The "Girl Dinner" Trend: A Social Media Content Analysis Exploring Potential Themes Related to Eating Habits & Mental Health

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Introduction

- The social media concept "girl dinner" can be characterized as convenient, spontaneous, and often unbalanced meals consisting of random food combinations. This trend, most prominently featured on platforms such as TikTok and Instagram, is particularly popular amongst women in their teens and young adult years (Girl dinner! Girl dinner! Girl dinner! Girl dinner!, 2023).
- Though intended to showcase quirky food combinations as convenient meals, critics highlight the trend's tendency to normalize under-eating—presenting unbalanced food combinations as normal for women and girls to enjoy at dinner (Shope, 2023).
- Additionally, the trend has received criticism from a number of directions regarding its association of low-calorie, small portion meals with femininity and girlhood. (Who's eating? The mystery of 'girl dinner', 2023).
- The purpose of our study is to systematically investigate the "girl dinner" social media trend on Instagram for potential themes pertaining to disordered and restrictive eating behaviors as well as mental health. We are interested in gaining more information as to who is participating in this trend as well as the types and varieties of foods displayed in the content. .

Methods

- We performed a content analysis by searching "#girldinner" on Instagram's search bar, screen recording or screenshotting the first 50 posts (images/reels) that appeared, including captions but excluding comments.
- Posts were collected over the course of five days (12/02/24-12/06/24) at different times by two research assistants, alternating collection days, to ensure a representative sample. A total of 250 posts were collected, and research assistants conducted preliminary coding on the first 50.
- Duplicates were removed before analysis. An objective coding scheme was used to evaluate each post for elements such as the presence of people, food groups, beverages, calorie content, aesthetic quality, and diet-related themes. Numerical scores assigned to the categorized elements underwent statistical analysis to identify thematic trends.
- Interrater reliability was measured with Krippendorff's alpha (α) to ensure consistency across the 50 posts coded by the two research assistants. Any $\alpha < .667$ was excluded from further analyses, but a values deemed to have an acceptable interrater reliability ($\alpha > .667$) underwent further analyses (see Tables 1 and 2).
- Additionally, we calculated descriptive statistics, specifically mean and standard deviation, to determine frequency for the number of foods present in each post.
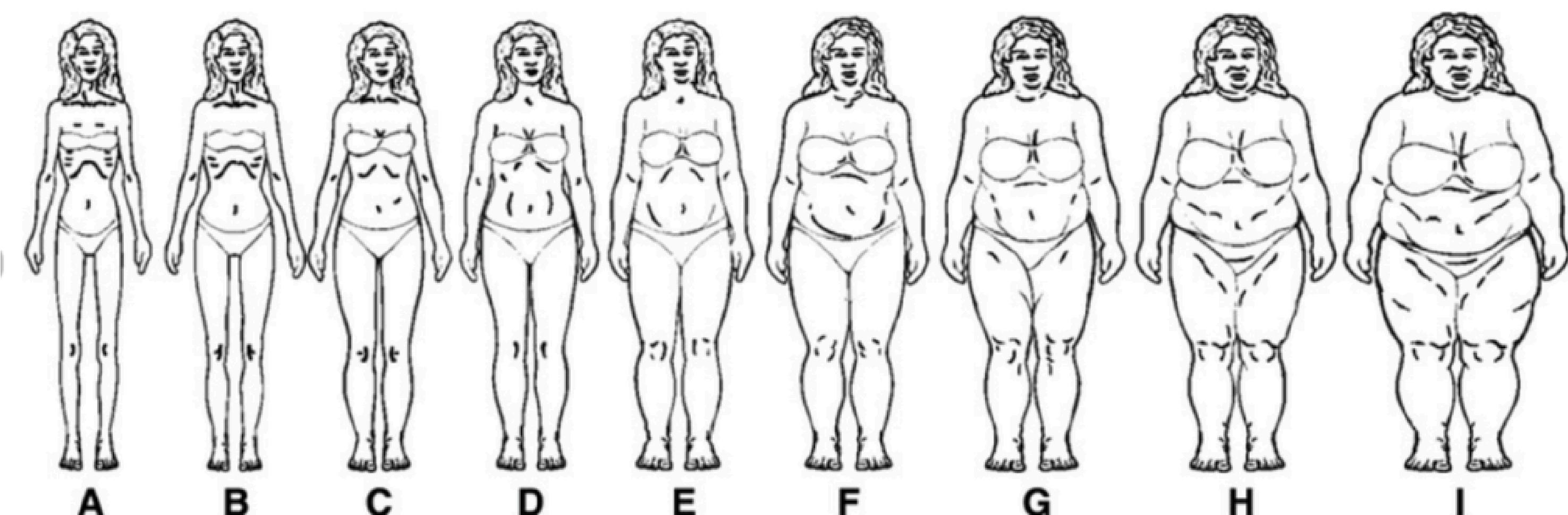
Pulvers Figure Rating Scale. (Reprinted with permission of Dr. Kimberly Pulvers.)

Results

Below are the categories of our coding scheme and their corresponding interrater reliability scores. Variables in Table 2 have unacceptable interrater reliability ($\alpha < .667$) and thus we did not run any descriptive statistics on them. Variables with acceptable interrater reliability ($\alpha > .667$) underwent further analyses. For variables in which the value could not be calculated, there lacked any variation in coding amongst the 2 raters.

Table 1

Variable	Kalpha (α)
Visible Human	1.00
Display Type	.98
Age	.97
Race	.89
Body Type	.98
Coffee/Tea	.65
Alcohol	.86
Soda	.73
Number of Foods	.90
Veggies	.76
Fruits	.74
Meat/Fish	.99
Audio	.82
Clothing/Beauty for Appearance	Unable to calculate
Weight/Fat Stigma	Unable to calculate
Body/Weight/Food Shame	Unable to calculate
Fat Acceptance	Unable to calculate
Mental Health	Unable to calculate
Activisim	Unable to calculate

Table 2

Variable	Kalpha (α)
Social eating	.45
Calories	.22
Energy Drink	.00
Healthy Drink	.00
Other Drink	.30
Dessert	.64
Carbs	.55
Dairy	.62
Scratch Preparation	.63
Aesthetic Preparation	.52
Weight Loss	.48
Thin Praise	-.01
Eating Disorder	-.01
Commercialism	.46
Humor	.42

- The posts were categorized as follows: 26% reels, 38% single images, and 36% image carousels containing at least 2 images.
- Of the posts coded, 34% featured a visible human, all of whom were women. Among these:
  - 11.8% were aged 15–20, 76.5% were in their 20s, and 11.8% were in their 30s.
  - 77.8% were Caucasian, 5.6% were Latina, and 16.7% were Middle Eastern.
- Body size was coded as the second thinnest on the body rating scale in 41.2% of posts, the third thinnest in 35.3%, and the fourth thinnest in 23.5%.
- In regards to beverages, 32% of posts featured alcohol and 8% featured soda.
- 90% (45 out of 50) of the coded posts featured a meal. The meals displayed in the coded posts primarily consisted of 1 to 2 food items, with a mean of 2.28 (SD = 1.896). The number of foods per meal ranged from 0 to 9.
  - Among the posts featuring a meal, approximately 62.22% (28/45) included vegetables, 26.67% (12/45) included fruit, and 55.56% (25/45) contained meat or fish.
- 50% of posts included audio. The categorizations of audio and their frequencies are as follows:
  - Traditional girl dinner music: 12% (3/25)
  - Soft-toned/girly music: 52% (13/25)
  - Heavy toned music (such as metal): 0%
- All other audios: 36% (9/25)
- The following thematic variables did not appear in the coded posts:
  - Clothing/Beauty for Appearance: emphasis on clothing and beauty tips for appearance purposes
  - Weight/Fat Stigma: negative portrayal of being overweight
  - Body/Weight/Food Shame: expression of guilt about one's body, weight, or food behaviors
  - Fat Acceptance: acceptance, celebration and/or admiration specifically of higher weight individuals
  - Mental Health: references to mental health
  - Activism: explicit encouragement for others to support for a social cause

Implications

- A majority of the posts related to this trend featured young, Caucasian women who are the thinner end of the body size spectrum.
- The high frequency of soft-toned/girly audio reinforces the association between this food trend and femininity.
- The lack of mental health, appearance, and activism-related themes implies that the trend is largely presented as lighthearted entertainment rather than a platform for deeper discussions on nutrition or body-image.
- Additionally, the absence of explicit weight-related topics (e.g., fat stigma, body shame, fat acceptance) suggests that potential restrictive eating themes are more implicit rather than obvious.
- The low interrater reliability scores for many thematic variables limited the analysis of this study while reinforcing the subjective nature of this social media trend.
- While this study provides insight into the content and themes of "girl dinner" posts, its scope is limited to Instagram and a small sample size. Future research in this area should explore a larger amount of content, a greater variety of social media platforms, as well as user engagement (e.g., comments, captions, etc).

References

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