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## Qualitative Research on Youths' Social Media Use: A Review of the Literature

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### Abstract

In this article we explore how educational researchers report empirical qualitative research about young people's social media use. We frame the overall study with an understanding that social media sites contribute to the production of neoliberal subjects, and we draw on Foucauldian discourse theories and the understanding that how researchers explain topics and concepts produces particular ways of thinking about the world while excluding others. Findings include that: 1) there is an absence of attention to the structure and function of social media platforms; 2) adolescents are positioned in problematic, developmental ways; and 3) the over-representation of girls and young women in these studies contributes to the feminization of problems on social media. We conclude by calling for future research that can serve as a robust resource for exploring adolescents' social media use in more productive, nuanced ways.

### INTRODUCTION

The life of social media platforms has been relatively short, but attention to this domain of technology and its impact on youth and youth culture is at the forefront of scholars' research agendas across multiple disciplines. Additionally, there has been a constant stream of advice, concern, and reporting about youths' social media practices in popular culture discourses (e.g., Dunkley, 2017; Heitner, 2017; Mastroianni, 2016; Whitson, 2017). Based on findings from two of the authors' previous work on social media (Author 1, Author 2), we began preparing for a qualitative study to explore how and why youth engage with social media and the consequences of those practices for youth and for society.

The research presented in this article germinated from our initial literature review of the existing research on young people's social media use. We were surprised both by what we found, and even more, what we did not find in the literature. We realized from the start, for example, that there were considerably more quantitative research studies than qualitative studies. Perhaps more importantly, we found that within the qualitative research literature, there was not a coherent pattern in the way researchers described adolescents' social media use. By this we mean that there was not a consistent set of behaviors, conditions, or

contexts described in these studies. The concept of what social media use "is" was operationalized in a wide variety of ways, and perhaps as a result, the study designs and the social media behaviors captured and analyzed varied widely. Further, the social media literature citations that authors used to situate the studies were inconsistent, in the sense that they did not trace back to a set of foundational texts. Overall, the qualitative literature in which the studies were grounded reflected a disparate set of ideas, purposes, and theories.

While a great deal of attention is paid to youths' engagement with popular media, we wondered what the pattern of divergent studies we found might mean for other academics and educators who turn to research to explore and understand this phenomenon. These concerns led us to postpone our current study in order to first conduct an analytical review of the qualitative research that attends to youths' social media use. After describing our theoretical framework and methodological processes below, we present three salient findings from our analysis that reflect the ways in which the neoliberal framing of youth and a constrained understanding of social media are reproduced through this literature. We then discuss suggested considerations for future research focusing on youths' social media use.

## **Theoretical Frameworks**

We frame the overall study with an understanding that social media sites contribute to the production of neoliberal subjects. This critical perspective of social media as a technology of neoliberalism relies heavily on media studies theorists (e.g., Gill, 2007, 2008, 2016; McRobbie, 2009) who foreground neoliberalism as a factor shaping media uses. Within this work, neoliberalism is understood as a discursive and material force that extends the logic of the market to aspects of social life previously not subjected to economic rationales (Foucault, 2008). In other words, entrepreneurial motivations are understood to extend to all conduct and “interpellate individuals as entrepreneurial actors in every sphere of life” (Brown, 2005, p. 42). In this sense, a wide variety of human behavior, including social media use, is seen to be driven by interests and rationales informed by economic concepts, like “value”, “efficiency”, and “branding.” Research drawing on analyses of the intersection of neoliberalism and social media offers valuable tools to examine the causes and consequences of the introduction and explosion of social media technologies over the last several decades.

Within this larger neoliberal framing of the study, we also drew on Foucauldian discourse theories and the understanding that how researchers explain topics and concepts produces particular ways of thinking about the world while excluding others. As Mills (2004) describes, Foucauldian-influenced research positions “discourse as something which produces something else (an utterance, a concept, and effect), rather than something which exists in and of itself” (p. 15). Specifically, language contributes to the production of discursive structures which “have effects on ways of thinking and behaving” (Mills, 2004, p. 15). As such, the productive power of language does not lie within the meaning of the words, but through the potential of language to plug into systems of understanding that produce meaning, form subjects, and regulate conduct (MacLure, 2003). In other words, the language we use as qualitative researchers to situate our work and frame our findings does not stay bound within the published document; rather, it contributes to already existing discourses that produce particular understandings and obscure others.

Taking up this Foucauldian concept regarding discourse, we sought to understand how the language researchers use contributes to the maintenance of particular discourses through the continual citation of particular versions of meaning and understandings. Our analyses of the research literature involved paying close attention to the language used to describe social media and youth in order to trace the discourses present in the discussions. In doing so, we explored how these descriptions might shape readers’ perceptions of youths’ social media practices, and how they might limit the ways in which young people’s social media behaviors were framed in the literature. In the analysis that follows, we describe patterns in the data that described youths’ social media behaviors in certain ways, and not others, and consider how these themes might contribute to shaping ideas of what is “normal” and “common sense” about young people’s social media use.

## **Data Collection**

Our research team began by searching for peer-reviewed research focusing on social media and youth in four education databases: Education Research Complete, Educational Administration Abstracts, ERIC, and PsycINFO. We used several filters to shape our initial search. First, we limited the search to articles published since 2007 to focus on social media platforms that are in current use (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, etc.). Further, we used age specific descriptors (e.g., “youth,” “tweens,” “adolescents,” “middle school students,” “high school students”) to identify research targeting our focus on youth. Finally, we eliminated non-peer reviewed research and articles not published in English. This initial search yielded 744 results.

We then undertook four rounds of review. In the first round, our goal was to identify studies that used qualitative research methods and focused on adolescents. As qualitative researchers in education concerned with how adolescents are constructed and constrained in popular culture discourses and research literature, our primary interest was in analyzing how other qualitative researchers were framing studies of young people’s use of social media in education journals. At least one member of the research team read each abstract to determine the methodology and identify the age of participants. Studies with a primary focus on young children (under the age of 10) and those

focused on adults (over the age of 24) were also deemed out of scope. The review of the research methodology and age resulted in large number of exclusions and reduced the number of articles to 67.

In our next round of analysis, deep reading and rereading of research questions and methodologies within these 67 articles revealed that even in studies where researchers collected qualitative data directly from young people's experiences, the focus was typically on how adults might intervene in youths' social media practices. Many articles, for example, focused on health promotion studies and descriptions of how to use social media in pedagogical ways, which pointed mostly to how adults could use social media for their own purposes--rather than focusing on how youth were engaging with social media. Studies such as these were excluded. Further, we chose to exclude studies that based their data collection and analysis of general technology use (e.g., amount of time spent online or on cell phones) rather than describing the use specific social media applications in detail. While most of the studies describing general technology use did acknowledge one or more social media platforms, they were excluded if attention to specific platforms was not integral to the analysis. For similar reasons, a handful of studies on MySpace and YouTube were excluded because the former is largely not used by young people today and the latter does not function primarily for social networking. Thus, the final sample included 16 articles published in 11 journals between 2013 and 2016 (see Appendix A). While this made for a manageable number of articles to review, it also indicates that qualitative research on how adolescents make meaning with popular social media platforms is sparse.

In our third and fourth rounds of review, at least two members of the research team reviewed each article. Our specific focus at this stage of the analysis was to document the discursive patterns used to describe the ways young people engage in meaning making with their social media use and to consider how neoliberal concepts and themes were deployed in researchers' descriptions (see Appendix B). Following each of these rounds, the research team met to discuss emerging patterns and ways of characterizing the data in relation to how adolescents *and* social media were being produced in certain ways and not in others. In the following sections we present three findings:

(1) lack of attention to platforms and their architecture; (2) problematic positioning of adolescents; and (3) feminization of social media.

## Results

### The Role of Social Media Platforms

The ways in which researchers situate and contextualize youths' social media use as a productive topic, or as a "problem" in need of investigation, provides great insight into the way that both youth and social media activities are framed in the discourse. In order to determine the ways that researchers were framing social media use as worthy of study, we identified the rationale for attention to the topic in each article. The justification for researching youth-focused social media use typically appeared in initial sentences or opening paragraphs of each article. The systematic analysis of these rationales revealed that the inevitability of social media use was the most common justification for researching the topic. By this we mean that most researchers described the role of social media in the lives of adolescents as a reality that has simply emerged and now needs to be explored. Excerpts like the following exemplify the kinds of rationales found in the initial pages of a majority of the articles:

Young adults spend more time with technology than any other daily activity. (Vaterlaus, Barnett, Roche, & Young, 2016, p. 596)

Young people are the fastest growing adopters of new online platforms, with nearly a quarter of teens reporting being online 'almost constantly'. (Malvini Redden & Way, 2017, p. 21)

Social networking sites have become central to the way young people communicate in their everyday lives. (Rubin & McClelland, 2015, p. 512)

These descriptions of the ubiquity of social media use among adolescents frame this phenomenon in an ahistorical and uncritical manner. Positioning the emergence of social media use as a dominant activity in young people's lives – as if it is a behavior and practice that has come from nowhere – makes it difficult to trace its history to a pattern of behavior associated with specific discourses and ideologies. In particular, this matter-of-fact, "we

just have to deal with it” way of describing adolescent media use unmoors it from the consideration of the growth of digital technology as one tentacle of the broader neoliberal forces shaping society, economics, and politics.

The perspective that our role as researchers is to respond to the new reality of social media is pervasive in this literature. Take, for example, these justifications found in the opening pages of two different studies:

*We find ourselves* in a world where social networking media are integral to the way people interact. This is particularly the case for teenagers, who rely on social networking sites such as Facebook to communicate with friends, establish new friendships, and find expression through posting online [emphasis added]. (Price, Wardman, Bruce, & Millward, 2016, p. 162)

*Given the increasing use of the Internet and social media* by children, tweens, and teens, privacy has emerged as an urgent topic of concern among parents, educators, and policymakers [emphasis added]. (Davis & James, 2013, p. 5)

When adolescents’ use of social media is framed as a “given” reality in which we “find ourselves,” the emergence and function of social media platforms as corporate, profit making spaces, working to monitor and shape the behavior of neoliberal subjects in specific ways, are obscured. This approach conceals the material manifestations of the intentional design of these platforms, which are intended to capture and maintain attention through, for example, a variable reward structure (e.g., checking for “likes” and “retweets”) that keep users engaged and online (Alter, 2017). This design is driven by corporate consumer interests and work to affect a particular consumer behavior. As Mason and Metzger (2012) assert, while the ways in which participants interact in digital spaces “are heavily mediated by the commercial products and services of multinational corporations [,] the citizen’s role mainly appears to be to adjust to these new realities and make consumer choices” (p. 442). When social media research fails to take corporatism into account, the function of these platforms as commercial products is ignored and the need for people to adjust to this new reality is unquestioned. Even more, research that positions adolescents’ social media use as taken-for-granted is likely to reinforce

these systems and processes as they are. The unquestioned status of social media use in young people’s lives as a “given” makes it difficult to imagine how it could be otherwise.

**Taking platforms into account.** The underlying assumption in these justifications – that we should research social media use because everyone is using it – is that technology use is an independent force for which no one is responsible. What this assumption obscures, as Egea (2014) asserted, is that our digital lives are contributing to a “new modality of social engineering [that] positions human beings and knowledge as management resources exploited to obtain exchangeable and marketable value” (p. 268). Obscuring the way this re-engineering is at work, by failing to acknowledge or consider the way social media is acting *upon* us, is a missed opportunity. There is great potential in qualitative research on youths’ social media use to attend to the ways social media positions adolescents as having “exchangeable and marketable value.” For example, attending to the design of platforms in the analysis might acknowledge that the design of social media platforms drives users to pursue “likes,” which not only shapes how people interact on the platform, but is used as a metric through which to assess ourselves and others. Attending to the platform can also highlight the ways that youth negotiate and manipulate platform architecture to participate in social media on their own terms. This kind of analysis was present in Marwick and boyd’s (2014a) study through their examination of the ways that participants used the existing structures of Facebook privacy settings to their advantage. For example, they described the activities of a participant, a ward of the state, who discovered that by activating her account at night and deactivating it again during the day, she could avoid surveillance of the agencies who were using social media to monitor her. She used deactivation and reactivation functions available on the platform to avoid detection by adults whom she perceived would only be checking her Facebook status during the day. This is an explicit example of incorporating the architecture of the platforms into the analysis of the phenomenon under study. In contrast, the rest of the studies in the data set discussed participants’ interactions in ways that ultimately situated the platforms themselves as neutral vehicles for the phenomena under study. For example, in a study of gifted and talented girls, participants mentioned Facebook functions such as tagging,

friending, and self-editing in their descriptions of their experiences on and with the platform. While the authors acknowledge these aspects of Facebook, the functions themselves, were not examined in relation to the participants' experiences as Facebook users or the "layer of complexity" Facebook use has added to their lives (Price et al., 2013, p. 172). The authors indicate that one of the themes in their analysis was that "Facebook draws out a range of conflicting emotions, anxieties, and attitudes" (Price et al., 2013, p. 168), but they do not directly explore, address, or question the way that Facebook produces these affective responses. For example, they do not unpack participants' perceptions of the importance of receiving "likes" or their efforts to curate their Facebook posts and friend lists to secure as many positive post responses as possible. Presenting a running count of "likes" and friend totals are just two aspects of Facebook's architecture that explicitly encourage users to measure themselves against their peers. These neoliberal functions, and the comparisons and self-evaluations they encourage, likely contribute to the "sense of loneliness" (Price et al., 2013, p. 171), the participants described. However, when the consequences of particular features of Facebook's structure and functionality remain unexamined and unquestioned, the focus relies solely upon how the participants react to its features.

When trying to make sense of how adolescents are interacting online, ignoring platform architecture seems problematic. Research that ignores the design of the platform obscures the neoliberal functionality of sites like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, and the ways these for-profit products are shaping our behavior and our sense of self. Perhaps even more troubling, ignoring platform functions produces individual participants who are perceived as entrepreneurial, self-optimizing subjects while "effac[ing] power and displac[ing] it onto seemingly neutral and impersonal systems" (Gill, in press, p. 4). The social engineering happening within the platforms is hidden when descriptions of participants' use fail to take into account how social media is shaping and guiding users to interact and respond to each other in ways that encourage neoliberal behaviors like competition, self-quantification, and self-surveillance.

## The Impetus for Studying Youth

Another pattern we found in our analysis was the use of developmental psychology and stereotypical "common sense" assumptions about adolescents to describe participants and their experiences with social media. Framing youth through developmental lenses has been widely critiqued among scholars over the past few decades because of the limited insights they provide about young people and their highly nuanced lived experiences. In her work troubling historical and cultural conceptions of adolescence, Nancy Lesko (2012) argues that we need to recognize that the concept of *adolescence* is made – by way of developmental psychology – in and through the passage of time, which is signified by age. If we (the authors of this paper) say we are interested in research involving youth between the ages of 10 and 20, for instance, this statement might implicitly call forth multiple images and references: developing and/or awkward bodies; strange music; moodiness; distancing; simultaneous laughter and tears; and endless hours on social media, just to name a few (Lesko, 2012). From the perspective of developmental psychology, youth cannot live in the present; they can only exist in a discourse of "growing up" or "always becoming" (Lesko, 2012; Hughes, 2014; Hughes-Decatur, 2012; Vagle, 2012). Lesko expands on this idea:

Teenagers are "at the threshold" and in "transition to adulthood." These phrases suggest an evolutionary arrival in an enlightened state after a lengthy period of backwardness. These phrases also participate in an "ideology of emergence," which is a belief that teenagers are naturally emerging and outside of social influences. They are autonomous beings who get dropped down into various social and historical contexts. (p. 2)

By paying close attention to how language is used to construct and constrain *adolescentS* then, we begin to see how the concept of *adolescencE* (Vagle, 2014) is positioned as inauspicious, uncontrollable, and naturally occurring (Lesko, 2012). We agree with scholars who find this positioning of youth troublesome, as much of the research over the past few decades disrupts developmentalism by adding a more nuanced and thoughtful analysis of adolescents (see for example, boyd, 2014; Lesko, 2012; Vagle, 2012).

In the 16 qualitative studies analyzed, we paid particular attention to the ways in which adolescents were described. What we found was that many authors wrote with unquestioned assumptions about developmental transitions from adolescence to adulthood, further sedimenting the idea that adolescence is a stable and fixed concept. These researchers seemed to construct young people by framing them in terms of the constraints of passage of time and age. Chua and Chang (2016) posited, for example, that:

During the transition to adulthood, teenage girls aged 12-16 years old experience emotional changes in intrapersonal and interpersonal development as well as physical changes such as gaining weight suddenly and transitioning from a girl's body to a grown woman's body. (p. 190)

This language reflects the understanding that once girls move beyond a certain age, they will transcend emotional and physical changes in intrapersonal and interpersonal development. However, these experiences and changes are always already taking place from the time all of us are born until we die. In other words, there is nothing specific to 12-to-16-year-olds that is not taking place with infants, 20-year-olds, 40-year-olds, and so on.

Baker and Carreno (2016) also drew on similarly constrained frames to situate their argument about technology's influence on youth dating violence in the existing literature. For example, they suggest that:

Romantic experiences are important for helping adolescents achieve developmental milestones, including identity and intimacy development...These experiences also provide adolescents with many benefits such as social status, enhanced feelings of self-worth, and opportunities to gain resolution skills. (p. 308)

This way of describing youth, which is steeped in developmentalism (e.g., "developmental milestones" that adolescents are expected to achieve by way of romantic experiences) limits the ways in which we can think about youth and their capabilities outside of these particular benchmarks. Further, reducing adolescents' social and relational experiences to a "stage" they are passing through makes it difficult to consider seriously the validity and importance of

these events from the perspective of the young people under study.

With the exception of Marwick and boyd's work (2014a, 2014b) and a few others (e.g., Malvini Redden & Way, 2017), which positions youth as active, nuanced, and savvy participants in society from the start, most of the authors of these studies used developmental language to position youth in ways that constrain young people to particular ways of being in the world. Assuming 10-year-olds are incapable of engaging with social media in savvy ways due to their assigned age category, for example, Davis and James (2013) wrote:

Although she is *only* 10 years old, Marisa's online privacy strategies are fairly sophisticated. She withholds sensitive, personal information from her Facebook profile and takes more proactive measures, such as using privacy settings and blocking unwanted contacts online [emphasis added]. (p. 4)

Statements such as these assume that youth who are assigned a certain age category are not capable of embodying sophisticated ways of being or knowing.

What this language also reveals is that while adolescents are framed as the target participants of these studies, the findings presented can easily be applied to older social media users as well. Most of the studies do not specifically identify or discuss how the described phenomenon are affecting youth specifically. Take for example the following quote, which draws specific attention to the lack of research on high school students' digital experiences: "A recent survey from Pew Research found that 50% of 16-to-17 year-olds use Twitter, and yet little research has explored how and why young people use Twitter" (Gleason, 2016, p. 32). This assertion may be accurate, but the way in which the topic is framed implies that adolescents, as a particular group, have been understudied. However, widespread social media use is a relatively recent phenomenon and research has (predictably) lagged behind in terms of research that addresses social media practices in general. As such, there is limited research attention to social media users of *any age group*, not just the practices of young people. People in all age categories experience tensions and consequences of their social media use, but most of the conclusions found in the articles included

in the dataset did not tease out if and how their findings were specific to youth.

In order to address the issues youth may be encountering with social media, several studies proposed various interventions and educational programs to help youth negotiate social media during the perilous time of adolescence. Researchers in these studies suggest specific strategies to help youth learn how to recognize what is safe and unsafe, responsible and irresponsible, ethical and unethical online. Davis and James (2013) refer to several “opportunities for interventions” and educational programs, for example, that have been implemented and sometimes mandated in schools to educate “youth about the use of privacy settings and engag[e] youth in conversations about the ethical implications of certain privacy-protecting behavior like falsifying personal information online” (p. 8). Similarly, Moreno, Kelleher, Ameenuddin, & Rastogi (2014) advise clinicians that when it comes to addressing digital privacy protections, “discussions of maintaining a positive online persona may be more persuasive for some teens compared with traditional fear-based tactics” (p. 350). The authors of this study also note that:

The views of older adolescents regarding dangers to young teens from social media sites, such as Facebook, suggest that older adolescents may be valuable partners in promoting safe and age-appropriate internet use for younger teens. (p. 351)

While well-intended, interventions like these are framed in ways that present the problems caused or experienced on social media in ways that are unrelated to institutions, processes, and systems that have always already been in place. In other words, when researchers propose ways to intervene in youths' problematic digital experiences, there is often an implication that social media itself is the agential entity causing harm to our youth. Rather than examining the larger systemic issues that were in place long before social media was invented that continue to harm youth (i.e., racism, sexism, misogyny, classism, the researchers in these studies describe social media in ways that signal it is the applications that have created the problems youth experience online. As such, many of these studies fail to acknowledge how face-to-face (or historical) adolescent patterns of behavior have been mediated by social media use. The kinds of risks described in youths' social media use, like

violence in relationships or declines in girls' self-esteem, came to life and continue to exist in non-digital spaces. We assert that the existence of these issues in real life (IRL) must be considered and addressed as we develop and suggest interventions that will help youth learn to better navigate these problems in complicated technological spaces.

In her research exploring the social lives of networked teens, boyd (2014) reminds us of the critical importance to recognize that “technology does not create these problems, even if it makes them more visible and even if news media relishes using technology as a hook to tell salacious stories about youth” (p. 24). Scholars in media studies have similarly argued for over a decade that the daily practices youth engage in are not new; they are simply magnified and made more visible through social media. boyd (2014) expands on this idea further:

As teens embrace these [social media] tools and incorporate them into their daily practices, they show us how our broader social and cultural systems are affecting their lives. When teens are hurting offline, they reveal their hurt online. When teens' experiences are shaped by racism and misogyny, this becomes visible online. (p. 24)

We assert that this impetus to de-emphasize historical and social forces that undergird any online interaction and behavior is shaped, in part, by neoliberal discourses that mask the existence of “the social.” As Elias and Gill (2018, p. 64) contend, neoliberal discourses have “almost entirely replaced notions of the social or political, or any idea of individuals as subject to pressures, constraints or even influence from the outside.” As a result of the pervasiveness of this perspective, it may seem commonsensical to describe social media users as actors who encounter social media as if they float free from social forces, like sexism, racism, and classism, to shape their interactions. However, describing youth social media users in ways that fail to frame them as social subjects whose options derive through their membership in social groups (Rose, 1999), veils other considerations of the ways that institutions, systems, and processes are acting on users to shape behaviors in particular ways. Research grounded in the acknowledgement of neoliberalism compels us to identify the relationship of social media behavior to broader discourses in our society,



which cloud the myriad institutional and cultural process that shape these behaviors. In the following section, we focus on the attention paid to girls and young women in these studies in order to describe and explore some specific consequences of *not* attending fully to the cultural and social discourses shaping gender roles, gendered interactions, and gender inequity in social media research.

### **The Uncritical Feminization of Social Media**

Even in the early stages of our search for empirical research on youths' social media use, it was readily apparent there were a large number of studies that focused on young women and girls. In response to this observation, we decided to specifically analyze 1) the gender of participants, and 2) the discussion of gender in the findings and analysis in each article. Our analysis indicated that five of the 16 articles in the dataset included female-identifying participants only. These studies provided differing reasons for their focus on women and girls. Two of the five studies described the connection between social media and the objectification/sexualization of young women as the reason for their focus on females (Chua & Chang, 2016; Daniels & Zurbriggen, 2016). The authors of another study justified their focus on young women by noting that their work drew upon previous research "that illustrate that [adolescent females] are more invested in social media for social connections and displayed personal content" (Moreno et al., 2014, p. 348). Finally, two other studies justified their focus on female participants by noting the intense pressures young women face (Price et al, 2016; Rubin & McClelland, 2015). These five articles cut across a variety of specific topics but were similar in that they addressed issues of privacy, sexuality, and risk associated with young women's social media use.

Eleven of the 16 studies in the dataset had participants who identified as female and male, but within most of these studies, the specific experiences of girls and women were highlighted. For example, among these 11 articles, eight paid specific attention to data and findings pertaining to young women. Only four of these eight articles also mentioned young men or masculine subjectivities; none of the studies looked at this population exclusively. It is worth noting that two of the articles paying specific attention to men and boys were studies about

social media in heterosexual relationships; therefore, attention to masculinized gender in these instances was discussed almost exclusively in terms of how young men made sense of and were impacted by social media in relation to how they treated and understood young women.

Ten of the 16 studies in the dataset reinforced the idea that young women's bodies and psyches are at risk because of their activities on social media. While seven of these studies acknowledged that there were both benefits and drawbacks to social media, in general, the young women described in the studies were framed as putting their mental health at risk through the choices they made in their social media behavior. This pattern of categorizing young women's behavior on social media as "risky" uncritically reinforces notions that problems in social media are particularly feminized. This, in turn, contributes to the understanding that girls and young women are simultaneously responsible for and the victims of problematic experiences on social media.

In the previous section, we argued that research that does not pay attention to broader social forces shaping online behaviors can obscure the ways in which the same discourses that shape our face-to-face interactions appear in digital spaces as well. This argument is particularly salient to our assessment that there was a lack of sufficient attention to gender and the gender hierarchy within the studies that examined girls and young women's experiences. Despite the fact that much of this work shines a spotlight on girls and young women, most of these studies do not sufficiently attend to gender as a factor shaping their experiences. For example, Chua and Chang (2016) explored the ways that young women used selfies to elicit peer feedback. The study tracked the interaction of "likes," followers, self-worth and presentation on social media. This research was designed to examine how young women's social media participation reinforces specific understandings of beauty through which they evaluate themselves and others. The researchers concluded that self-comparison activities had negative effects on young women's well-being and can lead to troubling psychological and psychological outcomes like eating disorders, self-injury, and poor self-esteem.

In their analysis of young women's efforts to judge themselves and others in photos, the authors failed to frame young women's behavior in the context of the larger cultural/social

gendered expectations that contribute to young women's desire to seek approval for their appearance. For example, Chua and Chang (2016) acknowledge that the "media ideal of beauty" (p. 195) produces markers of attractiveness by which participants judge themselves and others, but do not address or critique the ideal. By this we mean that while describing the efforts the participants undertook to produce and edit images that brought them closer to this ideal, and detailing the process through which the participants assess the beauty of themselves and others, the authors do not address the complicated problematics of "the media ideal of beauty" itself. This consideration might have included: an exploration of what counts as beauty; how class, race, and gender norms inform beauty; and why and when these markers became the beauty standard. Instead, by focusing on these activities in terms of the threat they pose to young women's mental health, the participants' behavior is discussed in ways that ignore the historical, material, racial, and gendered forces that lead women (and men) to equate women's self-worth to particular markers of physical attractiveness. Ultimately, instead of drawing attention to the problematic relationship between issues like beauty and self-esteem, these findings pathologize young women's social media participation as self-destructive.

Other female-focused studies also fell short of attending to gender as a category of analysis (Scott, 1986) in their discussion. For example, Price and colleagues' (2016) study sought to identify the tensions young student-leader women face in their attempts to navigate social media. The author concluded that these gifted and talented young women work to find a balance between sharing too much or too little about themselves. The study was comprised entirely of young women, but there was no specific consideration for the ways in which their femininity shaped the tensions they experienced or the public/private balance they sought to create. In other words, there was no particular effort to understand what was gendered in the data the participants produced, or to frame their experiences as shaped by gender. Nonetheless, the effect of using only females as participants contributes to the understanding that social media use – and in particular, problems in these spaces – is feminized.

The feminization of social media can also be traced throughout studies in the dataset that

included female and male identifying participants. In one such study, Berriman and Thomson (2015) interviewed young women and men to understand the moral landscape of social media usage for teenagers. The researchers drew from their data to create a typology with four different kinds of social media users. The 'lowest' level user, the "Incompetent Victim," was described as existing in an uninhabitable space...

of bullying, exploitation and humiliation. It is also an *implicitly gendered* space, showcasing the extraction of value from the circulation of sexualised images, ... this is the land of the lost that *is a warning to all but especially perilous to young women* who not only risk professional reputations in the future but also sexual reputations in the here and now [emphasis added]. (p. 595)

The authors' description of social media space as "implicitly gendered" and "perilous to young women" was presented without analysis of the origins of these "risks" for girls and young women, or a description of the inequitable gender mechanisms that cause these problems to occur. But what are the consequences of alluding to the role of gender here without more thoroughly theorizing why gender seems to be particularly relevant within these domains? We assert that the absence of critical analyses of the role of gender and gender hierarchies in shaping social media interactions normalizes the close association between women and problematic social media use. Further, it places responsibility for avoiding these problems solely on the shoulders of young women, without any consideration of the "implicitly gendered" systems and processes that make such warnings necessary.

Studies that emphasize young women's and girls' responsibility for what happens to them on social media prevent us from thinking about the broader, patriarchal forces that make some online behaviors for young women and girls "risky." It also alleviates any shared responsibility by young men and boys. This inclination to let young men and boys "off the hook" for their online behavior can be found explicitly in one of the four studies that addressed the experiences of young men. In this study on heterosexual teenage dating, researchers found that the young men in the study were more likely than young women to monitor their partner's social media use and use

mobile devices to isolate their partner. Notably, these researchers asserted that “boys knew this was wrong but they could not stop themselves” (Baker & Carreño, 2016, p. 519). Across the dataset, the negative consequences for young women’s online behavior was typically described in terms of something they could and should control. However, this statement about boys not being able to “stop themselves” was not interrogated for its relationship to hierarchical gender relations or tied to problematic “boys will be boys” discourses.

While the evidence presented here supports our original impression about the over-representation of female subjectivities in these articles, it is also important to understand *how* these young women were positioned in the research. Through the types of descriptions documented above, young women are seen as both producers and victims of problematic social media content. This results in a double-bind for young women. They are depicted as causing their own problems, through activities like selfie posting and peer comparison, and at the same time are described as being subject to risks on social media that are out of their control.

Even more, these contradictory ways of thinking about young women’s social media experiences are facilitated by neoliberal discourses that construct and idealize a rational and free subject. As such, girls and young women are paradoxically mandated to take responsibility for their individual successes and failures without regard to larger socio-cultural histories and structures (c.f., Gill, 2012). In other words, the application of neoliberal ideas to young women’s social media use makes it possible to frame their activities as motivated by individual choices that are untethered from the structures and processes that make those choices rational or attractive in the first place. For example, the practice of selfie taking is informed by a wide variety of raced, classed, and gendered discourses that determine the social acceptability and desirability of a particular kind of appearance and self-presentation (Author 1). These discourses also shape selfie-takers’ understanding of the rules of selfie taking and posting (With whom? Where? When? Wearing what?). In reality, all of these structures work together to create significant constraints on selfies, but on individual level, the decision to take and post a selfie is perceived to be a “choice.” With freedom, however, comes responsibility: because their activities are

attributed to their individual choices, young women are framed as needing to take full responsibility for the attendant risk. And while both female and masculine-identifying social media users are subject to neoliberal discourses and forces, the over-representation of girls and young women in these studies provide support for the suspicion that neoliberalism is a discourse which is “always already gendered” (Gill, 2008, p. 443).

As Rosalind Gill explains, “Whilst we are all implicated, the surveillant imaginary, the ‘work of being watched’ remains disproportionately women’s work in a way that requires our urgent attention” (Gill, in press, p. 26). The depiction of young women and girls we encountered in this analysis supports Gill’s assertion of the disproportionate surveillance of the activities of female users. This pattern of focusing on women in social media research contributes to what it is possible to think about how young people interact with and through social media. For example, research that continues to overemphasize young women’s use of social media and ignore young men’s reinforces the naturalization of social media as a site where young women need to be surveilled.

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

The examples presented in our analysis are not intended to critique particular authors, but rather to highlight patterns across the data set and social media research in general. By paying close attention to the ways that young people and social media are repeatedly framed in these studies, we seek to draw attention to the challenge of researching and presenting the complexity of youths’ online activities. Further, we aim to provide specific examples of ways that social media researchers (including ourselves) can work toward nuanced and rich descriptions of youths’ meaning making on and through social media.

One important strategy for adding to our knowledge of young people’s experiences of social media is attending to how the platforms themselves are shaping what adolescents are doing on social media. The consideration of the ways platform architecture is driving participants to interact in particular ways contributes to our understanding of the role that social media is playing in shaping and reshaping the ways that young people think about themselves and others, and interact with each

other in online communities. Additionally, it creates space to keep the corporate, profit-making function of these platforms in the forefront of our analysis, rather than as an afterthought or side note.

Our analysis of how adolescents are framed in qualitative social media research, mostly through the lens of developmental psychology, demonstrates the need for researchers to consider a more complex study of youth, in general. In this way, we can move between and against the “confident characterizations of youth, which involves including them as active participants (not tokens)” (Lesko, 2012, p. 186) in our work.

Finally, we suggest researchers build on studies that go beyond reporting out what adolescents are doing on social media and give considerable attention to myriad reasons that help us to understand *why* they are doing it. Specifically, this body of research would be strengthened by work that takes seriously the outside forces, discourses, and factors that shape adolescents' interactions within digital spaces. As Ruiz et al. (2015) assert, treating social media as if it facilitates unprecedented forms of communication ignores the reality that it is likely to replicate existing forms of patterns of interaction.

It is important to note that while our analyses of these studies indicated that the literature tends to uncritically replicate developmental and gendered neoliberal discourses about adolescent social media use, there were several instances where researchers explored the ways youth make sense of and with social media that position youth as active, nuanced, and savvy participants in society from the start (see, for example, Marwick & boyd, 2014a, 2014b; Rubin & McClelland, 2014; Salter, 2016). Most studies, however, seemed to emerge from research questions mired in the discourses about the necessity to protect - and therefore surveil - youths' social media practices. Rather than beginning inquiries under these, we imagine research questions that focus instead on the subtleties of how youth make sense of and with social media while taking into consideration the existing developmental and gendered neoliberal discourses that might frame our thinking so we can work against those discourses in favor of new ways of seeing and positioning youth.

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**Appendix A: List of Reviewed Articles**

<b>Author(s)</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Journal</b>
Baker, C., & Carreño, P.	2016	Understanding the role of technology in adolescent dating and dating violence.	<i>Journal of Child &amp; Family Studies</i>
Berriman, L., & Thomson, R.	2015	Spectacles of intimacy? Mapping the moral landscape of teenage social media.	<i>Journal of Youth Studies</i>
Chua, T. H., & Chang, L.	2016	Follow me and like my beautiful selfies: Singapore teenage girls' engagement in self-presentation and peer comparison on social media	<i>Computers In Human Behavior</i>
Daniels, E., & Zurbriggen, E.	2016	'It's not the right way to do stuff on Facebook:' An investigation of adolescent girls' and young women's attitudes toward sexualized photos on social media	<i>Sexuality &amp; Culture</i>
Davis, K., & James, C.	2013	Tweens' conceptions of privacy online: Implications for educators	<i>Learning Media And Technology</i>
De Ridder, S., & Van Bauwel, S.	2015	The discursive construction of gay teenagers in times of mediatization: youth's reflections on intimate storytelling, queer shame and realness in popular social media places	<i>Journal of Youth Studies</i>
Gleason, B.	2016	New literacies practices of teenage Twitter users	<i>Learning, Media &amp; Technology</i>
Malvini Redden, S., & Way, A. K.	2017	'Adults don't understand': Exploring how teens use dialectical frameworks to navigate webs of tensions in online life	<i>Journal of Applied Communication Research</i>
Marwick, A., & Boyd, d.	2014	Networked privacy: How teenagers negotiate context in social media	<i>New Media &amp; Society</i>
Marwick, A., & boyd, d.	2014	'It's just drama': teen perspectives on conflict and aggression in a networked era	<i>Journal of Youth Studies</i>
Moreno, M. A., Kelleher, E., Ameenuddin, N., & Rastogi, S.	2014	Young adult females' views regarding online privacy protection at two time points	<i>Journal of Adolescent Health</i>
Price, E., Wardman, J., Bruce, T., & Millward, P.	2016	The juggling act: A phenomenological study of gifted and talented girls' experiences with Facebook	<i>Roeper Review</i>
Rubin, J. D., & McClelland, S. I.	2015	'Even though it's a small checkbox, it's a big deal': Stresses and strains of managing sexual identity(s) on Facebook	<i>Culture, Health &amp; Sexuality</i>
Rueda, H. A., Lindsay, M., & Williams, L. R.	2015	'She posted it on Facebook': Mexican American adolescents' experiences with technology and romantic relationship conflict	<i>Journal of Adolescent Research</i>
Salter, M.	2016	Privates in the online public: Sex(ting) and reputation on social media	<i>New Media &amp; Society</i>
Vaterlaus, J. M., Barnett, K., Roche, C., & Young, J. A.	2016	'Snapchat is more personal': An exploratory study on Snapchat behaviors and young adult interpersonal relationships	<i>Computers In Human Behavior</i>

## **Appendix B: Code Book**

Who are the participants?

How is the focus on this age group rationalized?

What theoretical framework is used in the paper?

What is studied in this research?

What are the research objectives?

How is the focus on social media rationalized?

What are the major findings of the research?

What are the specific findings about the experiences of adolescents?

What are the implications?

How is social media described/framed?

What social media platforms are described?

How is social media historicized in this study?

How are adolescents framed?

How are adolescents assigned agency (or not)?