EXPLORING THE ASSOCIATION BETWEEN SOCIAL MEDIA AND BODY IMAGE CONCERNS

AMONG WOMEN

Devorah Mekonnen

The University of Georgia

HPRB 5410W

Dr. Walters

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Exploring the Association between Social Media Use and Body Image Concerns

*Research Question:* How does social media play a role in distorting body perception among young women?

Abstract

The objective of this literature review is to analyze the correlation between social media content and body image concerns among teen and young adults. A total of ten peer-reviewed articles were selected from the databases PubMed and Science Direct and used as support for this research. Of those articles, five were selected pertaining to social media and its influence on body image concerns. In addition, 3 articles were selected that focused on the relationship between eating disorders and social media use. Finally, 2 articles that explored the relationship between social media use and eating concerns among young adults living in the United States. The social media platforms examined included Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, Pinterest, and Snapchat. The articles used for this literature review suggested that media plays an instrumental role in body dissatisfaction, particularly among women. Some of the articles reviewed further suggested that body dissatisfaction and eating concerns were positively correlated. Eating concerns included anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, and extreme dieting habits. It was discovered that women were more likely to develop eating disorders and other mental illnesses due to social media use than their male counterparts. This is partly due to the promotion of unrealistic body expectations on women that is advertised across most social media platforms. More research is necessary to further examine the association between social media use and eating disorders, particularly among young women.
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Introduction

In recent years, social media has become one of the most common forms of human interaction. With easy access to an array of information, an increasing number of teens and young adults have turned to social platforms such as Twitter and Facebook to explore the latest trend or public opinion. An article published by the University of Pittsburgh found that those who spent most of their free time on social media have approximately two times the risk of developing eating and body image concerns when compared to those who reported minimal use of social media sites (Sidani, Shensa, Hoffman, Hanmer, & Primack, 2016). As of this year, Instagram has 800 million active users and 59% of its user are between the ages of 18 and 29 (Aslam, 2018). Other sites such as Facebook and Twitter have 2.072 billion and 300 million users respectively (Aslam, 2018).

According to an article published by Social Media Today, the average person spends two hours on social media every day with YouTube being the most frequented website (Asano, 2017). This number continues to increase as more social media applications are becoming widely available via mobile devices. Another study conducted by Pew Research found that teenage girls are more likely to use social media sites and frequent those sites more than their male counterparts (Lenhart, 2015). While the research cannot prove that social media is the cause for body dysmorphia and other psychological issues, it can be suggested there is a significant association between social media use and negative body concerns (Spettigue & Henderson, 2004).

This literature review outlines the methods used to find articles that support the notion that there is a strong correlation between social media use and negative body concern.
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Furthermore, the researcher interpreted the results of the selected peer-reviewed journals and reveal the overall findings of the research conducted. The paper concludes by examining the future implications of the evidence presented and how the results can be used to address other concerns similar to the research topic.

Objectives

Since social media is a relatively new form of media entertainment, the amount of research that explores the relationship between media sites and body concerns is limited in number. However, it has been concluded by several publications that there is a strong, positive relationship between social media use and the development of negative body perception (Perloff, 2014). Other articles have suggested that appearance-focused social platforms such as Instagram leads to a greater rate of body dissatisfaction among women due to unhealthy physical comparisons that some partake in (Marengo, Longobardi, Fabris, & Settanni, 2018).

Purpose

The purpose of this literature review is to explain how social media distorts body perception among young women. In this digital age of smartphones, more teens and young adults have turned to popular social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook for their source of entertainment. Although social media can be useful for transmitting mass media information worldwide, it can also produce damaging psychological effects on its audience, particularly on teens and young adults (O'Keeffe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011). Trending topics that promote thin body ideals have shown to correlate with negative body image concerns among the target population.
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Methods

Two databases, ScienceDirect and PubMed were used to search for peer-reviewed articles on the subject matter. The inclusion criteria included articles that were peer-reviewed from the years 2008 to 2018. Another inclusion factor limited the search to include the target population, women. This is because body dissatisfaction due to social media influences are more prevalent in women. The study mainly focused on body image concerns in the United States, but other countries were included due to the worldwide use of social media. Exclusion criteria included articles that were not peer-reviewed, that were older than 2008, included male participants, and articles that did not have a free full text available.

PubMed Search Criteria

The search terms used for this database included “body image concerns” and “social media”. The advanced search option from the aforementioned databases was utilized to separate the two phrases. Only peer-reviewed journals articles were allowed for this literature review. A second filter was applied that limited the publication dates from 2008 to 2018 which yielded a total of 76 peer-reviewed articles that were published within the last ten years. A third limiter narrowed the focus of the topic to include only the U.S. population because the researcher wanted to review articles relevant to Western culture. A total of 10 articles were screened for relevancy and 4 were selected for review.

ScienceDirect Search Criteria

The search terms used for this database were “social media” and “body image concerns” and limited publication dates from 2008 to 2018 which yielded a total of 2,034 articles. A second limiter narrowed the topic to the U.S. resulting in 1,496 peer-reviewed
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articles. A second filter that included topics related to body image narrowed the list to only 20 articles. Eight articles were screened for relevancy to the topic and 5 were used as part of this literature review. Another search criteria was included in the ScienceDirect database that narrowed the topic to appearance comparison and women. This resulted in a total of 65 articles and only 1 was selected for review.
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Figure 1: Article Selection Process

**PubMed Search**

**Search 1:** “social media use” AND “body image concerns”
- Limiter: must be a peer-reviewed article
  - N=154

- Limit publication date range (2008-2018)
  - N=76

- Limit topic to only U.S. population
  - N=23

- Articles reviewed based on relevancy
  - N=10

- 4 articles selected

**ScienceDirect**

**Search 1:** “social media” and “body image concerns”
- Limiter: Peer-reviewed only
  - N=2,034

- Limit publication date range (2008-2018)
  - N=1,496

- Limit to only *Body Image* journal articles
  - N=20

- Limit topic to appearance comparisons and women
  - N=65

- Articles reviewed based on relevancy
  - N=24

- 5 articles selected

- 1 article selected
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**Results**

After reviewing 10 peer-reviewed articles, it was revealed that there is a strong relationship between social media use and body concerns. First, it was found that women who frequent popular social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter are more likely to develop negative body perceptions. Another overall finding revealed that women are more likely to seek affirmation from their peers on social media than men. A third overarching finding suggested that the negative effects of social media can lead to other psychological consequences such as eating disorders. A detailed summary of the articles reviewed can be found in Table 1. *Summary information of articles reviewed.*

This literature attempted to understand the role of social media and its negative impact on body image concerns. One finding suggested that women who are sensitive to body image messages are more likely to internalize social media advertisements that promote thin body ideals (Fardouly, Pinkus, & Vartanian, 2017). It was also discovered women are more likely to seek affirmation from their peers on social media in relation to their physical appearance (Spettigue & Henderson, 2004). A third finding suggested that social media-triggered body comparisons have problematic effects on body dissatisfaction (Spettigue & Henderson, 2004).

Although more women reported body dissatisfaction due to social media, the findings suggested that gender was independent of social media influences on body image concerns. However, other factors such as age and race were found to be dependent on body dissatisfaction (Sala, Reyes-Rodríguez, Bulik, & Bardone-Cone, 2013). One study examining the racial differences concerning body dissatisfaction and disordered eating found that Black women had lower rates of body dysmorphia than White women (Howard, Heron, MacIntyre,
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Myers, & Everhart, 2017). Another study suggested that women who are already dissatisfied with their bodies are more sensitive to the effects of social media exposure (Grabe, Ward, & Hyde, 2008).

**Impact of social media sites on body satisfaction**

As discussed earlier, social media content can sometimes elicit negative behavioral consequences among women. One study conducted in Turkey found that media exposure of thin body images on women can alter body and weight perception in a negative manner (Karsli & Karsli, 2015). This is partly due to the fact the social media sites have the tendency to promote thin and attractive women which excludes those who do not fit that criteria (Grabe et al., 2008). Another study concluded that more women are susceptible to negative body image concerns than men due to the disproportionate pressure on women to attain unrealistic body images (Brown & Tiggemann, 2016). Popular hashtags such as #thinspiration and #collarbones are surfacing across several social platforms and encouraging young women to engage in unhealthy lifestyles to attain a thin figure (Hendrickse, Arpan, Clayton, & Ridgway, 2017). This can result in several physical and emotional consequences including low self-esteem and body dysmorphia which is a psychological disorder in which an individual is persistently preoccupied with an imagined or slight defective in their appearance (Murray, Maras, & Goldfield, 2016).

**Social media and appearance comparisons**

According to the social comparison theory, humans have an innate desire to compare themselves with others in order to make evaluations about their abilities and opinions (Festinger, 1954). When comparing their appearance with that of thin and attractive models,
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most women will inevitably fall short, resulting in feeling negative about themselves and their bodies. As previously mentioned, social media content can elicit negative thoughts and emotions, particularly among young women (Murray et al., 2016). A study conducted by Brown and Tiggemann found that appearance comparison served as a mediator between media exposure and body dissatisfaction (Brown & Tiggemann, 2016). When asked to view images of “attractive” celebrities and distant peers, it was discovered that participants reported greater negative mood and body dissatisfaction than the control group who only viewed travel image (Brown & Tiggemann, 2016).

Similarly, in another article discussing the effects of comparisons among peers found that appearance comparison occurs more frequently in social media than in traditional media (Fardouly et al., 2017). Of the 160 female undergraduate students, 76 reported that most of their appearance comparison was done through social media sites (Fardouly et al., 2017). Furthermore, the results of this study indicated that most of participants tend to compare themselves to those who are most attractive by societal standards which can produce damaging effects on their state of mind (Fardouly et al., 2017).

Media effects on eating attitudes of women

According to the National Association of Anorexia Nervosa, approximately 30 million Americans suffer from an eating disorder which is the highest mortality rate of any mental illness (National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders, 2017). The study conducted by Grabe, Ward, and Hyde provided evidence of a link between exposure to thin-ideal media images and body dissatisfaction in women (Grabe et al., 2008). The study found
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that women who are dissatisfied with their appearance due to external influences on social networking sites are at a greater risk of developing harmful eating habits (Grabe et al., 2008). Another study concluded that those who frequent social sites several times throughout the day are more likely to develop eating concern as compared to those who occasionally check their social media accounts (Sidani et al., 2016). A study exploring the relationship between media exposure between urban and rural communities found that women living in metropolitan areas had a higher occurrence of eating disturbances than those living in rural communities (Karsli & Karsli, 2015). This was partly due to the greater access to media sites in the urban community which allowed for more exposure to foreign beauty standards and practices (Karsli & Karsli, 2015).
### Table 1. Summary information of articles reviewed

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Author(s)</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Article Title and Journal</th>
<th>Purpose of Article</th>
<th>Sample Info</th>
<th>Type of Research</th>
<th>Research Findings</th>
<th>Limitations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Brown, Z. Tiggemann, M.</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>Attractive celebrity and peer images on Instagram: Effect on women’s mood and body image</td>
<td>To investigate the impact of social media exposure of attractive celebrities and peer on body perception regarding women.</td>
<td>138 female undergraduate students between 18-30 years of age</td>
<td>Experimental study</td>
<td>Exposure to celebrity and peer images increased negative mood and body dissatisfaction as compared to the travel pictures in the control group</td>
<td>Majority of the participants were Caucasian, so study cannot be generalized to other groups of women.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Cohen, R. Newton-John, T. Slater, A.</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>The relationship between Facebook and Instagram appearance-focused activities and body image concerns in young women</td>
<td>To examine the features of social networking sites (SNS) and how they relate to body image concerns in young women</td>
<td>259 women (ages 18-29) with an average BMI of 22.45 77.5% Caucasian 15.1% Asian 2.7% Middle Eastern 0.8% Black 3.9% Other</td>
<td>Cross-sectional research (questionnaire)</td>
<td>90.3% checked their Facebook account at least 3-5 times a day, 57.3% for Instagram SNS use was positively correlated with body surveillance</td>
<td>Only two social media sites were included in the study (Facebook and Instagram)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Fardouly, J. Diedrichs, P. C. Vartanian, L. R. Halliwell, E.</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>Social comparisons on social media: The impact of Facebook on young women's body image concerns and mood</td>
<td>To investigate the effect of Facebook usage on women’s body image as compared to other media outlets</td>
<td>112 female university students (ages 17-25) 75% White 11% Asian 9.8% Black</td>
<td>Randomized controlled trial (RCT)</td>
<td>Those in the exposure group reported being in a more negative mood more frequently than did participants in the control group</td>
<td>Facebook content was not controlled for therefore exposures were unclear. Participants were not directly asked about appearance comparison</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Authors</td>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Title</td>
<td>Participants</td>
<td>Design/Methodology</td>
<td>Results/Findings</td>
<td>Notes</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>Fardouly, J., Diedrichs, P. C., Vartanian, L. R., Halliwell, E.</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>The mediating role of appearance comparisons in the relationship between media usage and self-objectification in young women</td>
<td>150 female participants (ages 17-25)</td>
<td>Correlation study</td>
<td>Magazine usage and Facebook usage were both significantly positively correlated with self-objectification</td>
<td>Causation cannot be inferred due to the design of the study. Other social media sites (i.e. Instagram, Twitter) were excluded from the study.</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>Fardouly, J., Pinkus, R., Vartanian, L.</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>The impact of appearance comparisons made through social media, traditional media, and in person in women’s everyday lives</td>
<td>160 female first-year psychology students</td>
<td>Cross-sectional research (questionnaire)</td>
<td>Results showed a positive correlation between appearance comparison and body dissatisfaction</td>
<td>The purpose of the study was not disguised so reporting bias on appearance comparison may have been present.</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>Grabe, S., Ward, L. M., Hyde, J. S.</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>The role of the media in body image concerns among women: a meta-analysis of experimental and correlational studies</td>
<td>No participants</td>
<td>Experimental and correlational study design</td>
<td>Results suggest media exposure is linked to women’s generalized dissatisfaction with their bodies</td>
<td>No direct experiment; based off of other studies and research.</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>Hendrickse, J., Arpan, L., Clayton, R., Ridgway, J.</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>Instagram and college women’s body image: Investigating the roles of appearance-related comparisons and intrasexual competition</td>
<td>185 female university students</td>
<td>Cross-sectional study (questionnaire)</td>
<td>Results indicate that body image concerns may be associated with exposure to images on social networking sites (SNSs)</td>
<td>Types of images were not identified. Sample size is not representative of the general population.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Author(s)</td>
<td>Year</td>
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<td>Method</td>
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<td>8</td>
<td>Howard, L. Heron, K. MacIntyre, R. Myers, T. Everhart, R.</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>Is use of social networking sites associated with young women’s body dissatisfaction and disordered eating? A look at Black-White racial differences</td>
<td>Body Image</td>
<td>Examined the racial differences in SNS use and body dissatisfaction and disordered eating</td>
<td>Cross-sectional study</td>
<td>Results showed that Black women experience lower levels of body dissatisfaction and eating disorders than White women</td>
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<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Kasrslı, Y. Karslı, T.</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>Media effects on body image and eating attitudes of the women living in metropolitan and rural areas in a Turkish population</td>
<td>Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences</td>
<td>Investigate media effects on body perception of women living in rural and metropolitan areas of Turkey</td>
<td>Cross-sectional study</td>
<td>Women living in metropolitan areas of Turkey are more exposed to media content than women living in rural areas</td>
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<td>10</td>
<td>Sidani, J. Shensa, A. Hoffman, B. Hanmer, J. Primack, B.</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>The association between social media use and eating concerns among US young adults</td>
<td>Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics</td>
<td>To understand the relationship between social media use and eating concerns among college students</td>
<td>Cross-sectional study</td>
<td>Those who had higher volumes of social media use had greater odds of having eating concerns</td>
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Sample size was small, no specific measurement of internalization level of thin body images, Self-reported data so bias may have been present.
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Discussion

The purpose of this literature review was to examine the social media content that young women are exposed to, with the objective to determine the relationship between social media exposure and self-perception and body dissatisfaction. It was found that the frequency of social media usage was strongly associated with negative body perceptions among college women (Fardouly, Diedrichs, Vartanian, & Halliwell, 2015). Based on the results obtained from the peer-reviewed journals, it can be reasonable to assume that the association between social media and body image concerns is strongly correlated. More research must be conducted to further explore this relationship and to determine if something can be done to mitigate the harmful effects of media on its users.

Another determining factor of body dissatisfaction in women related to appearance comparison on social media sites. Several studies found that the social comparison theory is prevalent among young women who, often times, compare themselves to famous celebrities and models such as Beyoncé and Kim Kardashian (Brown & Tiggemann, 2016). As a result of this, many women feel as though they are not meeting the standards of beauty that society places on them. This can, in turn, lead to negative thoughts and eating habits (Verma & Avgoulas, 2015). The exposure to images that promote thinness can leave a lasting impression on young adults who may still be struggling with body acceptance. More efforts must be made to ensure that young teens and adults are not internalizing images that can lead to dangerous lifestyle habits such as anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa.
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Limitations

There were a few limiting factors to this literature review. Due to the requirements, data was limited to only 10-12 articles. Another limitation resulted in only reviewing peer-reviewed articles published between 2008 and 2018. The researcher only examined social media influences on body perception so other forms of media including television and magazines were excluded from the review even if the data supported the subject matter. Another limiting factor regarding the articles that were examined was the lack of causal factors that could link social media to body image concerns. Due to the fact that the majority of the studies reviewed conducted a cross-sectional study, it could not be concluded that social media use is direct cause of eating concerns and other issues related to body image. Finally, this paper solely focused on social media exposure on women and not men which excluded several publications regarding body dysmorphia in men.

Future Research

Due to the relatively new development of social media, there is little research surrounding the negative effects of media exposure on women. There are many articles that suggest that social networking sites can have a psychological impact on women, but more research must be done to determine how influential social media sites are on the self-esteem of men and women alike. After reviewing these articles, it is apparent that there is an issue surrounding body dysmorphia in young women, but there does not seem to be an intervention program in place to educate young teens and adults healthier ways to view and interpret social media content. It is the responsibility of public health professionals to communicate with the
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public through online mediums by promoting body positivity and confidence. By creating social media pages that inspire women to take pride on their physical appearance, the prevalence of eating disorders and other behavioral habits can be eliminated.

Conclusion

The rise of social media has resulted in several issues regarding body image, particularly among young women. Evidence from articles show a positive correlation between social media exposure and negative body perception. The glamorization of thin and attractive women in the media has a direct correlation to the distorted view women have of themselves. Other factors such as appearance comparison among peers and celebrities can elicit negative mood and body dissatisfaction among women. In addition to this, more preteen and teens are engaging in harmful lifestyle modifications to attain the ideal body size. While social media can be useful for connecting individuals to each other, there are some negative consequences of these sites that need to be resolved.
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References


https://www.omnicoreagency.com/twitter-statistics/


doi: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bodyim.2016.08.007


doi:10.1177/0361684315581841


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doi: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2017.04.027


doi: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bodyim.2017.08.008


doi: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2018.01.003

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<td>- Includes research question</td>
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<td>Abstract</td>
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# Exploring the Association between Social Media Use and Body Image Concerns

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<td><strong>Introduction</strong></td>
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<td>- Background of the problem</td>
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<td>- Relevant statistics</td>
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<td>- Appropriate aims for paper listed</td>
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<td><strong>Methods</strong></td>
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<td>- Search terms listed</td>
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<td>- Databases used</td>
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<td>- Explanation of article selection with visual figure</td>
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<td><strong>Results</strong></td>
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<td>- Table of articles reviewed (pages in Landscape view)</td>
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<td>- Results structured to answer research question</td>
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<td>- Cohesively discuss findings of all articles reviewed</td>
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<td><strong>Discussion</strong></td>
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<td>- Overview of lit review findings</td>
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<td>- Fit findings into larger picture of research</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Limitations of this lit review</td>
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<td>- Implications for future research and practice</td>
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<td>- Conclusion remarks or other wrap up of content to signify end of paper</td>
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<td><strong>Writing Style</strong></td>
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<td>- Spelling, grammar</td>
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<td>- Written scientifically</td>
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<td>- Follows appropriate structure of paper as discussed in class and listed in instructions</td>
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<td>- Paper has 1-inch margins and used 11-12 point font</td>
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<td><strong>References</strong></td>
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<td>- Correct use of in-text citation (5)</td>
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<td>- APA 6th style references (5)</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Use of EndNote for citation management (5)</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Use of 10-12 scientific sources (5)</td>
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**Total** | 200 | 197 | Great work, Debbie! |