Feminism of Today: How does Social Media Impact Women's views of Feminism?

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Abstract

The fourth wave of feminism is characterized by the rise of social media. Social media allows feminism to reach a broader audience, including the younger generation. Feminism can help women feel more empowered, enables women to learn from one another and find strength in shared experiences. The aim of this study is to examine the effect of social media on women's views of feminism, the relationship between mental well-being and feminism, and the moderation effect of social media on this relationship. A mixed method study was conducted using a questionnaire which featured a qualitative approach consisting of open questions to gain insight into women's views of feminism and the impact of social media on these views. A quantitative approach was used to examine the relationship between well-being and feminism and the effect of social media on this relationship. Results of the qualitative data indicated that social media largely improves women's opinion of feminism and allows them to learn new things about both women and feminism. Linear regression analysis indicated a negative relation between mental well-being and feminism. The moderation analysis indicated that social media did not play a significant role in the relationship between mental well-being and feminism. The results of the quantitative section of the study are not in line with the qualitative section or previous scientific research, which can possibly be attributed to high scores on feminism and time spent on social media. For future research, it could be interesting to use observation to measure time spent on social media or include more people in the target group such as men or older women.

Introduction

The reach of feminism has expanded almost exponentially in recent years, exerting its influence on increasingly younger generations. The term 'feminism' appeared in the English Dictionary all the way back in 1895, but has since made great strides (Feminism, N. Meanings, Etymology and more | Oxford English Dictionary, n.d.). Feminism has focused on providing basic human rights for women such as the right to vote, work, receive education, have access to contraception, and many more societal changes (Echols, 1989). Today, feminism is defined as the belief in and advocacy of the political, economic, and social equality of the sexes expressed especially through organized activity on behalf of women's rights and interests ("Feminism", 2023).

Historically, the feministic movement has been categorized in four waves. The first and second wave were focused mainly on legal and financial equality by demanding voting rights for women and opposing direct discrimination against women (Tong, 2018; Freedman, 2003). The third wave of feminism focused on individuality and diversity (Krolokke & Sorensen, 2006). The fourth wave of feminism is seen as an extension of the third wave but is characterized by activism taking place on social media which made the reach of feminism grow considerably (Cochrane, 2013). As a result, there has been a sudden resurgence and expansion of feminism in the past decade. Social media is capable of reaching a large public through popular platforms, for example by distributing hashtags as was done in the Me-Too movement (Morales-I-Gras et al., 2021). Because of the integration of activism and social media, the way feminism communicates with the world and each other has changed (Jiménez et al., 2021b). Through social media, adolescents have been not only been able to be a part of feminism, they are now also able to learn about feminism and feel empowered. For example, Alzate (2020) mentioned in her article about social media and feminism that women use social media as "an alternative feminine classroom space". Thus, social media has allowed

women to speak up more about their experiences and struggles navigating the world as women, connecting with each other and empowering each other along the way. However, it is yet unknown whether this fourth wave and the role of social media has a noteworthy influence on the well-being of this new generation.

Well-being is defined as the state of being happy, healthy, or prosperous ("Well-being", 2023). In the construction of his mental framework for well-being (The Mental Health Continuum), Keyes (2002) proposes three categories of well-being: emotional, social and psychological well-being. Well-being of women in relation to involvement with feminism was investigated in an experimental study by Yakushko (2007). The study examined whether women with feministic values generally felt more satisfied with their lives compared to women with traditional values. Results showed that women who identify with feminist values scored significantly higher on well-being than women who identify with more traditional values. Additionally, there are other, more subtle ways in which feminism can positively influence the level of well-being of women. For example, according to Nolen et al. (2020) feminists are likely to promote self-acceptance and actively foster an accepting environment which tends to promote an aversion towards the appearance standard that is forced upon women. As self-acceptance, autonomy and confidence are important aspects of psychological well-being (Ryff, 1989), it can be suggested that feminism has a beneficial effect on the lives of women and allows them to develop and grow.

This point was first introduced by Weitz (1982), who conducted an explorative study with women who were registered for feminist consciousness-raising groups, using interviews and observation to examine the psychological benefits of involvement with feminism. The results indicated that feminism has a beneficial effect on depression and improves self-esteem. Klonis et al. (1997) also used a qualitative approach to gain insight into the perspectives of academic feminists on whether they felt feminism had helped them academically or held them

back by provoking discrimination. It was concluded that instead of thinking of feminism as a means for discrimination, the academic women viewed feminism as a life raft. Although some research has been done on feminism and its psychological effects on women, it is not extensive by any means. These studies often take either an explorative or experimental approach, and none include a third variable such as social media.

Therefore, this paper aims to examine the cross-sectional relationship between feminism, social media and mental well-being using both qualitative and quantitative measures. First, it is expected that the qualitative analysis results correspond with the relationships found in the quantitative analysis. Second, it is expected that social media positively influences the relationship between feminism and mental well-being, such that participants that spend more time on social media have a more positive view on feminism which then enhances their mental well-being. Finally, it is expected that there is a positive relation between feminism and mental well-being.

Methods

Design

A mixed methods design was used to conduct this study. The effect of social media on women's views of feminism was analyzed using a qualitative approach. Mental well-being, feminism and time spent on social media were measured using a quantitative approach. The study was ethically approved by the University of Twente (no. 231226) and the participants were online asked for informed consent before starting with the questionnaire. Participants completed the survey online in Qualtrics.

Participants and Procedure

A sample of 90 participants between the ages of 18 and 65 years old was recruited. 14 participants were excluded from the quantitative elements of the survey due to incomplete survey data, meaning 76 individuals participated in this part of the study (74 women, 1 prefer not to say, 1 non-binary/third gender, 39 Dutch, 24 German, 13 other, mean age = 21.24, SD =

3.52, range = 18 – 45). 4 of these participants did not respond to the qualitative questions but were included in the other analyses, as their scores on the well-being and feminism still hold value to the quantitative aspect of this study. A recruitment message containing the link to the Qualtrics survey was spread on social media platforms such as Instagram and WhatsApp, and via word of mouth through the friends and family of the researcher. It was also posted on SONA systems of the University of Twente. An English and Dutch version was made of both the recruitment message and the survey.

Measures

Qualitative Measures

To find out more about the effects of social media on women's view of feminism, women were asked to describe how people were first introduced to feminism, and what impact social media has had on their perspective of feminism. These questions were formulated as follows: "At what age did you first hear about feminism, and what did you learn about it?", "Do you think that social media has had an impact on your opinions and/or involvement in feminism? If yes, can you describe its influence? If not, why not?" and "Are there things or concepts in feminism that are important to you that you would not have known about if you had not been introduced to them via social media? If so, which things or concepts?".

Quantitative Measures

Feminism was measured by using Szymanski's (2004) Self-Identification as a Feminist Scale (SIF). This test measures four components of being a feminist (beliefs, public identification, private identification, and support for the feminist movement) in four items by using a five-point Likert scale (e.g., "Feminist values and principles are important to me."). The answers run from 'strongly disagree' (0) to 'strongly agree' (4), higher scores indicate a

stronger alignment with feminism. A great internal consistency was previously reported (Szymanski, 2004). This study reported a good Cronbach's alpha of 0.87.

Time spent on social media was measured by two items: "How many hours a day do you use social media?", where the participants were able to choose from four options (0-2 hours, 3-4 hours, 5-6 hours and 6+ hours) and "Which social media platforms do you use?", in which the participants were able to select more than one platform such as Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, etc.

Mental well-being was measured using Keyes' (2009) 14-item Mental Health Continuum – Short Form (MHC-SF). This test measures well-being by asking participants the number of times they have experienced emotional, social and psychological wellbeing in the past month (e.g., "During the past month, how often did you feel satisfied with life?"). Emotional well-being is measured by item one till three, social well-being is measured by item four till eight and psychological well-being is measured by item nine till fourteen. The test uses a six-point Likert scale with answers ranging from 'never' (0) to '(almost) every day' (5). Higher scores indicate a higher level of mental well-being. Prior studies have shown a good reliability (Hendriks et al., 2020: Lamers et al., 2010), in this study a good Cronbach's Alpha was reported of 0.89.
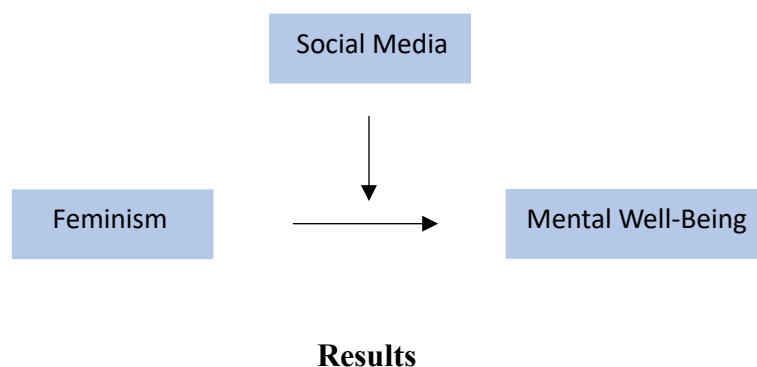
Statistical Analysis

Qualitative Analysis

Explorative content analysis based on inductive values coding was used to gain insight into the impact of social media on the respondents' views of feminism. The Dutch responses were translated to English by the researcher and added to the responses that were originally written in English. Subsequently, the data was thoroughly reviewed by the researcher. Different rounds of coding and reading were done throughout the study. Recurring topics were identified, condensed and labeled by constructing various codes and subcodes per question

(Table 1). 15 codes were identified, the data was categorized into 5 codes representing overall sentiments. The 10 remaining subcodes were constructed out of recurring topics.

Quantitative Analysis

To analyze the data, the statistical software R version 4.3.2 (RStudio) was used. To analyze the relationship between well-being and feminism as well as the relationship between time spent on social media and well-being, linear regression was used by using the (lm) function in Rstudio. The moderation effect of social media on the relation between feminism and well-being was measured using a moderation analysis. No outliers were reported, and assumption testing indicated that no assumptions were violated.

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Results

Qualitative Analysis

Of the 76 participants, 66 participants completed at least one of the open questions. The results revealed that the participants were introduced to feminism at a mean age of 13.85 years. The results of the content analysis of the 3 open questions are presented in Table 1. More than one code could be given to one response, 8 responses were given more than one code.

The first question was answered by 72 out of 76 respondents. How women were introduced to the feminism and what they learned about the topic was categorized in 'equality', 'wage gap' and 'sexism'. 49 participants only stated their age and therefore their responses could not be coded. Most participants (n = 13) stated that they were introduced to

feminism by learning about equality, for example, "*Mainly about the fact that women should have equal opportunities and be paid equally.*" *(age 22)*. The wage gap between men and women was also mentioned regularly (n = 7) by participants as the first topic that introduced them to feminism. A few participants (n = 3) stated that they were introduced to feminism by discussing sexism. For example, one participant stated the following: "*I learned a lot about sexism, the problems that women are facing in daily life as well as on a structural level.*" *(age 25)*.

The second question was answered by 70 out of 76 respondents. 64 respondents described that they expected that social media has had an impact on their opinions about feminism. 48 of these statements were coded as having a 'positive impact' and 16 as having a 'negative impact' (Table 1). 54 participants only responded with yes/no or did not mention any specific reasons as to why they thought social media had influences their opinion of feminism. For this reason, no subcodes were assigned to these responses. One subcode was identified by analyzing the positive impact statements which was called 'necessity'. This code was described by participants stating that they have realized through social media that feminism is still a necessary cause (n = 8). One participant mentioned the following: "*Social media underlines the importance of feminism and that it is still a topic to discuss.*" *(age 21)*. Two subcodes emerged when analyzing the negative impact statements. Namely, most women who indicated that social media had a negative impact on their views of feminism described this negative impact by mentioning 'extreme' feminism (n = 6) or a hatred towards men and a belief that women are fundamentally better than men (n = 4). For example, one participant wrote: "*I get a distorted negative image of feminists from extreme cases that can be seen on the internet (women who say that men should have fewer rights, etc.).*" *(age 21).* It is important to note that these values have no place in the feminist movement, as feminism stand for equality between both sexes and therefore does not place one above the other.

The third question was answered by 66 out of 76 respondents. 41 participants (62.1%) stated that they had learned new concepts and/or information about feminism due to social media (Table 1). 53 participants only responded with yes/no or stated that they did not know or could not mention specific concepts at the moment of filling out the survey. For this reason, no subcodes were assigned to these responses. After analysis, three subcodes emerged. Most of the participants (n = 13) mentioned that social media had deepened their knowledge and interest in the subject of feminism which was coded as 'in depth information'. For example, one participant mentioned: "*Without social media I would not be such a strong advocate because I would not be aware of the extent of the underlying problems. Social media has also taught me about confidence in being a woman.*" *(age 22)*. Participants also expressed that social media allowed them to find women who share their experiences which offers them support and recognition and helped them realize the extent of the inequality between women and men. This was coded as 'shared experiences' (n = 4). For example, one participant said: "*Social media makes it easier for women to gain an audience for addressing inequalities that have happened to them. Problems that you might never have become aware of.*" *(age 26)*. Another participant mentioned: "*I realized that all women experience what I experience and how messed up it is that we have such horrible, shared experiences.*" *(age 20)*. Some participants (n = 3) highlighted the fact that feminism also criticizes societal standards that are harmful for men and can therefore also better the lives of men. This sentiment was coded as "support for men". One participant stated: "*Social media has shown me that feminism is not only about equal rights for women, but also fights for equal rights for queer people, and that men should also be able to step out of gender norms and have the right to show their emotions and not suffer under toxic masculinity.*" *(age 21)*.

Table 1

Codes and their Number of Appearances (N = 197) in the Qualitative Data of 72 participants (100% = 197 statements)

| Topics	Codes	N (%)	Sub codes	N (%)	Quotes
Learning about feminism (11.68%)			Equality	13 (6.6%)	"How important it is for women to have equality as goal."
			Wage gap	7 (3.55%)	"The earliest thing I remember was learning about the gender pay disparity."
			Sexism	3 (1.52%)	"Later I learned more about different disadvantages that women experience such as in medical situations (not being taken seriously)."
Social media influence on opinions of feminism (44.67%)	Positive impact	48 (24.37%)	Necessity	8 (4.06%)	"It made me way more aware of how much we need feminism."
			Extreme Feminism	6 (3.05%)	"There is also a lot of incorrect information or a lot about extreme feminism. These extremes are not the basis of feminism and can give a distorted picture."
	Negative impact	16 (8.12%)	Man-hate	4 (2.03%)	"I do believe that the media has a wide reach and not 'ideal' ideas are being spread, like blatant hatred for the opposite sex."

	No impact	6 (3.05%)		"No, I never thought about the content on social media in terms of feminism."
Learned about feminism via social media (43.65%)	New concepts/information	41 (20.81%)	In depth information	13 (6.6%)	"Yes, I can't name specific ones, but I would not know as much about the movement if I had not used social media."
			Shared experiences	4 (2.03%)	"That other women still feel disadvantaged and that many women have to deal with this today."
			Support for men	3 (1.52%)	"That feminism can also be positive for men, and that the patriarchy is bad for both sexes."
	No new concepts/information	25 (12.69%)		

Quantitative Analysis

On a scale of 0 to 5 the participants had a mean score of 2.82 (SD = 0.71) on mental well-being, which is slightly beneath the norm of the Dutch population (M = 3.05, Keyes, 2009). On a scale of 0 to 4 the participants had a mean score of 2.87 (SD = 0.77) on feminism, which is a relatively high score and therefore it can be said that this is a relatively feminist sample. The linear regression analysis used for the relation between feminism and well-being showed a significant negative relation, meaning that the higher one scores on feminism, the lower one's general well-being is (Figure 1, b = -.26, SE = 0.11, $t(76)$ = -2.41, $C.I.$ 95% = [-0.47, -0.04], p = .019). The participants had a mean of 3.13 hours of time spent on social media per day. The moderation analysis indicated that time spent on social media had a weak negative effect on the relationship between feminism and mental well-being. However, this effect was not significant, indicating that time spent on social media did not influence the negative relation between wellbeing and feminism (b = -.04, SE = 0.08, $t(76)$ = -.54, $C.I.$ 95% = [-0.2, 0.11], p = .594).

Figure 1

Linear Regression: Relation Feminism on Well-Being
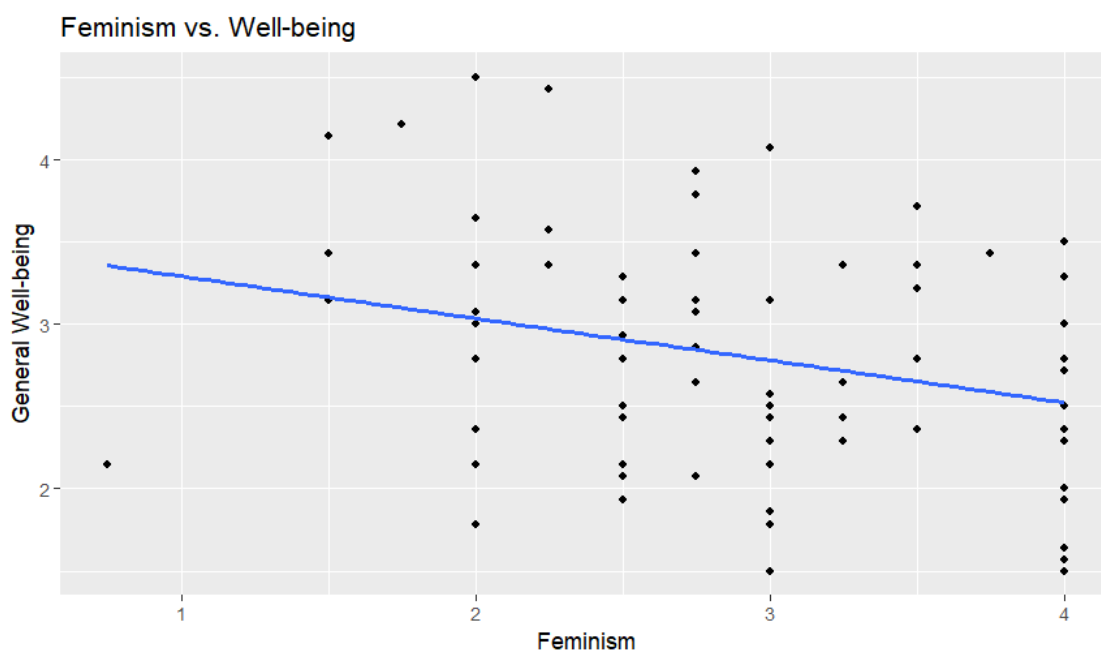
Discussion

The aim of this paper was to use a mixed methods design to examine the effects that social media has on women's views of feminism and the relationship between feminism, social media and well-being. Social media and its impact on women's views of feminism was analyzed using a qualitative approach with open questions. The relationship between feminism and mental well-being was examined with linear regression analysis and a moderation analysis was used to examine the effects of social media on this relationship.

Main Findings

There is a clear discrepancy between quantitative and qualitative results regarding the relationship between feminism, well-being and social media. While the quantitative results found that there is a weak negative relationship between feminism and well-being and social media has no significant impact on this relationship, the qualitative analysis revealed that social media has a largely positive influence on women's views of feminism and that feminism has helped them, for example by increasing their knowledge about feminism society or finding support in each other by sharing experiences about womanhood. A possible explanation for this discrepancy could be the quantitative question about time spent on social media, which could have easily been underestimated. The average time spent on social media of the sample is 3 hours and 8 minutes per day, which is above the Dutch average of 2 hours and 41 minutes (Oosterveer, 2023). However, time spent on social media does not directly indicate how much of that time is spent looking at feminism-related content. It is possible that even though one spends a large amount of time on social media, they do not necessarily spend that time looking at feminism-related content. Thus, the variable of time spent on social media was not adequately measured, as it does not account for exposure to feminism on social media specifically.

The quantitative results are also in contrast with scientific literature described in the introduction, as it was expected that the relationship between feminism and well-being would be positive (Yakushko, 2007; Saunders & Kashubeck-West, 2006). The sample has a high average score on feminism and can therefore be considered as a feminist sample. Because the sample is predominantly feminist, it is hard to say that feminism is the sole cause for the low score on well-being. Feminism might contribute to the low average well-being; however, the negative relation is likely not caused by feminism alone. A second possible explanation for the low score on well-being could be the high average for time spent on social media instead of feminism. Braghieri et al. (2022) analyzed mental-health data amongst college students around the years of Facebook's expansion and saw that Facebook's growth was accompanied by a decline in the mental health of college students. A second study examined the relationship between social media use and well-being in adolescents and found that prolonged social media use (4+ hours per day) is associated with poor emotional health (McNamee et al., 2021). 19.7% of the sample reported spending either 5-6 hours or 6+ hours per day or on social media. Thus, time spent on social media could possibly be partly responsible for the below average well-being of the sample instead of feminism alone.

Notable results include the mention of negative, incorrect information is present on social media and participants were introduced to feminism through this type of content. The majority respondents who stated that social media had a negative impact on their views of feminism mentioned that they had seen hateful content on social media, for example accounts that value women's rights above men's rights, who brand themselves as feminists. This was perceived notable as it was not necessarily expected that respondents that experienced negative influence on social media would be influenced by extreme feminists and incorrect information, rather than anti-feminists.

Strengths and Limitations

The mixed methods aspect is considered to be the most important strength of this study, as the measures provide multiple perspectives and more specific insights on the data. It is also important to note that the sample size of the qualitative portion of this study is large enough to be generalizable. A sample size can allow generalizability for qualitative research from anywhere between 9-59 participants (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022: Staller, 2021). Additionally, both the MHC-SF and the SIF are reported to have good internal consistency and reliability (Lamers et al., 2010; Szymanski, 2004).

The unique contribution of this study is the examination of the role that social media plays in the context of feminism, women's opinions of feminism and their mental well-being. Although there has been an increase in research regarding the relationship between feminism and well-being in recent years, none of these studies include the variable of time spent on social media into the research. The fourth wave of feminism has been around for at least a decade; however, scientific research is still very much lacking. This study can serve as a start into examining the role social media plays in the world of feminism and its impact on the younger generation.

The study is primarily limited by its sample size of 76 participants when looking at the quantitative results. The previously mentioned studies investigating the relationship between feminism and well-being all used samples of 200+ participants. A generalizable sample for quantitative research ideally consists out of at least 300 participants (Serdar et al., n.d.). The small sample size is most likely due to the method of recruitment, which was done through social media and the SONA system of the University of Twente. The respondents of SONA receive study credits for their participation, however, participants who came through social media did not receive any external rewards. At least half of the participants came from the SONA system and number of participants grew steadily throughout the time that the

questionnaire was posted on the platform, which is in contrast with the social media link. The sample size should be increased in the future to ensure generalizability regarding the quantitative section of the study. Increasing the sample size can be done by promising external rewards to respondents, such as a monetary compensation (Abdelazeem et al., 2023). Additionally, the questionnaire can be distributed by more people with greater reach on more platforms.

A second limitation was the measurement instrument, which was a self-report questionnaire. Self-report measurement instruments come with the risk of personal biases, such as social desirability bias, influencing the objectivity of the respondents filling out the questionnaire (Krumpal, 2011).

Future Research

In future research the variable of time spent on social media should be measured in a more thorough manner, by for example observing social media use. This would allow insight into how much time spent on social media is actually spent looking at feminism-related content. This would also allow for objective data which would eliminate the risk of personal biases such as social desirability bias. It would also be interesting to see what kind of content is shown to which participants, as in the qualitative results of this study participants mentioned both being influenced in a negative and positive way regarding feminism.

Secondly, in future research a different, broader target group could be used to see if age or gender plays a role in the relationship between feminism, time spent on social media and well-being. Older women have more life experience and therefore could be aware of more information regarding previous developments of the feminist movement. On the other hand, they might be influenced by conservatism and traditional values on views of feminism and women's lives more than young women would, which might then also impact their independence and well-being. Additionally, it could be interesting to see the opinions of men

about feminism, and how social media influenced men's views of feminism. It could be possible that different feminism-related content is shown to men compared to women, and it would be interesting to see whether men are more likely to be influenced in a negative way. This would be unfortunate, as feminism does not only support women rights but can be helpful for men as well as was mentioned in the qualitative results.

A final aspect to examine could be the disinformation and extremities regarding feminism that are distributed on social media, and whether it has a large influence on social media users or not. Although this kind of content does not align itself with actual feminism which strives for equality between the sexes, it does contribute to the development of stigmas towards feminism as this kind of content is often branded as feminism. As seen in the qualitative results where it was mentioned multiple times, it does most certainly have an influence on the public. It could be interesting to see how this type of content spreads and who is most susceptible to it.

Conclusion

This study sought to analyze the impact of social media on the general opinion of women about feminism and the relationship between feminism and women's mental well-being. Time spent on social media does not have an impact on the relationship between feminism and mental well-being, and a weak negative relationship between feminism and mental well-being was found, which contrasts with scientific literature. However, a qualitative approach showed that women's views of and involvement with feminism are most definitely influenced by social media, mostly in a positive and empowering way. Future research about feminism, the role of social media in feminism and its impact on women across the world is necessary to keep striving for equality and empowerment of women.

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