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Themes of Sexualization, Racialization, and Intersectional Objectification in University “Crush  
Pages” on Twitter

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Themes of Sexualization, Racialization, and Intersectional Objectification in University “Crush Pages” on Twitter

*Introduction*

My research assesses textual information from four universities’ “crush pages” on Twitter, a widely used social media website. Furthermore, I conducted focus groups to record and analyze university students’ reactions to and experiences with crush pages. A crush is defined as “a strong feeling of romantic love for someone that is usually not expressed and does not last a long time” (“Crush,” n.d.). Crush pages allow Twitter users to anonymously submit a “tweet” – or status update consisting of 140 characters or less – about a person they have a crush on, and a moderator then posts this tweet on the crush page. Crush pages are open to the public and individuals do not need a Twitter account to view the information that is posted to them. I investigated if there is evidence of sexualization, racialization, and intersectional objectification in tweets posted on crush pages and if these same themes were discussed in focus group sessions with university students. Before describing my research in further detail, I discuss existing scholarship on the Internet and social networking sites, online sexual harassment, racialization, sexualization, and intersectionality. I have derived my coding categories and theoretical framework from the prevalent academic discourse on these processes.

*The Internet & Social Networking Sites*

Internet use is widespread. In fact, an estimated 40 percent of the world’s population, or three billion people, use the Internet (International Telecommunications Union, 2014). Moreover, roughly 80 percent of Internet users report using social networking sites (SNSs)

(Panek, Nardis, & Konrath, 2013). A SNS is defined as “a popular way for users to connect, communicate, and share content” (Mislove, Lehmann, Ahn, Onnela, & Rosenquist, 2011).

Females constitute the largest population of SNS users (Lenhart, Madden, Smith, & Macgill, 2007). With the advent of the Internet, some scholars felt that the web would provide a space for females to express themselves however they pleased outside of society’s gender binary (Plant, 2000). Social media was expected to influence females to both (1) challenge gender stereotypes and (2) define what the experience of being a “girl” is like for them (Koskela, 2004; Scott-Dixon, 2002). These predictions, however, do not reflect reality. Social media, for the most part, presents women in a sexualized and commoditized manner (Bailey, Steeves, Burkell, & Regan, 2013). The presence of misogyny online has been reported by numerous scholars (Megarry, 2014).

The SNS Twitter, a microblogging site that allows users to create status updates, exceeds 75 million users (Murthy, 2011). Of all Twitter users, 46 percent engage with the SNS on a daily basis (Megarry, 2014). Young adults have a particularly strong presence on Twitter, as one-third of all users fall between 18 and 29 years of age (Malikhao & Servaes, 2011).

### *Online Sexual Harassment*

There is not a universal definition of online sexual harassment. Megarry (2014) defines online sexual harassment as “a political term” and claims that it “identifies the abuse of women online as a manifestation of male dominance which functions to perpetuate male social control in cyberspace” (p. 52). The majority of online sexual harassment victims are females (Barnes, 2001). Online sexual harassment has negative implications – it can impact victims on an emotional level and can lead them to avoid using particular SNSs or SNSs altogether (Barak,

2005). Online sexual harassment has been compared to street harassment because both (1) transpire in public venues; (2) involve an element of anonymity; and (3) involve references to women’s bodies in a sexualizing and objectifying manner (Megarry, 2014).

Barak (2005) defines three types of sexual harassment. One form is unwanted sexual attention, which concerns “uninvited behaviors that explicitly communicate sexual desires or intentions [sic] toward another individual” (p. 78). Gender harassment, a second type, refers to “unwelcome verbal and visual comments and remarks that insult individuals because of their gender or that use stimuli known or intended to provoke negative emotions” (p. 78). A third kind, sexual coercion, regards “putting physical or psychological pressure on a person to elicit sexual cooperation” (p. 78). While all three of these forms of sexual harassment occur both online and offline, for the most part there are considerably more instances of gender harassment and unwanted sexual attention online.

### *Racialization*

Based on Galabuzi’s (2004; 2006) definition, racialization can be understood as “the social process whereby certain groups come to be designated as different and consequently subjected to differential and unequal treatment” (Hyman, 2009). Representations of individuals through race-related stereotypes is one form of racialization.

Individuals who prescribe to racial stereotypes – whether knowingly or unknowingly – may attribute these stereotypes to people on reality television shows. For example, Bresnahan and Lee (2011) showed that viewers of the reality show *Survivor: Cook Islands* generated racial stereotypes about the contestants. Overall, viewers indicated that European American contestants were significantly more sociable than Asian American, African American, and Hispanic

American contestants. Moreover, Hispanic American contestants were given lower scores of competency than those in all other racial groups. Viewers considered African Americans to be the least cohesive group. The race of the viewers themselves was also important, as those who identified as non-European American expressed antagonism toward European American contestants. Thus, the results suggest that reality television shows can lead to stereotype activation in viewers and that race plays a role in how viewers perceive individuals on reality television shows.

Research shows that racial stereotypes are created and reinforced through the media. Racial stereotyping has been found in music videos (Turner, 2011), telenovelas (Rivadeneira, 2011), television programs (Gilens, 1996; Turner, 2014), video games (Burgess, Dill, Stermer, Burgess, & Brown, 2011), and in cyberspace (Museus & Truong, 2013).

The oversexualization and infantilization of African American women are two dominating stereotypes that at first glance appear contradictory (Dagbovie-Mullins, 2013). However, these stereotypes both imply that African American women “are forgettable and invisible and yet highly visible, hypersexual, and repelling” (Dagbovie-Mullins, 2013, p. 746). Patricia Hill Collins (2004) notes that racial stereotypes like these are created and reinforced through popular culture. She provides examples from rap music and popular films that use specific images of and languages (such as “freak,” “faggot,” “booty,” and “bitch”) for Black masculinity and femininity that create lasting stereotypes. Collins frames this trend in her discussion of Black sexual politics and labels gender a constituent of what she calls a “new racism” (Collins, 2004, p. 5).

*Sexualization*

Sexualization – particularly the sexualization of females – is an area of increasing concern for researchers. As noted by Bragg, Buckingham, Russell, and Willett (2011), “The sexualization of children is often presented as a relatively recent development, but it is by no means a new issue” (p. 289). To address the sexualization of girls, the American Psychological Association (APA) created a Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls. According to a report released by the Task Force, sexualization is said to take place when

a person’s value comes only from his or her sexual appeal or behavior, to the exclusion of other characteristics; a person is held to a standard that equates physical attractiveness (narrowly defined) with being sexy; a person is sexually objectified – that is, made into a thing for others’ sexual use, rather than seen as a person with the capacity for independent action and decision making; and/or sexuality is inappropriately imposed upon a person. (Zurbriggen, Collins, Lamb, Roberts, Tolman, Ward, & Blake, 2007).

The Task Force argues that there is evidence for the sexualization of females in almost all types of media, including: advertisements and magazines (Durkin & Paxton, 2002; Graff, Murnen, & Krause, 2013; Hatton & Trautner, 2011; Krassas, Blauwkamp, & Wesselink, 2001; Krassas, Blauwkamp, & Wesselink, 2003; Plous & Neptune, 1997), music lyrics (Cougar Hall, West, & Hill, 2012), music videos (Gow, 1996; Vincent, 1989), television commercials (Lin, 1997), television programs (Grabe & Hyde, 2009; Grauerholz & King, 1997; Ward, 1995), and video games (Yao, Mahood, & Linz, 2009).

The sexualization of females through the media might create a mindset that sexualized females embody certain characteristics. For example, Graff, Murnen, and Smolak (2012) studied college students’ ratings of images of girls dressed in childlike, somewhat sexualized, or definitely sexualized clothing. Girls in the images were indicated to be either of average or above



average in their accomplishments. Results revealed that images of girls in definitely sexualized clothing who were described as less accomplished were rated as the least capable, competent, determined, and intelligent. These girls were also rated lower on characteristics of morality and self-respect. What these findings suggest is that the sexualization of females has led to a relationship between the sexualized female and negative personality traits, especially when the female is described as being average in her accomplishments.

### *Intersectionality*

The term intersectionality was coined by Kimberle Crenshaw (1989), who expressed concern over “the tendency to treat race and gender as mutually exclusive categories of experience and analysis” (p. 139). An intersectional analysis considers how individuals’ gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, class, and nation interact to position them in society. This positioning is based on hierarchical systems that privilege certain identities (e.g., male, white) over others (e.g., female, people of color) (Aulette & Wittner, 2012). The interaction of these identities is the critical component in an intersectional analysis. Intersectionality, then, recognizes that “not all women suffer oppression in the same way, nor do all men always benefit from patriarchal privilege simply because they are men” (Aulette & Wittner, 2012, p. 9). Intersectionality considers multiple axes of oppression; my feminist textual analysis looks specifically at two categories – gender and race – and how they interact in tweets posted on crush pages. I name this interaction intersectional objectification, where gender and race seem to be simultaneously referenced and, in terms of characteristics, co-constitute each other.

*Research Questions*

My research question are: (1) Is there evidence of sexualization, racialization, and intersectional objectification in tweets posted on university crush pages and (2) Are these themes discussed in focus groups with university students? To address the first question I utilized content analysis or, more specifically, feminist textual analysis. I use the term textual analysis not only because I analyzed the language, and not images, used in crush page tweets but also because I perceive these tweets as social text. A text is a medium of communication that conveys meaning. The meaning in tweets posted on crush pages goes beyond a mere expression of a crush; it also embodies the ways in which sexualization and racialization occur in everyday communication and media/policy representations. To answer the second question, I conducted focus groups with university students to record their opinions on crush pages and to see, more specifically, if they address the themes of sexualization racialization, and intersectional objectification.

The existence of university crush pages is a gender and racial justice issue. Sexualization, racialization, and intersectional objectification are related to issues of power, and this relationship is studied within the field of women’s, gender, and feminist studies. Moreover, because I focused on sexualization, racialization, and their intersections, I applied an intersectional analysis. A consideration of intersectionality is heavily emphasized in feminist research. Lastly, my research is informed by multiple fields, as it draws from feminist and media theories. By definition, feminist studies is inter- and cross-disciplinary, so my application of an interdisciplinary approach makes my research project feminist.

Studying crush pages may be important feminist work because it seems that they are affiliated with many universities. A quick Google search for crush pages yielded 44 articles that had been written about them by authors working for companies such as *The Huffington Post*, *Reuters*, and *The Daily Star – Lebanon*. I came across a number of articles about crush pages in Lebanon, so it seems that crush pages are a cross-cultural and transnational phenomenon. The majority of the articles I found – 22 total – were published in April 2013. The month with the second-highest number of articles published (six) is March 2013; these are the earliest articles I came across. Overall, 36 of the articles I found were published in 2013, six were published in 2014, and I could not find dates for the remaining two. Based on what I discovered by looking at these articles, it seems likely that the first crush pages surfaced in early 2013, but this needs to be further investigated. These articles came from popular journals and university newspapers. Additionally, I found at least 30 university crush pages; some were located on Twitter and others on Facebook. Ultimately, given that university crush pages are associated with several schools and universities within and outside the United States – likely more than my very quick Google search yielded – I believe the existence of crush pages is a current and emergent trend and that it is vital that the tweets on these pages be studied as social texts. By social texts, I am referring to a multitude of media products that convey and reproduce meanings about society. From my research perspective, crush page tweets embody and reinforce gender, sexual, and racial scripts.

### ***Methods***

### ***Materials***

The data for my research is in the form of tweets from four universities’ crush pages: Grand Valley State University (GVSU), Central Michigan University (CMU), the University of

Michigan (U of M), and Michigan State University (MSU), all four of which are public universities located in Michigan. GVSU’s, CMU’s, U of M’s, and MSU’s crush pages that I assessed operate under the Twitter usernames of @GVSUlove, @CMichCrushes, @crushes\_umich, and @MSUCrushes. There are other crush pages associated with these universities; I chose to assess those that seem the most active. The number of individuals following GVSU’s, CMU’s, U of M’s, and MSU’s crush pages through their Twitter accounts was assessed at two time points: first, at the end of October 2014 and second, on April 21, 2015. @GVSUlove had the most dramatic increase in followers, from 3,575 at the first time point to 5,358 at the second. At time point one, @CMichCrushes had 8,723 followers; at time point two, there were 8,848 followers. @crushes\_umich was the only university whose crush page following decreased, from 5,310 to 5,096. @MSUCrushes had a slight increase in followers, from 14,400 to 14,600.

While the GVSU, CMU, U of M, and MSU crush pages that I analyzed are not officially associated with the universities themselves, it appears that it is students from these institutions who are sending in crush page tweets and being tweeted about. Moreover, these crush pages had distinguishable markers of their respective universities in their main photograph. The @GVSUlove page has a picture of GVSU’s Cook Carillon Tower. @CMichCrushes’ picture is of the university’s “C” logo. While @crushes\_umich and @MSUCrushes do not use photographs that specifically depict their campuses or logos, they use images that suggest an association with U of M and MSU. The @crushes\_umich picture is of the letters “LOVE”, but the “O” has been replaced by a U of M football helmet. @MSUCrushes has as its photograph “KEEP CALM AND SPARTY ON”, which is a reference to MSU’s mascot, a Spartan. Therefore, the @GVSUlove, @CMichCrushes, @crushes\_umich, and @MSUCrushes crush

pages seem to be utilized by students from GVSU, CMU, U of M, and MSU. Even though @GVSUlove and @MSUCrushes specifically state in their pages’ descriptions that they are not associated with GVSU and MSU, they – along with @CMichCrushes and @crushes\_umich – appear to be unofficially affiliated with their universities.

### *Procedure*

I printed off all tweets posted on GVSU’s, CMU’s, U of M’s and MSU’s crush pages during October 2014. Since there seemed to be fewer tweets posted during holiday breaks, I chose October as my month of interest, as very few breaks fall within this month. I assessed only a month’s worth of tweets since there were over 500 tweets posted on @GVSUlove and @MSUCrushes during October 2014. Because so many tweets were posted within just one month, theoretical saturation was expected to be achieved by assessing tweets from the month of October alone.

I performed a feminist textual analysis of tweets from the four aforementioned universities’ crush pages to see how the text of these tweets conveys meaning. According to McIntosh and Cuklanz (2014), “A feminist approach to understanding multimedia communications involves an analysis or methodological exploration of a text or group of texts with the goal of revealing the power structures, their relationships, and the contradictions that inform them” (p. 268). Since for this project I was interested in looking at conversations about sex and race, I coded the tweets based on three themes: sexualization, racialization, and intersectional objectification. When applicable, tweets were coded as more than one of these themes. Any irrelevant tweets, retweets, or pictures posted on the crush pages were not counted. Tweets that were posted more than once were counted only one time.

A tweet was coded as containing sexualization if it references a sexual act, labels an individual as “sexy”, “hot”, or a variation of these terms, and/or sexualizes the person, such as this tweet posted on @MSUCrushes on October 14, 2014: “[Student’s name] I have one question- did you sit in a pile of sugar? Bc you’ve got a pretty sweet ass! [sic]” Racialization was ascribed to tweets that reference race and/or ethnicity, such as this tweet from @MSUCrushes, which was posted on October 16, 2014: “the light skinned BZ pledges are beautiful #lodge [sic]”. A tweet was coded as intersectional objectification if it contains elements of sexualization and racialization. For example, on @GVSUlove a tweet was posted on October 3, 2014 that said “[Student’s name] from North B... I want that sweet black ass. Hot damn.” My textual analysis indicated how many tweets contain sexualization, racialization, and intersectional objectification on GVSU’s, CMU’s, U of M’s, and MSU’s crush pages during October 2014. See Appendix 1 for details of the coding scheme.

I also analyzed GVSU’s, CMU’s, U of M’s, and MSU’s institutional statistics. By looking at the demographics of sex and race at these universities, I sought to determine if tweets posted on the universities’ crush pages reflect these demographics. Target subjects’ gender can only be assumed, given that it is rarely stated in crush page tweets. However, race sometimes is, hence the need to code for racialization in my feminist textual analysis. Thus, I hope to compare university demographics to the proportion of racialized tweets on crush pages. Perhaps more racially diverse campuses have a greater number of racialized tweets. While not all students are tweeted about on the crush pages associated with their universities, it is possible that a cross-section of students are, and this was to be revealed by comparing university demographics and tweets.

Additionally, I formed focus groups to assess students’ knowledge of and perspectives on crush pages. I conducted them with students at GVSU because of the convenience of location. I held three focus groups of five, six, and seven students, for a total of 18 participants. Sessions were held during March 2015. Participants were randomly recruited from student organizations, classrooms, and the Frederik Meijer Honors College. Focus groups lasted from an hour to an hour and a half. Reference Appendix 2 for the script used during the sessions.

I began each focus group session by asking participants to complete an information card that asked them to write in their gender, sexual orientation, age, race/ethnicity, major(s), minor(s), and year in college. They were told that they could fill out all, some, or none of the card. I then gave students a packet of selected pages of tweets from the @GVSUlove Twitter page and asked them to read through the tweets and mark anything that stood out. During the first focus group, students were given five pages of tweets from October 2014. This, however, did not generate an hour’s worth of discussion, so participants also looked at another five pages of tweets posted in March 2015. The other two focus groups looked only at tweets from October 2014. The tweets were assessed prior to each session to ensure that none of the participants’ names were mentioned in any of the tweets, as presenting a tweet about a person in the room could have had serious negative implications for that individual. Overall, I was curious to see if students would bring up the themes of sexualization, racialization, and intersectional objectification that I assessed in my feminist textual analysis. Students’ responses were recorded with a recording device and laptop. Only my advisor and I have access to the data that was collected. Participants’ responses were transcribed and coded for the presence of sexualization, racialization, and intersectional objectification. I analyzed the focus group data to identify how students reacted to the @GVSUlove crush page.

## **Results**

### *Feminist Textual Analysis: Crush, Admiration, and Anonymity*

After eliminating irrelevant tweets and retweets from the four universities’ crush pages data, there were 1,220 total tweets posted during October 2014. More specifically, there were 537, 114, 61, and 508 tweets posted on GVSU’s, CMU’s, U of M’s, and MSU’s crush pages, respectively. For the crush page associated with GVSU, 245 tweets were coded as sexualized, 19 as racialized, and 14 as sexualized and racialized (i.e., intersectional objectification). Regarding the CMU crush page tweets, 36 were sexualized, two racialized, and one sexualized and racialized. There were 18 sexualized, four racialized, and four sexualized and racialized tweets posted on the U of M crush page. Finally, the MSU crush page had 128 sexualized, 10 racialized, and five sexualized and racialized tweets. See Table 1.

Table 1

*Number of tweets coded as sexualization, racialization, and intersectional objectification per crush page*

	<b>GVSU</b>	<b>CMU</b>	<b>U of M</b>	<b>MSU</b>
<b>Sexualization</b>	245	36	18	128
<b>Racialization</b>	19	2	4	10
<b>Intersectional Objectification</b>	14	1	4	5
<b>Total</b>	537	114	61	508

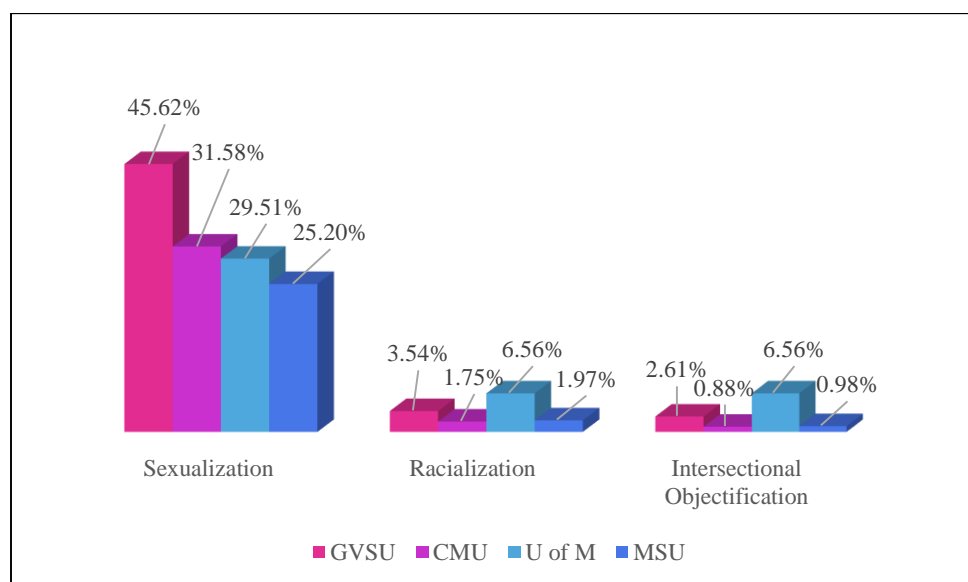
The GVSU crush page has the greatest proportion of sexualized tweets – 45.62 percent. For CMU, U of M, and MSU, the proportion of sexualized tweets is 31.58 percent, 29.51 percent, and 25.20 percent. Racialization was present in 3.54 percent, 1.75 percent, 6.56 percent,



and 1.97 percent of tweets posted on the GVSU, CMU, U of M, and MSU crush pages. The majority of racialized tweets were also sexualized, as is evident by the presence of intersectional objectification in 2.61 percent, 0.88 percent, 6.56 percent, and 0.98 percent of tweets from the GVSU, CMU, U of M, and MSU crush pages. See Figure 1.

Figure 1

*Proportion of tweets coded as sexualization, racialization, and intersectional objectification per crush page*



Anonymity plays a crucial role in the existence of university crush pages on Twitter. Tweets posted to crush pages are not intended to be face-to-face compliments; individuals are expressing attraction to “crushes” with whom they do not necessarily seek to interact. It is safe to assume that, for the most part, people would not actually say the things that they send in to university crush pages if they were actually conversing with their crush. Thus, anonymity gives crush page users freedom to express feelings and thoughts that they would never say aloud. Much of what is said on crush pages would be considered socially inappropriate if said offline. It

is important to question, then, why comments that are unacceptable offline are considered acceptable online. Again, anonymity is partly responsible for the freedom of expression that occurs on crush pages.

There were a considerable number of tweets that were not coded as sexualized but could be considered more broadly as objectification. These are tweets that refer to the subject's physical appearance, using terms like “attractive” and “flawless”, and those that speak specifically about a person's body part(s), such as their legs, eyes, and arms. According to Barbara L. Fredrickson and Tomi-Ann Roberts (1997), “The common thread running through all forms of sexual objectification is the experience of being treated *as a body* (or collection of body parts) valued predominantly for its use to (or consumption by) others” (p. 174). Thus, what makes these tweets objectification is the way in which they put the subjects' bodies on display, even reducing the individuals to mere body parts. Given that objectification negatively impacts women's mental health, the presence of objectifying tweets on crush pages could possibly have consequences offline. This form of objectification also displays a trend of disembodiment. Targets of crush page tweets are framed as memorable body parts which, as discussed earlier, fragment and reduce them as human beings.

#### *University Demographics: Exoticizing the Other*

The demographics of GVSU, CMU, U of M, and MSU during the Fall 2014 semester were assessed. At this time, there were 25,094 students enrolled at GVSU; 59.6 percent were female and 40.4 percent were male. Regarding race, 91.1 percent were white, 3.6 percent Asian or Pacific Islander, 6.9 percent Black or African American, 4.5 percent Hispanic or Latino, 1.9

percent American Indian or Alaskan Native, and 5.8 percent multiethnic; 0.9 percent did not report this information (“Quick facts,” 2014).

There were 19,858 students enrolled at CMU. Females made up 54.1 percent of the student population and males constituted 45.9 percent. Of these students, 78 percent were white, 2 percent Asian, 7 percent Black or African American, 3 percent Hispanic/Latino, 1 percent American Indian or Alaska Native, 5 percent non-resident alien, and 4 percent unknown (“Fall 2014,” n.d.).

At U of M, there were 43,625 total students; 47.9 percent were female and 52.1 percent were male. Demographic information on race revealed that 56.9 percent of students identified as white, 11.4 percent as Asian, 4.0 percent as Black, 4.4 percent as Hispanic, 0.2 percent as Native American, 13.8 percent as non-resident alien, 2.9 percent as two or more races, and 6.4 percent as unknown (“Enrollment,” 2015).

At MSU, 50,085 students were enrolled. Females comprised 51.5 percent and males 48.5 percent. Seventy-eight percent were white, 5.2 percent Asian, 7.5 percent Black/African American, 4.4 percent Hispanic/Latino, 0.3 percent American Indian/Alaska Native, 2.9 percent two or more races, 0.1 percent Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, and 1.5 percent other/no response (“2013-2014,” 2015).

*Focus Group Sessions: “People are Ugly when they’re Anonymous”*

All focus group demographic information was self-identified by participants. Of the 18 students, 15 were female and three male. Thus, I use male and female pronouns when referring to participants. Regarding sexual orientation, 14 were heterosexual, one bisexual, and three chose not to disclose this information. There were seven participants who were age 18, eight who were

19, one who was 20, and 2 who were 21. All but one student was Caucasian; this student identified as Asian. Participants represented a variety of majors; eleven indicated that they do not have a minor. There were nine freshman, four sophomores, four juniors, and one senior. Only one participant was unfamiliar with crush pages; the others had heard of and/or seen the @GVSUlove crush page. All quoted participants have been given aliases.

Overall, GVSU students’ opinions about crush pages were mixed. Perspectives varied among respondents as well as in response to individual tweets. Only one participant felt that the page was entirely unacceptable; others found certain tweets tolerable, even complimentary; and there were students who did not, for the most part, find the page or the tweets posted on it problematic. Participants responded more strongly to the theme of sexualization.

Seventeen of the 18 students felt that the use of first and last names in crush page tweets is inappropriate. According to Stephanie, “The name thing isn’t cool because then that gives direct offense to a certain person [sic].” Participants agreed that the moderator(s) of the page should not post tweets that use full names. Mikayla and Sean recommended the use of a first name and last initial, but others said neither first nor last names should be posted. Also, as mentioned, one participant, Margaret, felt that the inclusion of full names in tweets posted on crush pages was not an issue.

Participants expressed concern about tweets referencing individuals who have been seen at the university gym. All agreed that gym-related crush tweets are unacceptable. Noah disclosed that if a tweet was posted about him at the gym, “Honestly, I probably wouldn’t go.” Margaret elaborated that gym tweets are “...straight up why I don’t go to [the university] gym. Like I pay for a membership somewhere else because...I don’t like being around those kinds of people. It

doesn't surprise me at all that that's what's ended up on this page [sic].” Jessica noted that *not* being tweeted about can potentially be as concerning as being tweeted about. She remarked: “Some people that don't get put on [crush pages] feel insecure because they are not on here. People shouldn't feel this way.” The clothing worn by women at the gym was also brought up. Betsy made the argument that

I should be able to wear comfortable clothes that...are comfortable to work out in. I don't wanna wear a turtleneck to the gym...I would rather be wearing spandex shorts. And I don't wanna be sexualized for doing that. Like I'm just there to work out like anyone else is [sic].

While Stephanie argued that some females wear revealing clothes to the gym to get attention from males, students were unanimous in the opinion that tweets posted about individuals who were seen at the gym should not be allowed on crush pages.

Conversations about safety were also brought up during focus group sessions. Tweets that mention the address of the target student were referred to as “creepy” and “dangerous.” As Hilary commented, “If your address is put out on the Internet, then anyone can find it...People have done weirder stuff than go stalk someone that they saw on Twitter.” Jessica expressed that if her address was posted she “would try to contact [the moderator(s)] to get it taken down.” Some participants said that what is posted on crush pages might bring to mind offline events happening on- and off-campus. For example, Felicia remarked

And there was that one [Grand Valley Police Department] update that told people about the guy who broke into that one girl's apartment. I'm kind of curious if [a tweet revealing someone's address] was posted before or after that because if it was tweeted after that I would be very uncomfortable.

Betsy made a reference to the presence of sexual assaults on campuses, asserting: “I don't like the idea of letting people go on an online forum and anonymously say [sexual] things because

college campuses do have a lot of problems with sexual assaults and rapes.” Sexual orientation and safety, too, might also be a concern. Eileen brought up sexuality, noting “I also just noticed [a tweet]...that references someone being gay and I just wonder – they use a first and last name – and I just wonder if that’s something they don’t want...everybody to know about them [sic].” Overall, the relationship between safety and crush pages was a concern in all focus groups, and these conversations touched on a variety of ways that crush page tweets can post a safety risk.

During the third focus group, there were two students whose opinions represented two extremes. Stephanie argued that crush pages are, in general, not problematic, whereas Betsy claimed that crush pages are completely inappropriate and harmful to the campus climate. According to Stephanie, the @GVSUlove crush page is “funny and entertaining...I think that if it makes you uncomfortable, don’t read it, but it’s one of those things that makes me laugh, it makes a lot of people I know laugh [sic].” In response, Betsy remarked: “I’m gonna really disagree, and I think it’s sad that we find entertainment out of sexual harassment online [sic].” Betsy was the only focus group participant to specifically use the term “sexual harassment” to describe the tweets posted on crush pages. While Stephanie and Betsy had strong feelings for and against the page, respectively, other participants’ perspectives fell along a continuum of disapproval to approval. Some focus group participants perceived certain crush page tweets to be complimentary. Colton pointed out that “...there were a couple [of tweets] like ‘So and so is perfect’, ‘The dimples’, ‘You’re cute’...some of that’s like, nice. And then it’s followed by like ‘Carly has the cakes’ [sic].” From Colton’s perspective, the former three tweets are acceptable, whereas the latter is not. Similarly, other students expressed that there were certain tweets that were “cute”, “nice”, or “compliments.” Despite recognition by certain focus group participants that there are some “positive” tweets, Amber made the argument that these are not the tweets

getting attention on the crush page, saying: “I noticed that some of the more – the worst [tweets] – have the most likes, too, and retweets... Those are the ones that are spread more than the nice ones [sic].”

Participants also discussed anonymity as it functions on crush pages. A few students felt that because individuals sending in tweets are anonymous, they are not actually trying to connect with their crush. Some participants were convinced that without the anonymous aspect, crush pages would not exist. For example, Amelia relayed: “I feel like it would be a lot different if you put your name. I mean, I don’t think anyone would post anything.” Participants brought up, too, the way in which anonymity gives users the opportunity to make remarks about individuals that they would not ordinarily say in daily conversation. Sean noted that “People are ugly when they’re anonymous.” Julia questioned why people send in tweets in the first place, disclosing: “...a lot of these things I wouldn’t even tell my closest friends. Why would you go out and tell everybody on Twitter? [sic]” Stephanie replied “Because it’s anonymous [sic].” Regarding the intentions behind crush page users, Claudia asserted: “I guess you can finally say what you want to say without being judged for what you’re saying.”

As previously mentioned, focus group conversations tended to focus on sexualization more than racialization. However, race was not entirely absent from discussion. During the third focus group, the first remark, which was made by Betsy, was: “There were some really problematic racist things in [the tweets] that I was really ashamed of that come from people from our school...I was really embarrassed for our school [sic].” When later asked about what should not be posted on the crush page, Betsy responded “Anything racist. Anything that hints at race. I would just take it out.” She noted, too, that individuals who send in tweets to crush pages “...never point out if [the target student] is white.” During the first focus group, I asked if

participants noticed anything about race. Noah said “I didn’t see anything derogatory. Or racist. It was like a way to describe [the people being tweeted about].” In other words, Noah perceived race to be merely an identifying marker. Margaret disclosed that she “...marked the Hispanic [tweet] ‘Basically any Hispanic girl on campus.’ It’s a huge generalization. I thought it was strange [sic].” Race was not discussed much during the second focus group. There was a conversation on a tweet posted on October 14, which reads: “Sexy Mexican swimmer [student’s name], I’m Cuban but I’m willing to break the racial barrier.” Regarding this tweet, Amelia commented “...that one has four retweets and 10 favorites. So we might sit here and say we think that’s racist, [but] other people are like ‘Break the barrier.’” Colton expressed “It’s probably [the target student’s] friends.” In response, Jessica referenced another tweet from the same day, which reads: “I would let [student’s name] eat curry off of my nut sack.” She contended: “[The tweet] has one retweet and six favorites. And like, even if it’s a joke, you’re still perpetuating everything that people are saying [by retweeting and favoriting the tweet] [sic].” While informative, these were the only race-related discussions that occurred during the focus groups. No participant brought up the idea of intersectional objectification, or the way in which race is sexualized through tweets posted on crush pages.

### ***Conclusion: Sexual Harassment, Compliment, or Both?***

For this project I only analyzed the crush pages of four public universities in Michigan. Future research must look at colleges and universities outside of Michigan, the Midwest, and the United States. Crush pages are also associated with some middle and high schools, and these pages need to be studied as well. Instances of hypersexualization are becoming common in younger age cohorts and it is important that researchers interrogate the effects this has on early gender socialization and interpersonal interactions. Also, I assessed just three themes:



sexualization, racialization, and their intersections. These are likely not the only themes that might emerge from crush pages. How disability – mental and physical – and sexual orientation are referenced and portrayed on crush pages is also valuable work that needs to be considered. In addition, I was only able to conduct focus group sessions at GVSU with 18 students. This research, however, should be broadened to include the voices, experiences, and online presence of students from other institutions, including colleges, universities, middle schools, and high schools. While I looked at tweets from the month of October – which is the middle of the Fall semester for Michigan universities – as representative, I recognize that tweets might change in quality and content at different times of the year, such as the beginning of a semester, before or after spring breaks, etc. Therefore, comparing tweets from various phases of the academic year might also be instructive.

An assessment of the institutional statistics of GVSU, CMU, U of M, and MSU during the Fall 2014 semester revealed that, for the most part, there is equal representation of gender at all universities. Only U of M had more male than female students. GVSU had the largest gender difference, with 19.2 percent more females. Only the male-female binary was represented in the universities’ demographic information, so the prevalence of students who did not identify as male or female is unknown. I am also interested in race representation on these four campuses. Given that the U of M crush page has the most racialized tweets, I am curious if this is a reflection of the institution’s demographics. This may be the case, as U of M had the most racially diverse campus, followed by CMU and MSU, and then GVSU. Yet, the GVSU crush page had the second greatest number of racialized tweets. It is possible that because GVSU lacks racial diversity, racial differences are more pronounced. Ultimately, however, because users sending in crush page tweets are anonymous, their motivations for mentioning race are unknown.

Focus group sessions with GVSU students revealed diverse views on crush pages. While there were two individuals who clearly stated that they were for or against these pages, the other participants' attitudes about crush pages fell somewhere in between. Some students made the claim that, in theory, these pages could be positive, but the way they are put into practice – with sexualized and racialized language – is problematic. On the other hand, there were participants who did not perceive most of what is being posted on crush pages to be worrisome. Students' indication that they are not entirely against crush pages is not surprising; the fact that crush pages exist – and that they are updated every day or almost every day – suggests that there are a number of students who are using and interacting with them. Crush pages are active and there are students who enjoy them. Given that the language used on crush pages is laced with sexualization, racialization, and intersectional objectification, it is vital that students' opinions on them continue to be assessed.

As a female undergraduate student, I find the existence of university crush pages as well as the tweets posted to them problematic. While I perceive crush pages in their entirety to be negative, there are elements of crush page tweets that I find particularly worrisome. The use of full names, for instance, directly targets an individual. While there could be multiple students who share the same name at a given university, posting full names still narrows down who the target student might be. Moreover, when a full name is used, other identifying information is often included. For example, the following tweet was posted on the @GVSUlove page on March 18, 2015: “[Student’s name] is so hot, his blonde colored hair cut suits him, his accent is too. Jamaican/British chocolate [sic]”. The use of full names is concerning because perhaps targets of crush page tweets do not want their names associated with the crush page and/or the tweet that is posted about them. Another issue is that tweets are sometimes directed at individuals who have

been seen at the university gym, and this could make the gym an unwelcoming space. The anonymous gaze that was and seems to still be directed at targets could discourage them from attending the on-campus – or any – gym. Personally, I will never work out at the university gym because of the crush page. Similarly, tweets that are posted by individuals claiming to be in target students’ classes, which usually include the course name, section, and/or time, are also disconcerting. Students who have been posted about might not feel like the classroom is a safe space. This could influence their level of comfort within the classroom and/or their decision to attend class, ultimately impacting their educational experience. There are tweets, too, that reference where particular individuals live; sometimes, even specific apartment numbers are mentioned. These tweets are a violation of target students’ safety. Again, these are just a few specific examples of especially troubling tweets which demonstrate that tweets posted on university crush pages could have significant impacts on offline attitudes and behaviors.

With the advent of the Internet in 1991, there were many individuals who felt that the web would serve as a safe space to create and sustain communities (Nakamura, 2002). In some ways it has; for example, Intersex and Transgender activism and solidarity movements both started and strengthened online (Aulette & Wittner, 2012). Cyberfeminism, too, which began in the mid-1990s, has provided feminists with an chance to analyze “the potential that [information and communication technologies] hold for change and challenge in our patriarchal society” (Rowe, 2008, p. 129). Cyberfeminists, in other words, see the Internet as an area with opportunities for social justice and freedom. Yet, they also recognize that as much as the Internet can be a platform for feminist work, it is rooted in offline systems of gendered and racial oppression. Cyberstalking, online sexual harassment, revenge porn websites, and other harmful activities that threaten the trust and safety of online users are present and prevalent online. The

recent GamerGate controversy is one example of a concerted misogynist effort to exclude and alienate women gamers and game developers and anyone who protests about misogyny in video games (Chess & Shaw, 2015). While crush page tweets could be positive – as tweets posted to them could be seen as compliments – target students may also perceive these tweets as sexual harassment, which can impact their educational experience and campus life. Crush page tweets can be perceived as all three types of sexual harassment described by Barak (2005): unwanted sexual attention, gender harassment, and sexual coercion. Crush pages – a widespread component of social media – need a feminist critique, as they are arguably a form of online sexual harassment, and thus websites that can jeopardize users’ trust and safety both online and offline. This contrasts with the initial cyberfeminist ideas about the activist potential of the Internet as a safe space.

As previously discussed, the Internet serves as a space for interaction – both positive and negative. While it has unlimited opportunities for social good, it may also cause social harm. Anonymity can be particularly problematic when it comes to online harassment “because it is unclear who the victim can and cannot trust, or where the stalker may be lurking” (Hazelwood & Koon-Magnin, 2013, p. 163). Furthermore, anonymity makes a case more difficult to both investigate and prosecute (Hazelwood & Koon-Magnin, 2013). Given that individuals sending crush page tweets are anonymous, it is important to consider how anonymity might influence the targets of the tweets. My exploration of crush pages revealed that – masked as admiration – tweets posted on these pages could possibly be a form of sexual and racial harassment based on the way sex and race are talked about by users. This is because these tweets seem to frequently reference the appearance of individuals’ bodies, other appearance-related features, skin color, or a combination of these factors. Thus, the target of the message is being objectified through

sexualization and racialization. If target students are aware of these tweets and perceive them as sexual harassment, this might have negative implications in their everyday lives, especially since the harasser is unknown. It seems that crush pages then can be sites of (1) open interaction as well as exclusion and (2) freedom as well as risk. Overall, this project has sought to extend the conversation on sexualization and racialization as they occur online, with the sub-themes of online sexual harassment and questions of trust and risk. I hope that this research, in addition to addressing issues of sexualization and racialization in social media interactions, also raises new, provocative questions about the nature of social media and cyberspace as a whole.

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## Appendix A: Coding Scheme

Descriptive Category	Definition	Total Instances	Examples
Sexualization	References a sexual act, labels an individual as “sexy”, “hot”, or a variation of these terms, and/or sexualizes the person.	@GVSUlove: 245 @CMichCrushes: 36 @crushes_umich: 18 @MSUCrushes: 128	<p>@GVSUlove, October 14, 2014: “Not to be blunt or anything...but I would eat [student’s name] ass for breakfast, lunch, and dinner everyday [sic].”</p> <p>@CMichCrushes, on October 29, 2014: [Student’s name] from Beddow, I want you to rip my clothes off and spank me all night. I bet I can ride better than your gf [sic].”</p>
Racialization	References race and/or ethnicity.	@GVSUlove: 19 @CMichCrushes: 2 @crushes_umich: 4 @MSUCrushes: 10	<p>@CMichCrushes, on October 5, 2014: “[Student’s name] is such a cutie. Please like black girls.”</p> <p>@GVSUlove, on October 6, 2014: “Will the black guy from Pew just come up and talk to me one day [sic].”</p>
Intersectional Objectification	Contains elements of sexualization and racialization.	@GVSUlove: 14 @CMichCrushes: 1 @crushes_umich: 4 @MSUCrushes: 5	<p>@MSUCrushes, October 16, 2014: “This girl [student’s name] is a booty goddess. These white girls evolving bruh [sic].”</p> <p>@crushes_umich, October 20, 2014: “[Student’s name] from Squad is in my Math 115 class and she’s so damn attractive...by far the hottest Asian girl I have ever talked to.”</p>

## Appendix B: Focus Group Sessions Script

Note: While the focus group sessions were mostly structured around this script, I did not follow it strictly. If there was a productive conversation taking place, I allowed it to continue and asked follow-up questions to have students clarify and/or expand upon their thoughts.

For this focus group session I am interested in hearing your honest opinions on and reactions to content from university crush pages on Twitter. More specifically, we will be discussing the crush page associated with Grand Valley, @GVSUlove. Everything that is said in this room is completely confidential. I will be recording your responses with my laptop and voice recorder. The only people to see and/or hear this recording will be myself and possibly my advisor, Dr. Debjani Chakravarty. Information from this focus group will not be connected to your real name in any way. When sharing direct quotes in my research article, I will use aliases. If at any time you no longer want to participate in the focus group, you are welcome to leave. Feel free to contact my advisor or myself if you have any questions, comments, or concerns about this focus group session. Overall, this should take approximately an hour to an hour and a half. Does anyone have any questions or concerns?

To begin, I would like everyone to please fill out this information sheet. Feel free to fill out all, some, or none of it. Please do not put your name anywhere on the sheet. When you have finished filling it out, flip it over. Once everyone is finished, I will come around and collect them.

Who has heard of crush pages? For those of you who have not heard of them, crush pages are pages on Twitter that allow users to anonymously submit a tweet about a person they have a crush on; a moderator then posts this tweet to the crush page. I am now going to pass out tweets

from Grand Valley’s crush page, @GVSUlove. These tweets are from October 2014. I am going to give you about 10 minutes to go through the tweets on your own. Please mark anything that stands out to you. Once everyone is finished, we will regroup and discuss the tweets. Now that you have looked the tweets over, let’s discuss them. Who would like to share what they marked?

Note: Other questions that may have been asked include, but are not limited to, the following:

1. Why did this tweet stand out to you? Did anyone else mark this tweet?
2. How does this tweet make you feel?
3. Has anyone ever been tweeted about on a crush page? Would you mind sharing this experience?
4. For those of you who have not been tweeted about, what would you think if you were? What would you do?
5. Has anyone you know ever been tweeted about on a crush page? How did this person react? Did their attitudes or behaviors change in any way?
6. Has anyone ever sent in a tweet to be posted on a crush page? Was it posted?
7. Can you think of a scenario where a tweet about you would change your behavior?
8. Would you be concerned about a potential employer or admissions committee reading a tweet about you? A family member?
9. Did you notice anything about race?
10. Did you notice anything about sexual orientation?
11. What do you think about tweets that reveal where a person lives? Works?
12. What do you think about tweets referring to someone the sender has class with?
13. What do you think about tweets referring to someone the user has seen at the gym?
14. Who do you think is looking at this page?

15. What role do you think being anonymous plays in the existence of crush pages?
16. What do you think about this kind of page being associated with Grand Valley?
17. What role, if any, do you think Grand Valley has when it comes to Grand Valley crush pages?
18. What are your overall thoughts on crush pages? Do you think they should exist?