifestyle was extremely desirable, and 11 (21.15%) participants stated that it was not at all desirable to them. The ones who visioned it to be extremely desirable, responses were in due to the freedom and money flow that they have. Here are some examples of how participants stated they felt towards the extreme desire of lifestyles: *“Just being weird for money sounds kinda cool.”* *“They have money and usually nice bodies.”* *“Because you seem them living a lavish lifestyle, while being extremely happy.”* These individuals were content in desiring that kind of lifestyle reinforcing the false image of self-identity that is established through social media platforms.

Contrary to extremely desirable, the majority selected somewhat desirable in part because several stated that the lifestyle felt easy, yet fake. Social media is known to a lot of people as a way to extend a part of your life on the internet through a perfect lens. Social media is also known to be used by young adults as a way to monitor what their favorite celebrity or social media influencer is up to. To have a constant reminder of what kind of lifestyle an individual does not have, can be detrimental to the attainability of life paths. A participant stated, *“They present a jet setting lifestyle. They travel, eat great food, have great clothes. They don’t work a mundane 9-5 job. We only see the highlights though.”* This statement highlights the feeling that several participants stated they felt. They felt as if it looked like a pretty life on the internet but presents a different presentation of self (Goffman, 1956) through the false sense of identity. Another individual stated, *“Sometimes they live the life we want to have, but we don’t know entirely what behind closed doors if it’s really desirable. Of what we can see, it gives off the temporarily desirable feel.”* Influencers tend to always put out the positive aspects of their life, no one is going to post how stressed they are with their management team, etc. Those who are able to understand that not everything that is put out on the internet is real are the ones who surpass the struggle of false identity. Those who do have the understanding of such ideas, are the ones who fall vulnerable to the struggle of self-acceptance. Aspects of life such as class, race, gender, all fall into question when a young adult is aspiring to be someone on the internet.

If you had the chance, would you pursue becoming a social media influencer? Why?

Answered: 52 Skipped: 17



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
▼ Yes	9.62% 5
▼ No	38.46% 20
▼ Why?	Responses 51.92% 27

The last question brought a controversial ending to the survey. Five (9.62%) participants voted that they would pursue becoming a social media influencer if the opportunity presented itself. Twenty (38.46%) participants voted no in becoming a social media influencer. The highest rating with a 51.92 percentile, voted to explain why or why not a person would pursue becoming a social media influencer. Several participants stated that they would consider doing so, if it made them money. An individual stated, *“To be honest, I’m not sure. I mean if it pays the bills and gives me money for leisure spending I mean why not?”* Another individual stated, *“money just to post pictures, and a bunch of free stuff!”* There was a complete divide in the responses, some mentioned that if it made them money then they see no harm, and others mentioned that it was out of reach and not something that they would be interested in. A quote from a participant

in the study stated, *“To be honest, if it pays the bills and gives me money for leisure spending I mean why wouldn’t I want to become an influencer?”*

The ones who were not interested in becoming a social media influencer, stated that they liked their privacy and they would not be able to live a life on the internet at all times. Several other participants stated that it would be hard on their mental health if they did decide to pursue becoming an influencer. One stated, *“I’m not confident enough.”* Another one stated, *“I don’t think I’m interested enough to be in the public eye.”* Several of the participants opened up as to how social media made them feel about themselves. Their answers reflected that social media does have an impact as to how individuals may view themselves in comparison to other people on the internet. Several other participants stated that it would not be a good idea because the internet is not stable enough and there's too much that comes with being an influencer. Participants stated that because the internet is constantly changing as well as trends, it may be hard to have as a stable job. One day you may be on top of subscribers/followers, and the next day the individual may be on the bottom of the trending page. Other individuals stated that influencers only put out the content that their followers want to see. It’s hard to cope if behind the scenes is something that others would want to deal with on a daily basis. The question brought a variety of responses and allowed the discussion of how individuals view social media and if it is something that may inspire them in their life.

Discussion

This study explored the overall impact of social media and the ways it impacts the aspirational lifestyle of young adults. The results showed that when it comes to the aspirations of young

adults, it varies from individual to individual. Hart's (2016) article reinforces the idea that the aspirations of young adults are all different and stem from different backgrounds/ideas. In the article Hart states, "aspirations are never simply individuals, they are always formed in interaction and in the thick of life" (p.325). The participants in the survey had the same conclusion as well. With the diverse responses, it displayed that people value different aspects of life and they do change as people age. The survey also had different conclusions on how people felt towards certain aspects of life.

Social media has been proven by a number of studies that the overuse of such, can be extremely detrimental to the development of young adults' identities. Radovic (2017) argued that the attachment of internet platforms can severely damage the psychological traits of an individual. "Depressed adolescents use the internet more frequently. With regard to SM specifically, adolescents who experienced high levels of psychological distress, unmet mental health needs, and suicidal ideation were more frequent users of SM such as Facebook" (p.4). Over analyzing their self-worth in relation to other images on the internet can be impactful for young adults' self-esteem. Radovic's study concluded that the overuse of internet platforms can be detrimental to the development and psychological aspects of an individual's life. The survey conducted however did not provide any questions that could come to a better conclusion to Radovic's study. There were participants that stated that they did not feel confident or interesting enough to become an influencer; however, it failed to reinforce Radovic's study. In future research, providing questions that evaluate an individual's feelings towards their self-worth in relation to the over usage of social media can better provide an understanding.

Individuals' economical status is also an indication as to what a young adult is available to achieve or not. Previous literature has demonstrated that the social environment does have an impact on what individuals are able to achieve or not. When young adults feel their identity being questioned due to their social environment, it makes them feel less than and not worthy enough to have aspirations. Young people from ethnic minority backgrounds are sometimes positioned as having undeveloped aspirations. That is due to the lack of exposure the people that do not have the same economical opportunities face. (Charoensukmongkol, 2018). The study failed to analyze if class impacts the aspirations of young adults. The study did however highlight the ways individuals idolize social media influencers because of their ability to make money and have success. Several participants stated that they would pursue becoming a social media influencer only because it is an "easy" way to make money. The study failed to analyze how class is differentiated in different social environments. For future research, providing semi in-depths interviews in different social environments may allow a wide range of responses. Providing semi in-depths interviews may allow the interviewees to open up the discussion on how class affects their aspirations in relation to social media.

The study failed to analyze whether or not social media impacts the aspirational lifestyle of young adults. For future research, changing the survey question to perhaps an in-depth interview process would allow the individuals more freedom in answering the questions. The demographic also was predominately young women and very low on the male, non-binary, and gender non-conforming individuals. In having the population being predominantly young women, it did not allow for research on how gender is shown and influence on social media platforms. For future research, expanding the demographic to different populations could expand

the question of aspirations. Also, expanding the demographic to a younger or older population of individuals may shift the responses. Although the research failed to answer whether or not social media impacts the aspirational lifestyle of young adults, it did gain data on the emotions of desirability to have such lifestyle. It also gained data on the aspects of life that people want most success in.

Conclusion

This study was focused on answering the question of, does social media impact the aspirational lifestyle of young adults? The survey did allow the discussion of the desirability of having such life. However, it did fail to answer if social media has an impact on how young adults view their lifestyle in relation to social media. In conducting this survey, it was interesting to find out how individuals feel towards such ideas and it did allow the opportunity for individuals to express their feelings towards such ideas. Conducting this survey allowed the foundation for future research. For future research, finding better outlets to gather responses such as semi in-depth interviews, can provide a better understanding of how individuals feel towards social media. Also, for future research, understanding the niche of the question can allow a more targeted response. There were too many ideas and pathways that this research went, so in providing a better question, there can be a better understanding of such research. Overall, in conducting this research it did allow the freedom of participants' responses and opened up the discussion in research.

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Appendix

[TEXT BOX OPTION] The person must answer the question if there is a text box option provided to gather further data.

Does social media influence the aspirational lifestyle of young adults?

1. How old are you?

- Younger than 18, thank you for your participation but this survey only evaluates ages 18 and older.
- 18
- 19
- 20
- 21
- 22
- 23
- 24
- Older than 25, thank you for your participation but this survey only evaluates ages 18-25.

2. How do you identify?

- Male
- Female
- Transgender Male
- Transgender Female
- Non-binary
- Gender non-conforming

- Other (please specify) [TEXT BOX OPTION]

3. What is your race?

- White or Caucasian
- Black or African American
- Hispanic or Latino
- Asian or Asian American
- American Indian or Alaska Native
- Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander
- Can pick more than one [TEXT BOX OPTION]

4. What is the thing you want most success in?

- Success in career
- Success in love
- Success in health
- Success in faith
- Explain why you chose your answer(s). [TEXT BOX OPTION]

5. How often do you use social media platforms such as, YouTube, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, and Facebook?

[SCALE OPTION]: not at all _____ All the time

6. What kind of social media influencers do you follow?

- Vloggers
- Gamers
- Fitness & Health
- Makeup gurus
- Fashion
- Food oriented
- Wealth oriented
- Can pick more than one. (please specify) [TEXT BOX OPTION]

7. Social media influencers' lifestyles are desirable. Why?

- Extremely desirable
- Somewhat desirable
- Not at all desirable
- Please explain why it is or is not desirable [TEXT BOX OPTION]

8. If you had the chance, would you pursue becoming a social media influencer? Why?

- Yes
- No

- Why [**TEXT BOX OPTION**]