

2018

The digital self: A qualitative approach to studying female college students' use of social-networking platforms

Megan Christine Gore

Follow this and additional works at: <http://commons.emich.edu/theses>

 Part of the [Educational Leadership Commons](#), and the [Mass Communication Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Gore, Megan Christine, "The digital self: A qualitative approach to studying female college students' use of social-networking platforms" (2018). *Master's Theses and Doctoral Dissertations*. 896.
<http://commons.emich.edu/theses/896>

This Open Access Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Master's Theses, and Doctoral Dissertations, and Graduate Capstone Projects at DigitalCommons@EMU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Master's Theses and Doctoral Dissertations by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@EMU. For more information, please contact lib-ir@emich.edu.

The Digital Self: A Qualitative Approach to Studying Female College Students'
Use of Social-Networking Platforms

By

Megan Christine Gore

Dissertation

Submitted to the College of Education

Eastern Michigan University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

Educational Leadership

Dissertation Committee:

Ronald Flowers, EdD, Chair

David Anderson, EdD

Elizabeth Broughton, EdD

Geoffrey Hammill, PhD

February 28, 2018

Ypsilanti, Michigan

Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my daughter, Makenna. You inspired me to show you the wonderful success that comes from hard work, commitment, and perseverance. May you follow your dreams and reach for the stars. And to my mother, Kimberley Smith, who encouraged me throughout my entire college career, always providing a listening ear when I needed it the most. I love you both and hope I have made you proud.

Acknowledgments

First, I would like to thank my husband, Adam Gore, for his support throughout these past 6 years of my doctoral program. Without his emotional support, words of affirmation, parental support for our daughter, and love, I would not be where I am today. You provided me the space to follow my dream and pursue a graduate degree in educational leadership, and I will always cherish that selflessness.

Importantly, I would like to thank my parents, Kim and Brad Smith, for their unconditional love; long conversations; intellectual stimulation; emotional support; financial support; caregiving to my daughter, Makenna, during all of my long research and writing times; and the motivation to persevere through the hard times. If I can be half as good of a parent as you both have been to me, that will be my greatest achievement.

Next, I would like to thank my dissertation chair, Dr. Ronald Flowers, for the good advice, guidance, and time spent to help me through this educational process. He challenged me to think deeper and view things from a different lens when I was struggling. Without his assistance, push, and encouragement, I wouldn't be the woman I am today. A big thanks to my entire dissertation committee, Dr. Broughton, Dr. Anderson, and Dr. Hammill. All of you donated time to reading my work, provided feedback, challenged my ways of thinking, and widened my intellect, which I am extremely grateful for.

Notably, I would like to thank my friends who donated time to listen to me and support me through this educational journey. Specifically, I would like to thank my friend Rocco Sulfridge for his empathy, love, guidance, humor, and knowledge about the dissertation process. Thanks also to my friend Meghan Hudson for being a shoulder to lean on, providing me the encouragement I needed to continue forth, and being one of the best listeners I know.

Lastly, a huge thanks to my entire support system. To all of my family members who supported me through this process, especially my aunts Sandy, Brenda, and Terri, I am so lucky to have you all in my life. Thank you to my mother-in-law, Deborah Wiedyke, for your pep talks and providing me with sunny writing getaways in Florida. To all of my colleagues and friends, Amy, Margie, Ethel, Deb, and Christina, I appreciate you tolerating my stress and always providing me with a smile and pat on the back of encouragement. I am inspired by all of you, and I appreciate you all more than you will ever know. Thanks to my friend and doctoral cohort member Casey Krone for going through this process with me. Your support and encouragement played an integral role in my success, and no one will truly understand how I feel better than you. I am finishing up this process with a full heart overflowing with gratitude.

Abstract

The purpose of this research was to understand how female college students make use of social networks, specifically how they use the medium to connect with others. Researching social-networking use pertaining to the phenomenon of connection will give a richer understanding of female students' lived experience of social networking. Many quantitative studies have been conducted about social networking, but more qualitative measures are needed to explore social networking. With the continuously changing social-networking platforms, there is little research that sheds light on social-networking use among female college students. My goal was to conduct a qualitative research study that examined female college students' use of social-networking platforms, specifically how they use the medium to connect, by conducting an exploratory instrumental case study, using experience sampling and the VisionsLive qualitative software platform for data collection. My unit of analysis was six female college students attending a comprehensive Midwestern university. I sought to answer five research questions through my research:

1. What social-networking platforms are female college students using?
 - a. Which social-networking platforms are female college students using most often?
2. How do female college students describe their social-networking use?
3. In what ways do college women describe connecting through social networks?
 - a. Who are female college students connecting with through social-networking platforms?
4. How do female college students describe their needs, and how is social networking related to those needs?

5. How do female college students describe their feelings about the use of social-networking platforms and connecting?

After synthesis of the data and development of the emergent themes, the core of how female college students are experiencing social networking to connect with others materialized. The emergent themes were:

- Connection happens on multiple levels and is used to maintain existing relationships;
- Construction of shared meaning through virtual symbols;
- Shapes self-value/self-worth;
- Evokes feelings, both good and bad;
- And wanting to be heard and understood.

The essence of social-networking connection for these female participants was as a tool that evoked feelings and met needs, which is understood through the construction of shared meaning through virtual symbols.

Table of Contents

Dedication.....	ii
Acknowledgments.....	iii
Abstract.....	v
List of Tables	x
List of Figures	xi
Chapter 1: Introduction.....	1
Background of the Study	1
Purpose of the Study	14
Self as Researcher	15
Research Questions.....	19
Definitions of Relevant Terms.....	19
Chapter Organization	21
Chapter 2: Conceptual Framework.....	22
Building a Conceptual Framework.....	22
Sociology of Communication	22
Media Communication Theory.....	24
Symbolic Interactionism and Uses and Gratifications Theory	
Working Together.....	26
New Conceptual Framework Model.....	27
Chapter 3: Research Design.....	30
Research Tradition	30
Qualitative Research Approach	32

Phenomenology.....	35
Instrumental Case Study Design.....	37
Research Design.....	38
Data Gathering/Research Instrumentation.....	39
VisionsLive Platform.....	40
Moral, Legal, and Ethical Issues.....	41
Ethical Research in the Virtual World.....	44
Validity.....	47
Reliability.....	48
Data Analysis—Generating Meaning and Confirming Findings.....	49
Chapter 4: Findings.....	53
Introduction.....	53
Participants’ Background and Synthesized Data Collected.....	58
Participants’ Social Networking Narratives.....	60
Social Networking Connection Themes.....	83
Summary.....	99
Chapter 5: Summary of the Study and Conclusions.....	100
Purpose of the Study.....	100
Conceptual Framework.....	100
Research Questions.....	101
Research Tradition.....	102
Research Methods.....	102
Summary of Findings.....	105

Conclusions.....	106
Implications for Practice.....	116
Implications for Theory	123
Recommendations for Future Research	124
Limitations	126
References.....	128
Appendix: IRB Approval Letter	137

List of Tables

Table 1. <i>Needs Gratified by the Media</i>	25
Table 2. <i>A Comparison of the Assumptions of the Media Characteristics and Social Information Perspectives</i>	27
Table 3. <i>Female College Student Background Information</i>	57
Table 4. <i>Social-Networking Platforms Used With Corresponding Numbers of Posts</i>	59
Table 5. <i>Social Network Use Based on Type of Connection</i>	85

List of Figures

Figure 1. <i>Social Networking Communication Behavior</i>	28
Figure 2. <i>VisionsLive Homepage</i>	41
Figure 3. <i>Facebook Emojis</i>	89

Chapter 1: Introduction

Background of the Study

Being electronically tethered, Americans unplug and plug in from their social network lives and the surrounding physical world all the time. One of the virtual tools that has evolved in this digital age, tethering people to the social and physical worlds, has been social networking platforms. Ninety percent of young American adults aged 18–29 use social media sites (Perrin, 2015). Educational attainment influences social media use as well, with young college-educated adults more likely to be social media users (Perrin, 2015). According to Perrin (2015), “Currently adoption rates for social media stand at 76% for those with college or graduate degrees and 70% of those with some college education.” The use of social networks among college students is popular and pervasive. Social networking trends are constantly changing, growing, adapting, and have become a thread woven into the culture of American society. According to Boyd and Ellison (2007), social network sites are:

web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. The nature and nomenclature of these connections may vary from site to site (p. 211).

Many social networking platforms fall under this definition, such as Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram, and Twitter. According to Pew Research Center’s Internet Project Survey conducted from August through September 2013, people use Facebook to share photos and videos with many people at once, see entertaining or funny posts, learn about ways to help others, receive support from people in their network, receive updates and comments, keep up with news and

current events, and get feedback on content they have posted (Smith, 2014). According to Instagram (2016), their social networking platform is an entertaining way to share pictures people take on their mobile devices with friends. Instagram allows users to select filters to change the look of their pictures. Instagram provides an experience that connects the world through photos, experiencing moments “as they happen” (Instagram, 2016). Instagram also has other features, such as private messaging, video sharing, and comment sections. No matter a person’s social network of choice, platforms and applications (apps) are constantly being created, updated, and reshaped to fit the needs of the consumer.

Social networking has expanded and contracted the world. It is a conduit for communication and connection that resides in a virtual environment, but young adults have been communicating and socially connecting in multiple ways since the beginning of time. As human beings, we are compelled to connect with others. College students maintain interpersonal relationships with the people important to them, using multiple channels to send and receive messages as relational maintenance strategies (Johnson, Haigh, Becker, Craig, & Wigley, 2008). The concept of social connection is not a new one, but it is important to have a working definition of social connection to have a lens to view the phenomenon of connection. According to Dutton and Heaphy (2003),

A connection is the dynamic, living tissue that exists between two people when there is some contact between them involving mutual awareness and social interaction. The existence of some interaction means that individuals have affected one another in some way, giving connection a temporal as well as an emotional dimension. (p. 264)

Historically, the earliest adopters of new technologies to communicate and connect have been young people. Each new generation is quick to appropriate the newest media technology in an

effort to carve out their own social space. This has and continues to be especially true for college students.

Youth and social networking. The history of student culture in higher education provides insight into how students have used the “medium” of their time to connect with others inside and outside of higher education. The concept of “social networking” is not new. People have been “social networking” and connecting with others since the beginning of human existence. When young men started attending college in the 1700s, they looked for ways to connect with others using the “media” of that time. One of the first ways was through student organizations, which were created for students to gather to discuss and debate in small groups about topics that interested them, such as literature and politics. Students wanted to create their own identities and align themselves with groups that represented their beliefs and values. These extracurricular outlets allowed students to be themselves and communicate and connect with like-minded people, making their voices heard (Horowitz, 1987).

One of the first printed media used by college students to connect and socially network was printed pamphlets and flyers. Student organizations used pamphlets to share information with other students and to recruit them to join their organizations. This was a costly way for students to network, so they would often write or draw their leaflets to pass around campus. Some students would leave messages on chalkboards for other classes to read (Horowitz, 1987). This was an effective way for students to spread messages to other students and connect.

Unfortunately for students, many of the social media of the time, such as college newspaper publications, college catalogues, and yearbooks, would come to be controlled by the institutions, which meant there was little room for student voices. If students were participating with print publications during this time, it was the fraternity men who participated in and

controlled the literary magazines and campus newspapers, so stories were usually one sided, and the fraternity men's voices were the public voice of the time.

Women in higher education. Women's voices were nearly nonexistent on campuses during the time of college-student publishing because women did not start attending college until the second half of the 19th century. When they did start attending higher education institutions, they received little attention, especially for wanting to participate in extracurricular activities and organizations (Horowitz, 1987). In the 1840s, American women started fighting for access to higher education. Mostly, women did not start attending college until after the Civil War in the 1860s, but the population of women attending college at that time was low. In 1870, 0.7% of college-age females attended college; this statistic only rose to 7.6% by 1920 (Caplow, Hicks, & Wattenberg, 2001). Most of these women went to college to become teachers, nurses, or another helping profession (Caplow, Hicks, & Wattenberg, 2001). These women were often banned from social events and were not allowed to join student organizations with the men, such as joining the staff of *The Daily* or the yearbook (Horowitz, 1987). The suppression of women during this time supported the belief that women should be seen and not heard. Even when women started to enroll in college, they were segregated from men. Consequently, women's social networking occurred with other women, not men. Women were often pushed into different majors than men, marginalizing them in the college culture. Male students continued to dominate both the official and unofficial forms of communication media, and faculty continued to assume the parental role over students.

Telephones on college campuses. The telephone was patented by Alexander Graham Bell in 1876; not long after, telephones were installed on college campuses (Peterson, 2014). When this technology reached campuses, there was typically one telephone placed within the

administrative offices, but students quickly determined they could use this technology to connect with family and friends (Peterson, 2014). By the early 1900s, campuses started implementing telephone utility systems, allowing administrators to communicate with one another across campus, which helped with day-to-day operations (Peterson, 2014). Switchboards were installed to connect the president's office with other buildings, classrooms, and the gymnasium (Peterson, 2014). Students would line up to use the telephone in the president's office to call friends, family, and sometimes other men and women they fancied, though they had to state that they were calling family members (Peterson, 2014). By the 1930s, dormitories had telephones installed throughout the hallways, so students could connect with one another all over campus. But universities had many rules about using the system, such as no calls after 8 p.m. and a 3-minute time limit per call (Peterson, 2014). Switchboard operators had to deal with difficult requests from students trying to connect with others. Sometimes students only knew their friends' first name and hair color, but the operators did their best to accommodate students with these connections (Peterson, 2014).

By the late 1960s and 1970s, telephones were being installed in private dorm rooms (Peterson, 2014). Some institutions used the dorm telephone to communicate recorded messages with information about athletics, concerts, theater performances, dances, conferences, and other events around campus (Peterson, 2014). By the 1990s, students were using phones to register for classes and for public safety around campus (Peterson, 2014).

First media on campus. With the startup of journalism programs, students hoped to use the outlet of newspapers to make their voices heard on a regular basis. Colleges insisted that students get involved and “do something” for the college, like reporting for the college newspaper (Horowitz, 1987). Their insistence was not about pursuing one's interests; it was

about the institution's interests. With the tight hold that faculty had over the content of newspapers, students were unable to use this medium to make their voices heard and connect with other students the way they wanted. Therefore, students continued to seek out new and innovative ways to connect by seeking and adopting new communication technologies, such as radio in the early 1900s.

With the growing movement of noncommercial educational broadcasting, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) in 1945 assigned 20 FM channels entirely for noncommercial use (Frost, 2000). In 1969, there were 396 noncommercial radio stations; by 1980, there were more than 1,076 college and university radio stations ("Public Broadcasting," 1981). The growth of educational stations can be credited to educators realizing the potential of radio broadcasting as an educational instrument, community service outlet, and public-relations tool for the institutions (Saul, 2000). Students were getting their chance to use the radio broadcasting medium to enhance their audiences' enjoyment at college.

College radio grew slowly during the 1920s and 1930s due to transmission interference, lack of funding for programs, and equipment failures. The college stations could only broadcast at certain times during the day because most of the prime-time broadcasting spots were given to the more profitable commercial stations. Most college radio programming in the 1920s and 1930s was comprised of music, such as in-studio concerts by college musical organizations; individual artists of the college and surrounding areas; and other entertainment interests. Educators wanted to give students the opportunity to be creative and use the tools and skills they were learning in their broadcasting classes to connect with others, but they also wanted to have control over what students would be broadcasting. Students wanted the opportunity to provide alternative programming that interested them, speak about important issues that related to their

lives, and provide entertainment that other students would welcome and connect with. College radio continued to grow as a social-networking medium through the early 1900s, but, with the invention of the television (TV), radio became less popular for some time.

The early use of TV in higher education involved educational TV in the college classroom covering topics that were important to students, such as different career fields, academic freedom, race relations, and one-act plays (Cumming, 1954). Because these stations were licensed with the FCC, it was extremely important for the universities to follow specific regulations for content. With the FCC's strict rules, universities created TV policies that all students had to follow. Due to the rigid rules of the programs, content produced by students had to be approved by faculty, which left little room for topics students could explore. The types of TV programming were to inform, help viewers develop appreciation, or entertain. To operate professionally, the administrations of TV-licensed universities wrote policies pertaining to programming so there would be no questions about how problems would be handled (Cumming, 1954).

Social change on campus in the mid to late twentieth century. As television continued to grow throughout the 1960s, women's college attendance also continued to rise. The 1960s and 1970s brought about a decade of transformation in American society. The role of women in society was changing. Feminism took priority as women fought for work equality and rights as citizens. More women than ever were entering the workforce and wanted freedom to choose how to live their lives. There were civil rights protests and the protest of the Vietnam War. Young people had become more radical, and college campuses were at the forefront of this change. Student activists held anti-war demonstrations and celebrated feminism. Students wanted their voices to be heard, and, since institutions regulated the newspaper publications on

campus, students decided to find their own outlet to share their opinions and connect with others. Students created independent publications to connect socially with others, which were known as “independent” or “underground” newspapers. Students gathered in groups to connect and communicate about topics that interested them. By the end of the Vietnam War, students were on the cusp of a new technology used for communication—the Internet.

Internet becomes the newest medium. As with previous communication technologies, higher-education institutions have been at the forefront of creation and use of the Internet. In 1962, professor and head of the computer research program at the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA), J.C.R. Licklider, discussed his “Galactic Network” concept, which he imagined as globally connected computers where people could access programs and data from anywhere (Leiner et al., 2012). Through trial and error, many inventors, and several decades, this concept is what became the Internet of today. By 1985, the Internet was becoming a well-known technology, with many research communities using electronic mail communications on a daily basis (Leiner et al., 2012). By the late 1980s, colleges started wiring their campuses to allow Internet access, and, by the 1990s, most college campuses were connected between classrooms, laboratories, dorm rooms, offices, and other campus buildings (Jones, Johnson-Yale, Millermaier, & Perez, 2009). Until the World Wide Web was created, the Internet was only used for research, education, and governmental needs.

What made the technology of the Internet different than the former media of print, radio, and television was that information communicated through the Internet had the ability to be synchronous. The various forms of print, radio, and television were basic linear models of communication because they tended to be asynchronous and had limited opportunities for audience feedback. Sometimes, people wrote letters to editors or called into radio shows, but it

was a slow process, and responses were limited. With this new technology, people were sending and receiving messages simultaneously, which created a new arena of communication and connection among college students.

As early as the late 1990s, college students were accessing the Internet to communicate with one another. College campuses had to make sure their telephone systems included hardware that enhanced Internet use, allowing for connection to the Internet without tying up the landlines for phone use (Peterson, 2014). In 1997, America Online launched AIM, an instant-messaging software program in which people created a profile, had a list of “buddies,” communicated instantly with one another, and left “away messages” for when they were not at their computer. This was a great tool for students away at college. It was an outlet for them to connect from their dorms with friends at other colleges or back at home, and, for the first time, they had a media tool for connecting that was not easily controlled or monitored by others. The instant messaging programs, such as AIM and Yahoo messenger, paved the way for social networking through the 2000s, and college students were some of the biggest proponents of social networking use.

According to Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, and Silvestre (2011), college students have traditionally used the Internet for accessing information, watching or listening to media, and conducting e-commerce, but college students are increasingly using new platforms for sharing content, “blogging,” social networking, and communicating. Platforms are content-sharing or social-networking sites that allow people to create content and share ideas (Kietzmann, et al., 2011). Kietzmann et al. (2011) defined the key components to social-networking use, which are “a framework that defines social media by using seven functional building blocks: identity, conversations, sharing, presence, relationships, reputation, and groups.” These concepts

have been present in earlier forms of social networking. When people communicated through social networks before advances in technology, they had more face-to-face interactions. Today, it is the technology that has changed, making the flow of information in virtual social networking synchronous, instantaneous, and individually controlled. Now, social networks are web-based services that allow people to construct profiles, create lists of other people to connect with, and view and cross their lists of connections with those made by others within the platform (Boyd & Ellison, 2007, p. 211). The first social networking sites were created in the 1990s and were virtual places where people could interact, blog, and share files. Some examples are Six Degrees and Blogger (Edosomwan, Prakasan, Kouame, Watson, & Seymour, 2011).

Six Degrees is known as the first social-networking site. It was created in 1996 by Andrew Weinreich and launched in 1997. SixDegrees.com allowed users to create networks of friends and personal profile pages to share with their networks (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). Blogger is another social-networking site started in 1999 by a company called Pyra Labs in San Francisco (Blogger.com, 2015). It was created for “helping people have their own voice on the web and organizing the world’s information from the personal perspective” (Blogger.com, 2015). In 2002, LinkedIn was created as a professional social-networking site, allowing users to communicate in the business world by creating personal profiles containing employment and education information and documents such as resumes (LinkedIn, 2015).

In the Pew Internet Project Survey Analysis from 2002, approximately 42% of college students reported using the Internet primarily to socialize with family and friends, but 69% of students said they preferred to use their phone to communicate with friends because of its immediacy of talk and text messaging (Jones, 2002). In 2002, cell phones had just started

offering Internet services and camera capability, but most people lacked Internet access on their mobile phone until 2003 or later.

Social networking continued to grow in the early 2000s, and the technology kept up with the trends. In the 2000s, many new social-networking sites emerged, creating opportunities for individuals and organizations to communicate about common interests, like education, media, music, business, and friendship, along with new platforms and devices for exploring these topics.

In 2003, MySpace was created; by 2006, it was the most popular social-networking site, with approximately 43.2 million users (Edosomwan et al., 2011). Again, college students were at the forefront of this new communication technology. New platforms were materializing because people were experiencing the impact of social connection through the Internet (Edosomwan et al., 2011). In February of 2004, Mark Zuckerberg created Facebook. The site was created as a social connection for students, allowing users to find students who were in their classes, social organizations, and dorm rooms. At its inception, Facebook was limited to Harvard students, but it eventually expanded to include college and high school students before finally including everyone over the age of 13 (Edosomwan et. al., 2011). In 2009, Facebook had approximately 500 million users; in 2010, Google announced that Facebook was the most visited website in the world (Edosomwan, et. al., 2011). Today, Facebook has over 1.44 billion active monthly users (Facebook, 2015).

According to Boyd and Ellison (2007), “As the social media and user-generated content phenomena grew, websites focused on media sharing began implementing SNS features and becoming SNSs themselves. Examples include Flickr (photo sharing), Last.FM (music listening habits), and YouTube (video sharing)” (p. 216). Today, over 1 billion people visit YouTube, and over 6 billion hours of videos are watched each month (YouTube, 2014).

On March 21, 2006, the first “tweet” was sent on Twitter, a platform that quickly became popular for its microblogging capabilities (Johnson, 2013). The trends continued to roll out as many more social-networking platforms were created. In 2010, Instagram was formed. The year 2011 brought about Snapchat (originally launched as Picaboo) by Stanford students Evan Spiegel, Bobby Murphy, and Reggie Brown (Shontell, 2013). In June 2012, Vine was created as a video-sharing, microblogging application. Most of these major social-networking sites continue to thrive and grow, increasing users daily from around the world, including from college campuses. In addition, colleges and universities are trying to stay current with the trends by creating their own social-networking accounts to draw in students, help students engage with student life, inform students, use as a public relations outlet, and market the institutions.

From the founding of the first institutions of higher education, college students and universities that serve these students have been among the first to adopt and engage in the newest forms of communication. Beginning with the earliest pamphlets and scrawled notes on chalkboards, students have sought ways to engage and connect with other students, family, friends, and university personnel. While difficult, from a current perspective, to ascribe to these communication relics, the concept of “social networking” has always offered students opportunities to engage and connect. Today, the social media and social-networking landscape is vast, allowing college students to explore, communicate, research, publish, play games, and create virtual worlds. There are over 200 major active social-networking sites, excluding dating sites, and this number continues to grow daily. Social networking has produced a powerful way for college students to communicate with one another. Consequently, virtual social networking has become ubiquitous for today’s college student.

Communication theory suggests that individuals use media to connect in order to satisfy needs and reach personal or social goals (Dobos, 1992). In its earliest forms, the use of media and communication technology suggests an interrelationship in which a limited number of media communication sources could be easily selected from and chosen on the basis of that which optimized an individual's needs. Over time and with advances in technology, an array of avenues to communicate and connect has exploded. While current studies of this phenomenon have focused on quantitative examinations of the number and volume of social networking, few have examined how individuals, specifically college students, experience the phenomenon of connecting within this new environment.

College age students are the first adopters of technology, yet institutions have historically fallen behind with understanding how students use technology to connect and gratify their needs. Therefore, this study attempts to examine how students are doing just that. Because I am a woman and because I am a communication faculty member, I am interested in studying women within higher education. To complete this study, I focused on women at a comprehensive university, where I have access to participants. Due to the fast-paced changes of social-networking platforms, researchers lack a clear understanding of how female college students are using social networks to connect with others.

As educational leaders, it behooves us to learn more about social-networking use to determine if it is changing the ways female college students connect with others during their college experiences. Currently, universities do not know enough about how the phenomenon of connecting through social networking impacts female students. If we learn how female college students are connecting through social networks and connecting with institutions, we can more

thoughtfully connect with our students. This research will help me and other educators be more thoughtful leaders who work with and connect with students on a regular basis.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research was to understand how female college students use social networks, specifically how they use the medium to connect with others. With the continuously changing social-networking platforms, more research is needed to shed light on the phenomenon of female college students connecting through social networking. Today, the global average use of social-networking platforms is 135 minutes per day (Statista, 2017). In the United States, 75% of adult males and 83% of adult females use social networks (Pew Research Center, 2016). According to a 2012 Nielsen study, 71% of Internet users engage in Facebook use, but only 66% of that population were male users, and 76% were female users. When asked why they wanted to use Facebook, the female users were most interested in connecting with people they know in real life to “catch up on things” (Nielsen, 2012). Not only are females using social networking more than men, but they are also attending college more than men. In the United States Census Bureau’s American Community Survey of 2014, the percentage of men obtaining a bachelor’s degree was 29.9%, and women obtaining a bachelor’s degree was 30.2%, marking the first time in history that women’s college attainment was higher than men’s. Researching female college students’ perspectives on social networking will provide a well-rounded view of the current landscape of the contemporary female college student, allowing educational leaders to determine the best ways to provide academic and mental health support; community engagement; connection with students, faculty, and staff; and the overall well-being of student success. As a female faculty member and doctoral student, this research topic is important to me because it will

help me and educational leaders learn about social networking use by female college students as a connection tool.

One of student affairs professionals' areas of concern is retention. Tinto (1999) discussed the concept of persistence, which is one aspect of motivation for students. Sense of belonging influences persistence, and, if educational leaders can promote persistence by engaging students and promoting a sense of belonging, students are more likely to be retained through graduation (Tinto, 1999). Social networking may help create a sense of belonging for students by engaging them through their college experience. A clear understanding of female college students' social networking use can give educational leaders with the necessary information they need to provide support services tailored to meet students' needs during their college years.

The academic literature about college students' social-networking use is increasing at a fast pace. The majority of the research is quantitative, often counting how much time people spend on social-networking platforms, how many people use social networks, and what platforms of social networks are used most often. This is important information about social networking, but it just scratches the surface of the phenomenon of connection through social networking. There is also value in using qualitative measures to gain a more profound understanding of the meaning of social networking use to connect with others. Using a conceptual framework related to sociological and media theory for this study provided a lens through which to view social-networking use among female college students that will add value to the educational leadership field.

Self as Researcher

Personal life. When I was working on my undergraduate degree, I had an amazing time in college. I became involved in various activities such as the university orchestra, Greek life,

and the student radio station. Through these experiences, I socially connected with my community, which helped me excel academically and connect with others. I lived on campus and was able to create new friendships that will last a lifetime. These have been some of my fondest memories, and I owe a lot of that to my teachers and the higher-education professionals who worked with me to help me succeed. I did not know it at the time, but now I can look back and see what a huge influence these people made on my life.

Media have also played a huge role in my life. I remember wanting to be a radio disc jockey when I was in high school. I was excited and passionate about the field. In college, I immersed myself in learning, taking classes that would satiate my appetite for media, creating TV commercials, writing scripts, and running cameras and other pieces of broadcasting equipment. My experience at various television stations has been enlightening, giving me purpose and first-hand knowledge about one existing medium of communication. I have always been interested in media literacy and learning how media influences people's lives and how they connect through a medium. As an educator, I now want to turn that passion into research that could benefit students on a different level, by studying the medium of social networking.

One other aspect of my life that drives my passion for researching female college students' social-networking use is my gender. As a current female college student myself, I relate to females and want to learn more about their use of technology and my own. More women than ever are attending college today, drastically more than when colleges began in the colonial days of the United States. According to CCAP (2015),

For every four women graduating from four year colleges, there are only three men. If males graduated from college in the same proportion as women, there would be about 14 percent more college graduates each year—over two million more over a decade.

The female viewpoint is interesting to me as I think about my own social-networking use and biases. This research could shed light into how my gender feels about this growing technology and the role it plays in our lives as women. Lastly, I have a daughter who, from a young age, has learned how to use technology. This research could give me insight into her social-networking use. As a parent, it is important for me to learn how she connects with others so that I can better look out for her and connect with her.

Professional life. For the past 12 years, I have been an instructor in the School of Communication, Media and Theatre Arts at a comprehensive Midwestern university. I teach both communication and electronic media courses. I wake up every day excited about teaching and discovering new things with my students. By sharing my journey from my personal education, to my professional field experience, to the university classroom, I can paint a picture of why this research topic is important to me.

In 2002, I graduated with a bachelor's degree in telecommunications and film. At that point, I was dedicated to pursuing a career in broadcasting, and I received a position as an associate director at a top-10 television market station. During this time, I decided to go back to school to work on my secondary teaching certification so that I could share my strong career passion with students. With my teacher certification, I continued my job at the television station, but I missed being with students. So I started the quest to make a difference in an educational environment.

During the fall semester of 2005, I received a graduate teaching assistantship in the communication department. I could obtain my master's degree, teach, and continue my work at the television station. The experience of the graduate teaching assistantship was rewarding, and it reinforced my goal to teach, especially to teach the very thing that drives life—communication.

My master's thesis research focused on the incorporation of media literacy across the secondary education curriculum in all subjects, creating a comprehensive project that other teachers could utilize.

As a female faculty member teaching communication and electronic media courses, a media professional, and an aspiring educational leader, I value understanding students. Social networking plays a huge role in my life and college students' lives, which drove me to learn more about this phenomenon. In the classroom, I see my students utilizing this form of communication, and I wanted to discover how they are using it and what those uses of social networking mean to them.

Personal bias. Social networking has been a part of my life since I created my first MySpace account in 2004. Social networking keeps me connected, informed, and entertained. My phone, with all of its apps, is an extension of me. I enjoy staying current with social-networking trends and trying out new social networks. I make decisions about what I choose to post and share with others on social networking because it is important to me to filter my online self. I continue to learn about social networks and what role they play in society because it is a passion that drives me every day. I have a positive viewpoint of social networking, which was important for me to keep in mind as I conducted research about female college students' use of social networks to connect with others. It was important for me to set my opinions aside and look objectively at all the information in an attempt to give an unbiased account of my research. As a faculty member who teaches media courses, I believe media communication is a powerful tool. I wanted to learn all that I could about it so that I could share my findings with other higher-education leaders. Because of my personal and professional background, it was difficult

for me to separate myself from my life's work, so acknowledging my biases and being honest about my background was important to conducting an ethical research study.

Research Questions

The following list of research questions has guided me through my research process. These questions were central to providing a foundation for the research and honed the focus of the study.

1. What social-networking platforms are female college students using?
 - a. Which social-networking platforms are female college students using most often?
2. How do female college students describe their social-networking use?
3. In what ways do college women describe connecting through social networks?
 - a. Who are female college students connecting with through social-networking platforms?
4. How do female college students describe their needs, and how is social networking related to those needs?
5. How do female college students describe their feelings about the use of social-networking platforms and connecting?

Definitions of Relevant Terms

In this section, I will define relevant terms that I use throughout this document to give the reader a context to understand the overall phenomenon of connection, specifically relating to social-networking use. These definitions come from the book *Oxford: A Dictionary of Social Media, First Edition*, by Daniel Chandler and Rod Munday (2016).

Blog/blogging. A blog is a genre and format for online self-publishing and social networking. Blogging arose in the late 1990s and includes sharing articles, photos, and videos

on the web in a chronological series of dated posts. Some blogs are like personal diaries, some focus on a particular topic (such as political blogs), and others represent brands. Most allow comments and are thus interactive (p. 124).

Follow. Following is to subscribe to someone's updates on social media (p. 209).

Followers. Followers are registered contacts receiving regular real-time updates or posts from a user's social-media account (p. 209).

Liking. In social-networking sites, liking is the casual endorsement of online content through clicking an associated like button: a minimal form of positive feedback (p. 264).

Meme. A meme is either (a) any content which spreads quickly through a network or (b) a picture with a humorous caption which is very widely shared online (p. 284).

Poke (poke button). On Facebook, the poke button is a means of attracting the attention of a contact without writing anything; poking can be also interpreted as a greeting or a form of flirting (p. 359).

Post. A post is a single entry published online in a blog, forum, or social-networking website. It is typically possible for others to like, comment on, or share such posts though such options may be restricted by the person who posted the item (p. 362).

Shares. Shares are posted website content on social media or reposts of someone else's content from one's own newsfeed to followers on a social-networking site. Shares can be seen either as an indicator of popularity or as a vanity metric (p. 416).

Sharing. Sharing is making information or resources freely available to others (p. 416).

Snapchat/Snap. Snapchat is an app enabling users to send and receive photos and videos (snaps) that self-destruct after a brief time limit (p. 422).

Social networking. Social networking is the use of websites and apps for professional or personal social networking, or their use by businesses for developing and maintaining a brand (p. 438).

Tag. A tag is a keyword labeling an item of online content, typically to categorize it by topic. This includes keywords provided by the author of an online document and labels applied by other users (p. 464).

Timeline. On a social-networking site, a timeline is a user's "feed" displayed in the order in which items were posted (thus appearing in reverse chronological order, with the most recent items at the top; p. 471).

Tweet/tweeting. A tweet is a message posted on Twitter and sent to the user's followers. Tweets are limited to 140 characters (p. 479).

Chapter Organization

This dissertation is comprised of five chapters. Chapter 1 presents the introduction, significance, and purpose of the study. Chapter 2 details the research methods and research design. Chapter 3 examines the conceptual framework related to this study. Chapter 4 presents the results of the study, specifically focusing on the themes that emerged from the data of participants' social-networking platforms to connect with others. Lastly, Chapter 5 presents the analysis of the findings, implications for research, and conclusions.

Chapter 2: Conceptual Framework

Building a Conceptual Framework

According to Miles and Huberman (1994), “A conceptual framework explains the main things to be studied—the key factors, variables, or constructs—and the presumed interrelationships among them” (p. 20). Understanding a body of literature pertaining to sociology and media theory was crucial for providing a lens to view my research study. The following sections will provide insight into theories of sociology and media that structured my research study.

Sociology of Communication

Sociology is defined as “the study of our behavior as social beings, covering everything from the analysis of short contacts between anonymous individuals on the street to the study of global social processes” (American Sociological Association, 2015). With the creation of new technology, social networking is a common way that people socially interact. Kietzmann et al. (2011) developed key components to social-networking use, which they define as “a framework that defines social media by using seven functional building blocks: identity, conversations, sharing, presence, relationships, reputation, and groups” (Kietzmann, et al., 2011). According to Boyd and Ellison (2007), social-network sites are services available on the Internet for people to construct profiles and navigate the system to connect with other users; the jargon used within the networks may vary from site to site (p. 211). The Internet is not only the conduit/medium through which the communication flows, but, when people use social-networking communication, the Internet is a symbolic way for people to socially connect, creating a social world that transcends all traditional forms of face-to-face communication. Social networking affords people the opportunity to connect with others globally on a daily basis, creating new

relationships and maintaining existing relationships from their fingertips. Although social-networking communication is relatively new to society, it has become a large part of people's social lives, interwoven in all aspects of culture. Social networking has provided the opportunity to develop large social networks that create a global community. The tradition of human networking is not new to the field of sociology, though, and the theory of symbolic interactionism lends itself well to the exploration of social-networking communication.

Symbolic interactionism. The framework of symbolic interactionism was founded on the belief that symbolic meaning of reality stems from the social interactions people have with others, which means humans socially construct society. Blumer (1969) defined three premises of symbolic interactionism that provide a framework to understanding his approach:

1. Human beings act toward things based on the meanings that the things have for them.
2. The meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one's fellows.
3. These meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretive process used by the person in dealing with the things that he encounters. (p. 2)

As Blumer (1969) indicated, the concept of symbolic interactionism is a process of encounters that individuals have with others, creating their social reality through their actions.

Meaning and language use are important aspects of symbolic interactionism. The phenomenon of social networking can relate to the conceptual framework of symbolic interactionism through its use of symbols, specifically language, to communicate socially with members of society. Through social networks, individuals create and co-create meaning through their interpretations of symbols and language communicated through the electronic medium.

Media Communication Theory

Media can be defined as “communication channels through which, news, entertainment, education, data, or promotional messages are disseminated. Media includes every broadcasting and narrowcasting medium such as newspapers, magazines, TV, radio, billboards, direct mail, telephone, fax, and internet” (Business Dictionary, 2015). The study of media is not a new phenomenon. Media studies date back to the 1930s with the Chicago School. Researcher George Herbert Mead believed that a form of communication must be created to allow people to share ideas and thoughts that were similar and different to theirs, creating an ideal society where people could empathize, share opinions, and communicate (Mead, 1934). The period between World War I and World War II brought about propaganda studies; later, in the 1970s, more media-effects studies emerged with the creation of new media forms. Although some media theories date back before the Internet, they still have practical implications for current media research. The following theory, uses and gratifications theory, provides a conceptual framework for studying female college students’ use of social networks to connect from a mass media perspective.

Uses and gratifications theory. The uses and gratifications approach to studying media stems from early media research claiming that people use specific media that gratify them. This means that participants find the media use rewarding in some fashion, so they have a desire to seek it out again in the future. As Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch (1974) stated,

From this point of view the approach simply represents an attempt to explain something of the way in which individuals use communications, among other resources in their environment, to satisfy their needs and to achieve their goals, and to do so by simply asking them. (p. 510)

The needs could range from emotional to cognitive or personal to entertainment (Rubin, 2002). Uses and gratifications theory has a user-centered approach to media theory that suggests the consumer of the media is in a position of power, rather than being controlled by the media. The uses and gratifications approach typically has focused on traditional forms of broadcast media but has recently been expanded to include Internet use. Table 1 provides examples of media use and a description of the need that the specific medium gratifies.

Table 1

Needs Gratified by the Media

NEED TYPE	DESCRIPTION	MEDIA EXAMPLES
Cognitive	Acquiring information, knowledge, comprehension	Television (news), video ("How to Install Ceramic Tile"), movies (documentaries or films based on history, e.g., <i>The Other Boleyn Girl</i>)
Affective	Emotional, pleasant, or aesthetic experience	Movies, television (sitcoms, soap operas)
Personal integrative	Enhancing credibility, confidence, and status	Video ("Speaking With Conviction")
Social integrative	Enhancing connections with family, friends, and so forth	Internet (e-mail, chat rooms, Listservs, IM)
Tension release	Escape and diversion	Television, movies, video, radio, Internet

Source: Adapted from Katz, Gurevitch, & Haas, 1973.

Note. Reprinted from "Uses and Gratifications Theory," by R. L. West & L. H. Turner, 2013, *Introducing Communication Theory: Analysis and Application*, p. 410. Reprinted with permission.

From past research, Park, Kee, and Valenzuela (2009) concluded in their factor analysis that college students visit social-networking sites to meet the primary needs of socializing, entertainment, self-status seeking, and information.

Symbolic Interactionism and Uses and Gratifications Theory Working Together

With the invention of the Internet and social-networking sites, the uses and gratifications theory offers new ways to look at how people symbolically interact through the new technological medium. According to Ruggiero (2000), concepts such as interactivity, hypertextuality, demassification, and synchronicity/asynchronicity need to be added to current models of the uses and gratifications theory to make the theory relevant for mediated communication studies, allowing for more in-depth interpersonal and qualitative research. When studying the phenomenon of connection through social networking, the concept of interactivity of participants to gratify needs is important to define. Ha and James (2009) discussed five dimensions of interactivity: playfulness, choice, connectedness, information collection, and reciprocal communication. Depending on the type of user, the reason for interactivity varies (Ha & James, 2009). Dobos (1992) concluded that people's gratifications, needs, expectations, and motivations are shaped by their individual characteristics and the social environment.

According to Fulk, Steinfield, Schmitz, and Power (1987), perceptions of communication media are influenced by media's characteristics such as ability to carry nonverbal cues and synchronicity, but perceptions are also influenced by comments, beliefs, and behaviors of others. Fulk et al. created the social information processing model of media use that compares media characteristics with social information perspectives. Table 2 describes how the social environment and media characteristics influence people's media choices.

Table 2

A Comparison of the Assumptions of the Media Characteristics and Social Information Perspectives

	<i>Media characteristics perspective</i>	<i>Social information perspective</i>
Properties of media	objective–inherent, physical attributes recognizable by users	subjective–influenced by attitudes, statements, and behaviors of others
Saliency of media properties	a function of individuals' perceptions of media properties and task attributes	a function of the assessments of coworkers (including supervisors)
Media choice processes	rationality based upon a matching of media attributes with task requirements	rationality influenced by past statements and behaviors, as well as social norms

Note. Reprinted from “A Social Information Processing Model of Media Use in Organizations,” by J. Fulk, C.W. Steinfield, J. Schmitz, & J. G. Power, 1987, *Communication Research*, p. 537, Reprinted with permission.

This table recognizes that media are chosen based on the features most important to the participants pertaining to what they hope to accomplish by using the media (social networking). Media choice is also influenced by the attitudes, beliefs, and values the participant holds about the media. Finally, media choice is also influenced by social behavior of statements about the specific media and social norms.

New Conceptual Framework Model

Figure 1 provides a lens that joins sociological theory with media theory to study female college students' social-networking use for connecting within their cultural environment, from a phenomenological perspective.

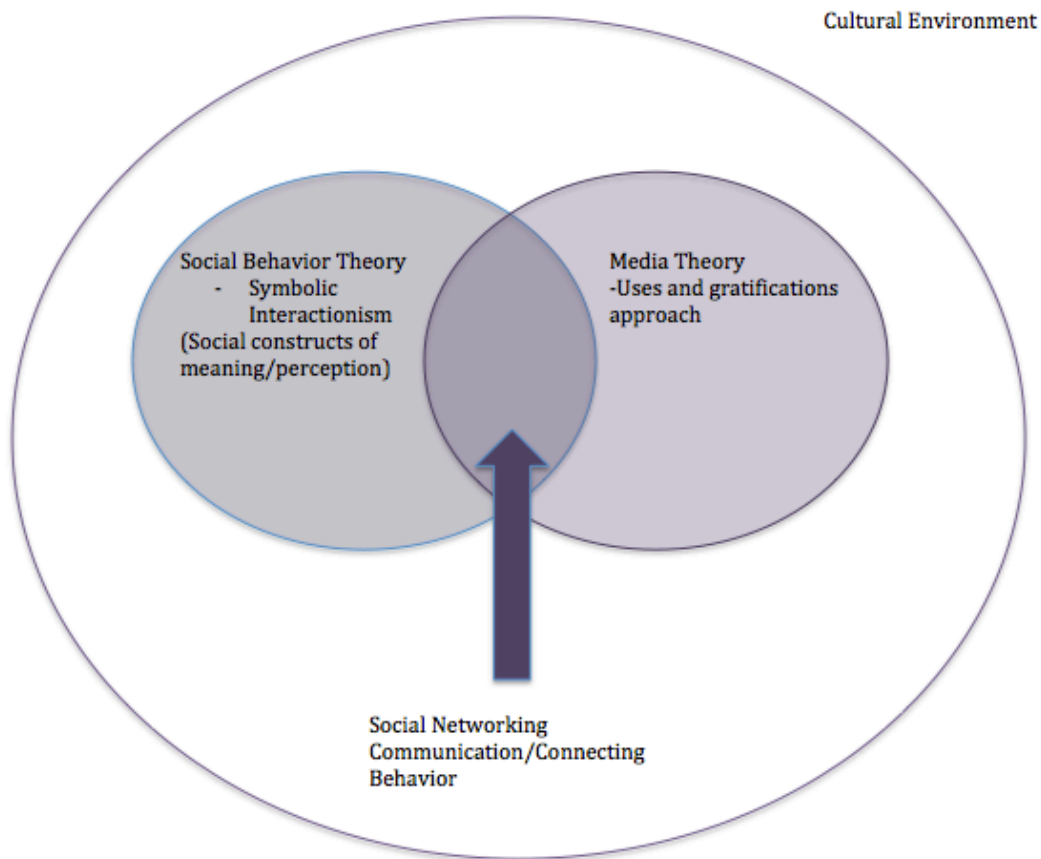


Figure 1. A Venn diagram describing social networking communication behavior through the overlap of social behavioral theory and media theory, which is encompassed by the cultural environment.

The media theory sphere encompasses the specific media chosen by participants based on the needs they want met and what social-networking platform will gratify those needs. For example, to enhance relationships through connections with family and friends, the participant may choose Facebook or Instagram. This sphere overlaps with the social behavior theory sphere. This overlap is where meaning is constructed symbolically relative to connecting based on gratifying needs. Symbolic interactionism indicates that people create understanding of their reality through social interactions with others. This symbolic behavior is co-created through

social interactions using specific symbols on the social-networking platforms. As Blumer (1969) indicated in his social interactionism framework, the second premise is that meaning comes from people's social exchanges. The social-networking experiences of participants create meaning for them, specifically how they should respond to others, what types of information is appropriate to post, and how to connect in suitable ways that follow social norms. Virtual language has been socially designed to create symbolic meaning, which is part of the communication process. The language and symbols participants choose create a social-networking connection behavior based on the social interactions and social-networking platform chosen as the conduit for communication. This behavior, then, coincides with the participants' culture, which indicates the appropriate attitudes, beliefs, and values used among that specific culture, which influences communication. This cultural environment also takes into account the personal frame of reference in which the participant filters messages through, including demographic factors such as age, race, socioeconomic status, educational level, gender, and religion.

Chapter 3: Research Design

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the qualitative research approach to studying female college students' use of social networking, specifically how the medium is used to connect with others. This chapter will cover the research tradition that I employed and the research design I used to collect the qualitative data.

Research Tradition

According to Guba and Lincoln (1994),

A paradigm can be viewed as a set of basic beliefs (or metaphysics) that deal with ultimates or first principles. It represents a worldview that defines, for its holder, the nature of the "world," the individual's place in it, and the range of possible relationships to that world and its parts, as, for example, cosmologies and theologies do. (p. 107)

Guba and Lincoln (1994) discussed the different paradigms with which most researchers identify. They asserted there are three fundamental areas of each paradigm that make each distinct: the ontological position, epistemological position, and the methodological position. When analyzing what type of research paradigm I identify with, I classify myself under constructivism. I want to research the world of human experience and discover my participants' view of using social networks to connect with others and understand their perspectives. It was important for me to recognize that my participants' social-networking use is a social construction, created and impacted by society and their experiences of reality. My goal was to observe my participants by interacting within their social setting to understand and interpret their social reality through the conceptual lens of sociological and media theories.

Ontological position. Ontology refers to how someone views the nature of reality. My ontological beliefs support the idea that there are multiple meanings of reality that stem from our

world being socially constructed (Guba & Lincoln, 1985). This is known as relativism. When I consider what reality is, I believe that our experiences are shaped based upon different contexts and that reality is socially constructed. Lincoln and Guba (1985) described this as constructed reality, where reality is in the minds of individuals, which means an infinite number of realities exist among people. Lincoln and Guba (1985) also said that these constructed realities are related to tangible entities, where people create a belief system to organize and construct the phenomena. Looking at reality from this perspective requires the researcher to understand how individuals socially construct their social worlds.

Epistemological position. Epistemology is the relationship between specific knowledge and the “knower” (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). The epistemology that describes my relationship is that of being a cocreator of meaning between participants and myself as a researcher. I believe that the phenomenon of social networking is best understood by analyzing female college students’ use of social-networking platforms while it happens, through using qualitative research software application and questioning participants about events, symbols, feelings, and social settings online. This knowledge is created and co-created, constantly changing depending on the context and belief of the individual using the social-networking platform to connect. As the researcher, I was responsible for describing this reality of my participants and explaining their reality through their use of social networks and how they create meaning from these social experiences. The knowledge of my research participants was constructed through their social experiences; because these experiences exist inside the individual, I had to interpretively examine these constructs for the meanings constructed by those individuals.

Qualitative Research Approach

To study the phenomenon of female college students using social networks to connect, I took a qualitative research approach, specifically implementing a phenomenological, multiple-case-study method. Denzin and Lincoln (2000) defined qualitative research as:

a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world. They turn the world into a series of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos of the self. At this level qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural setting, attempting to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. (p. 3)

This research practice afforded me the opportunity to study at a deeper level female college students' social-networking use to connect, at the essence of the experience. The following sections explain how these choices were best suited for my dissertation research.

Merriam (2002) said, "The key to understanding qualitative research lies with the idea that meaning is socially constructed by individuals in interaction with their world. . . . there are multiple constructions and interpretations of reality that are in flux and that change over time" (p. 4). These characteristics of qualitative research are beneficial when studying the phenomenon of social-networking use to connect among female college students. As a researcher, I wanted to understand social-networking use as a process and discover the perspectives students have about social-networking use to connect with others. The best way to do this was through qualitative research that would reveal recurring patterns or themes. Qualitative research allowed for a richer descriptive explanation of the data (Merriam, 2002).

Qualitative research methods are popular within the social sciences because they allow for in-depth studies about a plethora of topics. Yin (2011) listed five features that describe how qualitative research works:

1. Studying the meaning of people's lives, under real-world conditions;
2. Representing the views and perspectives of the people (participants) in a study;
3. Covering the contextual conditions within which people live;
4. Contributing insights into existing or emerging concepts that may help to explain human social behavior; and
5. Striving to use multiple sources of evidence rather than relying on a single source alone. (p. 7–8)

By employing a qualitative approach to study female college students' use of social-networking platforms to connect, I was able to provide insight into this group's social-networking behavior, uncovering their perspectives on the phenomenon of connection through social networks based on the context of the social-networking communication use. This phenomenological approach involved a continuous process of observation of female college students to provide new data that allowed for a richer understanding of the female college students' use of social networks to connect with others. Looking at several individuals' use of social networks in everyday life provided a more holistic view of the social-networking connection phenomena.

This phenomenological case study of female college students at a comprehensive Midwestern university employed an interpretive research tradition. This type of inquiry stems from researchers educated at the Chicago School of Sociology. The influential years of the Chicago School were the early 1900s to the 1950s. The department chair Albion W. Small and other anthropology faculty laid the foundation for the school by employing a qualitative

methodology and studying urban life and social interactions. The foundation of the school was based on social psychology and the concept of symbolic interactionism stemming from George H. Mead's work (Lutters & Ackerman, 1996). Symbolic interactionism is a theory that suggests that people's selves are social constructs, where reality is perceived as social and is developed through interactions with others (Blumer, 1969). The qualitative, naturalistic observation methods of the Chicago School were fitting for the study of urban, social interactions, encouraging close ethnographic focus of subjects (Lutter & Ackerman, 1996). The city of Chicago became the subject of many sociological studies that examined cultures of people and their everyday lives.

The roots of qualitative research and symbolic interactionism from the Chicago School provided a framework for studying female college students' social-networking use at Eastern Michigan University. I was concerned with understanding social networking for connecting with others as a social phenomenon among female college students, and I borrowed from the Chicago School to conduct my study. I served as the main research instrument, observing and collecting data.

By using a qualitative, constructivist/interpretive research tradition with incorporation of phenomenological fieldwork, I was equipped to study female college students' use of social networks to connect at a comprehensive Midwestern university. This research tradition is most aligned with studying sociological phenomena, such as social networking for connection, and supported the application of sociological theory to the social-network interactions of female students on campus.

Phenomenology

Phenomenological study. Johnson and Christensen (2014) defined phenomenology as “the description of one or more individuals’ consciousness and experience of a phenomenon. The purpose of phenomenological research is to obtain a view into your research participants’ life-worlds and to understand their personal meanings constructed from their ‘lived experiences.’” The term life-world comes from the German word *Lebenswelt*, used by phenomenology founder Edmond Husserl to refer to “an individual’s inner world of immediate experience” (Johnson & Christensen, 2014). Phenomenological researchers believe that experiences are shaped by our activities, thoughts, and emotions, impacting individuals’ sense of reality and understanding of their worlds (Long & Glen, 2012). Interactions with others influence subjective and objective experiences and therefore influence the conscious in various ways (Long & Glen, 2012). The charge of the researcher in a phenomenological study is to describe phenomena with a detailed account, leaving out any predispositions and remaining factual (Groenewald, 2004).

A new way to view phenomenology has surfaced, called interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA). Johnson and Christensen (2014) defined IPA as a “new type of phenomenology more focused on situated, interpreted, and particular lived experiences than on transcendental experiences” (Johnson & Christensen, 2014). Heidegger, Husserl’s assistant, was concerned with the notion of *Dasein*, a concept of personhood, and asked questions about the nature of being and existence (Holloway & Wheeler, 2010). The concept of IPA involves interpreting the messages from study participants to aid in understanding, which has become known as hermeneutics, the theory of interpretation of meaning (Holloway & Wheeler, 2010). IPA goes beyond description and focuses on the interpretation of lived experiences. According to Holloway and Wheeler (2010), “[IPA] explores the meaning of being a person in the world.

Rather than suspending presuppositions, researchers examine them and make them explicit” (p. 217). Studying female college students’ use of social networks was well suited for IPA because social-networking use is a personal type of social communication which is a specific type of lived experience. The IPA method helped in understanding how different female students experience the phenomenon similarly or differently, through the interpretation process of understanding.

While a traditional phenomenological study helps researchers understand a person’s experience of a phenomenon, new forms of computer-mediated communication require different approaches for gathering data. With the nature of social networks, different data collection approaches to this phenomenological study were needed to obtain the “how” and the “why” of social-networking use as a phenomenon.

Phenomenological framework. When using a phenomenological approach to research and studying the human experience, it is important to have a foundation for the research process. According to Van Manen (1990), six research activities encompass the method of phenomenological research:

1. Turning to the nature of lived experience,
2. Investigating experience as it is lived,
3. Reflecting on essential themes,
4. The art of writing and rewriting,
5. Maintaining a strong and oriented relation to lived experience,
6. And balancing the research context by considering parts and the whole.

These activities are important to remember when conducting a phenomenological study. People are always experiencing life in their world, every day. These experiences are lived experiences

that can be interpreted and understood as they are lived. Themes emerge that give a clearer understanding of the phenomenon, which require reflection to make sense of the phenomenon. The phenomenon of connecting through social networks is an ideal subject for qualitative research, but it poses challenges because of its virtual environment. This virtual tool is a conduit of communication that needed to be researched in a particular way to gain the most insight possible into the lived experiences of the individuals who use the medium. Data collection is the key component to embracing the virtual phenomenological approach to research. With a multiple-case-study design and experience sampling methodology (ESM), I was able to craft a study that provided the appropriate tools for assisting with data collection.

Instrumental Case Study Design

The case-study method “is a form of qualitative research that is focused on providing a detailed account of one or more cases” (Johnson & Christensen, 2014, p. 434). An instrumental case study looks at several cases in the same research study to give a more in-depth analysis of the cases (Johnson & Christensen, 2014). Johnson and Christensen (2014) asserted that case studies have several advantages such as comparing similarities and differences of cases, which permits researchers to look more effectively at multiple cases and easily generalize results. Using an instrumental case study approach provided me the opportunity to explore the phenomenon of connection through social networking and describe participants’ use of the medium. According to Baxter and Jack (2008),

One of the advantages of this approach is the close collaboration between the researcher and the participant, while enabling participants to tell their stories (Crabtree & Miller, 1999). Through these stories the participants are able to describe their views of reality

and this enables the researcher to better understand the participants' actions (Lather, 1992; Robottom & Hart, 1993). (p. 544)

It was important for me not only to understand how female college students use social networks but also to understand how these students construct personal meaning from their lived experiences of using social-networking platforms to connect with others. Conducting several individual case studies allowed me to dig deeper into the phenomenon and decipher patterns, routines, and themes among participants' social-networking use. According to Johnson and Christensen (2014), instrumental case studies help researchers gather information and understand a phenomenon in a more general sense. By using the instrumental case study approach, I was able to generalize social-networking use among female college students. I conducted several individual case studies with female college students. Using multiple cases also allowed me to collect data about a variety of college students' experiences pertaining to their social-networking use.

Research Design

Organization of study. My role as researcher was to be the main research instrument and filter for all information. I collected information from participants about their social-networking use through multiple case studies and experience-sampling measures. At the university where I teach, I have several roles in which I work with students daily. I am a faculty member in the School of Communication, Media and Theatre Arts; a student organization advisor for the radio station, TV Lab, and a Greek organization on campus; and a doctoral student in the Educational Leadership program. Having completed my coursework, I am familiar with looking at the university through a cultural lens, providing me a theoretical framework with which to observe students using social-networking platforms to connect.

Working in this environment full time has additional benefits for me as a researcher. Being able to observe female college students in their natural environment, rather than in a formal setting, gave me more authentic results in my study.

Unit of analysis. Miles and Huberman (1994) discussed the importance of determining what the contents of a research sample will be. This includes the people researched, the setting, social processes, and events that take place (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 30). For me to focus my research, it was important to narrow my unit of analysis to a feasible sample of students, so I chose to focus on a purposeful sample of six female undergraduate college students at this comprehensive Midwestern university.

Data Gathering/Research Instrumentation

Data gathering. I recruited participants with a participation flyer through the School of Communication, Media and Theatre Arts. I spread the call for participants through faculty communication with current students from the school. I have the most access to this population because of my position within the department. Some of the students from the school may have been more inclined to participate in the study because of their interest media communication as a profession. To minimize any conflicts of interest, I made sure that none of the participants were current students of mine.

Experience sampling (ESM). ESM is a methodology that examines individuals' experiences at the exact time they are happening, allowing participants to reflect in that specific moment about their behavior and feelings in context. This research approach involves tracking thoughts, feelings, and actions throughout the days and weeks, which could result in hundreds of responses (Zirkel, Garcia, & Murphy, 2015, p. 7). With ESM, responses are immediate; participants can answer brief surveys about their environment, behavior, and feelings in response

to a specific event-focused prompt (Zirkel et al., 2015, p. 12). This research method lends itself well to studying the phenomenon of connecting through social networks. With a qualitative research application for mobile devices, such as the VisionsLive platform, participants were prompted to answer a few brief questions after they participated in social networking. This information was then directly sent to me for analysis and synthesis of cases. There are many benefits to ESM as a data-collection method. For example, ESM offers close proximity to participants' experiences, which reduces retrospective bias; affords access to real-time experiences that researchers could not otherwise access; and provides entry into "intraindividual variations" and developments within participants, highlighting emotions and behaviors in highly specific contexts (Zirkel et al., 2015, p. 8). According to Zirkel et al. (2015), intraindividual variations are the process of "examining multiple instances of individuals' experiences over time, [through which] researchers can disentangle which effects are due to individual differences and which can be attributed to be contextual factors" (p. 8). With social networking being a fast changing, highly personal use of communication that is utilized at various times throughout the day, it was important to gather the data in real time so that participants could more easily connect with feelings at the time of social-networking use instead of trying to remember how they felt at a particular moment days before.

VisionsLive Platform

VisionsLive is an online qualitative research platform (see Figure 2 for a screen shot of the VisionsLive homepage). They are the leader in mobile apps and services for online and mobile qualitative research (VisionsLive, 2016). The participants of my study utilized the mobile application for data entry. The data were collected over a 5-day period (from Thursday through Monday). The six female participants answered specific research questions that were

delivered to them through the mobile app after they participated in social-networking use to connect. The participants could enter their information through typing, voice-to-text, video entry, or audio entry and share photos/screenshots of their social-networking connections. After each ESM data collection, VisionsLive sent the information to me for data analysis. As the researcher, I received notifications through the mobile application when a participant submitted an entry, and I was able to send probing questions to the participants if more specific information was needed. Each participant signed up with their email address and created a private password. Participants' names and personal information were not used or shared with other participants.

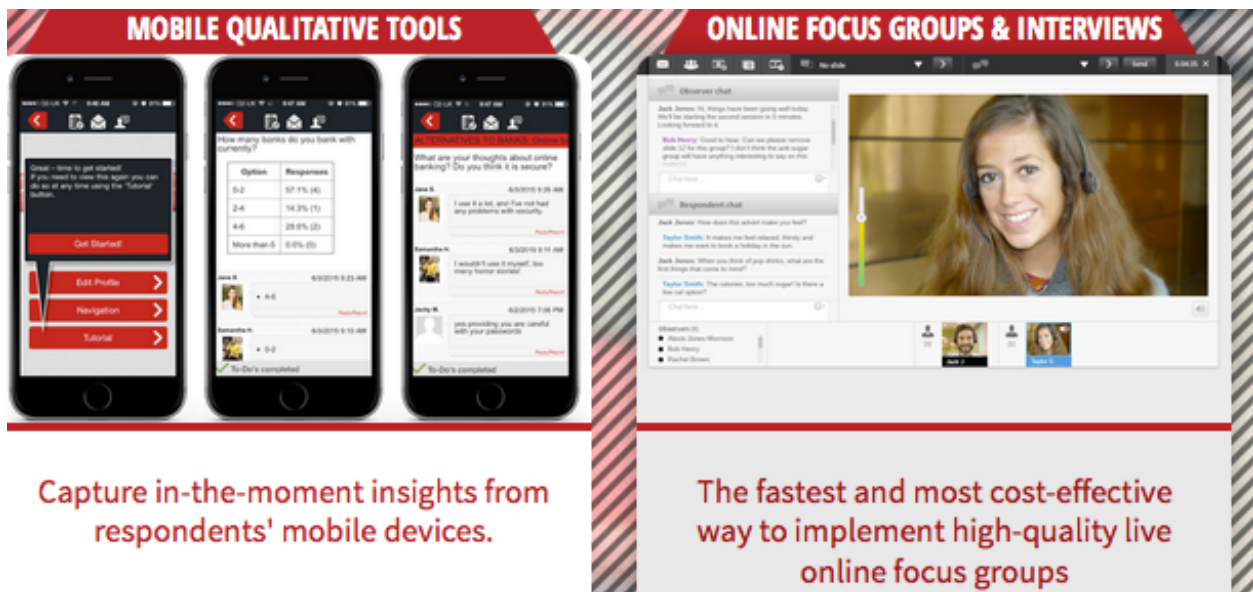


Figure 2. VisionsLive homepage. This screenshot shows the mobile application platform used for qualitative research of focus groups and interviews capturing in-the-moment responses from participants.

Moral, Legal, and Ethical Issues

As an educational leader and researcher, it was imperative that I considered ethical situations that I could have faced throughout this research process. As a researcher, I am dedicated to adding credible knowledge to the field of education, not just to my personal

knowledge base. My passion for media studies in education has been a driving force through this research process, and it was important for me to stay open to all information and ideas that came from this study, especially findings that I had not anticipated. Because I was the primary research instrument for this study, it was important for me to identify my own ethical code of conduct and find specific ethical standards with which I closely aligned so that I could conduct my research with integrity. Ethical considerations are a part of everyday life, and understanding my ethical values was crucial to my success as a researcher through this process.

Ethical standards. When conducting research with integrity, it is important to create an ethical framework to ground the study with ethical standards. I chose two professional organizations' ethical codes of conduct with which to align my study, providing support and concrete guidelines for me as a researcher. The American Sociological Association (ASA) Code of Ethics provides a comprehensive guide for researchers to follow in their academic and professional ventures. ASA (1999) provides a list of general principles that serve as a guide when researchers are faced with ethical questions. The principles are as follows:

- Professional Competence;
- Integrity;
- Professional and Scientific Responsibility;
- Respect for People's Rights, Dignity, and Diversity;
- And Social Responsibility. (p. 6)

The ASA principles were my ethical compass, guiding me to make appropriate decisions when faced with ethical questions. First, as a dedicated faculty member and doctoral student, I have completed many courses and conferences in the discipline of educational leadership and media studies. I have acquired a broad set of skills and knowledge from these fields to assist me with

applying appropriate concepts to my research, affording me professional competence. I acted with integrity at all times because I was raised with good character and live by strong moral principles. I treated my participants and research findings similarly by making sure that I was fair and honest. I respect all people. As a society, we are a diverse group that deserves respect and dignity. While conducting my research, I made sure all people involved were treated appropriately. Lastly, I had a social responsibility to make sure my research was benefiting the good of society, not focusing on my personal gains from this research process. ASA also provides a detailed list of ethical standards that guide researchers to act responsibly and encourages people to act ethically in all facets of scholarship. These standards were my ethical compass throughout this research process.

The second ethical code with which I closely aligned this study with was the Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE) Principles of Ethical Conduct. These principles provided a high standard of ethical integrity and helped me to conduct my research. The ASHE Principles of Ethical Conduct are as follows:

- Integrity
- Credit
- Responsibility
- Honesty and accuracy
- Originality
- Respect
- Fairness
- Advancement
- Responsibility to clients and to the public interest

- And conflict of interest. (ASHE, 2003)

The ASHE Principles of Ethical Conduct specifically guided my research in several ways. Throughout this research process, I sometimes needed to make difficult decisions. It was crucial for me to have a guide when these decisions arose. It was also of great importance for me to be honest, fair, and trustworthy to all individuals with whom I worked during this process. Finally, it was crucial for me to give credit to publications, organizations, individuals, and past research that I used during my research process. I respected participants' information and was accurate with feedback, checking for appropriate understanding of information from participants before drawing conclusions. This research I conducted was for the greater good of society, so I was responsible for being fair to all parties involved in the study. All of my work was original to my study and used in appropriate ways to advance the educational-leadership discipline and higher education as a whole.

Personal bias is another area researchers must consider when reporting findings. It was necessary to be as accurate as possible by including all perspectives to represent all findings. Most importantly, I had to make moral decisions about including information that could be damaging to participants, organizations, or the educational and media fields. It is impossible to be unbiased in all ways, which is why I disclosed my biases when discussing myself as a researcher. Through my ethical decision-making process, I hope to have added research that is authentic, progressive, timely, and important to the field of higher education.

Ethical Research in the Virtual World

The Internet has brought about new ways to study human interaction in different contexts and social situations, but with this new technology comes a new set of ethical conflicts such as privacy, autonomy, and informed consent (Buchanan, 2004). The type of online research in this

study makes understanding virtual research ethics necessary, so I chose a guide for my research process. To gain a clearer understanding of my own ethical values, I analyzed several virtual ethics positions to gain a sense of my own ethics position when it came to online research.

According to Maczewski, Storey, and Hoskins (2004), there is interplay between three spheres of interactions during the Internet-mediated research process:

The online sphere encompasses the virtual space and all forms of actions that are completed within it, for example, a conversation in a chatroom. The onground sphere encompasses the material world and all actions grounded in physical realities, for example, the institution that employs the researcher. The technical sphere is grounded in the onground world and enables the virtual—it connects the onground and online worlds, forming the latter. The technical contexts in which the online research is embedded consist of many parts. For example: hardware, software, infrastructure bandwidth as well as local, institutional, national and global information and communication laws and policies. (p. 64)

With this type of Internet-mediated research, both the researcher and the participants are a part of the online and onground spheres within their own cultural environments and communities, and both will be influenced by all three spheres differently (Maczewski et al., 2004). As a beginning point for ethically broaching this study, it was important for me to reflect upon and answer the questions that Maczewski et al. (2004) proposed when determining. A few of their questions that pertained to my study are as follows:

1. What kinds of technologies are used?

Students use social networks through various technologies. Most prominently, their mobile devices with specific apps become the technological extensions of their social networking.

Social networks are also accessed from tablets, laptops, and PCs. The technology aspect was important when choosing specific participants.

2. How will the interplay of online, onground, and technical spheres impact the research project?

Social networking does not exist in a bubble. Social networking exists within an online sphere, in a virtual space. This sphere includes personal social-networking accounts where participants share comments, pictures, discussions, videos, and more. Therefore, it was important for me to remember that this research study does not just exist online. The onground sphere includes the relationships the participants have with friends, family, coworkers, and significant others who have influenced their actions on their social-networking accounts. This included the Eastern Michigan University campus, participants' hometowns, and the surrounding areas of Michigan. The technical sphere connects the online and onground spheres. Participants' onground experiences spark the need for continuing online connections, which brings about the need for technology. For my study, participants needed access to technology (mobile phones, tablets, computers), wireless connections, and the ability to download the VisionsLive software for data collection. As the researcher, I had to ensure all guidelines were followed ethically and the virtual space of participants was protected.

3. What are the changes in human and social interactions that occur through the specific technologies used?

The ways people communicate are altered depending on the channel of communication, such as computer-mediated communication versus face-to-face communication. When collecting data from participants, I used the VisionsLive platform application. Using the ESM for data collection gave me a more authentic response from participants directly after the social-

networking usage took place. Participants were able to answer questions in private without the researcher physically in front of them, possibly influencing their feedback.

4. Are my assumptions about research processes applicable within the technologically mediated research contexts?

VisionsLive was a valid tool for studying the phenomenon of connecting through social-networking use. I was able to receive data from the participants in a timely manner and provide follow-up questions or feedback through a secure software program that had appropriate website security tools in place such as security certificates, network security (logins, passwords), and a web application firewall.

These four questions helped me consider possible ethical issues such as consent, privacy, data use and ownership, and security and trust as the research process evolved (as cited in Buchanan, 2004, p. 74).

Validity

The quality of research conclusions is important for the success of research projects. Without validity, my research would not be sound and therefore would not have been a quality piece of work. According to Brink (1993), “A valid study should demonstrate what actually exists and a valid instrument or measure should actually measure what it is supposed to measure.” I strove to make my research instrumentations and conclusions strong and a true measure of what I intended to measure.

Internal validity/credibility/authenticity. It was important for my writing to be as clear as possible; providing large amounts of detailed information helps bring the data to life. I made sure that rival research about the topic was known to my audience and that my findings were related to theory and well-linked with appropriate measures to my conceptual framework. I took

my role as research instrument seriously and with integrity. I made a conscious effort to interpret the meaning of the data accurately and in a trustworthy way. I provided participants with feedback, allowing them the opportunity to confirm or reevaluate data before I drew conclusions. I recognized that reality is socially constructed and the data were filtered through my perspective, so it was important for me to have my bias at the forefront of my mind and to have articulated those biases, as I made explicit in my above biography.

External validity/transferability/fittingness. In my research, I prioritized clarity about all participants, settings, and processes of data collection and comparisons with other samples of research. Therefore, I gave background information about all theories used to support my research. It was also important to explain all research-conclusion processes. It would benefit me if my audience felt my research was plausible and if they could relate to my research through their own experiences.

Objectivity/confirmability. I also prioritized transparency in my research, allowing readers to know my biases and data collection, data analysis, and conclusion processes. I explained my methodology up front, which was detailed enough for an outsider to the field to understand completely what I did. I mentioned other hypotheses and conclusions made by other researchers so that readers were familiar with opposing or related viewpoints. I will continue to keep my data so that they can be reexamined if necessary in the future.

Reliability

According to Brink (1993), reliability is achieved when “a researcher using the same or comparable methods obtain[s] the same or comparable results every time he uses the methods on the same or comparable subjects.” To conduct a quality study, I had to make sure that my research was reliable and consistent.

Reliability/dependability/auditability. One way that I made my research reliable and dependable was by explaining my role as the researcher and my own personal bias. This has been made clear through my transparent, detailed personal biography. My research questions, the data-collection process, and my conceptual framework aligned with my objectives. I collected data in the appropriate setting, keeping in mind my choice of respondents and length of time of the study. While the results of the study were specific to the women who agreed to participate, the study's conceptual framework was analytically generalizable.

Data Analysis—Generating Meaning and Confirming Findings

According to Loftland and Loftland (1995), "In qualitative field studies, analysis is conceived as an emergent product of a process of gradual induction. Guided by the data being gathered and the topics, questions, and evaluative criteria that provide focus, analysis is the field-worker's derivative ordering of the data" (p. 181). Data analysis is an ongoing process starting from the initial conception of research ideas to the final conclusions of the study. To clearly understand the areas that needed to be researched, I became familiar with current research on the topic. Once my own data collection was complete, I familiarized myself with it. Next, I organized the data in a meaningful way so that I could determine how to make specific conclusions about the study. Lastly, I categorized the data into specific groupings and applied my conceptual framework as a lens to analyze the data.

The systematic process of semiotic phenomenology is a three-step process of description, reduction, and interpretation (Lanigan, 1988). This process provided an appropriate instrument for data analysis in this study. The first step of description involved describing what was seen and heard in the interviews, which were observations of the participants' lived experiences; looking at language use and symbols; and listing themes in written form. The second step,

reduction, helped to deduce themes that had become apparent from the description step. Thematizing shed light on common threads or “patterns of experience” that participants expressed through the interviews (Lanigan, 1988, p. 147). Lastly, in the step of interpretation, I delved deeper into the themes I discovered during the reduction step. The essence of the lived experience emerged from those themes, and the significance of the phenomenon became clear. This three-step process provided a richer understanding of the phenomenon, adding depth and breadth to the research study. The following categories helped to generate meaning and confirm findings that were appropriate for my research topic.

Checking the meaning of outliers. When reviewing and analyzing data, I attended to all data, even if they did not fit in with the majority of my findings. This helped me to avoid bias in my explanations of the research. For example, some participants did not experience the phenomenon of connection through social-networking use the same way as others, and their responses did not fit into a theme or pattern. I attempted to understand this outlying information as well.

Getting feedback from participants. I checked in with participants throughout the entire study to make sure that my findings were accurate. After collection of data, ideas and concepts began to take shape. Again, I tried not to introduce my personal biases about connecting through social networking to the participants during this process because they would have felt I was leading them to change their answers and feelings about the subject. Getting feedback from participants helped in confirming ideas and formulating additional questions for continued research. As Miles and Huberman (1994) discussed, I must make sure participants understand and can relate to the feedback, and I should consider the format of the feedback, allowing for change and participants’ additions and subtractions.

Noting patterns and themes. Through this data analysis, patterns appeared. Themes became evident, and patterns stood out concerning the content and processes of when and how female students were connecting using social-networking sites. When transcribing video recordings, audio recordings, and interviews, I looked for and counted specific word usage related to specific themes or ideas. If I was unsure about an answer, I asked the participant probing questions to gain a richer understanding of her experiences.

Seeing plausibility. Once patterns and themes emerged from the data, I organized the data to make sense of those patterns and themes. It is easy to find themes and patterns when looking for specific words and phrases. To avoid this bias, I looked at the information as a whole and determined if the themes and patterns seemed plausible. If those patterns and themes did seem plausible, I accepted the findings and moved on to strategies such as analyzing disconfirming evidence, allowing participants to review findings, and sharing findings with my dissertation committee.

Clustering. After collecting data, I clustered the data to make sense of the data's different categories. This tactic helped me condense the information and make meaning making of the information. I specifically looked for categories of connecting through social-networking use such as roles, rules, relationships, routines, and rituals, which are specific action patterns.

Counting. There were patterns or themes in my research on connecting through social networking that I counted to help make sense of the data. It is one thing to note patterns and themes, but taking the analysis a step further to look at the depth and frequency those patterns occurred in the data was an important step in the research process. Counting offered more insight into the importance of those patterns and themes.

Making contrasts/comparisons. It was important for me to determine the similarities and differences among the data from interviews that I conducted with students through the qualitative-research software application VisionsLive, so that I formed accurate conclusions.

Chapter 4: Findings

Introduction

From the founding of the first institutions of higher education, college students and universities that serve these students have been among the first to adopt and engage in the newest forms of communication. Beginning with the earliest pamphlets and scrawled notes on chalkboards, students have sought ways to engage and connect with other students, family, friends, and university personnel. While difficult, from a current perspective, to ascribe to these communication relics, the concept of “social networking” has offered students opportunities to engage and connect. Today, the social-media and social-networking landscape is vast, allowing college students to explore, communicate, research, publish, play games, and create virtual worlds. According to a running list on Wikipedia, there are over 200 major active social-networking sites, excluding dating sites, and this number continues to grow daily (“List of Social Networking Websites,” n.d.). Social networking has produced a powerful way for college students to communicate with one another. Consequently, virtual social networking has become ubiquitous for today’s college student.

Communication theory suggests that individuals use media to connect in order to satisfy needs and reach personal or social goals (Dobos, 1992). In its earliest forms, the use of media and communication technology suggests an interrelationship in which a limited number of media communication sources could be easily selected based on the optimization of individuals’ needs. Over time and with advances in technology, an array of avenues to communicate and connect has exploded. While current studies of this phenomenon have focused on quantitative examinations of the number and volume of social networking, few have examined how individuals, specifically college students, experience the phenomenon of connecting within this new

environment. In addition, college-age students are the first adopters of technology, but institutions have historically fallen behind with understanding how students are using new technology to connect and gratify their needs. Therefore, this study examined how students are doing just that.

The purpose of this research was to understand how female college students use social networks, specifically how they use the medium to connect with others. With the continuously changing social-networking platforms, more research was needed to shed light on the phenomenon of connecting through social-networking use among female college students. Researching diverse perspectives provided a well-rounded view of the current landscape of the contemporary female college student. In the United States, 75% of adult males and 83% of adult females use social networks (Pew Research Center, 2016). Because women dominate social-networking use, female college students' perspectives represent a unique subgroup of this population. Not only are females using social networking more than men, but they are also attending college more than men. According to the United States Census Bureau's American Community Survey of 2014, the percentage of men obtaining a bachelor's degree was 29.9% and women obtaining a bachelor's degree was 30.2%, marking the first time in history that women's college attainment was higher than men's.

The academic literature about social-networking use by college students is quickly increasing. The majority of the research uses quantitative measures, often calculating the amount of time people spend using social-networking platforms, counting the number of people using social networks, and examining social-network platforms used most often. For example, studies by Valenzuela, Park, and Kee (2009) and Pempek, Yermolayeva, and Calvert (2009) use surveys to measure how often college students are using Facebook and to determine Facebook's

effects on college students and their overall experiences with the social network. This is important information about social networking, but it just scratches the surface of truly understanding the phenomenon of connection through social networking.

My research was guided by the constructivism paradigm, which studies the world of human experience, to discover participants' views of using social networks to connect with others and to understand their perspectives. To study the phenomenon of using social networks to connect among female college students, I took a qualitative research approach, specifically using phenomenology as the studies analytical tool. Consequently, the study sought to understand and construct the essence of the connecting experience using social networks. I implemented a multiple-case-study method. The unit of analysis for this multiple-case study was six female college students from a comprehensive Midwestern university. I collected data using the ESM through the VisionsLive mobile software platform over a 5-day period. Participants logged daily social-networking journals, answering specific questions relating to their social networking use. The data-analysis techniques used were noting patterns and themes, clustering the data into different categories, seeing plausibility of those themes, and making contrasts and comparisons of the data through inductive reasoning (Miles & Huberman, 1994). After the 5-day data-collection period, I met with each participant privately for a debriefing of the study and a 30-minute post interview.

Data analysis is an ongoing process from the initial conception of research ideas to the final conclusions of the study. After completing data collection, I became familiar with the data. Next, I organized the data in a meaningful way so I could determine how to make specific conclusions about the study. Lastly, I put the data into specific groupings, which were applied to the conceptual framework as a lens to analyze the data.

Lanigan (1988) described semiotic phenomenology as a systematic three-step process of description, reduction, and interpretation. This process provided an appropriate instrument for data analysis. The first step of description involved describing what I saw and heard in the interviews by observing the lived experiences of the participants, looking at language use and symbols, and listing themes in written form. The second step of reduction helped me deduce themes that became apparent in the description step. Thematizing shed light on common threads or “patterns of experience” that participants expressed through the interviews (Lanigan, 1988, p. 147). Lastly, the interpretation step delved deeper into the themes discovered during the reduction step. The essence of the lived experiences emerged from those themes, and the significance of the phenomenon became clear. This three-step process produced a richer understanding of the phenomenon, adding depth and breadth to the research study. Using a conceptual framework related to sociological and media theory provided a lens to view social-networking use among female college students. To enhance understanding of the data, I created a new conceptual framework model as shown in Figure 1 on p. 28 to provide insight into female college students’ use of social-networking platforms to connect with others.

To deliver a thorough examination of the data, I will organize the sections of Chapter 4 into background information about the participants, specific data collected over the 5-day period pertaining to the study, the participants’ personal social-networking narratives that shed light on their social-networking use to connect with others, and the themes that emerged from the data.

These themes were:

- Connection happens on multiple levels and is used to maintain existing relationships;
- Construction of shared meaning through virtual symbols;

- Shapes self-value/self-worth;
- Evokes feelings, both good and bad;
- And wanting to be heard and understood.

Participants’ Backgrounds and Synthesized Data Collected

To gain a better understanding of who the participants were, I performed a survey of demographic information before beginning the data-collection process. Table 3 illustrates the characteristics of each participant.

Table 3

Female College Student Background Information

<u>Participant</u>	<u>Age</u>	<u>Race</u>	<u>Grade Level</u>	<u># of Social Platforms</u>
FCS 1	21	White	Senior	2
FCS 2	21	White	Senior	5
FCS 3	22	White	Senior	4
FCS 4	20	Black	Sophomore	1
FCS 5	22	White	Junior	4
FCS 6	21	White	Junior	6

This table depicts the composition of the sample of female college students. All participants lived close to the university. Five participants were upper classmen, and one participant was in her second year of college. Five participants were White, and one participant was Black. The number of social-networking platforms used by the participants ranged from one to six.

Two of the participants (FCS 2 and FCS 5) were from the metropolitan city (City #1) where the university is located. According to the United States 2010 Census, City #1 has a population of 19,435. The city’s racial makeup is 61.5% White, 29.2% Black, 0.6% Native American, and 3.4% Asian. The median household income for City #1 is approximately \$31,061 with a 33.4% poverty rate. The industry of City #1 is comprised of educational services, accommodation, food services, and retail trade.

Two of the participants (FCS 1 and FCS 6) were from a metropolitan city (City #2) located approximately 20 minutes from City #1. City #2 has a population of 90,173, according to the 2010 United States Census Bureau. The city's racial makeup is 82.3% White, 4.5% Black, 8.7% Asian, and 2.3% Hispanic. The median household income of City #2 is approximately \$73,884. The prominent industry for City #2 is transportation equipment; professional, scientific, and technical services; and construction.

FCS 3 was from a metropolitan city (City #3) approximately 27 miles from City #1. City #3 has a population of approximately 30,047, according to the 2010 United States Census Bureau. City #3 has a median household income of \$50,280. The poverty rate is 11.1%. The racial makeup of City #3 is 88.7% White, 5.5% Black, 0.5% Native American, 1.6% Asian, and 6.5% Hispanic. The prominent industry for City #3 is sales and office, management, business, science and arts, and production and transportation.

FCS 4 was from a metropolitan city (City #4) located 165 miles from the university. City #4 has a population of 385,809, according to the 2010 United States Census Bureau. The median household income of City #4 is \$28,831 with a 42.6% poverty rate. The city's racial makeup is 50.1% Black, 34.5% White, 10.5% Hispanic, and 2.0% Asian. The major industry in City #4 is comprised of manufacturing, accommodation and food services, retail trade, and construction. It is important to understand the makeup of the participants and where they come from to gain a clearer understanding of their experiences with social networking to connect with others.

Over the 5-day data collection period, I collected 144 ESM journals from the participants. Table 4 represents the social networking platforms used and the number of journal posts about each platform.

Table 4

Social-Networking Platforms Used with Corresponding Numbers of Posts

<u>Social-Networking Platform</u>	<u># of Posts About Platform</u>
Facebook/Messenger	79
Snapchat	30
Twitter	15
Instagram	14
Tumblr	4
Pinterest	2

Each journal entry asked the same four questions:

1. What social network did you use?
2. What information did you post or share during this social-networking interaction, and was it public or private?
3. How did the social-networking experience make you feel about yourself and why?
4. Did you feel more connected or more isolated after the social-networking experience and why?

Participants' Social-Networking Narratives

To gain a clearer understanding of each participant's use of social-networking platforms to connect with others, the social-networking narratives of each participant were told to shed light on how these young women are using social networking to connect with others.

FCS-1. FCS-1 is a 21-year-old White senior. She uses Facebook and Snapchat as her social-networking platforms of choice. She said she mainly uses social networking to enjoy entertainment, look for local events, read fun articles, and message her friends. Over the 5-day data-collection period, FCS-1 discussed her social networking use 24 times. Her activity was comprised of sharing pictures with quotes that she related to, liking pictures with quotes that other people shared on their timelines, researching businesses on Facebook, posting comments

on organizational pages, sending GIFs and pictures privately through Facebook Messenger to her boyfriend, liking her friends' posts on Facebook, poking her boyfriend, posting photos she had taken, following pages/events she was interested in, and Snapchatting pictures to her friends. FCS-1 explained her personal thoughts about social networking. The following paragraphs detail FCS-1's personal experience of connecting through her social networks and how she felt about the experiences.

FCS-1 said she enjoys using social networks to connect with her friends. Sharing comments or pictures on her timeline makes her feel connected with her friends. When asked how sharing comments and pictures makes her feel connected, FCS-1 stated:

In a sense every time I share a comment or a picture it gives my friends more insight into my personality and the things that I enjoy, while also giving them a chance to comment and like what I share. This interaction makes me feel more connected as I use this as a form of communication with my friends.

FCS-1 enjoys sending pictures and messages to her boyfriend occasionally, which makes her feel more connected to him throughout the day. When I asked her why, FCS-1 explained, "Because it allows us to communicate our thoughts and feelings to each other multiple times throughout the day."

FCS-1 said she enjoys keeping up with old friends she does not see regularly. When she shares on social media, she enjoys receiving comments because it feels like support from her friends. When I asked her why she felt this way, FCS-1 answered, "I enjoy receiving comments on things that I share because it creates a medium of communication with my friends, which makes me feel connected to them."

More “likes” or comments received on pictures/posts led to FCS-1 feeling more connected with her friends, as well as happier with her post and her sense of self. FCS-1 stated:

I used Facebook to post these photos. These photos could only be seen by my friends on Facebook. This experience made me feel good about myself, because I was excited to share my experience. . . . I felt more connected because of this experience, because people know more about what is happening in my life right now.

For FCS-1, the experience of sharing or liking equals a sense of connection with her network of friends. Both having people like her post/photo and liking other friends’ posts/pictures/pages create feelings of positive self-affirmation and positive self-identity. This sense of belonging brings her back to the social-networking platform to see if she has received any notifications about her picture/post. FCS 1 indicated:

I do feel more valued by my friends with the more likes I get on a specific post. When I don’t get very many likes I feel like my post isn’t good enough or too controversial, which makes me wonder if I should have made the post at all. Sometimes I find myself checking to see how many likes I have on a post.

I asked FCS-1 how the act of liking and receiving likes boosted her self-esteem. She stated:

Because a like means that you are supporting someone’s post/photo. Liking someone’s post/photo essentially means that you are supporting their beliefs since their post is a form of expressing their thoughts. Therefore, liking someone’s post/photo means that you support their beliefs, which would make anyone feel positive since you are informing them that you are supporting them.

When FCS-1 does not receive the self-affirmation she desires, she starts to question the specific picture/post she has shared publicly with her network of friends. I asked her why she

questions herself and how the event makes her feel, and she stated, “Because I feel as if my post offends people and is not good enough since my friends do not like the photo/post. This makes me feel as if my friends do not support my beliefs.”

FCS-1 used Facebook later in the day and liked a new page, which in turn had a positive effect on her feelings and sense of connection. She stated:

I liked the student center on Facebook. I felt good about this experience, because I will now be more informed about events happening in the student center. I feel more connected from this experience, because I will now be more connected to the student center and events happening at the student center. In general I will be more connected to the community.

I asked FCS-1 if she would be more likely to participate with events at the student center because of this connection on Facebook, and she said, “I will be more likely to participate in events held at the student center because of this connection on Facebook.” In addition to having her network of friends like her personal posts, liking group pages also makes her feel connected to specific communities, events, and organizations, creating a sense of happiness and connection. She went on to say, “It makes me feel positive and more likely to participate in events and connect with people who have similar interests as me on Facebook and outside of Facebook.”

FCS-1 also used Facebook to connect with an organization she is a part of on campus. This communication exchange made her feel more connected to the community. She stated:

I used Facebook to make this post on _____ page. The post can only be viewed by people who join this Facebook page. This experience made me feel hopeful that people would come to our meeting. I feel more connected after this experience because about 200 people were able to view this post and know who I am on Facebook now.

This connection helped FCS-1 feel connected to the community that she participates with, creating a sense of belonging for her on campus. Being able to reach out to over 200 people was important for her to feel she had a purpose within this organization. I asked FCS-1 if quantity mattered in her connections, and she stated:

The amount of people who can see a post on Facebook matters. More people viewing a post on Facebook means that more people will get to know your thoughts and beliefs through every post that you make. This is important to keep in mind while posting to ensure that every post that you make is suitable for the intended audience. If the post is not you might end up embarrassing yourself.

Lastly, FCS-1 liked a photo posted by the College of Education (COE). This was a photo of a COE pendent with a set of graduation tickets for the upcoming commencement ceremony. FCS-1 indicated:

I liked this photo on Facebook. This made me feel excited because it reminds me that I am graduating soon. I feel more connected because this post reminds me of the hundreds of other students that will also be graduating.

The COE's post made FCS-1 feel more united with the community she belongs to, creating a sense of connection with other students experiencing the accomplishment of graduation. Not only did her social-networking interactions with organizations and the community create a sense of connection, but showing interest in events also created a sense of community for her.

According to FCS-1,

I showed that I am interested in this event on Facebook. This made me feel good, because I am excited to possibly attend this event! This also made me feel good because sometimes people see that I am interested in an event on Facebook and want to come to

the event with me. I feel more connected now because my friends on Facebook might see that I am interested in this event and want to go with me.

This public display of information by FCS-1 helped her to connect with her friends in a positive way. Not only was the connection made through social networking, but the interaction could possibly create an in-person friendship connection later. I asked FCS-1 if she was hoping to create an action among other Facebook friends. She responded:

I do not intend or hope to create an action among my Facebook friends, however, when friends show interest in the events that I am attending it makes me happy because I enjoy attending events with my friends and spending more time with them.

Most of FCS-1's social-networking experiences had a positive influence on emotion and connection.

Sometimes, however, the social-networking experience has an adverse effect on feelings of connectedness. One day, FCS-1's friend posted a picture of her children on Facebook. FCS-1 liked the picture and commented, "I miss you guys." FCS-1 truly enjoyed seeing the picture, but it made her feel sad and a bit isolated because the family live across the country and she has not seen them in a long time. Staying connected with friends through social networking is an enjoyable experience, but, when she is unable to spend face-to-face time with friends, the separation brings FCS-1 feelings of detachment.

While some of FCS-1's friends are posting from far away, other friends are posting about events close to home. In one of her journals, FCS-1 discussed that she liked a post on Facebook that a member of her network had posted. The post was about an award ceremony that her friend was attending, and FCS-1 is a member of the organization that hosted the event. FCS-1 stated:

I liked this post on Facebook. This experience made me feel jealous, because it looks like everyone is having a lot of fun without me. I feel more isolated from this experience, because I feel left out since I did not attend this event.

The post contained pictures from the event with people dressed up, smiling, and enjoying each other's company. This sense of isolation stemmed from seeing friends having a nice time at an event and not being there to share in the experience, which reminded FCS-1 of the separation that is linked to personal contact.

FCS-1 made a plethora of connections throughout the 5-day data-collection period with her network of friends through her social-networking platforms. Most of these experiences created a sense of connection and positive feelings that FCS-1 found to be beneficial in her life.

FCS-2. FCS-2 is a 21-year-old White senior. She uses Facebook, Snapchat, Twitter, Instagram, and Pinterest as her social-networking platforms. In a conversation with FCS-2, she said she uses these social networks for entertainment, communication, and news. She enjoys using the different platforms to communicate with family and friends, staying in touch with people who live across the country from her or in other countries. When communicating through social networks, FCS-2 uses apps such as Messenger to share private information, but she shares information that is not personal with her entire network of friends. Throughout the 5-day data-collection period, FCS-2 logged eight social-networking journals, providing information about her social-networking use to connect with others.

FCS-2 enjoys connecting to people privately through Facebook Messenger. In her journals, she talked about messaging friends and family to share information and connect. She gains a sense of contentment from the experience, which brings her happiness in knowing that she can communicate with family and friends no matter where she is. FCS-2 stated:

This morning I used Facebook Messenger to message a friend. I didn't have her phone number. The message was private and I was telling her about a new vegan product because she was looking for it. After this message I felt more connected to her in a sense that I could talk with her whenever no matter what either of us were doing because if she were busy at the time she could reply later. This social networking experience made me feel helpful because I was able to let her know of a new product.

This social networking experience was rewarding for FCS-2 because she felt personal value from sharing information with her friend. Although the connection was small, it brought joy to FCS-2, allowing her to feel helpful to a friend.

FCS-2 also used Facebook Messenger to connect with a family member living outside of the country. FCS-2 discussed:

My social media was Facebook Messenger. I was able to talk to my cousin who lives in _____ without having to pay extra for international bills on my phone. I felt happy and excited to talk to her because we don't talk much. I felt very connected with her and was happy to have something as simple as Facebook Messenger.

Messenger provided an alternative outlet of communication for FCS-2 to connect with family, which may not have taken place otherwise due to the cost of conventional phone communication avenues.

Another avenue of connection for FCS-2 is Snapchat. One of her journals recounted using the platform to communicate privately with a couple of friends from her network:

I used Snapchat to message a couple of friends privately. All the messages just included images of what I saw around me. The messages were all private. It made me feel

entertained to be able to message my friends whenever and it did make me feel more connected.

Sharing life occurrences as they happen through social-networking platforms was a positive experience for FCS-2. It is similar to someone being there in person, sharing in that moment with the participant. FCS-2 also used Snapchat to share with her network of friends what she was doing during a day with her boyfriend. FCS-2 discussed:

I used Snapchat this morning around 11am. My boyfriend and I went to breakfast and I took a picture with him and posted it publicly saying “Happy Sunday”. It made me feel happy. I’m not sure why but it made me happy to be about to express how happy I was in the moment, even though I was unsure of who would see it. I didn’t feel connected this specific time because I wasn’t directly talking to one person.

This experience was a public display of affection for her boyfriend and a sense of wanting to share her happiness with her network of friends, even though she was unsure who would notice her post.

FCS-2 also took to Twitter for an even more public post. FCS-2’s Twitter account is public to anyone who would like to view it, as opposed to her other social-networking platforms, which are accessible only to her network of friends. FCS-2 said:

Last night, well 4:30AM I posted to Twitter. I tweeted because I stayed up all night watching this show on Netflix that everyone is talking about called *13 Reasons Why*. I thought it would be funny to post how I liked it so much that I literally stayed up all night binge watching. At that moment I didn’t know if I felt connected. Maybe it was because it was so late or because no one replied, that I didn’t. In a way I did feel connected

because even though no one replied I had this common interest with everyone because I've seen so many other posts about them.

This experience for FCS-2 was different than using Messenger to connect with friends and family. The act of sharing information on Twitter was less personal for FCS-2, which resulted in a less connected feeling; still, sharing information about a trending television show gratified a need to experience the show and tell others about that experience.

Lastly, FCS-2 took to Snapchat to share with her network of friends about a lab practicum she was studying for. She was nervous about it and shared a picture of her brother helping her study for this upcoming test. FCS-2 promoted the importance of receiving support from her friends, who said she was going to do a great job, which was encouraging for her and made her feel connected with her network of friends.

FCS-2's social-networking experiences were positive, and her connections created a sense of belonging and closeness among her and her friends. Overall, she views social networking as a necessary channel to communicate with others, staying connected throughout the day with her family and friends.

FCS-3. FCS-3 is a White 22-year-old senior. She uses Instagram, Snapchat, Facebook, and Twitter as her social-networking platforms of choice. FCS-3 shared 49 social-networking journals over the 5-day data-collection period. She enjoys sharing photos, communicating with her family and friends, connecting with organizations she participates in, and sharing information with her network of friends. FCS-3 believes that social networking connects her to others, and she enjoys the positive feedback she receives from her friends. She feels happy when people comment or like posts that she shares. Many of her journals discussed the importance of people

appreciating what she posts. This social-networking behavior makes her feel connected with her friends after sharing, creating positive feelings of happiness.

In a journal, FCS-3 reported that she changed her public profile picture, which made her feel good because she thought she looked very nice in the picture. This social-networking act made her feel connected because her network of friends liked the photo and made comments on her photo. FCS-3 checks her social-networking platforms regularly to see what her friends are doing. This activity creates a feeling of connection, as expressed in her journal posts:

Snapchat, twitter, instagram, facebook. I snapped a picture of what my friend got me from [redacted], watched a boy's story I like a lot on Snapchat, tweeted the picture, checked Instagram feed and checked Facebook feed. It made me feel good to check up on everyone else and it made me want to share what is going on with me. [*Sic*] more connected since they share what they are doing so I did as well.

I asked FCS-3 to explain further why she felt connected from this social-networking interaction. She stated, "I felt that this made me excited to share with all my friends. This created a sense of security in story-telling with them that truly made me feel admired."

I asked another probing question to FCS-3: "Do you want the boy you like to see you looked at his story on Snapchat?" FCS-3 responded, "No I tried to resist. I check mine to see if he looks all the time. Ugh it sounds bad saying it."

FCS-3 shares pictures frequently in the hopes of receiving likes, comments, or views. This makes her feel better about herself, which plays a role in her self-concept. This theme presented itself throughout FCS-3's journals. In another post, FCS-3 wrote, "[*Sic*] Snapchat. [*Sic*] pictures of me all day, public to my friends. Made me feel open since I was sharing what I have been doing all day. Connected as you can see people looking at your snaps." Snapchat's

visual confirmation reinforced FCS-3's behavior of checking to see who was looking at, commenting on, or liking her posts, satisfying her need of a positive self-concept. Another journal reflected the same behavior toward connection: "[*Sic*] Snapchat. To only people that are my friends on it. [*Sic*] good because I dressed all cute. [*Sic*] connected because I wanted a certain person to look and they did." Although most of the feedback FCS-3 receives from her friends is positive, not receiving likes or comments has an adverse effect on her self-concept.

FCS-3 stated:

[*Sic*] Facebook. [*Sic*] my information about Miss Greek. [*Sic*] hopeful because I wanted people to say they would come out and support. [*Sic*] isolated because everyone is currently out for opening day and I hope that is why they have not responded otherwise I'm not cool.

I asked FCS-3 why this experience made her feel isolated, and she stated, "It makes me feel left out, since I know what everyone was doing and why they were not responding. It made me feel left out and unappreciated at that given time." For FCS-3, sharing seems to be for the purpose of validation. When she receives likes and comments, she feels a sense of connection. When she does not receive likes and comments, a feeling of isolation sets in.

Even though the majority of FCS-3's posts were public to her network of friends, she sometimes chose to communicate privately with friends through the Facebook Messenger platform. FCS-3 discussed in a journal:

[*Sic*] Facebook. [*Sic*] a rant on two exes with girlfriends messaging me in the same week and how jacked up that it is. Only my friends could see. [*Sic*] better after the fact. That's why both those relationships ended in the first place. [*Sic*] connected to share feelings with people going through maybe the same thing almost reassurance.

These connection experiences were an outlet for her to share with her friends how she felt even when her friends were unable to communicate face-to-face.

FCS-3 used her social-networking platforms to communicate with her sorority and share information about their organization with others. This information was sometimes shared publicly; other times, information was communicated among the sisters of the organization. FCS-3 shared information about upcoming events such as Relay for Life and Miss Greek. In a journal, FCS-3 shared her social-networking post about Relay for Life: “[*Sic*] Facebook. [*Sic*] a public post [*sic*] Relay for Life. [*Sic*] good being a part of something greater than myself. [*Sic*] connected with society.” In her next journal about Relay for Life, FCS-3 stated, “[*Sic*] Facebook. [*Sic*] shared a link about Relay for Life. [*Sic*] good because it was saying my sorority helped fund the most money. [*Sic*] more connected with my sisters and our hard work.” These connections with her organization are a meaningful part of who FCS-3 is, and her journals reflect the importance of connection with her sorority sisters through social networking.

FCS-3 had positive social-networking experiences. She enjoyed communicating with friends and family by sharing pictures of her life on those platforms to stay connected. FCS-3 looked for self-identity validation through those connections from the likes and comments she received on her posts. Social networking connected FCS-3 with organizations she is a part of and allowed her to communicate privately with others in the organization.

FCS-4. FCS-4 is a Black 20-year-old sophomore. She only uses Facebook as her social-networking platform. Her primary use of Facebook is to communicate with family and friends. She said that she tries not to share too much private information with her network publicly. She uses Facebook Messenger when she wants to communicate with people privately. She dislikes the negativity she experiences on Facebook. Sometimes, FCS-4 feels like it is pointless to

maintain connections with some people with whom she is not very close. FCS-4 posted 22 social-networking journals over the 5-day data-collection period. Several themes emerged from FCS-4's social-networking journals.

When people from FCS-4's network shared her original post/picture, she felt positive feelings of connection. In a journal, FCS-4 discussed her experience with having her post shared:

I used Facebook as my social media application. I posted a picture of my sister and I. I titled it as a throwback meaning that it's an older picture I have saved in my phone. It was a public post. I felt very loved after posting the photo. Some of my family members who I haven't spoken to in awhile shared the post and people were happy to see the photo of us together. For this post I felt more connected. I usually don't with social media, but I appreciated people reaching out to me. It was great to see that people were glad to hear from me.

Having someone who cared for her enough to want to share her pictures with their network created positive feelings of affirmation and happiness.

FCS-4 feels more connected as she receives more likes and comments on her posts. She stated:

I posted a question. It was regarding which restaurant my friends from back home prefer. I felt connected because I got about 13 comments from people and some people even laughed at me. And I also felt very connected because it was an "insider" for the people I know back home because they are famous restaurants in _____ city.

Sharing something on Facebook that receives likes and comments seems to be directly correlated with a sense of connection for FCS-4. FCS-4's described this theme in her next journal post:

The post I made was a picture of my friend and I. It was from us hanging out from the same night as laser tag. I felt connected because a friend of mine commented and said that she loved the picture and she didn't know me and the person were friends. I thought it was really interesting how pictures connect people because others can find out who's friends with who.

This communication through sharing pictures was a positive experience for FCS-4. She receives validation from the comments and likes that she obtains. Sharing information through her social network makes her feel connected to her friends, which results in positive feelings of affirmation.

FCS-5. FCS-5 is a White 22-year-old junior. Tumblr, Facebook, Twitter, and Snapchat are her social-networking platforms of choice. FCS-5 said she likes to use social networking to check in with family and friends and look up people she meets. She said that likes and comments on her posts make her feel connected to her network of friends. FCS-5 posted 27 social-networking journals over the 5-day data-collection period. Several themes emerged from her journals that provided insight into how she connects to others through her social-networking platforms.

FCS-5 deals with medical issues that she often discusses through social networking. Some of her posts share information with others about her illness; other times, she is searching for information through her posts. She feels as if social networking is an outlet for her to talk about the illness when she does not want to bother her family and friends with her feelings about it. In her first journal, FCS-5 stated:

I used Tumblr and it was public. I wrote a post about my side affects of my new anxiety medication and I browsed through some posts. It made me feel a bit better just getting out my feelings because I don't like to bother my friends with it during the day when they

are busy. I felt more isolated because not a lot of people in my day to day life know about my blog, but I use it when I talk about things I don't advertise to a lot of people.

For FCS-5, it seems that sharing information about herself that is not directed to her network of friends created a feeling of isolation because there was a lack of connection with those whom she shared the information. She worried about burdening those she cares about with her problems. I asked her to further describe the emotions she experienced from this Tumblr post. FCS-5 stated:

I experienced sadness but also relief during this post. Sadness because I feel like I couldn't talk about what makes me an individual without feeling guilty about it and feeling like a burden to people who would probably love to support me. Relief because I did have somewhere to share my feelings when I felt like no one would have wanted to listen.

In a later post, FCS-5 shared information about her illness with her network of friends:

I used Facebook publicly [to] share an article about how people should stop diagnosing themselves with mental diseases like anxiety and depression. It made me feel sort of upset but also glad that someone is trying to get the information out about how dangerous it is for those with mental illness. I was upset because I know so many people that do that and I want the ones that I see doing it to see it, but I don't know if they'll get it. I felt connected with the person who I shared it from because I know we both have been professionally diagnosed with it and are on actual medications for it, but I felt more isolated from the rest of the Facebook world because a lot of them don't actually understand what it's like living with these mental illnesses. They just think that because they share the "Whatever Number of Things You Won't Know if You Date Someone

with Anxiety” that they’re automatically diagnosed with it, when in reality, they’re just anxious about something. Huge difference.

It seems that sharing information about her illness with her network of friends created the same feelings of isolation for FCS-5 as did sharing this same information with strangers online.

Although she experienced a sense of isolation from sharing this information, she continued to share posts about her illness:

I used Twitter to post publicly about how I was feeling panicky. It made me feel a little guilty because I feel like I’m putting my anxiety on others when I post about it. I felt a little more isolated this time because no one responded to it when they usually would.

But it’s also late on Saturday, so I imagine people are out having a good time.

FCS-5 experienced feelings of isolation from talking specifically about her mental illness but continued to discuss these topics through her social-networking platforms. Part of the feelings she experienced from her posts stemmed from having assumptions about what an appropriate response to her post from her network of friends would be. FCS-5 went on to say:

It felt very upsetting to have posted previously many times about suffering from panicky/anxious feelings and having so many people respond with “Oh please let me know when you feel this way so I can help” and when I did post about it, no one responded. It was disheartening and made me feel a little bitter towards those that had previously volunteered to help the next time these feelings came around.

Although the majority of her posts about her illness created a sense of seclusion, there were other times she talked about the topic and felt a sense of connection. FCS-5 stated:

I checked Facebook this morning and commented on some friends’ posts publicly. It made me feel good because I left some advice for a girl that is struggling with her mental

health, and I shared some links and advice with a friend who is looking at becoming vegan. I feel more connected because these are two people with whom I rarely get the chance to talk to anymore so it was cool to offer advice.

When FCS-5 shared information about her illness publicly, it left her with a sense of separation, but, when she was able to provide information to someone else dealing with the same issues, she experienced a sense of connection.

FCS-5 discussed the unique experience of using her social-networking platforms with a friend. This experience provided a sense of connection both in person and online. FCS-5 stated: I used Tumblr with my roommate. We were both just looking at the posts together. I didn't share anything personal, but reblogged a few posts I thought were funny or relatable. I felt great afterwards. My roommate and I had a super fun time laughing at funny videos and reading interesting theories about TV shows. I felt more connected with my roommate after because it was a lot of laughing (so much so that I cried) and I really needed it today.

FCS-5 later discussed in a journal:

Along with using Tumblr earlier, we also browsed Facebook together (my roommate and I). I only shared a funny meme with my roommate so that she could tag her boyfriend in it. It made me laugh at myself in my lack of attempt at getting a "summer bod." I felt more connected with my roommate, because it was more laughing and sharing that we did.

The act of using social-networking platforms with someone else in person created a sense of connection for FCS-5. This experience brought about feelings of happiness and enjoyment for her.

She also used her social-networking platforms to communicate with family and friends privately, which was a positive experience resulting in feelings of connection. FCS-5 stated:

I used Facebook to privately talk to my brother a little bit and scroll through during a homework break. It made me feel a bit better to talk to him and made me excited to see him in a few months. I saw a lot of positive things that are happening to family and friends and I am excited for those opportunities for myself that will come in the future. I feel more connected since I got to talk to my brother and commented on some distant friend's posts.

Not only did FCS-5 use Facebook to communicate with family and friends, she also used Snapchat to stay in touch with her friends:

I used Snapchat to post publicly about my trip to the park and privately to my long distance friends about our day. It made me feel nice because I was shamelessly enjoying my day and getting to talk to people I love. I felt more connected with everyone and more so with my friends because of the ease of talking to everyone.

In a later journal, FCS-5 described another instance of using Snapchat to communicate privately with friends which evoked feelings of contentment and connection:

I used Snapchat privately to talk to my long distance friends about the weather and discuss our day. It made me feel happy because I was talking to them like it was a normal day and all 3 of us weren't separated by 250 miles. I felt more connected in the sense that I could talk to them, but more isolated because I knew I couldn't see them for a while.

The use of the social-networking platform to connect with her friends who lived far away was positive yet also created feelings of isolation. I wanted to know more about FCS-5's feelings of isolation stemming from her distance from her friends. She told me:

Sometimes I get extremely depressed because of the distance that my friends and I experience. I also feel very bitter sometimes because the entire time I have lived in _____, only 1 of my friends from back home has ever made the 2 hour drive out to see me and the new place I call home. I try not to let it bother me, but it's very upsetting and hurtful that they don't want to come out here, even though I would always try to go out to them for events and such.

Not all of FCS-5's private Snapchat communications resulted in feelings of connection or isolation. She also experienced feelings of being left out. She stated:

I used Snapchat to privately talk with some of my best friends. We have a group Snapchat that we use to keep each other updated on our daily lives. We all shared how we were spending our Saturday nights. I was spending mine reading my Kindle, while they were both at parties. It made me feel a little sad because I saw all of the parties happening on my Snapchat, including my two friends, and I hadn't been invited out by anyone. I did have a long day workday, so I was pretty tired, but being invited still feels nice. I felt more isolated because I realized I was alone and being kind of boring on a Saturday.

When FCS-5 was not invited to any of the parties her friends were posting about on their social-networking platforms, a sense of isolation occurred, which brought about feelings of sadness.

FCS-5 discussed current events and politics in several social-networking journals. The topic seemed to be important to her because she mentioned that her brother is in the U.S.

Military. She stays connected with him through her social-networking platforms because they live in different places. FCS-5 discussed the bombing that took place in Syria in April 2017:

I used Twitter to look at and post publicly about the bombing in Syria. I feel sad and worried about the state of our country and I am extremely worried about my brother, as he is in the military and I fear that he may need to get deployed, should this start a war. I felt more connected because people have been really supportive of my worries and are equally as worried.

Acquiring information from Twitter created a sense of connection for FCS-5 because she was able to share her worries and get supportive feedback from her followers.

FCS-5 had a mixture of positive and negative experiences while connecting through her social-networking platforms. When discussing her personal medical issues through social networks, FCS-5 experienced a sense of isolation, but she continued to share the information in the hopes of helping others. When FCS-5 used her social networks with a friend, she experienced positive feelings and a sense of connection with her in-person friend. When FCS-5 communicated with her friends privately, she felt a sense of connection and happiness. When communicating about current events and politics, she was saddened by what was taking place in the world and what she read on social media, but being able to communicate about this privately with her brother through her social network brought about a sense of connection.

FCS-6. FCS-6 is a White 21-year-old junior. She uses Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, Instagram, Tumblr, and Pinterest as her social-networking platforms. FCS-6 uses social networking to stay in contact with family and friends. She said she is careful about what she posts on her social-networking platforms and makes sure not to post information that is too personal. She made 22 social-networking journals over the 5-day data-collection period.

Several themes emerged from her journals that provided insight into how she connects to others through her social-networking platforms.

FCS-6 uses social networking to communicate with friends, but most of her interactions leave her with a sense of isolation. When she does not receive the feedback she expects, she feels down and disconnected. In a few of her Snapchat interactions, she discussed how she feels isolated after using the platform unless she has been directly communicating with someone.

FCS-6 stated:

I went on Snapchat. I posted a snap about how I felt like going to class today was kind of pointless. It was public, I posted it to my story, so it will be there until tomorrow. It felt alright. Maybe a little forced? It was a weird mix of venting, but also forcing myself to come up with something to seem present. Generally, more isolated. It feels like screaming into a void when you aren't talking to someone directly. I did also send a couple follows, and messages to friends. That did not make me feel more isolated because it was a direct interaction.

She seemed to experience the same sense of isolation when she used the social-networking platform Tumblr:

I went on Tumblr. I got a new follower. I looked at their blog for a bit, followed them back, and then just scrolled through Tumblr. It made me feel kind of bad. Tumblr, honestly romanticizes mental illness and suicide. There's a lot of helpful stuff out there, but there's a lot of jokes that aren't so good. [*Sic*] isolated. Tumblr does a good job of pulling you in, but it doesn't feel like real people, it feels like a trash can that you dig through and hope you find something good.

Twitter had the same effect on FCS-6's mood when she decided to scroll through her feed one day:

[*Sic*] Twitter. I received a follower then scrolled. I was going to tweet, but Twitter was being really political, so I decided to close out. It was negative. It was a lot of political hate. I would say I felt more connected and then isolated.

FCS-6 experienced isolation and a sense of sadness while using Facebook when she was hoping to connect with her friends. She stated:

[*Sic*] Facebook. I posted publicly that I almost forgot about induction tomorrow. I felt a little sad because it didn't get the immediate reaction I expected. A ton of my friends are going to be at induction tomorrow and I was looking for a conversation. [*Sic*] isolated. I didn't get the conversation I was hoping for.

When none of her friends commented or liked her post, FCS-6 felt a sense of isolation because her post did not get the feedback she was wanted. The social-networking platform Pinterest also gave FCS-6 a sense of isolation. The limited amount of interaction that Pinterest provides left her feeling down. She stated, "I was on Pinterest looking for fairy garden ideas. I feel discouraged, and also bad because I meant to take a nap. I feel a little isolated just because I wasn't interacting with anyone." Lastly, FCS-6 discussed using Instagram as her social-networking platform. This platform also gave her a sense of seclusion. She stated, "I was on Instagram. My friend posted a picture. It made me sad. I miss my friend she's out in Tennessee. [*Sic*] isolated." It seems that when FCS-6 does not get the response or experience she is looking for in social networks, a sense of isolation occurs that leaves her feeling down.

Not all of her social-networking experiences were negative, though. FCS-6 described some positive connection experiences with her friends through social networking. In fact, FCS-6

had several positive connections through social networking over the 5-day data-collection period. After using Facebook, FCS-6 discussed how she felt more connected when she used the platform:

[*Sic*] Facebook. I didn't post anything, but I did say I was interested in an event. I was reacting to my notifications. [*Sic*] good. Someone thought of me, so that was nice. I feel more connected.

She went on to write in another journal about using Facebook:

[*Sic*] Facebook. I replied to a post my brother tagged me in, so public. Again, I was actually talking to someone, so I felt fine. I owe my brother a pizza though. I felt more connected because I don't see my brother as often as I would like. It was nice that he reached out.

FCS-6 also had a positive connection experience when using Snapchat: “[*Sic*] Snapchat. I responded to my friends. I wished them a happy Passover. [*Sic*] good. It was nice to talk to people. [*Sic*] connected.” The experiences where FCS-6 had direct contact with a friend provided the most sense of connection and positive feelings for her.

Overall, FCS-6 had more feelings of isolation during the study. Her social-networking patterns of behavior made her feel more closed off from people than connected to them. When directly communicating with someone from her network, she did experience some positive feelings and a sense of connection.

Social Networking Connection Themes

All participants in the research study used Facebook most frequently. Over 79 journals out of 144 journals mentioned Facebook as the chosen social-networking platform. Facebook also has a private messaging application, Facebook Messenger, which participants used.

Because this application is through Facebook, all journals relating to Messenger use were tagged as Facebook related. Snapchat was the second-most-used social-networking platform, with 30 journals discussing the use of Snapchat. Twitter was the third-most-used social-networking platform, with 15 journals discussing Twitter. Instagram was the fourth-most-discussed social-networking platform, with 14 journals describing the use of Instagram. Tumblr and Pinterest were discussed 6 times total during the 5-day data-collection period. Several themes surfaced from the data and are discussed in further detail below.

Connection happens on multiple levels and is used to maintain existing relationships.

There were different types of connection based upon the information participants wanted to share, the network with whom they wanted to share, the social network the participant used as the communication channel, and the type of connection the participant was looking for. The concept of connection meant different things at different times for the participants. Sometimes the participants were looking for an information connection in the hopes of staying up-to-date with their network or news. Other times, the participants were looking for an intimate connection with friends. Several types of connection (superficial, casual, and intimate) emerged after analyzing the data collected from the participants.

Superficial. Superficial connections through social networks are a surface-level connection formed when sharing information publicly to an entire network (e.g., individual posts, pictures, sharing videos/memes/gifs/check-ins). The content shared within a superficial connection is of common or open information that is not private to the participant. According to a journal, FCS-3 shared a social-networking post about Relay for Life: “[*Sic*] Facebook. [*Sic*] a public post [*sic*] Relay for Life. [*Sic*] good being a part of something greater than myself. [*Sic*]

connected with society.” This is an example of a superficial post because it contains information that is shared publicly to an entire network and is common information for the community.

Casual. Casual connections through social networks often take place publicly but are directed toward a specific person or group (e.g., wishing a friend happy birthday, congratulating a friend, commenting on a friend’s public post/picture). The information is directed toward an individual but is displayed in a public newsfeed. The content shared within a casual connection is of common or open information that is not private to the participant. FCS-6 provided an example of a casual connection when using Snapchat: “[*Sic*] Snapchat. I responded to my friends. I wished them a happy Passover. [*Sic*] good. It was nice to talk to people. [*Sic*] connected.” This social-networking post was directed toward specific friends but was available for her network of friends on Snapchat to see.

Intimate. Intimate connections on social networks take place through private forms of social networking (e.g., Facebook Messenger/private Snapchat message) and are sent to friends with whom the participants maintain relationships online and offline. The content is of a private nature and is only sent to that individual(s), so the entire network of friends cannot see the information. For example, FCS-3 discussed in a journal:

[*Sic*] Facebook. [*Sic*] a rant on two exes with girlfriends messaging me in the same week and how jacked up that it is. Only my friends could see. [*Sic*] better after the fact.

That’s why both those relationships ended in the first place. [*Sic*] connected to share feelings with people going through maybe the same thing almost reassurance.

This type of connection was of an intimate nature because it was a private interaction with only close friends to discuss an intimate experience.

In the study, the type of information shared related to the social-networking platform of choice to disseminate the information. Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram, Twitter, and Pinterest were used most frequently for public posts comprised of superficial or casual connections with the participants' network. Facebook Messenger and Snapchat were used most frequently for sharing private information for intimate connections. Table 5 describes the interrelatedness of connection type, social-network choice, and type of information shared. All types of connection resulted in both positive and negative feelings depending on the information shared, responses from the participants' network, and participants' expectations for the posts' responses.

Table 5 *Social Network Use Based on Type of Connection*

Connection Type	Social Network Used to Share	Information Shared
Superficial	Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram, Pinterest, Twitter	Public/Open
Causal	Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram, Twitter, Tumblr	Public/Open
Intimate	Facebook Messenger, Snapchat	Private

Online social networks have put mass communication in the hands of individuals rather than the large corporations that create media content through more traditional media such as radio and television. In essence, social-networking users have complete control of their own "channel," communicating to those with whom they have established relationships and disseminating their messages to the masses, which conjure feelings of connection. Pempek et al. (2009) described this perspective in their study "College Students' Social Networking

Experiences on Facebook.” The researchers equated students’ social-networking use to being the content creators of their own “broadcast,” similar to radio and television’s “one-to-many” communication model. Students are the actors and directors of their own shows that appear on their personal profiles, which now allow feedback from viewers (Pempek et al., 2009). This was evident with this study’s participants. They chose what to post about their lives, whether it was a photo, a check-in at an event, or an opinion about current events. These choices allowed them to be the creator of their own channel that was shared with their network. They edited the content to fit the needs of what they believed their audience would appreciate. The one-to-many model is still evident within the social-networking platforms, allowing all participants to be creators/cocreators of their daily broadcasts, with up-to-date information about their daily lives.

The environment of the social-networking platform shaped the women’s connection experience based on the characteristics of the media (Fulk et al., 1987). When the task was to connect with others, the women went through a media-choice process to determine the appropriate social-network tool based on the networks’ characteristics (Fulk et al., 1987). Facebook and Snapchat were chosen most often for superficial and casual connections because of their ability to share public information with large network audiences. Facebook Messenger and Snapchat were chosen for more intimate connections because of their capability to send messages privately to one or more individuals. This process was influenced by the social-information perspective of past behaviors of others and the social norms that have evolved from the use of the social network.

When using Facebook or Snapchat as the communication tool to view friends’ posts, the participants felt connected with their friends. Scrolling through their network’s posts provided participants with a sense of connection. They were able to catch up on their friend’s lives. The

experience of scrolling through a social-networking feed gratified the women's need of tension release, providing them with entertainment and an escape from their own lives. When participants liked or commented on friends' posts, they felt a sense of connection and contentment. If the post was positive, the participants felt happy to read it and more connected to that specific friend. In several instances, seeing posts from friends who lived far away created a sense of sadness for the participants because they could not see them in person.

Sharing private messages through the Facebook Messenger and Snapchat communication tools created a sense of connection. Facebook Messenger unites networks of friends more privately than Facebook posts on personal profile pages which the entire network can view. Users on Facebook Messenger can send private messages to individual friends or small groups of friends. Snapchat allows users to send messages privately to friends, and the message disappears after they read it. Overall, participants believed sharing information privately through Messenger or Snapchat made them feel more intimately connected to friends.

Using social-networking tools with friends in person produces feelings of connection. FCS-5 provided a unique connection experience when she discussed using her social networks with her friend. They enjoyed reading posts, reading stories, and looking at pictures that her network shared. This experience made FCS-5 feel connected to her friend, and it provided feelings of happiness.

Social networking is a better conduit for maintaining existing relationships than for building new relationships. The essence of connecting is a transactional process through social networking, in which this study's participants experienced mutual influence among the relationships they maintained through the social-networking platforms. According to a quantitative study conducted in 2007 at Michigan State University, Ellison, Steinfield, and

Lampe also found social networking to be the communication tool through which students maintain established face-to-face relationships. They concluded social-networking exchanges do not replace offline relationships, but they support these relationships and help students stay in contact, even when students have moved away from friends (Ellison et al., 2007). The current study also concluded that social networking provides a channel for communication that adds to the already established channels of face-to-face communication in which the participants regularly take part. Each participant discussed communicating with a pre-established network of friends comprised of people with whom they have offline relationships, even though they may not see them often. There were no journals discussing the creation of new relationships, just the maintenance of existing relationships.

Construction of shared meaning through virtual symbols. Sharing photos or posts publicly on Facebook and Snapchat creates a connection, resulting in positive feelings. Many of the journals mentioned sharing pictures or posts publicly with a network of friends. When participants received feedback in the form of likes or comments, this social-networking experience resulted in positive feelings of connection with their network of friends. The act of “liking” or clicking on the thumbs-up sign is a virtual symbol that shows that someone feels positive about or enjoys what has been posted. Seeing this emblem signals participants to feel good about the experience, so they want more likes. Participants felt more connected with their friends or community when they received notifications from the social-networking platform alerting them someone liked or commented on a post, invited them to an event, or asked them to like a social-networking page. As the uses and gratifications theory suggests, the participants were filling a social integrative need to enhance their connections with their network of friends

(Katz, Blumler & Gurevitch, 1974). This function brought the participants back to the social network time and time again to satisfy their need of connection.

The encounters that the participants' experienced with their social networks of friends encouraged the women to return to the social-networking platform often to confirm and gratify their need of self-validation. This process was a social co-creation of meaning, which stems from symbolic interactionism. Facebook's emoticons or "reactions" to convey emotion, as seen in Figure 2, provide symbolic channels of communication for users to interact and make meaning of their social-networking experiences.

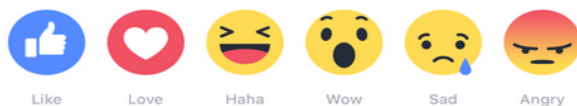


Figure 3 Facebook emojis available in 2017.

Using these emoticons and language for comments on posts/pictures creates an online social reality. As Blumer (1969) indicated in his social interactionism framework, meaning comes from the social exchanges people have with each other. The social-networking experiences of the participants created meaning for them, specifically, how they should respond to others, what types of information are appropriate to post, and how to connect in suitable ways that follow social norms. The less formal language people use for personal communication online is influenced by the new technology. "OMG" (oh my God), "TMI" (too much information), and "LOL" (laughing out loud) are just a few examples of common acronyms related to the language of social networking. Words such as "selfie," "unfriend," "post," and

“following” are all examples of how technology has changed online language and created a symbolic understanding of the medium.

There are many ways that the participants symbolically communicated with their network of friends. Through the manipulation of language, they could communicate thoughts and feelings that would normally be communicated through nonverbal communication channels. Participants capitalized or bold text, checked-in to the places they visited, used emoticons/gifs, used texting shorthand, and tagged their friends in photos. All these elements of virtual language have been socially designed to create symbolic meaning, which is part of the communication process. Unfortunately, because there are no nonverbal elements to the virtual communication process, information was sometimes misinterpreted due to the lack of face-to-face interaction. These public displays created feelings of connection, which were symbolically powered through the language use, and mutually created understanding from the social-networking interactions.

Although sharing moments in life through social networking was a positive experience for the participants, there are still some negative associations with being able to connect instantaneously with friends and family. FCS-5 worried about close friends sharing private information about her through their social networks. FCS-5 stated:

Being connected with family and friends is both a blessing and a curse. It is exciting and fun to be able to share the good days with people and have a “following” in a way that sort of makes you feel like a celebrity. It is a curse sometimes because if you don’t post for a while, people start to ask why you aren’t posting lately and if it’s for personal reasons, you either have to be truthful and trusting that that person won’t reveal what’s going on without your permission or you have to come up with a lie to keep them at bay. It is refreshing but also a burden to be the person who is always joyful on social media

because then people come to expect you to always be happy which is just sometimes not the case.

Learning how to navigate these experiences on social-networking platforms is an added element of relationship maintenance that is new to the process of communicating interpersonally with close friends and family. Social networking is an extension of communicating within close relationships that is symbolic, and boundary setting is an added dimension when using social networking as a communication tool. The participants found themselves having to filter what they posted just as people filter what they say to someone they are communicating with in person. Self-preservation is an important part of sharing information through social networking. The participants questioned themselves before making posts. They wanted to make sure they were posting something that was interesting for their network, that was not too personal yet was entertaining or funny.

Overall, these social-networking interactions place established onground relationships and place them in a virtual environment whose existing traditional symbolic communication systems influence the exchange of the connection of a network of friends. Similarly, Ellison et al. (2007) discovered social networking supports relationships and is a tool to help people stay in contact, even when there is distance between students away at college (Ellison et al., 2007).

Shapes self-value/self-worth. Receiving more likes, comments, and reactions gave participants a higher sense of self-worth. Receiving fewer likes, comments, and reactions provided a negative sense of self-value. When participants' posts did not receive the anticipated feedback, participants were left with feelings of isolation or discontentment. FCS-3 believed:

It does influence your self-value if I had to say so myself. It is like you are always in competition with people when you look at pictures, posts, and events. It can also increase

or decrease your value depending on how you use all of the platforms. Social media is all about what you use it for and for me, it is to show the better side of myself, but no one ever knows what is really going on behind closed doors. It is only a small image of what you really are and that is what makes the self value of it sad.

Through social interactionism, the participants have learned that, if a post meets societal expectations, they should receive the intended effect of appropriate positive feedback through comments or reactions from their network of friends. When this goal was not achieved, the participants felt the post was inadequate and that the sense of connection was lost. In these instances, participants were forced to question and reevaluate the initial post, which is part of the interpretive process of symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969). For example, if the intended response was not obtained, participants determined what was posted was not socially acceptable and chose to change the post or delete the post. This experience could then be saved for future reference when determining appropriate future posts on the social-networking platform. FCS-1 described her feelings about the correlation between likes and self-value: “I feel negative and my self-worth/value declines when I do not get a lot of likes and comments on my post/pictures. I feel positive and my self-worth/value increases when I get a lot of likes/comments on posts/pictures.”

Participants were more gratified by the social-networking experience when they received more likes/reactions/comments, which brought them back to use the social-networking platform frequently. This experience gratified the social integrative need to connect with family and friends (Katz, Gurevitch, & Hass, 1973). The feelings of connection were enhanced when participants experienced a positive social-networking exchange. When participants experienced

more synchronous interactivity with their network (receiving likes/reactions/comments), they felt happier with the social-networking experience. FCS-5 stated:

Whenever I post a new picture or a funny story, I am constantly checking how many people reacted to it. I recently got into a relationship on Facebook and was checking it every couple hours or so to see who had reacted to the post. Along with doing that, you can also check to see who hasn't liked it and if that person means a lot to you or has heavy influence or knowledge on the relationship, it hurts and makes me worried as to why they haven't reacted.

When participants received the intended responses from their network of friends, they were gratified socially, but they also received personal gratification from these social-networking connections (Katz, et al., 1973). Receiving likes, reactions, and comments enhanced their confidence and status from their network of friends, which gave them a positive self-concept and drew them back to the social network frequently to enhance personal gratification. This personal self-status-seeking gratification made the desire to connect with others stronger, bringing the women back to the social network frequently. FCS-6 discussed her thoughts about self-worth influenced by social networking:

I would say that social media use does influence my self worth, unfortunately. I would like to say that it is only positively influenced, and the little things like how many followers I have, or likes, doesn't [affect] me, but that would be dishonest. I am positively [affected] (excited/validated) when I see that I have a high number of likes on a post, or a lot of followers, and negatively [affected] (disappointed) when I don't get as many reactions, or the right reaction.

Other studies had similar conclusions about self-esteem and social networking use. A Dutch study conducted by Valkenburg, Schouten, and Peter (2005) focused on adolescents' social-networking use and found that negative feedback from social-networking sites produced feelings of low self-esteem while positive feedback resulted in higher self-esteem, which influenced participants' self-identity (Valkenburg et al., 2005). These results are reflective of the present study and prove that self-esteem and self-value play a pivotal role in identity through social-networking use.

Evokes feelings, both good and bad. Not being invited to an event produced feelings of isolation among the participants. Several journals from participants indicated that seeing a post that showed their friends having a good time, but not being invited themselves, left participants with a sense of isolation and sadness. FCS-1 explained, "When my friends want to go to events with me that I am interested in on Facebook my self-value increases. It makes me feel left out and jealous when I'm not invited and informed about an event." FCS-6 also experienced negative feelings associated with being left out through social networking. She stated:

Another time I am negatively impacted is when I see pictures of my friends getting together, I often end up wondering, well, hey, why didn't they invite me? This, again, leaves me feeling disappointed, and wondering whether they really consider me one of their friends, or if I'm just someone they hang out with when it's convenient.

FCS-5 echoed the other participants' feelings:

I feel a little betrayed when people go out and don't invite me. But only if they are semi-close friends. If acquaintances post about their parties, that's okay. But if I see a few work people get together after work even though I had also just been at work, I feel like I was stabbed in the back. Then I feel worried that they don't like me or think enough

about me to invite me out and being forgotten is never a fun feeling.

The fear of missing out, or “FoMO,” was added to Merriam-Webster Dictionary in 2016. Largely, this concept stems from the use of social-networking platforms. For example, if people use Facebook to see what is going on, they may feel let down when they see they are missing out, which in turn brings them back to the social-networking platform frequently to make sure they are not being overlooked. It is a cycle that can cause anxiety and lead to unhappiness. The participants in this study confirmed feelings of FoMO throughout their journal entries and, when questioned, expressed the need for inclusion through their network of friends on social-networking platforms. In the study “Motivational, Emotional, and Behavioral Correlates of Fear of Missing Out,” researchers conducted three studies pertaining to young adults’ experiences with social networking and FoMO. They concluded that people with reduced life satisfaction experience higher levels of FoMO, which is linked to elevated engagement with social networking (Przybylski, Murayama, DeHaan, & Gladwell, 2013). The concept of FoMO seems to be related to the need for constant connection, which is a continuation of face-to-face relationships within the virtual world that allows for communication at all times. FCS-5 experienced feelings of being left out. She stated:

I used Snapchat to privately talk with some of my best friends. We have a group Snapchat that we use to keep each other updated on our daily lives. We all shared how we were spending our Saturday nights. I was spending mine reading my Kindle, while they were both at parties. It made me feel a little sad because I saw all of the parties happening on my Snapchat, including my two friends, and I hadn’t been invited out by anyone. I did have a long day workday, so I was pretty tired, but being invited still feels

nice. I felt more isolated because I realized I was alone and being kind of boring on a Saturday.

This need is a driving force for female college students' use of social networking to receive validation from their network of friends through inclusion and equity. FoMO was a theme that stood out in this study from all participants, echoing the former studies previously discussed.

Wanting to be heard and understood. When people share information through social networking, there is a strong desire to receive validation from their network of friends. Humans crave connection through understanding and acceptance. Social networking is an outlet to allow one's voice to be heard, but this experience can produce both positive and negative outcomes. For the participants, it was more important to feel as if they were being heard as opposed to actually being heard by their audience. FCS-1 described being understood as a validation of self: "I have a desire to be understood through my social networking use since my social media is a representation of myself, my thoughts, and my beliefs."

Sharing private information publicly forms feelings of isolation if the network does not validate it. When people are empathetic to posts that share personal feelings, the originator of the post feels heard and validated. When FCS-5 shared information about her mental illness, she hoped to receive positive feedback, but she instead experienced a sense of isolation. She wanted to be heard and understood from her network of friends, but she did not receive the expected responses. When she did receive positive feedback from a friend, she felt understood and validated for helping a friend. She explained:

It made me feel excited that I had someone to share my mental health issues with and it also helped me feel empowered and proud to be able to help this girl with problems that she was struggling with. It made me feel knowledgeable to be able to leave advice for her.

This communication experience through social networking fulfilled FCS-5's desire of being heard, which was validating because she was able to use her knowledge about a subject to help someone in need. It was imperative for FCS-5 to feel understood by her network of friends. She described this need in further detail when I asked her how important being understood is to her:

I think it is extremely important to be heard through social media. Social media is the number one networking tool and if people are trying to figure out what kind of a person I am whether it be for professional reasoning or just a friendship, I want them to be able to see what I stand up for and how I feel in general about certain topics. When this does not happen it is extremely frustrating. For example, if I am invited to an event on Facebook that clearly goes against something that I have previously defended or shown that I have disinterest in, it is frustrating and annoying. I also feel more or less ignored in a sense because the person inviting me to an event or posting on my wall about events that I have no desire to participate in, it means that they aren't really paying attention to what I'm posting about/saying.

For other participants, the need to be heard was more about reaching audiences in a positive way through posts and pictures that did not reveal information that was too private.

FCS-3 stated:

I do want to be heard through my social networking just like most people that use it do but for beneficial things. For example, philanthropy, setting goals, nice pictures, positive sayings, and accomplishments. But I know I could never put my issues with family or friends on here since I feel negativity is not what I want to portray with networking use. Sadly, it does say a lot about people even though it is only a preview of what really happens.

FCS-6 echoed these same sentiments as FCS-3 when asked if she has a desire to be heard through social networking. For her, it is important to pick and choose topics that she believes would be interesting for her network to read. FCS-6 stated:

I do have a desire to be heard and understood through my social media. However, I don't feel the need to share my day-to-day life, only the things that I deem some sort of event (whether that's an actual event, an emotional event, a realization, a joke, etc.) I'm very picky about what I post and I try to keep everything I do share positive. I think this pickiness is what creates a gap. Nobody is positive all the time, and the choosiness keeps people from seeing the depth of me as a person.

Social networking provides an outlet for people to voice their thoughts, which can result in support. When looking for validation from their network of friends, participants reported mixed positive and negative experiences. A current study looking at how online support groups of general caregivers, Alcoholics Anonymous, and gender identity groups provide support to members found that voicing personal thoughts on social networks builds social capital (Green-Hamann & Sherblom, 2014). All three groups described feelings of being heard and understood through comments of emotional empathy received through the social-networking group. The study also found that participating within these groups reduces feelings of isolation (Green-Hamann & Sherblom, 2014). Being heard and understood through social networks may directly come from a person's network of friends, but it can also arise through participations in online social-network communities.

Summary

This chapter provided an analysis of the case studies that describe participants' lived experiences of connecting through social-networking platforms and of the themes that emerged

from the data pertaining to connection through social-networking use of female college students.

The emergent themes are:

- Connection happens on multiple levels and is used to maintain existing relationships;
- Construction of shared meaning through virtual symbols;
- Shapes self-value/self-worth;
- Evokes feelings, both good and bad;
- And wanting to be heard and understood.

These themes were discussed in detail after clustering the data and using direct quotes from the participants' ESM journals from the data-collection period to support the research's emergent themes. It is apparent from the data that participants' social-networking use is influenced by social behavior theory and media theory, an influence reflected through participants' use of the different social-networking platforms to connect with others. After synthesis of the data and development of the emergent themes, the core of how female college students experience social networking to connect with others materialized. The essence of social-networking connection for these female participants was as a tool that evoked feelings and met needs, which is understood through the construction of shared meaning through virtual symbols.

The next chapter concludes this qualitative research study with discussion of the conclusions reached, the implications of the research, and future recommendations for educational leaders pertaining to connecting with female college students through social-networking platforms.

Chapter 5: Summary of the Study and Conclusions

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research was to understand how female college students make use of social networks, specifically how they use the medium to connect with others. Social-networking platforms are continuously changing, and researchers' knowledge about how the platforms are being utilized by college students is moving at a slower rate. More research could provide a well-rounded understanding of social-networking use among female college students. Women are not only using social networks more frequently than men (Nielsen, 2012), but women are also attending college more than men (U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey, 2014). Researching female college students' perspectives pertaining to social-networking use provides a comprehensive view of the modern female college student, which will help educational leaders create appropriate support services such as mental health support; community engagement; computer-mediated connections with students, faculty, and staff; and the overall welfare of student success.

Conceptual Framework

Figure 1 on pg. 28 provides a lens that brings together both sociological theory and media theory to study female college students' social-networking use for connecting within their cultural environment from a phenomenological perspective. The media theory sphere includes the specific media chosen by participants based upon what particular needs they want met and what social-networking platform will gratify those needs. The media theory sphere intersects with the social behavior theory sphere. The overlap is where meaning is formed symbolically relative to connecting based upon gratifying needs. Symbolic interactionism indicates that people create understanding of their reality through social interactions with others. This

symbolic behavior is co-created through social interactions using specific symbols on the social-networking platforms. As Blumer (1969) discussed in his social interactionism framework, meaning comes from the social exchanges people have with each other. Participants' social-networking experiences created meaning for them, specifically in how they should respond to others, what types of information are appropriate to post, and how to connect in suitable ways that follow social norms.

Virtual language has been socially designed to create symbolic meaning, which is part of the communication process. The language and symbols people choose to use create a social-networking connection behavior based upon the social interactions and the social-networking platform chosen as the conduit for communication. This behavior then coincides with participants' culture which indicates the appropriate attitudes, beliefs, and values used among that specific culture and influences communication. This cultural environment also takes into account the personal frame of reference in which participants reside. Messages are filtered through demographic factors, such as age, race, socioeconomic status, educational level, gender, religion, and other characteristics.

Research Questions

To engage in this research, I created a list of research questions to guide me through my research process:

1. What social-networking platforms are female college students using?
 - a. Which social-networking platforms are female college students using most often?
2. How do female college students describe their social networking use?
3. In what ways do college women describe connecting through social networks?

- a. Who are female college students connecting with through social-networking platforms?
4. How do female college students describe their needs, and how is social networking related to those needs?
5. How do female college students describe their feelings about the use of social-networking platforms and connecting?

Research Tradition

The research paradigm I chose is constructivism. I wanted to research the world of human experience and discover participants' views of using social networks to connect with others and to understand their views from their viewpoints. It was important for me to understand that participants' social-networking use is a social construction, created and impacted by society and their experiences of reality. My goal was to observe participants through interaction within their social setting to understand and interpret their social reality through the conceptual lens of sociological and media theories.

Research Methods

Unit of analysis. To focus my research, I narrowed my unit of analysis to a feasible sample of students. I focused on a purposeful sample of six female undergraduate college students at a comprehensive Midwestern university.

Instrumental case study. An instrumental case study looks at several cases in the same research study to give a more in-depth analysis of the cases (Johnson & Christensen, 2014). Johnson and Christensen (2014) believed that conducting case studies has several advantages. For example, with the ability to compare cases' similarities and differences, a researcher can more effectively look at multiple cases, and generalizing results is easier when the researcher has

multiple cases (Johnson & Christensen, 2014). Using an instrumental case study approach to research provided me the opportunity to explore the phenomenon of connection through social networking and describe participants' use of the medium.

It was important for me to not only understand how female college students were using social networks but also to understand how these students constructed personal meaning from their lived experiences of using social-networking platforms to connect with others. Conducting several individual case studies allowed me to dig deeper into the phenomenon and decipher patterns, routines, and themes among participants' social-networking use to connect. Also, by using the instrumental-case-study approach (Johnson & Christensen, 2014), I was able to generalize social-networking use among female college students. I conducted several individual case studies with female college students. Using multiple cases allowed for collecting data from a variety of experiences of college students pertaining to their social-networking use.

Data collection. I recruited participants through a participation flyer in one specific school at the university. I announced a need of participants through faculty communication with current students from the school. I have the most access to this population because of my position within the department. Some of the students from the school may have been more inclined to participate with the study because of their interest in media communication as a profession. I made sure that no participants were current students of mine to minimize any conflicts of interest.

ESM is a methodology that examines individuals' experiences at the exact time they are happening, allowing participants to reflect in that specific moment about their behavior and feelings in context. This approach to research allows for tracking thoughts, feelings, and actions throughout the days and weeks, which could result in hundreds of responses (Zirkel et al., 2015,

p. 7). With ESM, responses are immediate as participants answer brief surveys about their environment, behavior, and feelings after receiving a specific event-focused prompt (Zirkel et al., 2015, p. 12). This research method lends itself well to studying the phenomenon of connecting through social networks. With the use of a qualitative research application for mobile devices, such as the VisionsLive platform, I prompted participants to answer a few brief questions after they participated in social networking. This information was then directly sent to me for analysis and synthesis of cases.

Data analysis. Data analysis is an ongoing process starting from the initial conception of research ideas to the final conclusions of the study. It was important for me to become familiar with current research on the topic so that I could clearly understand the areas that needed to be researched. Once my own data collection was complete, I familiarized myself with it. Next, I organized the data in a meaningful way so that I could determine how to make specific conclusions about the study. Lastly, I categorized the data into specific groupings and applied my conceptual framework as a lens to analyze the data. Lanigan (1988) described semiotic phenomenology's systematic three-step process of description, reduction, and interpretation. This process was an appropriate instrument for data analysis of this study. The first step of description involved describing what was seen and heard in the interviews, observing the lived experiences of the participants; looking at language use and symbols; and listing themes in written form. The second step of reduction helped to deduce themes that became apparent from the description step. Thematizing shed light on common threads or "patterns of experience" that participants expressed through the interviews (Lanigan, 1988, p. 147). Lastly, the interpretation step delved deeper into the themes discovered during the reduction step. The essence of the lived experience emerged from those themes, and the phenomenon's significance became clear.

This three-step process provided a richer understanding of the phenomenon, adding depth and breadth to the research study.

Validity. The quality of my research conclusions was important for a successful research project. Without validity, my research would not be sound and therefore would not have been a quality piece of work. To complete a valid study it was important for me to make sure I was measuring what I was proposing to measure (Brink, 1993). I attempted to make my research instrumentations and conclusions strong and a true measurement of what I intended to measure.

Summary of the Findings

It is apparent from the data that social behavior theory and media theory help to explain the participants' social-networking use, which is reflected through the participants' use of the different social-networking platforms to connect with others. After synthesis of the data and development of the emergent themes, the core of how female college students are experiencing social networking to connect with others materialized. The essence of social-networking connection for these female participants was as a tool that evoked feelings and met needs, which is understood through the construction of shared meaning through virtual symbols. As the themes unfolded, it was clear that the lived experience of social networking use to connect is part of the participant's digital self. This perceived digital self is influenced by the participant's social networking interactions and is part of the identity of the participant. Through the construction of shared meaning, the participants interact with their networks in symbolic ways that influence their perceptions of self and others. Their sense of self is impacted both positively and negatively through their social networking interactions. Their choice of connection types is connected to their desire to be heard and understood. These interactions shape their self-value/self-worth and evoke feelings, both good and bad, that influence the perceived digital self.

The lived experience of social-networking use, specifically to connect with others, was further examined and explored by answering the following research questions, using the conceptual framework lens to provide a deeper analysis to understand the phenomenon.

Conclusions

Research Question 1. What social-networking platforms are female college students using? Female college students are using multiple social-networking platforms on a regular basis. The social-networking platforms used in the study were Facebook, Snapchat, Twitter, Instagram, Tumblr, and Pinterest.

Research Questions 1a. Which social networking platforms are female college students using most often?

Out of the 144 journals collected, 79 (55%) discussed the use of Facebook. Snapchat was discussed 30 times (21%). Lastly, there were 15 journals (10%) discussing Twitter.

Research Question 2. How do female college students describe their social-networking use? The female college student participants in this study used social networks daily. The virtual communities created by the participants are interwoven into the common thread of everyday life. Their social-networking platforms are extensions of self that shape their self-value and self-worth, having both positive and negative implications and evoking many types of feelings for the participants. Participants used social networks to connect with others, entertain, inform, and pass time. Social networking is a tool used to maintain relationships on multiple levels, giving the participants an outlet to share their voice in the hopes of being heard and understood.

The use of these social networks gratifies needs, bringing the participant back to the social network frequently. The participants sought feedback on posts/pictures. Receiving more

likes on a post resulted in more positive feelings for the participant. When posts did not receive the expected feedback, participants were disappointed, and they questioned the initial post. Overall, the participants believed that social networking plays an important role in their lives with both positive and negative effects.

Research Question 3. In what ways do college women describe connecting through social networks? The college females participating in this study used multiple platforms to connect with their networks of friends. Through data analysis, I determined that Facebook/Messenger, Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter, Tumblr, and Pinterest were the social networks of choice. The participants connected with their network by sharing posts of information, sharing pictures, sending private messages, liking posts, liking pictures, checking in to events/locations, and staying current with organizations.

Social networking was the conduit used to maintain relationships the participants already had or were first developed outside of a social-networking experience; the participants did not use social networking to build new relationships. There was no evidence to suggest that these participants were building first time relationships although there may be other activities on the Internet where people meet other people online, such as dating sites. The essence of connecting was a transactional process through social networking in which participants experienced mutual influence among the relationships they maintained through the social-networking platforms. This study concluded that social networking provides a channel for communication that adds to the already established channels of face-to-face communication the participants regularly use with their friends. Each participant discussed communicating with a pre-established network of friends comprised of people with whom they have offline relationships, even if they do not see

them often. There were no journals discussing the creation of new relationships, just the maintenance of existing relationships.

For the participants, connection happened on multiple levels, and there were different types of connection based upon the information the participants wanted to share, with whom they wanted to share the information, the social network they used as the communication channel, and the type of connection they desired. The concept of connection meant different things at different times for the participants. Sometimes, participants wanted an information connection in the hopes of staying up-to-date with their network or news. Other times, participants were looking for an intimate connection with friends. The types of connection that emerged after analyzing the data collected from the participants were superficial, casual, and intimate, which were defined in Chapter 4.

Research Question 3a. Who are female college students connecting with through social-networking platforms? The female-college-student participants in this study have created extensive lists of friends on their social-networking platforms. Researchers indicate that the average Facebook user has approximately 338 friends within their network (Mazie, 2016). The participants' networks were identified from family, friends from high school, friends from college, groups the participants belong to, significant others, and coworkers. Although participants had networks of hundreds of people within their online social communities, there were specific friends with whom the participants regularly communicated and connected through their social networks. According to Dunbar (Dunbar, 2010), a British anthropologist and evolutionary psychologist professor at Oxford University, people have a cognitive limit to the number of people with whom they can maintain interpersonal relationships (even through social networking). This number has been coined the Dunbar Number, which varies around 150 people

within a person's social network (Dunbar, 2010). This current study supports Dunbar's theory because, even though the participants had hundreds of friends on their social network, they communicated interpersonally with the same smaller social circles.

Research Question 4. How do female college students describe their needs, and how is social networking related to those needs? Participants' social-networking use helped them meet their needs, which encouraged them to continue the daily use of the social-networking platforms. West and Turner's (2013) adaptation of Katz, et al.'s (1973) uses and gratifications research provided a lens to view the female college students' use of social networking to meet their needs. From the social and psychological functions of media, West and Turner (2013) created five categories describing people's needs and how those needs are gratified by media. These updated categories include Internet usage, as indicated in Table 1 on pg. 25. West and Turner's (2013) categories translate from mass-media use in the past to social-networking use today, as illustrated in the examples from this study's female-college-student participants. This theory provided a frame of reference to understand how the needs of these female college students are being met through social-networking platforms.

Cognitive needs. Social networking is a communication tool that allows people to engage with their network for up-to-date information, knowledge, and comprehension (West & Turner, 2013). People use social networks to find out what is happening within their community. It is a tool to find local, national, and international news that is extremely current. In one of her journals, FCS-1 provided an example of social networking meeting her cognitive needs:

I liked the student center on Facebook. I felt good about this experience, because I will now be more informed about events happening in the student center. I feel more connected from this experience, because I will now be more connected to the student

center and events happening at the student center. In general I will be more connected to the community.

Social networking is a place to find dates of events and locations of businesses. It helps users navigate day-to-day experiences as they can access information quickly from their fingertips, retrieving important information specific to their community and to society as a whole.

Affective needs. Social networking provided the participants an emotional escape. Seeing friends' pictures of their experiences or happy moments made the participants happy. The students found it pleasant and fulfilling to see happiness in others through their social networks. Receiving likes and comments about their own posts also brought the participants positive feelings of affirmation, love, and contentment. FCS-2 described how her social-networking experience met her affective needs:

I used Snapchat this morning around 11am. My boyfriend and I went to breakfast and I took a picture with him and posted it publicly saying "Happy Sunday". It made me feel happy. I'm not sure why but it made me happy to be about to express how happy I was in the moment, even though I was unsure of who would see it.

Sharing her happiness with her friends through the social-networking platform gratified FCS-2's needs, bringing her back to use the social network frequently.

Personal integrative needs. Social networks allow for identity impression management to enhance credibility, confidence, and status (West & Turner, 2013). People learn who they are through communication with others, and identity is formed through others' impressions (Adler & Proctor, 2011). Through participants' choices of what personal information to share about themselves with their network, they were able to create the "face" of their identity to show to others. Participants chose certain pictures to share and determined what topics were appropriate

to discuss in posts. The choice to post certain information and leave out other information is known as “personal branding” and helps people become who they want to be by co-creating their self-identity through how they feel about themselves and what their network says about them (Giuseppe, Wiederhold, & Cipresso, 2016). The process of maintaining an identity through social-networking profiles enhanced participants’ personal confidence, particularly through likes and comments about their profile picture and information they chose to disclose. In a journal, FCS-3 mentioned changing her public profile picture, which made her feel good because she thought she looked very nice in the picture. This conscious choice allowed FCS-3 to put forth the face she wanted to portray to her network of friends, influencing how they see her identity through her lens of self-expression.

Social integrative needs. Social integrative needs are the needs people fulfill by enhancing connections with family and friends via online interactions (West & Turner, 2013). The social-networking experiences allowed participants to regularly engage in virtual communication with their friends. Social networking was tool for participants to stay in contact with friends who live far away and to maintain interpersonal relationships with people they see frequently. Further, through social networking, participants could share their social lives with friends and explore what their friends were doing. Social networking provided an outlet for mutual give and take of support, escape from the stressors of everyday life, and entertainment from friends through the exploration of photo and videos. FCS-5 described an instance where she was able to offer support for friends, which fulfilled her need for socialization and connection with friends:

I checked Facebook this morning and commented on some friends’ posts publicly. It made me feel good because I left some advice for a girl that is struggling with her mental

health, and I shared some links and advice with a friend who is looking at becoming vegan. I feel more connected because these are 2 people with whom I rarely get the chance to talk to anymore so it was cool to offer advice.

Social networks are virtual spaces that allow socialization with friends without having to be in the same physical space together. This socialization online takes place with people the participants have pre-established relationships with, usually not with people they have met online.

Tension release needs. The participants enjoyed turning to their social-networking platforms to take a break from stress and responsibilities of everyday life. During the interviews, the participants mentioned one activity they enjoyed was scrolling through their Facebook timeline or Instagram feed to take a break from work or homework, take their minds off their to-do list, and turn their minds off from whatever was bothering them. FCS-5 shared an interaction with her roommate that exemplified the use of social networking to relieve tension and fulfill a need:

I used Tumblr with my roommate. We were both just looking at the posts together. I didn't share anything personal, but reblogged a few posts I thought were funny or relatable. I felt great afterwards. My roommate and I had a super fun time laughing at funny videos and reading interesting theories about TV shows.

FCS-5's social-networking use was a relaxing, mindless activity to relieve tension. It allowed her to reset and then get back to her responsibilities after a tension release.

Research Question 5. What feelings emerge after using social-networking platforms to connect? Participants experienced both positive and negative emotions pertaining to their social networking use. Receiving more likes, comments, and other reactions provided a positive sense of self-worth. For example, FCS-1 stated:

I used Facebook to post these photos. These photos could only be seen by my friends on Facebook. This experience made me feel good about myself, because I was excited to share my experience. . . . I felt more connected because of this experience, because people know more about what is happening in my life right now.

This made her feel good about herself and connected to her network of friends.

Receiving fewer likes, comments, and other reactions provided a negative sense of self-value. The positive feelings from the likes, comments, and reactions were enjoyable for the participants, but the negative emotions seemed to have a deeper impact on their sense of self. Often, participants mentioned negative feelings from their interactions with the social-networking platforms as they influenced their emotions and self-esteem. These findings are the darker side to the benefits the participants' received from their use of social-networking platforms, which seem to suggest a stronger impact than the positive findings. The following categories represent the negative emotions that stem from social-networking use, which are fear of missing out and negative self-value/self-worth.

Fear of missing out (FoMO). The FoMO concept, which stems from the use of social-networking platforms, is an outcome of when people use social networking to see what is going on but then feel let down when they are not included, a feeling that brings them back to the social-networking platform frequently to make sure they are not overlooked again. This cycle can cause anxiety and lead to unhappiness. The participants in this study confirmed feelings of FoMO throughout their journal entries and, when questioned, expressed the need for inclusion through their network of friends on social-networking platforms. Not being invited to an event produced feelings of isolation among the participants. Several journals from participants indicated that seeing a post showing their friends out having a good time when they were not

invited themselves left the participant with a sense of isolation and sadness. FCS-1 explained, “When my friends want to go to events with me that I am interested in on Facebook my self-value increases. It makes me feel left out and jealous when I’m not invited and informed about an event.” FCS-6 also experienced negative feelings associated with being left out through social networking. She stated:

Another time I am negatively impacted is when I see pictures of my friends getting together, I often end up wondering, well, hey, why didn’t they invite me? This, again, leaves me feeling disappointed, and wondering whether they really consider me one of their friends, or if I’m just someone they hang out with when it’s convenient.

FCS-5 echoed the other participants’ feelings:

I feel a little betrayed when people go out and don’t invite me. But only if they are semi-close friends. If acquaintances post about their parties, that’s okay. But if I see a few work people get together after work even though I had also just been at work, I feel like I was stabbed in the back. Then I feel worried that they don’t like me or think enough about me to invite me out and being forgotten is never a fun feeling.

FoMO can have real consequences on self-value/self-worth, especially for young adults in the process of navigating college and developing their personal identities and sense of self. A current study focused on social-media use of young adults in the United States found that young adults who partake in frequent social-media use have high levels of perceived social isolation (Primack et al., 2017). This effect on a person’s mental health could have damaging outcomes.

Negative self-value/self-worth. Negative sense of self has been linked to mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, eating disorders, suicidal tendencies, and addiction (Mann et al., 2004). The participants experienced low self-esteem from their social-networking use.

When participants' posts did not receive the anticipated feedback, participants felt isolation or discontentment. FCS-3 believed:

It does influence your self-value if I had to say so myself. It is like you are always in competition with people when you look at pictures, posts, and events. It can also increase or decrease your value depending on how you use all of the platforms. Social media is all about what you use it for and for me, it is to show the better side of myself, but no one ever knows what is really going on behind closed doors. It is only a small image of what you really are and that is what makes the self value of it sad.

FCS-6 discussed her thoughts about self-worth influenced by social networking:

I would say that social media use does influence my self worth, unfortunately. I would like to say that it is only positively influenced, and the little things like how many followers I have, or likes, doesn't effect me, but that would be dishonest. I am positively effected (excited/validated) when I see that I have a high number of likes on a post, or a lot of followers, and negatively effected (disappointed) when I don't get as many reactions, or the right reaction.

These feelings of lowered self-esteem/self-worth were evident throughout the data and were echoed by all participants in some capacity.

The participants may have experienced a more negative impact overall and on a deeper level than positive feelings from social-networking use. The participants sought social-networking experiences in the hopes of gratifying their affective need of a pleasurable experience, only to feel let down when they viewed a picture or an event to which they were not invited. This experience influences self-esteem and can negatively impact feelings of college students. Mental health plays an important role in the success of college students, and social-

networking use may be contributing to anxiety and depression. It is also possible, however, to use social networking in positive ways for mental health support if incorporated as a supplemental program for students seeking online peer-support communities.

Implications for Practice

Researching how female college students use social networking, specifically how they use the medium to connect with others, has informed my role as an educational leader and faculty member. As I walk into my classroom and see all my students on their mobile devices, I now have a peek inside what is taking place on those tiny screens. As educational leaders, it is what we do next that can impact this scenario. We see students engaged with their phones throughout campus, but do we stop to think about the cognitive implications lurking in their minds? We can choose to dismiss this behavior, to think that social networking is mindless entertainment, and move forward with our teaching or role within the university setting, or we can choose to address the effects of social networking on our students. When we stop to listen to our students, we realize there is a lot to learn about what is happening in their complicated lives. I am mindful of what Lee Burdette Williams (1998) eloquently stated in her article “Behind Every Face Is a Story”:

They teach me and remind me that I am one link in the chain of their education, and this means I am linked to all others in this community of educators. Here we are, held together by the lives of our students—lives incredibly fragile, remarkably hardy, complicated, and challenging—ours to know and understand for the asking. (p. 21)

In essence, higher education professionals need to take a step back from their own complicated lives and think about the complexities of each of our students.

The knowledge I have gained from this research has influenced the ways I view college students' use of social networking, providing me a glimpse into how social networking contributes to college students' development process. The academic process of completing this research project has provided me with new insight into the ways the contemporary female college student is communicating and connecting today through new forms of social networking. This study's findings suggest that social-networking communication behavior is an extension of the face-to-face relationships that female students create offline. Students manage these connections symbolically through virtual symbols and language that they co-create to make sense of this social process of communication, which results in feelings both positive and negative. Social networking plays an enormous role in the day-to-day lives of female college students. By understanding their use of the medium, educational leaders can be better prepared to use social networking within the higher-educational setting in ways that are aligned with how students use it to connect. The following paragraphs provide some ideas for social-networking integration strategies for educational leaders that may provide students with a sense of connection, such as peer-to-peer mentor programs, virtual classroom/organization communities, and social-networking virtual support groups.

More conversations are needed pertaining to social networking. From faculty and support staff to student organizations and mentor programs, having open, honest dialogue about media and their effects can help students understand their role within society and look at media from different perspectives. Sharing personal narratives about social-networking experiences with others could shed light on the prevalent issues college students face regarding social-networking use. This study found that social networking shapes self-value/self-worth, which is important for understanding the development of the female college student and how she

interprets her identity and place in the world. Incorporating social networking into the day-to-day learning process can foster collaboration across curricula. For example, general education courses that are required for all students could incorporate media literacy to enhance learning about social-networking influences. More specifically, educational leaders could facilitate open dialogue about the effects of social-networking use, like FoMO or the negative impacts on self-concept, which could help students understand they are not alone when experience these negative feelings. Embracing the medium and learning more about it will help educational leaders connect with their students about social-networking use.

This study's results suggest that connection through social-networking platforms happens on multiple levels. Social-networking platforms are interpersonal communication tools that allowed the participants to interact with their network in various ways depending on which need they were trying to gratify. For example, the students indicated "pre-established" relationship connections happened on multiple levels, depending on what they wanted to communicate. The types of connection (superficial, causal, intimate) influenced the social network of choice and the type of information that was shared.

The act of connecting through social networking gave participants the opportunity to be the creator of their story, the producer of their broadcast, the director of their online presence. For example, changing their profile picture, sharing a picture from a night out with friends, sharing an opinion or feeling about a specific topic, or commenting on their friends' pages allowed participants to connect on the level of their choosing. These practices gratified needs, bringing the participant back to engage and connect frequently. FCS-1 stated:

The amount of people who can see a post on Facebook matters. More people viewing a post on Facebook means that more people will get to know your thoughts and beliefs

through every post that you make. This is important to keep in mind while posting to ensure that every post that you make is suitable for the intended audience. If the post is not you might end up embarrassing yourself.

This act of self-disclosure gratified the need to be heard and understood by their audience, bringing participants back to see if they had achieved their intended message. Providing social-networking spaces for students to share their thoughts and feelings with current classmates or members of organizations with whom they regularly interact face-to-face may have a positive effect on students.

Recommendations for faculty. This study showed that students use social-networking platforms to maintain existing relationships offline, not to create new relationships online. Therefore, educational leaders need to foster in-person relationships first and then guide students to the appropriate online social-networking resources that can foster success, provide support, or promote community. Faculty could create classroom communities for their students who have preexisting relationships in the physical teaching classroom and expound on their learning, creating togetherness and belonging, which could help with retention as Tinto (1999) suggested. Educational leaders should ask students to continue dialogue together online by using hashtags, posting on classroom Facebook pages, sharing photos and videos, and facilitating dialogue through the different social-networking platforms to engage students where they are and with a medium that students know best.

Educational leaders must also learn about the symbolic nature of language use online and in social-networking platforms. As this study shows, this construction of shared meaning through virtual symbols can offer insight into the complexity of this virtual space. Being cognizant of the phenomenon of connection and its multiple levels will provide the appropriate

context to understand social-networking platforms as a connection tool among female college students.

Recommendations for student affairs practitioners. This study's results suggest that student affairs practitioners may want to consider new and innovative ways to reach students and engage them in student organizations, support services, campus happenings, and student opportunities. By creating relationships via campus programs and face-to-face interaction, students may become more inclined to create connections online through Facebook pages, Instagram feeds, Twitter accounts, and other social-networking platforms. For example, student organizations, classrooms, counseling groups, and advising groups could create virtual communities that are a continuation of in-person groups. Each student would be asked to join the private group that would be a virtual safe space for open dialogue, blogging, discussion threads, question-and-answer sessions, and self-concept-building activities. As demonstrated by this study, these online social-networking activities would support students' need for being heard and understood. By reaching out to students through notifications on social networks, educational leaders could help meet their need of belonging and inclusion. Reaching out to students regularly through these social-networking communities might provide the persistence necessary for students to continue on the path of educational success.

FoMO was a common theme threaded throughout the data. This research may suggest that addressing FoMO at the beginning of a college student's career could be beneficial for the student. Creating peer-to-peer mentor programs could drastically cut down on the negative implications of FoMO that social networking inflicts on students. Freshman students would be paired with an upperclassman with whom they connect. This initial selecting of peers must be done in person, however, to start the foundation of a mentor relationship between the students.

This onground relationship is foundational to the continuous relationship that would be regularly fostered online. The mentor would consistently check in with the mentee through their social-networking connection. The mentor would provide answers to questions about the higher-education experience but would also send invites to happenings around campus, providing a tailored experience to meet the needs of the mentee. These acts of connection could alleviate feelings of FoMO and boost the mentees' self-esteem/self-worth.

Recommendations for counseling departments. A study published in *Translational Issues in Psychological Science* surveyed 386 college students from a large university, and their findings suggested that higher levels of FoMO were associated with more symptoms of depression related to social-media use (Baker, Krieger, & LeRoy, 2016). This study would suggest that FoMO was experienced within the participants of this study's social-networking behavior. Educational leaders need to be aware of the mental health effects, such as anxiety and depression, that social-networking use may have on students; fostering positive social-networking experiences could bring about constructive social support and connectedness on campus (Seabrook, Kern, & Rickard, 2016). According to the National College Health Assessment of Spring 2016, more than a quarter of the approximately 90,000 undergraduate students surveyed from 137 colleges experienced overwhelming anxiety within the past 2 weeks (ACHA, 2016). Due to their lack of funding, many campus mental health centers are not equipped to serve the higher rates of students entering college with mental illnesses (Simon, 2017). One way educational leaders might be able to combat this overwhelming deficit would be through fostering the growth of virtual social-networking communities centered on college students' mental health. Campus counseling centers could direct their students to online social-networking resources aimed at peer-to-peer mental health support. This type of social-

networking support system could help students cope with their personal difficulties and aid them in achieving their goals.

Counseling departments could also regularly touch base with the students they see in person through their own social-networking platforms. These connections could provide students with a safe space to discuss their feelings, worries, experiences, and fears. Social-networking support services could add a layer of mental health maintenance to help alleviate feelings of anxiety and depression in between the face-to-face meetings with counselors.

Recommendations for educational leaders. Educational leaders will benefit from the incorporation of social-networking strategies to connect with students, offering a more comprehensive and well-rounded approach to helping students navigate their college experience. Instead of looking at social networking as just an activity people enjoy, we can harness social networking for students' good within the higher-educational setting. Tinto (1999) discussed the concept of persistence as an aspect of motivation for students. Sense of belonging influences persistence, and, if educational leaders can promote persistence by engaging students and promoting a sense of belonging, students are more likely to be retained through graduation (Tinto, 1999). Building social-networking communities that help shape positive self-worth, providing a space for students to feel heard and understood, and allowing students to feel included will help retain students throughout college, shaping their character and perceived sense of self. This study would seem to suggest these social-networking communities need to be structured in a way that can be operationalized through the establishment of initial onground relationships.

As the rates of anxiety and depression continue to rise on college campuses, the supportive nature of social-networking communities could benefit students struggling with

mental health issues. Learning the new social-networking platforms, their uses for connection among students, and students' desire to be heard through this medium will help educational leaders be more informed. The feelings that social networking evokes, such as FoMO, are strong and can have major implications for students if not caught early with intervening support from educational leaders. These support services can be the added layer of mental health maintenance students need, as well as a sensible alternative for counseling departments that experience financial and personnel struggles.

Implications for Theory

Figure 1 on pg. 28 provides a graphical representation of social-networking communication/connecting behavior by female college students proved to be influenced by social behavior theory and media theory. These spheres overlap, combining to create the symbolic nature of social networking that constructs meaning for its users and impacts the ways these female college students use the medium to connect. Virtual symbols express thoughts, feelings, and ideas through the medium, meeting the users' needs. The uses and gratifications theory by West and Turner (2013) can be used as an updated lens to view the needs (cognitive, affective, personal, social, and tension) that are met through the symbolic communication channels. The cultural environment that surrounds the individual participant of this study took into consideration demographic, psychographic variables, and societal norms that influence the communication process. This lens is a good tool for understanding the themes that emerged from this study:

- Connection happens on multiple levels and is used to maintain existing relationships;
- Construction of shared meaning through virtual symbols;

- Shapes self-value/self-worth;
- Evokes feelings, both good and bad;
- And wanting to be heard and understood.

The themes represent the overlapping area of the Venn diagram. The themes are representative of the participants in this study and illustrate how these six participants experienced social networking, specifically to connect with others. This conceptual framework provides a lens to view social-networking use by female college students and could be used and adapted by other researchers to study social-networking use. This new conceptual framework provides a more thorough examination of social-networking use as opposed to just looking at symbolic interactionism or the uses and gratifications theory independently.

Recommendations for Future Research

The purpose of this research was to understand how female college students use social networks, specifically how they use the medium to connect with others. Some points emerged from the research that I believe should be investigated further. These items are discussed in greater detail below.

Other-gender-identifying students' use of social networks. For this research study, I narrowed my focus to allow for thorough examination of the connecting phenomenon through social-networking platforms. Therefore, I only examined female college students' use of social networks. Researching other-gender-identity perspectives could provide a distinctive view of social-networking use by college students.

Other uses of social-networking platforms. For this research study, I specifically looked at the phenomenon of connecting through social networks. There are many other uses of social networking that could provide a unique perspective into how female college students are

using social-networking platforms such as for entertainment, news, dating, information, commerce, or employment.

Identity development. One theme that stood out through my research was how important identity was to the social-networking experience. Participants filtered their posts/pages through their own lens of how they believed others would view them. This cognitive behavior operates on a deeper level, involving perceptions and identity development and impression management of self. Social networking seems to play a large role in college students' identity-development process, which could have a profound impact on the college experience. More research in this area could prove promising for understanding self-concept as it pertains to social-networking use.

Social networking and mental health. My study found that the negative implications of social-networking use, or the “darker side” of social networking, impacts college students' sense of self-value/self-worth. This could be an area of interest for future research. As higher-education practitioners and mental health practitioners seek to learn more about college students, they may find that the negative impact of social-networking use is stronger than they suspected. Understanding the negative impact of social networking on college students could provide a better understanding about how to support college students' well-being.

Apps for qualitative research. My data-collection process utilized the VisionsLive qualitative-research app, giving me instantaneous data from participants. I was able to have the participants journal directly after their social-networking use, which provided me with their answers in the moment when they were experiencing specific thoughts and feelings. Most of these mobile apps have been created for qualitative marketing research, but the process can be utilized for other types of studies as they allow the collection of pictures, text, and videos in real

time. Researchers can send notifications and probing questions to participants for a more interactive data-collection experience. New qualitative-research apps are being created quickly, and the use of these platforms is growing. The cost of these apps ranges from a few hundred dollars to thousands of dollars, depending on the size of the study and number of participants. Cost could possibly be a limitation for some researchers, but there may be free options for students.

Limitations

There were several limitations to this research study. First, this study focused on six female college students from a comprehensive Midwestern university. The research participants volunteered and were all from the School of Communication, Media, and Theatre Arts, so the study's subject may have influenced their desire to participate. Five participants identified as White, and one participant identified as Black, which may have influenced the results of the study. Because of these limitations, the data and findings are not generalizable to other universities. Nevertheless, the conceptual framework employed could have some analytic merit for studies researching similar phenomenon.

Second, I served as the primary research instrument. I was a responsible researcher, following my moral and ethical compass and standards throughout the entire research process. The validity of my research study was of utmost importance to me, and my data collection and data analysis followed a rigorous process that attempted to offer minimal risk to participants and an unbiased approach to conceptualizing the data. With that said, it is impossible not to take into account that, as the main research instrument, all information flowed through me, which could be viewed as a limitation to the research study.

Third, this study only focused on female college students at one specific comprehensive Midwestern university. Other-gender-identity perspectives were not considered for this study and could have produced different findings. Also, the female participants were from specific hometowns, ages, and socioeconomic statuses not generalizable to other populations.

Fourth, I let participants self-identify the social-networking platforms they used and discussed within their journals. I could only examine the social-networking platforms they spoke of and used, yet there are hundreds of social-networking platforms online.

Finally, this research study is limited by my own knowledge and understanding of the conceptual framework and theories used to analyze the data. Though this study's findings have added to the research pertaining to female college students, future studies will consider other aspects to research and ways of interpreting the framework provided that I did not consider. I worked to the best of my ability with the amount of knowledge that I have about the topic. With these limitations recognized, I believe this research study will advance the field of educational leadership, providing practitioners and scholars more knowledge in the study of higher education. Understanding that the essence of social-networking connection for these female participants was a tool that evoked feelings and met needs, which is understood through the construction of shared meaning through virtual symbols, will aid in deepening the comprehension of the social-networking connection phenomenon.

References

- American College Health Association. American College Health Association-National College Health Assessment II: Reference Group Executive Summary Spring 2016. Hanover, MD: American College Health Association; 2016.
- Adler, R. B., & Proctor, R. F. (2011). *Looking out/looking in*. Australia: Wadsworth/Cengage Learning.
- American Sociological Association. (1999). *Code of ethics and policies and procedures of the ASA committee on professional ethics*. Washington, DC: ASA Committee on Professional Ethics.
- American Sociological Association. (2015). *What is sociology?* Retrieved from <http://www.asanet.org/about/sociology.cfm>
- Asher, B. (1993, October 6–9). *An applied social science: Journalism education and professionalization*. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Journalism Historians Association, Salt Lake City, UT.
- Association for the Study of Higher Education. (2003). *ASHE principles of ethical conduct*. Retrieved from <http://www.ashe.ws/?page=180>
- Baker, Z. G., Krieger, H., & LeRoy, A. S. (2016). Fear of missing out: Relationships with depression, mindfulness, and physical symptoms. *Translational Issues in Psychological Science*, 2(3), 275-282.
- Blogger.com (2015). *The story of Blogger*. Retrieved from <https://www.blogger.com/about>
- Blumer, H. (1969). *Symbolic interactionism: Perspective and method*. Los Angeles: University of California.

- Boyd, D. M., & Ellison, N. B. (2007). Social network sites: Definition, history, and scholarship. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, 13*, 210–230.
- Brink, H. I. L. (1993, March). *Validity and reliability in qualitative research*. Paper presented at S.A. Society of Nurse Researchers Workshop RAU '93.
- Buchanan, E. (2004). *Readings in virtual research ethics: Issues and controversies*. Hershey, PA: Information Science.
- Caplow, T., Hicks, L., & Wattenberg, B. J. (2001). *The first measured century: An illustrated guide to trends in America, 1900-2000*. Washington, D.C.: AEI Press.
- CCAP. (2015). The disappearing college male. *Forbes Magazine*. Retrieved from <http://www.forbes.com/sites/ccap/2015/05/04/the-disappearing-college-male/#38631c133e15>
- Chandler, D., & Munday, R. (2016). *A dictionary of social media*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- City Data. (2017). United States city data [data file]. Retrieved from www.city-data.com
- Cumming, W. K. (1954). *This is educational television*. Ann Arbor, MI: Edwards Brothers.
- Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2000). *Handbook of qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Dobos, J. (1992). Gratification models of satisfaction and choice of communication channels in organizations. *Communication Research, 19*, 29–51.
- Dunbar, R. (2010, March 16). *Dunbar's number: Why we can't have more than 150 friends* [Video file]. Retrieved from: <https://ed.ted.com/on/SuXNvTzp>

- Dutton, J. E., & Heaphy, E. (2003). The power of high quality connections. In K. Cameron, J. E. Dutton, & R. E. Quinn (Eds.), *Positive organizational scholarship* (pp. 263–278). San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler.
- Edosomwan, S., Prakasan, S. K., Kouame, D., Watson, J., & Seymour, T. (2011). The history of social media and its impact on business. *Journal of Applied Management and Entrepreneurship*, *16*, 1–13.
- Ellison, N. B., Steinfield, C., & Lampe, C. (2007). The benefits of Facebook “friends” social capital and college students’ use of online social network sites. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, *12*, 1143–1168.
- Emojis on Facebook. (n.d.). In *Emojipedia*. Retrieved from <https://emojipedia.org/facebook/>
- Facebook. (2015). Retrieved from www.facebook.com
- Frost, S. E., Jr. (1937). *Education’s own stations: The history of broadcast licenses issued to educational institutions*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago.
- Fulk, J., Steinfield, C. W., Schmitz, J., & Power, J. G. (1987). A social information processing model of media use in organizations. *Communication Research*, *14*, 529–552.
- Green-Hamann, S., & Sherblom, J. C. (2014). The influences of optimal matching and social capital on communicating support. *Journal of Health Communication*, *19*, 1130–1144.
- Groenewald, T. (2004). A phenomenological research design illustrated. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, (3)1. Retrieved from http://www.ualberta.ca/~iiqm/backissues/3_1/pdf/groenewald.pdf
- Guba, E. G., & Lincoln, Y. S. (1994). Competing paradigms in qualitative research. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 105–117). London, UK: Sage.

- Ha, L., & James, L.E. (2009). Interactivity reexamined: A baseline analysis of early business web sites, *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, (42)4, 457-474.
- Holloway, I., & Wheeler, S. (2010). *Qualitative research in nursing and healthcare* (3rd ed.). Oxford, United Kingdom: Wiley-Blackwell
- Horowitz, H. L. (1987). *Campus life: undergraduate cultures from the end of the eighteenth century to the present*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Johnson, A. J., Haigh, M. M., Becker, J. A. H., Craig, E. A., & Wigley, S. (2008). College students' use of relational management strategies in email in long-distance and geographically close relationships. *Journal of Computer Mediated Communication*, 13, 381–404.
- Johnson, R. B., & Christensen, L. (2014). *Educational research: Quantitative, qualitative, and mixed approaches*. Washington, DC: SAGE.
- Johnson, M. (2013). *The history of Twitter*. Retrieved from <http://www.socialnomics.net/2013/01/23/the-history-of-twitter/>
- Jones, S., Johnson-Yale, C., Millermaier, S., & Seoane Perez, F. (2009). Everyday life, online: U.S. college students' use of the Internet. *First Monday*, 14(10).
doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.5210/fm.v14i10.2649>
- Katz, E., Blumler, J. G., & Gurevitch, M. (1974). Uses and gratifications research. *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, 37, 509–523.
- Katz, E., Gurevitch, M., & Haas, H. (1973). On the use of the mass media for important things. *American Sociological Review*, 38, 164-181.

- Kietzmann, J., Hermkens, K., McCarthy, I.P., & Silvestre, B. (2011). Social media? Get serious! Understanding the functional building blocks of social media. *Business Horizons*, 54(3), 241-251.
- Lanigan, R. (1988). *Phenomenology of communication Marleau-Ponty's thematics in communicology and semiology*. Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University.
- Leiner, B. M., Cerf, V. G., Clark, D. D., Kahn, R. E., Kleinrock, L., Lynch, D. C., . . . Wolf, S. (2012). *Brief history of the Internet*. Retrieved from <http://www.internetsociety.org/brief-history-internet>
- LinkedIn.com. (2015). *A brief history of LinkedIn*. Retrieved from <https://ourstory.linkedin.com/>
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- List of Social Networking Websites. (n.d.). In *Wikipedia*. Retrieved January 16, 2018, from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_social_networking_websites
- Lofland, J., & Lofland, L. H. (1995). *Analyzing social settings: A guide to qualitative observation and analysis*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- Long, S.D., & Glenn, C.L. (2012). Considering phenomenology in virtual work research. *Virtual Work and Human Interaction Research*. (pp. 248-256). Hershey, PA: IGI Global.
- Lutters, W. G., & Ackerman, M. S. (1996). An introduction to the Chicago School of sociology. *Interval Research Proprietary*, 2(6), 1-25.
- Mann M., Hosman, C. M., Schaalma H. P., & De Vries, N. K. (2004). Self-esteem in a broad-spectrum approach for mental health promotion. *Health Education Research*, 19, 357–372.
- Mazie, S. (2016). Do you have too many Facebook friends? Retrieved from <http://bigthink.com/praxis/do-you-have-too-many-facebook-friends>

- Mead, G. H. (1934). *Obstacles and promises in the development of an ideal society: Mind, self & society*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago.
- Merriam, S. B. (2002). *Introduction to qualitative research*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Miles, M., & Huberman, M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook*. New York City, NY: SAGE.
- Nielsen Company. (2012). *The Nielsen U.S. social media survey* [Data File]. Retrieved from <http://www.nielsen.com/us/en/insights/reports/2012/state-of-the-media-the-social-media-report-2012.html>
- Nielsen Ratings. (2014). Retrieved from <http://www.nielsen.com/us/en/top10s.html>
- Park, N., Kee, K., & Valenzuela, S. (2009). Being immersed in social networking environment: Facebook groups, uses and gratifications, and social outcomes. *CyberPsychology & Behavior, 12*(6), 729–733.
- Pempek, T. A., Yermolayeva, A., & Calvert, S. L. (2009). College students' social networking experiences on Facebook. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology, 30*, 227–238.
- Perrin, A. (2015). *Social media usage: 2005-2015*. Retrieved from <http://www.pewinternet.org/2015/10/08/social-networking-usage-2005-2015/>
- Peterson, G. L. (2014). *A history of telephone service at the University of Northern Iowa*. Cedar Falls, IA: Special Collections & University Archives.
- Pew Research Internet Project. (2013). *Social networking fact sheet*. Retrieved from <http://www.pewinternet.org/fact-sheets/social-networking-fact-sheet/>
- Pew Research Center. (2016). *Social media update 2016*. Retrieved from <http://www.pewinternet.org/2016/11/11/social-media-update-2016/>
- Public broadcasting: A status report 1980. (1981). *Educational Record, 62*(3), 78–79.

- Primack, B. A., Shensa, A., Sidani, J. E., Whaites, E. O., Lin, L. Y., Rosen, D., . . . Miller, E. (2017). Social media use and perceived social isolation among young adults in the U.S. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, *53*, 1–8.
- Przybylski, A. K., Murayama, K., DeHaan, C. R., & Gladwell, V. (2013). Motivational, emotional, and behavioral correlates of fear of missing out. *Computer in Human Behavior*, *29*, 1841–1848.
- Qualman, E. (2011). *Digital leader: 5 simple keys to success and influence*. New York City, NY: McGraw-Hill.
- Giuseppe, R., Wiederhold, B., & Cipresso, P. (2016). Psychology of social media: From technology to identity. Retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/303410829_Psychology_of_Social_Media_From_Technology_to_Identity
- Maczewski, M., Stoney, M.A., & Hoskins, M. (2004). Conducting congruent, ethical, qualitative research in internet-mediated research environments. *Readings in virtual research ethics* (pp. 62-78). Calgary, AB: Information Science Publishing.
- media. BusinessDictionary.com. Retrieved February 25, 2018, from BusinessDictionary.com website <http://www.businessdictionary.com/definition/media.html>
- Rubin, A. M., Bryant, J., & Zillmann, D. (2002). *Media effects: Advances in theory and research* (2nd ed.). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Ruggiero, T. E. (2000). Uses and gratifications theory in the 21st century. *Mass Communication and Society*, *3*, 3–37.
- Saul, S. J. (2000). *The culture of American college radio*. Ames: Iowa State University.

- Seabrook, E. M., Kern, M. L., & Rickard, N. S. (2016). Social networking sites, depression, and anxiety: A systematic review. *JMIR Mental Health*, 3(4), e50.
<http://doi.org/10.2196/mental.5842>
- Shontell, A. (2013, July 2). The sketchy, founder-feuding history of Snapchat summed up in an infographic. *Business Insider*. Retrieved from <http://www.businessinsider.com/history-of-snapchat-lawsuit-infographic-2013-7>
- Simon, C. (2017, May 04). More and more students need mental health services. But colleges struggle to keep up. Retrieved February 27, 2018, from
<http://college.usatoday.com/2017/05/04/more-and-more-students-need-mental-health-services-but-colleges-struggle-to-keep-up/>
- Statista. (2017). *Daily time spent on social networking by Internet users worldwide from 2012 to 2017*. Available from <https://www.statista.com/statistics/433871/daily-social-media-usage-worldwide/>
- Smith, A. (2014). *6 new facts about Facebook*. Retrieved from <http://pewrsr.ch/1dm5NmJ>
- Tinto, V. (1999). Taking retention seriously: Rethinking the first year of college. *NACADA Journal*, 19, 1–5.
- United States Census. (2010). *Michigan populations* [Data file] Available from
<https://www.census.gov/2010census/>
- Valenzuela, S., Park, N., & Kee, K. F. (2009) Is there social capital in a social network site? Facebook use and college students' life satisfaction, trust, and participation. *Journal of Computer Mediated Communication*, 14, 875–901.
- Valkenburg, P. M., Schouten, A. P., & Peter, J. (2005). Adolescents' identity experiments on the Internet. *New Media & Society*, 7, 383–402.

Van Manen, M. (1990). *Researching lived experience: Human science for an action sensitive pedagogy*. Albany, NY: State University of New York.

West, R. L., & Turner, L. H. (2013). *Introducing communication theory: analysis and application*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill Education.

Williams, L. B. (1998, March-April). Behind every face is a story. *About Campus*..

Yin, R. K. (2011). *Qualitative research from start to finish*. New York City, NY: Guilford.

YouTube. (2014). *YouTube for press*. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/yt/press/>

Zirkel, S., Garcia, J.A., & Murphy, M.C. (2015). Experiencing-sampling research methods and their potential for education research. *Educational Researcher*, 44 (1), 7-16.

Appendix: IRB Approval Letter

RESEARCH @ EMU

UHSRC Determination: **EXEMPT**

DATE: **March 12, 2017**

TO: **Megan Gore
Department of Leadership and Counseling
Eastern Michigan University**

Re: **UHSRC: # 1021128-1
Category: Exempt category 2
Approval Date: March 12, 2017**

Title: **The Digital Self: A Qualitative Approach to Studying Female College Students' Use of Social Networking Platforms to Connect With Others**

Your research project, entitled **The Digital Self: A Qualitative Approach to Studying Female College Students' Use of Social Networking Platforms to Connect With Others**, has been determined **Exempt** in accordance with federal regulation 45 CFR 46.102. UHSRC policy states that you, as the Principal Investigator, are responsible for protecting the rights and welfare of your research subjects and conducting your research as described in your protocol.

Renewals: Exempt protocols do not need to be renewed. When the project is completed, please submit the **Human Subjects Study Completion Form** (access through IRBNet on the UHSRC website).

Modifications: You may make minor changes (e.g., study staff changes, sample size changes, contact information changes, etc.) without submitting for review. However, if you plan to make changes that alter study design or any study instruments, you must submit a **Human Subjects Approval Request Form** and obtain approval prior to implementation. The form is available through IRBNet on the UHSRC website.

Problems: All major deviations from the reviewed protocol, unanticipated problems, adverse events, subject complaints, or other problems that may increase the risk to human subjects **or** change the category of review must be reported to the UHSRC via an **Event Report** form, available through IRBNet on the UHSRC website

Follow-up: If your Exempt project is not completed and closed after **three years**, the UHSRC office will contact you regarding the status of the project.

Please use the UHSRC number listed above on any forms submitted that relate to this project, or on any correspondence with the UHSRC office.

Good luck in your research. If we can be of further assistance, please contact us at 734-487-3090 or via e-mail at human.subjects@emich.edu. Thank you for your cooperation.

Sincerely,

Beth Kubitskey
Chair
COE Human Subjects Review Committee