

Health in Social Media:
The Pros and Cons to the Effect it has on Readers

A Senior Project

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By

Sam Gilbert

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Statement of the Problem

In the past few years, social media grew from a way to connect with friends to a phenomenon creating competition among peers and lack of self-esteem as a result of constant comparison. The outlets-more specifically Facebook, Instagram and Twitter- offer both positive and negative aspects to the issue.

According to the article "Top 3: Health tips use social media for your well-being" in the journal *Morning Call*, some of the pros to health in social media are the endorsement of retrieving the best medical care, finding new methods to weight loss and tips to stay motivated during a workout. However, more commonly advertised in media, are the negative aspects. In the *Star Tribune's* article "Social media becomes a battleground on body image," an emphasis on the trending movement of finding underfed girls as "thinspos" (the combination of the words "thin" and "inspiration"), demonstrate how women specifically compare themselves to others and strive to look a certain way that leads to lack of self-esteem and poor body image. In addition, those posting the photos feel the pressure to look a certain way and measure the amount of reinforcement they receive as acceptance from society. In the *Business Wire's* "Are you afraid to be your selfie," the concept of individuals using Photoshop on their photos before posting them demonstrates this concern for negative responses.

Studies show a positive correlation between the sudden influx of social media in the past few years and an increase in body dissatisfaction. Social media offers positive and negative components when it comes to health-related topics; the question is, which outweighs the other.

Background of the Problem

The cause of low self-esteem and eating disorders is constantly being tested and questioned because of the evolution that comes with technology and the growth that comes with each new generation. Women, specifically, compare themselves to others based off of what is popularized as “beautiful.” In years before the social media outburst, women looked to the pages of magazines and compared themselves to the unrealistic standard that models set out for them. Although models in the media still create pressure to look a certain way, individuals look more towards what is being shown on social media sites instead as the prevalence of it begins to grow. When looking at pictures of other women on sites such as Facebook or Instagram, it appears more attainable to look that way since the pictures viewed are often friends or acquaintances. The positive correlation between social media and eating disorders creates concern over whether health on these platforms is utilized as more of a positive or negative reinforcement.

Purpose of the Study

With the influx of technology, the new generation began focusing on what is seen digitally to retrieve news or interact with one another on social media sites. Primarily using Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, viewing others’ photos to stay updated suddenly became a detrimental influence on self-esteem and confidence as

women, more specifically, began comparing themselves to one another. According to studies, women look to those seen on social media sites as a threshold for the standard of beauty. With trending terms such as “thinspo” or the advocacy of a “thigh gap” on these sites, women began putting unrealistic expectations for themselves believing that these unattainable goals are the definitive norms.

The purpose of the study is to implore whether health in social media creates more positivity or negativity. In addition, if negative, whether the consequence of poor body image is worth getting involved in the new phenomenon. By looking into these pros and cons, readers can become more confident in their own skin without comparing themselves to one another.

Setting for the Study

This study will be conducted to collect data for a Senior Project at California Polytechnic State University in San Luis Obispo, California. Based off of surveys past on the subject matter, age groups spanning from 16- to 22-year olds are most commonly internally influenced by social media. A survey with the same 12 questions will be given to the Sigma Kappa sorority with ages spanning from 17 to 22 at California Polytechnic State University in San Luis Obispo, California. The questions will address exactly how social media affects them personally, as well as the gaps in research such as whether she thinks health in social media is perceived as more positive or negative.

Research Questions for the Study

This study set out to answer fundamental questions ranging from personal insight on the matter to generalization about whether health in social media is more positive or negative. Every question is designed as a result of literature review in order to test on women ages 17 to 22.

1. Who is primarily affected by health in social media and why is that specific population so heavily affected?
2. What are the pros to health in social media?
3. What are the cons to health in social media and when does it start to be considered that way?
4. What are ways to combat the negativity that results from health in social media?
5. Why is it important to reflect on the pros and cons to health in social media?

Definition of Terms

The following terms may be foreign to the reader and are therefore defined to clarify any confusion.

Thinspo: The combination of the words “thin” and “inspiration.” This term is applied to any individual with anorexia, bulimia and other eating disorders (EDs) that use the Internet's broad reach to encourage and network about achieving extreme, unhealthy thinness (Tillotson).

Thigh gap: An Internet trend in which girls become so slender that their thighs do not touch when standing with their feet together (Salter).

Selfie: The act of taking a picture of himself or herself by himself or herself.

Instagram: An application in which an individual uploads a photo and applies filters or borders to enhance said photograph.

Twitter: An application in which an individual uploads thoughts up to 140 characters, as well as links and photographs.

Health Belief Model: A social learning theory that focuses on behavioral change on an individual level. The model suggests that decision-makers make a mental calculus about whether the benefits of a promoted behavior change outweigh its practical and psychological costs or obstacles. That is, individuals conduct an internal assessment of the net benefits of changing their behavior, and decide whether or not to act (Green, Murphy).

Organization of the Study

The first chapter of this study lays out the purpose of the research and the definition of terms to help aid any confusion along the way. The second chapter goes into depth on the literature used for research to learn more about the different sides of health in social media. The third chapter presents the methodology of the study. The fourth chapter presents the results of the methodology and explores the meaning behind the findings compared to the literature analysis. Finally, the fifth chapter concludes the study by summarizing the findings behind the pros and cons to health in social media.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Over the past few years, social media grew from the initial idea of connecting with friends to a way of life. The advancement in technology, especially Apple, popularized applications that became the main source of social media endorsement. Facebook, which began the phenomenon, evolved into Instagram, Twitter and Snapchat. These methods of interaction all started with the same purpose: To provide a unique way to stay in touch with friends. However, as time progresses, alternative motives for these outlets do as well. Individuals, mostly teenagers, began using these forums as a way to advertise their bodies online. Once photographs in bathing suits or little-to-no clothing surfaced, the purpose to this exposure was suddenly brought into question. Social media brings positive health-related aspects to light- the promotion of healthy living and motivation to achieve fitness goals being a couple of them. However, the negative components seem to be a larger topic of interest when it comes to reporting in the media on the issue; lack of self-confidence and poor body image result from those who feel they don't measure up to the "perfect" bodies seen online. In addition, those posting the pictures are affected by the feedback received. Extensive research into articles, comparative studies and examples of the reactions to those personally affected by the influx in body and health promotion on social media brought the pros and cons to the topic into perspective. The negatives seemingly outweigh the positives; however, through introspection, the mindset and perception of the individual and his or her level of

confidence in general is the true determinant to the outcome of the effect of health in social media.

The Pros to Health in Social Media

The positives to health in social media stem from the promotion of a healthy lifestyle. In an age that primarily receives news through outlets such as Twitter and Facebook, health magazines, bloggers and columnists provide insight and tips via these various forms. In the paper “Promotion of sexual health and sexual responsibility in women's health and men's health magazines,” the positive aspects to health magazines are brought to light. In magazines, facts are backed up by sources and research in order to provide truth to readers. An in-depth analysis of *Women's Health* and *Men's Health* magazines from January 2009 to November 2012 found all issues, regarding sexual health, focused on providing clear information and only discussing positive aspects of sex, rather than the promotion of anything violent or irresponsible. The advocacy of responsible sex in these magazines leads to more responsibility and intelligence amongst readers. Twitter, a forum that prides itself on only allowing 140-characters at a time, gets straight to the point when offering information. In an article by *PR Newswire*, HealthCentral opened up a Twitter account to give daily information on new health tips, as well as open the door for readers to ask questions. The Twitter base continues to grow as more people follow the account and HealthCentral is able to answer questions pertaining to the audience with reliable information and improving health in general. Another example of health on Twitter is described in an article from *Morning Call* titled “Top

3: Health Tips use social media for your well-being.” The article offers evidence from *Women’s Health* magazine that utilizes Twitter to offer daily health tips, such as how to get the best care at hospitals and “buddy up for weight loss.” This type of platform allows actual health professionals to reach out directly to individuals in a way that could not be done before social media became a part of everyday life. In another article by *PR Newswire*, the Herborium group launched a social media campaign via Facebook and Twitter to advocate for AcnEase, a product designed to help improve acne. Although acne isn’t a direct body image concern, it still is considered a disease that alters confidence and self-image. The positive response to the social media campaign reinforces how social media impacts affirmative change when providing tips in an approachable, non-intimidating way on how to improve health. A study by UCLA Public Health actually proved the success of health advocacy via social media outlets by conducting a study that compared the effectiveness of a Web-based social media intervention versus a “usual care” intervention to improve preventative care and decrease emergency room visits among adolescents. As the study progressed, it turns out that adolescents were more informed on health care, attitudes and preventions in the Web-based social media intervention rather than those in the “usual care” intervention. In a generation fascinated by the online presence, the approach to health promotion on these forums allows for adolescents to obtain information and understand more thoroughly than any other method of intervention. The most influential media standpoint, however, is perceived through pictures. Teenagers especially look to photographs when they begin comparing themselves to models or others who have what is perceived as “perfect.” In the

article “Teens take on *Seventeen* for altered photos” in *Charleston Daily Mail*, 14-year-old Julia Bluhm gathered 12,500 signatures to present to the magazine’s top editor about the issue of models being touched up or altered on Photoshop that creates an unrealistic expectation to readers. As a response, the magazine from that moment on pointed out what was touched up in the magazine and instead offered tips on how to achieve body acceptance in a proposition called the “Body Peace Treaty.” Alterations such as these demonstrate the power of social media and the positive impact that can be made on body image acceptance. Health can be promoted in a multitude of ways on social media, and when it is, evidence of positive change results.

The Cons to Health in Social Media

Social media, a form of communication based on looking at others’ pictures and lives, inevitably leads to comparison. This negative proponent of the online world overshadows the positive aspects, such as magazines lending health tips, as reports repeatedly come out about the increased lack of self-confidence among young people. The reason for this being that adolescents compare themselves more directly with their peers, rather than models altered on Photoshop. In a study titled “Concurrent and Prospective Analyses of Peer, Television and Social Media Influences on Body Dissatisfaction, Eating Disorder Symptoms and Life Satisfaction in Adolescent Girls,” it was found that, in later years, women compared themselves with models featured in magazines. Eating disorders such as anorexia and bulimia resulted as thinness became popularized. However, since individuals now look at

social media more rather than just magazines, comparisons between actual people are being made instead. Since known friends or acquaintances' bodies seem to be more attainable than an unrealistic model, there is a positive correlation between eating disorders and social media. In a public survey conducted by the center for eating disorders at Sheppard Pratt by *PR Newswire*, a positive correlation was made between how many times a user logs onto Facebook a day and overall body satisfaction. In the survey, only 25 percent of respondents said they were happy with their current body and weight. The survey revealed four central themes: "Facebook-users spend a lot of time analyzing their bodies and others; Facebook fuels a 'camera-ready' mentality; advances in technology, such as Facebook Timeline, make it easy for people to track body and weight changes; people are not happy with their bodies and are engaging in dangerous behaviors in connection with those feelings." These strong conclusions demonstrate the negativity attached with health in social media; which, ironically, leads to unhealthy choices. In the article "Thin end of the wedge: Body image adds pressure to girls" by *The Guardian*, an interesting conclusion was made regarding girls approaching puberty at a younger age and how social media isn't helping their self-image. As they endure puberty at a younger age and with social media on the rise, these girls going through one of the biggest changes of their lives are suddenly influenced by what they see online, which leads them to holding themselves up to an unattainable standard. As social media increases, girls engaging in underage sex and the amount of eating disorders increases as well. To back it up, another article in *The Daily Telegraph* titled "Social media threatens pupils' mental health, headmaster warns," describes

the effects on students' well-being as mental health issues including anxiety and eating disorders ensues. As these problems continue to grow, teachers continue to get involved in trying to put an end to the problem that results from the scrutiny of social media. One of the most concerning aspects attached to online health platforms is the formulation of the trending term "thigh-gap" and "thinspo." These two terms refer to the gap in between thighs as a sign of beauty, as well as the "inspiration" to be "thin." In *The St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, "Social media fuels dangerous weight loss goal" targets the rise in trend of the thigh gap. The article says that studies suggest the peer pressure from social media is the cause of wanting to be so thin. Most models on Instagram typically are so slender that their thighs do not touch, so younger girls want to look the same way. An additional article in the *Star Tribune* exploits how social media gives opportunity for the promotion of starvation as individuals compete with themselves to look thinner than somebody else in a picture, known as that person's "thinspo." These unrealistic expectations reinforce the cons to health in social media; although it's desirable for individuals to be motivated by the positive aspects, they often get caught up in just comparing themselves with one another. Another interesting aspect to the negativity evolving from social media is how the girls or boys posting the photos feel about themselves; lack of self-confidence ensues from those viewing the photos and wanting to look a certain way, but not getting a certain type of feedback leads to lack of confidence and self-doubt as well. In the *Business Wire's* "Afraid to be your selfie," photos from peers are edited just as much as those from magazines. In a generation of always being "camera-ready," those involved in posting pictures feel the need to look a

certain way to impress others, just as much as those viewing the pictures do. This constant anxiety to always look a certain way puts pressure to Photoshop and edit these photos in order to be up to society's standards. This same concept is discussed in *The Christian Science Monitor's* "Facebook may amplify eating disorders and poor body image" by the feedback on "likes" that one person receives on a photograph. Users compare their photos to friends'-not just by the way they look but by how much attention the photo received. Lack of self-confidence and low body image results from not getting enough feedback, making the user think that the photo wasn't good enough. The purpose to social media is utilizing the advancement in technology to pursue others in unique ways; however, health won't be able to be thought of as a complete positive on these new platforms until the unrealistic standard and promotion to look a certain way ends.

Proactivity to Combat Cons in Social Media

As social media becomes the main outlet for collecting news and interacting with others, the controversy over whether health in social media is a positive or negative continues to be in debate. Although advocacy for a healthy lifestyle is made from health forums, the constant comparison young adults do to themselves create a negative component as eating and mental disorders continue to rise. This ironic aspect to health online leads to the conclusion that the solution to rising against the negatives starts with a subjective mindset and stopping the comparison between others. In the *Pittsburgh Tribune's* "Closing the gap between body image and health," the irony between the pros and cons to health are pointed out saying, "Social media

is part of the problem, but it can also be part of the solution.” By advocating healthy bodies and accepting figures that don’t have the thigh gap as still beautiful, the trend can catch on so the pressure to look a certain way no longer exists. Even fashion, often put under fire for promoting too-thin models, takes a stand against this obsession with looking a certain way. In *The Observer*, an article discussing a revolution at the London College of Fashion is being put underway as grassroots groups set up an event to promote diversity and acceptance of body types others than the size zero. Even in an industry centered around body image, fashion students feel the need to combat social media’s negative health promotion by showing that nobody needs to feel the need to look a certain way, even when looking at models on a runway. Some of the most inspiring movement stories against these perceptions are the ones of teenagers making change on their own. In *The Record’s* “Girls Pushing Back Against Body Image Stereotypes,” girls utilize social media platforms such as change.org to stop the negative thought processes. The irony of the situation is not lost on these girls standing up for what they believe in; their point is to change the perception of health in social media to positive rather than the negative that is currently attached to it. Blogger Lauren Sanderson also takes a stand against society’s standards in the article “Positive message set to get louder/Business agency helping student reach teen girls” in the *Journal-Gazette*. The 18-year-old promotes being confident, staying positive and moving forward, rather than dwelling on the obsession with body image. Outlets such as these not only utilize social media to get positive messages across, but reinforce the idea that health in social media doesn’t need to be negative.

Conclusion

The pros and cons to health in social media continue to be in debate. Magazines and health forums utilize platforms such as Twitter, Instagram and Facebook to promote healthy lifestyle tricks, motivation for fitness goals and interaction between users for individual questions. Even magazines, such as *Seventeen*, listen to the needs of their readers and make changes according to what will better suit them when it comes to increasing confidence and body image. However, negative aspects to social media in the form of eating disorders, lack of self-esteem, the promotion of condescending hashtags such as “thigh gap” and “thinspo,” and depression from undesirable feedback from “likes” on photographs also come from users constantly comparing themselves to one another. Ultimately, the best way to tie ends between putting an end to the negativity is promoting diversity in general so not one look is considered superior to others. Although a plethora of information supports the pros, cons and solutions to the question of health in social media, there is a gap in research regarding whether social media is the direct cause of body image issues. Positive correlations are made between the two, but outliers such as mental health issues not as a result of social media or lack of confidence before social media came into play throws off the research results. It is clear, however, that the irony of the situation plays a huge role in whether or not social media is perceived as a pro or a con: Health is a negative when users compare themselves to one another on social media platforms, but that can be turned around by using those forums as promotions for positivity.

Chapter 3

Methodology

This chapter explains the methods behind conducting data for the study including sources, collection, presentation, limitations and delimitations.

Data Sources

For this study, a group of 76 sorority girls from California Polytechnic State University in San Luis Obispo answered eight survey questions pertaining to the topic of choice. The questions ranged from how health in social media is generally presented to how health in social media specifically affected her.

Participants

The participants selected for this study were 76 girls involved in Greek life at California Polytechnic State University in San Luis Obispo. The girls' ages ranged from 17 to 22. According to research, females more often than males are the victims of negativity revolving around health in the media. Especially being a part of an organization that includes a large population of the same demographic, the subjects' exposure to the topics asked in the survey make them a reliable population to test on. The 76 females involved in the study, as well as the name of the sorority, remain anonymous in order to ensure accurate feedback about her experience with the subject.

Survey Design

The following questions were asked to each female involved in the study and were utilized as data sources for the study:

1. Circle age group:

17-18 19-20 21-22 other

2. How often do you go on social media?

- a. Every day
- b. Every other day
- c. Once a week
- d. Never

3. What is your favorite form of social media?

- a. Facebook
- b. Instagram
- c. Snapchat
- d. Twitter
- e. Other

4. Do you ever read health-related articles on social media?

Yes No

5. Do you ever take advantage of health tips offered online? (Ex: Healthy recipes or tips on how to work out)

Yes No

6. Do you ever feel a lack of confidence about yourself by comparing yourself to others on social media?

Yes No

If yes, do you compare yourself more to models or your peers (circle one)?

7. Have you ever changed your eating or workout habits in order to try to look like someone else seen on social media?

Yes No

8. Do you think that health in social media is more positive or negative (circle one)?

Data Collection

The method of data collection was in the form of a survey given out to 100 girls involved in a sorority on campus on February 22, 2015. The survey includes eight unique questions ranging from the age of the female filling out the survey to social media and health in general to her specific reaction to health seen online. The purpose of declaring the age is to compare whether younger age groups are affected by health in social media more or less than older age groups. The influx in social media over the past years suggests that the younger age groups are influenced more by what is presented online. The purpose of asking which social media platform she prefers is to compare and observe whether there is a positive correlation between a specific forum and lack of confidence. The survey ends by a general question of whether she believes health in social media leans towards positivity or negativity. The purpose of the study is to discover the pros and cons of health in social media, and the answers to the survey reflect personal accounts from the age group presumably affected by it.

Data Presentation

The surveys were printed during the morning of February 22, 2015 before being given to the girls in the evening to fill out. They were presented to the 76 individuals outside of a sorority meeting, and were filled out without talking in order to ensure there was no influence on any answers creating bias. The participants did not see the survey questions prior to the conduction of the study. This method of data presentation ensures lack of bias. By asking a sample of 76

females a part of a sorority ranging from ages 17 to 22, the full population of females involved in Greek life is represented.

Limitations

The limitations to this study result from the amount of time given to complete the study, as well as the survey process. This study is a part of a Senior Project over the span of 10 weeks. Given more time, a larger sample of the population, as well as more subjects outside of Greek life could have been involved in the study. The time limitation made it impossible to gather more information due to deadlines. The survey process offered a limitation as a result of time as well. If given more time, it would have been beneficial to give each female the survey in a quiet place not surrounded by friends. Although each participant was instructed to not speak while filling out the survey, it was impossible to eliminate bias completely and have each girl fill it out alone in a quiet room due to the sorority meeting about to take place and not enough time to take 76 girls out one-by-one.

Delimitations

The delimitations of this study are a result of cost, collection, demographics and necessary skills on the conductor's part. Due to time, it was easiest to collect data from 76 girls of generally the same demographic and involved in the same organization. Even at California Polytechnic State University in San Luis Obispo, it would have created more credibility if more subjects outside of just Greek life were asked to fill out the survey. To go even further, it would have been more accurate to

go outside of the small town to a location with more diversity since the demographic of students at Cal Poly is generally Caucasian between the ages of 17 and 22. Due to the delimitation of cost and choosing not to travel, the smallest sample of sorority girls from the same location were tested on. In addition, males were not included in the survey, which may or may not have swayed results. Finally, the necessary skills to conduct a proper survey study offered delimitations in the study. As a journalism major, classes on conducting surveys were never offered pertaining to the field of study. However, it would have been useful to take a course designed for this method of research to gather completely accurate results.

Chapter 4

Data Analysis

Chapter 4 describes the constituents that participated in this study in detail, as well as a summary of their responses to the questionnaire. Since the study was done as a survey, each description will be summarized in accordance to age groups 17-18, 19-20 and 21-22 to emphasize any differences between them; a total of 76 females were surveyed. The answers will then be analyzed along with the research questions and the literature research on the pros and cons to health in social media.

Description of Participants in the Study

17-18 year olds

The youngest generation involved in the study is the 17-18 year olds. All participants are girls that joined the sorority at California Polytechnic State University in San Luis Obispo during fall recruitment in September. The girls are all freshmen that have been involved in Greek life for approximately six months when the study was conducted. The reason why looking at girls involved in a sorority is important for this study is to see whether being involved in a stereotypical “self-centered” organization creates any impact on self-esteem or body image since the individuals involved are surrounded by their sisters on a weekly basis. In addition, girls in general are stereotyped to compare themselves to one another. This population of 17-18 year old sorority girls is imperative to the study since they fit that criterion, as well as the inference that the younger generation is more heavily

impacted by the influx in social media. There were a total of 24 girls aged 17-18 years old.

19-20 year olds

The median generation involved in the study is the 19-20 year olds. These girls are primarily sophomores and juniors that have been involved in the sorority for 2-3 years. This age group is essential to the study since they are now more comfortable with college-life and the initial shock of a new lifestyle is primarily over. Although they aren't the youngest generation that is estimated to be more apart of the social media craze, they still offer an interesting perspective to see how they compare to the younger and older girls. There were a total of 34 girls aged 19-20 years old.

21-22 year olds

The oldest generation involved in the study is the 21-22 year olds. This group of females makes up the juniors and seniors involved in the sorority for 3-4 years. These girls will supposedly be an interesting comparison to the younger generations since they are not associated with the obsession with social media and have different priorities since they are at different points in their lives; for example, they are closer to graduating college rather than getting situated and trying to find a place in the new atmosphere. There were a total of 18 girls aged 21-22 years old.

Survey of Health in Social Media

Each female involved in the study was asked to fill out an identical survey with eight questions. The first question was to fill in her age, which has already been summarized in description of participants above. The summaries of each question and the participants' responses will begin with the second question:

Question 2:

2. How often do you go on social media?

- a. Every day
- b. Every other day
- c. Once a week
- d. Never

Question #2 was designed to see how many times a day students in general go on social media, in addition to whether there is a difference in age groups on how often they visit social media sites. Supposedly, the younger generation goes on more since the craze in new technology more advertently affects them. The numbers in the results will be ordered in accordance to age group-the first number will pertain to the first age group, the second number to the second age group and the third number to the third age group.

Results to Question #2:

- Every day: (24; 33; 17)
- Every other day: (0; 0; 0)
- Once a week: (0; 1; 0)

- Never: (0; 0; 1)

The results to Question #2 do not show any significant difference between the age groups. Although a couple of girls from the older groups only go on once a week or never, the majority of every girl from every age group visits a social media site every day.

Question 3:

3. What is your favorite form of social media?

- a. Facebook
- b. Instagram
- c. Snapchat
- d. Twitter
- e. Other

Question #3 was incorporated to see if the participants involved go on more image- or text-based platforms. Although each social media platform wasn't analyzed in detail, a correlation between lack of confidence and the type of website being visited most often was put into consideration when analyzing results.

Results to Question #3:

- Facebook: (1; 1; 1)
- Instagram: (16; 20; 11)
- Snapchat: (7; 11; 5)
- Twitter: (0; 2; 0)
- Other: (0; 0; 0)

The results to Question #3 demonstrate how all generations prefer more image-based social media platforms rather than text-based. Instagram, by far the most popular, is solely focused on images, with Snapchat in second, Facebook in third and Twitter in fourth. The top two-Instagram and Snapchat-most commonly include looking at photographs of models and peers that may act as triggers to lack of confidence.

Question #4:

4. Do you ever read health-related articles on social media?

Yes No

The purpose of Question #4 was to measure the positive aspects of health in social media. Most health-related articles portray a positive image, either telling the dangers of eating disorders, giving health tips or describing new workouts. In addition, this question gives an idea of how many individuals partaking in the survey pay attention to health in the media, whether it is positive or negative.

Results to Question #4:

- Yes: (21; 26; 11)
- No: (3; 8; 5)

The results for Question #4 show that there is a larger portion of the population of the survey that pays attention to health in social media by reading health-related articles. The total number of people that said “yes” is 60 and the total number of people that said “no” is 16. This does not mean that it is a pro or con-it

just simply gives the reader an idea that there is a far greater number of individuals that make health-related topics a priority, regardless of the age. However, although the sample size for each group varies, it should be noted that there is a larger number of individuals in the older groups that say they pay attention or read health-related articles as much as the youngest group.

Question #5:

5. Do you ever take advantage of health tips offered online? (Ex: Healthy recipes or tips on how to work out)

Yes No

Question #5 was designed to create another positive perspective. One of the biggest pros to health in social media is the spread of health tips, motivational quotes regarding fitness and new methods for working out. Just as the previous question, it's important to see how many individuals actually take advantage of these health tips offered from an online forum. Although it doesn't necessarily mean it's a pro or con since it's not known from the survey question whether the girls take the tips too far, it still gives an idea of how many of those who took the survey pay attention to health in social media.

Results to Question #5:

- Yes: (23; 33; 14)
- No: (1; 1; 4)

The results for Question #5 backup the information from the previous question to a higher degree. The same conclusion is made that the females involved in the study pay attention to health in social media. Although the same conclusion is made, it's important to notice how big of an increase there is with how many individuals actually take advantage and do something with the tips offered in the media. It's unclear as to whether the population utilizes them for positive or negative reasons, but it's interesting to see how many girls pay attention to health-related articles and then actually use what they read or see online. In addition, it is recorded that the oldest generation has the highest number of females that do not take advantage of health tips offered in social media.

Question #6:

6. Do you ever feel a lack of confidence about yourself by comparing yourself to others on social media?

Yes No

If yes, do you compare yourself more to models or your peers (circle one)?

Question #6 is broken into two parts and starts to become more personal. The first part of the question was designed to follow immediately after whether the females taking the survey take advantage of health tips online and her favorite form of social media. Especially since it was suspected that the population in general prefers image-based platforms, the question was meant to get on a more personal level to see if she is affected by the images online and to see if whether or not that

certain population does something about it by taking advantage of the health tips. The second half of the question was designed as a follow-up for those that answer that they do compare themselves to others, then what people do they compare themselves to: models or peers.

Results to Question #6 Part 1:

- Yes: (22; 32; 9)
- No: (2; 2; 9)

Results to Question #6 Part 2:

- Models: (5; 14; 1)
- Peers: (15; 16, 7)
- Both: (2; 2; 1)

The results to Question #6 were extremely eye opening to how many college-aged girls involved in a sorority compare themselves to others on social media. In total, 63 girls out of 76 admitted to feeling the pressure to compare the way she looks to a model or a peer. Something interesting to point out are the results for the oldest group. In the previous question, compared to the other groups, the lowest number of girls said they pay attention to health-related articles and/or take advantage of health tips offered online. In this question about comparison, however, half of them said they compare themselves to others, which brings up the question of whether seniors avoid health online because they compare themselves. The second part of the question was interesting as well because five girls, all from different groups, added another category for “both” models and peers. Overall, it was shown that females compare themselves more to their peers rather than

models, but the results show that both models and peers affect those viewing photos online.

Question #7:

7. Have you ever changed your eating or workout habits in order to try to look like someone else seen on social media?

Yes No

Question #7 is directed more towards the females that answered, “yes” to the previous question. However, it was asked as a completely separate question rather than a part 3 to Question #6 to see if the females taking the survey, whether they compare themselves or not, have changed their eating or workout habits as a result of looking at others in social media. Although changing an appearance as a result of looking at somebody else is a point of comparison, it was important to see if anybody has actually taken action on himself or herself regardless of whether or not they identified themselves with the previous question.

Results to Question #7:

- Yes: (13; 20; 8)
- No: (11; 14; 10)

The results to Question #7 were surprisingly almost half for each age group. Although it is concerning that so many of the females surveyed felt the need to change their eating or workout habits as a result of looking at photographs of others on social media, it is still comforting to know that half of them do not feel the need to

change themselves. This is still a concern that comparison is still such a prevalent part of social media, but the results show that almost half for each group do not play into it.

Question #8:

8. Do you think that health in social media is more positive or negative (circle one)?

Question #8, the final question, was designed to wrap up the entire survey. After being asked a series of questions regarding positive and more personal aspects in regards to how social media affects confidence and self-esteem, the final question just summarizes the individual's overall feelings on the subject matter. In addition, the entire study is based off of the overall question of whether or not there health in social media is more positive or negative, so it is imperative to take into account what the sample believes with their experience with it.

Results to Question #8:

- Positive: (12; 15; 9)
- Negative: (12; 18; 5)
- Both: (0; 1; 4)

The results to Question #8 were very interesting because, like the previous question, they were very half-and-half. The second generation of females had slightly more girls say they thought that it was overall negative, but it was pretty even. Again, five girls wrote on their surveys a separate "both" category with comments. One survey said, "That is a good question. I believe it is positive because

it offers health tips, but it is negative because a lot of girls feel badly about themselves once they start comparing each other.” That statement is a good summary about the results from the survey. It is hard to pinpoint whether health in social media is distinctly positive or negative because there are proponents for both.

The Pros and Cons to Health in Social Media Research Questions

For this study, the following five research questions were created to determine what the pros and cons are to health in social media. Although there are sides to both arguments, the question of whether social media elicits an overall more positive or negative message is still unanswered.

Research Question #1: Who is primarily affected by health in social media and why is that specific population so heavily affected?

- “Social media use was found to contribute to later peer competition in prospective analysis, however, suggesting potential indirect but not direct effects on body-related outcomes. Peer competition proved to be a moderate strong predictor of negative outcomes both concurrently and prospectively. It is concluded that the negative influences of social comparison are focused on peers rather than television or social media exposure” (Ferguson, Munoz, Garza & Galindo, 2012).
- “Facebook is making it easier for people to spend more time and energy criticizing their own bodies and wishing they looked like

someone else," said Dr. Harry Brandt, director of The Center for Eating Disorders at Sheppard Pratt. "In this age of modern technology and constant access to Smartphones and the internet, it's becoming increasingly difficult for people to remove themselves from images and other triggers that promote negative body image, low self-esteem and may ultimately contribute to eating disorders" (*PR Newswire*, 2012).

Research Question #2: What are the pros to health in social media?

- "More than half of all articles addressing sexual health were found to promote sexual health (57 %). Promotion of sexual responsibility was rare with variables such as *ensuring that pregnancy occurs only when desired, recognition and tolerance for diversity, limiting the number of sexual partners, and using birth control consistently* each mentioned in <3 % of articles in this study sample" (Hall, West, Magnuson & Cox, 2014).
- "Ultimately through @Health_Tips we are better able serve the online health community. Since the soft launch in June, engagement rates, both quantitatively and qualitatively, have drastically improved from months prior to the project" (*PR Newswire*, 2011).
- "Social media is not only for keeping in touch with your friends -- you can get some major health benefits, too. Women lose weight, give up smoking and even get support for major health concerns with these

social platforms thanks to a built-in community of friends and family offering support and accountability”(*Morning Call*, 2013).

- “Dr. Agnes Olszewski, President and CEO of Herborium, stated, ‘Our aggressive marketing campaign includes an overhauled Facebook and Twitter presence. Additionally, the Company has deployed a blog of highly educative content aimed at establishing Herborium's position an expert in helping people achieve clear and healthy skin in a natural and safe manner’”(*PR Newswire*, 2011).
- " Over 90 percent of teens today use social networking sites, not just to interact with their peers but also to get information about issues that are important to them," said Michael Prelip, a professor of community health sciences at the UCLA School of Public Health and one of the principal investigators of the project. ‘This intervention will provide important clues about the effectiveness of social media in influencing adolescents' understanding of their health care rights, responsibilities and benefits so that they can become good health care consumers’”(*Business Wire*, 2010).

Research Question #3: What are the cons to health in social media and when does it start to be considered that way?

- “Social media use was found to contribute to later peer competition in prospective analysis, however, suggesting potential indirect but not direct effects on body-related outcomes. Peer competition proved to

be a moderate strong predictor of negative outcomes both concurrently and prospectively. It is concluded that the negative influences of social comparison are focused on peers rather than television or social media exposure” (Ferguson, Munoz, Garza & Galindo, 2012).

- "Facebook is making it easier for people to spend more time and energy criticizing their own bodies and wishing they looked like someone else," said Dr. Harry Brandt, director of The Center for Eating Disorders at Sheppard Pratt. "In this age of modern technology and constant access to Smartphones and the internet, it's becoming increasingly difficult for people to remove themselves from images and other triggers that promote negative body image, low self-esteem and may ultimately contribute to eating disorders" (*PR Newswire*, 2012).
- "The national survey of 600 Facebook users ages 16 to 40 revealed four clear themes: 1. People spend a lot of time on Facebook and in doing so, spend a lot of time analyzing their bodies and the bodies of others; 2. Facebook appears to be fueling a "camera ready" mentality among the general public; 3. Advances in Facebook technology such as Timeline, are making it easier for people to track body and weight changes; 4. People are not happy with their bodies and are engaging in dangerous behaviors in connection with those feelings" (*PR Newswire*, 2012).

- “And yesterday there was a ‘summit’ in Downing Street of more than 40 magazine editors, representatives of the fashion industry, broadcasters and psychotherapists discussing what is to be done to tackle a pervasive culture promoting one image of female beauty: stick thin. One of those attending, therapist Susie Orbach, pointed out on our pages yesterday that 90% of girls and women across all social and ethnic groupings restrain their appetite because of anxiety about their body shape - and this anxiety is setting in at an earlier and earlier age”(*The Guardian*, 2000).
- “Experts in eating disorders are concerned about an Internet-fueled trend in which teenage girls and young women pursue an elusive and possibly dangerous weight-loss goal: to become so slender that their thighs don't touch even when their feet are together. Specialists say achieving a so-called thigh gap is risky and virtually impossible. But some exceptionally thin models have the gap, which is upheld as a beauty achievement on countless Tumblr pages, blogs and other social media sites”(Salter, 2013).
- “Children are being made to feel like the ‘inadequate star of a second-rate biopic’ because of the level of personal scrutiny on social networking websites, according to a leading headmaster. Sites such as Facebook, AskFM, Little Gossip and Instagram are forcing under-16s to live under an ‘electronic adjudicator far more cruel and censorious’ than teachers, parents or examiners, says Andrew Halls, the

headmaster of fee-paying King's College School, Wimbledon, south London" (Paton, 2014).

- "The thigh gap, as it is known, is a small, hollow cavity with a huge following on social media. You can follow supermodel Cara Delevingne's thigh gap on Twitter or peruse thousands of thigh gaps on Tumblr with images of ultrathin women in bikinis, hiked up skirts, and lingerie, all baring thighs so thin they don't touch. The photos, shared by young women, come with captions like, 'Three more inches to go' and 'All I want in life is a thigh gap'" (Yadegaran, 2013).
- "In this age of toddler beauty pageants, digital retouching, peer pressure, celebrity worship, and other unrealistic cultural messages about beauty, there are definite challenges to developing a positive body image; challenges that put women at risk for eating disorders and other self-destructive behaviors,' said Ressler" (*Business Wire*, 2014).
- "The report, which was based on an online survey of 600 Facebook users and was conducted by The Center for Eating Disorders at Sheppard Pratt in Baltimore, also found that 32 percent of users feel sad when comparing Facebook photos of themselves to those of their friends, that 37 percent feel they need to change specific parts of their body when comparing their photos to others', and that 44 percent wish they had the same body or weight as a friend when looking at the photos. Even doctors at the mental health institution were surprised

by the intensity of the survey's findings" (Hanes, 2012).

Research Question #4: What are ways to combat the negativity that results from health in social media?

- "When people spend time focusing on something they consider a flaw, it can lead to depression, eating disorders, low self-esteem and decreased performance of cognitive tasks.' Meredith Colaizzi, program/council director for the Pittsburgh chapter of Girls on the Run, a nonprofit dedicated to helping girls be healthy and confident through running, says when positive attention is paid to celebrities -- like Beyoncé -- who buck society's obsession with the emaciated look, it helps girls ignore dangerous ideas about body image" (Weaver, 2013).
- "On Tuesday, nine speakers will aim to bridge the gap between aspiration and reality in Be Real Talks: Why Size Doesn't Matter -- 'a cross between a theatre experience and a comedy club with a workshop element.' Speakers will include psychologist Dr. Linda Papadopoulos, who has spoken out against the airbrushing of photos and has advised the government on its negative impact, and Natasha Devon of Body Gossip, a not-for-profit organization that aims to raise awareness about body image" (Groskop, 2013).
- "Years from now, 2012 may be remembered as the year that girls truly started to fight back and gain traction against decades of

damaging ideas about beauty and stereotypical media portrayals. If that happens, teens like Lauren Alberti will have their place in history. In early December, Alberti, a 17-year-old junior at Northern Valley Regional High School at Old Tappan, asked her fellow female students to show up for school without makeup, to feel good enough about themselves and, for one day, not try to look like Taylor Swift or Megan Fox” (Yorio, 2012).

- “Abhoulson feels it's her duty to spread a positive message to her followers. In a social media world where celebrities often show filtered, airbrushed versions of their lives on Instagram, she makes it a point to depict a realistic version of herself - Pot Noodles and all” (*Telegraph*, 2014).
- “I love Seventeen and they do have a lot of stuff to promote (positive) body image,’ said Julia Bluhm, from Waterville. ‘But Photoshopped pictures can be harmful to girls when they compare themselves to the pictures and think that they have to look like those models to be beautiful” (Italie, 2012).

Research Question #5: Why is it important to reflect on the pros and cons to health in social media?

- “Compared to clinical eating disorders, which remain relatively rare, non-clinical body dissatisfaction is very common, affecting 50 % of girls and young women (Grabe et al. 2008). Both males and females tend to view the pursuit of beauty as important for females (Markey

and Markey 2012). This primary importance attributed to female beauty can contribute to relatively higher body dissatisfaction levels among women (Ferguson et al. 2011b)"(Ferguson, Munoz, Garza & Galindo, 2012).

- What is clear is that Instagram (and other social media) has allowed the public to reclaim photography as a source of empowerment in a way that has never been possible before. Psychologists have long focused on the oppressive nature of photography in the media...Supposedly, this reflects what "we," as a culture, picture to be beautiful, but in actuality, it reflects what advertisers want us to believe is beautiful"(Gervais, 2013).
- "And yesterday there was a 'summit' in Downing Street of more than 40 magazine editors, representatives of the fashion industry, broadcasters and psychotherapists discussing what is to be done to tackle a pervasive culture promoting one image of female beauty: stick thin. One of those attending, therapist Susie Orbach, pointed out on our pages yesterday that 90% of girls and women across all social and ethnic groupings restrain their appetite because of anxiety about their body shape - and this anxiety is setting in at an earlier and earlier age"(The Guardian, 2000).
- "Facebook is making it easier for people to spend more time and energy criticizing their own bodies and wishing they looked like someone else," said Dr. Harry Brandt, director of The Center for

Eating Disorders at Sheppard Pratt. "In this age of modern technology and constant access to SmartPhones and the internet, it's becoming increasingly difficult for people to remove themselves from images and other triggers that promote negative body image, low self-esteem and may ultimately contribute to eating disorders" (*PR Newswire*, 2012).

The Pros and Cons to Health in Social Media Data

For this study, it was important to create a survey and gather the thoughts and beliefs of college-aged students towards health in social media in addition to preexisting literature. In order to acquire this information, 76 females ages 17-22 in sorority XYZ at California Polytechnic State University answered an eight-question survey about their ideas on the topic. They were asked questions relating to the five research questions the study was originally based off of. The girls involved were split into three age groups: 17-18; 19-20; 21-22. The following graphs demonstrate the comparisons in answers between age groups.

Research Question #1: Who is primarily affected by health in social media and why is that specific population so heavily affected?

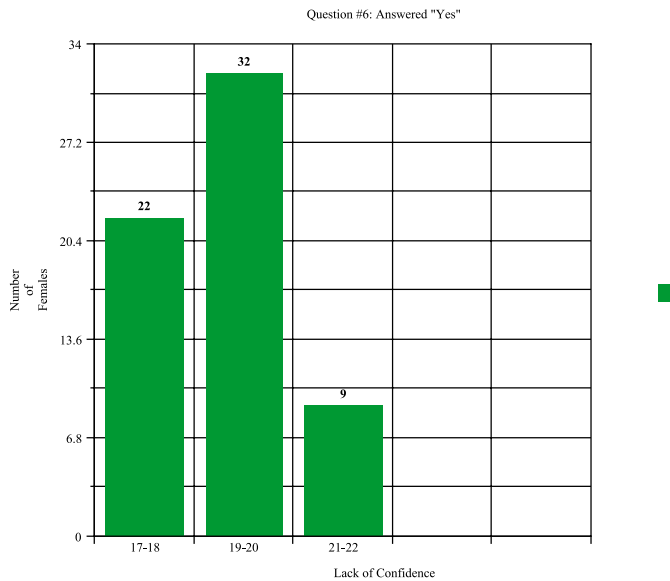
This question began as the basis of the study. Since the sudden influx of technology and social media over the past few years, health platforms have taken advantage of it as well. Although a lot of positivity comes from it, a lot of negativity follows. The question of whom it affects most and why that specific population is most prevalent in combatting the negativity in general. As technology grows, a new

generation grows along with it “becoming increasingly difficult for people to remove themselves from images and other triggers that promote negative body image, low self-esteem and may ultimately contribute to eating disorders”(PR Newswire, 2012). Those growing up with this social media are the ones most susceptible to the effects of it since those individuals are still in school and surrounded by their peers where “it is concluded that the negative influences of social comparison are focused on peers rather than television or social media exposure”(Ferguson, Munoz, Garza & Galindo, 2012).

The question of who is primarily affected by health in social media and why was presented in the survey to see if there was a difference between the age groups. Overall, however, it was concluded that all age groups studied were affected since all participants but one frequent social media sites. The original research question was implored more specifically, however, in survey Question #6: “Do you ever feel a lack of confidence about yourself by comparing yourself to others on social media?” All answers were broken down by the three age groups and this question that gets straight to the point about whether or not there is pressure on social media demonstrates the differences in answers.

The graph below displays how many girls said, “yes,” when asked if she feels a lack of confidence about herself when comparing herself on social media. Ultimately, there isn’t a big difference between the groups when considering the sample size of each age group, since ages 19-20 had more participants than the other two categories. However, it does still show that the older girls felt less pressure to compare themselves than the younger girls. Going back to the first

research question, the answer is demonstrated in the table: All females at this age are affected by social media in some way or another because every participant in the survey goes on social media and more than half of them answered, “yes,” to feeling the pressure of comparison.



Research Question #2: What are the pros to health in social media?

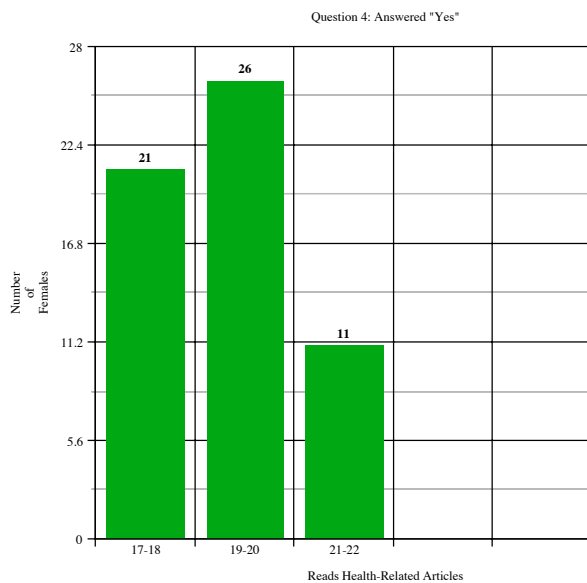
The pros to health in social media are one of the main arguments in the study. As the social media phenomenon began, the opportunity to advocate for a healthy lifestyle in a convenient and non-intimidating way suddenly became available. With the help of social media, sites such as HealthCenter were “able to serve the online health community. Since the soft launch in June, engagement rates,

both quantitatively and qualitatively, have drastically improved from months prior to the project”(PR Newswire, 2011). By being more informed, “women lose weight, give up smoking and even get support for major health concerns with these social platforms thanks to a built-in community of friends and family offering support and accountability”(Morning Call, 2013). Twitter accounts offer tips and advice that provide “over 90 percent of teens today” to “not just to interact with their peers but also to get information about issues that are important to them” (Business Wire, 2010).

The positive aspects of health in social media are obvious: the advocacy of a healthy lifestyle on platforms that the average person visits daily. In the survey, instead of blatantly asking what the individual believes is the most positive part about health in social media, Question #4 asks: “Do you ever read health-related articles on social media?” Health-related articles, whether in regards to a positive or negative topic, provide awareness for the health industry in some form. By having the participants answer this question, their awareness on the issue of health by reading about it through social media demonstrates a positive component to even having it online.

The graph below demonstrates how many females answered, “yes,” to reading health-related articles online, which was 60 out of a total of 76. Broken up into age groups once again, the graph looks similar to the one above as the oldest group has the lowest number; however, it is important to remember that the number of girls in each group varies. Overall, a small number of girls from each age

group denied reading health-related articles on social media, demonstrating the positivity that social media has on health awareness.



Research Question #3: What are the cons to health in social media and when does it start to be considered that way?

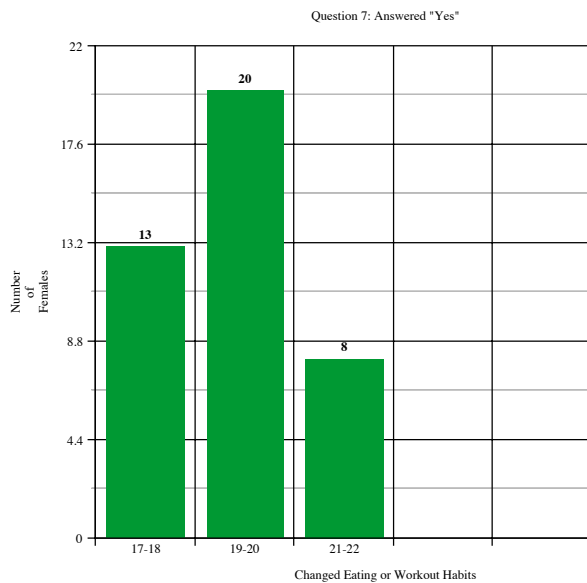
This research question is primarily the reason for the study. Every since social media became a driving force, negativity including online bullying and eating disorders as a result of comparison suddenly became an issue never dealt with before. The generation currently enrolled in school looked to social media sites to interact with one another, which then “was found to contribute to later peer competition in prospective analysis, however, suggesting potential indirect but not direct effects on body-related outcomes”(Ferguson, Munoz, Garza & Galindo, 2012).

Surveys and studies were done to start the research on the effect of these social media sites, and although a lot was positive, “the national survey of 600 Facebook users ages 16 to 40 revealed four clear themes: 1. People spend a lot of time on Facebook and in doing so, spend a lot of time analyzing their bodies and the bodies of others; 2. Facebook appears to be fueling a "camera ready" mentality among the general public; 3. Advances in Facebook technology such as Timeline, are making it easier for people to track body and weight changes; 4. People are not happy with their bodies and are engaging in dangerous behaviors in connection with those feelings” (*PR Newswire*, 2012). In addition, it’s been found that girls specifically are growing up and going through puberty at a younger age. The anxiety that comes with puberty and becoming a woman isn’t helped by the constant scrutiny that image-based websites inevitably lead to; approximately “90 percent of girls and women across all social and ethnic groupings restrain their appetite because of anxiety about their body shape - and this anxiety is setting in at an earlier and earlier age”(*The Guardian*, 2000). Even health trends are becoming popular on these sites. One of the more well known fads is the thigh gap, which “specialists say achieving is risky and virtually impossible. But some exceptionally thin models have the gap, which is upheld as a beauty achievement on countless Tumblr pages, blogs and other social media sites”(Salter, 2013).

In comparison to the second research question, the third research question is asked in a discreet way to see if any unhealthy behavior results from health in social media. The biggest con is females believing they must look a certain way in order to be beautiful. By changing their eating pattern or increasing their workout activity,

those extremely affected by others can be ultimately hurting themselves. Survey Question #7 asks: "Have you ever changed your eating or workout habits in order to try to look like someone else seen on social media?" This question does not necessarily question the act of changing eating or workout habits. The question is more geared towards the negativity that surrounds changing those habits in order to look like somebody else.

The graph below shows the results of those who answered, "yes," to the question. Each age group, once again, appeared to be split. The fact that about half of the girls in sorority XYZ changed their eating or workout habits in order to look like somebody else demonstrates the con associated with health in social media, as well as provides evidence to when it starts to become a problem.



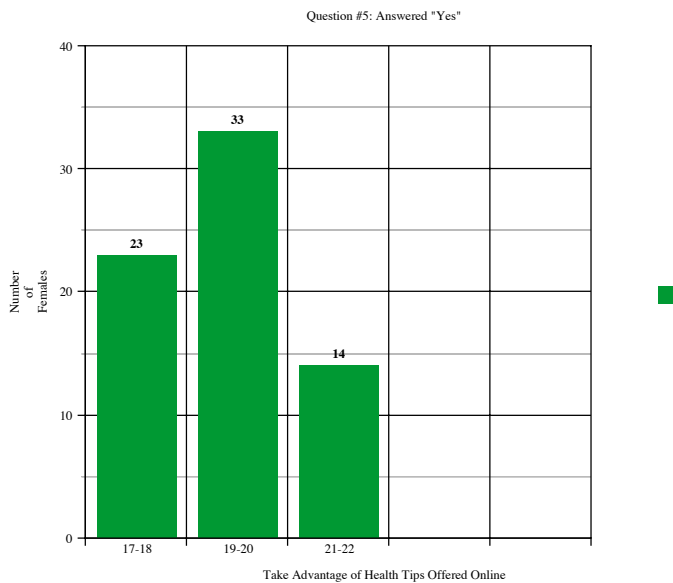
Research Question #4: What are ways to combat the negativity that results from health in social media?

The negativity that comes from social media ultimately relies on perspective. A person can look at pictures on social media and take it negatively by comparing himself or herself or it can be taken positively by being motivated, inspired or creating a voice to end this type of negativity. When, females especially, are brought down by images of models, it's important to pay attention to "celebrities -- like Beyoncé -- who buck society's obsession with the emaciated look, it helps girls ignore dangerous ideas about body image"(Weaver, 2013). Even bloggers, like Abhoulson, take advantage of social media by being proud and confident when "in a social media world where celebrities often show filtered, airbrushed versions of their lives on Instagram, she makes it a point to depict a realistic version of herself - Pot Noodles and all" (*Telegraph*, 2014). It's people like Abhoulson or Bluhm, a girl who presented to *Seventeen* magazine on not using Photoshop because "pictures can be harmful to girls when they compare themselves to the pictures and think that they have to look like those models to be beautiful,"(Italie, 2012) that should be looked up to as a way to stop the negativity.

Survey Question #5 asks: "Do you ever take advantage of health tips offered online? (Ex: Healthy recipes or tips on how to work out)." This question correlates with Research Question #4 because it asks about perspective when observing health in social media. Tips on wellness and fitness are one of the most positive aspects of health in social media. These forums provide motivation without the intent of making others feel bad about themselves. Often, specifically females, will look at

photos of others and feel bad about themselves and then unhealthily change their eating or workout habits in an unsafe way. By taking advantage of health tips ensured by professionals, however, a safe way to improve wellness is provided.

The graph below demonstrates the impact that safe and motivational health tips have on the following population. Approximately 70 out of 76 girls in sorority XYZ said she takes advantage of health tips offered online. The tips offered by professionals provide the opportunity to combat the negativity by getting fit in a safe way rather than looking to others. All age groups have a high frequency in taking advantage of those tips.



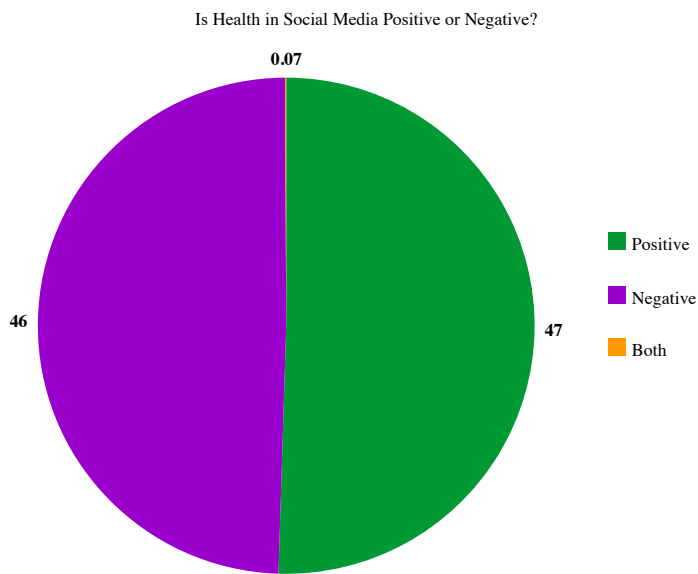
Research Question #5: Why is it important to reflect on the pros and cons to health in social media?

The purpose of the study is to compare the pros and cons to health in social media and determine whether it is overall more positive or negative. Not often looked at is “Instagram (and other social media) have allowed the public to reclaim photography as a source of empowerment in a way that has never been possible before.”(Gervaois, 2013). Suddenly, females want to change the way they look because of a trending “thigh gap” and eating disorders are resulting. It seems that “Facebook is making it easier for people to spend more time and energy criticizing their own bodies and wishing they looked like someone else” (*PR Newswire*, 2012). It is important to reflect on the pros and cons to evaluate the perception of social media users to see if it is ultimately hurting them, and if it is, finding a way to put an end to it.

The final survey question asks: “Do you think that health in social media is more positive or negative?” This final question sums up the final research question as well-overall, what does the population of college-aged girls involved in a sorority think of health portrayed in the media. The results to this graph are similar to the rest of the results in the study because they are about half-and-half. As the research continues, it is becoming obvious that an individual’s perception about himself or herself ultimately becomes the deciding factor in whether health in social media is positive or negative. The literature offers articles depicting the pros and cons. As the final question in the survey and after questions about positive and negative aspects,

the consistent results of half feeling a certain way and half feeling the other provides evidence to the theory of perception.

The graph below shows the results to the final question in the survey. When giving out the surveys, only two answers were possible: “yes” or “no.” About five girls, however, added the category “both” because they felt so indecisive about it. Since the results were so even, it is more effective to display the results as a total, rather than breaking it up into each age group. The evidence provided in this graph demonstrates how there is no definitive answer to the research question.



Chapter 5

Discussion and Recommendations

Summary

This study was performed in response to the influx in social media over the past few years. As it progressed from a way to communicate with one another to posting pictures in bathing suits, health in general was suddenly questioned. Although health forums utilize the new technology to support fitness tips or motivational quotes, a lot of readers take the new publicity negatively by comparing themselves to the “perfect” bodies seen online.

To find more information on whether health in social media is more of a positive or negative force, 76 females a part of a sorority at California Polytechnic State University in San Luis Obispo, California filled out a survey with eight identical questions designed to emulate the five primary questions the study is based off of:

1. Who is primarily affected by health in social media and why is that specific population so heavily affected?
2. What are the pros to health in social media?
3. What are the cons to health in social media and when does it start to be considered that way?
4. What are ways to combat the negativity that results from health in social media?
5. Why is it important to reflect on the pros and cons to health in social media?

Each research question was designed to cover the main questions regarding the positives and negatives to health in social media, as well as reflection on why it is important to be aware of them. The survey questions brought about interesting responses that tied together with the research from preexisting literature.

Discussion

Through analysis, connections were made between the answers from the survey given to 76 girls involved in a sorority at California Polytechnic State University and the preexisting literature from Chapter 2. From these connections, it is possible to draw conclusions for the study based on the original research questions.

Research Question #1: Who is primarily affected by health in social media and why is that specific population so heavily affected?

In order to analyze the data of the participants, specific questions in the survey were asked to draw conclusions based on how each age group answered. In this case, Question #6 asked: "Do you ever feel a lack of confidence about yourself by comparing yourself to others on social media?" This question was asked to measure whether one age group answered significantly different than the others in addition to seeing if a specific age group was targeted. The results showed that there wasn't a huge difference between age groups, but not as many females in the oldest age group (ages 21-22) answered, "yes" to the question.

The literature estimated a similar conclusion. The youngest generation growing up with social media will be most affected by it and “Facebook is making it easier for people to spend more time and energy criticizing their own bodies and wishing they looked like someone else,” said Dr. Harry Brandt, director of The Center for Eating Disorders at Sheppard Pratt (*PR Newswire*, 2012). The sample size in general, regardless of the age group separations made for the study, is a group of girls all growing up with social media as a prominent part of their lives, which ultimately leads to comparison and pressure to look like others when peers are constantly posting photographs of themselves (Ferguson, Munoz, Garza & Galindo, 2012).

Since the oldest age group in the study also had similar results to the youngest age group, there is no way to say that only the younger girls are affected negatively by health in social media. Overall, a large number of the girls admitted to comparing themselves to others, which demonstrates how social media does have an impact on how females view themselves.

Research Question #2: What are the pros to health in social media?

To answer this question, an analysis of the survey results for Question #4: “Do you ever read health-related articles on social media?” was made. This question was chosen to relate to this particular research question because the most obvious positive aspect to health in social media is the motivation and health tips offered online to improve overall wellness. The answers from the different age groups resulted in exactly 60 out of the total 76 girls saying that they do read health-related

articles online. Again, the difference between the age groups wasn't obvious, not creating a huge divide between whether younger girls are more conscious of health online than the older girls.

The literature offered many examples of positive components to health online. Due to the large social media presence with multiple health forums utilizing that social media, it should be obvious that so many girls in the study said that they read health-related articles online. The amount of readers is demonstrated by the improvements "since the soft launch in June, engagement rates, both quantitatively and qualitatively, have drastically improved from months prior to the project" from the Twitter account @Health_Tips (*PR Newswire*, 2011). In addition, according to Michael Prelip, a professor of community health sciences at the UCLA School of Public Health, research shows that "over 90 percent of teens today use social networking sites, not just to interact with their peers but also to get information about issues that are important to them" (*Business Wire*, 2010).

There are a lot of positive aspects to health in social media. Due to the large amount of individuals, specifically targeted to the ages represented in the study, individuals are able to learn a lot about the subject that they would not necessarily have looked out for before. Overall, there is no major distinction between the age groups in the study regarding who reads more health articles online, and it can be concluded that, since all of the individuals are associated with social media, then the majority of the participants have been exposed to the articles.

Research Question #3: What are the cons to health in social media and when does it start to be considered that way?

The negativity that health in social media offers is, ultimately, the reason for the study. By looking further into research and surveying the participants, the cons became very obvious. Identifying exactly what makes those cons so detrimental to the individuals going on social media constantly leads to the possibility for change. In order to answer the question of what the cons are, Question #7 asks: “Have you ever changed your eating or workout habits in order to try to look like someone else seen on social media?” This question is not necessarily targeted at just changing eating or workout habits; this question specifically asks if an individual is affected enough by the appearance of others on social media that he or she actually took action to change. The results to the survey were very similar to the results to answer the other research questions-not a very big difference in age groups because they all answered similarly. However, each age group answered almost half “yes” and half “no” showing that about half of the participants in the study felt the need to change themselves in order to look like somebody else seen on social media. Since so many people answered, “yes,” to the question, it is at the time that people feel the desire to take definitive action that health in social media is considered a con.

The literature offered multiple examples of cons to health in social media. A big part of the negativity is the “peer competition proved to be a moderate strong predictor of negative outcomes both con- currently and prospectively”(Ferguson, Munoz, Garza & Galindo, 2012). One of the most concerning research findings was “experts in eating disorders are concerned about an Internet-fueled trend in which

teenage girls and young women pursue an elusive and possibly dangerous weight-loss goal: to become so slender that their thighs don't touch even when their feet are together”(Salter, 2013). Trends such as these provide perfect examples that correlate with the survey findings: sacrificing or changing health habits in order to look like somebody seen on social media. It is at this time that cons to health in social media start to become an actual problem, and those that frequent social media sites are the ones most prone to this negativity.

Overall, the cons to health in social media stem from when individuals feel the need to change themselves to look like somebody else. The sample of participants in the study attest to this-about half of them all admitted to changing her eating or workout habits as a result of wanting to look differently because of an image on social media. The literature offers numerous examples of this negativity; although there wasn't a huge distinction between the age groups, all participants have been exposed to social media and half of them felt the need to change themselves because of it.

Research Question #4: What are ways to combat the negativity that results from health in social media?

The survey questions utilized to find an answer to the research question was Question #5: “Do you ever take advantage of health tips offered online? (Ex: Healthy recipes or tips on how to work out).” This question was asked to draw conclusions since the tips offered online are safe ways to get in shape, rather than the advocacy of a fad diet or trend such as the thigh gap to give motivation to lose weight. The

healthy recipes and fitness tips online offer healthy ways to reach a goal rather than any other dangerous outlet, which gives proof to combatting the negativity social media often leads to. The results, like the others, showed no significant difference between age groups, but a very high frequency in those that take advantage of health tips online: 70 out of 76 females answered, "yes," to the question. Ultimately, the individual's perspective on health in social media and the level of confidence he or she has is the best way to combat the negativity from health in social media. However, those depending on healthy ways to make a lifestyle change demonstrate a positive way to change the cons in social media as well.

The literature gives multiple examples of females who have found a way to beat the negativity to social media, as well as positive components on the subject matter to pay attention to. One of the best ways is "when positive attention is paid to celebrities -- like Beyoncé -- who buck society's obsession with the emaciated look, it helps girls ignore dangerous ideas about body image" (Weaver, 2013). A more positive perspective results from focusing on real women that don't exceed unrealistic expectations of how a female should look, rather than the latter. Even bloggers that don't have the "perfect" body image flaunt their bodies as a way to show others that it's okay to not look like the girls with a thigh gap (*Telegraph*, 2014). Positive influences such as these combat the negativity that comes with the cons in social media that center around changing eating or workout habits in order to look like somebody else.

Overall, the females in the study pay attention to health in social media, which is shown in evidence by the number that said she reads health-related articles

and takes advantage of health tips online. It is a positive step to take advantage of health tips offered online because it is a safe and productive way to getting healthier, rather than resulting in an eating disorder or any other dangerous means to giving into an online trend or fad. The conclusion to the research in the study from the literature and survey is that the generation most absolved in social media feels the pressure from it but takes positive actions to combat the negativity that results from it.

Research Question #5: Why is it important to reflect on the pros and cons to health in social media?

The whole study is centered around the pros and cons to health in social media; by discovering the cons, a change can be made. The final question in the survey asks: “Do you think that health in social media is more positive or negative?” This was posed as the final question in the survey for the same reason that it was posed as the final research question. It sums up the majority of the study, and it is important to do research from literature and real people in order to ultimately learn from it and make a change. The results from the survey, like the rest of them, were about half-and-half. What was interesting was that about five girls added the additional category of “both.” These results conclude that the way health in social media is perceived depends on the individual herself. In this study, about half of the females admitted to feeling the pressure of others seen on social media and then half felt that health in social media is overall negative. The other half, however, felt the opposite. The fact that half felt negatively demonstrates how it is important to

find a way to combat the cons since social media is such a prominent part of everyday life.

According to research, the same conclusions are found from the survey with “non-clinical body dissatisfaction is very common, affecting 50 % of girls and young women (Grabe et al. 2008)” (Ferguson, Munoz, Garza & Galindo, 2012). Body dissatisfaction depends on the perspective of the individual, just like the females involved in the study. Social media offers a lot of positive aspects, but negative aspects make it clear that “Instagram (and other social media) has allowed the public to reclaim photography as a source of empowerment in a way that has never been possible before” (Gervaois, 2013).” Females specifically finding their self-worth depending on feedback from social media or looking the way that “beautiful” is advertised shows how important it is to identify the pros and cons in order to change this norm that has developed ever since the influx of technology.

Overall, according to the survey and research, about half feel negatively towards health in social media. Although a lot of it depends on perspective, it is important to identify the pros and cons in this situation in order to make a change for females to feel more confident and not put up against an unrealistic standard.

Recommendations for Practice

After completion of the study, substantial data has been collected and analyzed on the pros and cons to health in social media. Especially since the technology boom that resulted in the influx of social media over the past few years, it is important to review the findings for the future of the online presence. The point

of the study was to identify the positives and negatives and make a change based on what needs to be improved. Some recommendations for practice include the promotion of realistic body types, more emphasis on empowering individuals and a tighter focus on health being beautiful, rather than just thin.

Lose the unrealistic standard.

One of the main issues discovered through research was girls looked to others online as a set standard for what is seen as “beautiful.” The promotion of the thigh gap leads to unhealthy eating and workout habits, even eating disorders. In a research study based on an online survey of 600 Facebook users, “32 percent of users feel sad when comparing Facebook photos of themselves to those of their friends, that 37 percent feel they need to change specific parts of their body when comparing their photos to others', and that 44 percent wish they had the same body or weight as a friend when looking at the photos” (Hanes, 2012). The lack of self-esteem that females, specifically, feel when looking at models or peers online is evidence to the negativity that goes along with health in social media. A way to change this is to promote more realistic body types. If social media-users feel the need to compare themselves, it should be for more positive attributes. By looking up to celebrities, such as Beyonce, the unrealistic expectation for the thigh gap or any other online fad is immediately put to rest (Weaver, 2013).

Emphasis on empowerment.

One of the problems found in the survey is that about half of the females interviewed answered, “yes,” to changing her eating or workout habits in order to look like someone else seen online. This result was expected, since research shows that a lot of the individuals that frequent online sites end up comparing themselves to others. In the literature, however females the same age as the ones involved in the study show that “years from now, 2012 may be remembered as the year that girls truly started to fight back and gain traction against decades of damaging ideas about beauty and stereotypical media portrayals”(Yorio, 2012). Girls such as Abhoulson blog about their confidence without being stick-thin (*Telegraph*, 2014). Other girls like Julia Bluhm actually wrote a petition against *Seventeen* magazine to stop using Photoshop on models so readers don’t feel the pressure to look a certain way (Italie, 2012). Social media needs to put a higher emphasis on females such as these that empower others to feel confident in her own skin, rather than just models that put down the self-esteem of others just because everybody’s body is different.

Healthy is beautiful.

One of the most important findings from the study is how females perceive themselves is how they react to pictures online. Therefore, if an individual already has low self-esteem, then looking at photographs at seemingly “perfect” bodies does not increase that confidence in the slightest. The best thing for online forums to do for situations like these is to emphasize the importance of being healthy as beautiful, rather than just being thin as beautiful. In this day and age, “social media is not only

for keeping in touch with your friends -- you can get some major health benefits, too" (*Morning Call*, 2013). By promoting health tips and fitness motivation, people who frequent social media websites will be able to become healthier individuals, both physically and mentally, rather than just concerned about looking a certain way or being a certain weight.

Study Conclusion

In conclusion, the influx in social media over the past few years has led to the promotion of health online as well. Although there are positive aspects to the online presence, negatives resulting in eating disorders and lack of confidence create a large concern, especially for females. In this study, a survey of 76 girls involved in a sorority at California Polytechnic State University in San Luis Obispo, California provided evidence to the positives and negatives of this phenomenon. In the end, about half of the girls believed health in social media to be positive and half to be negative. The biggest concern for the individuals that thought it was negative is they admitted to changing their eating or workout habits in order to look like somebody else. Although a big part of perceiving health in social media as positive or negative is the initial self-esteem of the individual, it is important for those operating social media sites to lose the unrealistic standard for body types, promote women that empower others more frequently and emphasize how being healthy is beautiful.

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