

Likes, Follows, and Fears: Social Media's Impact on Female College Freshmen's Mental Well-Being

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Part 1: Task Force Charge

Our project tackles the impact of social media on female college freshmen's mental health during their transition to university life. This demographic is already navigating stress and anxiety in a new academic and social environment. Platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat often amplify these challenges through comparison, curated perfection, comparing amounts of likes and comments, and endless scrolling — intensifying feelings of inadequacy and uncertainty. Our goal is to empower female freshmen to better understand the impact of social media on their well-being and offer tools for healthier digital interactions. Drawing from multiple theories such as Feminist standpoint theory, Media ecology theory, Uncertainty reduction theory, symbolic interaction theory, and Communication Privacy Management Theory.

Part 2: Current Landscape of the Issue

Issue Background

Mental health has increasingly become a major concern among college students, particularly female freshmen who face unique challenges in the age of social media compared to other groups. Freshman year marks a significant milestone as students embark on a new chapter of their lives; they must navigate unfamiliar social dynamics, adapt to a new environment, and learn to live independently for the first time. This combination of social, environmental, and personal adjustments can feel overwhelming. Research by Vijayvargiya et al. (2023) found that female college students showed significantly lower emotional adjustment levels compared to their male peers, with the study revealing "very unsatisfactory" levels of emotional adjustment among females.

These findings are further supported by a March 2023 Gallup survey of undergraduate students, which revealed that female students face particularly severe emotional challenges during their college years. The survey found that nearly half of female students experience frequent emotional stress, with 72% reporting daily stress and 56% struggling with worry. Additionally, high rates of loneliness and sadness affected 41% and 40% of female students respectively (Bryant, 2023). This numerical data regarding the direct mental health struggles women face is closely related to heavy social media use as well as the adaptation to the college experience.

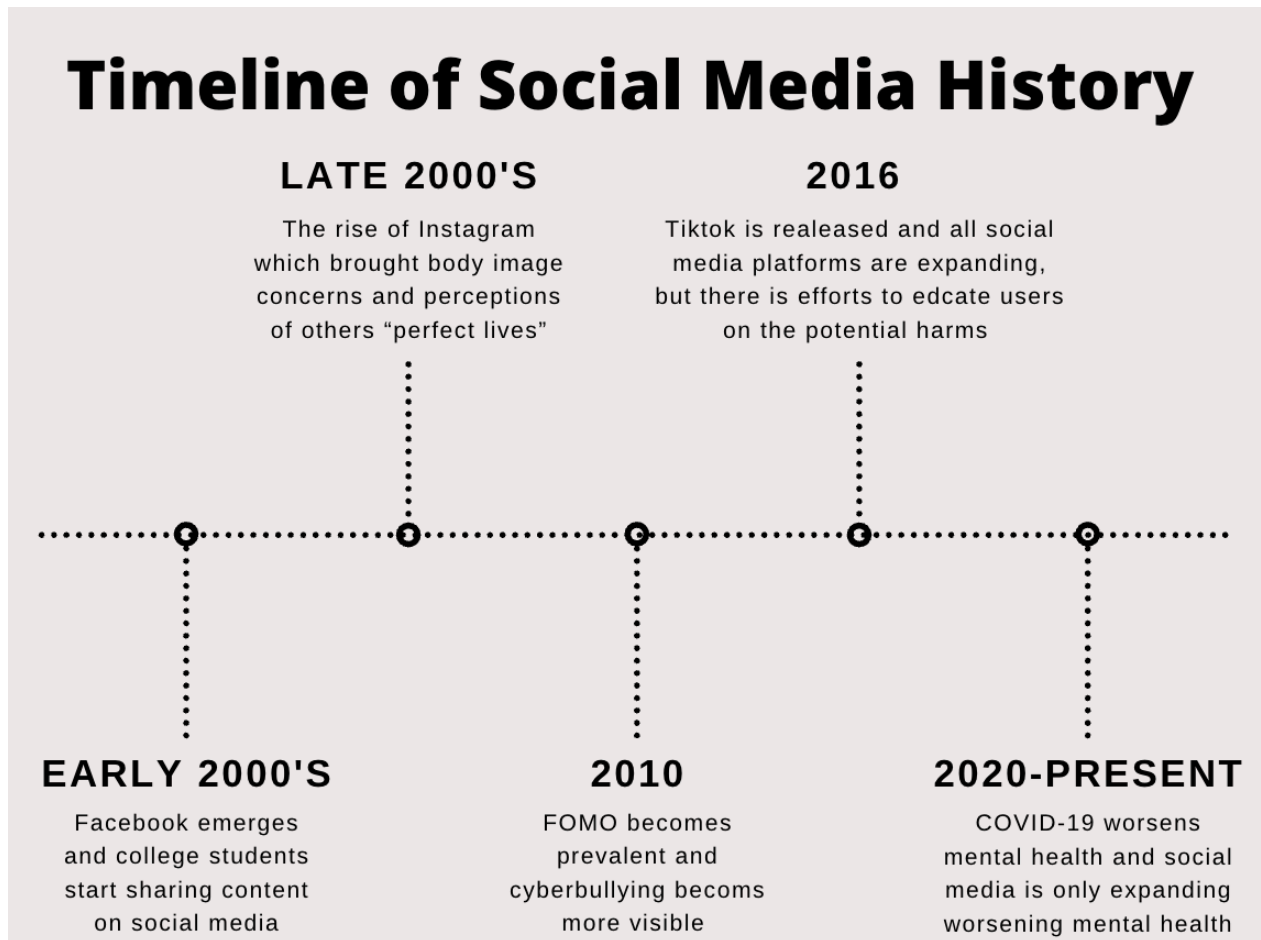
During this vulnerable period of transition, many female freshmen naturally seek connection and support through social media platforms. However, what begins as an attempt to ease adjustment challenges often worsens their emotional struggles. Female college students who used social media for more than two hours per day reported higher stress levels than students who used social media for only 0-20 minutes daily (Oyinbo, 2024). This negative impact is particularly evident on platforms like Instagram, where research has shown that image sharing significantly influences women's appearance concerns (Fardouly et al., 2015), with users seeking validation through likes and responses, causing their self-perception to fluctuate based on feedback (Baker et al., 2019). Even when users are aware that images may be edited, they still feel societal pressure to conform to these unrealistic beauty standards (Baker et al., 2019).

This challenge has intensified in the social media era, with research indicating a strong connection between social media use and negative body image, particularly regarding elevated appearance exposure through posting, viewing, and reacting to images (Fardouly and Vartanian, 2016). Among social media

platforms, Instagram has emerged as particularly influential, with young women who already exhibit high body dissatisfaction levels showing a marked preference for the platform (Fardouly and Vartanian, 2015). The statistics are striking: over 90 percent of college women in the United States express dissatisfaction with their bodies and weight (Pritchard and Cramblitt, 2014).

History/Key Moments of Issue

Image 1: Timeline of social media’s effect on mental health from 2000-Present



Part 3: Communicative Concerns & Lenses

Empirical Approach

Lens: Uncertainty Reduction Theory

Uncertainty Reduction Theory's central idea claims that individuals are inherently motivated to reduce uncertainty about others and situations through information-seeking communication behaviors, encompassing three key strategies (passive, active, and interactive), foundations about uncertainty-communication relationships, principles of initial interaction patterns, and connections between uncertainty levels and anxiety. When viewed through this communicative lens, female freshmen's social media usage emerges not as problematic screen time but as strategic communication behavior aimed at reducing uncertainty about their new college environment, revealing how mental health challenges stem from paradoxical effects where digital information-seeking often increases rather than decreases anxiety. This theoretical framework proves particularly valuable in examining communicative contexts such as early-semester social media monitoring of potential friends, digital investigation of campus organizations, initial interactions in class group chats, and roommate relationship development, with implications suggesting that mental health interventions should focus not on reducing social media use but on developing more effective uncertainty reduction strategies that don't amplify anxiety through information overload.

Lens: Social Information Processing Theory

Social Information Processing Theory centers on the premise that people can develop rich relationships in computer-mediated environments by adapting available communication cues despite the absence of traditional nonverbal signals, with key components including adaptation to limited cues, message construction strategies, chronemics, relationship development patterns in digital spaces, and alternative cue systems. Through this communicative framework, female freshmen's social media anxiety becomes visible as a sophisticated communication adaptation challenge where students develop complex systems for interpreting limited social cues in digital spaces, revealing how mental health impacts stem from the cognitive burden of constantly processing and interpreting digital social signals. The theory proves particularly relevant in examining communicative contexts such as direct messaging conversations, social media comment sections, profile interactions, and platform-specific communication norms, with implications suggesting that mental health support should focus on helping students develop more sustainable strategies for processing digital social cues rather than simply limiting platform use or viewing their struggles as purely psychological.

Lens: Expectancy Violation Theory

Expectancy Violation Theory fundamentally asserts that when communicative behavior violates our expectations, we evaluate both the violation and its source to determine meaning and significance, incorporating key components of expectancy violations, violation valence, communicator reward valence, violation importance, and response patterns. When applied communicatively to social media's impact on female freshmen's mental health, this theoretical lens reveals how psychological distress often stems from violations of established digital communication norms and expectations, transforming seemingly minor digital interactions into significant emotional events based on the violation's importance and the violator's social value. This framework proves especially relevant in analyzing communicative contexts such as response time expectations in messaging, engagement patterns on posts, social media interaction reciprocity, and platform-specific behavioral norms, with implications suggesting that mental health interventions should address how students form and manage digital communication expectations, particularly during the transition to college when previous expectancy patterns are disrupted and new norms must be established.

Interpretive Approach

Lens: Symbolic Interaction Theory

At its core, Symbolic Interaction Theory suggests that humans create and modify meaning through interpretive processes of social interaction and symbolic communication, particularly relevant when examining how female college freshmen interpret social media metrics as powerful symbols of social worth. This theoretical framework reveals how digital elements like likes, comments, and follower counts become loaded symbols carrying profound social meaning, with key components including shared symbols, meaning-making processes, and behavioral modifications based on interpreted meanings. When viewed through this communicative lens, we see how mental health impacts stem not from the numbers themselves but from the complex process of symbolic interpretation and meaning-making within digital spaces. For instance, when a freshman's post receives fewer likes than her established "normal," the resulting anxiety and comparison emerge from the communicative interpretation of this symbol within her peer group's constructed meaning system. This theory proves particularly valuable in understanding communicative contexts where digital symbols carry significant social weight - from Instagram engagement metrics to Snapchat streaks - and helps explain why seemingly minor digital interactions can trigger major emotional responses. The implications of viewing social media's mental health impact through this symbolic lens reveal how digital communication creates and maintains powerful systems of

meaning that directly influence students' self-worth and social identity during their critical freshman transition.

Lens: Communication Privacy Management Theory

Communication Privacy Management Theory examines how individuals develop and manage rules for sharing or concealing private information across different audiences, providing crucial insight into the complex privacy challenges facing female college freshmen on social media. The theory's core components - including privacy boundaries, disclosure rules, boundary coordination, and boundary turbulence - help explain the psychological toll of managing multiple digital identities during college transition. When framed as a communication boundary management challenge, social media anxiety becomes understandable as a response to the sophisticated communicative task of simultaneously managing multiple privacy boundaries across platforms and audiences. This perspective illuminates how mental health stress often stems from constant privacy calculus decisions: a freshman must continually evaluate what to share, with whom, and how to maintain appropriate boundaries between family, high school friends, new college peers, and potential romantic interests. The theory proves especially relevant in communicative contexts involving multiple overlapping audiences and platform-specific privacy decisions, helping explain why privacy violations (like an unwanted share or screenshot) can trigger significant emotional distress. Viewing social media's mental health impact through this privacy management lens reveals how the constant strain of boundary maintenance and fear of boundary turbulence contributes to freshman anxiety and stress.

Lens: Media Ecology Theory

Media Ecology Theory, which argues that communication technologies create environments that fundamentally shape human perception, understanding, and behavior, offers a comprehensive framework for understanding how immersion in social media environments affects female college freshmen's mental health. Key components including media as environment, technological determinism, and the influence of media forms on cognitive processes help explain how social platforms create specific conditions that shape both communication patterns and psychological well-being. When framed as an environmental communication challenge, freshman social media distress becomes understandable as a response to living within a digital ecosystem that fundamentally alters how students perceive and engage with reality. This theoretical perspective proves particularly valuable when examining how platform-specific features (like disappearing stories, streaks, or algorithmic feeds) create distinct communication expectations and behavioral patterns that impact mental health. The implications of viewing social media through this

ecological lens reveal why "digital detox" attempts often fail - students aren't just stepping away from a communication tool but attempting to extract themselves from an entire environmental system that shapes their social reality. This theory helps explain how constant immersion in social media environments fundamentally alters freshmen's perception of social relationships, self-worth, and academic experience during their critical first-year transition.

Critical Approach

Lens: Feminist Standpoint Theory

Feminist Standpoint Theory fundamentally asserts that women's social and political perspectives are unique and uniquely valuable because they emerge from a position of marginalization that provides critical insights into social structures. Key components include the concept of situated knowledge (understanding based on social position), strong objectivity (recognizing all knowledge as socially situated), and the emphasis on lived experiences as a source of critical awareness. When applied communicatively to social media's impact on female freshmen's mental health, this theory reveals how their digital experiences are distinctly shaped by their position as young women entering higher education. The theory frames their social media struggles as communication issues emerging from their particular standpoint at the intersection of gender, age, and academic transition. For example, when female freshmen feel pressured to maintain an "authentic" yet carefully curated social media presence, this reflects their unique communicative challenge of navigating patriarchal expectations in digital spaces. This theoretical lens is particularly valuable in examining communicative contexts where gender intersects with platform dynamics: beauty-focused content, academic achievement posts, and social relationship presentations. The implications reveal how female freshmen's mental health challenges on social media aren't merely individual psychological issues but reflect broader patterns of gendered communication expectations and power structures.

Lens: Muted Group Theory

Muted Group Theory theorizes that dominant societal groups determine acceptable forms of communication, forcing marginalized groups to adapt or remain silent. Essential components include the concepts of dominant communication modes, systemic silencing, and adaptive communication strategies developed by muted groups. When framed communicatively, female freshmen's social media experiences become visible as a complex negotiation of voice and silence within digital spaces that often privilege masculine forms of expression. This theory illuminates how mental health impacts stem from the communicative labor of constantly translating experiences into "acceptable" forms of social media

expression. For instance, when female freshmen carefully craft posts to avoid appearing "too emotional" or "too academic," they're engaging in the exhausting process of adapting their communication to dominant norms. The theory is particularly relevant in examining comment sections, academic discussion groups, and profile presentations where female voices are often muted through subtle and overt mechanisms. The implications suggest that mental health interventions must address not just individual behavior but the broader communicative structures that force female freshmen to constantly monitor and modify their digital self-expression.

Lens: Cultivation Theory

Cultivation Theory claims that long-term exposure to media content gradually "cultivates" or shapes viewers' perceptions of reality to match the mediated world they consume. Key components include mainstreaming (convergence of heavy users' viewpoints), resonance (when media content aligns with lived experience), and mean-world syndrome (developing exaggerated negative perceptions). Applied communicatively to social media's impact on female freshmen, this theory reveals how persistent platform exposure shapes not just their beliefs but also their communicative practices and expectations. The theory frames mental health impacts as emerging from the gap between cultivated expectations and the lived reality of college life. For example, when freshmen experience anxiety because their college experience doesn't match their social media feeds, they're experiencing the effects of cultivated expectations about what college "should" look like. This theoretical perspective proves especially valuable in analyzing communicative contexts involving lifestyle content, academic achievement posts, and social relationship presentations. The implications suggest that understanding social media's mental health impact requires examining not just current usage but the cumulative effect of years of exposure to cultivated digital realities.

Part 4: Effective Public Messaging Examples

In this section, we share examples of messaging to address the communicative problems related to female college student's mental health and social media use. The core issue revolves around how social media engagement, particularly during the transition to college life, can exacerbate mental health challenges. This section presents the actual messaging materials designed to effectively communicate with the target audience: college freshman females.

We designed our poster to address the specific mental health challenges faced by female college freshmen, exacerbated by social media. The primary communicative goal is to raise awareness about the emotional impacts of digital engagement and provide resources for support. The poster was designed to resonate with our target audience by focusing on visuals, color schemes, and messaging that align with the realities of our lived experiences.

We used a combination of Feminist Standpoint Theory and Symbolic Interaction Theory to design the poster. Feminist Standpoint Theory helped us center the unique experiences of female freshmen, acknowledging the added pressures that gender plays in how they experience social media. Symbolic Interaction Theory informed our use of digital symbols such as social media icons. The message "Perfect posts \neq Perfect reality" directly reflects the need to challenge the false perceptions of reality that get promoted on social platforms.

The poster employs warm pink and coral tones to create an approachable and comforting visual environment. These colors resonate with female college students and are often associated with empathy. The use of soft tones allows the poster to stand out without being overwhelming, ensuring its accessibility in busy, high-traffic areas on campus.

As for our graphics, we used the:

Brain Image – This image symbolizes mental health in a non-threatening way. It visually represents the cognitive and emotional effects of social media, making the issue more relatable and approachable.

Social Media Icons – Familiar symbols like Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat are included to catch the attention of freshmen, signaling relevance and engagement with social media.

Young Girl in Distressed – This visual aims to humanize the struggles of college freshmen facing social media pressure, helping viewers relate to the emotional toll of constant digital engagement.

Blurred, Digital-Effect Photo – This visual distortion represents how social media often distorts reality. The message “Perfect posts ≠ Perfect reality”, reinforces the idea that social media presents an edited, filtered version of life that does not reflect true personal experiences.

QR Code & Crisis Contact Information: The poster includes a prominently displayed QR code that links to digital resources and additional support. Critical contact numbers, such as CU Boulder’s 24/7 support line (303-492-2277) and the National Suicide & Crisis Hotline (988), are clearly visible. This design ensures that students can quickly access help if they are in crisis or seeking preventive support.

Image 2: Page one of our poster

YOUR MENTAL HEALTH MATTERS!

YOUR DIGITAL SPACE SHOULD SERVE YOU. NOT STRESS YOU!

Nearly HALF of female undergraduate students frequently experience emotional stress while attending college.

Emotion	Female Students (%)	Male Students (%)
Stress	~70%	~55%
Worry	~55%	~40%
Sadness	~40%	~28%
Enjoyment	~70%	~82%
Loneliness	~40%	~35%
Anger	~25%	~22%

(Bryant, 2023)

CONSTANTLY CHECKING SOCIALS FOR UPDATES? THAT'S YOUR MIND SEEKING CERTAINTY - LET'S FIND BETTER WAYS :)

Studies show that high usage of many social media platforms can increase feelings of loneliness & inadequacy in women

(Robinson & Smith, 2024)

CU Boulder 24/7 support: 303-492-2277

Suicide & Crisis Hotline: 988

For More Resources:

Image 3: Page two of our poster

DAILY DIGITAL WELLNESS TIPS!

- Set time limits on social media apps within your phone settings
- Designate specific hours for social media usage
- Look through your friends and followers list and unfriend people whose accounts make you feel bad about yourself

(UC Davis Health, 2024)

BEING 'INSTAGRAM PERFECT' ISN'T THE PRICE OF ADMISSION TO COLLEGE LIFE

YOUR WORTH IS NOT MEASURED BY LIKES

Women & girls feel worse about themselves when comparing with friends and peers online.

(McCutcheon et al., 2024)

PERFECT POSTS ≠ PERFECT REALITY

Women with high appearance-related social media consciousness (ASMC) report higher depression & lower body esteem with increased social media use.

(McCutcheon et al., 2024)

Public Communication Context

Through these theoretical lenses, we designed materials using warm pink tones and relatable imagery, alongside practical tips and data visualizations, to deliver key messages like "Perfect posts ≠ Perfect reality." We're planning to place these posters in high-traffic freshman areas like residence hall common spaces, dining halls, campus cafes, and the recreation center, with targeted timing during key stress periods including move-in week, mid-semester adjustment, and finals seasons. Each poster includes QR codes for more resources and crisis hotlines for immediate support, empowering students to develop healthier relationships with social media during this critical transition period.

Agenda Setting Theory Messaging Example: Script for Spokesperson

Share specifics, including who the suggested spokesperson is, who they should be talking to, through which channels, etc. Considering information such as why you're suggesting a particular word choice, etc.⁵

Interpersonal Context

Feminist Standpoint Theory Messaging Example: Male vs. Female Graph of Daily Emotions

Image 4: Addresses female students' unique experiences supported by gender-specific data in the emotions graph and statements about women's particular challenges with appearance-related social media consciousness

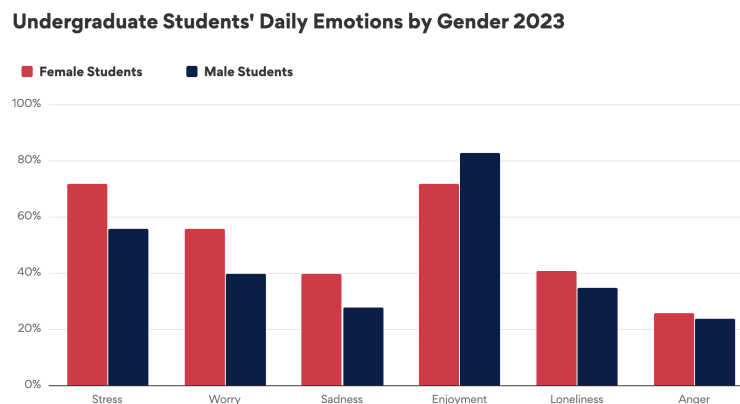


Image 5: All under Feminist Standpoint

Women with high appearance-related social media consciousness (ASMC) report higher depression & lower body esteem with increased social media use.

(McCutcheon et al., 2024)

Image 6: All Under Feminist Standpoint

Women & girls feel worse about themselves when comparing with friends and peers online.

(McCutcheon et al., 2024)

Symbolic Interaction Theory Messaging Example: Empowering Messages towards Females

Addresses how social media metrics have become powerful symbols of social worth, aligning with the theory's focus on how meaning is created through symbols

Image 7: Perfect posts don't equal perfect reality

PERFECT POSTS ≠ PERFECT REALITY

Image 8: Being Instagram-perfect isn't worth ruining your college experience

BEING 'INSTAGRAM PERFECT' ISN'T THE PRICE OF ADMISSION TO COLLEGE LIFE

Image 9: Your worth is not measured by likes

YOUR WORTH IS NOT MEASURED BY LIKES

Communication Privacy Management Theory Messaging Example: Tips for managing media

environment

Suggests the importance of managing boundaries to protect mental wellbeing

Image 10: Daily Digital Wellness Tips



Media Ecology Theory Messaging Example: Tips for managing media environment

Treating social media as an environmental factor that shapes behavior and mental health

Image 11: Your digital space should be positive not negative



Image 12: Social media direct affects on mental health



Directed at a female audience, we planned for this poster to appeal to all types of people in the community, no matter their background or culture.

Part 5: Implementation Guide

For maximum impact, posters should be strategically placed in areas with high freshman foot traffic, including residence hall common areas and study lounges where students frequently gather, dining halls and campus cafes where students take meals and socialize, and the campus recreation center where students exercise and unwind. The posters should be created in multiple languages based on campus demographics, and QR codes should be included to link to more detailed online resources. The timing of poster displays should align with periods of heightened stress throughout the academic year. These key periods include a move-in week in August/September when students are first adjusting to college life, the mid-semester adjustment period in October when academic pressures begin to mount, the first finals season in December which can be particularly challenging for new students, the start of spring semester in January when students return from break, and spring finals in May. By scheduling the poster placement during these high-stress periods, the task force aims to provide support and ensure that the messages reach students when they are most in need.

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