



Feminine Knowledge in the Digital Age: The Impact of Social Media on Student Perspectives on Pregnancy and Childbirth

Gabrielle Ray

College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, University of Florida

Adrienne Strong, PhD, Department of Anthropology

Abstract

Members of Generation Z are bombarded daily with new innovations in technology within a rapidly globalizing world, leading to a constant shift in modes of connectivity and communication. The new wave of social media, especially TikTok and Instagram, arrives in parallel to increasing social awareness of previously taboo topics, like the focus of this research—pregnancy and childbirth. Women’s health issues, especially including the topics of menstruation, sex, pregnancy, and childbirth, were hardly spoken about publicly less than a decade ago. However, this is changing, and there is a growing number of women influencers using internet platforms to normalize conversations surrounding women’s health. Using an interview-based methodology, this research seeks to gather a better understanding of opinions on social media as an avenue for women’s health knowledge, and to answer questions about how the sharing of women’s health content on social media affects young women along with what this content reveals about the societal understanding of pregnancy and childbirth. This article primarily includes opinions and commentary from young female students at the University of Florida, in addition to some supplemental viewpoints from women’s healthcare providers. These diverse perspectives produce a more multifaceted understanding of *how* social media can be so impactful and therefore *why* it is able to shape perceptions of a condition such as pregnancy.

Keywords: social media, pregnancy, childbirth, feminine knowledge, students

Introduction

Much of the previous research related to this subject surrounds the use of social media as a tool for pregnant women to connect with each other and discuss common, more taboo, issues. The author used observations of posts on social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok that placed attention on a rare symptom of pregnancy or childbirth and amplified it in a way that was fear-inducing, leading to disbelief and anti-pregnancy notions evident in the comment section. How does this kind of content affect young women who are not yet reproducing? What does the sharing of this content reveal about our knowledge and understanding of pregnancy and

childbirth? This research aims to explore these questions by engaging in discussions with women who may be seeing this content online. Moreover, it aims to gain better perspectives on what impact this content has on women's understanding of pregnancy and childbirth. The interviews that were conducted through this research revealed that pregnancy and childbirth content shared on social media is not a monolith—everyone experiences this content differently, and the content interacted with differs from person to person based on algorithms that are at play. This paper displays how digital content can impact young women when it comes to their opinions on pregnancy and childbirth, as well as how important a role it plays in filling the gap in feminine knowledge that exists amongst young women today.

Methods

Most of the data collected for this research has been drawn from 23 interviews with young women ranging from 17-22 years old, 15 of which were conducted in the spring of 2021 as part of a previous research project that also examined the impact of social media on student perspectives on pregnancy and childbirth. Additional data collected include 8 recent interviews with female students and an interview with two midwives, in which they discussed their perspectives on how social media has informed users (and therefore their clients) of knowledge relating to pregnancy and childbirth. Participant recruitment for this project was conducted through social media. Digital flyers were posted in Facebook and GroupMe groups, with a link attached to a Google Form that allowed for people to share their contact information with the interviewer. The interviews for this project ranged from 15 minutes to an hour-and-a-half, with most of them being conducted over the phone. These were done in a semi-structured format, wherein the interviewer had a pre-written list of questions to ask, but also posed follow-up questions when deemed necessary. Institutional Review Board approval was obtained through the University of Florida in the Fall of 2022, before new data collection began. Permission was granted to use previous data through the IRB, as consent had been obtained from past participants at the time of their interviews in the Spring of 2021. A consent form was shared with all the participants, and verbal consent was obtained from each that their responses could be used within this research. Once the interviews were complete, Otter.ai was used to perform transcriptions and MAXQDA software was used to code and perform thematic analysis. All participants have been given a pseudonym, and any identifying information has been removed

from any responses they provided. In the following sections, several themes that surfaced in data analysis will be described.

Feminine Knowledge

This term first came up in this research when one participant, Raina, mentioned the show *Peaky Blinders* and expressed her shock at a scene during which a woman went into labor and was suddenly surrounded by other women who seemed to know exactly what to do. Raina described a feeling of “cognitive dissonance,” where she felt that she would have no idea what to do if a woman started going into labor near her. Throughout subsequent interviews, this theme of cognitive dissonance continued to emerge, and discussions about generational knowledge, unknowingness, and (feminine) knowledge transfer ensued.

For the purposes of this paper, feminine knowledge is defined as information related to traditionally feminine experiences and bodily processes, including but not limited to menstruation, female puberty, pregnancy, childbirth, postpartum, and menopause. This knowledge has traditionally been passed down by mothers and grandmothers, as well as through conversations with other women. As the age of social media has dawned, many alternatives to the traditional dynamic have appeared, and the sources of this knowledge have, in many cases, become strangers. This research demonstrates how knowledge transfer has persisted throughout time, but the mode of transmission, as well as the type of content shared, has transformed alongside developing modes of communication. The kind of information shared in contemporary times, according to participants, seems to be more rare personal anecdotes as opposed to foundational knowledge as relating to pregnancy and childbirth—in this way, it may be interpreted as less constructive and rather destructive of previous understandings of childbearing. When prompted to explain how feminine knowledge is transferred today and if a comparison could be made to how it was in the past, Paige described:

I think it's still happening, just in a different way. Before the Internet, it was like your entire world was your community around you. And so that's where you got knowledge from, like, you didn't really have another choice. Whereas now, we have all the knowledge in the world at your fingertips. You can learn from someone's motherhood experience not just in your neighborhood, but somebody who literally is on the other side of the world from you. So, that knowledge is still being passed down, I just think that it's

less community-based, and more so information that you would find in an article written by a doctor or even something like TikTok. (Paige, 22)

Paige also used the term “chosen mothers” as an example of who is doing the passing-down of information relating to feminine knowledge, in addition to the general categories of mothers, grandmothers, and friends, which were generally agreed-upon among interlocutors. This paper posits that “chosen mothers” in today’s digital age are often complete strangers to those doing the choosing, and likely were found through the means of social media applications on which these ‘maternal’ figures possess a platform that allows them to share information with a large audience.

Unknowingness

There was a collective lack of comprehensive understanding about pregnancy and childbirth amongst interlocutors. The insufficient sex education these participants received coupled with stigma against discussing female sexuality have done little to provide these women with the tools they will need to advocate for themselves if and when they go through pregnancy and childbirth. Horrible, terrible, and nonexistent were all words used by the interlocutors in this study to describe the state of sex education in the United States. Moreover, nearly all participants labeled sex education in the United States as abstinence-based. Hall et al. (2016) describe the Abstinence Only Until Marriage (AOUM) system, which is a federally funded initiative that encourages students to practice sexual abstinence until marriage. Hall et al. writes that the U.S. government supports this initiative financially every year, primarily through the Title V Sexual Risk Avoidance Education (SRAE) program, which receives about \$75 million annually (Gutmacher Institute, 2022). Moreover, Hall et al. write that there is only an annual average of 6.2 hours of sexuality education required by high schools. The authors also bring to light the paradox of declining formal sexual education coupled with unexpected declining adolescent birth rates and increasing contraceptive use. This contradictory data means that adolescents must be learning about these sexual topics elsewhere (Hall et al., 2016). The Internet and social media have been credited with filling this gap (Strasburger & Brown, 2014). This value of social media was recognizable through conversations with interlocutors in this study, with several participants mentioning how they learn a lot about sex and their bodies from content that they see online.

I learned more about reproduction and sexual health through TikTok than I ever did through a sex ed class, which, now that I think about it... I don't think I've ever even had a sex ed class. (Blake, 19)

The implications of this statement are twofold: one, Blake is receiving sex education content on her social media platforms and is absorbing the material, and two, this content is filling the void that is her lack of formal sex education.

Another adjacent topic of conversation within this research was that of the stigmatization of discussing feminine bodies. A research study done on the sex education topics that are most commonly searched for on TikTok echoed the issues that participants had with the formal sex education they received—the most common searches found within the study were female anatomy and female pleasure (specifically, orgasms) (Fowler et al., 2022). This shows that the participants' feelings that these topics were taboo were not isolated. Understanding sex and sexuality is imperative to understanding childbearing, and it became clear through these discussions that there is a severe gap in the sexual education system in which participants were raised. This paper argues that the hush-hush nature that surrounds discussing sex and women's bodies has created a culture that relies on the constant availability of online platforms and communities that can be easily entered and quickly explored as a source of information.

Social Media

Not all participants in this research are avid users of social media, and those who are not credited their lack of use to its addictive qualities along with personal issues that came about as a result of heavy use of social media. This section discusses characteristics of childbearing content present on social media platforms that were identified by participants. Through these themes, this paper argues that there are both positives and negatives to the use of social media as related to certain ways that this information is portrayed. This also provides insight into how these women receive information about pregnancy and childbirth, as well as what makes social media so powerful in its delivery of this information.

The People of the World at Your Fingertips

There's a common saying when someone is talking about the value of smartphones and the Internet: "You've got the world at your fingertips." The introduction of social media to this

digital realm expanded the absorption of subjective information provided by other users. I describe this, more accurately, as having the “people of the world at your fingertips,” as the opinions, knowledge, and beliefs of strangers, ‘influencers,’ celebrities, etc. are available to anyone who seeks them out. This more personal nature of social media networks was mentioned several times throughout interviews.

I feel like that's the thing with social media, like...you feel like you're actually talking to somebody who you can trust or whatever, I guess, because it's a real person versus like, if you were reading a book, you don't know how personal a statement is. So, I feel like it's useful to get firsthand knowledge about stuff like that and get actual tips from somebody who's been in that situation. (Blaire, 22)

This ties back into this concept that Paige described as “chosen mothers,” wherein these social media users, who would normally not be discussing women’s health topics with women like those interviewed, are able to share their personal experiences and knowledge. This kind of personal touch enables women viewing this content to feel a sense of relatability and learn something they might not have known about before, which can help normalize different experiences. This raises the question of who is doing the educating on these platforms. Research shows that there are three main categories of people who are educating users about sexuality-related subjects on social media. The largest group is comprised of laywomen (i.e., those with no institutional or professional credentials), whose position as peer educators create a space in which women can connect with each other about personal experiences. The other two groups are professional sexual health organizations (e.g., Planned Parenthood) and professional individual sex educators—who could also be called ‘influencers’ (Döring, 2021). These latter groups are often the ones who are sharing more educationally-framed content, with topics explained in more detail, as opposed to the laywomen’s approach, which relies heavily on personal anecdotes. Most content mentioned by interlocutors in this study was anecdotal, an example of which is:

I just saw this lady on TikTok saying her uterus was literally, like, falling out of her body. It was like a week after she gave birth, and I was like... that is literally insane. (Allie, 17)

Social media has granted users the opportunity to connect with people from all over the world. With this, these platforms are also incredibly accessible to anyone who has a smartphone or computer, which was mentioned many times throughout interviews. Not only are most social

media apps free, but one can search whatever they would like, and algorithms are able to cater the content one receives to their interests.

Curated Echo Chambers

By using complicated algorithms, social media platforms have created digital environments that are personalized for its users—through features like the Explore page on Instagram and the For You Page on TikTok, users are able to see content that has been informed by their previous interactions on the site. Such content can transcend these algorithms and go viral, so long as it is seen as attractive to a wide audience. The concept of virality seems to underlie much of the content that is present on social media sites today—especially TikTok, as several participants noted. This can lead to the spreading of information that will lead to more views, which, in the case of childbearing content, is often the “extremes,” as Joy described. These “extremes” of pregnancy and childbirth include either very positive or very negative experiences with childbearing. The sharing of this content can also lead to echo chambers, which are essentially cocooned digital spheres manufactured by algorithms. Fear can be created as a result of these echo chambers, which often increases visibility of negative portrayals of pregnancy.

Performing Pregnancy

When discussing the kind of content participants often encountered while on social media sites, they often described seeing only the “extremes” (Joy) of pregnancy experiences. On one end, participants referenced the “highlight reel” (Stevie, Ren, Sienna, Tess), which consists of users posting manicured moments from their pregnancy or birth experience. Examples of this include maternity photoshoots (Autumn, Orion, Carmen, Ren, Jordan) and edited birth vlogs (Bea, Ren). On the other end, participants recalled seeing posts highlighting the scariest parts of pregnancy, which often included descriptions of very rare conditions. The sharing of these experiences garnered attention on social media platforms and attracted “virality” (Millie), enabling more people to see it and comment on it, thereby making the condition seem more common. This phenomenon feeds back into the concept of echo chambers that was discussed in the previous section. The social pressures that exist when it comes to posting on social media likely constrict the ways that women feel they can post publicly, which leads to glamorized images of pregnancy—even if the user sharing these images herself would prefer to see more

realistic content. In this way, the act of performing pregnancy includes posting filtered content designed to portray an individual and their experiences in the best light possible. This phenomenon was most often attributed to Instagram, but it happens everywhere. This creation of false expectations or unrealistic notions of what pregnancy looks like can be isolating for women who had different experiences—which sometimes can also be remedied by digital platforms.

Building Community

I see how people are very raw and unapologetic on TikTok. And I think that's why it's taking off so much as an app and gaining so much traction because people like to see other people experiencing the same things. I think that the feelings that make us feel most alone are actually what connect us the most, and I think TikTok really utilizes that.

(Casie, 19)

The ability of social media to create communities was one of the positive aspects of social media that was most mentioned throughout conversations with interlocutors. The wide reaches of the digital world enable people to connect with others from all over the world, expanding an individual's sphere of influence beyond their own physical community. In this way, finding community in social media, even if that's just through seeing somebody's post that one can relate to, can allow women to feel less alone—especially about things that are taboo to openly talk about in real life. Some of these topics were mentioned by participants during this topic of conversation, including infertility (Lily), miscarriage (Casie, Sienna, Lily), and fetal conditions (Millie).

This kind of online community can also be beneficial to young girls who may feel unable to talk about their experiences going through puberty and learn about their sexuality. Being able to connect with other girls who are going through the same kinds of things allows for a better understanding of the normality of these processes, which could greatly influence a girl's self-confidence. This can be translated into finding community as adult women as well and can act as an empowering force when women are free to discuss previously stigmatized concepts with one another. One example of this is the #breakthesilence community that was created in the Netherlands, in which women are free and encouraged to share their traumatic experiences with childbirth in a safe space, in good company (van der Pijl et al., 2020). This ability to speak about

something that is mostly taboo is empowering and opens the door to greater conversation about that topic.

Bringing the Digital World into the Physical

I'm thinking of a situation where we had a client that repeatedly would come in with these same fears or very specific things that could happen, or very specific things that could go wrong, or that could possibly alter their pregnancy or birth. And so finally we were like, "Where are you getting this information?" And they're like, "Oh, I saw it on TikTok." And we're like, "How much per day are you on TikTok watching these videos?" And they said, "Oh, I could do this for hours; it's like my whole morning routine." (Sandra, Student Midwife)

This part of the paper emphasizes how social media affects the way that interviewed participants view pregnancy and childbirth as well as how the midwives interviewed have seen real-world examples of social media's effects on these understandings. The midwives interviewed shared examples of questions clients asked relating to childbearing—particularly remedies like "raspberry leaf tea" and "okra water" (Sandra) along with preferences like water births and the use of doulas. In addition to these midwives' perspectives, the college-aged participants had many things to say about how social media has impacted their understanding of pregnancy and childbirth—many of which had negative connotations. However, a positive example is as follows:

I feel like it just gives me a realistic viewpoint of it just because, you know, I've never seen someone go through pregnancy. So literally, if I didn't have social media, it would literally all be like, fiction, almost like fiction to me. (Millie, 22)

Exaggerated content which often becomes most popular on social media sites can influence the way that young women view pregnancy and childbirth, especially if the content includes information that can incite fear about a bodily process. So, while there is a benefit to receiving this kind of information, there also is an element to it that can cause unnecessary fear.

Deciding what to accept as realistic is up to the user, and through the participants' responses, it seems like they have each figured out what information they believe and what they do with that information. For most participants, social media has provided a space where the

transfer of information related to childbearing is able to be shared, allowing them to gain some more perspective on the topic and be more well-informed. In this way, the experiences participants have with social media are incredibly varied but largely indicate an overall influence on how they view these topics.

Conclusion

Using interview-based methodology, this paper sought to answer multiple questions. First, how does content discussing women's health on social media affect young women who are not yet reproducing? Second, what does the sharing of this type of content reveal about our knowledge and understanding of pregnancy and childbirth? The major findings of these interviews were that young women were learning more about their personal health from online sources rather than in scholastic settings, and the sharing of this kind of content online was impactful in decreasing stigma surrounding female bodily processes. Based on the interviews conducted, there are clearly both positives and negatives to the presence of childbearing content on social media as well as its potential to influence younger women. Social media will never be able to be reduced to either 'good' or 'bad,' as it is truly individualized to the user. It provides a unique avenue in knowledge acquisition (on any topic) and fosters connection, but it also is commonly spoken about with a negative connotation, especially when it comes to screen time and superficiality. Most participants in this research noted how social media portrayals of pregnancy and childbirth altered their opinions on it as well as their understanding of how the processes work. Even though not all participants seemed to be greatly affected by this content, they all contributed to the greater understanding of how this social media content is constructed.

References

- Döring, N. (2021). Sex Education on Social Media. In A. D. Lykins (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Sexuality and Gender* (pp. 1–12). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-59531-3_64-1
- Guttmacher Institute. *Federally funded abstinence-only programs: Harmful and ineffective*. (2022, August 24). <https://www.guttmacher.org/fact-sheet/abstinence-only-programs#:~:text=Funding%20for%20the%20program%20started,from%20having%20sex%20before%20marriage>.
- Fowler, L. R., Schoen, L., Smith, H. S., & Morain, S. R. (2022). Sex Education on TikTok: A Content Analysis of Themes. *Health Promotion Practice, 23*(5), 739–742. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15248399211031536>

- Hall, K. S., McDermott Sales, J., Komro, K. A., & Santelli, J. (2016). The State of Sex Education in the United States. *Journal of Adolescent Health, 58*(6), 595–597. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2016.03.032>
- Strasburger, V., & Brown, S. (2014). Sex Education in the 21st Century. *Pediatric Annals, 30*(2), 73–73. <https://doi.org/10.3928/0090-4481-20010201-05>
- van der Pijl, M. S. G., Hollander, M. H., van der Linden, T., Verweij, R., Holten, L., Kingma, E., de Jonge, A., & Verhoeven, C. J. M. (2020). Left powerless: A qualitative social media content analysis of the Dutch #breakthesilence campaign on negative and traumatic experiences of labour and birth. *PLOS ONE, 15*(5), e0233114. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0233114>